

A vocational qualifications system fit for adults? Revisiting some ideas from the University for Industry

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Abstract

Recent reviews of English vocational education and training leave open questions about the ability of current systems and structures to meet the needs of adults who are already in work or have significant experience of work. In particular, the assumption that qualifications in the vocational sector must be based on predefined content or competence standards is not fully congruent with the idea, put forward over 40 years ago by Knowles, that adults have their own motivations, goals and definitions of relevance. An initiative by Ufi-Learndirect (the 'University for Industry') at the turn of the century resulted in a framework entitled *Learning through Work* (LtW), which enabled learners and employers to create individually unique award-bearing programmes in real time to meet their specific needs. LtW was designed for use equally in the further and higher education sectors, but it was only taken forward in the latter. The underlying approach is now established and proven in higher education with clear benefits to learners and businesses, but it remains overlooked in the vocational sector. There are challenges to implementing such an approach through the vocational system, not least the need for recognition that control of qualification content can be shared with individual learners and employers. Nevertheless it provides a fundamentally adult model for qualifications at all levels while supporting the coherence and rationalisation of the overall system, and it is perhaps overdue for extension beyond higher education.

Introduction

The United Kingdom (specifically England) has recently seen, in three successive years, three government-commissioned reviews of its vocational education and training (VET) system [1]. The Wolf review (Wolf 2011) examined vocational education from the perspective of young people entering the labour market, while the Richard review (Richard 2012) focused on apprenticeships, and the third report (Whitehead 2013) considered vocational qualifications for adults. All three concurred that the current system of VET is in need of improvements and the associated qualifications system has become too complex and rigid to be entirely fit for purpose. Wolf comments that attempts over the last thirty years to reform the latter have resulted in greater complexity, increased duplication of qualifications, and confusion as successive waves of new types of qualification are introduced without fully replacing older-established ones. Two of the last major reforms to the VET qualifications system, the introduction of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) in the late 1980s and the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) two decades later [2], brought in specific design and accreditation principles that can be regarded as innovative; however, both have proved too restrictive for a genuine national system and have created barriers to further innovation (Raggatt and Williams 1999, Lester 2011).

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More positively, a gradual if tentative recognition has emerged that VET systems and qualifications that are designed principally for entrants to the labour market are not always the most appropriate for learners who are already in, or have experience of, work. This has long been present in a low-key way, for instance through the approach taken by the Open College Networks (OCNs) that were set up in the 1970s, but it has taken longer to appear in the VET mainstream. The QCF originated out of a proposal for a Framework for Achievement (QCA 2004), which was initially adult-oriented and drew partly on principles used by the OCNs (Wilson 2010). It subsequently encompassed the full range of publicly-funded vocational and basic skills qualifications outside of those awarded by higher education institutions, and perhaps as a result became more circumscribed (the original proposal was to provide credit for achievement in any form, while the QCF as implemented only supports pre-defined units). The different approaches to vocational qualifications seen in the Framework for Achievement proposal and the contemporaneous Tomlinson report (Tomlinson 2004) can be interpreted as recognition that qualifications for labour market entrants and for experienced adults need not follow the same patterns and structures, even if at the time these differences failed to emerge fully in practice; the division of tasks among the more recent set of reviews can be interpreted similarly.

In the remainder of this paper I consider qualifications validated in the VET system – i.e. as distinct from general secondary education, higher education and the professional bodies – from the perspective of adults who are established in the workplace, drawing partly on some pioneering work done by the embryo University for Industry around the turn of the century. My purpose is not primarily to critique the Whitehead review (which in any case devotes much of its space to regulatory and process aspects that will not be discussed here), but to focus on what it leaves out and argue for a more genuinely adult-oriented strand to the vocational qualifications system.

