

# Assessment and quality assurance in the QCF:

(Do you know as much as you think you do?)

## Introduction

For those of us who train practitioners within the sector, there is still confusion about what constitutes good practice in assessing and quality assurance. Lack of CPD among assessors and those responsible for QA can prove a problem, particularly when it comes to the QCF and the changing regulatory landscape. The good news is that assessors, IQAs and EQAs are in key positions to improve the quality of learning as well as ensuring standards are maintained, however, this means taking a total quality approach and allowing those responsible for QA to manage performance and make improvements. To give an example, a curriculum for training assessors and IQAs may include an explanation of QCF terminology and what this means for practice. However, for those who then take responsibility for their assessment decisions on the job or in the classroom, practice often remains exactly as it was when they assessed and internally verified qualifications under the NQF and newly-qualified assessors find themselves unable to implement what they have learned. Although NVQs in the NQF are still with us, there are also qualifications in the QCF with 'NVQ' in the title – these qualifications are structured in the same way as all other QCF qualifications and assessors and IQAs/EQAs need to understand the differences and implications for practice.

## 1. Centres now need to enable their Awarding Organisation (AO) to meet Ofqual's General Conditions of Recognition.

Responsibility for the quality of assessment has changed since the introduction of QCF qualifications. Awarding Organisations are individually responsible for ensuring quality and each has different procedures and requirements of centres. These include enabling the AO to meet their obligations under the General Conditions of Recognition (Ofqual, 2011). Failure to do so by a centre may result in Ofqual directing the AO to stop dealing with them. It also means:

- if there's a problem, you may be affected even if you are classed as a low-risk centre (as in the case of one AO that had a condition placed upon it by Ofqual requiring EQA visits across all centres where it was found that a disproportionate number of distinction grades had been awarded).
- it's the Quality Manager's job to know about regulatory changes, to bring these to senior managers' attention and to put the case for change (not the other way round).

## 2. Quality assurance is about improving assessment practices and procedures: it is not just about assessing and verifying outcomes

For IQAs and EQAs, this means actively managing the performance of assessors and internal quality assurance within centres respectively, so that practice evolves and improves. For example, internal quality assurance will include:

- QA of the learning journey – from recruitment procedures through learning and learner progress, to summative assessment
- using a variety of qualitative and quantitative sources such as learner (and employer) interviews, observations of performance and looking at drop-out and achievement rates
- observations of assessors in action – in both the workplace and vocational settings (classroom, workshop and/or online). Observing the conditions of assessment, such as the way in which learners are prepared, is as important as moderating the outcomes, for example.

EQAs should also be carrying out live observation of the ways in which IQAs implement QA processes (not just looking at portfolios or insisting on evidence matrices because of a personal preference – see the accounts under 4, below and Ofqual's Frequently Asked Questions on the General Conditions of Recognition and Recognition Criteria for a list of activities EQAs are expected to undertake).

For assessors this means:

- being actively involved in QA and standardisation processes
- taking responsibility for their performance and professional development needs with the support of their IQA.

## 3. Everyone involved needs to know about the implications of the QCF for assessing and quality assurance

Areas of practice where CPD and updating may be needed are:

- **Understanding of the QCF levels and assessment of learning outcomes (LOs) and assessment criteria (ACs)** – as opposed to elements and performance criteria in NVQs, or performance and knowledge statements within National Occupational Standards (NOS). QCF qualifications contain separate knowledge units, applied units and units that are a combination of both. The verbs contained within ACs are important: assessors need to understand domains and taxonomies of learning if they are to choose and use valid and reliable methods of assessing. (The same applies to AOs – multi-choice questionnaires are not a valid method to use on their own when assessing applied units, for example.)

- **Understanding of the QCF levels.** The higher the level, the more complex the qualifications become. There is a corresponding need to assess and QA taking into account, for example, the level of autonomy required on the learner's part.
- **Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL).** This happens at recruitment and requires the assessor's involvement. IQAs therefore need a policy and a QA procedure in place.
- **RPL and credit transfer.** These are different: potential learners who bring credits with them are exempt from having to repeat the same units; those who bring relevant prior learning, experience and/or achievement should be offered RPL as an option. If these learners then achieve the relevant LOs and ACs having had their evidence assessed, they should not have to repeat learning or be assessed unnecessarily. (It's important that recruitment staff know this and how the rules of combination apply to different qualifications too.)

#### 4. External quality assurance should mirror the IQA process

The EQA process also concerns improving quality. The following accounts were sent to me by centre managers and show contrasting approaches taken by their EQAs.

##### **Account 1**

When our EQA visits, he asks to see a sample of learner portfolios across all cohorts. If it's a new cohort or qualification, he'll usually want to see every one – often 60 or 70 of them.

