New Maps for Old: Guidance and the Reform of Vocational Qualifications

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The reform of occupational qualifications in England and Wales being undertaken by the National Council for Vocational Qualifications will affect the qualifications of those who work in guidance and counselling, and the opportunities open to their clients. While early development work concentrated on lower-level qualifications, attention is now turning to higher levels, including occupations like guidance and counselling where interpersonal skills play a major part. The principles underpinning the reform of qualifications are outlined; the project work carried out up to the end of 1991 is described; and some of the implications and issues arising from this work are identified, both for the professional qualifications available, and for the map of the broad fields of guidance and counselling.

A new national framework for qualifications

In its New Training Initiative (MSC, 1981) the Government proposed a major reshaping of the vocational qualification systems of England and Wales. In 1986 it created the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) to lead this development, with the objective of establishing new qualifications for all occupations by the end of 1992. The intention is to rationalise the maze of qualifications and awarding bodies, creating a single, comprehensible and coherent framework of qualification for all areas of the economy, in the first instance up to the broad equivalent of first-degree level. In the next few years, this development will have an increasing effect on the choices available to the clients of guidance and counselling services, and on the qualifications of those who work in this field.[1]

The reform involves the explicit abandoning of the traditional notions that qualifications should be tied to age, and based on attendance at courses, or on time served in the occupation. It proposes to replace such models with an outcome-led system based on the specification of explicit standards of competence for employment in all sectors. These standards will be defined by specially created Industry Lead Bodies representing relevant employment interests for particular 'sectors' (e.g. Catering, Caring, Training and Development, Construction). The standards will then be incorporated into all occupational qualifications, which will be developed and awarded by existing examining and awarding bodies. Over a period, all existing qualifications are to be revised or replaced.

Figure 1: **Structure of National Vocational Qualifications**

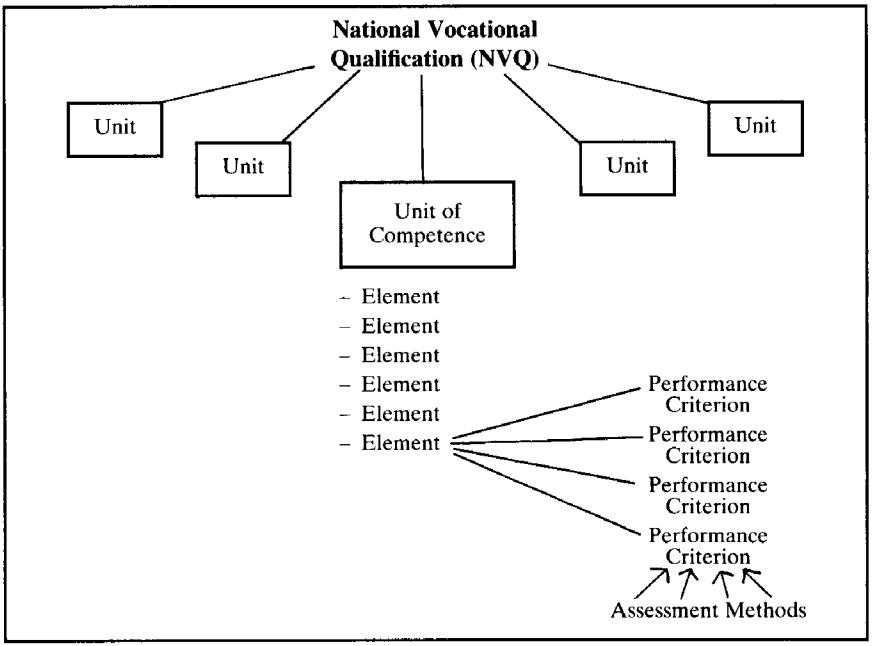

Figure 2: **Structure for specifying standards**

Key Purpose	The function of the occupational area
Key Work Roles	What needs to be done to achieve the purpose, in terms of distinct functions of individuals
Units	Components of the Key Work Role, each capable of being separately accredited
Elements of Competence	Description of an action, behaviour or outcome which can be demonstrated
Performance Criterion	The standard to be achieved in each element
Range Statement	The range of contexts to which performance criteria apply, e.g. range of client groups, institutional locations
Evidence/Assessment	The kinds of evidence which would be acceptable to demonstrate competence

(For further details, see NCVQ, 1991).

'Occupational standards' are being based on an analysis of the functions required in the industry; expressed in terms of competence (what the individual needs to be able to do, know and understand to perform effectively in a given role); and assessed in practical contexts (the workplace wherever possible). Each qualification will consist of a number of discrete units, which can be separately acquired, and each of these is divided into elements with associated performance criteria, range statements and assessment guidelines (figure 1).

Within the new framework, all qualifications are to be located at one of five levels. At the lowest level (Level I), competence will involve 'the performance of a range of varied work activities, most of which may be routine and predictable', with relatively close supervision. At the highest level (Level V: broadly equivalent to higher levels of undergraduate and postgraduate work) competence will involve:

> 'the application of a significant range of fundamental principles and complex techniques across a wide and often unpredictable variety of contexts. Very substantial personal autonomy and often significant responsibility for the work of others and for the allocation of substantial resources feature strongly, as do personal accountability for analysis and diagnosis, design, planning, execution and evaluation'.

