

## CONSULTATION ON NATIONAL OCCUPATIONAL STANDARDS

### PURPOSE OF THE CONSULTATION

In 1986<sup>1</sup>, National Occupational Standards (NOS) were phased in to provide the skills system with clear definitions of competent performance in occupations, with the overall objective of improving the match between vocational qualifications and skills. The aims were: for learners to benefit from occupational standards that would help them to develop relevant skills for their occupation (both technical and broader employability skills); for employers to be able to make sense of the confusing array of different vocational qualifications; and for the state to improve participation and productivity rates. There has been very little research to test whether NOS are contributing productively to these aims, and are fit for purpose – the emphasis has been on reviewing the funding and management arrangements<sup>2</sup>. To address this, the UK NOS Board<sup>3</sup> appointed consultants (MacKinnon Partnership)<sup>4</sup> to review NOS as products, and to make recommendations about how they should be presented..

There are a large number of stakeholders in standards development, including employers, qualification regulators, the four Governments in the UK, occupational and sector bodies (for example Sector Skills Councils and Standard Setting Bodies) as custodians of NOS on behalf of their employers, awarding and professional bodies, the various inspectorates, and education and training providers. Stakeholders vary in levels of awareness of the technical language.

To engage appropriately with stakeholders, there is to be a two-stage consultation. This first stage aims to get agreement among key stakeholders to reforms to occupational standards that will support their use by employers and providers for other than qualifications and their relationship with credit and qualifications frameworks of each home nation. The outcomes from this consultation will inform a second, less technical consultation with employers, and the strategy and programme of work to deliver agreed reforms.

### CONTEXT

There have been recent reviews of skills in each of the four home nations, including:

‘Skills for Scotland: A Lifelong Skills Strategy’ which was launched in September 2007.  
“Skills that Work for Wales” The Welsh Assembly Government’s new skills and employment strategy and the Webb Review;  
Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland: Success through Skills  
World class skills: Implementing the Leitch Review of Skills in England

Each of these reviews emphasises the importance of developing world class skills to address productivity and employability issues in each home nation.

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<sup>1</sup> A key outcome of the Review of Vocational Qualifications in England and Wales: A Report by the Working Group, MSC/Department of Education and Science, April 1986

<sup>2</sup> The most comprehensive review of NOS was that commissioned by QCA/SQA entitled: UK National Occupational Standards, Report of the Independent Review, September 2001

<sup>3</sup> The UK NOS Board is the four home nations body currently responsible for the funding, management and quality assurance of NOS on behalf of Government.

<sup>4</sup> Quality Improvement of National Occupational Standards, The Mackinnon Partnership, December 2007

## WHAT ARE NOS?

Occupational standards set out the measurable performance outcomes an individual is expected to reach in a given occupation. Developed by bodies representing employers across the UK, NOS define the skills, knowledge and understanding required to perform competently in the workplace. The pedagogy underpinning NOS<sup>5</sup> is about personalised lifelong learning. Occupational standards provide individuals with clear information about competent performance in an occupation, including the knowledge requirements. This enables individuals to use nationally-agreed standards to review their own skills, and their learning and development needs. It also gives education and training providers (including employers) the opportunity to run courses that are informed by what is needed to be competent in an occupation. Because NOS are a “national” standard, they offer individuals transferability – between organisations with similar occupations – and between occupations, with related skills requirements.

NOS vary in presentation, but generally they contain: a title and detailed information about what competence is including what must be achieved for successful performance. Some contain range statements, to illustrate the spread of contexts the individual needs to have performed in to be judged as competent. NOS are developed and refreshed by Sector Skills Councils (SSCs)<sup>6</sup>, working with employers in their sectors, according to agreed development processes and criteria, and, once developed, they are available free-of-charge to awarding bodies for converting into S/NVQ qualifications. They are accessible through the websites of individual SSCs, through the UK NOS Directory, and when converted into S/NVQs, from awarding bodies.

