The impact of different modes of assessment on achievement and progress in the learning and skills sector

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This study was commissioned to investigate whether or not use of different assessment methods makes a difference to learner achievement and progress in the learning and skills sector. The research found that clarity in assessment processes and criteria has underpinned the widespread use of coaching, practice and provision of formative feedback to boost achievement. However it also indicates that such transparency encourages instrumentalism and that this is the most significant challenge confronting assessment in the LSS: balancing the explicitness of learning objectives and instructional processes against the validity and worthwhileness of learning outcomes.

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The impact of different modes of assessment on achievement and progress in the learning and skills sector

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(Care and Motor Vehicle)

A-level (Business Studies and Sport)

BTEC/AVCE/BND (Sport and Business Studies)

Access students

Acknowledgements

Section 1	Executive summary

1   The study was commissioned to investigate whether or not, and if so, how, use of different assessment methods makes a difference to learner achievement and progress in the learning and skills sector (LSS).

2   It sought to compare and contrast the assessment experiences of learners in different LSS contexts, and to identify which assessment regime works best in enabling learners to progress, in which contexts and in which sectors.

3   This is the first comprehensive study of assessment procedures and practices employed across the full range of LSS contexts – school sixth forms, further education colleges, workplaces and adult learning environments.

4   The study identified an enduring divide between post-16 academic and vocational tracks and the different methods of assessment employed in those tracks. More practical forms of learning and assessment are favoured in the vocational track, but achievements attained by these methods are still regarded as of lower status when compared with 'traditional' examination results.

5   The study also identified many anomalies of structure and practice across post-16 awards. Some would argue that these reflect genuine differences in the context and purpose of the assessment – ie fitness for purpose issues – but others would argue that they raise issues of equity and fairness across the sector. Some, such as the different status given to key skills testing and to GCSE passes, in the academic and vocational tracks, are clearly unfair and counter-productive, and warrant immediate change. Key skills tests in particular are not serving the purposes for which they were ostensibly designed, and should be reformed to become uniformly applicable across the LSS or abolished.

6   Overall the study found that assessment methods *per se* do not directly affect learners' choice of award or likelihood of success, but the association of certain awards with methods which employ extensive writing (coursework, exam essays, etc) does. Thus for example, practical tests and/or multiple-choice tests are seen as acceptable – and indeed unavoidable – across most groups of learners in the sector, especially younger trainees, but extensive written work is disliked and largely avoided, except by A-level takers.

7   The move in recent years towards criterion-referenced assessment and competence-based assessment, which has underpinned the move towards greater transparency of intended learning outcomes and the criteria by which they are judged, has significantly benefited learners in the LSS in terms of the numbers of learners retained in the system and the awards which they achieve. Clarity in assessment procedures, processes and criteria has underpinned the widespread use of coaching, practice and provision of formative feedback to boost individual and institutional achievement. Detailed tutor and assessor support, in the form of exam coaching and practice, drafting and redrafting of assignments, asking 'leading questions' during workplace observations, and identifying appropriate evidence to record in portfolios, is widespread throughout the sector and is effective in facilitating learner achievement and progression.

8 Further development of procedures and strategies noted under 7, above, would be helped by rendering one-year or two-year long programmes more accomplishable through credit accumulation. Achieving formal, certifiable 'stepping stones' along the way of an NVQ Level 2 or Level 3 would probably increase retention and completion rates. Such credit accumulation would also render NVQs more directly comparable with other awards at the same level and possibly facilitate credit transfer across awards.

9 Electronic online testing (e-testing) is popular and effective. Wider use of e-testing across programmes and via wireless technology in workplaces could improve completion rates, pass rates and speed of progression in underpinning knowledge tests and adult basic skills tests. E-testing is most suited to multiple-choice formats and wider use must also attend to issues of validity and appropriateness.

10 Transparency, however, encourages instrumentalism. The clearer the task of how to achieve a grade or award becomes, and the more detailed the assistance given by tutors, supervisors and assessors, the more likely are candidates to succeed; but succeed at what? Transparency of objectives, coupled with extensive use of coaching and practice to help learners meet them, is in danger of removing the challenge of learning and reducing the quality and validity of outcomes achieved. We have identified a move from what we characterise as assessment *of* learning, through the currently popular idea of assessment *for* learning, to *assessment as learning*, where assessment procedures and practices may come completely to dominate the learning experience, and 'criteria compliance' comes to replace 'learning'. This is the most significant challenge confronting assessment in the LSS: balancing the explicitness of learning objectives and instructional processes against the validity and worthwhileness of learning outcomes.

11 The longer-term implications of 5–10, above, are that inconsistencies across the sector should be reviewed and a wider range of assessment methods should be employed across all awards, with the QCA and awarding bodies allowing more candidate choice with respect to method of assessment. In a social and economic environment which supposedly privileges the consumer over the producer, consumer choice in assessment, coupled with the need for equality of consumer choice across the LSS, should be given more attention. A range of assessment methods could be made available for all awards, with the candidate choosing that combination of methods which most suits their learning style and maximises their chances of success.

12 The 'wider benefits of learning' are very apparent in the data but are not currently identified or recorded systematically. Pursuing and recording them more specifically could go some way to counteracting the narrow instrumentalism noted above, and the pressures of accountability which ultimately drive such instrumentalism. It might also, if it were developed across the sector, feed into the wider debate about what we wish to achieve through vocational education. The recording of wider individual competencies could be pursued fairly easily, since evidence is likely to exist already (eg writing CVs and job applications, attending interviews, helping with children's homework and after-school clubs, etc) The recording of increasing confidence and/or social capital would be more challenging, but might be an interesting topic for a pilot study by an awarding body – identifying and accrediting the collective social achievements of a community involved in a Sure Start programme, for example, rather than just the particular achievements of individual candidates.

13 The balance between complying with 'national standards' and interpreting them appropriately *in situ* needs to be re-examined. Central prescription of national standards in academic subjects and vocational fields has been prominent for more than 20 years. Some would argue that such prescription is necessary, and has in any case arisen from widespread involvement of practitioners and employers in analysing national learning needs and specifying appropriate outcomes and competences. But this has led to a narrow focus on accumulating marks or elements of competence, thereby restricting the quality of the learning experience (10, above) Moreover, definitions of standards can never expunge local interpretation, and the evidence from this study and others (eg Fuller & Unwin 2003, Stasz *et al.* 2004) is that local 'communities of practice' constitute the context in which all meaningful judgements about standards are made, and thus should be the level of the system at which most efforts at capacity building are now directed. Further improvement of both the numbers of successful candidates, and the quality of the experience and awards they receive, will be dependent on capacity building at local level.

Section 2   **Introduction**

We know a good deal about the interaction of assessment, teaching and learning in the compulsory school sector and the impact of assessment on learning. What is assessed, and how it is assessed, is hugely influential in determining what is taught and how it is taught. Likewise, with respect to learning, while assessment can motivate learners if they are successful, it can also undermine confidence and capacity to learn if they are unsuccessful, especially if young learners meet with early failure (cf. Black & Wiliam 1998, Harlen & Crick 2003, Reay & Wiliam 1999, Torrance 1995). We also know that modes and methods of assessment make a difference. Using a wide range of methods and employing formative feedback can promote learning and achievement (Black & Wiliam 1998, Torrance & Pryor 1998). However, we know very little about how assessment impacts on learning in the post-compulsory sector of education and training.

This study was commissioned to address this gap. This is the first research project to take a comprehensive look at assessment methods employed across the full range of types of provision in the learning and skills sector (LSS) A prior review of the literature on assessment in post-compulsory education noted the scarcity of studies and the almost 'hermetically sealed' nature of the sub-sectors or 'tracks' within which they were contained:

- the 'traditional 16–19 college-based sector' (most studies which featured some discussion of assessment related to this sector, but they were still few in absolute number)

- the adult and community education sector, including Access to Higher Education courses (some limited studies)

- the work-based vocational training sector (very few studies).

Thus while there was some evidence of assessment practices and impact on achievement and progress within these tracks, there was no comparing or contrasting of practice across tracks, and no discussion of what import this overall lack of an evidence base might carry for the sector as a whole (see Torrance and Coultas 2004). Other recent research reviews such as Stasz *et al.* (2004) note a similar paucity of evidence with respect to assessment in the LSS and very limited evidence as to what teaching and learning approaches might actually make a difference to achievement and outcomes in the sector. The current project was commissioned to address the need for a comprehensive overview of assessment procedures and practices, especially at the level of impact on the learner.

In particular, the research was commissioned in the context of a growing concern with respect to 'over-assessment' in the English education system and the seemingly unending treadmill of formal assessments being taken at 7, 11, 14 and 16 years of age in the compulsory sector, followed by further assessment at 17 and 18 through the introduction of Curriculum 2000 (AS, A2 and AVCE) and key skills testing in further education and vocational training. Similarly, extensive formal testing of 'basic skills' for adult returners to learning had raised concerns about the impact of such measurement on the very process it was intended to underpin – progression in learning and achievement. The study therefore focused on the learner experience in order to:

- compare and contrast assessment experiences of learners in different settings

- identify what assessment regime works best in enabling learners to progress in which context and in which sectors

- identify how learners can best be supported in engaging with the different demands of different assessment methods.

Data have been gathered by conducting a series of parallel case studies of assessment 'in action' across a wide variety of LSS settings and by a questionnaire distributed to a larger sample of learners derived from the case study settings. The boundaries of each case were established with respect to particular qualifications and/or awards and the contextual and regional factors which influence the assessment of awards in practice, including awarding body procedures and processes. Thus the case studies were designed as 'vertical' investigations, exploring a particular qualification such as AVCE or NVQ from awarding body through to learner, though with the emphasis on learner experience. The aspiration was to collect data across a wide range of LSS contexts and awards in order to describe and analyse assessment practices across the sector. Thus the study is broad in scope but focused in terms of topic and depth of analysis. The intention is to learn lessons about assessment across sub-sectors and contexts, by comparing and contrasting experience of different awards and methods of assessment in different settings.