The creation of this new framework for qualifications is expected to improve the effectiveness of the workforce by making standards more explicit, thus making it easier for individuals to understand, use and improve their own skills, and for employers to recruit and train staff appropriately. By creating a common framework across all areas of employment, mobility within and between sectors should be encouraged; by specifying occupational standards in terms of outcomes (what an individual can do) rather than learning processes (how long (s)he has spent on a course), the accreditation of informal and uncertificated learning (in the home, workplace or voluntary work) will be eased. The intention is that this will make explicit many of the human resources already present in the workforce, and enable individuals to identify realistic goals and routes to progression. In terms of empowering individuals, and increasing the effectiveness of the workforce, the model has many obvious attractions, although there are a number of unresolved issues, which will be discussed later in this paper.

Functional analysis. In developing the new framework the Department of Employment and the NCVQ, who are responsible for development and implementation, have chosen to use a single technique for identifying standards. This technique of 'functional analysis' examines an occupational area through a 'top down' hierarchy. The first step is to define a 'key purpose' for the occupation, and then to describe the component functions

by analysing what needs to be done for the purpose to be achieved. The process is repeated for each function, through successive stages of work roles, elements, performance criteria, range statements and assessment guidance (DE, 1991).

Descriptions of the Department of Employment's approach to functional analysis stress that it differs from task analysis by beginning not from what people do now but from the purpose of their employment. The assumption is that by beginning at the highest level of generalisation, it will be possible to ensure flexibility, and avoid building the working practices of the past into qualifications for the future. In practice, however, the process of developing occupational standards is an iterative one, and certainly the work to date in guidance and counselling has involved considerable testing of preliminary models with groups and individuals to clarify and revise the functions derived from the 'top down' analysis. Figure 2 outlines the basic structure laid down by NCVQ and the Department of Employment for specifying standards for an occupation.

Progress to date. The Government's initial remit to NCVQ was to reform the qualification structure up to Level IV by the end of 1992. Work began with lower-level qualifications, and in general in manual occupations, reflecting the priority which the Government had to give during the 1980s to the problems of youth unemployment, and to those with no, or lower-level, skills, who were likely to be squeezed out of the workforce by economic and technological change.

While the priorities are understandable, this approach had three unfortunate side-effects. The first was that, in the minds of many people, NVQs came to be associated with low-level 'skills' and were perceived as having no relevance to higher-level qualifications (although the work of the Management Charter Initiative in defining standards for managers has had some counterbalancing influence here). The second side-effect was that the techniques developed for defining and assessing competence, and for setting standards, were developed in employment contexts quite unlike those which apply to professional work. Pilot work is now in progress to explore approaches to such occupations but, at the time of writing, it remains unclear how far the models developed for catering or construction are applicable to fields like law, medicine or counselling. The third side-effect was that the techniques of competence definition and assessment were developed outside the academic world, and received less attention from academics than they might otherwise have done. While this may have protected development work from undue academic influence, it also resulted in some early academic commentary being superficial and ill-informed, and the development work itself has not benefited as it might have done from an academic perspective. It was only during 1989 that a significant body of academic attention began to be directed to what was going on (Burke, 1989).

A further set of difficulties arises from the necessary tensions between the three major partners in development (NCVQ, the Lead Bodies and the Examining and Awarding Bodies). While the relevant Lead Body defines the standards required of a competent practitioner in a given occupation, it is for the awarding bodies to incorporate those standards into qualifications, and for the National Council to ensure that the qualification adequately reflects the standards. The underlying intention, reflected in the guidance and procedures of NCVQ, to promote transferability between and within occupation areas, argues for breadth of qualifications and an emphasis on underpinning knowledge and understanding. Lead Bodies, on the other hand, have to pay regard to employers' real short-term needs for specific skills, which can lead to a narrowing of this vision. Similarly, in order to encourage mobility and access, NCVQ is anxious to ensure that individuals can be separately accredited for individual units of qualifications at different times, which pulls against the concern for coherence and cost-effectiveness among educators and awarding bodies. As a result, progress on separate accreditation for individual units has been slow.

A similar tension arises from the Government interest in making the school curriculum more 'vocational' which has produced a pressure to co-ordinate vocational qualifications with the school curriculum. The resulting desire to design vocational qualifications which can be delivered and assessed outside the workplace conflicts with the fundamental stress on the relevance of NVQs to current workplace practice. Concerns about the reliability of assessment in the workplace, and of the accreditation of prior learning (which has been very positively promoted by NCVQ and the Department of Employment in relation to NVQs), have also caused delays in the production of new qualifications. However, in January 1992 the main development programme was still broadly on schedule, and it was expected that by the end of 1992 NVQs would be established at Levels I to IV for all areas of employment, covering 80% of the workforce by the end of 1992.

