

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) and the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCDA)

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Key Features of QCA and QCDA

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) was established as a statutory body in the Education Act (1997) by the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE). It operated whilst Labour governments were in power, with a series of departments and six secretaries of state responsible for education policy.

Operation Date: 1 October 1997 to 31 March 2010.

Purpose: to bring together responsibilities for the school curriculum, general and vocational qualifications and their assessments, in order to promote quality and coherence. Also, from April 2004, to regulate external qualifications in England, with a QCA subsidiary, the National Assessment Agency (NAA), created to administer National Curriculum assessments. From April 2010, QCA's regulatory functions were transferred to the new Office of Qualifications and Examination Regulation (Ofqual).

The Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCDA) was created to take on the other functions of QCA, with its objectives, duties and functions set out in The Apprenticeships, Children and Learning Act 2009 (receiving Royal Assent on 12 November 2009). It was abolished after a short period of time when the Coalition Government came into power.

Operation Date: 1 April 2010 to March 2012, although it ceased to be a government delivery agency in November 2011 to work on transfer of its functions to the Department for Education (DfE) with direct Ministerial accountability, or to the new Standards and Testing Agency (STA) and the Teaching Agency (both executives of the DfE).

Purpose: to keep under review all aspects of the curriculum, review and reform qualifications and assessment; and assist Ofqual, if asked, in setting criteria for qualifications, including accreditation, and recognition of awarding bodies.

Introduction

This paper examines a selection of key developments and lessons learned from the work of QCA (October 1997 to March 2010) and QCDA (April 2010 to March 2012).

QCA was created through a merger of two culturally different organisations: the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) and the Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA). NCVQ staff brought with them a history of developing National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), core skills, GNVQs, and Modern Apprenticeships. Their commitment to assessment of competence meant they advocated for alternative forms of collecting evidence from any mode of learning, beyond sitting examinations. SCAA staff experience came from advising Government on the National Curriculum and statutory assessment, and for the quality of public examinations up to GCE level. SCAA assessment instruments were guided by the drive to discriminate between individuals (norm referencing) to service selection processes, for example. Their practices, such as sampling, a choice of questions and pass marks of around 50% contrasted sharply with NCVQ competence-based assessment philosophies.

Some key developments

The QCA's remit was extensive, but this brief policy review paper mainly confines itself to salient developments addressing issues arising from reviews of GNVQs (Capey, 1995), NVQs (Beaumont, 1995), and 16-19 qualifications (Dearing, 1996). Examples of issues highlighted included: questions around the manageability and fitness for purpose of GNVQ assessment, grading and recording requirements, and the contribution of core skills; excessive bureaucracy, lack of clarity in language and in what was expected in NVQs, such as the place of knowledge and understanding; and the difficulty experienced by employers and others in navigating and comparing the plethora of qualifications.

A major strand of QCA's work thus centred around renewed attempts to 'build a qualifications system that was easily understood, gave equal value to both academic and vocational qualifications, met employers' and individuals' needs and promoted the highest standards' (The Learning Age, 1998, p.15). This included creating a new National Qualifications Framework (NQF), launched in 2000 with rules on how qualifications would be accredited for inclusion. For example, as well as criteria common across qualifications, NVQs had to meet type-specific criteria, designed to allow for flexibility in format while strengthening processes and placing a greater emphasis on external quality control of assessment. However, in response to criticism that the NQF was still insufficiently clear, flexible and responsive to the needs of individuals and employers, QCA's thinking (May 2005) was to replace it with a unit and credit based 'framework of achievement'. Outcomes from a large public consultation, taken forward jointly with the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and the Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA) ultimately led, in 2011 after QCDA was formed, to the launch of the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF).

Rebuilding the qualifications system necessarily involved reforms to both general and vocational qualifications, with technical questions focused on: 'how assessment regimes can best be developed to retain "fitness for purpose" whilst providing sufficient rigour and reliability' (Stobart & Gipps, 1997, p. 101). In the QCA consultations with internal colleagues and stakeholders, debate oscillated between a desire by some to keep coursework and the distinctiveness of the assessment of applied knowledge centred on portfolios, and demands for more external components perceived by others to increase reliability (consistency of assessment and qualification results).