*Annex 1 illustrates a current national occupational standard*

***Question: Our view is that there continues to be a need to define and update occupational standards. Do you agree?***

## NOS AS A PLATFORM

The proposal is that future NOS should provide an infrastructure upon which a range of products can be developed (qualifications or organisational development tools). As a key reference point or “platform” they would provide an overview of the competence requirements of an occupation (a summary, performance criteria, knowledge and understanding). They would clarify in general terms, what the learner at work or practitioner needs to know, understand and be able to do to be competent.

This “NOS platform” could be developed for use with employers to support organisational development, or be developed further, through Sector Qualification Strategies and action plans into appropriate qualifications for the sector. There would continue to be a close relationship between NOS and qualifications, but this less prescriptive approach would give greater scope for innovative approaches to developing qualifications, which should have a positive impact on take-up. The Platform would also be easier for employers to navigate and use for wider purposes.

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<sup>5</sup> NVQs and the Emerging Model of Education and Training, Gilbert Jessup, 1991

<sup>6</sup> There are also a small number of standards setting bodies other than licensed SSCs that develop and refresh national occupational standards.

There are arguments against NOS being a “platform”. For example, the current evidence base for NOS usage is based on qualifications, and there is limited information from employers about their views on NOS and how they can contribute to the development of their workforce beyond qualifications. Also, evidence from other countries suggests that their equivalent to NOS work better if they are aligned to qualifications or government initiatives. The current funding model favours this link. At present, NOS are funded on the basis of a levy paid by awarding bodies for qualifications development. The introduction of grant-in-aid funding for NOS development and new approaches to qualifications development provide an opportunity to re-consider the relationship between NOS and qualifications...

Annex 2 illustrates a possible NOS platform, based on the national occupational standard, illustrated in Annex 1.

***Question: There is an emerging consensus that NOS should be a “platform”. This means that NOS would provide a basis from which a range of products and service, including qualifications could be developed. Do you agree with this? What challenges will result from this approach and how should we tackle them?***

## **USAGE OF NOS**

NOS are available for 94.3%<sup>7</sup> of the workforce in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and, in some cases, are benchmarked against international best practice. They are used for a broad range of purposes, in addition to their role in qualifications, but there is limited information about their full range of uses. Until recently, SSCs have not been required to collect evidence of wider usage of NOS systematically. Some SSCs have named public and private sector organisations (the police service, NHS, Scottish Water, various construction companies and volunteering organisations) where NOS are used to measure the skills of individuals, to underpin training courses or to define job roles. Most SSCs either already do or plan to monitor and measure the impact of this broadening employer usage for workforce development.

Usage of NOS has been reinforced in England, Wales and NI by the regulatory requirement that awarding bodies either base their qualifications on NOS (NVQs) or that vocationally-related qualification are informed by NOS. In Scotland, the qualifications regulator (SQA) requires SVQs to be based on NOS. The link between NOS and S/NVQs provides evidence of usage. Recent information from OfQual indicates that during 2006 – 2007 there were 630,419 NVQ certificates issued in England, Wales and NI; and there were 2,276,313 certificates for other vocationally related qualifications. This is 12.2% and 44.2% of the qualifications market respectively<sup>8</sup>. SQA indicates that, for a similar period there were 34,285 SVQ certificates issued. In total since the NVQ system was put in place, by 30 June 2007, there had been 6,253,299 NVQ certificates issued by awarding bodies, and a 10.9% growth in NVQ certifications from 30 June 2006 – 30 June 2007<sup>9</sup>.

***Question: Our view is that there is an evidence-base for usage of NOS in qualifications, but there is limited information about wider usage of NOS, and their impact on employability and productivity. We need a detailed investigation into usage of NOS. Do you agree?***

<sup>7</sup> Quality Improvement of National Occupational Standards, The Mackinnon Partnership, November 2007

<sup>8</sup> Reasonableness of Fees for Other Widely Used Qualifications, Grant Thornton for OfQual, July 2008

<sup>9</sup> Statistics available from QCA's website.

