

COMPLETION RATES OF SCOTTISH VOCATIONAL QUALIFICATION (SVQ) COURSES: A RESEARCH STUDY

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SYNOPSIS

This article examines notions of completion as applied to candidates taking Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs). It is based on case-study research carried out by the authors in the winter of 1998/99. It is argued that a number of factors militate against the compilation of meaningful completion rates for SVQs, the most important of which are the type of candidate, the funding regime and the poor quality of data held by Awarding Bodies. The conclusions reached are of direct relevance to policy makers in post-16 education and training in Scotland.

INTRODUCTION

The research seeks to establish completion rates for candidates undertaking Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs). An SVQ is defined (Jessup, 1991) as a statement of competence clearly relevant to work and intended to facilitate entry into, or progression in, employment and further learning, issued to an individual by a recognised Awarding Body. The prime aim of an SVQ is to accredit learning in the workplace against an employer-led national standard of competence, to encourage open access to education and training opportunities and to help produce a new flexible and adaptable workforce. The take-up of SVQs is a major Government priority (Scottish Office, 1999) in 'work-based' education and training.

The initial aim of the research was to explain the factors that accounted for the relatively high differences between the enrolment and completion rates for SVQs in Scotland. At this point it was envisaged that an across-the-board "natural" or anticipated completion rate for SVQs could be compiled. However, it soon became apparent that the issue of completion could only be meaningfully explored in the wider socio-economic and political context of post-16 education in Scotland. This, in turn, involved an extended analysis of the target participant groups undertaking the qualifications, the role of the Enterprise Network in sponsoring the awards and the part played by employers in the promotion and use of competence-based training.

The paper begins by providing a context setting section on post-16 vocational education in Scotland followed by a literature review on completion rates within 'work-based' and 'work-related' vocational qualifications (Howieson, Raffe, Spours and Young, 1997). The research methodology is then described followed by the results of the case-study research. Finally, the discussion explores the variation in completion rates for SVQs, funding arrangements for the awards and the role of the Local Enterprise Companies (LECs). A number of conclusions are drawn from the research that are pertinent to current policy debates in post-16 education.

CONTEXT SETTING

Post-16 education and training has undergone considerable change in the last decade. Whilst the numbers of pupils entering school has declined sharply, the numbers staying on after age 16 and achieving a minimum of level 2 qualifications and above have expanded considerably (Advisory Scottish Council for Education and Training Targets, [ASCETT], 1998). The norm is now for the majority of 16 year olds to stay on at school and study for academic and/or vocational qualifications, and for over

forty percent of this cohort to continue on into higher education (Raffe, Brannen, Croxford and Martin, 1999).

Historically, the starting point for the transition to a medium participation system in post-16 education can be traced back to the decision to raise the school leaving age from 15 to 16 in 1973. This meant that pupils ended compulsory education at or around the end of fourth year of secondary school. It also signalled a raising of expectations by pupils and parents. However, the situation changed dramatically in the late 1970s when the UK entered one of the deepest recessions since the post-war years. For the first time large numbers of school leavers were failing to gain employment after leaving school. The Government's response was to establish the Youth Opportunities Programme (YOP) in 1978 (Manpower Services Commission [MSC] Review and Plan, 1977). The YOP was larger than any previous Government intervention in the post-16 youth labour market. By 1980 some 15 per cent of school leavers in Scotland had joined the programme, while 14 per cent were officially registered as unemployed. Following criticism, the YOP was replaced in 1983 by the Youth Training Scheme (YTS), guaranteeing all 16 year olds and unemployed 17 year olds an integrated work experience and education programme (MSC, 1981).

The next piece of legislation to have a major impact on post-16 education and training in Scotland was the Action Plan for 16-18 (SED, 1983). The report published in January 1983 proposed an integrated modular structure for all non-standard grade courses for 16-18 year olds. For the first time students in further education and pupils in schools could enrol on nationally recognised modular-based qualifications. These National Certificate (NC) modules are now recognised as mainstream 'work-related' vocational qualifications that can be taken in schools or FE colleges and studied at any age on a full-time or part-time basis. The organisation set up in 1985 to oversee the development of a modular-based vocational curriculum was the Scottish Vocational Education Council (SCOTVEC). Working in collaboration with the Scottish Examination Board (SEB), this new vocational education body was remarkably successful at introducing modular structures, criterion based assessment systems and new forms of quality control within the education sector.