While GCSEs and A Levels were reformed to become modular, with restrictions on coursework, moves from detailed criterion-referenced specifications for NVQs and GNVQs meant more attention being given to external assessment, a marked shift in emphasis. For example, when GNVQs developed by NCVQ were revised for QCA's pilot (1997-2000), they included externally-set, internally-marked and externally moderated set assignments. Advanced GNVQs, restructured to increase compatibility with the revised A Levels, were renamed Advanced Certificate in Education (AVCE) with exam-based assessment, and then replaced by Applied A Levels with a mix of coursework and traditional examinations (Tatham, 2022).

Development of new hybrid qualifications, the 14-19 Diplomas (Jones 2021), was an attempt to combine general and vocational components, drawing on thinking about learning, teaching and the curriculum described, for example, in theories of experiential, situated and connective learning (QCA, January 2008). While QCA designed their structure, Diploma Development Partnerships were led by employers, who consulted widely and worked with awarding bodies

to design the content. Some Principal Learning units were assessed by teacher-marked controlled assessments, using awarding body criteria and moderation by an examiner. Projects in the Diploma's generic learning component, and also available as an optional qualification alongside GCSE, A Levels, apprenticeships or other programme, were innovative in allowing for various forms of evidence (e.g. written, photographic, video, audio).

During this period of development work, the lingering divergent understandings of the nature of qualifications and the most appropriate forms of assessment within QCA were brought into sharp relief. Tensions were particularly acute in taking forward key skills¹ as a system innovation across vocational and general education, apprenticeship, training and work contexts, as QCA had to work with those holding different and often contradictory views.

For example, a new key skills qualification² with 'strong external testing and a demanding portfolio approach' (in an attempt to ensure credibility), attracted 'considerable professional resistance'. Furthermore, its focus on Communication, Application of Number and IT 'risked being associated with a basic skills agenda and remediation rather than with advanced level skills for further study or skills for the future' (Hogson & Spours, nd, p. 9). Indeed, in response to a strong government drive to improve basic skills, QCA subsequently had to reconfigure some key skills at levels 1 and 2 as functional skills³ in English and maths, with pilots exploring various assessment methods including on-screen, on-demand tests.

Alongside assessment regimes for different qualification types, there was work on equivalences, with GCSEs and A Levels generally providing the benchmark for comparing other qualifications. For example, broad equivalences included: Foundation GNVQ (four GCSEs, grades D-G); Intermediate GNVQ (four GCSEs, grades A*-C); Advanced GNVQs (two A Levels). Equivalences contributed to candidates' and end-users' assessment of the value of the respective qualifications, and to helping providers make judgements about delivery matters. More significantly, perhaps, they impacted on calculations of National Curriculum performance points used to standardise and compare qualifications of different levels, sizes, and grading structures, and performance-based rankings of schools (League Tables), as well as the UCAS Tariff for entry to Higher Education.

Although qualifications were a big part of QCA's and QCDA's work, they were also concerned with curriculum content, teaching and learning. For example, QCA led a substantial review of the National Curriculum (1999) focusing on aims and purposes, reducing prescribed content, and making explicit expectations for teaching and attainment. Standards were established for the performance of pupils in all subjects. The secondary curriculum was reviewed in 2005, with more emphasis on cross-curricular themes and life skills, followed by a QCDA-led consultation on proposals for the primary curriculum (2008). Other strands of work included 11-19 frameworks for 'Career, Work-related Learning and Enterprise',⁴ to support economic well-being, and 'Personal, Learning and Thinking Skills' (PLTS)⁵ to develop skills that enable learners to cope with social, economic and technological change, become more effective learners and progress.

Some reflections on developments

The education and skills landscape in which QCA and QCDA operated was multi-layered, complex and dynamic, with a whole host of players whose interests needed to be reconciled. This included considering the interface with Scotland's qualifications, as well as working with the devolved administrations. With Wales and Northern Ireland having more direct responsibilities for qualifications and apprenticeships, there was more scope for divergence and the necessity to ensure that it was clear how qualifications across the UK related, to support learner mobility and facilitate the work of those organisations that operated UK-wide. Also, for a similar purpose, to keep a watch on international developments, such as those relating to the European Qualification Framework (EQF).