While this remains the priority, the Government agreed in early 1991 to NCVQ undertaking preliminary work on qualifications at Level V (which will be the highest), and a number of pieces of pilot work were set up with a range of professional bodies. Level V development will clearly be of particular importance to the guidance and counselling professions, although there will also be a need for guidance and counselling units, and whole qualifications, below that level (since much guidance work is not at postgraduate level). A number of pieces of work are now in hand to explore the issues which Level V qualifications raise, and real progress has been made. One notable area is the field of social work, which shares with guidance and counselling a number of particular problems in applying the NVQ model. The series of exploratory projects which have been undertaken in the guidance and counselling fields will be discussed later.

Finally, it should be noted that, as the qualification framework develops, the Department of Employment and NCVQ have revised and refined their guidance. As a result, the format of some of the development projects does not follow current practice. Similarly, some of the problems identified in early work, and issues which concerned critics, have been resolved.

Likely impact. Recent years have seen an increasing number of innovations in education, training and guidance, and it is not surprising that the first reaction of many people is to question whether the NVQ enterprise is more than another transitory initiative. The history of NVQ development has helped to reinforce this view. Those in higher education, and professional bodies, who have been relatively untouched by the work to date, may be tempted to ignore it.

However, despite difficulties, progress continues to be rapid. Market pressures on Awarding Bodies make it unlikely that they will wish to develop new qualifications, or retain old ones, which do not at least incorporate NVQ standards. Significant professional bodies are now co-operating with the extension of the national framework into professional work at degree level and above, and development work is under way in related areas like the specification and accreditation of outcomes in degree courses (Otter, 1990; Winter and Maisch, 1991). All political parties share a commitment to improve British qualification levels and there is no indication of a desire in policy-making circles to abandon an enterprise in which there is already six years of substantial government investment. The issue is not, therefore, likely to go away, despite the difficulties.

NVQs and guidance and counselling

The reform of qualifications concerns workers in guidance and counselling for two reasons. The first is its impact on the opportunities and choices open to their clients. All those offering any form of guidance or counselling are concerned with individuals making choices about their futures: for many guidance practitioners, choices about learning and/or employment are a central feature of this. Since NVQs will form the framework for occupational qualifications and career development planning in the future, most workers in guidance and counselling will need some understanding of the principles; and the detail will be essential for all those directly concerned with careers or educational guidance work. Demand for such guidance is also likely to increase in the short term, since in the next few years the rationalisation of qualifications is likely to make life more, rather than less, confusing for individuals seeking qualifications, as the two systems run in parallel. For those working with adults, this need may continue for a considerable period, as adult returners seek to establish equivalences and transfer between pre- and post-NVQ qualifications.

The second reason why the reform of qualifications is important for workers in guidance and counselling is its direct impact on their own

qualifications, and, perhaps more importantly still, for their understanding of the nature of their own professional activities. This is the concern of the remainder of this paper.

The need for qualification reform. Work on the creation of the NVQ framework in the guidance field has only begun relatively recently. However, its importance has been recognised for some time within the Department of Employment and NCVQ, and its impact is likely to be profound. The need stems partly from the simple number and range of people already involved in some form of guidance or counselling role as a part of their work. A preliminary estimate in the Department of Employment suggested that guidance standards might be relevant to the work roles of as many as two million people. If projections of economic growth led by knowledge and service-based industries were to come about, the proportion of workers with some form of guidance role is likely to increase, as is the need for a wider dissemination of counselling skills in the workforce at large.

Many of the guidance professions have agreed for some time about the need to reform their vocational qualifications. It has been widely recognised that individuals working in a variety of agencies require common skills and knowledge, but that appropriate formal qualification is available to some and not others. In some cases, like the Diploma in Careers Guidance, well-established qualifications had failed to keep pace with changing circumstances (like the growing proportion of adult clients); in others, new professional groups, like workers in educational guidance with adults, had no appropriate qualifications at all.

Development work: a first phase. In 1988, in response to these concerns, and quite independently of the NVQ developments, the National Institute for Careers Education and Counselling and the Institute of Careers Officers convened a meeting of national associations and development agencies concerned with guidance in educational contexts to consider these issues. A body of common concerns was rapidly identified, and those present agreed to form the Standing Conference of Associations for Guidance in Educational Settings (SCAGES) to address qualification and similar issues.

At the same time, a variety of agencies began to explore the implications of applying NVQ principles to qualifications in specific areas of guidance and counselling. This first, informal phase of development included a series of independent initiatives by different agencies. The work was not co-ordinated, although all of the projects had some connection with the Department of Employment (whose Qualifications Standards Branch is responsible for the development of occupational standards), and several were funded by them. As a result, however, there are interesting overlaps and variations between different groups approaching the same problems.

The first of the pilot projects was carried out by the Unit for the Development of Adult Continuing Education (a national development agency funded by the Departments of Education and Science and of

Employment). UDACE was already active in development work both in guidance and in the definition of competence. In 1989, with financial support from the Further Education Unit, it undertook a pilot functional analysis. The aim of the project was to explore the feasibility of applying the NVQ techniques to work in educational guidance for adults. This was believed to be a particularly difficult area, both because it was concerned with high-level competence (a relatively unexplored area at that time), and with an occupation involving a high level of interpersonal skill, where one might expect particular problems with the assessment of competence. The product was a document which discussed the issues and offered a partial functional analysis of educational guidance for adults (Oakeshott, 1991).