In England and Wales the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) was established in October 1986 following the publication of the White Paper "Working Together-Education and Training" (Department of Education/Department of Education and Science, 1986). An independent body, the NCVQ had the role of establishing a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) framework based on occupational standards and linked to emerging vocational markets in the European Community. These 'work-based' qualifications were designed for people in employment and offered as an independent but parallel education and training "track" to complement academic qualifications (GCSE and A Levels) and led to the subsequent development of 'work-related' General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs). A decision was taken in 1989 to extend the development of the NVQ framework to Scotland, but this time to give SCOTVEC the sole responsibility as Accrediting and Awarding Body for what became known as SVQs. In practice the structure of the actual qualifications are the same as NVQs, confirming the prominence of UK policy making in this field (Raffe, 1998).

The development of 'work-based' qualifications was given additional impetus in 1990 by the creation of a devolved enterprise network that was to link more closely the economic expansion of the nation with the education and skills of its workforce (Fairley, 1996). The network consists of Scottish Enterprise (SE) and Highland and Islands Enterprise (H&IE) and 13 Local Enterprise Companies (LECs). The new companies are 'output-related' funded with responsibility for Youth Training (YT), including Skillseekers and Adult Training (AT). In 1991 this role was extended to include the recently set national education and training targets for Scotland (ASCETT).

The National Certificate, despite the emergence of the new VQ, remained the core of the 'work-related' vocational syllabus in Scotland. However, the rapid expansion of the NC had left it open to the criticism that although it encouraged flexibility it had not led to the provision of a coherent curriculum. With the publication of "Access and Opportunity" (Scottish Office, 1991) SCOTVEC introduced clusters of NC modules which in turn could lead to a General Scottish Vocational Qualification (GSVQ). Unlike GNVQs in England and Wales, the 'work-related' GSVQs were built upon the existing range of modules within the SCOTVEC catalogue.

In 1990, The Secretary for State for Scotland had established the Howie Committee to review the aims of the post-16 curriculum in schools. The subsequent report was published in 1992 with the main recommendation being the setting up of a two-track pathway after Standard Grades. The Howie proposals were, however, rejected following an extensive period of consultation. The response from the Scottish Office was the White Paper "Higher Still: Opportunity for All" (Scottish Office Education Department (SOED), 1994). The proposals contained within the paper aim to achieve a unified academic and vocational pathway, bringing together National Certificate modules, Highers and Advanced Highers in a single curriculum framework. Currently there is no intention to include within the 'Higher Still' programme any of the other offerings from Further Education or SVQs. Higher Still is being implemented from Autumn 1999.

The 1996 Education (Scotland) Bill proposed the setting up of a unified body to oversee the development of post-16 education. The Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) was established in 1997 and brought together SCOTVEC and SEB into one curriculum and assessment body for Scotland. The publication of the report by the Scottish Committee of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (NCIHE) into Higher Education in Scotland (NICHE, 1997) and the subsequent announcement in 1998 of the creation of a unified Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework that will embrace the concept of Lifelong Learning strengthens the argument for an integrated post-16 education and training policy framework that attempts to bridge the academic and vocational divide. In 1998 the New Deal was introduced as a 'Pathfinder' project in Tayside, signalling a radical rethink of preparatory 'work-based' training for unemployed young people and adults. The New Deal is likely to replace a number of the existing training for work schemes (Training for Work and Training and Employment Grant Scheme) and will complement, rather than replace, Skillseekers.

Finally, a number of national and local employer training organisations exist to encourage employers to invest in education and training and to influence the vocational curriculum through setting occupational 'work-based' standards of performance. The most important of these organisations are the National Council and National Training Organisations (NTOs). The NTO National Council represents and supports sector-based training organisations (NTOs) through influencing government policy, developing national partnerships and providing services to local members. The NTOs are independent employer-driven strategic bodies focused on a specific sector or employment area. They have a wide remit covering both education and competitiveness issues and have taken over the work carried out by the Occupational Standards Councils, Industry Training Organisations and Lead Bodies in defining occupational standards of competence.

