

NETWORK NEWS - ISSUE 4

Welcome to the fourth issue of our on-line newsletter.

This month we have an important article by Sara Coldicott, who raises the fundamental issue of the role of awarding bodies in vocational assessment. Sara is writing in the context of current developments in vocational qualifications and of QCA's consultations about a national Framework for Achievement. She argues that the exam boards' traditional role has been to establish a standard, to develop a way of measuring students' performances against that standard and to carry out the measuring process reliably. She suggests that unless the awarding bodies are at the heart of any new system of vocational qualifications, the fundamental issues of the underlying standards and their maintenance could be 'lost'.

Sara looks back over the period of the introduction and establishment of the NVQ system and deduces some lessons to be learned from that. Her aim is to suggest ways in which the public might have trust in any new system that might be devised, and she gives practical suggestions for how awarding bodies can collaborate to support a new system.

Important and controversial issues are referred to in Sara's article. If you have had experience, or have particular knowledge or opinions about any of them, why not send in a comment to the discussion forum?

This month Simon Ball will be in the discussion hot seat. Simon works for TechDis, which is a publicly funded group whose remit is to investigate the challenges which students who have special needs encounter when they use on-screen learning materials and assessments. Simon knows a lot about the implications of the Disability Discrimination Act as well as about how the use of IT can be made more inclusive. This will be a good opportunity to raise questions and issues with him on these and other points.

Finally, we have advance news of the launch of our new website, 'Assessnet', which will be available to you soon. More about that next month!



Andrew Watts
Director
Cambridge Assessment Network

Contents

Regular Features

- details of Cambridge Assessment Network courses and events, plus information on national and international conferences, events and new publications
- a round-up of the month's e-discussions
- articles from members of the education and assessment community
- press articles to stimulate debate
- job opportunities within Cambridge Assessment
- news of Cambridge Assessment products and projects

What else would you like to see in your newsletter? E-mail us at: thenetwork@cambridgeassessment.org.uk.

Details of Cambridge Assessment Network Courses and Events

The Certificate Programme in the Principles and Practice of Assessment

STOP PRESS!! THIS COURSE IS ALMOST FULLY SUBSCRIBED – ONLY 2 SPACES REMAINING!

The Cambridge Assessment Network's certificate course (run in collaboration with the University of Cambridge Institute of Continuing Education) in **the Principles and Practice of Assessment**, is due to start **next week**.

The course is designed in four modules, each lasting around eight weeks, and will take place in evening classes (plus one Saturday day-school). The evening classes for the first course starting on 28 February will be held at Homerton College, Cambridge. This first course attracts a specially reduced introductory fee of only £250 per module.

The course will be run again from September 2006 in Coventry. The fees for the September start date will be approximately £400 per module.

For further information on this course please contact: thenetwork@cambridgeassessment.org.uk.

For more information about the University of Cambridge Institute of Continuing Education, visit www.cont-ed.cam.ac.uk.

An Introduction to The Principles of Assessment - A Short Course

This one-day course is aimed at people interested in learning about the basic principles of assessment. It is delivered on-line and/or face-to-face and is available from the Cambridge Assessment Network.

The aims of the course are to:

- *provide you with an understanding of the general principles of assessment*
- *help you to apply these principles in your particular context*
- *offer a rationale for the work of the unitary awarding bodies*
- *open the door to discussion of the wider issues relating to assessment*

The course can be delivered from our offices in Cambridge or at your own venue and can be adapted to suit your needs and requirements.

The Cambridge Assessment Network can also provide affordable courses on a whole range of assessment-related subjects tailored specifically to your needs. For further information on the courses above, or for details of how we can help with a bespoke course, please contact us at thenetwork@cambridgeassessment.org.uk.

