

The effectiveness of SVQs in Care:

a study of candidates' and line managers'
perceptions of change and process issues



CareScotland

The effectiveness of Scottish Vocational Qualifications in Care: A study of candidates' and line managers' perceptions of change and process issues

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Contents

1	Introduction	1
2	Key questions	2
3	Summary	3
3.1	Method	3
3.2	Findings: overview	3
4	The study	4
4.1	Method	4
4.2	Response rates	4
4.3	Organisation of the questionnaire	5
5	Findings	6
5.1	Questions on the effectiveness of the SVQs	6
5.2	Examples of qualitative comments	7
5.3	Questions on the SVQ process and systems	10
	5.3a Examples of the qualitative comments	12
5.4	Contextual considerations (Questions 3.9 and 4)	13
5.5	Balance of qualitative responses	15
6	Discussion	17
6.1	Possible typologies	17
	6.1a Types 1, 2, and 3 — similarities	18
6.2	Type 2	18
6.3	Type 3	19
6.4	Type 4	19
6.5	Type 5	19
6.6	Key questions revisited	20
6.7	Centre typologies	22
	6.7a Category A: Integrated	23
	6.7b Category B: Partially integrated	23
	6.7c Category C: As yet unintegrated	24
7	Conclusions	25
	Appendix 1: References	27
	Appendix 2: Candidates Questionnaire	28
	SVQ Research Questionnaire Candidates	28
	Appendix 3: Line Managers Questionnaire	36
	SVQ Research Questionnaire Line Managers	36

1 Introduction

Though the impact of vocational qualifications in Care has been much discussed since their introduction in 1992, very little quantifiable research has added to understanding of the complex factors affecting processes and outcomes. A large-scale study in England, Wales and Northern Ireland by Sargeant (2000)¹ compared NVQ candidates with staff who had not undertaken awards. Positive findings were reported, but organisational context issues were found to be significant, and the detailed findings acknowledged that the relationship between the assessment and training experiences and positive outcomes was not straightforward and would benefit from further analysis. A small-scale study of SVQs in residential child care in a particular geographical area of Scotland (Chakrabarti & Heron, 2002) reported less than positive perceptions of process and outcomes, and questioned the model of assessment and its impact on staff development, as well as the value of implementation models.

SQA commissioned the current study to take a cross-section of successful candidates and their line managers across Scotland, and explore their views of the SVQ process, and the effectiveness of assessment and the learning around it. The project set out to see whether there is a perception of change in work performance after successful completion, and to discuss the differences between the experiences of individual candidates, line managers, SVQ centres and agencies.

The questionnaires used set out to identify features of positive and less positive experiences, as well as analysing themes and characteristics of different groups of staff. The focus groups discussed the same issues, after the questionnaires were completed.

The hypothesis implicitly contained in the research model was that candidates would be able to identify changes in their knowledge, skills and performance, and that line managers would confirm these or report otherwise. As well as reporting on its effectiveness, there was also an intention to gain a picture of particular aspects of the SVQ process, and to see whether individual components make a difference to positive or negative responses and outcomes.

¹ For references for articles by Sargeant, and by Chakrabarti & Heron, see Appendix 1.

2 Key questions

The range of questions addressed by the project includes:

- Does completion of an SVQ in Care have a positive impact on individual and service performance?
- What kind of learning experience does assessment for the SVQ in Care provide?
- Is the design of the competence-based qualification a factor in determining positive or negative outcomes?
- What are the most significant components of a positive or negative experience of SVQs in Care?
- Are there significant differences in the delivery of SVQs in Care that affect learning and assessment?
- What other contextual factors in agencies, centres and individual experience significantly affect outcomes?

3 Summary

3.1 Method

Twenty three SVQ centres were approached. Seven of these centres were sampled through postal questionnaires and 14 through questionnaires and focus groups.

3.2 Findings: overview

The 14 focus groups and 179 questionnaires analysed report high satisfaction rates with the effects on candidate performance of completion of the SVQs in Care. Lower rates of satisfaction with the SVQ systems and structures were reported.

Regarding effectiveness in achieving learning and change, 80% of responses were consistently positive, 10% were positive with some reservations, and less than 10% were consistently critical of impact.

Regarding the effectiveness of the SVQ system itself, there were significant numbers who thought it could be improved and simplified, though the majority of candidates were positive about their experience of it. Many of the critical comments were about local delivery, and this may point to continued variability in local centre delivery, rather than any feature of the SVQ itself.

From both positive and less positive respondents, there were comments about difficulties in delivering awards consistently across and within agencies. Some agencies and centres appeared to provide a largely positive experience.

The different cultures of learning and practice reflected in the findings indicate on the one hand considerable achievement of change and, on the other, differing experiences of a nationally standardised assessment process.

There is evidence that the majority of centres, agencies and individuals surveyed are making progress in addressing good practice in learning, assessment and verification. Where differences exist in the quality of experience, these findings suggest that practices at the level of workplace, manager or assessor can affect outcomes positively or negatively.

The prevalence of positive accounts of learning and development is indicative of openness and committed application by the majority of candidates and line managers.

The extent to which these qualifications — delivered in the workplace but usually achieved using the candidate's own time — are effective, is a reflection of the commitment of those individuals and organisations who have invested in raising standards and in the SVQ as a significant part of learning strategies.

4 The study

4.1 Method

Twenty three SVQ centres delivering the Care Awards were approached to take part (approximately a fifth of Scottish centres), seven were surveyed by questionnaire, and 14 by questionnaire and focus group. One centre was unable to participate for administrative reasons, and a second had already commissioned its own detailed research on similar themes. The 21 centres that took part were from local authorities, voluntary agencies, private care homes and residential schools, college-based centres, a health service centre, and a range of centres covering more than one type of agency. These centres also reflected a range of modes of delivery and management.

Centre contacts were asked to supply lists of completed candidates, and questionnaires were distributed with an explanatory letter. For focus group visits, centre contacts were asked to invite appropriate candidates and line managers to meet researchers (in eight centres this was the main researcher, and in six others an experienced External Verifier) and be given support to complete the questionnaires. This was followed by a discussion of the issues in the group to explore themes identified. The SVQs were Care level 2, Care level 3, Promoting Independence level 3, and Caring for Children and Young People level 3.

The focus was on the revised awards (introduced in 1998), although occasionally a candidate or a line manager was able to compare the difference between the old and the new.