This study was followed, independently, by a series of further projects. The first was a functional analysis project for 'guidance workers', carried out by Bristol Polytechnic's Accredited Training Centre with the Careers Services of the Local Education Authorities in South West England (Bristol Polytechnic, 1991). The next project, and the first to be directly funded by the Department of Employment, was undertaken by the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS) to examine the graduate careers service (Wilson, 1991). A study of the Local Authority Careers Service followed, carried out by the Local Government Management Board and the Kent College for the Careers Service (Wilson, 1991). As these projects progressed, it was noted that no similar work had been undertaken on counselling, and a series of consultations and workshops were carried out to explore this area, producing (as yet unpublished) outline proposals.

Each project involved the use of a consultant working with several groups of practitioners and service managers through workshops and written communications. The Careers Service project also undertook a review of job descriptions and a small-scale survey of views among managers. Although these projects shared a set of common principles and purposes, each approached the task in a different way, and none professed to have produced a full or final analysis of their occupational field. They did, however, demonstrate that the task was possible, and the variations between their conclusions shed important light on different perspectives of the nature of guidance.

Two further relevant projects were also completed. The first was an examination of initial assessment in the Employment Training scheme, carried out by Newland Park Associates at Hull University (Tuton *et al.*, 1991). This had a narrower focus than the other studies, being more specifically concerned with the practical problems of assessor competence in the Employment Training programme. As a result, it did not follow the structure of conventional functional analysis or of NVQs. Rather it identified a set of tasks, and outlined, for each task, the skills required of a worker at three levels. The final study, of 'counselling, guidance and support', was carried out by Barbara Shelborn Associates.

To illustrate the format of a functional analysis applied in a guidance context, and the degree of difference in approach between the projects, figure 3 shows the key purposes, work roles and units from two of the studies: educational guidance and counselling. Figure 4 shows the detailed treatment of one unit from the Bristol study.

Development work: a second phase. During 1990, the Department of Employment and the NCVQ began to take a more proactive interest in development work. In addition to funding some of the exploratory studies listed above, and becoming actively involved in the work of SCAGES, the Department initiated a mapping project, undertaken by Julie Janes Associates, to examine how a national framework of standards in guidance and counselling might be developed. This project involved consultation with a wide range of individuals and agencies, and produced proposals for the creation of a Forum to develop standards. The project's consultative report (Janes, 1991) proposed that the Forum should fulfil some of the functions of an Industry Lead Body, but would provide an umbrella for a series of 'interest groups', reflecting the wide diversity of interest in the guidance and counselling field. There would, for example, be an interest group for guidance and counselling in Care and Welfare, and another for guidance and counselling in Training, Education and Employment.

By the end of 1991, it was clear that some model of this kind was likely to be created, and that meetings to implement it might begin in 1992. At the same time it became clear that two further pieces of work would be needed. The first concerned the diverse and conflicting use of language in the area of counselling. It was evident that the development of standards, and the work of the Forum, might be seriously disrupted if some common agreement could not be found on counselling terminology. The Department of Employment therefore commissioned the British Association for Counselling to carry out a 'differentiation' project, to examine and report on this.

The second question concerned the results of the various pilot projects. It was clear that many lessons could be learned from this work, and that there was a danger of the new Forum repeating mistakes and failing to build on what had already been achieved. Accordingly, the Department of Employment contracted with SCAGES to carry out an 'integration' project, which would seek to draw from the previous pilot work an outline specification of generic standards which appeared to apply across the whole field, and to identify differences and issues for attention. The hope was that, when the Forum met formally for the first time, an outline would already have been prepared of the core standards on which they could build more detailed specifications, and modifications for the needs of the individual professional groups.

Development issues. The issues which arise from this work present challenges to those developing occupational standards, and to the guidance professions, and their resolution may well contribute to better models of

Figure 3: **Key purposes with roles and units from two studies**

EDUCATIONAL GUIDANCE		
Key Purposes	**Work Roles**	**Units**
To provide guidance to individuals and groups To provide feedback to agencies concerned with adults' learning	To provide a service offering educational guidance to adults	Policy and planning
		Managing resources: finance, premises, equipment
		Managing a staff team
		Outreach and publicity
		Establish and maintain a local educational guidance network with other agencies
		Establish and maintain an information system for educational guidance
		Monitor and evaluate the service
	To deliver educational guidance to adults	Deliver educational guidance to adults
	To provide feedback on clients' requirements to agencies concerned with adults' learning	Provide feedback on clients' requirements to agencies concerned with adults' learning

COUNSELLING		
Key Purposes	**Work Roles**	**Units**
Within an identifiable framework, to enable people to manage their lives creatively	To evaluate and monitor ethics and practice	Evaluate and monitor own ethics and practice
		Evaluate and monitor practitioners' ethics and practice
		Evaluate and monitor organisational ethics and practice
	To manage relationships	Actively engage with clients
		Establish contracts, boundaries and nature of relationship

Figure 3 (cont.)