An adult perspective on qualifications

The Whitehead review recognises two purposes for adult qualifications, one concerned with entry to occupations, initial development and where necessary confirmation of the ability to practise, and the other concerned with continuing professional development. It recommends that the former are met by qualifications parallel to those for young people, which are owned and recognised by industry; based on occupational or industry standards; and, drawing on the recent Commission for Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning report (CAVTL 2013), provide ‘a clear line of sight to a job or range of jobs’ (Whitehead 2013, pp34-36). This is perhaps all good as far as it goes, and there are significant numbers of adults (however defined) engaged in programmes including apprenticeships and college courses that lead to qualifications within this category. The report gives much less attention to people who are already established in work or in careers and has little to say about qualifications for continuing development, apart from suggesting that they will tend to be shorter; otherwise most of the same principles are assumed to apply as for those for initial development. A limitation of the review is that in focusing on the needs of industry and the employer, the ongoing development needs of the individual learner (whether employed, not employed, or self-employed or owner-manager) have become submerged. There is an assumption that the primary purpose of qualification programmes is to develop competence and demonstrate achievement to employers, when for the individual already in work – and often also for businesses and organisations opting to sponsor their staff on award-bearing programmes or run them internally – their main attraction can be different. Pragmatically, qualifications can provide access to funding for training, they can be a means of demonstrating investment in personal or staff development to the outside world, or importantly they can simply act as an organising framework for personal or staff development.

It is informative to compare the perspective taken in the Whitehead review with the work undertaken in the late 1990s by the then Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) to realise the University for Industry concept [3]. The working group concerned with what can broadly be called the curriculum offer – which was comprised of members from a broad spectrum of organisations involved in vocational and work-related education at all levels – identified six purposes for adult work-related qualifications. Two of these concerned preparation for work, initial training and attestation of the ability to meet given standards, while a further two focused on what might be thought of as formal continuing development, relating to changes in role such as increased responsibility or specialisation, or mastering new knowledge, methods, equipment and techniques. The final two were concerned with development of practice to expert levels and into areas of individual or organisational concern, and with providing a structure for the pursuit of individual or group learning agendas (which could be related to an immediate work or business goal or be more exploratory in nature). Critically, while the first four purposes were regarded as capable of accommodation by conventional curricular or competence-based provision (at least given the flexibility to design qualifications through appropriate combinations of units or modules), the latter two were seen as needing a personalised or bespoke approach.

Research on what actually makes for effective continuing development, such as that by Gear *et al* (1994), Felstead *et al* (2005) and Eraut and Hirsh (2007), suggests that for people in work the greatest impact is usually achieved when learning takes place through the medium of work itself or is a direct response to workplace issues. This learning may involve training or coaching, though based on a dialogue about needs and aims rather than predefined content or competence standards, but it is more often action-based and self-directed. This is increasingly being recognised both by professional bodies in moving from inputs-based requirements for continuing development to ones based on self-managed development or on impacts (e.g. Friedman 2011), and by companies through the use of action-based and experiential approaches to learning (e.g. Burgoyne *et al* 2004). The background research to inform the University for Industry developments included a strand focusing on firms of less than ten people (Lester 1999), where it was clear that any accredited development for existing staff and owner-managers would need to be driven very specifically by business needs and agendas; in particular, standardised curricula and complex assessment processes were widely rejected. Concurring with the continuing development studies cited above, small firms favoured action-based, self-directed modes of learning, and if certification was to be included the associated processes needed to be as light and transparent as possible. Subsequent studies of the needs of small and medium-sized businesses (e.g. PACEC 2006, Thomas 2011) have reported comparable findings.

These factors suggest a need for a more adult approach to qualification design, at least for qualifications that aim to meet the final two of the six purposes identified by the University for Industry working group. The principles outlined by Malcolm Knowles over forty years ago as underpinning an andragogical or adult-oriented approach to learning have some relevance here. Knowles argued that adult learners are internally motivated and self-directed; they bring experience and knowledge to learning; they are oriented towards relevance and towards their own goals; they are practical; and they like to be respected (Knowles 1970). While these principles have gained wide recognition in adult education, they have had considerably less impact on qualifications. The move to 'competence-based' VET in the early 1990s was accompanied by claims that it introduced a more learner-oriented approach to qualifications, notably through recognising previous learning and supporting practical, self-directed development, but it also assumed that what could be viewed as an appropriate goal or

