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Comparability study of NVQ assessment practice

Call handling operations

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Contents

Executive summary	2
Introduction	2
Methodology	2
Findings	3
Conclusions	4
Summary of recommendations	4
Introduction	6
Background	7
Purpose	8
Methodology	9
Details of the study sample	11
Profile of learners	11
The call handling sector	12
Profile of centres	12
Units reviewed	14
Arrangements for assessment	16
Quality of evidence	18
Detailed findings	20
Assessment practices	20
General observations on resources	20
Retention and achievement	21
Factors facilitating assessment	21
Factors inhibiting assessment	22
Strengths and weaknesses directly related to assessment	22
Programme design and acceptance	25
External verification	25
Conclusions	26
Recommendations	28
Issues for e-skills UK	28
Issues for awarding bodies	28
Issues for centres	29
Appendix: Glossary of awarding bodies in the study	30

Executive summary

Introduction

This comparability study forms part of the regulatory authorities' ongoing programme of quality assurance monitoring of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs). This particular study examined the consistency and quality of assessment practices within the suite of NVQ qualifications in call handling operations at levels 2, 3 and 4. The qualifications are offered by a range of awarding bodies: City & Guilds, Edexcel, the London Chamber of Commerce and Industry – now Education Development International (EDI) plc – and OCR. Qualifications in call handling were derived from previous customer service and IT awards. They sit within the customer service area of learning, and are generally considered to be in a 'new qualification area' introduced in response to the rapid growth in telecommunications and, in particular, the growth of call centres in modern society.

The study commenced in November 2004 and was completed during the first week of March 2005. Three scrutineers, and a team leader, were recruited by QCA to conduct the study across employers, colleges and private training providers. The scrutineers have considerable expertise in the management, implementation and audit of NVQs and other programmes in call handling. The study concentrated on assessment practices, assessment records and resources.

Methodology

The team inspected evidence from candidates and interviewed candidates and assessors in 42 centres. Data collection was based on a common instrument provided by QCA. The methodology used in the study imitates the current external verification system. Scrutineers judge the quality and consistency of assessors' decisions and practice against standards. Where reports from prior external verifier visits were available, the scrutineers made a note of this, but the report reflects analysis only of their own evaluation of candidate work.

The sample consisted of 42 centres selected on the basis of qualification types, number of learners and geographical spread across England and Wales. The centres included large and small employers and a significant number of public and private, funded and non-funded, centres throughout England and Wales, showing the diverse range of organisations involved in or using call handling as part of their business.

Findings

The scrutiny team was asked to make a number of judgements, the most fundamental of which was whether the evidence within the learners' portfolios met the national occupational standards and the NVQ guidelines. Overall 73 per cent of the assessment decisions met the standards and 27 per cent did not.

The general strengths and weaknesses noted across the sample are listed below. To support these findings the scrutiny team collected and recorded the centres' self-assessment strengths and weaknesses relating to the area of learning. The team found some additional shortfalls to those recorded by the centres themselves, particularly in assessment practice within funded provision.

Strengths

The following were identified as strengths in some of the centres in the sample:

- direct observation was frequently used as the primary method of evidence collection
- assessment and support materials were effective and well constructed
- there are some excellent training facilities in employer-based, non-funded centres
- assessors were developed and recruited from within the employee base
- there were examples among employers of good integration of induction programmes with initial training
- innovative use of other NVQ units to support programmes and learners' experience was shown.

Weaknesses

The following were identified as weaknesses in some of the centres in the sample:

- evidence was found to be insufficient and not always valid
- access to assessment was poor, as a result of demands by employers, lack of assessors and distances to employers' sites
- retention and achievement rates were poor
- rigour was lacking, and practice within internal verification was inconsistent
- there was a lack of specific occupational experience among training providers and external audit staff
- standardisation across assessor staff was lacking
- progression was slow, caused by assessment and access issues
- employers and providers showed poor understanding of qualification delivery requirements.

Conclusions

The main areas of weakness in current assessment practice have been identified as sufficiency and validity of evidence. This can be attributed to lack of assessment standardisation; poor implementation and use of observation practices, assessment methods and assessment feedback; and a lack of occupational and assessment expertise, affecting the quality of assessors' judgements.

Access to assessment is a problem for the sector. This stems from the diverse range of employment contexts and operations using call handling services and the lack of specific occupational expertise, combined with a lack of assessment expertise. There is also confusion over the roles of those participating in assessment and over the responsibilities and level of engagement of employers. The design of the qualifications reveals significant omissions that affect their relevance for learners and different employment contexts, as well as poor-quality guidance documentation for their delivery. The qualifications in their current format tend to disregard a number of new and growing sectors that require such guidance.