Key Purposes	Work Roles	Units
		End relationships
	To enable people to develop self-efficacy	Establish and maintain relationships
		Increase feelings of self-efficacy
	To facilitate change	Establish and maintain relationships
		Develop awareness of opportunity for change
		Enable people to make informed choices
		Enable people to implement choices
	To develop, manage and promote advice guidance and counselling services	Manage people (ex MCI)
		Manage finance (ex MCI)
		Manage operations (ex MCI)
		Manage information (ex MCI)

occupational competence as well as of guidance and counselling. The issues fall into two groups. The first are issues specific to the guidance projects carried out to date, which illuminate a range of professional concerns, and help set an agenda for the next stage of work. These include definitions of purpose, ethical issues, the role of supervision, feedback and information handling and the relationship between personal, vocational and educational guidance. Secondly, there are a series of issues about the NVQ enterprise itself which the guidance work highlights, but which have much broader implications. These include the extent to which it is possible to describe good practice at professional levels in terms of explicit outcomes (on which the whole NVQ approach rests); questions about assessment and implications for continuing professional development and excellence; the tension between flexibility and coherence; the nature and role of a Lead Body; and the roles of functional analysis.

Issues from the projects

The initial projects were begun without any central co-ordination, and the Department of Employment's policy was to encourage a variety of approaches at first. As a result, there are overlaps and divergences between

Figure 4: **Extracts from a unit in the Bristol study**

KEY WORK ROLE

Provide guidance to individuals and groups.

UNIT 4

Deliver guidance on an individual basis within a framework agreed with client using counselling skills.

Element 4.5 Help the individual to choose strategies to achieve aims.

Performance criteria

4.5.1 Future aims are clarified.
4.5.2 Short- and long-term strategies are agreed with given timescale.
4.5.3 The client is assisted in assessing strategies against available options.

Range

– *Clients*

School pupils years 10, 11, 12, 13	FT college students FE, HE
PT college students FE, HE	18+ and adults
Employed	Unemployed
Persons in training/education VET	Special needs
Ethnic minorities	Disadvantaged
Voluntary workers	Non-workers
Returners	Unwaged

– *Setting*

Careers Office	School
College FE/HE	Employers' premises
Training premises	Outreach centre

Sources of evidence

Observation of interview
Audio recording of interview
Video recording of interview
Prior achievement through recognised qualifications
Action plans
Client records
Formal/informal discussion with client
Formal/informal discussion with candidate
Written evidence of knowledge
Formal/informal discussion with third party (e.g. tutor)
Case studies as evidence of knowledge

projects which are illuminating both about development issues and about differences between professional groups. Some projects resolved issues which were not addressed or completed by others. The highlighting, for example, of issues of supervision by the Counselling study, or of feedback by the UDACE one, enables other groups to review their own proposals, and reflect on how far they share these concerns and practices. This section of the paper identifies some of the key issues arising from five of these projects, which will be abbreviated as UDACE, Bristol, AGCAS, LGMB, and Counselling.

The projects differed in their approach to defining a 'key purpose'. UDACE and Bristol both talked about *providing* guidance, while AGCAS and the Counselling study both placed heavier emphasis on the *enabling* of clients.

All identified three key roles (with the exception of the Counselling study, which had five). All except Counselling agreed that one of these was providing guidance (variously defined) to clients, although they differed in whether they included guidance to groups as well as to individuals. Four studies saw the management of a service/agency as one of the key work roles. Two saw networking with other agencies as a key role, while others subsumed this within the management of a service. All three of the careers-based projects (AGCAS, Bristol and LGMB) stressed the gathering and/or distribution of information as a key role.

Ethical issues are central to guidance practice, and the Counselling study highlighted these. Its key purpose referred to the counsellor working within 'an identifiable ethical framework', focusing attention on the need to define and make this framework explicit, without prescribing a single acceptable model. This is clearly a central issue for any guidance workers, and the difficulty of incorporating specifications of ethical behaviour in outcome-based occupational standards, and especially of assessing them consistently and fairly, will need further debate as the standards development work continues.

'Supervision' was a second issue on which the Counselling study placed particular emphasis. Many areas of guidance involve complex interpersonal relationships between staff and clients. Competent workers need to be able to deal with the stress of such relationships and with the challenge which they present to the worker's own value systems and identity. They also need to be able to give, and request, support from colleagues in dealing with such stresses. These are not easy qualities to specify in terms of outcomes, nor to assess simply in terms of 'competent' or 'not yet competent'. It is not surprising that the Counselling study placed these issues higher on its agenda, but they are issues which concern many areas of guidance work, and will need further attention as the standards development work proceeds. They have also been addressed in the Anglia/Essex 'ASSET' project on competence in Social Work (Winter and Maisch, 1991).