legitimately relevant could be delimited by predefined descriptions of occupational roles. Similarly, the QCF provides flexibility through enabling credit for individual units, in itself a welcome development when it is actually implemented (cf NIACE 2012), but it again assumes that individual relevance and goals can be accommodated by predetermined unit content and the 'rules of combination' (Ofqual 2008) that govern the assembly of units into qualifications. To borrow an analogy from transactional analysis (Berne 1961), the mainstream qualification system can be regarded as taking a parent-child approach where the design and content of qualifications are determined by the 'parent', in the VET system generally the standards-setting and awarding bodies, and delivered to the 'child', the learner, with individual colleges, training providers and employers taking the role of conduits and intermediaries. An adult-to-adult model suggests a more equal, negotiated relationship between the accrediting authority, the learner and the provider or employer. The next section discusses a template for this type of model that has become highly successful in parts of higher education, though largely ignored in VET.

Learning through Work: towards a system of negotiated qualifications

In the University for Industry discussions previously referred to, four main 'routes' – or product lines – were identified, with the first three leading to qualifications or credit (Route 4 was concerned with non-accredited learning). Route 1 focused on signposting to current provision, while Route 2 made existing qualifications available primarily through e-learning and blended learning, including combining web-based content and online tutor support with learner-managed, employer-supported learning in the workplace. Route 3 was based on similar processes, but allowed learners to gain accreditation for learning determined by their needs and agendas rather than by predefined qualification content. This route was geared to a variety of purposes across the full spectrum of qualification levels, including:

- developing a portfolio of basic skills to assist in progression to further education or training or to assist in getting a job;
- building on learning from current experience to gain a recognised qualification, for instance to help in moving from casual work to a career with further opportunities;
- drawing together experience from work, home and voluntary contexts and building a challenging programme of individualised learning to develop and demonstrate organisational ability;
- building an individual pathway tailored to developing the learner's business;
- negotiating a programme to support professional activity which doesn't fit neatly into an established profession or occupation;
- developing a programme to support interdisciplinary continuing professional development and 'extended professionalism.'

(Lester 1998, p3).

When the University for Industry was set up independently of the DfEE as Ufi-Learndirect, Route 3 was taken forward as Learndirect *Learning through Work* (LtW). LtW drew partly on an emerging area of practice in higher education, negotiated work-based learning. Negotiated higher education awards, where learners negotiate content and are responsible for directing their own learning with tutor support (as opposed to simply constructing a programme from pre-existing modules), go back to

at least the 1970s most notably through the School of Independent Study in the then North East London Polytechnic (O'Reilly 1993). A project sponsored by the government's Employment Department in the early 1990s aimed to extend this and related approaches to university involvement in workplace learning, and resulted in several institutions developing a strand of provision geared to accrediting individual learning from work (Duckenfield and Stirner 1992). The principles underpinning negotiated work-based learning were also promoted by the Higher Education for Capability network, including through the work of John Stephenson (e.g. Stephenson and Yorke 1998a) who subsequently led the developments referred to here.

Table 1. A Learning through Work negotiated programme.