Candidates who had completed SVQs were requested for the focus groups, though in two centres a small number (five) of incomplete award candidates contributed. Only one response was received from someone who had not undertaken the award, and this was not included in the analysis.

At each focus group session, researchers recorded the main themes of discussion — after individual questionnaires were completed to ensure that replies were not influenced by the group or the input of the researcher. This approach was adopted following a pilot study where respondents found that explanation of the process, and the presence of the researcher clarified what was expected of them and motivated more considered responses than receiving the questionnaire cold (see discussion of findings for impact of the mixed model of administering questionnaires on possible findings).

4.2 Response rates

Response rates reflect the selection of accessible individuals for focus groups, compared with the wider distribution of postal questionnaires. There was an inevitable variability of the sample between different centres, by postal questionnaire or through selected focus groups.

Total sample

Sixteen centres provided details of candidates who had successfully completed the revised awards. This gave a figure of 1,252 completers, from whom we received 92 questionnaires. Of these, the postal survey was inevitably more representative, whereas the focus groups captured a more selected audience and allowed researchers to engage in a useful dialogue with this part of the sample.

Postal sample

The five centres providing figures for candidates who had completed revised awards, by using the postal questionnaires, averaged a 36% response rate. The responses from centres ranged from 17% to 63%. The numbers of candidates in centres surveyed here ranged from 6 to 38.

Focus group sample

The average response rate from those 11 centres providing figures of completed revised awards, and using focus groups, was 17%. Here the coverage ranged from 3% to 60%. Numbers involved in centres varied from an estimated 390 in one centre to five candidate completions in another, demonstrating the difference of scale and shape of centres and agencies involved.

4.3 Organisation of the questionnaire

The questionnaire (see Appendices 2 and 3) was organised around characteristics and processes. It asked about: individual, qualification and work organisation details; the SVQ process and systems; a range of effectiveness measures; and finally more general contextual commentary. While the first section is therefore factual background, the second and third present evaluative scoring of agreement/disagreement with a range of statements. Both of these sections were framed as closed questions but invited written comments in addition to the quantifiable scores. The fourth section was an open-ended invitation to contextualise.

5 Findings

Questionnaires were returned from 179 individuals in 21 SVQ centres. 125 were completed at focus group visits to the 14 centres, and 54 were from postal questionnaires. 69 candidates and 56 line managers completed questionnaires at focus groups, and 40 candidates and 14 line managers returned questionnaires by post.

5.1 Questions on the effectiveness of the SVQs

Responses to the scored questions on the impact of SVQs on role clarity, confidence, knowledge, application of knowledge, skills and reflectiveness were as follows:

Candidates

question	number	strongly agree	agree	disagree	strongly disagree
3.1 role clarity	108	39 (36%)	51 (47%)	17 (16%)	1 (1%)
3.2 confidence	106	39 (37%)	55 (52%)	11 (10%)	1 (1%)
3.3 knowledge	107	40 (37%)	57 (53%)	10 (9%)	
3.4 applied knowledge	106	27 (25%)	68 (64%)	11 (10%)	
3.5 skills	106	29 (27%)	65 (61%)	12 (11%)	
3.6 reflectiveness	106	29 (27%)	68 (64%)	9 (8%)	

Line Managers

question	number	strongly agree	agree	disagree	strongly disagree
3.1 role clarity	69	17(25%)	40(58%)	12(17%)	
3.2 confidence	68	23(34%)	34(50%)	10(15%)	1(1%)
3.3 knowledge	69	22(32%)	38(55%)	9(13%)	
3.4 applied knowledge	67	13(19%)	43(64%)	11(16%)	
3.5 skills	68	23(34%)	38(56%)	7(10%)	
3.6 reflectiveness	68	15(22%)	44(65%)	9(13%)	

Average positive agreement scoring over all six questions: by candidates 88%, and by line managers 85%.

The range varied from 83% of candidates feeling clearer about their role in the workplace, and 91% reporting an increase in reflectiveness.

For line managers, 83% report that candidates became clearer, and drew on the knowledge base in practice, whilst 90% report that undertaking the SVQ has improved individual practice.

Other variations show that the average focus group respondents were more positive, 93% of candidates and 90% of line managers, compared with 80% of candidates and 74% of line managers in the postal survey. This represents an important variation and suggests the focus group attendees may have been more self-selectedly positive, and the postal respondents more of a natural cross-section, but the number of line managers responding postally was very small (14) to attribute a definitive connection.

Clearly, even with the difference between focus group and postal responses the 88% and 85% (respectively) overall positive correlations for effectiveness reporting suggest considerable satisfaction with outcomes.

Further differences show that candidates working with older people are slightly more positive in their responses compared with those working with children and young people, or adults, but the percentage difference is slight, and some of the reporting on client categories makes this difficult to interpret categorically.

Differences between groupings and variations across centres and agencies will be discussed in the interpretation of the qualitative material which supports trends in the quantitative data patterns (Section 6 — Discussion).

5.2 Examples of qualitative comments

These show the range of positive to negative response, with a number showing a mixture of views from first candidates, then managers:

Question 3.1 Role clarity

Candidates:

- before I wouldn't have spoken up for myself, am more capable of giving my opinion when necessary
- more valued by some members of staff, more confidence and more interest in some duties
- 15 years experience, but the theory was useful
- already clear

Line managers:

- candidates/care support staff are now more confident and will question roles and responsibilities
- staff who have been in the service for years seem to show a good improvement of practice
- a professional qualification has helped the staff to be more confident of their own abilities and knowledge when speaking to other professionals
- made candidates more aware of why and how certain aspects of care are carried out, it has also made them look closely at their own practice
- candidates had no idea what was involved in SVQ before registering
- most of the candidates that I have assessed are very experienced nursing assistants who could do the job effectively before SVQ
- did not provide additional clarity as clarity was already there — 'like teaching granny to suck eggs'

Question 3.2 Confidence

Candidates:

- helped me develop as a person, am now a trainer for my organisation
- learnt a lot about taking in the residents feelings, encourages me to care for them as I would like to be cared for — I like to involve them in day-to-day tasks they were used to doing, not to take away their independence
- was and am confident in carrying out my duties

Line managers:

- candidate working with user on a financial issue able to use initiative and make decisions knowing he had given choices, was aware of current legislation
- SVQ alone can't make people more confident, but as part of a staff development programme it can
- staff have gained confidence in their own ability and practice allowing them to tackle and question issues, eg infringement of people's rights
- candidates are being trained to a higher level/standard than many RGNs eg venepuncture, blood pressure, capillary blood testing — this has caused some resentment among trained staff, as the candidate is more competent to carry out these tasks