Interviews and observations have been conducted in college, workplace, informal adult education and school post-16 settings in:

- the north of England (Manchester, Sheffield, Leeds)

- North Wales and the Midlands (Deeside, Stoke, Birmingham, Worcester)

- the south west of England (Bristol, Exeter).

These have focused on:

- NVQ Social Care, Motor Vehicle Engineering (MVE), Sport & Recreation

- A-level and AVCE PE, Sport & Leisure and Business Studies

- Access to HE

- adult basic skills testing

- informal community education and accreditation via a Sure Start programme.

These subjects and occupational fields were selected to represent the range of likely practice and experience across the LSS, including newer and more traditional occupational sectors, vocationally-oriented educational subjects, Access and 'return-to-learn' programmes, and to be reasonably balanced in terms of the gender, race, age and socio-economic status of candidates. An extension was also specifically commissioned by Ufi to investigate e-assessment, especially via Learndirect centres.

In total, 237 learners/candidates have been interviewed; along with 95 'assessors' (ie all those involved in operating and conducting assessment within the case studies, including the full range of senior awarding body staff, chief and lead verifiers, external verifiers, employers, supervisors, college heads of department, tutors, internal assessors, internal verifiers, etc) These resulted in the production of 320pp of draft 'case reports' from which this final report is derived. Completed questionnaire returns were received from 260 respondents out of 890 distributed (34% return) Full details of the sample and methods, and a summary of the findings from the questionnaire data, are included at Appendices 1, 2, 3 & 4.

An overview of the development of assessment in the sector is provided in the next section to sketch out the social and political context in which debates about assessment in the LSS are located. A full understanding of the multi-faceted nature of assessment in the LSS and how different practices in different sub-sectors relate to one another – or not, as the case may be – warrants a preliminary discussion of this complexity in order to contextualise the findings set out in Section 4. The main body of the report (Section 4) then draws extensively on the case reports to present detailed evidence of the role of assessment in the LSS. This allows procedures and practices to be compared and contrasted across settings and sub-sectors. Finally, conclusions and recommendations are presented in Section 5.

Section 3	The politics and technology of assessment in the learning and skills sector

England's post-school education and training system has evolved since the mid-19th century to supply an enormously complicated and diverse range of provision and qualifications. These have resisted successive attempts at rationalisation and simplification. Understanding the range of assessment methods used in the sector and the different purposes they are intended to serve requires some prior discussion of the educational, social and political development of the system. Much of current attitude and practice relates to, and in some important respects derives from, key elements of this development, especially the enduring academic/vocational divide. It is hard to understand the development of one sub-sector without also understanding what traditions and practices it has been developed in contrast with, and often in opposition to.

The provision and qualifications which form the focus for this report can perhaps best be understood as operating within four sub-sectors or tracks, though with some cross-over and merging at various points:

- a general education system mainly for 16–19 year olds based on Advanced level GCE (A-levels), derived from syllabuses and assessment methods that have endured since the 1950s, accredited by the three unitary awarding bodies (ABs: AQA, Edexcel and OCR) and run by schools, sixth form colleges and further education colleges

- a general vocational education system mainly for 16–19 year olds based on the Advanced Vocational Certificate of Education (AVCE), derived from General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs 1991–2000), accredited by the three unitary awarding bodies and similarly run by schools, sixth form colleges and further education colleges; this sub-sector also includes BTEC national diplomas which parallel AVCEs and which retain a distinctive identity within Edexcel

- a training system based on National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) that has been in place since 1987, along with a large number of other employer-led qualifications, offered by a wide range of awarding bodies and providers, though with City & Guilds as by far the largest awarding body for NVQs, which are intended to be assessed in the workplace though they can often involve simulated work environments, including college-based provision

- a wide array of adult and community provision, including specifically-designed 'Access to higher education' courses, with certificates and qualifications that offer recognition of achievement from basic skills in literacy and numeracy through to entry to higher education, accredited by a diverse range of awarding bodies and offered by colleges of further and higher education, adult education colleges and local education authority providers.

Our fieldwork suggests that while the 'traditional post-compulsory 16–19 sector' might be thought of as fairly uniform because of the age of its client group, there are academic and vocational routes which involve students following A-level or AVCE programmes; this means that it can be better understood as comprising two distinct tracks. On the other hand, while work-based routes are intended to privilege on-the-job training and assessment, lack of employment opportunities and work-based placements and resources can mean that large elements of NVQs are delivered and assessed in FE colleges and/or workplace simulations of various kinds. This can be the case for younger trainees, in particular, who have not gained entry to formal work-based programmes such as apprenticeships. Thus in some key respects, work-based routes are closer to general vocational education than might at first appear. In turn, Access to HE programmes, while designed for an age group which overlaps with the general adult and community education sector, attend to core elements of both general education, with respect to academic qualifications, and vocational work-based routes, since courses are increasingly being developed to provide routes into professions such as nursing and teaching for mature adults, in response to demand within these professional areas.

Conflicting purposes of assessment in the LSS

Superficially, these four tracks can be described in terms of the age-range of the target groups and the institutional base of their learning and assessment activities. However, their distinct trajectories, progression horizons and the definitions of 'achievement' that pertain within each, derive far more from the different purposes that assessment is intended to serve within and across each track, and how these purposes relate to different conceptions and methods of assessment. Post-16 assessment is intended variously to:

■ continue to serve as a preparation and selection mechanism for higher education (HE) so that the expansion of HE can be regulated with respect to distribution of limited places in elite institutions

■ concomitantly identify students who do not take A-levels, or who achieve lower grades at A-level (Ds and Es), as 'less able' or 'non-academic', so overall growth in the numbers of certificates awarded does not 'undermine' received notions of academic standards

■ generally, nevertheless, encourage as many learners as possible to carry on gaining qualifications, and in particular motivate learners who might not otherwise stay on in post-16 education

■ satisfy demands from different constituencies, such as employers' representatives, subject associations, etc, to include and test what are considered to be 'essential' content and skills

- prepare for progression into work and job-related NVQs

- ameliorate previous poor levels of achievement in numeracy and literacy through 'Basic Skills' and 'Key Skills' provision

- overcome the FE/school sixth form divide

- raise the status of vocational training and education and in particular provide a meaningful work-based route through apprenticeships and other initiatives.

Often, of course, the pursuit of one purpose can only be achieved at the exclusion of others.

Purpose related to conceptions of achievement and methods of assessment

The different demands of and purposes for the post-compulsory education and training system have produced diverse methods and combinations of methods for formal assessment and certification of achievement. At the same time, the policy imperative of access and progression has produced various attempts to establish broad comparability or equivalence across types and levels of awards:

- from 'Entry level' (basic skills) which is generally taken to be well below GCSE standard and actually comprises three levels (Entry levels 1, 2 and 3, almost akin to Key Stages 1, 2 and 3 in the school National Curriculum)

- through Foundation and Level 1 (GCSE grades D–F)

- to Level 2 (GCSE grades A*–C)

- Level 3 (two A-levels equivalent sufficient for entry to HE)

- Levels 4 and 5 (HE undergraduate and postgraduate equivalent).

Foundation Apprenticeships are located at Level 2, Advanced Apprenticeships at Level 3. The nomenclature of equivalence, however, which we have been unable to escape here, is always articulated in relation to academic certification – GCSE and A-level. By discursive articulation, therefore, academic achievement is established and continually re-established as the known, tried and tested standard to which all others are compared.

In turn, detailed discussion of comparability within and between these particular awards and levels derives from and revolves around assessment practices that reflect different beliefs about what counts as 'achievement', and thereby what constitutes 'fair assessment'. Essentially, these comprise norm-referencing, criterion-referencing, and the specific vocational manifestation of criterion-referencing: competence-based assessment.

Norm-referencing involves awarding grades by reference to the achievements of others in the cohort, with a rank order being created, then cut-off points between grades established in relation to the overall distribution of marks, rather than the absolute level of achievement of candidates. Inevitably in such a system, relatively few top grades are awarded. The practice derives both from a belief in there being a fixed 'pool' of ability, or capacity to achieve, and from which therefore the most talented individuals should be identified; it also derives from educational opportunity being historically a scarce resource (ie access to grammar schools, universities, etc) so that selection was the main purpose of assessment. Although the latter situation no longer pertains in an absolute sense, the former belief persists, particularly in the context of debates about 'falling standards' (eg at A-level) and the perception that 'more means worse'. Thus while access to FE and HE opportunities have been widened in general, access to elite institutions is still very competitive, and demands the maintenance of selective mechanisms. Our fieldwork demonstrates that belief in such a normal curve of distribution is still prevalent, particularly within A-level teaching, but also pervades more general discussion about opportunities and progression, such that vocational tracks are often seen as 'second best', for the 'less able'[1]. In turn, these are linked to discussion of assessment methods and the need to preserve externally designed and marked final examinations as providing reliable, uncontaminated 'objective' evidence of achievement. None of the mainstream qualification tracks outlined above (including A-level) now use wholly norm-referenced procedures, however, so the main effect and impact is at the level of belief and policy-development with respect to the academic/vocational divide. Thus it is assumed by those influenced by this frame of reference that 'real achievement' must be demonstrated by gaining the highest grades, while 'real fairness' should be accomplished largely through external testing and limiting opportunities for coaching and feedback. Awards which utilise assessment methods which stray too far from this historical 'gold standard' risk being labelled as lower status from the start.