## SECTOR PRIORITIES

Currently, NOS are developed with the aim of providing blanket coverage of all occupations, for qualifications and wider purposes. Evidence of wider usage of NOS is limited, but based on S/NVQ certificates there are sectors where NOS are used more than others. These include: accountancy, engineering, construction and health and care. S/NVQ certification may not be an accurate indication of popularity of NOS because some NOS are not converted into S/NVQs.

A further measure of the importance of NOS to sectors could be the allocation of funding for NOS development. Over recent years, this suggests a major expansion in the use of NOS in the public sector, particularly the health and police services; alongside on-going refreshment of NOS in construction and engineering. This measurement has some validity, but it is affected by other issues – such as the UK NOS Board’s priorities for funding and the extent to which SSCs have prioritised NOS development.

Research in the four home nations into national priorities for skills development, and information from the UK Commission for Employment and Skills could inform future priorities for NOS development, both in the generic and technical skills. This suggests that, instead of the focus being on total coverage, it might be worth considering national priorities for skills development linked to productivity and competitiveness, and targeting these in taking forward NOS development. This would be compatible with international approaches, where there is less emphasis on full coverage of all occupations, and more focus on developing NOS in line with national priorities and initiatives.

***Question: Do you support an investigation into whether there should be priorities for NOS development influenced by skills needs of each home nation, and what those priorities should be?***

## DEGREE OF VARIATION OF PRESENTATION

NOS are respected in Europe and internationally, and some overseas approaches to developing standards of competence have been informed by or based on the UK system. Common areas between the UK and a number of overseas countries<sup>10</sup> are in having a model of occupational competence which is defined by industry and employers, expressed as outcomes and focusing on occupations. Most systems were informed by or based on the UK system initially, although they differ now. One key difference is that many overseas approaches have moved towards a high degree of centralisation, leading to significant consistency in how standards are developed and presented.

Consideration needs to be given to how the proposed NOS platform should best be presented to build on the established reputation of occupational standards overseas, and with employers, qualifications designers and providers. There have been suggestions that it would be helpful to have greater consistency in presentation, and, that they should be written in clear, plain English. Using this approach, actual and potential “customers” of NOS might find them easier to use and more transparent. This could support employers and individuals by helping them to “mix and match” parts of the “NOS platform” in line with the skills needs of their sectors.

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<sup>10</sup> Republic of Ireland, United States of America, Germany, France, the Netherlands and Australia

Although NOS are available centrally now, the different presentational styles<sup>11</sup> and complexity of language might act as a potential barrier to many users, including employers, and might make it challenging for qualifications designers and providers to navigate occupational standards and convert them to qualifications or training programmes.

Much of this variation in approach to presenting NOS is historic. There have been a number of changes to the bodies responsible for NOS development in their sectors, constraints on funding NOS development, and limited opportunities for joint activity between bodies leading on NOS. Over time, this has prevented bodies from building up the necessary in-house expertise in NOS development, and resulted in NOS being developed by a small number of external consultants.

With relicensed SSCs in place which include NOS as a core function, and SSCs collaborating through their Alliance<sup>12</sup>, there is the opportunity to broker more consistency in the presentational approach for occupational standards, so that standards can both meet individual sector needs and also be accessible beyond the specific sector.

***Question: NOS should be presented in a format that makes them easy to use for the widest range of potential users, particularly as occupations are often common to more than one sector. In clarifying what best practice looks like, we should consider overseas approaches, and the benefits and costs of a more consistent approach to presenting NOS. Do you agree?***

## **QUALITY ASSURANCE OF NOS**

To date, the quality of occupational standards has been managed through criteria and agreed development processes. Qualifications regulators in all four home nations and the UK Commission have approved NOS against criteria for NOS and checked their processes. These arrangements have been time-consuming for all partners, and have not encouraged SSCs to develop their own internal quality assurance processes.

