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Adding new ingredients to an old recipe: NVQs and the influence of CATERBASE

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Summary

National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) were developed out of a plethora of initiatives implemented between 1960 and 1990. The format of NVQs was initially based on a hierarchical task analysis of job functions within the hospitality and catering industry, conducted as part of the CATERBASE project, which was commissioned by the Manpower Services Commission in the mid-1980s. This issues paper explores the development of NVQs from their CATERBASE beginnings and argues that structural inefficiencies in qualification design is part of the reason for their failure to raise skill levels.

Introduction

If success can be measured temporally than the longevity of NVQs makes them one of the most successful in the history of English education. It is over 20 years since the National Council of Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) were given their remit to develop a nationally recognised framework of existing vocational qualifications from which NVQs came about. With 682 NVQ titles 'current' in the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), 5,641,152 NVQ certificates awarded as at 30 June 2006, and an estimated 12% of the workforce having attained an NVQ (QCA 2006) one could argue that this initiative HAS been successful.

However, NVQs, which were developed to

encapsulate, increase and accredit workplace knowledge and skill, have been heavily criticised. The suite of NVQ qualifications were developed to help form a national system of vocational education, to tie-in the various initiatives and to quell the fragmentation that was occurring at the time. So what has gone wrong? Even the QCA recognise that the initial remit has not been achieved:

The development of NVQs during the last twelve years did not bring the envisaged coherence to the system of vocational qualifications, rather it added a further much needed framework of competence based qualifications. (QCA 2006)

While NVQs did signify the beginning of competence based qualifications and the modularisation of assessment procedures (Young, 1998: 170) in vocational education, it is this aspect of the qualification that has received the most criticism. Many commentators talk of implementation issues as the problem with NVQs but very few look further back to development. NVQs were developed from a little-known project called CATERBASE, commissioned by the Manpower Services Commission (MSC) in the mid-80s. Given that CATERBASE was the starting point for the development of NVQs, this paper argues that it is not difficult to understand why this suite of qualifications has been unsuccessful in raising skills levels, particularly due to the structural inefficiencies in the qualification design.

The Vocational Route

The plethora of unrelated vocational education and training (VET) initiatives developed from 1960 onwards were strongly criticised for failing to add up to an overall national strategy or system of vocational education (Ainley, 1990), and for lacking an effective interface with formal schooling and higher education. This led to a widespread sense of inadequacy regarding the state of the VET system.

Many of the new initiatives and training schemes tried to remove the perceived negative elements of 'traditional apprenticeship', and to promote a viable and successful vocational education route, in line with developments on the European continent. The introduction of an employer-led Youth Training Scheme (YTS) is possibly the most symbolic of all of these initiatives even though it ran in parallel with old models of apprenticeship in industries such as engineering and catering.

One of the main departures from the notion of apprenticeship was the initial development of standards for YTS. However, it was on this basis that YTS was rejected, as employers thought that implementing these 'standard tasks' was too bureaucratic and ultimately too time-consuming. Employer dissatisfaction can be linked to Raffe's (1990:63) accurate prediction that YTS ran the risk of 'being stigmatized as a scheme for the less able, the less motivated and above all else the less employable, and thereby being sucked into the vicious circle of low status.' Employers were not prepared to expend time and effort on a training scheme that in reality did not signal anything to them in terms of end-use or exchange-value of competence. The rejection of YTS by employers led to the introduction of Youth Training in 1990, and it is important to note the placing of only one requirement on employers: all trainees had to follow a training programme leading to a Level 2 NVQ.

The publication of the 1986 White Paper *Working Together – Education and Training* reinforced the need to have established standards of competence and the NCVQ was established. The New Occupational Standards Branch was set up at the MSC, and the Standards Programme was instigated, both leading to the development of occupational standards. These standards became the basis of NVQs and were, therefore, being developed in the period between 1983 and 1990, alongside the reformulation of the youth training programmes. However, the seeds of a new system of vocational qualifications had been planted in 1981 by the MSC through the New Training Initiative (NTI).

CATERBASE

The 1981 White Paper, *A New Training Initiative*, set out three major national objectives for the future of training. These were subsequently reaffirmed in the 1984 White Paper *Training for Jobs* as:

1. better preparation in schools and colleges for working life and better arrangements for the transition from full time education to work;
2. modernisation of training in occupational skills (including apprenticeships) particularly to replace outdated age limits and time serving with training to agreed standards of skill appropriate to the jobs available;
3. wider opportunities for adults to acquire and improve their skills.

In order to progress these objectives, the MSC agreed to finance a project, subsequently called CATERBASE, to develop work-based assessment and accreditation within the hotel and catering industry in contractual agreement with what was then the Hotel and Catering Board (now the Hospitality Training Foundation). The project, while advancing the objectives of the government's New Training Initiative, was very much in accord with the needs identified by the hotel and catering industry itself. It began on May 1st 1985.

CATERBASE was developed 'very much in accord with the needs identified by the hotel and catering industry itself'. However, it is important to note that the majority of the people on the CATERBASE project Steering Group and the Industry Advisory Group were from large organisations and only one was a chef. Very few people on this list could be classified as small- to medium-size employers, who made up the majority of employers taking on 16–18-year olds through YTS. Of further significance, although CATERBASE was supposedly developed to fit into the YTS scheme, employers rejected the assessment scheme as too time-consuming and bureaucratic (Raggatt and Unwin 1991:XIV).