There was one time when two of the portfolios didn't have evidence cross-referenced in the way he had asked us to do it, and he put a stop to the whole cohort, about 40 learners in total, many of whom had left us by the time he visited. He also likes to see dates and signatures on all evidence. I know that this hasn't been a requirement under the NVQ Code of Practice since 2006, and there's no specific requirement now from our AO, but to be honest it's easier just to do things his way to keep him happy.

##### **Account 2**

As an IQA, the best EQA visit I have had was where the EQA pre-selected a number of learners from the centre information, for which he wished to see the assessment records for both completed and part-completed qualifications. He covered records for all IQAs, learners across organisations, and at all levels assessed.

He also arranged to observe the live assessment and IQA of a learner, assessor and IQA. On the day, he checked through the assessment records and sampled the decisions made. He made sure that he selected examples where I and the other IQAs had accepted the assessor decision and ones where I had questioned the assessor decision. He noted on his report whether he agreed or disagreed with my decisions.

He also noted a high turnover of learners for one particular assessor, then spoke to him to check on his workload and the assessment methods he used. In private, he also checked that the assessor was happy with the IQA process and the support he received from the centre in general.

He also spoke to staff at all levels in the organisation involved in the qualification. For the live visit, he observed the tail-end of an assessment which involved an observation and question-and-answer session which I also IQA'd. He observed the assessor's feedback to the candidate and also my feedback to the assessor. He then briefly interviewed both the candidate and assessor in private.

At the end of the visit, he wrapped up the session with verbal feedback to me and to the centre manager, which was followed up by a comprehensive written report with comments and action points.

## CPD of assessors, IQAs and EQAs

Encouraging a culture of CPD and reflective practice is one way to identify areas where improvements can be made. An IQA gave me the following account and it shows how she turned her reflections into CPD opportunities for herself and her team. (The structure and questions in italics are mine – you have to teach people skills of reflection in my view.)

### **Reflective log, 9 June 2012**

#### **Observation of J**

This afternoon I observed J, a new assessor who has recently joined our team. J came to us from a larger organisation and is highly experienced. (She has been an assessor for longer than I have been an IQA.)

These are the things that struck me during my observation of her:

1 J appeared to assess almost effortlessly: she followed her learner around as they carried out their job and wrote everything up as she went along. Her written observations and recording documents were well written and easy to follow. It was obvious she knew the standards inside out.

2 She did not make all her assessment decisions on the spot. For one area in particular, she said she'd contact a witness then ring the learner and discuss it with her later in the week.

3 In our discussion afterwards, she referred to the signature strips on all our documentation. She said these weren't needed and referred me to the NVQ Code of Practice.

**Reflection** (What went well/badly? How do I feel about it? What issues does this raise?)

The observation raised several issues concerning assessment practice in our team:

1 We do not write up observations and record decisions as they happen. Also, I suspect most of the team sign and date their records in front of the telly (I know I used to).

2 We don't know how to write good observations of performance: this is a team development need.

Observing J, I realise that I was feeling threatened by what she knows and by her practice. She is actually a brilliant assessor and we could benefit as a team and as an organisation from her experience.

**Review** (What have I learnt?)

I thought I knew what good practice in assessment was all about and that I understood what was involved in holistic practice. However, I now realise that our team is lacking in some of the basic skills we need if we are to improve what we do. We need to get used to writing observations and recording decisions as we observe.

**Action** (What will change?)

Observing J and discussing this with her has given me ideas about how to use her experience for the benefit of the team. I am planning the following changes:

1 Introducing peer assessment to the team. I will do this by asking K to observe J, and L to observe P. (K is another 'experienced' practitioner who does not like me observing him and who does not welcome changes; pairing him up with J, who is of a similar age, may help to challenge this). I will then 'rotate' the observations so that everyone gets a chance to see J.

2 Asking J to co-lead a CPD session with me on observation writing.

3 Removing the signature strips on all our documentation and using one declaration instead. I will speak to our EQA about introducing this.

## References

LLUK (2010). Assessing and Assuring the Quality of Assessment: Guidance for awarding organisations.

LLUK (2010). National Occupational Standards for Learning and Development.

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Ofqual (2010). Addendum to NVQ code of practice 2006.

QCA (2010). Claiming credit: Guidance on the recognition of prior learning in the Qualifications and Credit Framework.

QCA (2007). Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework.

QCA (2006). NVQ code of practice (revised)

Read, H. (2012). The best quality assurer's guide. Read On Publications, UK.

You can download the above at <http://www.readonpublications.co.uk/> under 'Course resources'.