Summary of recommendations

Issues for e-skills UK

- Qualifications in this rapidly growing sector need to apply to a wide range of operational and employer contexts. Optional pathways must be kept as relevant as possible to learners' needs and different employer contexts. Vocational qualifications in this area would benefit from more of a 'customer service' rather than an 'IT' orientation and should be shorter and take less time to achieve.
- These NVQ qualifications do little to support, recognise or address some of the major concerns experienced by call handling operatives. Stress management, conflict management, harassment and hoax calls are just some of the significant factors that need to be taken into consideration by the standards in offering scope for development of the qualifications.

Issues for awarding bodies

- Awarding bodies should, through external verification, ensure that centres' systems provide an auditable trail so that claims for certification can be substantiated.
- Awarding bodies should consider expanding standardised guidance documentation by including a range of contextualised examples and featuring this in training for assessors and internal verifiers. In particular, they should ensure, through verification, that this guidance is available in remote learning centres.

Centres could be encouraged through this guidance to be more resourceful and to use a wider range of assessment methods and materials, as used in the sector.

- It would be appropriate for external verifiers (EVs) to undergo additional standardisation and training to help them cope with the wide diversity of call handling contexts. EVs need to be more vigilant in their sampling and encourage continuing professional development for assessors in centres where assessment practice is limited.

Issues for centres

- Centres should encourage employers to engage more fully in qualifications delivery. Their role and responsibilities should be clarified through service agreements that are regularly monitored as part of the quality assurance system.
- An imaginative and constructive approach is required to address the problem of access to assessment – covering opportunities for learners to be assessed as well as use of dedicated assessor personnel. Better management of assessment planning, including the identification of evidence and the timing of assessment opportunities by centres, is required. This should form a core part of service-level agreements.
- Where qualifications are provided for specialised markets, centres should be more proactive in recruiting, training and supporting assessors and verifiers from within the sectors concerned. This would contribute substantially to the quality of validity and sufficiency of evidence required by qualification standards in vocational areas.

Introduction

The regulatory authorities for England, Wales and Northern Ireland are required to keep under review all aspects of accredited qualifications and to publish and disseminate information relating to their regulation, as appropriate. *The NVQ code of practice* (2001) is the basis for monitoring the delivery and assessment of all National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) to ensure that accredited qualifications are of a high quality, are fit for purpose and that consistent standards are being properly maintained across awarding bodies.

In comparability studies, sector specialists are appointed to evaluate specific qualifications across a range of levels, awarding bodies and centres to ensure that standards are consistent and fair for all candidates and that qualifications are appropriate for their levels.

Background

In recent years there has been substantial development in two key sector areas: customer services and e-business. Major growth is anticipated in these areas over the next decade. Call handling operations (CHO) are an important part of both sectors and are starting to develop a core function in many other growth sectors, such as care. As CHO is a competitive commercial area and has experienced increased exposure in media advertising campaigns, it is important to ensure that the NVQ qualifications are offering appropriate development and assessment for candidates working in the sector.

The NVQs in call handling operations, levels 2, 3 and 4, are offered by a range of awarding bodies: City & Guilds, Edexcel, the London Chamber of Commerce and Industry – now Education Development International (EDI) plc – and OCR Examinations. The qualification suite was derived from previous customer service and IT awards. It sits within the customer service area of learning and is generally classified as a ‘new qualification area’ in response to the rapid growth in telecommunications, particularly the growth of call centres in modern society.

The awards were originally supported and developed by the Telecommunication Standards Council, and this remit was transferred in 2002 to e-skills UK, one of the Sector Skills Councils (SSCs). They have been developed and implemented in a climate of considerable turmoil and growth, and a number of large telecommunications companies of an engineering nature had substantial input in the early years. A new suite of qualifications has been developed and was made available to centres during this study. However, assessment practices within centres were reviewed against NVQ delivery requirements and are unlikely to change with the implementation of the new standards.

Purpose

The main objectives of this study were to:

- evaluate the national standard of consistency and quality of assessment practices in NVQ call handling qualifications
- identify whether the design of the qualifications meets specific sectoral needs and is relevant to the needs of candidates
- determine whether assessment for this qualification suite is valid, authentic, current and sufficient for judgements to be made on candidates' performance
- establish whether assessment planning, assessment levels and the time allocated for assessment are appropriate for candidates undertaking the qualifications.

Methodology

A small team of sector specialists was appointed to evaluate the standard of assessment, as set out in the qualification specifications, provided by each awarding body. Each scrutineer was required to undertake a maximum of 20 centre visits and compare the assessment practices and outcomes in a random national sample. The scrutineers visited 42 centres across England and Wales, which were selected from 253 centres approved to offer CHO qualifications. Visits included learning sites that ranged from one mile to over 75 miles away from the centre itself. The comparability study examined the consistency and quality of assessment practice in call handling NVQ programmes, including mandatory and optional units, within:

- the level 2 NVQ in call handling operations
- the level 3 NVQ in call handling operations.