Criterion referencing involves establishing what individual candidates actually know and can do, irrespective of whether or not others in their cohort also know and can do these things. Aims and objectives for a course are established, along with clear criteria for deciding whether or not the aims and objectives have been achieved. This is easier said than done, but in principle, if a sufficient number of the objectives have been achieved, all can 'pass' the course. The driving test is the most obvious public example of this sort of approach.

In practice, most courses involve grading as different levels and numbers of objectives are achieved and criteria are met; this is the basis for criterion-referenced progression and for the 'accumulation' of achievement over time. From this perspective, norm-referenced selective systems lack transparency, and are demotivating to the majority, who will, by definition, never achieve the highest grades. By contrast, providing clear evidence of what learners should achieve and have actually achieved, is claimed to be motivating for learners. The use of criterion referencing in the UK has developed significantly over the last twenty years or so. This growth has been largely driven by concerns for:

1 Other recent research reviews and explorations of data on progression confirm this perception of the enduring low status of vocational routes and qualifications; cf. Savory, Hodgson & Spours (2003), Statz *et al*. (2004), Little & Connor (2005).

- transparency, and improving the technical quality of assessment (ie improving validity and reliability by using a wider range of assessment methods to measure a broader range of intended learning outcomes)

- learner motivation and engagement, and the use of clear criteria and feedback to communicate learning goals and promote achievement.

Thus 'achievement' within a criterion-referenced system involves gathering and presenting evidence by a variety of means, while 'fairness' involves transparency of process and the provision of multiple opportunities to achieve and improve. Moreover, communicating clearly what learners can do and have actually achieved ought to be very useful for employers and HE selectors alike. In practice, however, selectors rarely have the time or inclination to delve so deep. In this respect, criterion-referencing lacks the simplicity, historical warrant and sheer visceral appeal of norm-referencing.

Competence-based assessment is a particularly strong form of criterion-referencing practised in vocational environments, especially those of work-based learning. Here what the learner (often also the employee) can do, and can be seen to do, in relation to the tasks required of them for competent practice, is paramount. It is most closely associated with NVQs. Detailed specifications of outcomes and assessment criteria promote and demand 'mastery' (ie the meeting of *all* criteria) as opposed to the aggregation, compensation and grading common in examinations (ie where assessors can offset poorer performance in some areas by better performance in others) Candidates are required to show evidence of workplace competence in diverse forms that are relevant to demonstrating mastery – eg observation by supervisors and/or external assessors, written testimony by colleagues or managers, written assignments, practical tasks, oral reports and testimony. There is a strong emphasis on fitness for purpose and the validity of assessment as opposed to reliability. Candidates can repeat assessment tasks until they are deemed to be competent, producing assessment decisions of 'not yet competent' ('working towards…') or 'competent'. NVQs involve learners demonstrating achievement when they are ready ('readiness'), along with preparation and help comprising formative guidance and feedback and, in some cases, repeated assessments until the candidate achieves the outcomes. NVQs are also intended to be rooted in authentic workplace contexts and assessed by people inside those contexts. Thus 'achievement' is defined in terms of demonstrated competence *in situ*, while 'fairness' involves transparency of standards, criteria and procedure, comparability/similarity of assessment tasks and contexts, and multiple opportunities to demonstrate the required competence(s) Additionally, the content and criteria of NVQs are derived from 'functional analysis' of workplace tasks, and produced with the involvement of employers. They are thus claimed to be directly relevant to practice without any of the intervening 'constructs' which are the focus of traditional measurement theory. Likewise, they are claimed to be able to recognise and reward achievement wherever it is manifest, not 'just' in examination settings, and thus are claimed to be *intrinsically* fairer than 'paper-and-pencil' tests (cf. Burke 1989, Jessup 1991, Wolf 1995).

Different constructions of achievement

As is now apparent, different perspectives on assessment and achievement reflect contrasting assumptions about ability and fairness. What counts as 'achievement', and as 'fair' (valid and reliable) methods of assessment varies between qualifications. The political, social, educational and technical dimensions to meanings of 'achievement' discussed above are crucial for understanding tutors' and learners' attitudes to achievement, and to the respective roles of formative and summative assessment. In AVCEs and BTEC Nationals, for example, formative assessment to help students improve their grades is integral to the educational ethos of the qualification (with the exception of the award of 'distinction' grades, discussed below) Such formative assessment includes guidance on draft assignments and close attention to the criteria for assessment which students are encouraged to address in detail. In NVQs, candidates can repeat tasks until they demonstrate competence, with as much guidance as necessary. By contrast, many A-level teachers accustomed to the one-off pressure of a summative examination, see formative guidance as providing an 'unfair' advantage because they believe that assessment should reflect the students' 'uncontaminated' ability and performance on a particular occasion.

Images of 'achievement' are also inescapably defined by those of 'failure'. In popular discussions of assessment, as can be seen by the annual debate over GCSE and A-level results in England, failure is seen as a necessary adjunct to success. Pass rates approaching 100% are regarded as inherently implausible, even though an E grade at A-level is clearly worth much less than an 'A' when it comes to future opportunities for progression. This problem relates back to our discussion of norm-referencing and the requirement of elite universities for a simple selection tool to facilitate entry. Interestingly enough, in all of the assessment regimes encompassed by this study, including A-level, failure is regarded as an undesirable political and educational outcome, by candidates, tutors and policy-makers alike. For policy-makers, 'failure' signals poor teaching and wasted resources; for tutors and candidates it signals wasted work and impoverished life chances. Yet lack of failure is seen to compromise the validity of success and, while outright failure is now avoided as far as possible – by the system, teachers and learners alike – A-levels and AVCEs still use grades as an acceptable and fair way to differentiate levels of achievement. In turn, levels of enrolment, retention and completion have become the unambiguous indicators of success and failure for individuals, institutions and system.

Realising 'the tracks' in action

To make this discussion a little more concrete, take for example staff in the Business sections of two colleges involved in the research. They taught on either AVCE or GCE A-level courses, and of the sample of six, five had never taught on the other pathway and none wanted to. Tutors had a strong sense of identity and affiliation with the ethos and approach of each qualification and this, together with their own educational backgrounds, shaped their notions of 'fairness'.

In college 1, of the two AVCE staff, 'Janice' was proud of her identity as a non-traditional teacher and a successful 'adult returner'. She did an Access to Higher Education course, followed by a part-time degree in Business, and then started work part-time in the college. 'Mike' did an Advanced GNVQ in Business in another college in the county, followed by a full-time Business degree and moved into teaching from an administrative role in the college. Their own educational experiences were therefore strongly attuned to those of their students. Similarly, the AVCE course leader in college 2, 'Mary', was a 'woman returner' who did an HNC in Public Administration followed by experience in Marks and Spencer, and voluntary work in the probation service.

'Neil', the A-level tutor in college 1, had evolved his educational aims and ethos over 25 years of teaching A-levels in Sociology and Business; he had little experience of, or interest in, teaching general vocational qualifications. Instead, he preferred to concentrate on teaching GCE A-level. He had also worked as an examiner for A-level exam boards and spent most of his career in the college. Similarly, both A-level tutors in college 2 had taught Business A-level in the college for over 20 years; one had taught BTEC National in the past but now specialises in A-level.

Their own educational and professional backgrounds led AVCE and GCE tutors to hold very different views about the main aims of each course and its assessment regime, reflecting their own educational and career trajectories and their affinity with the demands and ethos of a particular qualification pathway. These led to different expectations of the 'type' of student suited for each course.

Both colleges had decided to go back to BTEC National in the future for their AVCE-track Business award. The decision was taken to privilege practical work, work placements and fieldtrips: 'to do all the things these kids love … and to move away from all this written assessment'. Mary's view was that this more specifically vocational qualification reflects 'the way that students prefer to learn…'; vocational students 'are often less secure and enjoy being part of one group with a small team of staff … it's more supported, it's to do with comfort zones – a more protected environment'.[2]

For AVCE tutors in both colleges there was a correspondence between approaches to assessment and tutors' expectations about students' motivation and ability. However Neil, the GCE tutor in college 1, chose an exam-based A-level because it offers a very different view of 'fairness'. In part, his view reflected the assumptions of norm-referencing, coupled with the idea that students should 'take a chance' on their own, in competition with others. It also reflected a belief in meritocracy and the idea that students should maintain a reasonable level of independent performance over the two years of a full A-level. For Neil, fairness and achievement came from assessment under exam conditions and without any direct help from the tutor:

Where students perform and produce material they understand, that's clear and not polluted by me. I don't mark the scripts and that's how it should be: there's no preferential treatment, nowhere for the students to run and hide. In other courses, the coursework can be done by other people, it happens … a student can get As on coursework and Ds on examined units…

2 Savory, Hodgson & Spours (2003) also report a move back to BTEC by colleges dissatisfied with what they see as the overly academic nature of AVCE, as compared with GNVQ.

Thus assumptions about the needs and preferences of different 'types' of students coupled with deep-seated views about the efficacy of different assessment methods led tutors from the two qualifications to hold different views about what 'being fair to the students' meant in terms of assessment demands and judgments. Fairness to students was also mediated by different allegiances: the AVCE tutors seemed to have strong allegiances to their students whereas the A-level tutors saw their allegiances rooted in a professionalism representing their subject area on behalf of the awarding body. A-level tutors did not seem to experience this as a conflict of interest; rather, they reconciled their goals for students with allegiance to their subject via the awarding body. Having said this, however, it is also important to note that coaching and practising for A-level examinations is common, and is reported in more detail in the main body of the report.