SCOTTISH AND NATIONAL VOCATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS

The two major Accreditation Bodies for vocational qualifications are the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) in England and the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) for Scotland. Both organisations were created in 1997 from a merger of the vocational and academic Accreditation Bodies. The QCA

ensures National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) and General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) meet particular criteria and are comparable across sectors. QCA accredits proposal for NVQs and GNVQs developed by Awarding bodies and NTOs, and also has responsibility for the academic track in England. It has a non-governmental department status and operated through fee income from accrediting national qualifications. In England, Awarding Bodies develop NVQs/GNVQs and have the responsibility for implementing the awards through approving accredited centres that actually deliver the qualifications. Training providers, companies, schools and tertiary education institutions can become approved centres, operating within the assessment and verification procedures of the Awarding Body.

In Scotland SVQs are the responsibility of SQA, both as an Accrediting and an Awarding Body. Prior to offering an SVQ, potential providers have to gain both approval to act as a centre and approval to offer individual awards. Following approval by SQA, providers operate a three-tiered quality assurance system through internal assessment, internal verification and external verification. Assessment under SVQs is defined as the evaluation of achievement. It is concerned with making judgements on performance evidence as defined in the appropriate occupational standards. In other words, candidates have to demonstrate that they are competent to perform whole work roles to the standards expected in employment in real work situations. The system of assessment is criterion-referenced in that individual candidates are judged on whether they are competent in respect to the occupational standards within their awards. No reference is made in this assessment to the performance of other candidates. An explicit aim of the VQ assessment system is to avoid norm-referenced tests.

In summary, the S/NVQ system is a comprehensive, national system for determining levels of vocational qualifications covering all occupations and incorporating many of the quality assurance processes adopted within education and professional bodies. The most radical departures from existing post-16 education and training structures, both in the UK and elsewhere in Europe, are the prominence given to industry-led outcome-based standards of competence, to a criterion-referenced internal assessment system and to defining knowledge and understanding as underpinning performance. In Scotland, SVQs are seen as having a central role in the expansion of 'work-based' education and training policy and lifelong learning (Scottish Office, 1999).

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is an extensive body of literature in the UK on non-completion rates for post-compulsory qualifications. In England, Sharp and Kendall (1996) identified withdrawal rates of 7% over the first year of A-or A/S level courses, while non-completion rates over the full two years were estimated at 13% by the Office for Standards in Education (OfSTED)/Audit Commission (1993). According to Sharp (1996) GNVQ first year intermediate courses have a 20% non-completion rate, while the two-year advanced courses have a 40% non-completion rate. Traditional vocational Higher National Certificate (HNC) and Higher National Diploma (HND) courses in England are estimated to have a 30% non-completion rate (Business and Technology Education Council [BTEC], 1993). Kidd and Wardman (1999) claim non-completion rates on the Youth Training schemes are relatively high at 35%. In England data from the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) for England (FEFC, 1998) suggests that NVQ non-completion rates are currently on average 28% of those who register for the awards in colleges. Data published in England by the Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) suggests that Work Based Training for Adults (WBTA) non-completion rates for full awards are on average 55%, while,

those for Work Based Training for Young People (WBTYP) are 45% (Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), August 1998).

In Scotland, Higher Grade non-completion rates stood at 13% in 1998 (SQA, 1997), while National Certificate modules have a non-completion rate of 32% (Scottish Office, 1998) and HNCs a 26% non-completion rate (SQA, 1997). It is difficult to establish the rate of completion of full awards for the LECs given the differing definitions used to measure outcomes on Skillseekers and Training for Work. However, using published data from Scottish Enterprise (1998) it is reasonable to suggest that non-completion rates for full SVQ awards are similar to those for NVQs in government training schemes in England. The Further Education sector and the Scottish Executive do not publish non-completion rates for SVQs in Scotland.