Eleven centres (26 per cent) were offering the Advanced Modern Apprenticeship (AMA) programme, 21 centres (50 per cent) were offering the Foundation Modern Apprenticeship (FMA) programme, and a total of 25 (59 per cent) of the centres were offering one or both. Only three centres were identified as offering the level 4 NVQ, but no learners were registered at this level.

Using a data collection instrument, the scrutineers examined the assessment evidence of up to three candidates at each centre, focusing on the core units for each qualification. If insufficient evidence was available for these units, optional units were reviewed. The scrutineers made judgements on the validity, authenticity, currency and sufficiency of the evidence sampled across a range of units. The scrutineers were required to record their agreement or disagreement with the decisions made by the centres' assessors and to explain why they agreed or disagreed. The following sections examine the rates of agreement and disagreement between the scrutineers and the centres' assessors. It should be noted that the evidence was scrutinised against the national standards that apply to any NVQ. The pro forma also recorded:

- the suitability of the time allowed to candidates
- the level of the award
- assessment planning
- relevance of the qualification to the candidates' needs.

Scrutineers were asked to interview centres' and employers' staff and to examine documentation and portfolios of evidence prior to interviews with learners. Centre staff were asked to clarify their centre's background and employer base and to

explain the various policies and procedures concerning the quality assurance of assessment. The centres were also asked to explain, with the aid of staff involved in internal verification, how their systems and procedures for assessment were implemented and how decisions were standardised and managed within the programme. Where reports from previous external verifier visits were available, the scrutineers made a note of this, but the present report reflects analysis only of their own evaluation of candidates' work.

As part of the quality assurance arrangements for the study, the team leader undertook visits to centres and observed each of the scrutineers while on a visit. In addition, regulatory authority staff also accompanied scrutineers on random visits to centres to ensure uniformity of practice throughout the study.

Scrutineers disagreed with 27 per cent of the assessors' decisions. The most common reason for disagreement related to assessment practice concerning observations. These were being used in a holistic fashion as evidence across a range of units, but the observations themselves lacked validity, authenticity and sufficiency. Inappropriate use and recording of observations and product-related evidence has a further negative impact when it is used to determine competence across a range of units later in a programme. Reasons for variation in implementation of observations can be related to inappropriate schedules of direct observation, access issues and lack of rigour in standardisation and occupational competence.

The initial data from awarding bodies in relation to numbers of centres and learners was flawed, causing some problems for the study. This was a recurring issue throughout the project, and it quickly became clear that most of the records of providers of all types were generally flawed, in terms of numbers of learners, achievement data and past certification rates. Work by learning and skills councils (LSCs) and other parties to resolve the national data issue is ongoing, which is clearly a welcome development.

Details of the study sample

Profile of learners

Scrutineers interviewed up to three learners at each of the 42 approved centres and employers' premises; the total number of learners who were interviewed was 116. The majority of candidates within the sample were undertaking level 2 CHO programmes (see Table 1) and were employees (Table 2). In most cases, candidates were funded either by funding related to the Employer Training Pilot (ETP), a localised pilot fund intended to raise achievement at level 2, or by Modern Apprenticeship (MA) funds. Level 3 learners were mainly present within Advanced Modern Apprenticeship (AMA) programmes or were directly funded by employers. In some cases, mature learners at level 3 were present in privately funded or public sector employee programmes. Overall, there was little evidence of coherent progression of learners from level 2 to level 3, and the most likely movement was to another area of learning altogether – usually through customer service or business administration qualifications.

A number of learners in the sample were graduates working on a temporary basis or were employees in customer services roles, but Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) was not used in any meaningful way.

Table 1: Numbers of learners in sample by age, gender and programme level

Profile	Level 2	Level 3	Total	Percentage
Male	13	7	20	17
Female	74	22	96	83
Age 16–18	8	1	9	8
Age 19–24	38	12	50	43
Age 25+	41	16	57	49

Table 2: Numbers of learners by employment profile and level

Profile	Level 2	Level 3	Total	Percentage
Related employment:	29	87	116	100
Full-time	12	45	57	49
Part-time	17	42	59	51
Level 2			87	75
Level 3			29	25

Tables 1 and 2 show that in general most learners were female and that most were in the older rather than the younger age bracket. Most were in level 2, and of these candidates most were in full-time employment in a related area.

The call handling sector

The occupational area displays considerable evidence of growth in employment and shows that CHO is a fundamental part of both traditional and non-traditional industrial and commercial sectors. Employers using call handling centres – whether fully or partly – to serve or manage their work are involved in virtually all industrial and commercial sectors and public bodies, ranging from travel and car hire companies to fire and rescue services and the police. The emergency services were included in the study, along with the police; however, other specific programmes are available for training within the emergency services, particularly the fire service.