National and International Conferences, Events and New Publications

4th E-Assessment Question Conference and Exhibition – 2/3 March 2006

<http://www.e-assessment-question.co.uk/>

The Education Show – 9/11 March 2006

<http://www.education-show.co.uk/>

'Assessment for Learning Conference' – 13/14 March 2006

Incorporated Association of Preparatory Schools (IAPS)

<http://www.iaps.org.uk/courses/displayevent.asp?ID=223>

'Assessment for Excellence'

3rd Biennial Joint Northumbria/EARLI SIG Assessment Conference – 30/1 September 2006

http://northumbria.ac.uk/cetl_af/assessment2006/

English Teaching Professional (ETP! Live 2006) – 22/23 September 2006

<http://www.etprofessional.com/content/view/52/40/>

A Round-Up of This Month's E-discussions

The main discussion theme this month has been the question “who assesses the assessors?” and the issue of peer review, first posted by Sandra Gibson in her introductory email. Some of the comments you made in included:

'The problem with going down the road of who assesses the assessors is that it inevitably leads to the question of who assesses the assessors of assessors, and the whole thing gets a bit silly and counterproductive.'

'...add to that the professionalism of every almost every examiner I have met it would suggest that examiner assessors would be just an added and unnecessary nuisance.'

'I think some disciplines can learn a lot from each other in peer review.'

'I've mainly used peer review for assessing teaching delivery styles and their effectiveness, and found outside subject peer reviewing more constructive than within my specialist area.'

'The purpose has to be made clear to all participants as does the value you perceive to be gained from undertaking the review...Don't take it personally.'

Keep the discussions going! Let us know more about what you think about these issues, or begin a new discussion thread on your own topic. If you are a registered list subscriber, you can see the discussion archives at <http://lists.ucl.ac.uk/lists/private/assessment-network-discuss/> or <http://lists.ucl.ac.uk/lists/private/assessment-network-discuss-staff/>

Articles from Members of the Assessment Community

This month's article is by Sara Coldicott, Director of Vocational Assessment within OCR. The article was written in response to the QCA's new Framework for Achievement (see <http://www.qca.org.uk/10710.html> for details) and focuses on the implications of the framework on the awarding bodies.

Implications of the Framework for Achievement on awarding bodies' assessment and quality assurance responsibilities

Introduction

The sections on assessment and grading in the Framework for Achievement consultation were responded to mainly by awarding bodies, professional bodies and Sector Skills Councils. It would appear that, whilst there was broad and consistent support for a revised regulatory system, the awarding body responses raised a greater number of concerns in this area than those from other groups. This paper attempts to highlight some of the assessment related issues which underpin that concern.

In the context of the FfA consultation, much has been written about the role and responsibilities of awarding bodies. In essence, however, it is a very straightforward role. The awarding body is there to do three things:

- articulate a standard;
- develop a valid measuring instrument or system;
- carry out the measuring process reliably.

Whatever changes there are, it is important that these fundamental components are not overlooked. Some of the proposals for the FfA seem to suggest that the system could exist without them being explicitly addressed - it is yet another issue as to whether they continue to be the *raison d'être* of the awarding bodies. Similarly, there appears to be a danger that the mechanisms which regulate them may also disappear; these in combination could mean that the whole issue of maintenance of standards will be lost within vocational assessment. In place of this we seem to be offered a system in which the key feature is its rules of combination and where measurement capability and integrity comes a poor second.

The report notes that, for there to be comparability of assessment outcomes across awarding bodies and qualifications within the proposed arrangements, it will be necessary to ensure that the assessment criteria of individual units are clear, robust and capable of being used to make judgements about the validity of particular assessment methods and evidence requirements. There is no indication on how this is to be achieved, but the theme of this paper is to suggest that more is necessary than a title, a level, learning outcomes, a set of assessment criteria and a credit value.

The NVQ structure as a paradigm for the Framework for Achievement?

We have, in the NVQ system, something which is remarkably close to the notion of a Framework for Achievement, but if it is an exemplar there are also lessons to be learnt and mistakes to be avoided.

The NVQ system embodies the concept of common units. This is based on three shared principles:

- the common bank of units (the National Occupational Standards);
- a well understood and universally applied assessment methodology (candidates have to achieve all the criteria and have all the underpinning knowledge);
- a commonly applied assessment and quality assurance infrastructure (qualified assessors, internal and external verifiers) which is externally regulated to a detailed and mature code of practice.