During the first few years of their existence, higher level work-based N/SVQs achieved very low completion rates (Canning, 1997). However, more recent research suggests those candidates undertaking level 4 and 5 N/SVQs are likely to achieve higher completion rates:

Completion rates ranged from 20% to 100% with the mean and median at 65%. Those with rates of 80% or higher often mentioned that they sifted candidates at the beginning. (Eraut and Steadman, 1999: 12)

and

According to the students, 73% completed the full SVQ awards. This level of completion may, however, be unrepresentative of the whole population of students undertaking higher level SVQs given the tendency of those who complete the awards to return the questionnaires. However, it is reasonable to claim for this sample that the completion rates are comparable with other traditional vocational awards in Scotland' (Canning, 2000).

However, it should be noted that both studies relate only to higher level N/SVQs undertaken by employees in work who are sponsored by their employers.

Research carried out into the non-completion of post-compulsory qualifications suggests that those who withdraw from programmes are more likely to have entered the courses with poor academic results (Payne, 1995 and Howieson and Croxford, 1996). There is little evidence of gender effects in completion rates, although it has been suggested that females are less likely to complete Youth Training courses and males more likely to withdraw from Further Education courses (Kidd and Wardman, 1999). Martinez (1997) claims that non-completers are less likely to be interested in their courses when they start them and have been persuaded to enroll on them by third parties.

In summary, the literature points to a wide range of completion rates for post-16 qualifications depending on the provider, curriculum and type of candidate involved. It is possible to claim that academic qualifications have higher completion rates than 'work-related' or 'work-based' courses and that there is likely to be a wide disparity in completion rates for N/SVQs.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodology consisted of a literature review; a search of an Awarding Body (Scottish Qualification Authority) database and a survey of a sample of SVQ Centres. An initial literature review was carried out in October 1998 and then updated as new literature emerged. The SQA database was examined in November when initial contacts with Centres were also made. Case study interviews began in the same month and were completed in December 1998.

The Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) is the main Awarding Body (and sole Accrediting Body) for SVQs in Scotland. It groups SVQ providers into eleven

Centre-Types ranging from colleges to “other” and “unclassified”. Five main groups dominate the provision of SVQs in Scotland: colleges, private training companies, public sector employers, private sector employers and the voluntary sector. These account for around 91% of SVQ provision. Following informal consultations with various providers and the assumption that distinct Centre-Types faced similar problems with completion rates, it was decided to base the research on a series of case studies based on the five Centre-Types.

The research began with a series of informal face-to-face interviews with a number of providers across Scotland. Staff were interviewed in the colleges, private training companies and the voluntary sector. All the interviewees were chosen on the basis of being significant providers (in terms of numbers) of SVQs within their group. The interviews lasted around an hour and involved senior people (often more than one) within the relevant organisation. Interviewees were assured of confidentiality and their interviews were not recorded in order to facilitate an informal atmosphere.

The results of these preliminary case studies allowed for the compilation of a subsequent questionnaire for use in telephone interviews where again confidentiality was assured. This consisted of 28 questions under seven headings: funding, registration, completion, the SVQ itself, candidates, providers and general issues. Sub-sections dealt with such areas as tracking of candidate progress and employment status. A total of twenty Centres were interviewed as part of the research.

RESULTS

Introduction

There are inherent problems in defining completion when considering SVQs. Students either complete the awards or are ‘working towards’ completion. There are no withdrawn categories and no requirement to report on non-completions. In the study completion was taken to mean the achievement of a full SVQ award. An analysis of the Awarding Body database indicated that it was not possible to establish statistical data on non-completion rates. In order to establish notional non-completion rates it was, therefore, necessary to undertake case study research with the major Centre-Types.

Case Study One: FE Colleges

FE Colleges account for around 40% of the SVQs taken in Scotland. They are diverse institutions with varying missions, areas of expertise, and involvement in SVQs. Some have strong links to industry and so are well placed to take up SVQs. Others are more community-orientated with correspondingly fewer links to the industrial sector and less motivation to take up the awards. The colleges interviewed provided a wide range of SVQs including Construction, Child Care, Motor Vehicle, Information Technology, Horticulture and Customer Care. The levels involved were 1-3.

