

The effectiveness of SVQs in Care:

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

This is a brief summary of the main findings (the full project report can be ordered from SQA's Customer Contact Centre by quoting publication code DE2048).

1 Background

SQA (with assistance from the Scottish Social Services Council) commissioned research into the effects of SVQ completion on candidate work performance, and into a number of contextual factors, including the effectiveness of the SVQ assessment systems and processes in enabling and confirming learning and skills.

Key issues examined included the impact on individual and service performance, the relationship between assessment and learning processes, the design of SVQs in Care, and what makes a difference in achieving positive outcomes.

2 Outline of research

- **Sample:** 21 randomly selected SVQ centres were surveyed. Seven of these were sampled through postal questionnaires and 14 through questionnaires and focus groups. Centres provided contact with successfully-completed candidates, and with line managers whose staff have undertaken the Care SVQs.
- **Satisfaction with effects on work performance and the SVQ process:** The 14 focus groups and 179 questionnaire responses (109 from candidates, 70 from line managers) 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.
- **Learning and change:** Regarding effectiveness in achieving learning and change 80% of responses were consistently positive, 10% a mixture of positive with some reservations, with under 10% consistently critical of impact.
- **SVQ systems and processes:** 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 the SVQ itself.
- **Delivery difficulties:** 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.
- **Organisational cultures:** The different cultures of learning and practice reflected in the quantitative and qualitative material indicate both considerable achievement of change and differing experiences of what is a nationally-standardised assessment process.



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- **Variable experiences across centres and agencies:**
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 there are differences in the quality of experience, these findings suggest that practices at the level of workplace, manager or assessor significantly affect outcomes — positively or negatively.
- **Candidate and line manager commitment and positiveness:**
The prevalence of positive accounts of learning and development indicates the importance of openness and committed application by the majority of candidates and line managers. The importance of preparation is also emphasised.
- **Investment in SVQs in Care:** The extent to which these awards — which are delivered through the workplace but usually achieved by the use of candidates' own time as well — are effective, is a reflection of the commitment of those individuals and organisations which have invested in raising standards and in the SVQ as a significant part of learning and competence development.

3 Effectiveness findings:

Impact on work performance

Questionnaires recorded candidates' and line managers' perceptions of the impact on practice of successful completion of level 2 and level 3 in Care, Promoting Independence level 3, or Caring for Children and Young People level 3.

Agreement or disagreement with statements about the impact of SVQs on role clarity, confidence, knowledge, application of knowledge, practice skills and reflectiveness were scored as follows:

Candidates and line managers who agreed or strongly agreed on improvements in:

Have there been improvements in:	% of candidates agreeing or strongly agreeing	% of line managers agreeing or strongly agreeing
Role clarity	83%	83%
Confidence	89%	84%
Knowledge	90%	87%
Applying knowledge	89%	83%
Practice skills	88%	90%
Reflectiveness	91%	87%

Some quotations from the 1,006 qualitative comments also recorded give a flavour of the similarities and differences amongst respondents:

Role clarity

Line managers:

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.

Did not provide additional clarity as clarity was already there — 'like teaching granny to suck eggs'.

Confidence

Line manager:

SVQ alone can't make people more confident, but as part of a staff development programme it can.

Knowledge

Candidate:

More sure of self, make decisions faster and more independently.

Knowledge application

Candidate:

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.

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.

SVQ is a written exercise and cannot be compared with working on the job, dealing with diverse issues as they arise.

Reflectiveness

Candidate:

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.

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.

4 SVQ process and systems

This group of questions relate to whether candidates were clear about SVQs before registration, whether gathering evidence and completing a portfolio was straightforward, and whether assessors or the SVQ centre were adequately supportive. The specific SVQs surveyed were levels 2 and 3 in Care, Promoting Independence level 3, and Caring for Children and Young People level 3.

Statement:	% of candidates agreeing or strongly agreeing	% of line managers agreeing or strongly agreeing
SVQ process was clear to candidates at outset	64%	53%
Evidence and portfolio was straightforward	79%	41%
Assessor and VQ systems were supportive	89%	76%

Line managers, who will have experienced several assessments, not necessarily all successful, score differently from the successful candidates in the survey. Quotations from the comments submitted again illustrate a range of views.