Furthermore, NVQs are essentially designed to make a clear judgement between competence and absence of competence as defined in a workplace. Whilst this is not simple, it requires a less sophisticated measurement system than an assessment which is designed to judge acquisition of knowledge, for which there could be a set of differentiated achievements.

The Framework for Achievement is not just about occupational and workplace qualifications. The current National Qualifications Framework encompasses qualifications for many purposes and it would be making the same mistake as in the early 1980s to believe that an occupational framework could provide the complete system. It took the NQF to legitimise a greater range of qualifications and the FfA should be building on this rather than risking the creation of a blackmarket qualifications economy because valued

products do not fit a new philosophy.

It has taken twenty years to reach a level of confidence with the NVQ system and even then it is not infrequently subjected to public scorn and lack of confidence. To lose the expertise currently invested in other forms of assessment, in order to present an apparently simple picture of common units, would undoubtedly lead to lack of credibility in vocational assessment at a time when the need is to strengthen this credibility.

Much has been proposed recently on reducing bureaucracy and in nearly every case it is within the NVQ framework that the greatest potential is recognised. It would be unfortunate if that aspect of NVQs also became a feature of the Framework for Achievement.

What gives a unit/qualification its standard?

There is an assumption in the proposals that a standard is contained entirely within the title, learning outcomes and assessment criteria of the unit and that, given these elements, a unit can be drawn out of the bank by any number of awarding bodies and applied in such a way that the outcome of the ensuing measuring activities are all entirely comparable. Except in exceptionally mechanistic or technically precise activities this is unlikely. An awarding body will need to be able to derive a standard from a unit, find ways to benchmark it against others offering that unit and develop the assessment instruments or processes which will allow reliable measurement against that standard time after time.

In NVQs this has been achieved through years of standards development through which participants have achieved a common understanding. This has been coupled with the derivation by groups of awarding bodies (usually a limited, manageable number) working together on assessment guidance or assessment strategies in order to exemplify the standard.

In qualifications with externally examined elements, more precise documentation is drawn up which ensures the reliability of the assessment instrument and this will be supported by sample assessment materials and mark schemes. It is necessary to go no further than the work done on General Qualifications to appreciate the technical demands which achieving comparability makes. It would be unfortunate if the high expectations in that arena were seen as unnecessary in vocational qualifications - a further example of the lack of status between the two.

Distinguishing a system of mutual recognition from a system of common units

There are very different issues relating to a credit framework and to one which is predicated on the concept of common units. The QCA report of the FfA consultation suggests that awarding body concerns over common units would disappear if respondents had had experience of working with credit systems. This is not the case as good credit systems do not flourish by default. There are a number of ways in which they can be managed, but in all cases this involves a significant technical input and decision-making process.

The concerns over common units relate to the fact that an apparently identical unit will be offered by a potentially unlimited number of awarding bodies with little in place to ensure that the outcomes are consistent. In a reputable credit-based system significant work would be carried out to confirm that, whilst units may not be identical, they have an equal value and usefulness within a qualification.

An issue of 'trust' or of 'comparability'?

The responses in relation to common units seem in some way to have focused on, or been reduced to, a debate about the extent to which competitor awarding bodies trust one another and concerns about whether a competitor will offer an apparently identical unit which is actually 'easier' than others. Whilst there are real concerns over the dangers of 'dumbing down' this has had the effect of diminishing a justifiable concern about comparability of standards to one about competitive positions. This is a debate which would be seen as perfectly legitimate in the general qualifications arena. It should be remembered that we are about to enter a period of 14-19 qualifications development where the intention is for vocational and general qualifications to sit alongside one another within Diplomas. There is a responsibility on all of us to create as much parity between the two as is possible.

Assessment is a technical activity which should focus on absolute, rather than relative, standards. The awarding body concerns here are that an absolute standard is difficult to articulate and yet there seems to be a belief that any awarding body, whether it has the relevant experience of sector or assessment type, can replicate a standard reliably using very limited information.