Colleges attract funding through various means such as the Scottish Office in the form of SUMS, Student Unit of Measurement (FEFD, 1998), the LECs (primarily in provision of Skillseekers SVQs) and employers (who might also be drawing money from the LECs).

All of the colleges said that they kept data on registration and completion rates, although some commented that their management of information systems might not be up to the task of logging all enrolment dates and candidate details. Record keeping for withdrawals was widespread and often included the reasons for withdrawal where they were known. One college commented that it was obliged to tell its LEC about this.

Questions about completion rates elicited various responses. Often this appeared not to enter into the colleges' calculations (obligations to the LECs notwithstanding). As funding was often determined by the amount of time a candidate spent on an SVQ, completion per se was not necessarily of prime importance. Furthermore, as candidates can register at various times during the year, it is not always possible to determine completion. There is often no way for central administration to be able to calculate the total number of students a college has at any given time. Often only course/team leaders were in a position to be up to date with candidate progress. In sum, it was found that colleges were likely to have less than full records on completion rates.

When pressed on completion rates, colleges came up with notional figures varying from 80 to 100%. It was, however, evident that completion rates varied across SVQs. One college mentioned an engineering SVQ on which completion was almost guaranteed, as it was an essential part of an employee's training. Two colleges specifically mentioned that there was a high turnover in Skillseeker candidates in catering and hairdressing. SVQs involving relatively low-skilled occupations and targeted at school-leavers were viewed as problematic areas. Payment of bonuses to complete SVQs was widespread within colleges, generally involving payments to Skillseekers.

It should be noted that college provision takes place in classroom situations which were not intended at the introduction of SVQs. Colleges argued that it was often easier and quicker for candidates to do SVQs in a college away from the distractions and pressures of work. They were adamant that not only could they replicate work-type environments, but that they could simulate work situations, which might not occur for some time in the real workplace. Doing an SVQ outwith the workplace certainly has implications for completion rates, but also for the SVQ's status as a 'work-based' qualification.

Colleges placed great emphasis on the employers' role in motivating candidates, a factor generally seen as more important than the size of an organisation. There was evidence that the public sector was more supportive of candidates than the private. Colleges provided evidence that those candidates in paid full-time employment were most likely to complete, especially those who wanted to do an SVQ, rather than those who were being pushed into it.

Some of the private trainers interviewed (below) argued that colleges should not be involved in SVQs at all, as SVQs are meant to be about 'work-based' learning. They alleged that college-based provision was particularly unsuitable for Skillseekers, especially those who might have had a negative experience of school and for whom a return to a classroom would be unsuitable, with an obvious affect on completion rates.

Case Study Two: Private Training Organisations

Private training organisations are second only to colleges in the number of SVQs they provide in Scotland, accounting for some 20% of the total. Four private training organisations, providing SVQs from level 1 to 3, were interviewed as part of the research.

Private sector trainers are heavily reliant on the LECs for funding, although there is also some income from private employers. As the main candidates here are Skillseekers and Training for Work (TfW) workers, a major concern of the sector is the type of candidate they receive.

The role of Careers Offices in directing young people towards Skillseeker programmes was seen as crucial by the private trainers. They are often the recipients of decisions made earlier along the line whereby young people have been directed by Careers Offices and/or the Employment Service towards training schemes for which

they are not suited and/or which they do not want to do, with obvious implications for completion rates.

Registration is a key issue within this sector. Trainers reported that LECs required them to register Skillseekers for SVQs within 40 days of starting their training, with one saying that its LEC's limit was four weeks. There was a widespread belief that this is too early to judge candidates' suitability. One Centre described the timescale as "daunting". Monitoring of withdrawals was widespread, as was recording the reasons for withdrawal. But again the amount of information kept was partly driven by the requirements of the sponsoring LEC.