Question 3.3 Knowledge

Candidates:

- study further and widen my learning opportunities — trained and became a childrens' panel member; empathy with clients and work colleagues, managers
- more sure of self, make decisions faster and more independently
- did not learn anything, already had the knowledge

Line managers:

- more knowledge of legislation and reason behind some tasks they carry out
- seeking knowledge from all sources available in the home — spending spare time researching
- more knowledge of legislation and reason behind some tasks they carry out
- small increase in knowledge although more to do with my input than their quest for knowledge

Question 3.4 Knowledge application

Candidates:

- able to contribute more to care, eg more understanding of incontinence, and clinical procedures, and patient stress
- better able to understand the importance of treating clients as individuals
- advocating for children to be part of decision-making life choices
- encourage service user to access services and facilities, encouraging independence
- psychology and sociology very useful re understanding behaviour and roles, models in society — relevant to all aspects of the work
- argue more if I disagree instead of just accepting things
- show new staff members how to promote independence, and respect choice, privacy
- informing residents of their legal rights and recognising discriminatory practice
- more able to approach line manager about my practice

Line managers:

- greater input at care planning meetings, discussions on care planning and implementation
- they are more aware of the importance of clients choice, respect, dignity etc and think well before action is taken (which used to be automatic)

Question 3.5 Practice Skills

Candidates:

- before embarking on tasks I now think about the implications for colleagues' and clients' health and safety assessment, hygiene standards improved, take more time and care in practice
- reinforced my own values, am more tolerant, open to values and views of others
- same practice with more understanding of why
- SVQ is a written exercise and cannot be compared with working on the job, dealing with diverse issues as they arise
- do not feel I learned anything, it was more of a paper exercise for me
- everything I did for SVQ I do as a daily routine

Line managers:

- clinical skills are undertaken by candidates safely and correctly. Candidates are comfortable, confident and competent to do the tasks. RGNs are also confident in their staff's skills
- stronger awareness of why certain practices take place — bound by legislation not previously aware of
- not everyone has changed
- no difference in practice — staff consider SVQ just as a process they have to complete and don't relate to practice

Question 3.6 Reflectiveness

Candidates:

- benefited from training in language and approach — had to learn to write in a softer way, which made me address my whole approach to our clients, their relatives/advocates, and my colleagues
- in writing and approach to situations, try to think things out before jumping in
- will talk over or think about issues and their impact on self or others

Line managers:

- meetings are longer due to discussion of issues, events, incidents that have occurred
- staff are more able to look at the broader picture and possible reasons for a particular behaviour; they will also look at how an issue was handled and consider if an alternative way would have been more appropriate
- some may be slightly more so but others will continue as before — that is not to say that they were not already reflective

5.3 Questions on the SVQ process and systems

These questions relate to whether candidates were clear about SVQs before registration, whether gathering evidence and completing a portfolio was straightforward, how much of their own time was used, and whether assessors or the SVQ centre were adequately supportive. Responses to these questions were as follows:

Candidates

question	number	strongly agree	agree	disagree	strongly disagree
2.1 VQ outset clarity	109	21 (12%)	44 (42%)	38 (34%)	4 (4%)
2.2 straightforwardness	108	13 (12%)	72 (67%)	20 (18%)	3 (3%)
2.4 support systems	108	52 (48%)	33 (31%)	18 (16%)	5 (5%)

Line managers

question	number	strongly agree	agree	disagree	strongly disagree
2.1 VQ outset clarity	68	4 (6%)	34 (47%)	22 (32%)	10 (15%)
2.2 straightforwardness	70	1 (1%)	28 (40%)	34 (49%)	7 (10%)
2.4 support systems	65	12 (18%)	38 (58%)	12 (18%)	3 (5%)

Question 2.1: Candidate clarity at registration

Whether or not it is realistic to expect complete clarity about the SVQ at the outset, it is nevertheless concerning that around a third of candidates report lacking clarity at this stage.

Question 2.2: Straightforwardness of evidence collection and portfolio, and Question 2.4: Adequacy of support

Here again there were variations between postal and focus group positivity, the most striking being where only 29% of ‘postal’ line managers positively agreed with the straightforwardness statement, against 45% of the focus group ones. It is clear from comments that some interpreted the question as suggesting that within a few Units it was straightforward, rather than at the outset, and perhaps the phrasing of the question was more ambiguous than intended.

From these scorings, and from the written comments generally elsewhere in the questionnaires, there is little doubt that many candidates and line managers have found the assessment process difficult. Reasons for different experiences and perceptions are considered in the discussion (Section 7).

Note that questionnaire question 2.2 may have been misleading in that it is doubtful whether any qualification process is likely to be straightforward from the outset — it may not even be desirable that learning and assessment should be unchallenging, if they are to achieve change. However, the prevalence of critical comments from line managers, almost all of whom are also assessors, justifies highlighting this.

Question 2.3

In terms of use of own time, for 41% of candidates more than half of the time spent on the qualification was their own; for 29% of candidates it was half of the time spent; and for 26% it was less than half. (4% were unclear). There was not a clear correlation between the amount of own time spent and being positive about the learning and assessment experience. There were many comments about time difficulties and the variability of supportiveness in agencies for it. These figures in themselves indicate the scale and organisational commitment taking place across agencies.

The supportiveness of assessors for candidates, and of the organisation for assessors, was very highly rated — 79% for candidates and 76% for line managers.

Some caution is advisable in interpreting questions 2.2 and 2.3. As suggested, the issue of whether candidates can be expected to be fully clear about the process at the outset, or to what extent, is debatable — though comments suggest great variation in the style and quality of preparation. Equally it may be unrealistic for candidates and line managers to find the evidence and portfolio process straightforward. In some ways it is remarkable that 79% of candidates agreed, and significant that only 41% of the line managers shared that positive view. Given a range of comments on the language and structure of the SVQs it is intriguing that the overall findings about change and input are so positive.