Negotiated programme					
Candidate: Katie Borlase, Higher Pen Farm, St Austell					
Target qualification: DipHE (240 credits at levels 4 and 5, including at least 120 at Level 5).					
Provisional negotiated title: Developing a farm-based business					
Background: I grew up on the family farm (beef and sheep), worked full-time on it from age 16 initially as an apprentice. Now I run the farm with my father, including supervising three people. I helped set up some new parts of the business like making sheep's dairy products and the farm shop. I do anything that's needed including looking after the livestock, running the shop, ordering supplies, and doing the accounts and invoices.					
Existing relevant qualifications and significant learning: Modern Apprenticeship in agriculture 1997, including NVQ2&3 livestock production.					
Rationale for programme: The main reason is to help me develop a better business and be ready to take over when my father retires. I would like more practical business knowledge and to develop ideas about diversification. I also want to be able to do business plans properly so that we can use them to plan with and don't have to rely on the accountants. I'd also like a further qualification in case it doesn't work out and I need something to help me get a job working in a business or in tourism rather than on a farm.					
Aims from the programme: 1. Understand and be able to create and monitor proper business plans 2. Understand potential options for the future of the farm 3. Develop and start on a plan for expanding the tourism and selling enterprises.					
Programme components <i>For modules that you design yourself, have your module learning agreement approved before you start. Include any claim for credit for prior learning, as well as the relevant module for managing your own learning.</i>					
<i>Title</i>	<i>Component type *</i>	<i>Start</i>	<i>Target finish</i>	<i>Level</i>	<i>Credit</i>
Prior learning: write-up business development	T-P	9/01	10/01	4	80
Managing independent learning module	C-C	9/01	4/03	4	20
Farm diversification (college course)	T-C	9/01	12/01	4	10
Farm-based attractions (university distance module)	C-C	1/02	6/02	5	20
Business planning and expansion (see table 2)	T-I	2/02	7/02	5	20
Project - Diversifying the business	T-I	4/02	4/03	5	90
* T – based on a template module: P = prior learning, C = non-accredited course, I = independent learning; C – credit-rated module: P = prior learning, C = credit-bearing course					

(adapted from Learndirect Learning through Work; the candidate is fictitious)

The basic principle of LtW was that learners identify personal learning objectives and activities along with the work that they intend to produce for assessment, and via dialogue with a tutor negotiate a learning agreement that would lead to the award of a qualification or credit (Stephenson and Yorke 1998b). Previous relevant learning could be brought into the scope of the agreement, and although action-based and other independent learning were encouraged there was also scope to draw on existing modules as well as non-accredited training for which evidence could be provided of the

learning actually gained. These learner-negotiated programmes would be appraised to identify that they meet the criteria for the relevant level of qualification; to check that the previous and planned learning add up to an appropriate amount of credit; and to check that the programme is both coherent in terms of the individual's rationale and aims (as opposed to its needing to match to any predefined academic subject or definition of an occupation or profession), and feasible in terms of the proposed timescale and the resources available (not least, where applicable, employer support). An extensive web-based exploratory tool and set of guidance materials was developed to assist learners to identify if LtW was appropriate for them and to help them design their programmes. Tables 1 and 2, condensed from an example produced by the author and used on the LtW learner guidance web site, illustrates how an individual programme can be structured; the example is for a major higher education award, but a similar process can be used for smaller programmes such as certificates of 30 or 40 credits. In addition, group programmes could be designed by employers or other organisations such as professional bodies, provided that an individually-negotiated project or similar component was included.

Table 2. A negotiated module.

Negotiated component
Candidate: Katie Borlase, Higher Pen Farm, St Austell
Credit: 20 credits at level 5
Component title: Business planning and expansion
Component type: Template module: independent learning activity
Timescale: February-June 2002
Aim To understand business planning and be able to develop plans to expand the tourism and selling side of the farm.
Activities Attend the introductory course at Business Link in February Work through the distance learning pack Have meetings with the business adviser Produce options for expansion.
Objectives 1. Produce a working business plan 2. Understand how to identify and tap potential demand for new / existing enterprise 3. Understand risks and returns for small enterprise 4. Understand management and monitoring of enterprise .
Work to be produced for assessment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Worked examples based on the course content • A market assessment, costings / plan and proposed monitoring for expanded retail unit, with narrative
Generic criteria to be met (these are taken from the relevant level of the LtW level indicators) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Responsibility across a broad area rather than for individual tasks, including for negotiating objectives and outcomes and for their wider impacts • Developing thought-through courses of action • Understanding the implications of different issues and courses of action • Identifying and evaluating the effects and impact of operating parameters and principles • Drawing on a broad personal or formal knowledge-base and set of mental models relating to the area of practice • Evaluating the effects of options and actions, including impacts outside of the immediate context • Taking innovative approaches to address issues.