Issues of comparability and the role of the regulator

In any industry it is a natural response to welcome a reduction in the level of regulation imposed, and the responses in the report are predictable in that they support an apparent light touch. This is proposed through less regulation of individual qualifications and greater monitoring of awarding body systems. There is, however, an interpretation of this shift which could lead to greater regulation of the business but with less of a role in ensuring consistency of standards. Without this level of scrutiny, it will be difficult for awarding bodies to accept that the outcome of all awards against a unit are of the same standard and carried out with the same degree of reliability.

There appears to be a suggestion that comparability would be aided by restricting the use of different types of assessment instruments. Whilst this may be true, it is an artificial means of ensuring reliability. (An assessment-related metaphor would be to use a single examiner to mark all scripts rather than ensuring that a mark scheme is comprehensive and markers are all appropriately trained.) It could be argued that a common form of assessment is less likely to give comparable outcomes if the standard has not been articulated, than a range of assessment forms which are all focussed on a recognised standard. An analogy here should be GCSEs or A Levels. There is a confidence that the awarding bodies involved in the assessment of a subject will use different mixes of external and internal assessment but that the ensuing standard will be comparable. To achieve this requires technical expertise and carries a cost. But it is only by such means that the public confidence is secured.

Our experience of assessment arrangements being devised or controlled by third parties who are not then responsible for their operation has not been a positive one. To subject the whole system to the kind of bedding-in process experienced in the introduction of NVQs, GNVQs and Key Skills would not seem to be an option. The initial iterations of these, and some would argue the final ones, were all onerous and costly without delivering a high degree of reliability. They thus had the effect of creating unnecessarily burdensome assessment, the effects of which were felt by both the learners and their teachers/trainers.

Allied to this is a danger in separating content and assessment development; the resulting instrument is likely to be cumbersome and less fit for its purpose than if the two had been worked up in tandem.

Is grading a necessary feature of a vocational awarding system?

Responses to the questions on grading in the Framework consultation showed a pragmatic approach and undoubtedly pragmatism will be required to resolve the issues in this area.

There are a number of purposes of grading

- to distinguish between candidates eg in competitive situations such as entry to higher education;
- to achieve parity with other qualifications;
- to allow vocational components to be aggregated into a larger whole;
- to satisfy customer demand for a system which rewards higher achievement.

It is a surprising fact that, even amongst adult learners, there is real demand for the form of feedback which a finely graded system offers. From an awarding body point of view, one can be ambivalent about the value of such information, but there is no reason to deny it to candidates provided that the base for making such distinctions is sound. In occupational qualifications where the only judgement being made is confirmation of competence, then this would be entirely inappropriate. Where it is legitimate the basis of grading will vary from a percentage mark system based on positive marking of a knowledge-based subject area to criteria relating to specific grades for criterion-referenced assessments. Whilst criterion-related grading is likely to fit transparently with the requirement for units to be expressed in learning outcomes, there could be issues for a grading judgement made on a straight accumulation of marks which does not ensure that the higher grades are achieved through qualitatively better work.

It would be easy to envisage a vocational qualifications system in which grading did not feature, and where this could be compensated for by a more finely-tuned set of levels. However this would require such cultural change that it seems essential that there is provision for at least some sets of vocational qualifications to have grading attached.

There currently exists a plethora of grading systems where clearly there has been no attempt to standardise or regulate. Here is an area where the regulators and awarding bodies could collaborate, irrespective of the Framework for Achievement, to the development of grade descriptors and, ultimately, a common menu of grades according to qualification type. Failure to address this at an early stage could lead to arbitrary decisions being made, or even decisions made which are influenced more by funding implications than by appropriateness to the content or purpose of the qualification.

Grading of components of the 14-19 Diploma

In discussions on the 14-19 Diploma, the need for grading of all qualifications, including NVQs, was proposed. It is interesting to note that it was the awarding bodies, rather than employer representative or regulators, who challenged the appropriateness of grading occupational qualifications. This, however, is an issue which is likely to re-emerge if NVQs (or parts of them) are identified by Sector Skills Councils as being components of the specialised Diplomas.