5.3a Examples of the qualitative comments

These show the range of positive to negative response, with a number showing a mixture of views from first candidates, then managers:

Question 2.1 Candidate clarity before registration

Candidates:

- didn't realise how much theory involved in class work, though enjoyable sometimes
- pre-start training was informative
- thought it was a week's training, ignorance on my part
- no induction day, confusing messages

Line managers:

- initially candidates and assessors were unsure of the process; however this has been improved and candidates are given the required information in an understandable form
- there was lot of internal discussion before formal meetings took place but candidates were not totally aware until they had started
- candidates offered training/induction session for SVQ; however this no longer happens and I feel new candidates are less well informed
- the award is extremely complex, they had the information but found it rather baffling
- initially candidates not clear, assessment requirements kept changing, now we have an SVQ culture

Question 2.2 Straightforwardness of evidence gathering and portfolio

Candidates:

- enjoyed gathering evidence, have found it extremely interesting
- wording of PCs difficult to understand, most evidence easily gathered
- felt confused throughout the whole process

Line managers:

- again, initially the process took time to understand, but as I have become more experienced I have no problems
- having assessed both the old and revised award the revised much more straightforward
- it really takes the candidate to have completed two or three Units before they fully understand the process
- depends on candidate — some quickly grasped the process other not so

Question 2.4 Candidate support from assessor, line manager support from centre

Candidates:

- assessor full encouragement and support
- assessor extremely helpful
- support, but assessor too much else to do
- felt I had better understanding than my assessor
- had to work it out for myself, trial and error, workplace assessor completing her award and unsure, unable to support me
- was not explained, did it on my own
- took three years, letter of complaint before replacement assessor
- assessor was doing D32 only wanted her evidence, felt I was a burden

Line managers:

- initially more training was offered to new assessors and locality support groups, support is there if you ask, attendance at verifier/assessor meetings is helpful
- the internal verifiers have been supportive. Standardisation meetings allow problems/concerns to be discussed. However the assessment process was tagged on to the workload with no recognition of the extra work involved
- organisational pressures prevented any meaningful support being available

5.4 Contextual considerations (Questions 3.9 and 4)

Candidates and line managers were given the opportunity to amplify the specified questions with their own comments about information not captured elsewhere. The following are examples across the range received, first candidates then line managers. They give an impression of the complexities of introducing and developing a universal learning and assessment programme for the majority of a previously unqualified workforce, reflecting huge motivation and organisational changes, warts and all.

Candidates:

- 30 years since school, boosted confidence and reminded me I had a brain, three hours per week not enough, great support from assessor and from husband who amazingly took up ironing
- generally SVQ has improved the quality of care delivered to residents, made staff aware of holistic needs, promoted rights, anti-discriminatory practice, ensure high standard is maintained SVQ has certainly improved my skills, knowledge, benefiting service users and others; however, do feel there is room for improvement re layout and format of Units — many of the knowledge points are difficult to understand
- though it took me three years partly because of ill health and retirement of line manager I will encourage colleagues to apply because it has given me a greater insight for the clients needs and their rights

- after my experience of doing it outside work-time, workplace has set up better systems for others — still found my experience enjoyable and helped eagerness to learn and look at career options
- much confusion over organisation's managing of SVQ process, no cross-referencing until the end; no support within the organisation, although I took it higher, it was my determination, not organisation's support, that completed award
- assessor (and IV) rejected a reflective account early on, without discussion, I was devastated, only continued with support of colleagues, looked again at reflective account and felt it could have been used with constructive feedback — relationship with assessor suffered as result
- time-consuming, a good carer comes from inside the person, basically common sense, does not come by qualification

Line managers:

- impact: as a manager I see a confident qualified staff group who have changed in culture with the influence of SVQ learning — staff support each other and the gap between training and practice has been bridged
- improves practice even in staff who have been nursing for a long time
- very impressed with SVQs, and use standards to underpin training and development; but too much jargon and ambiguity
- work practice improved greatly, initially no idea and found foundation course very stressful with so much to take in — helpful if it was over a longer period; candidates have commented on language used in PCs — could be written in clear language instead of what appears to be cryptic clues — when time is short this can lead to frustration as WPA and candidates struggle to understand what is meant; candidates feel guilty taking time off the floor — such worry does not help concentration when doing work; I think those candidates who complete SVQ should receive a higher rate of pay than staff with no qualification; I feel that IVs can be too tricky, it's almost as if the candidate is supposed to achieve 100%; I know of one care worker who has an honours degree who states that she found SVQ more difficult — surely this should not be the case
- my experience as a line manager working with staff who are completing SVQs has been very positive — the support received from the college and the college IV has been a determining factor in the achievement of the award for the candidates; I have also noted an increase in confidence among staff — it might be that finally care staff are able to complete a qualification that recognises them as important and valuable members of the Scottish care sector workforce; my own concern is the cost for small voluntary organisation in allowing every staff member to have the opportunity to achieve a relevant qualification
- SVQs generally offer excellent structured learning and certification opportunities for staff, practice is improved and service-user's experience is more positive; however, staff development in this respect is compromised by insufficient resource to allow candidate a facility to document their experiences; equally staff have insufficient access to protected time with assessor

- lack of support from senior management — not enough IVs, no recognition of need for dedicated time for candidates and assessors; but current awards and systems are a vast improvement, dedicated time system makes positive difference
- SVQ has good parts to it, it is however too complex and it is very hard to keep people’s enthusiasm — they tend to stall and have periods when they cannot face it; the language used is very obscure and the people taking it are largely non-academic
- it makes them feel stupid to have to keep asking what statements actually mean
- pressures from all corners in the workplace result in SVQs being pushed to the bottom of the priority list, no incentive for assessor once they have gained their assessor’s award; could be simplified a lot more for people who have been away from education for a long time

5.5 Balance of qualitative responses

On effectiveness, (all the third set of questions and Question 4), questionnaire comments were distributed as follows:

Candidates:	549 positives, 69 negatives
Line managers:	321 positive, 67 negative

On the experience of the SVQ process in the second section, the comments were:

Candidates:	149 positive, 62 negative
Line managers:	67 positive, 78 negative

Whilst a proportion of the negatives will have included criticism of the SVQ, a significant proportion were about agency, work unit, individual line management, or assessor performance issues. In fact, only 24% of candidates and 24% of line managers made critical comments about the nature of the SVQs in Care. The majority of negative remarks — sometimes several from one source — were about confused delivery, the time difficulties, or other local issues.

Patterns of qualitative data are discussed in the next section, but obviously there was a tendency for candidates in particular to make fewer comments if they were rating statements negatively, so we have more expression of the positives.