There would continue to be the need for quality assurance of the proposed NOS “platform”, but it is proposed that there would be a migration away from the requirement for central approval. Instead, SSCs would develop the “NOS platform” for occupations within their sector, in line with an agreed approach to presentation, and make the platform available through a new central database. SSCs would apply two key tests for quality:

the robustness of the evidence base in terms of the depth and breadth of employer consultation; and

how clear and useful the NOS platform and any related products are for users (in particular, employers or qualifications designers).

It is suggested that the UK Commission could maintain oversight of the central database, and quality assure the “NOS platform” through enhanced performance management systems for

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<sup>11</sup> Quality Improvement of National Occupational Standards, The Mackinnon Partnership, November 2007. This report highlights models of best practice in standards, but they are all presented in a different style. These can be found at <http://www.ukces.org.uk/Default.aspx?page=4415>

<sup>12</sup> The Alliance is the name for the collective group of 25 SSCs.

SSCs. Where other bodies are developing NOS, quality assurance could be monitored through contracting arrangements.

***Questions: Do you agree with the proposed approach to assuring the quality of the NOS platform? Do you support the two key tests of quality? What role do you see the UK Commission playing in retaining oversight of the criteria and processes?***

## **NOS AND EXCELLENCE**

Occupational standards define competence in an occupation. There has been an on-going debate about the extent to which they are able to promote excellence. Some sectors argue that their NOS represent excellence in the occupations in their sector: the counter-view is that competence is the occupational benchmark, and that it represents what is achievable in terms of “best practice” in the occupation, but it does not encourage individuals in organisations to strive for excellence.

With the strength of competition from other countries, organisations need an approach to workforce development that encourages individuals to “go the extra mile”, and strive for excellence. It is worth considering whether NOS could or should differentiate performance, possibly between “satisfactory”, “good” and “excellent”. Such distinctions might encourage those who use NOS to see that while competence may be a necessary step to promoting high levels of productivity all round, it is not sufficient to achieve the competitive edge in a global economy. It might also encourage individuals and employers to invest in on-going learning and development.

***Questions: Should NOS be designed to illustrate “excellence” and “good” in addition to “competent”? Would this act as an incentive for individuals and employers to invest in their workforce? Or are there other ways of promoting excellence in the workforce through standards and qualifications?***

## **HIGHER LEVEL SKILLS AND NOS**

Some SSCs have worked with higher education and professional bodies to expand the use of NOS to cover higher level skills. Examples include the expansion of foundation and work-based learning degrees informed by or based on NOS. In higher education, there are subject benchmarks for degrees and foundation degrees, which SSCs are able to influence. These define the overall common coverage of content between different HEIs. They are non-regulatory. Some of these subject benchmarks are influenced by NOS or professional standards.

Professional bodies have a long history of defining the standards required of their members and of providing continuing development to promote the use of these standards. Some professional bodies use the occupational standards format to present their standards. Others have adopted a “competency framework” approach, which is more generic, and similar to the proposed NOS platform. In taking forward the NOS “platform”, it will be helpful to work to develop agreed approaches, wherever possible, with professional bodies and higher education to ensure that there is seamless progression to higher level skills.

***Question: Our view is that NOS need to be defined in a way that makes them useful to professional bodies and HE so that learners can progress to higher level skills. Do you agree?***

## **QUALIFICATIONS IMPLICATIONS**

In each of the four home nations, credit and qualifications frameworks are being developed and the European Qualifications Framework is in place. The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework, the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales, and the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications are non-regulatory. The UK Vocational Qualifications Reform Programme is developing the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) for England, Wales and Northern Ireland on a regulatory basis, introducing a unit databank which will form the basis for qualifications.