Given the reported growth expected in the call handling sector and the diverse needs of commerce, industry and the public sectors, the design and structure of call handling awards need to more accurately reflect this expansion. Table 3 below indicates the range of commercial and industrial service sectors covered by the sample.

Table 3: Types of employer

Employer type	Number
Travel	5
Banking, finance and insurance	7
Emergency services	4
Media and entertainment	3
Jobcentre Plus, Inland Revenue, DWP, DVLA	4
Engineering	5
Local councils	5
Various call centres (finance etc)	12

Profile of centres

The sample of centres included a wide range of approved centre types, ranging from further education colleges, training providers and private training companies to private and public employers (see Table 4). The sample generally consisted of centres with quite small cohorts of learners.

Table 4: Types of provider in sample, with rates of agreement between assessors and scrutineers

Type of centre	Number	Agreement rate (%)
Training provider	28	65.5
Employer-based (non-funded)	7	74
College-based	7	91.5

Awarding body and centre types

Table 5 shows the rates of agreement across the four awarding bodies between assessors and the comparability study scrutineers. The composition of the sample means that the determination of a direct relationship between agreement rate and awarding body is difficult. However, the results do support a fundamental qualitative relationship, one indicating an overall weakness regarding assessment standardisation.

Table 5: Breakdown of sample by awarding body*, with rates of agreement between assessors and scrutineers

Awarding body	Number of centres visited	Agreement rate (%)
City & Guilds	12	76
EDI	12	75.5
OCR	14	66.5
Edexcel	6	68

*Two centres were working with two awarding bodies.

Units reviewed

Centres were offering a range of optional units, and two centres were using units from the 'customer service' route or related areas. The optional routes tended to be selected by the centres' staff and depended on the expertise they had available, regardless of the specific needs of employers or employees, although in some cases additional units were specified from CHO and other areas to reflect employers' and employees' requirements. Table 6 indicates the units that were reviewed by the scrutiny team. At no time did the team find units being delivered that did not have appropriate resources.

Table 6: Unit titles and number of learners

Mandatory units:

Unit no.	Level	Title of unit	No. of learners
25	2	Contribute to an effective and safe working environment	28
26	2	Contribute to improving the quality of service provision	17
1	2 & 3	Contribute to developing and maintaining positive caller relationships	82
4	3	Solve problems for telephone callers	30
27	3	Develop and maintain an effective and safe working environment	8
35	3 & 3S	Manage yourself	10
20	3S	Maintain performance and an effective working environment	6
28	3S	Create effective working relationships	7
38	3S	Lead call handling team and individuals to meet their objectives	4

Optional units:

Unit no.	Level	Title of unit	No. of learners
2	2	Address the needs of callers	43
6	2	Make arrangements on behalf of callers	13
10	2	Undertake telephone research	11
12	2	Communicate information using e-mail facilities	11
11	2	Enter and retrieve information using a computer system	9
7	2	Authorise transactions using telecommunications	4

17	2	Process telephone calls	4
8	2	Generate sales leads for follow-up calls	1
9	2 & 3	Offer products/services over the telephone	6
21	2 & 3	Contribute to the handling of incidents and resources	1
3	3	Develop and maintain supportive relationships with telephone callers	22
5	3	Provide specialist assistance using telecommunications	17
19	3	Research and supply information	1
37	3	Facilitate learning through demonstration and instruction	1
30	3 & 3S	Contribute to improvements to call handling activities	1
32	3S	Manage information for action	1

Arrangements for assessment

As part of the study, the team recorded the assessment and verification processes that were in place within centres and employer establishments. In compiling this data, scrutineers also recorded the wide variety of assessment activity within the call handling sector and the range of logistical arrangements in place. Assessment activity ranged from that conducted within the employer establishment (through internal staff appointments) through to work-based assessment by training provider staff at distant sites. Data was also compiled on the effectiveness of the methods employed. Table 7 indicates the primary methods of evidence collection seen within the sample.

Table 7: Types of assessment evidence and percentage of use

Evidence type	Percentage used
Observation*	21.75
Product*	20.75
Work records*	15
Written questions	13.25
Witness testimony*	9
Oral questions	7.75
Other	12.5

Approximately 70 per cent of evidence within the sample is related to either work products or observation by assessors (these are indicated by asterisks). Although other NVQs show similar outcomes, this NVQ programme includes considerable observation and paper-based evidence, and little use is made of other more innovative or diverse methods of assessment such as case histories, risk assessment, message pads and in-house statistical data. The evidence was being used holistically in 90 per cent of the sample to provide specific evidence for different units. It was difficult to evaluate progress clearly and, where shortfalls in the rigour of such evidence occur, there could be a multiplying effect on programme quality that the figures alone do not make clear.