The dilemma of 'distinction'

Sometimes, however, the differences between categories of learners and categories of assessment methods are not so clear cut, and perceptions of 'fairness' are imported from one assessment regime into another. In AVCE a particular challenge to notions of fairness comes when ideas about the provision of formative guidance and support come into collision with those of the need for objectivity and tutor disinterest. This occurs when students wish to achieve a 'distinction' in their AVCE work. Support is the norm, but 'If they are looking for a distinction, they have to complete it as all their own work'. Here the AB specifications, reflecting QCA guidelines, insist that 'distinctions' are awarded on the basis of independent work. The idea of learner independence, and achievement accomplished without support, is being invoked in a different setting from that of A-level. Thus the idea that an assessment event was successfully completed independently, without much help, remains widely regarded as a sign of its status and validity as an achievement. This not only cuts across the basic assumption of transparency coupled with formative feedback, which energises the sector while also presenting both tutors and students with a very direct dilemma. Staff must make a judgement about a student's likelihood of completing a task to the highest standard without much help, then leave the student to make the attempt. If the emergent or resultant work is judged to be of a 'distinction' standard (as opposed to 'pass' or 'merit'), their original estimation would appear to have been justified. If, however, the work is anything below this standard, the subsequent feedback to the student may, by definition, rule out a 'distinction' grade, in complete contradiction to current policy interest in promoting 'assessment for learning'. In turn, students will have to be very circumspect in asking for support if they wish to achieve 'distinctions'.

Failing one element means failing all

A further example of the way in which a clash of assumptions about which assessment regime is actually operational can carry negative consequences for candidates is found in one particular 'Progression Award' in Sport and Recreation. 'Progression Awards' are designed to provide the underpinning knowledge for NVQs, and are taught as courses in FE colleges and other training providers. They are essentially college-based technical certificates. They should be taken in tandem with work-based NVQs but often are taken as stand-alone qualifications if candidates are not in employment. Thus progression awards, certainly in Sport and Recreation, can be pursued from NVQ Level 2, to Level 3, and on to Foundation degree level, almost as a series of vocationally-related academic qualifications, rather than strictly vocational qualifications. This confusion of purpose is paralleled by confusion of assessment requirements, such that at Level 3, there is a massive assessment load, with candidates having to pass *everything*. At Level 3, there is a requirement for learners to complete seven course units, of which three are compulsory and assessed via external exams and coursework. The remaining four units comprise options that are assessed through written assignments and a series of internal tests that are externally verified. In addition, for each of the seven units, there is a requirement to complete three pieces of coursework, making a total of 21 pieces of written work and seven exams. Moreover, failure in one element means failure overall:

If you fail one of the exams we're having to fail the whole course, regardless of the all the work we've done already and the grades we've been given; that doesn't make any sense to me, I don't believe you should fail just for one assignment or one exam…
Level 3 learner

All it needs is a student just to fail one of those exams … last year there were four or five that failed one, they're classed as failed the course. I think that's wrong … when you do an 'A' level which is say six units – you get one grade overall – that would be better.
college curriculum manager

Thus a vocational 'subject' is being assessed according to vocational mastery criteria (to achieve each unit the learner must be 'competent' and hence pass all assessments), yet these are organised in a structure that denies the flexibility ('competent'/'not yet competent') usually associated with competence-based assessment. In fact, certificates of unit credit can be issued, listing the individual units in which a candidate has been successful, but candidates are not eligible for a full certificate if they fail a unit and, clearly, this is perceived at local level as 'failing' the course. Furthermore, since the award does not allow for compensation or averaging across an assembly of coursework assignments and unit tests (as does A-level for example), it appears to represent the 'worst of both worlds' with respect to the merging of academic and vocational approaches to assessment.[3]

3 Savory, Hodgson and Spours (2003 pp15–16) make a similar observation about some AVCEs which they argue have become too academic when compared with their precursor, GNVQ, while still retaining many elements of the 'mastery' orientation of NVQ in the structure of their assessment.

This confusion of purpose and structure, in assessment regimes which emerge from different academic and vocational traditions, may be one of the reasons why introducing a uniform unit-based and credit-based 14–19 system has received such widespread support in the sector (viz the Tomlinson Report) and is being proposed in the Qualification and Curriculum Authority's 'Framework for Achievement' (see: http://www.qca.org.uk/10710.html).

Vertical 'communities of practice' and the realisation of assessment in action

These articulations and confusions seem to derive from the intersection of the personal learning (and assessment) biographies of tutors and assessors with institutional cultures and regulations; the person interprets and mediates the regulation at the same time as they enact it.

All qualifications in the UK are designed under guidance and specifications issued by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), a non-departmental government agency which regulates the qualifications industry. It is intended to guarantee broad similarity and equivalence across awards, at the level of structure and procedure, laying down for example, the proportion of formal external testing that a qualification must include alongside whatever coursework, practical work, and so forth is allowed. The broad guidelines are then interpreted and realised in specific awards by awarding body teams of senior examiners (or product managers, as they are sometimes known in ABs), assessment leaders, subject and other specialists. Those who administrate broadly academic qualifications have to attend to content and criteria laid down by QCA for subjects. Those involved in broadly vocational qualifications have to attend to content and criteria laid down by standard-setting bodies such as the recently created Sector Skills Councils. Even at this point, and often within the same awarding body, the differing cultures of academic and vocational tracks and qualifications are embodied in different working teams operating with little or no contact between them. Award specifications and syllabuses are produced, along with guidance for schools and colleges to follow, which in turn are adopted and mapped onto the differing academic and vocational cultures at local level.

Thus three intersecting forms or levels of activity are brought to bear on, and produce, the reality of assessment in action:

- what we might term assessment theory and methodology – ie the logic and rationale which underpins and informs issues of validity, reliability and the impact of assessment on learning

- QCA and awarding body regulations, responsibilities and procedures, which have to take account of political pressures and policy directives as well as 'assessment theory', and which lead to the design of actual awards; it is also important to note that ABs are commercial organisations competing for 'market share' in the 'assessment industry', and this will similarly influence the details of their procedures and the awards they offer[4]

- the realisation of these awards in practice in colleges and workplaces, through the activities of candidates, tutors, supervisors and assessors.

4 Interestingly, a recent review of assessment developments in the post-compulsory sector for the EU suggests that European priorities for assessing 'non-formal' learning may not be driven by 'bottom-up' demands from learners, but rather is emerging as a 'supply-driven development' with awarding bodies interested in expanding their 'industry' in order to argue for new funding from the EU, as well as pursue market share within the industry (Bjornvold 2000, p22).

In some respects, this third level could also be subdivided between overall college and workplace cultures of expectation about what assessment is and what assessors should do; and the particular activities of individual tutors and small groups of departmental or workplace colleagues which may attend to even more specific understandings of what assessment is 'all about' and what they are 'allowed' to do.

Assessment regimes: reification and participation

Wenger's (1998) notion of reification and participation may be helpful in understanding the interactions between these forms or levels. These terms capture the duality with which practitioners at every level are faced – both 'receiving instructions from on high', while at the same time realising such instructions in action and hence, at one and the same time, producing their effects. Thus assessment might be thought of as what students, tutors and institutions have to do in order to meet a set of requirements that 'come from the awarding body'. These reflect the policy decisions of government agencies coupled with the educational and commercial values of awarding bodies. These requirements are usually written down (reification) But assessment can also be discussed in terms of experience and activity: the day-to-day practices of assessment and their management (participation) Our argument is that assessment is always about both of these things, at the same time.

Reification and participation as realised in 'communities of practice' conceptualise how meaning is produced in everyday life, and they are usually completely interwoven. Wenger cites the American Constitution as an example:

The reification of a Constitution is just a form; it is not equivalent to a citizenry. Yet it is empty without the participation of the citizens involved. Conversely, the production of such a reification is crucial to the kind of negotiation that is necessary for them to act as citizens and to bring together the multiple perspectives, interests, and interpretations that participation entails.
Wenger 1998, p62

He goes on to show how a whole range of social practices and meanings can be viewed as reliant on similar relationships. Of course, we should also note that such processes are never entirely benign or without competing interests being at stake. Individual actors can quite self-consciously attempt to circumvent or even subvert policy, as well as simply interpret or misinterpret it. Likewise, particular groups will lobby and compete to protect their interests and to secure the primacy of their interpretation. Each successive settlement (ie periodically emergent set of assumptions) is as much a result of struggle as of 'negotiation'.

Thus it is helpful to see the methods, tasks, arrangements and all practicalities of assessment as *both* what is written in 'the rules' (reification) and what people actually do in particular situations (participation) – and to appreciate how these are mutually dependent. Gathering and interpreting data from across these 'vertical communities of practice', from awarding body through to learner and assessor, and back again, has underlined the necessity for keeping in view such interdependencies. While some tutors comment unfavourably on the constraining demands of an awarding body, AB representatives themselves often say similar things about QCA, while being dependent on tutors for their grounded judgments and indeed their ongoing custom. These kinds of dependencies are often misrecognised and presented only as top-down, one-way relationships, when they are much more dynamic and interactive than this. The particular practices which emerge at particular times as a result of such interaction can also be highly contested, however, as the current debate over A-level results demonstrates. While increasing the number of 'qualified' people in the workforce is a goal of policy, specifically manifested in this example by increasing the number of A-level passes, the reverberations impact on other interests in the social system as a whole. The specific procedures and processes of any individual award emerge out of the informal taken-for-granted assumptions and mediations that individual actors invoke and engage in at each level of activity. However, major interests continue to exert considerable influence, especially with regard to protecting access to elite universities and securing the commercial viability of each of the awarding bodies.

Section 4	**Key themes emerging from the research**

The structure of the report

The aims of the study were to explore learner experience of assessment in the LSS and in particular to try to:

- compare and contrast assessment experiences of learners in different settings

- identify what assessment regimes work best in enabling learners to progress in which context and in which sectors

- identify how learners can best be supported in engaging with the different demands of different assessment methods.