The unit databank, being developed for the QCF is being populated using a consistent approach, based on learning outcomes and assessment criteria. Occupational standards are presented as performance outcomes and criteria. For England, Wales and NI, the new “NOS platform” will need to be compatible with the unit databank, so that qualifications can be developed and approved quickly and effectively to address skills needs. In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, there is a move towards SSCs having responsibility for the approval of standards-based vocational qualifications. In these circumstances, NOS need to be capable of being used for qualifications, so that they can inform the SSC criteria for approval.

The agreed approach to the “NOS platform” would need to have sufficient flexibility to provide the basis for the different credit and qualifications frameworks in the UK, including the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework, the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales, and the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications.

***Question: We wish to promote and maintain the principle that the NOS platform must be ‘framework neutral’ but be capable of being used for qualifications. What challenges does this bring and how can we best meet them?***

## **ACCESSIBILITY**

There needs to be good access to the proposed NOS platform, so that employers and learners can use it effectively to support the development of their workforce, and that this usage can be monitored. The current technology (the NOS Directory) was developed to improve access to NOS, to provide a focus on SSCs, and to underpin a central approvals process. The new context for reviewing the technology is improved access to NOS for employers and learners. Whatever replaces the current NOS Directory needs to link appropriately with the products developed from the NOS platform, and, where appropriate, with the credit and qualifications systems of the four home nations.

What replaces the NOS “Directory” needs to allow employers and learners easy access to all the NOS platforms, either in place or under development. This will enable employers and learners to identify the skills they need to develop using the NOS platform, and to prevent SSCs from duplicating NOS. Stakeholders need to be involved in determining what functions the new NOS Directory will have.

***Question: Do you support a new NOS Directory, which provides easy access to the proposed new NOS platform? What functions do you think this new NOS Directory should have?***

## **MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS**

The proposed NOS “platform” needs to be a key tool for employers and learners to develop their skills, and to improve productivity and employability in the UK. To achieve this, there needs to be a greater awareness of what the new NOS platform is and how it can contribute to organisational development and individual achievement.

Although SSCs promote NOS to their own sectors, there has been limited central promotion of NOS. The creation of the NOS platform and a new NOS Directory gives a focus for co-ordinated, effective marketing and communications to employers, learners and other key stakeholders.

***Question: Do you agree that NOS have not been promoted effectively to date? Do you support a major marketing and communications drive for the new NOS platform, led by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills?***

## Annex 1 Example of existing NOS

### **Unit 2 : Research customer needs**

#### **What this unit is about**

This unit is about obtaining and evaluating research information to develop your understanding of customer needs relevant to your organisation's products/services.

This is a key activity towards ensuring that your organisation's products/services meet your customers' needs. It includes being clear about the reasons for the research, briefing those undertaking the work and establishing justifiable conclusions.

#### **Who this unit is for**

This unit is recommended for those responsible for identifying customer needs, such as through commissioning or conducting research, and for subsequently evaluating and utilising the resulting information towards establishing the opportunities and/or demand for products/services. Such individuals may not necessarily be marketing or sales specialists. For example, they may be 'general' managers within larger organisations, or managers and/or proprietors within small to medium sized organisations.

#### **Related specialist units**

Those seeking specialist standards offering greater depth regarding this area are referred to the following related MSSSB units:

##### *Marketing units*

- 1.2.1 Define the need for research
- 1.2.2 Design market research projects
- 1.2.5 Analyse market research data
- 1.3.1 Evaluate and interpret findings and identify connections in complex data
- 3.2.1 Establish requirements for products/services

Details of these units can be accessed via <[www.msssb.org](http://www.msssb.org)>

## **Unit 2 : Research customer needs**

### **Outcomes of effective performance**

You will need to:

- 1 Analyse the problem to be addressed, defining the key areas to be researched, and identify and agree the information required
- 2 Identify the timescale and budget available for the proposed research, confirming that these are realistic
- 3 Brief relevant staff, or third party suppliers, fully and accurately
- 4 Agree proposals with associated actions, timescales and budget for the work required
- 5 Monitor progress and outcomes, identifying and addressing any delays or issues promptly
- 6 Identify themes, trends and inter-relationships in the resulting information, relevant to addressing the problem being researched
- 7 Establish justifiable conclusions, ensuring that these are in line with the agreed research objectives
- 8 Identify clear, persuasive and reasoned recommendations for actions, setting out how customers requirements can be realised by developing existing and/or new products/ services, and how these opportunities are to be progressed

### **Behaviours which underpin effective performance**

- 1 You identify and make the best use of existing sources of information to meet the research objectives
- 2 You use cost-effective and time-effective means to gather the information required
- 3 You articulate the assumptions made, and risks involved, in assessing the outcomes from research

## **Unit 2 : Research customer needs**

### **Knowledge and understanding**

You will need to know and understand:

#### *General knowledge and understanding*

- 1 The importance of defining carefully the problem that research is to address, and how this can be achieved
- 2 The importance of involving relevant people fully in defining the problem, and in agreeing the purpose of the research
- 3 The importance of briefing potential third party suppliers of the research services fully, and the implications of not doing this
- 4 The importance of ensuring that conclusions are supported by findings, and of setting out any assumptions that may be made

#### *Industry/sector specific knowledge and understanding*

- 1 Legal, regulatory and ethical requirements affecting the design and implementation of market research programmes within your industry/sector

#### *Context specific knowledge and understanding*

- 1 The nature of the business problem to be addressed, including the factors impacting upon the problem
- 2 Key people within your organisation involved in commissioning the research
- 3 Organisational requirements affecting the design and implementation of market research programmes
- 4 Your organisation's overall marketing strategy and objectives

## **Annex 2 Example of NOS Platform**

**Unit Title: Research Customer Needs**

**Unit Reference ID: 034N2**

**Suite Title: Marketing and Sales Standards for non specialists**

### **Summery**

This unit is recommended for those responsible for identifying customer needs, such as through commissioning or conducting research, and for subsequently evaluating and utilising the resulting information towards establishing the opportunities and/or demand for products/services. Such individuals may not necessarily be marketing or sales specialists. For example, they may be 'general' managers within larger organisations, or managers and/or proprietors within small to medium sized organisations.

### **Performance Criteria**

You will need to:

- 1 Analyse the problem to be addressed, defining the key areas to be researched, and identify and agree the information required
- 2 Identify the timescale and budget available for the proposed research, confirming that these are realistic
- 3 Brief relevant staff, or third party suppliers, fully and accurately
- 4 Agree proposals with associated actions, timescales and budget for the work required
- 5 Monitor progress and outcomes, identifying and addressing any delays or issues promptly
- 6 Identify themes, trends and inter-relationships in the resulting information, relevant to addressing the problem being researched
- 7 Establish justifiable conclusions, ensuring that these are in line with the agreed research objectives
- 8 Identify clear, persuasive and reasoned recommendations for actions, setting out how customers' requirements can be realised by developing existing and/or new products/ services, and how these opportunities are to be progressed

### **Knowledge and understanding**

You will need to know and understand:

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- 2 The importance of involving relevant people fully in defining the problem, and in agreeing the purpose of the research
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- 4 The importance of ensuring that conclusions are supported by findings, and of setting out any assumptions that may be made

### **Industry/sector specific knowledge and understanding**

- 1 Legal, regulatory and ethical requirements affecting the design and implementation of market research programmes within your industry/sector

### **Context specific knowledge and understanding**

- 1 The nature of the business problem to be addressed, including the factors impacting upon the problem
- 2 Key people within your organisation involved in commissioning the research
- 3 Organisational requirements affecting the design and implementation of market research programmes
- 4 Your organisation's overall marketing strategy and objectives.