Assessment issues identified by scrutineers included:

- there was too long a gap between evidence being gathered, signed and dated by the candidate (in some cases as long as nine months), affecting the authenticity of the evidence

- where it was part of the FMA framework, key skills assessment takes priority over NVQs
- lack of evidence to support personal statements
- lack of signatures on evidence
- lack of time off the phones to allow assessment to take place
- assessment was not 'on demand'
- inadequate time was allocated to assessment
- lack of feedback to candidates within portfolio evidence
- observation sheets were not signed or dated (although assessors confirmed they would be before internal verification was carried out)
- there was no clear tracking matrix to indicate methods of assessment and location of evidence
- formative assessment was carried out although knowledge and understanding were still to be completed
- no substantive evidence of evaluation of qualitative and quantitative data
- professional discussion identified as form of evidence, but only questions and answers were provided
- evidence of referencing was lacking within portfolios
- no use of APL from other NVQ schemes already completed.

The above list suggests that the main shortfalls in centres' assessments concern recording and use of observation evidence (its rigour and authenticity). Many of the issues are related. For clarity, these are discussed in more detail in other sections of the report. The Recommendations section suggests possible means of addressing these issues.

On a broader issue – but related to assessment and its management – there is a fundamental issue of access of assessors from the training provider to candidates at work. Assessment staff, managers and indeed the scrutiny team experienced difficulties in gaining access to learners in over 16 per cent of the sample. The impact of this issue can be seen in terms of progression and retention within the sample, but it is not consistent across different types of centre. Training providers appear to have particular difficulties maintaining employers' commitment and understanding of learners' assessment criteria. Candidates need specific times to be allocated for training and assessment, and this needs to be planned by assessors and the learners. It is the team's view that this issue reflects the recent growth of the industry and the lack of experienced audit staffing (see the Recommendations section).

Quality of evidence

Table 8 shows the profile of types of evidence examined by the scrutiny team, along with their judgements on that evidence. In common with external verification and other evaluation processes, the judgements were made in terms of:

- validity – whether the evidence is appropriate to what is being assessed
- authenticity – whether the evidence was produced and is owned by the learner
- currency – whether the evidence is acceptable in terms of when it was produced
- sufficiency – whether there is enough evidence to prove competence against the national standards (NB: there is a tension here in that employers' own schemes and requirements sometimes demand more than is required in the qualification specifications, thus slowing the progress of the qualification).

Table 8: Scrutineers' rates of agreement (%) on assessment evidence*

	Validity	Authenticity	Currency	Sufficiency
Work records	87.75	100	100	78
Observation	92	100	100	84.5
Witness testimony	99	99	100	88
Product	92	99.5	99	83.5
Oral questions	93.5	100	100	82
Written questions	95.5	97.5	98	94

* Every candidate had evidence derived from each of these methods of assessment.

Currency and authenticity ratings are good. The validity and sufficiency of work records are areas that would benefit from some attention and are easily rectifiable – either candidates are selecting inappropriate material, or the material is not assessed according to the standards in the specification. Clarity of guidance on validity and sufficiency, and how this is recorded, would improve assessment practice in observations for NVQs. Any shortfalls in evidence validity will impact on candidate competence that is assessed for other units if a holistic approach is adopted for portfolio management.

Product-orientated evidence mainly raised issues of validity and sufficiency, although the impact on programme quality is difficult to determine, given that most learners have yet to complete and thus use such evidence across other units (if this is part of the programme delivery and management). To differing degrees, all types of evidence other than the centre-devised written questions raised issues of validity and sufficiency. This suggests that verifiers and assessors are not completely at ease

with the evidence being produced by learners or that guidance in this area and within support documentation does not clearly indicate what is required to judge competence. Centres should encourage resourceful assessment methods and materials, such as risk assessment, message pads, case studies and so forth.

Detailed findings

Assessment practices

Shift working makes it difficult to access learners for assessment, particularly when direct observation is required. In general, the technology used by employers within the sample allowed assessors to access the learners via headphones or other means, and direct observation was available for a considerable number within the sample. However, the effectiveness of these methods is severely restricted by assessors' access to learners and to the work settings. Where employers used internal staff for either support or implementation of a given CHO programme, the quality of the provision was better.

The telecommunications base and the nature of the qualifications have allowed the development and sharing of appropriate materials for assessment support. Where external verifiers identify good, innovative practice, awarding bodies should encourage its dissemination across the sector through standardisation updates.

Awarding bodies were deemed to vary in their documentation and in the effectiveness of the materials available. In one instance, a centre was using another awarding body's materials in preference to those provided. In general, the data indicates that it is possible to use a wide variety of methods of evidence collection in the assessment of call handling.