Trends in negative responses

The majority of the negative scores came from only 12 candidates and nine line managers who rated many statements negatively. There are certain characteristics in these clusters of questionnaires, which are spread across centres and agencies, that may suggest local rather than national explanations, although they are numerically important and are given attention in the following analysis.

Emerging themes

Regarding other dimensions, the study highlighted a number of complementary themes that confirm a changing environment associated with SVQs in Care. The question on promotion (3.7) reported 29 positive examples from candidates against six negatives, and three 'not yet's' — 47 line managers reported positive examples, as against only two negatives.

On access to subsequent assessed education opportunities, 45 candidates responded positively against eight negative or 'not yet'. 45 line managers gave positive responses, against 19 negatives. Examples ranged from HNC to the Diploma in Social Work.

Timeframes for completion

Finally, a picture emerged of most of these candidates achieving awards in a reasonable timeframe — of 78 replies:

- 17% completed in less than a year,
- 50% in a year,
- 5% in 18 months,
- 23% in two years.

There were 4% who took three years or longer.

6 Discussion

In presenting some of the written material and working towards an interpretation of the range and the patterns represented, the numerical balance of different experience is reflected. They were weighted towards the high number of constructive responses to questions, even where some negativity about the SVQ process itself is expressed. The balance across types is shown and Type 5 (below) discusses the particular groupings of very negative questionnaires.

Probably one of the clearest articulations of the impact of SVQs in Care came from these line managers' comments in a focus group:

Staff become more aware of the organisation, of roles, training, library resources, policy and procedure, legal rights and constraints. The reflective benefits are that candidates become aware of process, and can begin to analyse using that concept. This has a positive impact on team work, and on empathy for service users and for managers. Understanding of the pressures on line managers, and increased respect for colleagues, follows.

The second manager added:

The success creates monsters in that staff advocate, empower, and challenge managers. In some ways the decisions forced by restricted resources are now more difficult as problems and compromise are not so easily accepted by confident, more knowledgeable and aware staff.

6.1 Possible typologies

The following groupings of responses can be suggested from an analysis of the quantitative and qualitative material when compared:

- Type 1 Highly positive about learning, assessment and qualification.
- Type 2 Positive about learning and development, some VQ reservations.
- Type 3 Positive but with reservations about agency or assessor performance.
- Type 4 Mixed position, often positive comments re. learning but negative re system.
- Type 5 Negative regarding VQ system and value of learning experience.

Candidates in particular do not always fit easily into one category. Scores and comments often reflect partial agreement, or differing interpretation of the question. For example, some specify that they were competent, clear or confident before the SVQ but have still benefited. Line managers less frequently express the same view. There are also a handful of occasions where candidates have chosen disagree responses but have submitted a range of positive written comments, suggesting that they may have ticked disagree mistakenly.

6.1a **Types 1, 2, and 3 — similarities**

These groupings represent between 80% and 90% of the responses. The scorings and comments confirm that understanding of the work, additional knowledge, its use in practice, the confidence and skill base of candidates, and their capacity to reflect, are all enhanced.

91% of candidates thought they were more reflective, and 90% of managers see candidates as emerging with improved skills. The most highly rated for strong agreement was confidence, where 35% of candidates and 50% of managers gave a strongly agree rating.

These scores are replicated in the qualitative material, where many candidates describe personal and professional change over the period of the SVQ achievement. Reported areas of knowledge change include legal, rights, financial, disability issues, an understanding of values and anti-discriminatory practice. Awareness of care and clinical practice issues are also frequently referred to. There are references to more empathy, and more understanding of service-users', managers' and candidates' own feelings, and their impact on the work. There are reports of increased writing and reporting skills, as well as self-confidence for speaking in groups, advocating for service-users, and feeling valued and accepted within teams and amongst other professionals. In the reflectiveness section, candidates and line managers report increased decisiveness and professionalism. There is also the implication that, for many, mutual trust increases, as does delegation of responsibility.

A number of comments, especially from line managers, suggest that in some units and agencies a change has occurred in a whole work culture as a result of investment in SVQs in Care.

A discussion of why these positives may be clustered in particular centres, agencies or sites, will follow this general examination of individual differences.

6.2 **Type 2**

These candidates and line managers differentiate between on the one hand difficulties experienced with SVQ language and structures, overly-complex evidence collection, and SVQ systems, and, on the other hand, a positive experience of personal and work performance change. As with Type 1 respondents, there are often very positive statements about personal learning, changes to career, engagement with reading around work tasks, enjoying some of the knowledge and skills built up, but here there are indications that SVQ assessment itself was seen as difficult to engage with in the initial stages, and even on completion is regarded as requiring simplification and streamlining.

Clearly here there is a large group of line managers who believe that even though the Revised Awards are an improvement, there is a need for further reduction of clutter and jargon in the process.

6.3 Type 3

Here respondents, particularly candidates, report issues of disorganisation of implementation from agency, or from line managers or assessors. Again, this group report positively about learning and change, and the impact of the experience on their confidence and skills, but claim that it has been achieved sometimes by their own efforts with little coherent support. Isolation from peer support is often a feature, though some of these candidates and line managers have clearly become culture carriers and comment on agency improvement as a result of their difficulties being acknowledged and built on.

There are a number of references to college-delivered SVQs in Care where tutors or peripatetic assessors are seen as effective, but where agencies — mainly health or private care settings — are described as not as recognising or valuing the candidates' change.

From a variety of settings these respondents are appreciative of the process and opportunity, despite some difficulties with structures and experiences of unequal opportunity.

6.4 Type 4

Mixed scorings — a small group of candidates and line managers who report positives for some areas of effectiveness, but have reservations about the overall experience and process. These responses are typified by an acknowledgement of change in candidate performance, but reservations about the SVQ systems and the way in which implementation has been handled in their agency. There is often reported a sense of continuing confusion, line managers as assessors feeling exposed by inadequate induction, candidates feeling isolated in working on issues not understood by peers or managers. There is often an implication that candidate and assessor have struggled, sometimes embarking on the process for the first time.

6.5 Type 5

Negative responses to SVQ and any learning process. Here there is a sense that some candidates and line managers, in some cases probably influencing each other, have undertaken awards reluctantly, and have sometimes maintained a belief that there was no need or opportunity to change work performance. Some describe the process as a purely paper exercise, and some regard themselves as already competent and receiving little or no added benefit from the SVQ. Given that a number of the line managers also regard the candidates as competent before the process, it raises questions about how in the same centres (few of these responses come from the same agency or centre) such different experiences and perceptions exist. Even here there are sometimes positive comments about gains, but the scoring implies that there is negativity about the system and process pertains.

