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Pocket Watch – A new vision for adult vocational qualifications?

Introduction

"A system that rests on central government control would be superseded by a system that puts employer demand and business growth at its heart, enabling a better match between supply and demand." That's the vision for adult vocational qualifications published today in a long-awaited Review chaired by Nigel Whitehead, a UKCES Commissioner and Group Managing Director at BAE.

A self-confessed committed design engineer, the author accordingly brings an engineering systems approach to the intricate and sometimes byzantine process of developing vocational qualifications for those aged 19 and above. As such not only are we treated to a range of functional maps and flow charts but perhaps most significantly of all, to a new set of design principles that can *"give vocational qualifications a clear and distinct identity."* Some of the proposals require more development, for instance the nature of what are increasingly being referred to as employer-led or is it industry-led partnerships, some are already happening such as employers and Awarding Organisations working together on qualification design, some need to balance vision with wider needs for quality assurance professional development, and some such as the creation of *"a single front-end website that draws information from separate databases into one place,"* bring some much needed modernisation into the process.

Overall, the **Report** continues the trend towards greater employer ownership in the context of greater responsiveness, factors in a simplified qualification system and greater clarity on returns on investment as part of the package, and modernises a system that needs to show increasing dexterity and flexibility in the face of labour market, funding and political demands.

The Report by numbers

As perhaps befits a design model, the Report approaches the problem in a sequenced way. So we have the number of weakness in the current system (7,) the number of broad criteria for future development (3,) a number of recommendations (7) and a list of design principles for qualifications (12.) This is what lies behind some of those important numbers.

What's wrong with the current system?

Many of the problems identified are familiar and in some cases result from previous attempts to intervene. Such interventions, the Report notes, *"have created a more centralised system, unwittingly developed on 'low trust principles,' where quantity of vocational qualifications achieved is measured rather than quality or impact."* Moving away from that is the imperative. The seven problems identified in the current system include:

1. Accountability, not strong enough for customers individually and the market generally
2. National Occupational Standards, over prescriptive, complex and often unresponsive
3. Vocational Quals, too many, poorly recognised and in need of 'de-cluttering'
4. Economically valuable skills, poorly understood, poorly served
5. Qual titles, often confusing and difficult to search for
6. Technology, under-developed in both delivery and assessment
7. Employer involvement, limited when it comes to both the design and development of VQs

Broad criteria for future development

Along with the two 'Rs' of rigour and responsiveness, already identified as being critical measures of the new FE system, this Report adds a third namely: recognition.

Rigour here is defined as clearer and more ambitious occupational standards, *"assessed and graded"* and to be used across the board for Apprenticeships, Tech Level Quals and Adult VQs

but with the application of the unit format and unit sharing as currently operating in the QCF, made optional for Awarding Organisations. Responsiveness implies '*relevance to the needs of individuals and employers*' with the Report endorsing the '*clear line of sight to work*' criterion developed recently by the Commission for Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning. As for recognition, this is not just about better recognition and understanding of vocational qualifications but the provision of clearer data which can aid progression into employment and in time, highlight likely economic returns.

Recommendations

The Report comes up with seven recommendations, six "*immediate*," one "*longer-term*."

1. Awarding Organisations should include employers from relevant sectors when they design and develop vocational qualifications and colleges and training providers should work with employers when they deliver the training required
2. The UKCES should work with employers to develop a new model for developing occupational standards that will allow greater flexibility and responsiveness to particular sector needs
3. The current requirements for vocational qualifications should be replaced by a single set of new design principles (see below)
4. Awarding Organisations and training providers should provide information on the outcomes and impact including destination and wage level data, of their vocational qualifications
5. Ofqual, SFA and UKCES should create a single point of access in the form of a single website for employers and individuals seeking information about particular VQs
6. Ofqual, Ofsted and the SFA should ensure that regulatory, inspection and funding arrangements enable rather than inhibit innovative and high-quality provision
7. Government should incentivise and encourage the development of employer-led partnerships that can take a lead in developing 'rigorous, responsive and recognised VQs.

Design principles

Developed by the UKCES to give vocational qualifications "*clear identity and purpose*," and to take the place of existing criteria, they may make the proverbial 1-side of A4 more difficult but they do offer a clear set of design principles:

1. Identity: should have a clear link to the jobs they describe
2. Size: should comply with the same design principles whatever their size
3. Purpose: should be clear about the qualification's purpose so that its value and application can be immediately recognised
4. Recognition: should be able to assure learners that the qualification will be recognised by employers and other receivers
5. Recognised national standards: should summarise clearly the knowledge, skills and understanding required and be based on what industry wants
6. Recognised local standards: should allow for a proportion of locally-specified standards
7. Grading: should enable differential grades to be awarded either at unit or qualification level
8. Assessment fit for purpose: should ensure that the methodologies applied are appropriate to the purpose of the qualification and the needs of the learners
9. External control: should be subject to external verification or assessment
10. Distance travelled: should allow for prerequisite achievements
11. Progression: should require that providers publish data about learner progression
12. Employer involvement: should include employers in the design, development, delivery and evaluation of adult vocational qualifications



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