General observations on resources

- Awarding bodies' materials were used in 84 per cent of cases. Where centres' materials were used instead, these were considered appropriate by the scrutineers.
- Assessment planning was considered to be appropriate in 75 per cent of cases. Where it was not considered effective, reasons ranged from access difficulties through to inappropriate verification sampling.
- Most employers (98 per cent) did not always clearly understand their roles and responsibilities within the programme. Few understood that they were required to be involved in the delivery of training and support. There was confusion between 'training' and 'assessment'. There was no clear distinction, therefore, between what employers would deliver and what the centre would deliver and how any shortfall in implementation would be addressed.
- Most learners (93 per cent) understood their role within the programme and their role at work.

- Thirty-eight per cent of the sample of learners had appropriate previous qualifications that had not been taken into account, either because the employer had demanded this or because there was no clear policy on APL to apply.
- The qualification was considered to be relevant to 94 per cent of learners in the sample.
- Where employers outsourced training provision, the gaps between visits for assessment varied from two weeks to two months. One learner mentioned a three-month gap between visits, caused by staffing issues within the approved centre. This has a negative impact on retention, progression and achievement within funded provision in the CHO sector.

Retention and achievement

Retention and achievement varied considerably across the sample. In general, funded centres had some issues with retention and achievement, and these issues were a primary cause for concern either within their self-assessments or in previous reports. Where these problems were apparent, access to assessment was a significant factor. In one private employer centre, retention on level 3 CHO was 100 per cent but achievement was nil. The reason was that the employer's own training scheme, of which the NVQ was an integral part, took longer than the 'certification' time for the NVQ. The employer was implementing the programme in this way to ensure a full understanding of the employee's role and responsibility. This facility had excellent resources and evidence of good practice.

Factors facilitating assessment

The team identified factors that facilitate assessment in CHO programmes either directly or indirectly. Key factors are:

- written commitment to training and support by employer
- appointment of experienced internal staff to the training team
- the centre's commitment to funding long-term training
- contracts of service between employer and training provider (although detail was missing)
- salary and promotional opportunities linked to completion of NVQ
- employer encouraged to be part of provision
- fundamental focus on customer service in assessment practice
- peripatetic external staff are appointed and treated the same as internal assessment staff
- frequent support visits by the training provider (not just for assessment)
- assessment staff have ongoing continuing professional development

- clear distinction between ‘support’ and ‘assessment’ by those using the specifications
- materials and documentation often included within quality assurance system
- using a focused group of internal verifiers with cross-sector expertise, where achievement issues are raised
- reliance on external verification as primary information source.

Factors inhibiting assessment

The team identified factors that inhibit assessment in CHO programmes either directly or indirectly. Key factors are:

- closed provision with little chance for providers to measure against or be involved with other similar organisations and share experience and good practice
- employers lacking understanding of their own role
- little internal self-assessment – limiting the chance to benchmark and improve the provision of assessment and verification
- quality systems not related to training and more associated with performance and promotion
- limited access of training providers to employers
- qualification part of a wider and non-related training implementation, giving rise to doubts about understanding of NVQ programmes
- difficulties with recruitment of staff and learners
- problems arising over support visits and delivery location
- time given to complete qualification frequently undermined by ‘emergencies’
- assessment is often not planned and is ad hoc
- lack of accreditation for prior learning (APL) use
- lack of flexibility of programmes
- standardisation issues with internal and external staff.

Strengths and weaknesses directly related to assessment

Strengths

Some centres that were mainly employer based had well-planned assessment programmes and had developed comprehensive materials to support learners’ progress. Furthermore, there was virtually 100 per cent access to learners in these cases. Care and attention has been taken in the delivery of the programmes in question.

There were excellent facilities in most employer-based provisions. Where employers had funded the entire implementation, there was evidence of considerable

expenditure in facilities that would allow a programme of off-line training and assessment to improve confidence before a period of supported line work. To facilitate retention one employer had introduced separate state-of-the-art training facilities.

Some centres had trained previous employees as assessors. These employees' knowledge of the work context enabled them to provide a programme of assessment that was geared not just to the learners' needs but also to a thorough understanding of the specific employer's likely pressures and work profile. Learners commented on this positive factor, which appeared to have improved retention figures both in employment and in the NVQ programme.

Good induction programmes tended to be integrated with the employer's own initial training. This was not widespread, and in some cases employers refused to merge the two programmes. In others, the option was given but had not been taken up, and thus valuable training and assessment opportunities were lost.

The wide range of employers using CHO as a mainstay for their organisation frequently required options and pathways along with additional units that are not available within the suite of qualifications. In some cases, in order to provide a more valid qualification within, for example, the healthcare sector, units from other NVQs were being used to provide a wider focus to the qualification. Thus, different programmes were being devised, making the overall training and assessment more relevant to individuals employed within that sector.