As many of the candidates within this Centre-Type are Skillseekers or on TFW courses, it was found that a certain amount of circumspection was necessary when dealing with completion rates. An important factor is that private trainers are outcome driven. They are set targets by LECs which expect a certain percentage of cohorts to complete full SVQs. Private training organisations derive their income and profits from ensuring that candidates complete training courses of which SVQs are a constituent part.

It is with private trainers that factors relating to candidates were most marked. Trainers were only too aware that completion rates were to a large measure dependent on the type of candidate coming through. For example, many TFW candidates might be illiterate or have learning difficulties and were seen by one provider as particularly problematic. But there was still pressure to push them through SVQs in order to get the payment upon which private trainers are dependent. But there is again a need for closer inspection here. Trainers reported great differences in attitudes between different types of Skillseekers. Stereotypically those doing such SVQs as Administration and Accountancy were seen as more likely to complete than those doing, for example, Warehousing. A hierarchy within Skillseekers was apparent.

Two of the four private trainers mentioned a completion rate of around 70%, another set 50% as a bare minimum. The last said that their drop-outs were too high because this meant they were losing money. Three of the four private trainers routinely provided bonuses for completion, the other only did so if required to do so by their LEC. The bonus could be between £50 and £200 - a comparatively large sum for many trainees. One trainer was adamant that such payments had to be paid to encourage completion.

The private trainers were the only Centre-Type where age was felt by respondents to play an important role in completion rates. Two commented that there were problems with young people new to the world of work who could be undisciplined and would often leave training courses for a job or simply move away. Older workers on TFW were seen as reliable because they were keen to get anything which would aid their employment prospects.

Employer attitude was stressed by trainers as a key variable. One suggested that some employers do not see the relevance of qualifications which simply measure what workers are already doing, while another found that many employed workers dropped-out once they realised that the SVQ was not developmental.

Case Study Three: Public Employers

Public employers provide around 9% of SVQs. The respondents were drawn from local authorities, public services, and the welfare sector. Once again they were all major, experienced, users of SVQs. The organisations interviewed covered all levels of SVQs.

The funding mechanism within this provider group was highly diverse, ranging from complete self-funding, to a majority of LEC funding and including one with a split between LEC and commercial business funding. One Centre attracted money from other parts of the public sector within which it operated.

Three of the four respondents quoted completion rates of between 50 and 100%, according to the type of candidates. One employer spoke of striving for 100% and one almost guaranteed completion, so withdrawal was not an issue. The other two organisations monitored withdrawals, but not the reasons for it. All four organisations said that completion was very important to them. Candidate self-motivation was seen as a vital component of completion rates, but a role for managers and supervisors was also recognised.

Payment of bonuses for completing SVQs within this Centre-Type tended to be indirect. In one organisation promotion at a later date was possible, for another it led to salary increments in some cases. In another it had no effect. Only one paid a direct lump sum and this was on behalf of a LEC.

The research revealed one public sector organisation, which does not keep any figures for completion rates and is not interested in completion rates per se. However, this goes hand-in-hand with being highly committed to getting candidates to complete, routinely contacting those whose progress is too slow, setting targets for the percentage of staff it wants to have SVQs, and ring-fencing money for SVQ provision. The organisation allows candidates to take Units of SVQs if that is their choice, but places no emphasis at all on completing a full SVQ. This is because the organisation sees SVQs as a developmental process which, within certain parameters, is a matter for individuals to determine in conjunction with their line manager. The organisation allows employees to do SVQs, but puts no pressure on them to do so. The whole ethos of the process is that it is to be voluntary. Perhaps paradoxically the organisation believes that such an approach is an aid to higher completion. By removing the stigma of non-completion it was hoped that overall completion rates would rise. No evidence was produced for the success of this approach, but the view was very firmly held.

This *laissez faire* approach can be contrasted with the obligation to undertake an SVQ, which characterises one of the private sector employers (below). These differences emerge from a different emphasis in approach - from the provision of a quality safety service on the one hand, to the development of individuals on the other (although the two are obviously not mutually exclusive). What is important to emphasise is that such variance in approach to SVQs militates against any attempt to devise a meaningful, across-the-board, completion rate.