In the course of such an investigation a large number of issues and problems, as well as interesting and successful practice, were identified. The main body of the report, which follows, records and analyses these issues in some detail. They comprise the following:

4.1 Definitions of achievement

4.2 Definitions of progress

4.3 Assessment methods as used and experienced

4.4 Supporting candidates: coaching, practising and eliciting evidence

4.5 Facilitating and inhibiting learner success

4.6 E-assessment: online testing and portfolio completion

4.7 Key skills tests and basic skills tests

4.8 The performance – evidence – competence continuum

4.9 'Lost in translation?' Interpreting the language of assessment

4.10 Local communities of practice: the interpretive, mediating local culture(s) of education, training, employment and assessment

4.11 'Innovation without change?' The enduring academic/ vocational divide

The report then finishes with an overall summary of the findings, including conclusions and recommendations in Section 5.

The project has sought to investigate 'achievement' and 'progress' in the learning and skills sector. How these terms are interpreted by participants will carry significant import for the ways in which support is construed and might be developed. And indeed, much data pertain to definitions of and assumptions about these terms, and how they are interpreted and operationalised in different settings.

Achievement is fairly narrowly and instrumentally defined. It is routinely interpreted as securing the evidence to complete a portfolio and/or the 'necessary' or 'expected' grades to accomplish an award and proceed to further study; these are not necessarily the highest grades available:

I was happy with a merit standard.
AVCE student

Achievement would mean getting a C or above; I'd be happy to get a C but I know I could do better.
AVCE student

Similarly, this orientation is linked to securing the certificate/qualification; it is not necessarily linked to the accomplishment of any additional or even actual practical competence(s), even though these may well have been acquired:

Interviewer *What would happen if you didn't get it, if you were to drop out, would you lose your job?*

MVE trainee *No, he said there's a job for me whatever.*
Int *So how important is it to you that you do your NVQ?*
MVE trainee *Very important.*
Int *But if he's not bothered why is it important to you?*
MVE trainee *Just having the qualifications, isn't it.*

I've got to get my papers … so I can walk into any job in the future.
MVE trainee

I've got quite a lot of experience as a mechanic because I've worked in a garage for a while but I've just got no papers so … if anything goes wrong if I've got qualifications I can say well I've been in college and I've done that.
MVE trainee

Within a working environment, other rewards and incentives are also offered to trainees. One of the apprentices encountered received a £100 bonus from his employer for being 'apprentice of the year'.

Some learners comment on a wider range of achievements, especially with respect to personal development, or observe that they are 'getting better' at certain tasks when asked about how they know they are doing well, but the main focus of supervisors, managers, tutors and learners is on attaining grades/evidence:

From my perspective, for me … I want to do it, because I feel the need to prove I can do it, but also I had to [for my job] … I've got to get it done.
Social Care NVQ candidate

*I've had four years' experience now since being with Sure Start.
I can do it – I know what I'm doing, you know I go in there every day
and I am good at my job … but … I just want all of that on paper …
you know I want me bit of paper now to prove that I can do it …
I'm … capable of doing my job.*
Adult learner involved in Sure Start programme accredited by OCN

It's amazing how many people really do want that bit of paper.
adult basic skills curriculum manager

As such, the correspondence between programme objectives,
assessment criteria, and desired vocational outcomes, is
crucial to genuine workforce development. If participants are
going to pursue grades and awards, those grades and awards
must be valid, and authentic representations of intended
learning outcomes.

Judgements about grades and their implications for progression
still derive from the academic/vocational divide, with different
tracks or pathways being offered and 'chosen' in the light of prior
different (ie good/poor) GCSE and AS/AVCE results. These 'tracks'
are embodied in the expectations and working cultures of both
individual tutors and institutional organisations. In turn, kudos
and status are also related to academic/vocational tracks; with
vocational education and training regarded as 'second best',
especially at 16–19, even if it is increasingly seen as also
providing a 'second chance':

Those who don't do well at school can take another chance.
AVCE Sp&L tutor

*One lad you met … he did not do very well in his GCSEs. Courses
like this will give him another chance. BTEC, NVQs, AVCEs are
vocational courses, backed up with some paperwork. In the past,
before these courses, some students would have just left school,
some would have stayed on and failed.*
AVCE Sp&L tutor

*I've got good contacts with all the schools round here. They know
that I take apprentices on and if they've got somebody coming up
that they think will be good … not many of them have done very
well academically in school. A lot of them just didn't want to be in
school but as soon as they come here they're doing what they want
to do and they shine.*
MVE employer

At the same time, however, many of the major employers of MVE
apprentices were at pains to point out that modern cars largely
run on programmed electronic systems of various sorts and that
ideally they were now looking for potential technicians with good
GCSE grades in maths and science:

*It's all computers. You need a computer these days for diagnostic
work. The first thing they do is plug the computer in. It's the only
way they can find things on modern cars.*
MVE assessor

In general, however, the separation of 'academic' and 'vocational' tracks seemed fairly firm. As we have seen, staff in the Business sections of two colleges involved in the fieldwork taught either on AVCE or GCE A-level. The fieldwork reveals tutors' strong sense of identity and affiliation with the ethos and approach of each qualification, deriving in key respects from their own educational backgrounds and, as one of the AVCE tutors observed, 'We get the students who haven't really got quite the grades to do the A-level… There's also pressure for numbers on the A-level so the ones with good grades get poached from us'. On the other hand, A-level tutors saw a real qualitative difference in the demands being made on their students: 'I just don't see the quality in BTEC stuff … a decent A-level is a qualitatively different beast in Business; it's better for bright students'.

Similarly worthy of note in this respect is that one of the other FE colleges involved in the fieldwork is re-branding some of its academic and general vocational provision as a 'sixth form', presumably to make it more attractive in competition with the school-based provision in the area. This is an important *cultural* issue – it seems that for many people *further education college* denotes 'vocational' and second best, while *sixth form* (and sixth form college) denotes 'academic study', leading to higher education.

In different contexts, even when following vocational programmes themselves, respondents constantly articulate the hierarchy of A-levels being preferred to AVCEs, BTEC and/or Access courses. Thus A-levels are:

Higher status, more well known.
AVCE student

They say it's an equivalent to A-level, but of course its going to be viewed I suppose as lesser than an A-level.
AVCE student

[Employers] would go for A-level more… They hear BTEC and NVQ and don't really know what it is… A-level sounds more intelligent… I just think employers need to be notified of what these qualifications mean … it's basically discrimination, isn't it? I'd say we probably do the same amount as people who do A-level … but those students would probably not have the skills.
AVCE student

There was also evidence of learners preferring GCSEs to basic skills tests and Access Course achievements – ie many learners in the study are not doing A-levels, or GCSEs, but in terms of kudos, wish they were.

I'd like to get a few GCSEs hopefully … but if you've not got the confidence to do it because you've been suffering with dyslexia all your life, it takes a long time to think, 'Yes … I'll go for that.'
basic skills learner

What bothers me about it more than anything is that you're working towards A-level but actually at the end of it you don't get an A-level qualification. You've done all this work over two years, working to A-level standard and yet all you get is an Access certificate.
Access student

Some students following both A-level and AVCE courses also noted the apparently more interesting and potentially more challenging nature of group work and project work in AVCEs, and the collaborative nature of much of the pedagogy, but nevertheless were still persisting with those A-levels that they had chosen – they were less interesting perhaps, but of higher status:

I don't say that's how it is, but that's how it's seen… People have heard of A-level, fewer have heard of GNVQ…
AVCE student

There's no social interaction in Economics; the teacher never does group work but in AVCE they do, so you might get some feedback … but cos you don't understand it anyway, it doesn't make sense and so we all go 'we'll be lucky if we get an E in this…'
A-level and AVCE student

Well, Film Studies does lend itself to group interaction and he does try to include the whole group, like, analysing a film … but they don't test you until about a month before the exam and you practise an answer and go through it in class and that's it … in AS, you can feel alienated, like it's only you doing it wrong, in AVCE … you're all in it together.
A-level and AVCE student

Overall, it would appear that we still have no positive national 'vision' of what good quality general vocational education should look like, and therefore no coherent vision of what achievement should look like in such a context.[5]

Straightforward retention and completion is also regarded as achievement – by individuals and institutions alike – with retention and pass rates affecting institutional finance. Linked to this, there is now virtually no such thing as failure if 'failure' is interpreted in terms of completing a course or programme but not achieving sufficiently well to receive an award/certificate. Rather, failure is now defined as *non-completion* (of a portfolio, or of sufficient credits in a course of study) or not securing *necessary* grades (eg for progression to a particular HE course).

They don't fail, they can be withdrawn. For example, if an assessor observes bad practice or if somebody doesn't seem competent in their work, then that would be reported to the internal verifier, who would speak to the line manager … they are mentored within the workplace until such time [as] their manager feels that they are ready to continue. That would delay their progress by six months or so.
lead verifier – Social Care NVQ

Essentially there's no fail as such at NVQ – they're referred. Obviously if they're referred they get another opportunity to update their portfolio to get it to a pass standard or to demonstrate that they've met the units of competence.
external verifier, Sport & Recreation NVQ

Some people, through one circumstance or another, don't attend enough, don't hand in the work, don't achieve enough credits. They need to achieve the minimum number of credits to get the … certificate. Without that, they can, if you like, fail.
Access tutor

5 Stasz *et al.* (2004) make similar observations, but their report also stands as evidence of research and policy interest in developing such a vision. As the current study was being completed, and the final report drafted, the Tomlinson report, one such possible vision, was being rejected by government as a way of restructuring 14–19 learning and achievement opportunities. Some elements of it may yet be resurrected, however.

You can fail if you just don't do the work on time, or you don't take any notice of the teachers' advice … [but] you can drop a couple of the option units if your marks aren't any good and you can still pass the course.
AVCE student

6 Recent figures indicate AVCE pass rates are around 80% (83% in 2002) as against 96% in A-level. AVCE candidates tend to get fewer higher grades, however (see Savory, Hodgson and Spours 2003).