Weaknesses

The most common weakness in training provider's provision and employer-based provision concerned appropriate access to assessment and support. This affected motivation, retention and completion of the qualification, as well as reinforcing a general sense of apathy among learners. There were two main reasons for this:

- demands arising from a busy workplace
- inconvenience for employers using external assessors.

Management data was flawed in many instances, although it was apparent – both nationally and locally – that retention is an issue within the industry, putting overall completion of qualifications at risk. Most organisations that were eligible for regulatory inspection identified this issue in their self-assessment process.

There was slow progress towards achievement in over 16 per cent of the sample, owing to issues with access and a lack of available assessment time. Employers and assessors sometimes demanded more evidence than is required by the qualification standards. Assessment practices should closely follow the specifications.

Scrutineers observed that internal verification in some centres was inconsistent and not sufficiently rigorous. There were also issues relating to occupational expertise within internal verification systems, arising from lack of familiarity with the call handling context.

In some of the sample the professional expertise available to support assessment and internal and external verification was lacking. In some of the sample there appeared to be a lack of contextualised understanding of assessment across the range of call handling contexts, for example call handling in the emergency services rather than generic call handling operational skills.

There was a lack of clarity between 'training' and 'assessment' services; some learners, employers and providers failed to clarify their respective roles and were unsure who would provide elements of which activity. Where there were specific agreements in place, these did not specify responsibilities and requirements or how the programme would be monitored. In a few cases, learners had a poor understanding of how the programme would be delivered and their part in it.

Within the sample, 27 per cent of decisions undertaken were judged to be inappropriate, mainly because of the lack of sufficiency and validity of evidence. Evidence can be used holistically, so there is a multiplying effect on the quality of assessment overall. This affects confidence in the system. The lack of specific occupational expertise found in this study, along with the varied employer base, suggests that the results of such decisions could go unnoticed in some cases. Two centres had already identified this issue, as a result of their own quality audits, but no plans were in place to address the issues raised.

CHO lends itself to observation as a method of assessment. Observations and direct assessment lacked sufficiency and validity in this study, suggesting that more standardisation of training is needed in applying this form of assessment.

There was poor APL policy and implementation in 38 per cent of the sample. In some instances learners had qualifications and experience that were considerably beyond

the level of NVQ undertaken and that had not been taken into account. In the case of MAs, generally, centres had made provision for those with appropriate GCSEs against key skills; however, the wider application of APL was in many cases ignored, except where there was a funding issue. In an industry where retention is a major issue, the ability for learners to use prior achievement may well enhance their prospects and accelerate achievement. This is a significant reason to promote the qualification, but in many cases it is being ignored.

Programme design and acceptance

The current qualifications do little to support, recognise or address some of the major concerns that call handling operatives experience. Sexual harassment calls, hoax calls and hostility are significant and are reported as factors on which the qualifications need to offer standards. Management and reduction of stress are also notable issues in this environment and should be included as part of the health and safety elements of qualifications offered in this particular sector. This aspect of concern is addressed in the Recommendations section.

External verification

There is a lack of personnel with specific experience in CHO and assessment qualifications who can undertake the broad spectrum of assessment. It was noted, for example, that many of the centres did not have access to an expert EV for call handling, and where they did the EV's experience was likely to be in a different background, for example IT or customer service.

The level of the NVQs and the CHO content draw much from other sectors that entails some lead time before effective assessment delivery and its management can take place. The most effective assessment and verification personnel (within this sample) were drawn directly from an employer context, were given specific assessment training for the CHO sector and were then redeployed back to that context. Given the range of types of employer, this time-consuming process is creating difficulties for effective delivery, assessment and subsequent audit. Well-designed and regular training for centre staff and good exemplar materials would greatly assist this problem.

Conclusions

Across all centres and employer types 73 per cent of assessment decisions met the standard within the area of CHO. In the 27 per cent that did not, the main reasons were lack of sufficiency and validity of evidence, indicating that some improvement is required to meet the standards. Variance in validity and sufficiency of observations are often due to lack of standardisation, to poor implementation of feedback where observation is used as an assessment method, and to a lack of specific occupational assessment expertise. All of these were identified in the course of the study.

Across the wide range of employer types, access of learners to opportunities for assessment and to assessors has a significant effect on assessment and the management of assessment. Much of the variability within the sample was caused by the different employment activities and a lack of understanding and involvement by employers. Equally, it was evident that training providers of all types found it difficult to encourage employers to be a fundamental and inclusive party in the overall training process.

Most of the sample used assessment evidence holistically across a number of units. Invalid or insufficient use of observations and product evidence will, in these cases, fundamentally affect the standard of the qualification. Current quality assurance programmes and external verification are unlikely to address this issue.

Few training providers had additional assessment observation schedules in their quality assurance schemes that included the employers' premises. Internal verification and other quality assurance procedures do not always include employers' premises either.