'Feedback' is a notion which is central to educational guidance practice with adults as it has developed in the last decade. Educational guidance workers do not see their role simply as enabling clients to make wise choices about the education and training opportunities available. They also seek to influence the nature of those opportunities by feeding information about unmet, or inadequately met, learning needs to education and training providers. Not surprisingly, therefore, 'feedback' figured as a second key purpose in the UDACE study. As with supervision, the work may prompt other guidance professions to consider whether, and to what extent, this is a part of their current practice, or should be in the future.

'Information handling' was prominent in all the careers-based projects (Bristol, AGCAS, LGMB), although in different ways. This may reflect genuine differences in professional practice and function, since clearly some forms of counselling depend very much less on large bodies of factual material. However, it is not clear whether the fact that the educational guidance study subsumed this into a more general work role, embracing a series of organisational and managerial issues, reflects a real difference, or simply a variation in interpreting the hierarchical structure. Information handling is also an area where there will be interfaces to be explored with professional groups who do not always see themselves as engaged in guidance and counselling, including, for example, many librarians. The mapping of the overlaps and distinctions here should again help to define common ground, and test whether current professional boundaries are appropriately drawn.

A recurrent issue in debates about guidance is the relationship between personal, vocational and educational guidance. The distinction can be seen in the different key purposes of the various projects. The LGMB study is quite explicit about its vocational focus, while the Counselling and AGCAS studies focus much more heavily on 'life management'. At the point where a Lead Body for Guidance is formed, it will be necessary to explore how real these boundaries are, in order to establish appropriate sub-groups to develop standards. It will be important to ensure that distinctions are not based on obsolete models of initial education, nor on inappropriate notions about the distinction between personal and vocational development.

It should be borne in mind that many of the apparent differences may be matters of emphasis rather than principle: few careers officers would wish to dismiss the ethical issues, which were stressed in the workshops for the Counselling study, and few educational guidance workers would underestimate the need to manage information which the careers models stress. In many cases, issues stressed at the higher levels in one model reappear at lower ones in the others. The real purpose of comparative study at this stage should be to highlight issues for debate rather than to reinforce what may be accidental distinctions.

General issues

Outcome-based qualifications. The new vocational qualifications system rests on the principle that occupational qualifications should be based on explicit statements of the qualities required to perform adequately in the occupation. Competence, rather than time-serving, should be the criterion for qualification. It is difficult to disagree with the principle, although the language of 'competence' is taken by some to imply a narrowing of qualifications, which the Department of Employment and NCVQ have always been at pains to deny (Debling, 1989). The problems, which are serious, arise in interpreting how competence is to be described, and how it can be assessed.

Some commentators doubt whether those qualities which are central to good professional practice (especially in a field like guidance and counselling) are susceptible to explicit definition in this way. This reflects partly the close links between professional and higher education, where the process of individual development is often believed to be by definition implicit rather than explicit (Pring, 1991).

However, a contrary trend, inspired partly by NVQ developments and partly by a recognition of the need for a more open and accountable HE system, is now visible with – as noted earlier – work examining the outcomes of learning in higher education, testing the extent to which outcomes can be adequately described and assessed at this level. The importance of a shift towards outcome-based rather than process-based approaches to education and training have been explored by Otter (1989), and at greater length by Jessup (1991). At a practical level, the Department of Employment's Higher Education Branch has been supporting a number of initiatives, of which the largest is the Enterprise in Higher Education programme: this is supporting HE institutions to develop ways of producing more explicit personal transferable skills in their graduates.

Two further projects funded by the Department have been directly addressing the issue of outcomes at Level V. In the first, UDACE has carried out a project, in collaboration with ten HE institutions, to describe, and develop approaches to the assessment and accreditation of, the outcomes of normal undergraduate degree programmes in five subjects (Otter, 1990; 1992). In the second work at Anglia Polytechnic, in collaboration with Essex Social Services Department, explored approaches to the definition of competence in social work (Winter and Maisch, 1991). Both of these are directly concerned with seeking ways of describing and assessing those aspects of competence which do not easily fit with a purely 'skills-based' model: they have helped to identify both the scale of the task, and some ways of handling it. It is perhaps worth noting that both projects cut across traditional institutional and sectoral boundaries, taking advantage of informed 'external' views to shed new light on traditional practices.

Assessment. Some of the anxieties about an outcome-based model focus on the question of assessment. There are two particular concerns. The first is that only those qualities which are easily demonstrable and visible will be assessed and valued. The second is that criterion-referenced systems of assessment establish threshold performance rather than encouraging excellence or continuing professional development, which is of increasing importance to all professions.

It is clear that there are areas of occupational competence in the guidance and counselling field which cannot be defined with the kind of scientific accuracy that people associate with skills testing. However, as Jessup (1991) has pointed out, experienced professionals believe that they know competence when they see it. The fact that it is possible to describe someone as more or less competent means that assessment is possible, however imprecise that assessment may be, and indeed professionals do this constantly. Making the descriptions of how this is done more explicit will be a step forward, but it remains unclear how far this can be done by those who are not themselves professionals. A similar issue arises in the work on outcomes in higher education: how far is it possible to understand what a competent historian is without undergoing the process of education and assessment (by historians) which makes you a historian?