For whatever reason, there are a handful of candidates who report what sound like very demoralising scenarios of poor communication and continual confusion about requirements, often matched with isolation from effective support.

6.6 Key questions revisited

Of the key questions addressed by the research a number of findings can be asserted on the basis of candidate self-perception, confirmed or qualified by line managers' responses.

There is strong evidence found for the positive effects of the SVQ process on both individual development and performance in the workplace.

For the vast majority of staff involved the SVQ assessment process incorporated a variety of learning methods and was perceived as addressing relevant needs. These were articulated in the qualitative material as addressing knowledge, skills and values gaps.

Generation of evidence

For a significant number, the structure and content of the evidencing process was perceived as a limiting or unnecessarily complicating factor (21% of candidates, 59% of line managers). Given that line managers are central to candidates' experience of work and the SVQ, and that they have worked with successful and unsuccessful candidates, this suggests improvements are required. The Care SVQs are under review and their new format may deal with some or all of the specific criticisms voiced.

Despite these criticisms, 79% of candidates rated the SVQ process as straightforward, though some qualified this response by saying that it became so after two or three Units were completed.

Commitment

The most significant components of a positive experience of assessment seem to be the combined commitment and constructiveness of assessor (whether line manager or not) and candidate. Some candidates seem to have achieved considerable personal and practice development even without well organised assessment or workplace arrangements.

A majority of all candidates reported spending 50% or more of their own time evidencing the award, and although many commented that agencies should do more to protect time, a surprising number made little of its intrusion. For most of those staff reporting a positive view of change, there has been an individual or group learning process that has enhanced understanding of work roles, confidence, and knowledge skill and values.

There is evidence that candidates have expanded their horizons, many entering formal education for the first time in adult life, becoming more assertive, taking on a more reflective approach to working with people at all levels.

Common factors in negative experiences?

When looking at the most negative scenarios reported, there is little clear consistency in terms of centre, agency or type of work, though the clear type 5 responses have a high correlation with comments about remoteness, either because of rural location, or through being part of a large nationally-spread organisational centre. This implies that physical distance from assessor, IV or peer support is important. Given that 15 of the 21 centres returned at least one negative candidate or line manager questionnaire (though from nine of the 15 centres there was only one from either candidate or line manager), the analysis underlines that even within largely positive centre returns, one resistant line manager, or a set of individual or organisational circumstances, can create problems for the learning opportunity. There is also a sense in a small number of questionnaires that candidates have probably received an unsatisfactory service from an assessor or the SVQ system locally.

What is difficult to isolate is the extent to which these problematic responses indicate centre variation in the delivery of SVQs. The variety of delivery models was striking even in undertaking focus group visits. Local authority, voluntary, private agencies, and groups of agencies, working through their own, college or independent centre provision models, present an array of different relationships between candidate, line manager and centre. Despite collecting information on types of centre, agency, service-user group, model, and number of assessors used, there was no outstanding difference that correlated with the most positive or negative scoring.

Candidates reported the highest level of dissatisfaction where the line manager was the only assessor, but this was only 15% of those with line managers as assessors — and this was the largest single group, representing 49% of the total sample. The fact that those with varied methods of assessor provision, including peripatetic assessors, received a higher proportion of positive feedback on the experience may confirm the difficulties of providing management and assessment simultaneously. This would not undervalue the many line managers providing positive support, learning and assessment experiences, in addition to managing services. It does, however, point up the tensions of trying to achieve all these roles.

Line managers themselves reported highest dissatisfaction where a combination of more than two models of assessment was used, particularly overlapping with the peripatetic, but again the numbers are very small — between 17% and 20%. Only two of the 70 line managers who returned questionnaires had not acted as assessors, and both were amongst the group of nine most negative responses. This may unrealistically weight the findings on negativity, decreasing the likelihood of line managers who have assessed experiencing difficulties or perceiving little change in candidate effectiveness.

Similarly, the number of assessors isn't a clear indication of negative perception of effectiveness — three assessors is the least popular (15%, based on 13 candidates), but having one assessor is rated less highly than having two (ie 12% of 50 with one, versus 10% of 22 with two). The margins are small, but there were several accounts of a second assessor retrieving a previously unsatisfactory situation.

The most negative statements accompany accounts of communication or assessment difficulties, followed by unsatisfactory attempts at resolution, or unresponsive systems. This seems to indicate again that within some centres or agencies, positive and negative scenarios occur, depending on individual managers' or assessors' performance.

Clusters of negative responses

The one larger cluster of negative responses does come from an agency dealing with children and adolescents and younger adults, which may relate to the residential child care research findings referred to in the earlier study, and to some of that sector's status and acceptance issues.

Assumptions about increased complexity in residential child care, and the politics of social care hierarchical differences have dogged the introduction of SVQs in this context. In the wider sample there are as many negative responses from candidates and line managers in adult services as those in children and young people overall. Interpretation from this kind of minor difference is speculative in such a small sample difference.

6.7 Centre typologies

There were six centres with no negative responses, and a further nine with only one negative. This may point as much to the importance of effective systems in centres, and cultures in agencies, as to any ineffectiveness in the SVQ in Care process (which cannot in any case be viewed separately).

Tentative interpretation of the material suggests three possible categories of centre:

6.7a **Category A: Integrated**

From some focus group centre questionnaires, and some postal centre returns, there were reports of positive change that replicated questionnaire comments and scores. Some of the focus groups presented a very constructive view of agency and centre practice. A number of centres clearly have ways of delivering SVQs and interpreting the requirements of the standards that minimise duplication and any sense of frustration that might otherwise have arisen. This appears to enable positive processes for candidates and line managers.

These centres are characterised by appreciation of the purpose, value and opportunity the SVQ provides, added to a capacity to create a constructive individual and organisational learning experience. Responses from these centres speak of a wide range of personal and professional change, and minimise attention to perceived difficulties with SVQs in Care.

Even in these centres, however, individual candidates and line managers occasionally struggle with the process. There was no particular kind of agency or centre exclusively associated with this category: local authority, voluntary, and private agencies displayed these characteristics.

It could be suggested these centres and their agencies have integrated SVQs positively.