Thus it is now most unusual for candidates to 'fail' A-level or AVCE, rather they either withdraw or achieve lower grades than they expect and hope for.[6] Moreover, those programmes which have apparently high failure rates, such as Advanced (Level 3) Apprenticeships (AAs), often involve the candidates completing their NVQs, but not bothering to take the key skills test element of the AA, and thus technically not completing the AA, even though they have become competent workers and employees – see Section 4.7 below on key skills tests and basic skills tests.

The one clear exception to this 'expulsion of failure' identified in the data were 'Progression Awards' in Sport and Recreation, which, as discussed in Section 3, include a combination of course assignments and end-tests, with failure in any one test bringing failure with respect to the full certificate. There seems to be a specific issue here with regard to the objectives of college-based training, and whether or not aggregation and compensation across units might not be appropriate – see also Section 4.8 below on issues of validity and reliability.

Personal achievement

There is some evidence in the data of the importance of a self-referenced, intrinsic student sense of achievement – the personal achievement of having 'done something difficult' and perhaps even surprised oneself. This is especially the case in the adult and community education sector, where such achievement is also linked to developing self-confidence and overcoming previous fears and failures deriving from school experience.

When you've gone through life not being able to read and write … personal achievement means more than a bit of paper… Actually being able to do it and achieve something for myself is more important.
basic skills learner

My wife's been doing all my reading but I can't depend on her all the time… And I can't keep going to my daughters or my sons so – bit of respect I think… I've managed with my work and that, but I can't depend on my wife all the time because you never know what's going to happen do you?
basic skills learner

Pride in what I do … doing my best, even in horrible pieces of work I've managed to get a B – I was targeted an E and I got a B. I'm going to try for an A. If you'd seen me at school, you wouldn't believe it was the same person.
AVCE student, now in a college

This sense of achievement often derives from the 'second chance' element of post-compulsory education, but seems to be articulated in 'affective' terms, relating to an overall sense of achievement, identity change and social progress rather than directly related to acquisition of skills or competences *per se*. However, the two are linked. Thus Adult basic skills (ABS) tutors and learners often construe achievement in terms of related skills, such as preparing a CV and/or applying (successfully) for jobs, rather than just passing ABS literacy and numeracy tests *per se*. Similarly, becoming more prepared to read to one's children, and/or talk to one's children's teachers, and/or approach one's GP about a health issue, do not just demonstrate enhanced confidence; they are also important 'competences' which are entirely absent from formal recordings of achievements.

I feel a lot more confident… I've gotten a lot out of the [Sure Start] course, in order to deal with Robert's [child's] behaviour a lot more, than I actually thought I would get… We have a buddy system anyway, but I can ring any of them up and they talk it out with me…
Sure Start OCN candidate

I help my son at home with the homework as well, it is necessary for me to know English. And I need to answer him, to know the answer will be right, not wrong… I don't care about the exam or tests … I just like learning…
basic skills learner

Some younger vocational trainees (eg MVE apprentices) identify a general sense of 'doing the job better' when asked about achievement, apparently relieved that they can 'hold their own' in the workplace and not be embarrassed by their novice status. However, they rarely go into specific detail – see Section 4.4 below for some examples. Older basic skills learners can sometimes be more specific, however, especially when comparing their experience to previous school failure:

I've been really surprised with this English course. They're explaining why things are spelled that way. I was dead excited and it sounds so stupid, but I was dead excited because I found out why hopping and hoping – one was with a p and one was pp… She's explaining why things are spelt that way, and … it's like once you know why and there's a reason to it, I can do it… They explain it more and speak to you like an adult.
student, pre-Access

I have learnt some new stuff. I didn't know much about the names of shapes and things like that, and dimensions of shapes … don't know how it would help me with administration, but I think the fractions maybe will help me a bit in my administration job.
basic skills learner

I know how to write a letter … for business, then I have improved my typing skills as well … now, when I've finished my personal statement, I'll do it on computer.
basic skills learner

Vocational candidates (eg Social Care) are sometimes encouraged to think of portfolio completion and verification as gaining recognition for 'what they can do anyway' – ie, a long-overdue recognition of their skills and competences by an accreditation system that has finally caught up with the reality of 'learning on the job'. Many would argue that this is an important element of the NVQ system, but it begs questions about the contribution that assessment systems should make to *raising* skill levels. Reviewing skills and accrediting individuals also attends to issues of safe practice and licences to practice, so it is clearly not an inappropriate aim for a qualifications system. But this also underscores the overall finding of achievement being interpreted in terms of accreditation and certification – in the case of Social Care, competence recognition, rather than competence development.

It's recognising what I do … it's a valuable job but now somebody's recognising that.
Social Care NVQ candidate

They are frightened that they can't do it because a lot … left school with no qualifications and have not studied anything since leaving school and a lot … are middle-aged or over … [but] even if they can't read and write it doesn't exclude them from doing it because … it's on what they do every day.
internal verifier, Social Care

Section 4.2	Definitions of progress

Progression is conceptualised as both a 'horizontal' aggregatory process and a 'vertical' developmental process. In turn, both of these categorisations can also be subdivided into what might be termed intrinsic 'progress' – with respect to learning (or towards a learning goal) – and more extrinsic 'progression', with respect to moving from one accomplished achievement or qualification to another.

Within tracks, awards and levels, there is the aggregatory acquisition of modules/evidence at the same 'level' of difficulty (eg NVQ Level 2, AVCE units) However, because there is no clear change in marking criteria, some tutors do not recognise this as manifesting either 'progress' or 'progression':

Students are full-on from day one. Every unit contributes to UCAS points, so they have to be full-on from the beginning. But the programme is not stepped, so the level is supposedly the same throughout. This is a real issue, a real problem. How do you put progression into that?
AVCE Sp&L tutor

There is also accumulation of credits and awards across subjects within the same level of difficulty (eg Literacy *and* Numeracy in basic skills testing) Success in these programmes then maps onto progression in others, though whether this 'progression' signals actual acquisition of knowledge and competence, as opposed to simply gaining accreditation for access to another course, is a moot point:

They need to get up to Level 2 if they are on a course that requires their GCSE A–C and they've not got it.
basic skills tutor

We're all there for one reason. We're all there at the end of the day to pass it … I just want to get it over and done with. Get it passed and carry on.
pre-access student

Aggregatory accumulation can carry problems with it if the amount of evidence required within a level is too great. Many examples of non-completion (= failure) were encountered as large numbers of units were completed by candidates, but without the full number for an award ever being achieved:

If you're going for Level 3 which the bulk of ours do, you don't need to do Level 2, so you could end up with a youngster starting doing three years' training and then part of the next year finishing off the assessment so it's three and a half years and they haven't got anything … if … they can go home and say 'Look mum, look dad, look boss…' and say, 'Well I've got some units, I'm making some progress…' they've got their self-esteem.
MVE lead verifier

You've got a unit like diagnose complex systems, repair complex systems, which means that to diagnose something, you could be looking at brakes, lights, steering, engine, transmission, so you're never going to finish a unit… That's bad news because if somebody says well I've done brakes and now I've done a module on lighting and electronic systems you can actually see a progression and I think personally success breeds success and if they see they've only got a few left to go … whereas if they've been working two and a half years and they've achieved nothing it's really hard. So I think the way that the Standards are written has got a lot to answer for.
MVE external verifier

Such problems can also be compounded by the attitude of employers and training agencies wanting to save money on fees so that candidates are only entered for the most advanced qualification available to them:

I'm not allowed to get my Level 2 because [the training agency] won't pay for it. They've put me on a Level 3 course and even though I've done the Level 2, I've done the portfolio, I've done the exams and passed them all, there's only one thing stopping me having my Level 2 and that's getting the certificate. And [the training agency] won't pay for it and they said we put you on a Level 3 course so you only get it at Level 3. You can't get your Level 2…
MVE apprentice

Lack of accumulative progression is a key issue underpinning the development of NOCN accreditation in some adult education settings, where the acknowledgement of even small positive steps is considered to be extremely important:

The point is that OCN is a sort of can-do system, you know, you're always sort of adding something on, you're gaining something.
Access tutor

This is clearly an issue that NVQs need to address more generally, and changes to introduce more unit accreditation are under discussion by QCA and awarding bodies (cf. the QCA 'Framework for Achievement' noted above) Equally, however, even within an accumulative system, lack of grading can produce similar sorts of problems, as some candidates feel they are operating within a very wide achievement zone and not being challenged (or encouraged) to progress within it:

I always achieved Level 3 but I didn't have any input to build on that… I was pretty bored towards the end.
Access student, now an undergraduate

Within tracks/awards there is also a sense of 'upward' movement through levels of difficulty (from Level 2 to Level 3, or AS to A2) However, the evidence is mixed on whether or not there is any *actual* change in the level of difficulty encountered. Awards claim that there is – eg from 'description' to 'evaluation', or accomplishment of an activity to supervision of it, etc – but it is difficult to identify clear empirical evidence that real individuals find different tasks at different levels more difficult to complete – in other words, that there is a progressive increase in the nature of the cognitive challenge. Some respondents indicated that the level of workplace challenge was often greater than that required by the NVQ, or by supposedly superior courses:

One of the things that amazes me, on the key skills, for a motor mechanic it's IT Level 1 and then it's number and communications Level 2. I would have thought the IT would have been at Level 2 or even 3. They've got to know how to use this IT equipment. The car's got a memory as well. So we need people with reasonable intelligence to work on these cars.
FE college head of MVE department

[AVCE is] more practical, more geared to coaching. Some people say it is easier [than A-level], but I think it takes more guts to stand there coaching with kids.
AVCE student

With respect to returners to learning, attempting to come to terms with and progress through basic skills tests, the very earliest encounters with even 'Entry level' work could actually be more challenging than later encounters because of the social challenges involved:

They are worried about things like getting the kids to nursery, [and] 'How am I going to pay the gas bill, the phone bill,' whatever. 'I've got to go to work, do a 10-hour shift and then come here,' so it's all those other things.
Adult basic skills tutor

It's fitting it in. I mean I've only got one [child] … [but] … for me it's very hard … trying to explain to them that if I'm sitting on the computer working, leave me on the computer. I don't want to get up and do other things. That to me is getting to killing point at the minute which is the hardest bit. Getting peace. I don't know how you do it…
Access student

In these instances, it is very difficult to distinguish between cognitive and affective challenges. Similarly, difficulties encountered in moving through levels in vocational training can relate to lack of access to resources and lack of opportunities to display competences, rather than the challenge of the task *per se* – see Sections 4.5 and 4.8, below.