Case Study Four: Private Sector Employers

Private sector employers account for around 4% of the SVQs delivered in Scotland. Employers interviewed came from the oil, food, banking and gas industries and offered SVQs at levels 1-3.

These Centres were unique in the survey in funding almost all their SVQs themselves, although some LEC money was available for young employees and for training assessors. Monitoring tended to be done by internal assessors, generally with regular reports. Some private employers kept full figures of registration and completions, others did not. However some reported that the only reason for their candidates withdrawing would be because they had found another job. In general withdrawals for those staying in employment appeared to be rare.

Completion rates were taken seriously by all but one of the employers. Three aimed for 100% completion, the other estimated that between 20 % and 70% of candidates completed, but put this down to initial inexperience on its behalf in trying to get too many of its staff to do an SVQ during the qualification's early days. (There is anecdotal evidence that this also occurred in other industries). All saw candidates' self-motivation as very important, although one commented that line managers had an (equally) important role to play in completion.

None of the employers routinely paid bonuses for completion. One said that any

financial bonus for completion would be in terms of promotion rather than in a lump sum. Another had no official policy of paying bonuses, but said that area managers might offer a small bonus such as a gift token. A third was considering introducing bonuses for completion.

An example of best practice was provided by a respondent in the oil industry which had made the obtaining of an SVQ Level 3 a mandatory part of an employee's job for all those working in posts deemed to be "safety critical". Completion here was almost guaranteed to be 100%, with the only exceptions being those who left the company's employment and thus failed to complete. The employer also noted that many sub-contractors in the industry were now insisting on similar SVQs. Its practice encapsulated the best facets of SVQs - high standards and staff development.

Work patterns such as shift work and seasonal working had the potential to affect completion rates, at least in terms of the time taken to complete an award. There is less evidence to suggest that such factors influenced overall completion. Employers said that self-motivation was crucial, but that candidates needed to know what was expected of them. Often the line manager's role was crucial.

Case Study Five: The Voluntary Sector

The voluntary sector undertakes around 3% of SVQs. The respondents included those providing SVQs in conservation, for care workers, for those recovering from severe personal problems such as alcoholism and drug addiction, for candidates with long-term health problems, and for those working in childcare. The levels of SVQs offered were at levels 2 and 3.

Somewhat crudely the type of candidate here could be divided into those working in the care sector (in a very broad sense) and recipients of such care, such as those with mental health problems. The net result is to again highlight the importance of the type of candidate taking SVQs and to further undermine simplistic notions of across-the-board completion rates. In this sector some candidates might be doing very well to achieve any award.

The funding mechanism here was again dominated by the public sector with the LECs and the European Social Fund (ESF) being major funders. In some cases this was supplemented by local authority grants and there was evidence of limited amounts of money coming from employers.

There was a rough split over whether registration and completion rates were recorded: some did this routinely, others did not. Withdrawals tended to be monitored, but seldom the reasons because these often involved highly personal matters.

Completion rates were not really considered by two of the respondents. Another spoke of achieving 90%. The final respondent had many candidates with mental health problems, which might mean sustained periods outwith the SVQ process. They still aimed at 70% completion, although over an extended period. In this sector candidates' self-motivation was seen as very important, but there was also an awareness in respondents that they also had a role in motivation. There was some skepticism here about whether completion was really an issue, especially in a sector where candidates often faced immense personal problems.

In this sector only one of the four organisations gave bonuses for completion, and this was only for TfW candidates. But another noted that possible promotion (and thus increased remuneration) was the key factor in motivating many of its staff to take an SVQ in the first place. One organisation had ceased the practice of paying bonuses for completion.

In one example the SVQ's *raison d'être* was to act as a quality control mechanism. The respondent did not spell this out, but it became clear during the interview that this organisation (in the care sector) wanted its employees to be working to a certain standard and that completion of an SVQ was a recognition that this standard had

been met. The “best” staff had been selected to do the SVQ first and that staff had to be in post a year before being eligible to do an SVQ. Thus in this case the SVQ was used to maintain quality, rather than for continuing professional development *per se*. It was also obvious that this overall approach aided completion (albeit in the long term).