¹ Core skill units at levels 1-5, with portfolio-based assessment, were developed by NCVQ in communication, application of number and IT, plus the wider key skills of working with others, improving own learning and performance and problem solving. These units were rebranded as key skills, with revised specifications piloted at levels 1-4 with different forms of assessment.

² The Key Skills Qualification at levels 1-3 in the first three skills was rolled out as part of Curriculum 2000.

³ Functional skills, building on basic skills (foundation skills necessary for everyday tasks, primarily focusing on literacy and numeracy) were designed to assess application of skills in English and maths at Entry Levels 1-3, as well as Levels 1 and 2.

⁴ Guidelines were intended to support providers in planning a range of learning opportunities for career, work-related learning and enterprise in the national curriculum and the curriculum for all 16-19 year olds, taking account of the government's 14-19 reform programme. The Framework outlined what learners should be able to do as a result of their experiences.

⁵ The PLTS framework comprised six groups: independent enquirers, creative thinkers, reflective learners, team workers, self-managers and effective participants. Each group had a focus statement and a set of outcome statements.

Changes during the tenure of QCA and QCDA reflected shifting priorities in the educational landscape, as central government sought to balance the dual aims of maintaining rigorous academic standards while addressing the growing demand for vocational qualifications, aligned with economic needs. QCA endeavoured to introduce more relevant, vocationally orientated yet high status qualifications through, for example, repeated reform to GNVQs. However, government seemed reluctant to commit, to any great extent, to moves away from 'the traditional legitimating ideology expressed in words such as "standards" and "rigour" and in practices such as the learning of esoteric, specialised subject matter and highly discriminating assessment procedures' (Broadfoot, 1996, p. 198) exemplified by GCEs. The Tomlinson Report (October 2004) into 14-19 curriculum and qualification reform was clear that raising the 'quality of the overall vocational offer did not mean trying to fit vocational programmes into an 'academic' mould, but recognising what is distinctive and valuable about vocational learning and ensuring that it is respected and valued in its own right' (p. 8). Parity of esteem between qualifications was an overriding government policy objective. However, there was a tendency to rely on perceptions of status that pushed qualifications towards being in the same form, rather than a means of securing equal status as measured, for example, by take-up and progression statistics, and later economic pay-off. The introduction of frameworks, such as the QCF, was emblematic of a broader effort to standardise qualifications, and ensure a cohesive system for both learners and employers. However, it was later acknowledged that prescriptive rules on qualification design and assessment were not flexible enough to meet the needs of vocational qualifications and had too much focus on structure at the expense of validity.

Some shifts did emerge over time between some of the more centralising elements of the Government's reform programme, in which education priorities were being defined by politicians, civil servants, test constructors and exam boards, and the intention to devolve some decision-making responsibilities to learning providers. For example, schools needed to have due regard to QCA guidance on the statutory requirement for work-related learning at Key Stage 4, but there was room to take account of local circumstances and individual needs. Reduction in prescribed content, with a move from detailed statements of attainment to broad-based level descriptors in revisions to the National Curriculum, was intended to give more time and space for schools to decide what to teach and support personalised learning. However, although reducing government oversight and regulations could potentially lead to more autonomy and choice for schools, they were still reporting that they were 'struggling to cope with changing priorities, constant waves of new initiatives from central government and distortions caused by performance targets' (CSFC, 2010).

The work of QCA and QCDA to support personalised learning was an effort to achieve a shift in educational practices that aimed to create a more inclusive and conducive learning environment which allowed scope for a customised approach that would enhance individuals' learning experiences and outcomes. Guidance, such as that on projects, diploma pedagogy and PLTs, reflected this shift, with a more dynamic approach to planning and documenting skills and personal development, to include but go beyond qualifications.