(adapted from Learndirect Learning through Work; the candidate is fictitious)

Learning through Work attracted significant interest from VET awarding bodies such as City and Guilds and OCR as well as from universities. However, the political climate at the time was unfavourable to creating a new strand of qualifications in the VET system, and a decision was taken within Ufi to pilot the approach through higher education institutions alone. A second change that was accepted in discussion with the participating universities was that all learning within the programme, with the exception of prior learning put forward for credit, had to be expressed in terms of modules; experience with non-modular negotiated programmes, for instance at Leeds University (Foster 1996), indicated that approval processes could be cumbersome (for instance each individual programme having to be approved by an academic board as if it were a new degree). In practice this was achieved through the use of template modules, designed to allow learners to negotiate individual objectives, learning activities and assessment methods within a 'container' of a given level and credit size; this approach is illustrated in the example in Table 2.

An evaluation of the LtW pilot in 2003 (Stephenson and Saxton 2005), when over 1300 learners had entered into learning agreements with universities, showed that it had been highly successful in attracting people who would have been unlikely to enter conventional part-time higher education programmes. Participants ranged in age between 21 and over 65, with a mean of 32. Many had low levels of existing qualifications and were accepted on the basis of their experience and the level of work they were currently engaged in. It is perhaps notable that only 40% had the normal qualifications for entering university, and 9% lacked any formal qualifications. Individual learners were variously self-employed (10%), from small and larger firms, and from the public sector; two-thirds were employer-supported. As well as the expected agendas of personalised and business-focused development, reasons for enrolling on LtW included gaining accreditation at a level commensurate with the learner's work role as well as topping up existing qualifications to full degrees. Both this review and evaluations of negotiated work-based learning more generally (e.g. Costley and Stephenson 2008, Nixon *et al* 2008) indicate benefits that include increased competence, confidence and motivation at work, a hunger for further learning, reduced stress, and promotion or increased responsibility. Direct benefits for the business were also widely in evidence from the activities carried out as part of the programmes, alongside longer-term impacts from the effects of staff development and greater motivation.

Following this promising start, changes were made to the funding of Ufi-Learndirect which led to *Learning through Work* being placed on a commercial footing. This effectively forestalled any further work to take it forward with vocational awarding bodies, as well as ultimately leading to its demise as partner universities gradually withdrew from using the LtW gateway. While the failure of LtW to engage the VET system was regrettable, the principles and practices had become well-established (if not uncontested) in UK higher education (e.g. Garnett *et al* 2009, Lester and Costley 2010) and arguably the central gateway or branding was no longer providing enough added value to justify institutions using them.

Building on *Learning through Work*: an adult model for the VET system?

The question remains, in the light of the current deficiencies in respect of adult provision in the VET qualifications system, whether a LtW-type approach could be taken forward alongside the more conventional routes discussed in the Wolf, Richard and Whitehead reviews. When LtW was being developed, two main objections were raised to its use in VET. One centred on an assumption that

learners at the lower levels of the qualifications spectrum would be less able to design or negotiate programmes, and could be misled into creating qualifications and learning routes that had no real value. The second was that handing control to learners would undermine the principle of employers collectively being able to set standards and decide qualification content, creating further proliferation of awards and potentially reducing the rigour of the overall system. Re-examined today, the first argument is difficult to sustain in the light of both the experience of the LtW pilot with less qualified learners, and evidence from programmes at the lower end of the spectrum where learners work with their tutors to create individual pathways (the former Entry to Employment [E2E] programme is a case in point; see Spielhofer *et al* 2003). In the UK, the VET sector also encompasses qualifications at all levels rather than only those below the level of higher education. Experience from both LtW and E2E indicates that the key to creating successful programmes revolves around having adequate tutor support to assist learner decision-making and ensure an effective and robust learning agreement is created, as well as a framework that insists that programmes and qualifications are coherent and meaningful in terms of the learner's starting-point and aims.