In developing the CATERBASE modules, it was decided that the assessment needed to be a tool that could assess the achievement of elements while on work experience and to cover all four outcomes of YTS (HCTB 1988:21): Competence in a job and/or range of occupational skills; competence in a range of transferable core skills; ability to transfer skills and knowledge to new situations; and personal effectiveness. However, the developers of CATERBASE also wrote,

It appeared unlikely that a qualification which gave high prominence to the final three outcomes would be meaningful to employers and trainees. Difficulties could be anticipated in gaining acceptance and credibility. (HCTB 1988:21)

since holders of such a certificate may still lack the theoretical background prized so highly.

On being questioned, employers said that they would be happy to accept completed Passbooks as indicators of experience, although they would want to know where someone had been working before (PRD 1988:pp11-14).

This statement is significant for three reasons. Firstly, research evidence from Stasz (1997) indicates that the criteria of the YTS are indeed exactly what employers want. But in the development of CATERBASE (and subsequently NVQs) these criteria were ignored even though employers supposedly developed the assessment scheme. Secondly, in an explicit departure from the traditional importance placed on time-serving, the CATERBASE designers used competence as a standard of assessment adopting a hierarchical task analysis approach to progressively reduce occupational activities into mounting levels of detail.

The traditional time-serving aspect of vocational training and apprenticeship had always emphasised process, allowing the knowledge and skill constructed by trainees and apprentices to be refined and honed (Eraut, 2000). In direct opposition to these priorities, however, the CATERBASE assessment structures encouraged 'divisive specialization' (Young, 1998) and focused on discrete competencies that can undermine transfers of knowledge and the links between forms of knowledge and skill.

Thirdly, it was anticipated that there would be a lack of acceptance and credibility within the industry even before the project was implemented. An evaluation was conducted three years after the programme's implementation and, while the findings overall were on the positive side, a few major issues arose:

the feeling expressed that while CATERBASE modules were splendid for practical work, there was too little emphasis on theory.

Issues identified by the evaluators/PRD regarding assessment concern the element of time-serving, as shown in the time taken to reach basic standard/performance criteria before assessment occurs on the module itself and the need for additional testing, to check knowledge (theory).

While they [employers] appreciated the value of CATERBASE modules as training documents and the scheme as a whole, it was nevertheless "not as good as" college training, which has become the accepted way of qualifying to work in the industry. Even the carrot of joint certification with City & Guilds did not reassure them,

These issues of theoretical background, experience, and time-serving, identified in the above extracts from the report, are elements inherent in the processes of workplace learning, and were aspects that remained in the apprenticeships that were undertaken at the same time YTS was running. The new CATERBASE assessment framework was not only contrary to the culture and history of the industry, but also antithetical to the philosophy of the training scheme into which it was being fitted. The module system of CATERBASE was associated with a further erosion of the time-serving aspect, with an alternate emphasis on outcomes.

NVQs in the hospitality and other industries were developed following the implementation of CATERBASE by the MSC, and the programme's perceived success. These included clothing manufacture, retail distribution, business administration, pensions management, and marine engineering. Jessup (1991:52), in explaining the move from CATERBASE to NVQs has claimed that CATERBASE 'has been extensively evaluated'. However this term may have been used loosely, as only one evaluation report was found. Furthermore, the evaluation did not conclusively support the introduction of the module system into other industries. In fact, they raised many concerns that needed to be thought through regarding the continuation of CATERBASE within the hospitality industry let alone other industries. Nevertheless, the module system of NVQs and outcomes-based assessment was introduced.

The Methodology of NVQs

The new framework for vocational education and training was the largest example of centralized control of VET since the Statute of Artificers in 1563. Employers in industry were told they needed standards and were directed as to what these standards were to look like. However, the underpinning knowledge in the craft certificates and the process of constructing the knowledge was down-played.

The new qualifications were intended to be 'employer-led' and were supposedly designed in consultation with employers and had employer requirements in mind. It was believed that the more ownership employers felt, the more successful this new initiative would be. Thus, the system was to serve the dual ends of promoting the profitability of firms in the market place as well as high standards of education and training. However, as with CATERBASE, this was not the case.

Conclusion

Even though NVQs were supposedly developed for employers in conjunction with their Industry Training Organisations, employers in the relevant industries did not embrace the attempt to qualify the knowledge and skill constructed in the workplace through NVQs. In addition, it was also assumed that those young people participating in YT would gain NVQs. In the early 1990s, it was envisaged that 'two-thirds of all 16-year-old schools leavers' would attain NVQ Level 2 by 1992 and that 'all 18-year-olds would have a recognised qualification at level 2 and half of them at level 3' (Ainley, 1990:73). However, these targets were not achieved and as a result Modern Apprenticeships, incorporating NVQs up to level 3, were introduced in 1994.

Furthermore, recent research (for example, Billett, 2001; Rogoff et al., 2002) on workplace learning highlights the social and situational nature of knowledge and skill construction. These processes are deemed as important, if not more so, than the outcome (being competent). This is because the way in which the knowledge and skill is constructed will affect the proficiency of the worker, and is far more contingent on factors such as cognitive development rather than behavioural factors as in NVQs.

The development of NVQs from its CATERBASE beginnings, the emphasis on outcomes, and the underlying notion of competence collide with the training practices and needs of employers. The identification of a worker as either competent or not (yet) competent, the basis on which an NVQ is awarded or withheld, does not do justice to the depth and breadth of knowledge and skill that is constructed in the workplace. This process of constructing knowledge and skill is far more contingent on factors such as cognitive development rather than the behaviouristic factors favoured by the NVQ designers. As qualifications are not skills themselves but a proxy for skill and it is debatable as to the skills that are being qualified in an NVQ, it is no

wonder these qualifications are given scant regard by employers and discussed with such despair by academics.

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