It now seems obvious that vocational qualifications primarily designed for pre-19 learners will need to include grading systems which allow comparison, if not aggregation, with General Qualifications. If the pre- and post-19 frameworks are to articulate and we are to avoid proliferation of qualifications, this will inevitably have an impact on a considerable range of the adult provision.

Grading as a feature of the unit or the qualification?

Grading of a qualification can be achieved only through the grading of units - there is no facility for grading a qualification without the mechanisms to do so being included in the units. The units need to be designed with grading in mind if that is how they are to be used. Grading cannot simply be part of the rules of combination, and treated as some kind of bolt on approach which is unlikely to have technical credibility. Grading demands technical expertise of a specialist nature within the awarding body and this is yet another instance where there is potential for inconsistencies in standard if units are drawn from a common bank and used in a variety of ways.

There are also implications of grading for a credit system. The most transparent approach would be to credit rate units irrespective of grading, with the grade reported as an additional feature. However, the UCAS tariff, Performance Indicators and funding all use grades to differentiate the rating of a qualification. There will inevitably be confusion (but also a good rationale) for taking a different approach in a credit rating to any of the points systems which will inevitably co-exist.

Conclusions

Underpinning any decisions made on the Adult Framework should be an understanding of their implications in relation to 14-19 provision and practice. Additionally, the following conclusions could be drawn from taking an assessment focussed view of the proposals:

- A system of credit and of mutual recognition, whilst administratively onerous, does not present the potential assessment difficulties which would be created in a system of common units.
- The deployment of 'common' assessments by a large and diverse group of awarding bodies would require more, not less, quality assurance, standardisation and regulatory activity.
- Restricting or straight-jacketing assessment models must not be used as an alternative to ensuring common standards.
- Grading is likely to be a necessary feature of many UK qualifications and therefore it is incumbent upon regulators and awarding bodies to develop a mutually agreed specification for grading qualification types.

What do you think about Sara's arguments? Do you agree with her? Whatever your views on the subject, why not use the forum provided by the Cambridge Assessment Network (i.e. this discussion list!) to share your comments with others?

Send your comments to assessment-network-discuss@lists.ucles.org.uk or assessment-network-discuss-staff@lists.ucles.org.uk (Cambridge Assessment staff only).

Press Articles to Stimulate Debate

Please do comment on the articles below. Have you seen any other news items this month that you'd like to discuss?

Faith schools are to teach pupils about other religions as well as their own, leaders of the major faiths have said. See this article at:

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/4736810.stm>

Germany's education system has been severely criticised by a UN special rapporteur who carried out an eight-day inspection of the country's schools. See this article at:

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/4736910.stm>

An article on plagiarism and what the consequences should be for students. See this article at:

<http://education.guardian.co.uk/higher/comment/story/0,,1714001,00.html>

This article is about learning styles and personalized learning. See this article at:

<http://education.guardian.co.uk/schools/comment/story/0,,1713950,00.html>

Disputes over lecturers' pay could affect examinations this summer. See this article at:

<http://education.independent.co.uk/news/article346724.ece>

And finally, an article about a project to teach school students in their ethnic language has been scrapped. See this article at:

<http://education.independent.co.uk/news/article346941.ece>

Job Opportunities Within Cambridge Assessment

For details of opportunities at Cambridge Assessment, please visit our website at

<http://www.cambridgeassessment.org.uk/workingforucles/>.

News of Cambridge Assessment Products and Projects

achieve – our formative assessment offering with Harcourt Assessment

Working with leading educational publisher Harcourt Education, Cambridge Assessment has developed **achieve**, an interactive 'assessment for learning' system that supports teachers in the implementation of formative assessment in the classroom.

See <http://www.cambridgeassessment.org.uk/newdevelopments/achieve/> for further details.

We hope you have enjoyed this issue of Network News. Issue 5 will be out in April.

Please send any feedback on the newsletter, and any articles that you may like to contribute to Issue 5, to: thenetwork@cambridgeassessment.org.uk.

We look forward to hearing from you!