The second argument is also somewhat tenuous for a number of reasons. Firstly, negotiated qualifications generally serve different purposes from those that aim to develop and attest to preparation for employment or competence in a work role, as outlined above in relation to the early development of the University for Industry. Secondly, much of the interest in LtW-type qualifications has come from employers who want custom-made accredited programmes, often at short notice and on a one-off basis, to meet business needs or provide relevant and practical vehicles for staff development; these employers are generally clear that they do not want a standard curriculum offering or to have the programme distorted to enable it to fit occupational or similar standards. Thirdly, since the introduction of the QCF there has in any case been an increase in the number of qualifications and units in the VET system, and as will be outlined below, a properly designed negotiated model can reduce the pressure for further proliferation. Finally, experience from higher education indicates that negotiated qualifications are, other things being equal, no less rigorous than those based on predefined curricula; in fact there is some evidence to suggest that by giving more explicit attention to outcomes and criteria they may well be more robust (Williams 2008).

So what would a negotiated awards framework look like in VET? The framework would need to allow individual learners to create personal award-bearing programmes, as well as employers and others to create accredited group programmes in real time. The well-tested design principles of LtW (Ufi-Learndirect 2001), essentially using learning agreements both to map out overall award-bearing programmes and to define the individual content, objectives, learning activities and assessment processes in the template units that make up the award, appear no less relevant to VET qualifications than to those awarded by higher education institutions. The main difference is that while universities are involved in validating, awarding and delivery, in VET these responsibilities are split between separate organisations. In the VET system a college or training organisation could be approved to offer negotiated qualifications at a relevant level or series of levels, and would be responsible for negotiating learning agreements and supporting and assessing learners; it should be unnecessary for each personal programme to be referred back to the awarding organisation for approval, and learners could simply be registered through the normal processes. Awarding organisations would need to carry out the normal centre approval processes and quality assurance checks, with the latter likely to extend to sampling learning agreements.

The biggest challenge for fitting a LtW-type framework into the current VET system is likely to be approval of units and qualification structures in national qualifications frameworks. Validation of template units is easily feasible, but the requirement in the QCF for 'rules of combination' may need to be applied more flexibly to accommodate the 'rules of coherence' of LtW. For the LtW structure to work seamlessly, qualifications need to be capable of assembly from different combinations of unit templates, with a strong possibility of the same template – with different negotiated content – appearing more than once in the same award. A consistent system of individual award titles will also be needed, although this may not need to diverge too far from the current QCF format; so that the example in table 1 might be, for instance, 'Level 5 Diploma in developing a farm-based business (negotiated programme)', as opposed to a title such as agriculture or farm-based tourism that could imply a standard vocational qualification.

The addition of a framework of this type to the VET system would provide a number of benefits. The LtW-type framework would add the ability via the programme-level learning agreement to combine existing units into larger custom awards, via the templates to create individual units (including large project-based units) for independent and action-based learning, and via both to create fully tailored and accredited programmes at an individual or group level (including programmes that include both pre-existing and template-based units). As well as opening up a new, bespoke approach for individuals and groups, the LtW approach offers to make the existing system – particularly the QCF – more efficient. In particular, the ability to create content via unit templates avoids the need for formal approvals at awarding body and regulator levels, substantially reducing lead times for businesses wanting accredited packages to address real-time issues and also removing or reducing the need to add employer-specific or one-off units into the QCF. Similarly, being able to design accredited individual and group programmes quickly is also likely, as has been the case in higher education, to encourage businesses to engage with award-bearing education and training when they may otherwise not have done so; from a regulatory viewpoint, it will also remove some of the pressure to validate low-volume qualifications, particularly where these do not meet a need for occupational entry or initial training.