Candidate clarity at outset of process

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.

Straightforwardness of evidence-gathering and portfolio

Candidate:

Enjoyed gathering evidence, have found it extremely interesting.

Felt confused throughout the whole process.

Candidate support from assessor, line manager support from centre

Candidate:

Workplace assessor was tower of strength, motivated me... but assessor also had too much else to do.

Line manager:

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 onto the workload with no recognition of the extra work involved.

Context

Candidates and line managers also commented on issues that impacted on their experience of the SVQ process, from personal and organisational perspectives, as well as impressions of the SVQ assessment system.

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, I do feel there is room for improvement re layout and format of Units. Many of the knowledge points are difficult to understand.



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.

SVQ has good parts to it, but 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 undertaking it are largely non-academic.

5 Analysis of differences

The full report discusses the detailed findings and suggests a number of interpretations of the data, and ideas for further exploration. The most effective SVQ practice and process is described in two quotations from line managers in focus groups:

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 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.

Five varieties of individual respondent experience are suggested:

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 (less than 10%).

Type 1-3 account for over 80% of respondents.

Agency and centre environment

There is also a description of how three categories of centre suggest themselves in terms of organisational effectiveness in implementing SVQs in Care. Agencies and centres appear to range from **Integrated**, **Partially Integrated**, to **Not Yet Integrated** positions in terms of acceptance and positive working with the assessment and learning processes. The work of managing and delivering best practice in assessment is clearly considerable and continuous.

Integrated:	Centres where staff at all levels take ownership of SVQs
Partially Integrated:	Centres where ownership is patchy
Not yet Integrated:	Centres where SVQs are not part of workforce development



6 Conclusions

- **Positive findings but continued reservations about aspects of SVQ content:** The analysis of these largely positive findings on individual candidate experience should be balanced with attention to areas for improvement identified in responses. Line managers indicate continuing difficulties with the language, structures and assessment processes, despite seeing the outcomes for candidates as extremely positive.
- **Further work on causation:** The different experiences identified through this small survey, and an overall high indication of effectiveness, means more work needs to be done on typologies and causation. Successful candidates' own widely-constructive response to the whole process of the Revised Awards, despite continued criticism of language and model from a minority, suggests that for most the SVQ has become an important part of developing workforce and service capacity.
- **Supports:** Overall indications are that some candidates succeed with less than ideal supports, but a strong predictor of a poor experience is a line manager or assessor who is negative about the qualification. 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 have difficulty in engaging with the positives of SVQs in Care, not to underestimate the task of revising and reshaping quality awards which most effectively test skills, knowledge and attributes.

About the author

Ray Pavey is an Independent Social Work and Education Consultant. A qualified teacher and social worker he became a local authority staff development manager before moving to CCETSW in 1997. He held responsibilities for programme monitoring and design, then at TOPSS Scotland and the Scottish Social Services Council for workforce planning. Previous research was of social workers' perceptions and he has contributed to the British Journal of Social Work. Since 2002 he has held a number of consultancy contracts with national and local social work education projects.

- **Learning and assessment:** 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.
- **Organisational practice:** There are indications that some organisations have fully integrated the best practice to minimise system difficulties. Most organisations seem now to support a largely positive experience, with pockets of resistance, and 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.
- **Acceptance, but need for revision:** There is now a widespread, though not universal, acceptance of the value of SVQs in Care for changing practice. 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 for only validating existing competence, 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 to be complete in 2004.
- **Positive engagement:** There emerges from this review a clear picture of adaptability and of positive engagement with learning and assessment from most candidates and line managers. The value attached to opportunities to learn, to reflecting this learning and to changing in its light, that is shown by most of the responses, suggests that the SVQs in Care will continue to offer a previously disenfranchised group ways of improving practice. For individuals, both career and personal development have clearly been enhanced by these competence frameworks.

If you would like any further clarification on any points raised in this extract, please contact any of the Care Scotland Team at:

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