6.7b **Category B: Partially integrated**

There is another set of responses that suggest much individual ownership and appreciation of the SVQ in Care, but where either difficulties with SVQ delivery, or organisational obstacles — sometimes only in parts — result in a mixed experience. The existence or movement of key individuals, especially in small agencies or centres, can strongly influence the enjoyment, learning and capacity to change of groups of people over time.

Here it could be suggested that ownership is patchy, and not fully accepted or supported by all levels of management, and so support issues vary in implementation. Here candidates — and health settings were specified in a number of questionnaires — feel they have changed and developed, but see their organisation as not recognising the value of the SVQ, or the knowledge and skills acquired. These centres' responses often acknowledged that systems and individual assessor/manager performance had negatively affected candidates in the past, but said that the organisation had or was beginning to address systems positively. The implication seemed to be that overall strategy has taken a long time to prove effective, or deal with individual and collective need to change.

Here integration of SVQs is improving, but is partial.

6.7c

Category C: As yet unintegrated

Given that it was easier to experience these responses at focus groups in dialogue, rather than through questionnaire alone, this category is very cautiously proposed. There appear to be a small number of centres where significant culture carriers have yet to accept the value and status of SVQs as a major strategy for workforce development. One feature of this type of debate surrounded reluctance to accept Care Commission recommendations on qualification levels, or the shift to SVQs in Care Homes that were previously Nursing Homes. Some managers reported being unconvinced, and the same individuals as assessors clearly had some difficulty delivering the SVQ assessment process as an integrated learning and development tool. There were a number of comments and scores that implied that, in organisations where SVQs were otherwise effective, there remain specific locations where candidates will undertake assessment within an overtly sceptical environment.

As suggested in the interpretation of individual responses, some of the negative comments suggest geographical remoteness, or the absence of a group experience to expand the range of connection with other learners. Cost factors clearly affect the possibility of shared learning in some locations, and it is possible that even in urban areas the separation of assessment from line management can enhance individual experience, leaving any change in the workplace as more difficult, to be tackled after the SVQ. Perhaps these cultures are more a reflection of agencies' difficulties, rather than any on the part of an SVQ centre. There were indications from some managers that SVQs were regarded as an additional burden, diminishing attention for the key tasks of the organisation.

The overall impression from the most negative individuals, and the most ambivalent agencies, is that the agenda for adopting SVQs in Care as a national strategy is not universally owned by care providers, despite increases in uptake.

These and other peripheral findings emphasise a workforce in transition, with all centres evolving. Candidates, line managers and organisations reflect a range of changing environmental factors.

7 Conclusions

- 7.1 The analysis of these largely positive findings on individual candidate experience needs to be balanced with the areas for improvement emerging from responses. Line managers indicate continuing difficulties with the language, structures and assessment processes, despite seeing the outcomes for candidates as extremely positive.
- 7.2 The different experiences identified through the material from this small survey, and an overall high indication of effectiveness, leaves firmer theorising about typologies speculative. Successful candidates' widely constructive responses to the whole process of the Revised Awards, despite continued criticism of language and model from a significant minority, suggest that for most the SVQ has become an important part of developing workforce and service capacity.
- 7.3 Overall, the indications are that a strong predictor of an unproductive experience is a negative line manager as assessor. The potential continuance, or marginalisation, of those who may undermine learning would require further exploration. It is important, despite evidence that some managers and candidates continue to resist engagement with the positives that are available through SVQs in Care, not to underestimate the task of revising and recreating quality awards which effectively test skills, knowledge and attributes.
- 7.4 The continuing belief in some quarters that SVQs can effectively be implemented as assessment alone may contribute to the limitations of some reported practice, albeit for a minority.
- 7.5 There also suggestions that a few organisations have fully integrated the best practice to minimise system difficulties. Most organisations seem now to support a largely positive experience, with a minority of pockets of resistance, and an acceptance that coherent strategy can significantly affect performance. In a few agencies it may be that practice varies too widely between units — certainly, some centres provided questionnaires that indicated absolute resistance to the SVQ in Care as an influence for change.
- 7.6 Perhaps the most significant finding, from the combination of focus groups and postal questionnaires, is that there is now a widespread acceptance of the value of SVQs in Care. They are seen as contributing to the improvement of services through investing in the learning of staff groups.
- For a minority they remain a system only for validating existing competence, which is approached reluctantly. The significant numbers amongst line managers, many of whom were part of the original SVQs in Care delivery, who still regard the systems and processes as requiring simplification and rationalisation, may be reassured by the next revision, due for 2004.

7.7

There emerges from this review a clear picture of adaptability and positive engagement with learning and assessment. The valuing of opportunities to learn, reflect and change, shown through most of the material received, suggests that the SVQs in Care, and their successor revisions, will continue to offer a previously disenfranchised group ways of improving practice, as well as individual career and personal development.

Appendix 1: References

Gavin Heron & Mono Chakrabarti

Impact of Scottish vocational qualifications on residential child care: have they fulfilled the promise?

Social Work Education, Vol. 21, No. 2, 2002

A.V. Sargeant

An exploratory study of the effects of progression towards National Vocational Qualifications on the occupational knowledge and care practice of social care workers

Social Work Education, Vol. 19, No. 6, 2000

Appendix 2: Candidates Questionnaire

SVQ Research Questionnaire Candidates

Guidance

The Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) is undertaking a small scale research project on the perceptions of successful candidates and their line managers of their experience of SVQs in Care. Please complete the short questionnaire overleaf circling your response on the scale. There are no right or wrong answers. The most important thing is to respond honestly based on how you feel.

Please return the questionnaire, sealed, in a stamped addressed envelope. Your questionnaire is anonymous and will be handled in the strictest of confidence. Individuals and organisations will not be identified in the research.

Questionnaires will be coded to enable comparisons of groups of answers, and to check any focus group and questionnaire sample differences. It is envisaged that a report on our findings will be available later in the year.

Please take a little time to note comments or examples in the spaces where appropriate, in addition to scoring agreement or disagreement with particular questions. Your comments will help us build a picture of the important strengths and weaknesses of the SVQ experience.

1. About you

1.1 What qualifications have you successfully completed?
(please tick as many as appropriate)

- SVQ Care Level 2
- SVQ Care Level 3
- HNC Social Care
- Caring for Children and Young People Level 3
- Promoting Independence Level 3
- Other
(Please specify, HNC Early Years, Degree etc)

1.2 What sector do you work in? (please tick)

- Local Authority
- Voluntary Organisation
- NHS
- Private Healthcare

1.3 Please also indicate the client group you are
working with (please tick)

- Children & Young People
- Adults
- Older People
- Other (please specify)

1.4 When did you start, and when complete, the SVQ
(month, year)

1.5 What kind of workplace assessment arrangements
were there?

- Line manager as assessor
- Peripatetic assessor
- Peer assessor
- Combination of the above

How many assessors did you have during the SVQ? Please specify.