Lessons to be learned

During the period of reforms, many lessons to be learned were made apparent in related research, reviews and evaluations, including some in governments' own policy papers. For example, it is clear that 'a significant shift from an existing culture in which a premium is placed on external examinations, would require a strong, strategic focus' (Tomlinson 2004, p. 115). It needs to be acknowledged that 'qualification reform is not a quick fix' to problems in the system' (DES, February 2005, p.47). It requires holistic examination of institutions, inspection regimes, curriculum and pedagogy. 'Perverse incentives created by performance and funding systems' need to be removed to avoid: 'the teaching of qualifications which attract the most performance points or funding, rather than those that support young people to progress' (DfE 2011, p. 2); or 'colleges accumulating qualifications rather than providing sensible, balanced and broad programmes of study' (p. 8).

Brown (2011) in reflecting on policy failures, also suggests that rather than focusing exclusively on using qualifications development as a policy lever, more attention needs to be paid to: the challenges of policy implementation, with: 'equal concern about how learning and development will be facilitated' (p.3); the 'central importance of improving quality of teaching and learning' (p.10); and 'support for development of expansive learning environments' (p. 2).

QCA itself recognised that 'when qualifications are introduced or revised, strategies for communication, promotion, marketing and training should be given greater priority at an earlier stage' (QCA, December 2001, p. 21). The planni-

-ng and development process needs to be long enough to ensure that resources can be put in place and timed to allow for pilots to evaluate the changes so they can be properly managed in their implementation. To carry the support of parents, teachers, employers and higher education' and convince them of the value of the reform, 'research, testing and piloting', and 'modelling of impact', is needed to provide evidence that the reform is manageable.

QCA and QCDA understood that the comprehensive guidance material they produced to explain and support the various initiatives could be effective in influencing the behaviours of learning providers, but needs to be backed up by policy and the necessary resources. Securing the confidence of both learners and end-users requires clarity and consensus regarding the purposes of the different qualifications, as well as their assessment and quality assurance arrangements. For learners, provision of impartial information, advice and guidance at institutional level is essential if they are to make informed decisions about their options such as whether, or not, to take a particular qualification. If such lessons were identified at the time of QCA and QCDA, it raises the question of why the implementation of certain reforms met with such resistance and difficulty.

Firstly, the extent of upheaval in the system and additional costs caused by changes in government departments and secretaries of state, each keen to make their mark on policy should not be underestimated. Decisions made late on in the development process to make changes to technical specifications, for example, all add to costs in reconfiguring materials and impact on ability to make them available in a timely way.

Secondly, the rapid churn of developments can mean that 'by the time it is realised that policy implementation in the original case has been unsuccessful too much momentum has already been established behind the new development' (Brown, 2011, p. 3) or, in the case of short-lived developments, such as Diplomas, the reform's full potential has had too little time to embed and be seen. There is a need for policy stability over a longer timescale.

Thirdly, policy resulting from decision-making characterised by 'authority, expertise and order,' can be perceived as a one-way (top down), linear relationship between policy and practice. However, it is more like 'a cyclical and iterative process that occurs in different contexts' (Helsby, 1999, p. 19): 'a process of "pulling and hauling" in which different players (including 'experts who organise their knowledge as an agenda for government concern') interact and 'try to shape activity in ways which reflect their particular perspectives' (Colebatch, 1998, p. 4). Whilst successful reforms require involvement of all stakeholders, there is a need to ensure that powerful ones 'do not dominate in ways that influence the trajectory of policy adoption' (Raggatt & Williams, 1999, p. 70-71). For example, subject associations could hold considerable sway in discussions about a proposed reform if they perceived it to be too radical for their communities.

Concluding remarks

Both QCA and QCDA had their own research directorates and conducted wide-ranging consultations and in-depth research, including that with international bodies, to learn lessons from similar reforms. However, they also had to heed directives from government officials, who themselves had to satisfy ministerial demands, and needed to be sensitive to policy changes and media reports that could disrupt plans at short notice. At the same time, they were managing, usually within tight timescales, demanding technical work, with experts involved in different aspects of the work, and the expectations of the various interested parties. A tall order.

Splitting off some strands of the work to different organisations, such as QCA's regulatory functions to Ofqual, and administration of national curriculum assessments to the National Assessment Agency, was one strategy adopted by government to create a sharper delineation between the different responsibilities, although it created a greater need for collaborative effort to ensure quality and coherence across developments.

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