Nevertheless, some of the processes of making competence explicit are themselves valuable, regardless of the precision of the actual result. The process of defining competence and developing assessment criteria and techniques can help both established and new professionals to make such judgement more effectively and more publicly. They thereby improve their own skills by sharing them *with* others, and increase their competence at assessing such qualities *in* others. The experience of the preliminary pilot projects in the guidance and counselling area has already demonstrated the power of this approach as a mechanism for staff development. The extension of this to wider groups, including laymen, may contribute to the demystifying of the profession, bringing with it increased recognition as well as accountability.

The issue of criterion referencing causes particular concern at the interface between NVQs and higher education, where assessment has traditionally been based on a combination of covert criteria and norm referencing. NVQs rest on the belief that making criteria explicit and public increases the ability of individuals to identify, develop and claim competence, and that a workforce where all employees are competent at a specified threshold would be a great step forward. The argument for some other basis for assessment rests either on the belief that norm referencing is more appropriate, or that some quality develops in the course of continuing professional practice which cannot be identified through higher levels of assessment and qualification.

The answer to the first concern is that there is no prima-facie basis for believing that only a specified proportion of the population is potentially

competent at some level. If learning is seen as a lifelong process, rather than something which happens only to young people in formal educational institutions, neither the total pool of human potential, nor the time available for its development, is limited. Both can be expanded if people choose, and are encouraged, to do so. If the requirements of employment in a particular role can be met by everyone who applies for employment, this should be a cause for congratulation rather than concern, and for the setting of new and higher targets for individuals seeking to develop their potential.

The second issue can be addressed in two ways. Firstly, the national framework provides for qualifications at five levels, and individuals can be encouraged to seek higher qualifications when they have achieved lower ones. Although the notion of level, in NVQs as in other systems of qualification and accreditation, remains problematic, in principle a 'higher' level of qualification may include both more things, and the same things at a higher level (greater depth, complexity, volume of knowledge, etc.). The structure should therefore be able to recognise increasing proficiency by awards at higher levels (the question of what level of qualification is appropriate for employment in a particular context is an important, but distinct, question). Secondly, the national framework does not imply that additional training and development opportunities and incentives should not be provided. One would hope that any guidance or counselling agency would seek to build a range of further development opportunities on the basic framework. (One might also observe that the notion of threshold qualification, formally distinguishing only the entirely incompetent from the rest, has a long history in British professional education.)

It is also important to note that the emphasis of NVQs on workplace assessment will require more people to assess the performance of others than has been the case in the past, where assessment was often the prerogative of educational agencies or specialists examining or testing agencies. NVQs will cause assessment to play an increasingly large part in the work of first-line supervisors and managers, and the development of such skills in all those who are responsible for the work of others will itself be a developmental priority, in guidance as elsewhere. Some employers have already mounted large assessment training programmes for first-line supervisors in order to introduce NVQs for their workforces, and the wider dissemination of assessment skills in the population is one way in which the quality of services can be improved.

For some of those working in guidance and counselling, a special assessment problem arises in relation to the nature of the client-counsellor relationship. For certain professional groups, the relationship is endangered by the presence of an observer, however carefully that observer may be introduced into the situation. The client's interests may be damaged by the intrusion, and the process observed may become artificial precisely because

of the external presence. This is an issue which has been of particular concern to the British Association for Counselling.

Coherence and flexibility. One continuing theme of debates about the development of NVQs has been the tension between the need for coherence in qualifications and the need for flexibility and transferability within and between occupations. The initial projects have demonstrated that a range of different professional groups within the guidance field share common skills, although they may apply these to different client groups or knowledge bases. Some of these skills are also, no doubt, shared by workers in other professions (some counselling skills may be part of the professional skills of nurses or personnel managers; some managerial skills are shared by those who manage guidance agencies with managers of very different organisations). Since the development of common definitions for these areas will help understanding, and enable individuals to move between occupational areas, it is clearly desirable to encourage the development of common standards, and to enable individuals to use the system flexibly by accrediting the smallest practicable parts of qualifications. This may also be important for those for whom guidance or counselling is only a part of their occupational role, or who work on a voluntary or part-time basis.

However, there is a strong professional view that the guidance process has to be seen as a whole. This was evident in the UDACE study (Oakeshott, 1991), which chose to treat the provision of guidance to clients as a single unit (and thus indivisible for accreditation purposes). This view argues that functions like information handling or the management of an agency can be divided off and treated separately, but that the core of guidance is indivisible: it is not possible to be competent in a part of it but not the whole. This is a complex debate which will take time to resolve, but its resolution is clearly critical to the shape which a qualification framework would have in the guidance field.

The Lead Body. A major issue to be addressed in early 1992 is the creation of an Industry Lead Body for guidance and counselling. This is inevitably a politically delicate process, since it involves decisions about the boundaries of the occupational area, and the identification of employer interests in a field where many professionals are employed by agencies whose primary function is not guidance. Here, as in many other professional occupations, the 'employer' is usually unqualified in the field. In view of this, the constitution of a Lead Body will clearly need to provide places for professional interests of various sorts, but how large and broadly defined these should be will inevitably be an issue. There also questions to be resolved about the relationships between such a body and existing Lead Bodies in related fields, like Caring, Health, Training and Development, and Management, all of which include some element of guidance or counselling within their own occupational standards.