In this sector some evidence was found to counter the notion that an ideal SVQ candidate in terms of completion is in full-time paid employment (preferably in a large organisation). One respondent saw those who were unemployed or working part-time as more likely to complete as they had an incentive to do so in order to progress in their careers. This may be related to the fact that it was in this sector that candidates were most likely to come to the SVQ with significant personal problems. Health and social problems are the daily currency of this sector, and are obvious barriers to completion. Literacy and numeracy problems were also highlighted by respondents as particular problems. Because of its involvement with such candidates with severe personal problems, it is highly unlikely that this provider group will ever prioritise completion rates in terms of getting awards within a specific period of time.

DISCUSSION

The first important conclusion to be arrived at from an analysis of the database and the case studies is that it is not possible to say with any degree of accuracy what the level of non-completion rates for SVQs are. There is no ‘hard data’ available in a suitable format to determine how successful the awards are in comparison with other post-16 qualifications. The case studies indicate that providers have only a notional sense of completion patterns and do not systematically record reasons for student withdrawals from courses.

Secondly, because of their highly diverse nature, it may not make sense to think in terms of an across-the-board completion rate for SVQs. For example a 40+ year-old who is on a TfW programme and being forced to do an SVQ in order to maintain their right to the Jobseeker’s Allowance cannot be easily compared to a care-worker seeking an SVQ for career progression or a highly motivated 16 year old doing an Accounting SVQ. Even within sectors there is great diversification. Therefore, should any attempt be made to produce meaningful completion rates then these will need to be sensitive to the level of award, subject-area and type of candidate. It should, nonetheless, be possible to set completion rate targets at Centre-level, which reflects the diversity of provision and best practice within categories of provider.

Thirdly, the case studies suggest that where there is a genuine commitment to SVQs by employers this leads to comparable completion rates with other ‘work-based’ and ‘work-related’ vocational qualifications. This is confirmed by the college and private sector providers who claimed that those candidates in full-time employment achieved better completion rates on SVQs than those who were institutionally-based or on secondment. Where the qualifications are integrated into an organisation’s human resource development strategy and are seen as integral to work they are more likely to lead to satisfactory completion rates.

Fourthly, there are a number of problems related to SVQs when they are used as part of government training schemes (especially those targeted at the young) funded by the Local Enterprise Companies (LECs). To characterize somewhat crudely, respondents painted a picture of Skillseekers being pushed by Careers Offices on to training schemes which many of them did not want to do and were not suitable for. This is not only a major diversion from the original plan for SVQs, it also has an obvious impact upon completion rates. There is a danger here of ‘work-based’ vocational training been seen as the Cinderella service in post-16 education, attracting low achievers and disadvantaged groups.

Fifthly, it is clear that the issue of LECs funding SVQs is of crucial importance – especially for a qualification that is meant to be employer-led. Within Scotland, it simply is not. To a great extent the system is LEC-led rather than employer-led. It is a concern that public funds are being extensively used in the form of bonus payments for completing SVQs and units towards the qualifications. If SVQ funding is from the public purse then wider issues of quality and accountability need to be addressed to ensure confidence in the system.

Finally, given the central role to be played by ‘work-based’ qualifications in the present Government’s Lifelong Learning policies it is remarkable that so little attention is being given to the important area of student progress and completion. It can be argued that in the post-Beaumont (1996) period issues related to the validity and reliability of the qualifications are being addressed. However, this will make little impact on the take-up and completion of the qualifications if student support and guidance systems continue to be inadequate. It is unacceptable for such a high profile education and training intervention such as the development of SVQs to be so poorly monitored and evaluated in terms of value for money by policy makers in Scotland.

The case study research methodology was selected on the basis of providing illustrative qualitative data to explore in closer detail the issue of SVQ completion rates. The case studies are not intended to be representative of the wider provider group, although they are expected to inform and challenge existing assumptions and generalisations about SVQ provision within a post-16 qualification framework in Scotland. One key area for future research will be the role of Careers Services/Advisers in schools as they often effectively act as recruiting agents for SVQs.

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