2. Your experience of the process

Please respond to the statements below using the scale. Do not spend too long considering the statement. Please tick your response. An additional section is available where you can comment or give examples. There are no right or wrong answers. The most important thing is to respond honestly based on how you feel.
(Please tick boxes in 2.1 to 3.8)

2.1 I was clear about what was involved in undertaking an SVQ before I had registered for the award.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

Comment:

2.2 I found the process of gathering evidence and completing a portfolio straightforward.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

Comment:

2.3 What percentage of the SVQ was done in your own time/worktime?
(eg 20/80%, 50/50% etc)

2.4 I received adequate support from my workplace assessor in undertaking the various tasks associated with completing the SVQ.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

Comment:

2.5 Your SVQ assessment built on previous learning opportunities.

Yes No

Comment:

3. Your experience of the outcomes

3.1 Since undertaking the SVQ I now feel much clearer on my role within the workplace.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

Please give an example:

3.2 Since undertaking the SVQ I now feel more confident in carrying out my duties within the workplace.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

Please give an example:

3.3 Since undertaking the SVQ my knowledge base has increased.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

Please give an example of what you have learned:

3.4 Since undertaking the SVQ I have been able to draw on the knowledge base to use in my practice.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

Please give an example of how you used knowledge to help your practice:

3.5 Undertaking the SVQ has improved my practice.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

Please give an example of how you think your practice has changed:

If practice has not changed, please say why:

3.6 I tend to be more reflective in my practice since undertaking the SVQ.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

Please give an example:

3.7 The SVQ has helped me to gain a promoted post.

Yes No

Please specify promotion:

3.8 As a result of completing the SVQ I have pursued other certified learning opportunities.

Yes No

If yes, please specify:

3.9 Are there changes you have experienced as a result of undertaking the SVQ other than those mentioned above?

Please specify:

4. Other factors affecting how you experienced the SVQ and its impact for you and others (including service users and others).

In the section below please highlight anything else that you feel is important in helping SQA to understand your SVQ experience.

This could be anything from the support you received, assessment systems, the management of your workplace, or agency priorities and conditions as a whole.

Please refer to any personal or work circumstances that made a difference positively or negatively, and which this questionnaire has not covered.

Comments:

Thank you for your time and co-operation. Please return the questionnaire in the stamped addressed envelope provided.

Appendix 3: Line Managers Questionnaire

SVQ Research Questionnaire Line Managers

Guidance

The Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) is undertaking a small scale research project on the perceptions of successful candidates and line managers of their experience of SVQs in Care. Please complete the short questionnaire overleaf circling your response on the scale. There are no right or wrong answers. The most important thing is to respond honestly based on how you feel.

Please return the questionnaire, sealed, in a stamped addressed envelope. Your questionnaire is anonymous and will be handled in the strictest of confidence. Individuals and organisations will not be identified in the research.

Questionnaires will be coded to enable comparisons of groups of answers, and to check any focus groups and questionnaire sample differences. It is envisaged that a report on our findings will be available later in the year.

Please take a little time to note comments and examples in the spaces where appropriate, in addition to scoring agreement or disagreement with particular questions. Your comments will help us build a picture of the important strengths and weaknesses of the SVQ experience.

1 About your situation

1.1 What qualifications have your staff successfully completed?
(please tick as many as appropriate)

- SVQ Care Level 2
- SVQ Care Level 3
- HNC Social Care
- Caring for Children and Young People Level 3
- Promoting Independence Level 3
- Other
(Please specify, HNC Early Years, Degree etc)

1.2 What sector do you work in? (please tick)

- Local Authority
- Voluntary Organisation
- NHS
- Private Healthcare

1.2 Please also indicate the client group you are working with
(please tick)

- Children & Young People
- Adults
- Older People
- Other (please specify)

1.3 When did your staff first undertake/experience the SVQ
(month, year?)

1.4 What kind of workplace assessment arrangements were there? (Tick box)

- Line manager as assessor
- Peripatetic assessor
- Peer assessment
- Combination of the above

Any other assessor factors?

2 Your experience of the process

Please respond to the statements below using the scale. Do not spend too long considering the statement. Please tick your response. An additional section is available where you can comment or give examples. There are no right or wrong answers. The most important thing is to respond honestly based on how you feel. Please tick boxes in questions 2.1 to 3.8

2.1 Candidates were clear about what was involved in undertaking an SVQ before registering for the award.

- Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

Comment:

2.1a Were you as a line manager clear about what was involved?

Comment:

2.2 Candidates found the process of gathering evidence and completing a portfolio straightforward and easy to understand.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

Comment:

2.2a Did you as a line manager or assessor find the process straightforward?

Comment:

2.3 What percentage of assessment was done in own time/worktime?

Only answer this if you have been an assessor (eg 20/80%; 50/50%)

2.4 Workplace assessors received adequate support from the organisation in undertaking the various tasks associated with completing SVQs.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

Comment:

2.5 Was SVQ assessment connected to previous candidate training or learning opportunities?

Yes No

Comment:

3 Your experience of the outcomes

3.1 Since undertaking SVQs candidates now are much clearer on roles within the workplace.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

Please give an example:

3.2 Since undertaking SVQs candidates are now more confident in carrying out duties within the workplace.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

Please give an example:

3.3 Since undertaking SVQs candidates have increased their knowledge base.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

Please give an example of what they have learned:

3.4 Since undertaking SVQs candidates draw on the knowledge base for use in their practice.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

Please give an example of how they use knowledge to help their practice:

3.5 Undertaking of SVQs has improved practice.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

Please give an example of how you think their practice has changed:

If practice has not changed, please say why:

3.6 Staff tend to be more reflective in practice since undertaking their SVQ.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

Please give an example:

3.7 The SVQ has helped candidates gain a promoted post.

eg all most a few none

Please specify promotions:

3.8 As a result of completing their SVQ candidates have pursued other certified learning opportunities.

Yes No

If yes, please specify:

3.9 Are there changes in candidates undertaking the SVQ in Care, or in your experience as line manager, other than those mentioned above?

Please specify:



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