Implementing negotiated qualifications

Experience from higher education indicates that delivering negotiated qualifications – i.e. from setting up institutional processes through to guiding learners to assemble learning agreements, supporting learning and carrying out assessment – involves a somewhat different set of processes from those needed to provide taught programmes. While universities have experienced challenges that are less likely to be problematic in VET – such as resistance to programmes not grounded in an academic discipline or an identifiable profession, the need for staff to act as facilitators of learning rather than as subject-experts, and the need to establish work-based learning as a field of research in its own right in order to gain academic credibility (Lester and Costley 2010) – the different approach and skills needed to implement a negotiated framework still need to be taken into account. Fortunately there is now a substantial evidence-base and a growing body of literature on pedagogies and processes associated with negotiated work-based learning (e.g. Stephenson *et al* 2006, Graham *et al* 2006, Moore 2007, Rhodes and Shiel 2007, Boud and Costley 2007, Young and Stephenson 2007, and Workman 2009 among others); while this deals with provision across the various levels of higher education, much is relevant to the VET sector.

In terms of institutional arrangements, the greatest success has been achieved where there is a clear responsibility for negotiated programmes, either centrally or within a sponsoring department. Initially, most negotiated programmes were the province of a small project team within an existing faculty or department. A few of these work-based learning units have remained departmentally-based and relatively low-key, where they tend to offer programmes in specific contexts such as health and social services or management. Others have grown to become strong central units, sometimes departments or faculties in their own right, with strong and visible backing from central management and their programmes promoted as a significant aspect of the university's work. Tutors within these units generally provide the process expertise and facilitation associated with the negotiated framework, while staff from other departments (or from outside the institution) may be drawn in to provide the expertise and knowledge resource as needed for individual programmes. A tendency seen in some institutions is for key staff in relevant subject-based departments to become drawn into work-based learning, engaging in development as work-based tutors and co-ordinators and setting up local frameworks in their departments to complement those managed centrally (Workman *et al* 2011).

The literature cited above indicates several areas where the skills of staff are critical. Admission of learners will involve judgements about whether a negotiated programme is appropriate for the individual and whether s/he has adequate workplace resources and support. Providing adequate support to develop (and if necessary renegotiate) a robust learning agreement is widely agreed as central to the success of individual programmes in particular. The attention needed to the learning agreement is rather more than that usually given to individual learning plans or agreements within VET programmes, as the agreement is both a formal document defining the qualification content and assessment criteria, and a source of reference that the learner, and staff involved in the programme, will refer to periodically. Tutors will also need to be able to assess prior learning within the context of the overall learning agreement ('focussed credit', Garnett 1998), rather than in the more usual way as contributing to or substituting for existing units. The literature also points to the importance of ongoing 'process' support for the learner, for instance to build confidence, help learners move forward, develop enquiry-based learning, encourage networking between learners, and make the best use of people and resources in the workplace. The use of information and communications technology will be an important part of most programmes, both for access to resources and for networking and communication; in some programmes all or most of the contact between learner and tutor is likely to be online. Finally, while the use of diverse assessment methods is well-established in VET, both assessors and those responsible for its quality assurance will need to work with a system where assessment methods and criteria are negotiated as part of the learning agreement, subject to an overall requirement to demonstrate a level and volume of learning appropriate to the award being sought.

Based on the experience of higher education, it is likely that negotiated programmes will need to be introduced initially as a small-scale venture and expanded as further demand is stimulated. The major current markets for full qualifications through negotiated work-based learning can broadly be divided into company-based groups, individuals wanting to gain or top up qualifications to improve their professional standing or move on to a higher-level programme (for example teaching assistants seeking a degree to provide access to teacher training), and highly motivated individuals who are mapping out a personal learning pathway or seeking validation for their achievements. In VET it is probable that the first two groups will predominate, with the third (which is currently most significant on postgraduate awards) being confined to niche markets such as extension programmes in

management and business development, or continuing development programmes provided in conjunction with professional bodies.