There was considerable confusion over who is responsible for what in terms of training and assessment. In particular, there was a lack of:

- an understanding of the wide employer base and therefore different methods of operation
- a concerted effort to review acceptable expertise within the CHO sector
- methods to ensure the involvement of employers and acceptance of their roles.

There are nine accredited vocationally related qualifications for CHO, but they are designed to cover the generic skills required. In the future a key feature of qualification development in this sector should be to address the need for these skills

to be applied in a diverse range of employment contexts. Perhaps the inclusion of optional units offering knowledge development for different sectors' profiles would satisfy this need.

Overall observation

Statistically, direct employer establishments performed well, while the quality of training providers' performance was weak (see Table 4). However, the qualitative data and the review process undertaken by the team suggest that quality and assessment decisions were better when employers valued the learning process and were driving forward implementation. Where employers were not taking a formal and leading role in the work, access to assessment and support was, in general, subordinate to workload and thus standards suffered. By contrast, assessment by colleges showed the highest agreement rates (see Table 4).

Recommendations

Although the NVQs on which this study was based have expired, the following recommendations can be applied more widely to the assessment of the delivery of this type of qualification and therefore should be noted so that the standards of assessment in this sector can be raised more generally.

Issues for e-skills UK

- Qualifications in this rapidly growing sector need to apply to a wide range of operational and employer contexts. Optional pathways must be kept as relevant as possible to learners' needs and to different employer contexts. Vocational qualifications in this area would benefit from more of a 'customer service' rather than an 'IT' orientation and should be shorter and take less time to achieve. (Statutory criteria: 50f and 53g)
- These NVQ qualifications do little to support, recognise or address some of the major concerns that call handling operatives experience. Stress management, conflict management, harassment and hoax calls are some of the significant issues on which sector standards need to offer scope for development of qualifications. (Statutory criteria: 50f)

Issues for awarding bodies

- The combination of two main verification activities – checking the existence of systems and procedures, and monitoring their implementation – places a significant demand on the external verification of call handling operations. Awarding bodies should, through external verification, ensure that centres' systems provide an auditable trail so that claims for certification can be substantiated. (*NVQ code of practice*: paragraphs 48, 50, 55 (bullet points 1, 2), 56 (bps 4, 6))
- Awarding bodies should consider reviewing guidance materials against the wide variety of employment contexts in call handling operations to encourage resourceful use of good practice in assessment. It would also have a beneficial impact on the validity and sufficiency of candidates' evidence. The review should be informed by feedback from centres and by good practice as reported by EVs. Awarding bodies should ensure that this enhanced guidance is available for assessors and verifiers, particularly those in remote learning centres. (*NVQ code of practice*: paragraphs 31, 32 (bp 4); statutory criteria: 58b, 59)
- It would be appropriate for external verifiers who are responsible for cross-sector NVQs, such as call handling, to include in their development of NVQs an

awareness of the need for assessors to contextualise assessment according to sectoral needs. This could be achieved through the use of appropriate examples of contextualised assessment practice during verifier and assessor training events. EVs need to encourage continuing professional development for assessors in centres where assessment practice is limited. (*NVQ code of practice*: paragraphs 55, 57; statutory criteria: 97b, 97e)

Issues for centres

- Centres should be encouraged to use service agreements with employers that clarify roles and responsibilities in assessment practice and in qualifications delivery generally. (*NVQ code of practice*: paragraph 8)
- An imaginative and constructive approach is required to address the problem of access to assessment – covering both opportunities for learners to be assessed and use of dedicated assessor personnel. Better management of assessment planning, including the identification of evidence and the timing of assessment opportunities by centres, is required. This should form a core part of service-level agreements. (Statutory criteria: 53, 56)
- Centres should consider how to improve training practice and raise awareness of the benefits that arise from good assessment standards over a wider range of occupational contexts. Where specific occupational expertise is fundamental to good practice in NVQ qualifications, centres should encourage more professionals in the sector to participate as assessors and verifiers in delivering the qualifications. (*NVQ code of practice*: paragraphs 30, 31, 32 (bps 3, 4))

Appendix: Glossary of awarding bodies in the study

Qualifications in call handling operations are offered at levels 2 and 3 by the following awarding bodies:

- City & Guilds Level 2 Call Handling Operations
- City & Guilds Level 3 Call Handling Operations
- City & Guilds Level 3 Supervising Call Handling
- Education Development International plc Level 3 Call Handling Operations
- Education Development International plc Level 3 Call Handling Operations
- Education Development International plc Level 3 Supervising Call Handling
- Edexcel Level 2 Call Handling Operations
- OCR Examinations Level 2 Call Handling Operations
- OCR Examinations Level 3 Call Handling Operations
- OCR Examinations Level 3 Supervising Call Handling.