The creation of a Lead Body involves decisions about who is, and is not, within the occupational sector. Since the occupational standards which that body defines become the basis of qualifications on which individuals will be recruited, and around which their professional development will be focused, it touches on the most fundamental issues about the definition of the profession and admission to it. Thus, for example, a broad Guidance Lead Body which sought to define occupational standards for all those whose work involved offering information, advice or support to individuals about personal, occupational or learning choices, would be a very different body from one created to do the same only for those offering vocational guidance to school-leavers, or those supporting individuals experiencing bereavement.

Some of these issues have become easier to resolve as the notion of a Lead Body has evolved. The creation of Consortia (like the Care Sector Consortium) or Cross-Sectoral Bodies (like Training and Development or the Management Charter Initiative) may offer better models for guidance and counselling than the earlier Lead Bodies (NCVQ, 1991).

Boundary questions are particularly important for the guidance and counselling professions, whose status and security is often precarious because of their location on the margins of other professional groups (ancillary to medicine, education, employment, etc.). Thus professional debates about whether adult careers guidance and educational guidance for adults are fundamentally distinct activities have direct practical implications in terms of what service to clients, and what employment for workers, will be available. The existence of many distinct professional groups within the guidance and counselling field also reflects genuine, and strongly held, differences in beliefs, purposes and practice (as well, sometimes, as ignorance and prejudice).

The creation of a Lead Body is also being discussed against a background of great uncertainty about the future of agencies which provide guidance and counselling and of those with whom they work, or on which they depend for resources or referral. Such factors include debates on the future of the Careers Service, the developing roles of Training and Enterprise Councils, and the changes in hand to the structures and funding for the Health Service, local authorities, and further and higher education.

A new map: the role of functional analysis. The techniques of functional analysis used to define competence in an occupational area may actually help to resolve some of these long-standing tensions. Although the definition of a key purpose for 'guidance and counselling' may well prove elusive (it is one of the most difficult stages of the functional analysis process precisely because it involves the sensitive politics of occupational territories), the process of defining functions and standards for a competent worker is likely to help the guidance field to become clearer about the precise nature of the activity which it undertakes. Whatever the fate of the NVQ enterprise itself, this can only be helpful.

In the long term, it may well be that one of the most profound implications of the NVQ development will be this redrawing of our maps of employment: redefining the boundaries between occupational areas, and identifying the common areas of skill and knowledge. This has not been a primary objective of the work to date, but may be of particular importance in areas like guidance and counselling, where professional territories are not clearly defined, and territorial disputes have been known.

Precisely because the discussion becomes a technical one, not of right and wrong practice, but of accurate or inaccurate description of functions, and what competent performance looks like in practice, it becomes possible to identify real distinctions between professional or occupational groups. Making these elements of practice explicit allows more public debate about the extent to which work in one field is genuinely different from work in another. It becomes possible to demonstrate how far a careers officer working within a local authority service with adults returning to education is, or is not, doing the same things as an educational guidance worker in a voluntary advice service. The discussion itself helps understanding both between professionals and between professionals and the broader public.

It is also worth noting here that the process of functional analysis can be more than a tool for defining national standards (a once-and-for-all exercise to be carried out by specialist consultants). UDACE, among others, has used the functional analysis workshop as a staff development tool to enable individuals and agencies to develop understanding across sectoral and institutional boundaries. The work of defining precisely what is to be done, and how successful performance is to be assessed, enables us to recognise similarities and differences, and share skills and understanding. Carefully managed functional analysis workshops can provide a very effective instrument for inter-agency networking at local level, regardless of the longer-term outcome of the national standards development work.

The development agenda

This paper has argued that the introduction of NVQs will profoundly influence not only the qualifications available to those working in guidance and counselling, but also their understanding of their own work. It has also argued that this can bring major benefits if it is approached positively, recognising that some of the outstanding issues are complex and will require work and recognising the need for flexibility on the part of those developing the new structures.

The development agenda for the next few years is a challenging one. The creation of a Lead Body and of occupational standards will expose and focus debate about professional competence and boundaries in a way which has not happened before. It is likely to make what guidance professionals do visible and open to public debate in a new way. It is to be hoped that this will

lead to a greater recognition of the potential contribution of guidance and counselling work to the welfare of individuals, society and the economy.

I would also argue that the processes associated with this development can contribute to a greater understanding of professional competence within, between and outside the diverse professional groups, and that the debate and development work will provide a stimulus to staff development and service quality. Whether this happens or not depends to a significant degree on the extent to which the guidance professions themselves seize the opportunity offered.

Note

[1] Since there is no general agreement on terminology, the term 'guidance and counselling' is used here to include a broad range of overlapping activities, ranging from advice-giving to therapeutic counselling, and including feedback functions. It would be inappropriate to try to embrace them all by either term alone, and no other appropriate word exists!

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