Conclusions

The current English system of vocational qualifications is based on a perhaps justifiable assumption that the main purpose of VET is to develop essential skills for progression and to provide entry-routes and initial training for occupations and careers. Adult continuing development is accommodated in this system, but only insofar as it follows rules that were established in the context of this primary purpose. In some respects this reflects the dominant locus of control of qualification content, which traditionally sat with the awarding bodies and colleges, and has now moved at least partly to 'employers' at a generic level (either in the form of nominally representative bodies or, up to a point, large organisations with substantial numbers of learners). While there is capacity to create customised units and awards both inside and outside of the national frameworks, the mechanisms for doing this are generally slow and cumbersome, while adding to the proliferation of content; and at a framework level there is little recognition that the locus of control might need to be shared with individual businesses and learners.

In higher education, the introduction over the last quarter-century of programmes based on negotiated and accredited work-based learning has provided a tested and robust means of sharing control of content with individual learners and organisations, along with facilitating award-bearing learning that responds to business needs and individual directions while maintaining academic validity. Programmes of this type can represent a 'disturbing practice' (Boud 2001) that challenges conventional academic ways of working as well as the institutional systems and structures that were largely built around an assumption of running full-time degree courses (Garnett 2007). Introducing a comparable approach into VET is unlikely to be any less disturbing, and may be deeply uncomfortable for some organisations in the sector. Nevertheless, the negotiated model is now well-established in British higher education and experiences a healthy level of demand; while far from being adopted by all universities, for some it has become a major platform and source of distinctiveness for their work.

The experience of higher education suggests that the introduction of a negotiated qualifications strand in VET would be likely to start from small beginnings, growing incrementally as demand increases and systems are modified to accommodate new methods of working. Because VET providers already work with diverse delivery patterns, there are less likely to be barriers at a local level beyond the inevitable issues of fitting in new ways of working with stretched resources and pressured timetables. The greatest barrier is currently the limited ability of the vocational qualifications system to accommodate innovation; establishing successful negotiated awards will require it to recognise that at least some learners are responsible adults with their own motivations, goals and definitions of relevance.

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Dr Stan Lester has been a consultant, researcher and developer in professional and work-related education since 1993. He was involved in the development of both Ufi-LearnDirect *Learning through Work* and the Qualifications and Credit Framework, and works with a wide range of clients to develop and evaluate professional, vocational and higher education qualifications in the UK and Europe.

Notes

- [1] The United Kingdom has a complex and overlapping vocational education and training system where work-related and work-based qualifications of various kinds can be awarded by higher education institutions, vocational awarding bodies, professional bodies, trade organisations and commercial concerns such as equipment or software suppliers; and delivered by a wide range of education and training organisations, as well as directly by employers in respect of their own staff. The system also differs between the four countries of the UK. The discussion here is principally concerned with qualifications in the formal VET system, i.e. those that in England and Northern Ireland come within the remit of the Office of the Qualifications and Examinations Regulator (Ofqual). In terms of formal systems and structures it is based on practice in England, although aspects of the discussion apply equally to other parts of the UK.
- [2] The Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) was introduced in 2008 as a national unit-based framework for vocational and basic skills qualifications in England and Northern Ireland (in Wales it forms one strand of the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales). The QCF specifically excludes both general education certificates and qualifications awarded by higher education institutions under their degree-awarding powers. Inclusion of qualifications in the framework is voluntary, but in most cases is required for them to be eligible for public funding. The QCF covers the full range of qualification levels from Entry level (principally concerned with basic skills) to level 8 (the equivalent of doctoral level). The QCF regulations are due to be withdrawn in 2015.
- [3] The 'University for Industry' (subsequently Ufi Ltd, branded Learndirect) began as an initiative of the Labour opposition in the mid-1990s, associated particularly with the then Shadow Chancellor, Gordon Brown, and Shadow Education Secretary, David Blunkett. It was envisaged as a comprehensive national network of lifelong learning provision at all levels, building on and enhancing the existing VET and adult education systems and making extensive use of information and communications technology (see Hillman 1996). While Ufi Ltd was initially provided with substantial funding to pursue an ambitious development agenda, subsequent policy changes by both Labour and Coalition governments have led to a much more restricted remit for Learndirect as a provider of basic skills, entry to employment and commercially viable courses.

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