With younger workers moving through more distinct levels of academic as well as work-based progression, the challenge may be more apparent:

Level 2 is very much worksheet-based with some exams. Level 3 there is a big jump for them … they go from just filling in worksheets and really quite simple multiple-choice type of exams, short-answer exams up to them writing assignments and exams in every single unit as well… They are given assignments for the first time. They are asked to go away and research information on their own for the first time.
Sp&Rec Progression Award college tutor

Progress in written work is paralleled by increased difficulty in practical contexts:

For Level 2 they plan, deliver and evaluate one session…
For Level 3 they have to plan a six-week coaching session … and it can't be delivering to their peer group, it must be an external group, so that's a big sudden jump.
college curriculum manager

Interestingly, given our previous discussion of the problem of gaining a 'distinction' in AVCE, the Sport and Recreation Progression Award at Level 3 (ie AVCE equivalent) not only involves a major step-up in terms of academic and practical challenge, but also seems to involve reduced levels of tutor/assessor support. It was reported that the external verifier associated with the colleges visited for Sport and Recreation did not allow criteria and feedback to be shared with Progression Award candidates at Level 3 – see Section 4.4, below. Once again, what was seen as 'help' was not allowed. Somewhat ironically, however, as we shall also see in Section 4.4, A-level tutors do give students help in terms of exam practice and coaching, and indeed – even within A-level – some tutors spoke about some students being 'workers, not academics', who achieve good grades through 'sheer graft'. Thus the AS/A2 structure would appear to assist such students in building incrementally towards success even as AVCE and Progression Awards eschew too much tutor input for the highest achievement to be awarded.

Different types of activity can certainly be perceived as more or less difficult, however, eg across the *'academic'* or the *'practical'* tracks from AVCE to academic A-level or Access courses to HE. Most respondents had of course 'crossed the tracks' in the opposite direction, from academic school failure to vocational education and training. In this respect they thought their endeavours became 'easier' as they became more practical and more suited to what they thought were appropriate to their interests and abilities. For some this movement finally took place after 16+ as they discovered that AS was 'not for them' and they moved onto to AVCEs (or BTEC) rather than A2s. This was seen as 'sideways progression', but still progression, insofar as a positive decision had been taken. The elision of progression with decision-making is worth noting here: individual learners felt they were making progress by taking (what they considered to be) positive decisions.

'Upward' progression across tracks was seen in terms of moving from the 'practical' to the 'academic', after having benefited from a 'second chance'. This occurs to some extent in the move from AVCE to HE and via specific 'Access to HE' programmes, but these 'progressions' still tend to be within broad vocational tracks – from AVCE Business Studies to degree-level Business Studies, from 'Access to Nursing' to a Nursing degree. This could be seen as another example of progression *within* tracks but through higher levels. However, such easily identifiable 'stepping stones' do carry positive messages for aspiring learners who may have failed previously:

In the past I've tried GCSE and I've come out with the same result every time, and with me working as well full-time, I think it's best just to pass this [pre-Access course] and get myself the pre-nursing and then the nursing and university, so I know what I'm aiming for.
student, pre-Access

Progression was also reported from specific 'Access' courses (eg to Social Work) to more general undergraduate studies (eg Humanities), and from NVQ to professional (nurse) training which can be construed as a more explicit move to a different sort of learning and assessment environment:

NVQs have been well received, and people have often gone on from doing NVQ to … progress further, and some of them are now doing nurse training … where there's close links made between certain sectors and their local universities, that's worked well…
awarding body product manager

The trainee assistant practitioner role Level 3 that we're developing is also linked to a Foundation degree. It's a two-year programme so they're studying for the diploma and simultaneously they have to get a Level 3 in Care. At the end of that second year they can go on to do another degree, another route/pathway…
internal verifier, Social Care NVQ

Take Helen, for example, she started off as an admin assistant … then gradually took things on and was doing a Level 3 … and now she's a graduate with a really good honours degree and is a senior probation officer…
lead verifier, Social Care NVQ

This third quote, however, and to some degree all three of the above quotes, while demonstrating progression, also endorse the 'academic track' as the one to aspire to, the top of the hierarchy.

Progression is also identified in the data as moving from education/training into employment – progression to full-time, qualified employee – and there is a clear change of status implied here, as well as a change of level in terms of operating competence. Achieving well at work, especially 'holding down a job', is important, and brings a sense of achievement and progression for young apprentices in a new environment. Similarly, progression was encountered within employment as awards were achieved.

Linked to all of the above examples is a notion of progression as social mobility. Other examples include the move from NVQ-taker, to NVQ trainer/assessor – ie a movement from an operative to a supervisory and training/assessing role – and from Sure Start participant to Sure Start facilitator and organiser. In the social care sector in particular, a career ladder that didn't exist previously has been created. Many care staff who have demonstrated some competence and ambition have changed their jobs after completing their Level 2 certificates and now work as assessors in training agencies.

Further examples in the data include movement into HE from Access courses, with a clear implication of social class progression – 'bettering oneself', 'doing something' with one's life. This occurred especially with respect to female returners on vocationally-oriented programmes such as Access to Nursing and Teaching but also with respect to more academic programmes such as Social Science degrees and which, as we have seen above in at least two AVCE tutors' cases, led into college teaching. Such personal experiences feed into the 'second chance' perspective very directly and reproduce it *in situ* and in action:

I went through a divorce four years ago… I was … raising three children on income support … and I just thought right if I don't go out and do something then I'm never going to be anything.
Access student

A lot of it is because it's been triggered by my job, you see, I work in the NHS and … I've watched a lot of people go on and do better for themselves and I've kind of still been the same and it makes you think doesn't it. And that's why I did it really.
Access student

Progression can also be conceptualised in terms of acquisition of social capital – personal confidence, social engagement, new or increased personal networks, community development and vitality – with more 'choices' available to individuals. Such progression is very apparent in the adult and community education sector in particular, though very difficult to 'capture' in terms of specific achievements and outcomes (for individuals and institutions alike).

My daughters say I'm doing very well, because I couldn't even write out a birthday card or Christmas card or anything. I'm doing all that myself now. Full of self-confidence in myself now. Feel a lot better about myself. Before, I wouldn't talk to anybody… And I've got 14 grandchildren… I'm doing a bit of [reading to them] now, because I mind [some of] them three days a week.
basic skills learner

Sometimes the very act of participation is enough for learners, and they may even resist assessment success (the policy-makers' measure of success and progression) to remain within the learner community:

A lot of comments I've heard, especially from the ladies, is that 'I'm stuck at home all week and I really enjoy coming to the college, my English is improving and I'm meeting lots of people'. And for another group, asylum seekers, because they're brought here to this area, they know absolutely no-one in the area, so they do make friends through the college and they do become happy.
basic skills tutor

If I ever got a job, maths and English would help me. But I don't want a job! It's a hobby. Better than watching TV.
basic skills learner

The 'wider benefits of learning' are very much part of the ethos (and the observed reality) of the sector, but for the most part are not explicitly pursued or recorded within formal assessment discourses and procedures although the LSC is reviewing this in its development of New Measures of Success (LSC 2005). Interestingly enough, of course, such benefits also accrue, and probably even more substantially, to what one might term traditional, high-achieving A-level takers, but such benefits are rarely discussed – they are taken for granted as a corollary of academic progression.

Section 4.3	Assessment methods as used and experienced

As noted in the introduction, this research was commissioned in the context of a growing concern with respect to 'over-assessment' in the English education system, along with a growing policy interest in formative assessment. A key issue with respect to LSS policy-makers and practitioners is the possibility that external tests and exams will be particularly disliked or responded to negatively by post-16 learners in further education and training, including adult learners, given their probable lack of prior achievement at school. Such a view was certainly expressed by officials in the sector:

As you can imagine, with the kind of client base or candidate base for this, lots of people who haven't done that well at school, haven't been at school for years, and who are women who have got busy kinds of jobs and families, do not like external tests, and so there is resistance within the sector to actually having external tests.
chief certifier, Social Care NVQ

However, we do not actually know whether or not this is true, and the data do not confirm it, at least not in any straightforward way. Some learners, especially older learners, certainly do recall very bad memories of testing:

Like the exams, you just put your name on the top and walked out. You never sat any exams or anything… To be honest, years ago … the mere mention of an exam frightened me to death, bring me out in cold sweats…
basic skills learner

But a key finding from the study is that assessment methods *per se* do not inhibit achievement and progression in the sector, at least not of those learners continuing within the system, and hence available as respondents in the study. Assessment methods in and of themselves are not considered particularly important to achievement and progression by learners, once choice of award (and hence academic/vocational track) has been made. All of the programmes under study except for A-level Business Studies (100% external examination) and Social Care NVQ (100% portfolio) include some combination of coursework, practical assessment and tests and most learners, certainly the younger ones recently out of school, thought this was appropriate: 'I can't see how you would assess it differently really.' Indeed, even among adult returners there was a resignation, and in some cases even positive appreciation, of the fact that exams had to be faced and could bring benefits in terms of self-confidence – as long as you passed:

It's not the most wonderful thing to do … I felt very very nervous but when it was over and we got our results I'm glad I did it because it is nice, it is much nicer to actually do an exam and know that you did get that information in your brain and that you were able to transfer it onto paper rather than just being sort of tested or given your mark on the things that you've handed in because you had masses of time to do that. You get more achievement from having done the exam.
Access student

You work through each unit and you take your time … make sure it is correct, and you get to the end and do the final test … when you do the test it gives you confidence…
basic skills learner

Assignments you can take your time… So exams … give a true idea even though I don't enjoy them.
Access student

I found that easy because it's over and done-with within two hours. All they're asking you to do is to demonstrate what you know in two hours and then once you walk away from that exam you can forget about it then, can't you. So yes, I enjoy the exams.
Access student

Thus despite strong images among awarding body officials and some staff in the colleges, that adult and vocational students 'don't like exams', learners were much more instrumental and strategic in their views. There was no uniform or strong preference for coursework or exams. Although some students actively disliked exams because 'all the pressure comes in one go', there was also a view that they 'got things out of the way' and demanded less time than coursework. AVCE students doing AS qualifications alongside their AVCE offered some interesting insights about why exams and coursework were an acceptable combination. Some AVCE students liked 'having a mix, doing things on the day and also doing things in real-life' and liked exams because 'you get them over with, they don't keep dragging on like assignments do'. The overall framework of the AVCE regime allowed students to predict their grades and aim for what they wanted, high or low. And in both cases, AVCE and AS, exams were not regarded as particularly stressful because they could be retaken.

In effect, learners self-select awards (within the boundaries set by prior achievement) likely to suit their approach to learning and assessment, and privilege the combination of methods with which they feel most comfortable. Additionally, there is clear evidence from assessors/tutors and candidates alike that, while a broad range of assessment methods is thought to be appropriate in terms of fitness for purpose and validity, externally set and marked tests and exams are regarded as higher status, irrespective of validity issues, and hence a more valued indicator of achievement: 'You need exams, everyone has to do them at some point,' (AVCE student). Thus while exams might generally be thought of by the majority of candidates in the study as difficult and 'not for them', specific, small amounts of external testing is accepted as appropriate and inevitable and hence, to reiterate, not an issue *per se*:

Bit of a pain but got to be done.
MVE trainee

Well I chose to do it, so I have to do it.
MVE trainee

There's the unit exams at end of each unit – it's too much – I'm not very happy about that but you've got to do it haven't you…
Sp & Rec trainee

Too much external testing is both disliked and avoided, but not so much because of the method as such, rather because of its association with the academic track and more general problems of the perceived appropriateness of the award/programme:

I'd rather do workshop tasks or something but it's got to be done.
MVE trainee

I was scared because I didn't really like school anyway. I hated it … I just didn't like it at all and coming here I thought it's going to be like school again … and the first lesson … really took me back … [but] the whole introduction towards college made me feel this isn't so bad, this is alright you know.
Access student

This issue of past experience and perceptions of testing is also illustrated by one incident of workplace basic skills teaching and testing. An innovative programme was negotiated with management and unions in one particular workplace, and included some initial diagnostic assessment:

[Named] Foods is a great example. We started a big project there over a year ago, and there were four of us walked in there with boxes of paper – and straight away the unions jumped on it, and the manager said, 'They are not doing that, they are not being tested like that!' And I had to go in to them and chat to them and explain.
basic skills tutor

All this suggests that it is not sensible to see assessment methods in isolation, they are not reducible to matters of purely technical or pedagogical decision-making. They come with the 'territory' of a regime, a type of qualification, a programme and a personal identity, and are therefore bound up in defining qualifications as positional goods which different individuals pursue in different ways. In this respect, learners develop 'assessment careers' in much the same way as (and in tandem with) 'learning careers' (Ecclestone & Pryor 2003). A-levels without any – and indeed without a large weighting of – external exams are almost unthinkable. Equally, too many externally-designed assessments would not be appropriate or acceptable within more vocational tracks, though they are sometimes insinuated into such tracks by policy-makers in violation of fitness-for-purpose issues – see Sections 4.7and 4.8 below on key skills and validity).

Assessment method(s) 'smorgasbord'

In the questionnaire, questions were asked about learner preferences for different assessment methods. While the contrast is marked between, for example, A-level takers' responses to questions about assessment methods (even in vocationally-oriented subjects such as Business Studies and PE), and those of NVQ takers, the implications of the contrast are more subtle. When asked to rank preferences, A-level takers identified project work, written assignments and external exams as their top three (in that order) by numbers of respondents selecting them: all very much 'written' formats. On the other hand, NVQ takers identified online tests, observation by assessor and practical tests as their preferred three: all very much non-written forms – see Appendix 3. Thus A-level takers ranked external exams only third in their expressed preferences, while NVQ takers ranked other forms of testing first and third. From this it would seem that it is not so much testing as such that worries learners, but rather its context of operation and its association with extended writing and the transformation of practical knowledge into discursively presented propositional knowledge.

Perhaps surprisingly, multiple-choice online tests seem especially acceptable – see also Sections 4.6 and 4.7 on e-assessment and basic skills testing.[7] Certainly in 'return to learn' situations, while testing can cause concern, so can the extended writing associated with assignments:

It is hard. Like this two weeks we've got four assignments in and they're all quite big ones at that.
Access student

And if it's been a long time since you were at school, you're well out of practice and everything's completely new and it's scary isn't it…
Access student

It was having them all at the same time … they all had to be in and that's very hard, trying to do one and then you almost had to run them along with each other to get them all in.
Access student

7 NB the high ranking of online tests is probably skewed by the larger number of MVE apprentices returning questionnaires compared with other groups. Nevertheless, it is clear that they are, for the most part, liked by those who have encountered them, including in adult Basic Skills testing. This is discussed further in Section 4.7, below.

The questionnaire results

A vast range of assessment methods are used in awards in the LSS. Learners identified the following, ranked according to percentage of learners, responding that they had experience of the method in their courses and training.

	N	Percentage of all returns
Written assignment	224	86%
Observation by assessor	138	53%
Presentations	137	53%
Key skills test	133	51%
External exam	112	43%
Group work	112	43%
Project work	106	41%
Internal exam	100	39%
Practical test	95	37%
Spoken questions/interview	87	34%
Online tests	80	31%
Simulation/mock situation	69	27%
Witness testimony	62	24%
Video/audio recording	14	5%

Learner preferences were expressed as follows:

Assessment method	N	Mean score
1 Written assignment	133	1.53
2 Online tests	44	1.77
3 Practical test	80	1.86
4 Observation by assessor	59	1.95
5 External exam	52	1.98
6 Project work	73	2.21

Table 3
How would you prefer to be assessed?

Analysed by numbers of students who chose the type of assessment as one of their top three

Assessment method	N
1 Written assignment	133
2 Practical test	80
3 Project work	73
4 Observation by assessor	59
5 External exam	52
6 Group work	47

In each case (in Tables 2 and 3) 'external exams' come well down the list in fifth place, but testing as such is not responded to negatively, with online tests second in Table 2 and practical tests second in Table 3.

It is also the case that these figures need to be linked to experience of assessment methods and possible over-representation of sub-samples in the total. For example, 44 chose online tests as one of their top three methods of assessment, but only 80 report having experience of it, virtually all of whom will be MVE apprentices who prefer online testing over paper and pencil testing; hence online testing is highly ranked in Table 2, but not Table 3.

Thus when comparing assessment preferences, in tandem with experience of methods, the following rank order of the most popular forms of assessment is produced:

Table 4
Rank order of forms of assessment preferred by candidates (Choose top three methods in relation to experience)

(260 completed questionnaires returned from 890 distributed = 34% return)

Assessment method	N = experience of	N = choosing 1 of preferred top 3	Percentage
Practical test	95	80	84%
Project work	106	73	69%
Written assignment	224	133	59%
Online tests	80	44	55%
External exam	112	52	47%
Observation by assessor	138	59	43%
Group work	112	47	42%
Spoken questions/interview	87	33	38%
Presentations	137	44	32%
Internal exam	100	28	28%
Simulation/mock situation	69	18	26%
Key skills test	133	11	8%
Video/audio recording	14	1	7%
Witness testimony	62	2	3%

Practical tests are most preferred, while witness testimony is far and away the least preferred method. There are also some major differences between sub-sectors, such that although 'Presentations' are not generally disliked, they are very unpopular with some adult returners, which in turn can lead to resentment from others:

20 minutes. Bloody hell. I don't want to do that, it's scary.
Access student

I'm petrified. I don't do speaking out loud.
Access student

A lot of us were in a right state because of doing the presentations and some people we know didn't do them because of excuses and I think really that's wrong because it's one rule for one and one for another.
Ex-Access student, now undergraduate

Also interesting is that while key skills tests are unpopular (8%), online tests (sometimes thought of as co-terminous with KSTs) are considerably more popular (55%). In fact, online tests also include 'underpinning knowledge tests' and adult Basic Skills tests, and, while these are generally undertaken willingly, key skills tests are particularly resented because of the imposed necessity to undertake them. So it is this imposition, rather than the tests or their format as such, that leads to their unpopularity. This is discussed further in Section 4.7, below.

In light of these findings, a key policy issue must be how decisions about various combinations and weightings of assessment methods are made by awarding bodies, and in particular product managers and award developers. The most legitimate response is 'fitness for purpose' – varieties and combinations of methods are needed for the valid assessment of different abilities and competences, and particularly of competence *in situ*. But attention to learner preference might also be considered, especially when thinking about maximising achievement and progression.

A complicating factor here is what we might term 'methods in action' rather than 'methods in principle'. Thus for example observation by assessor is a more preferred method (43%) when compared to simulations (26%), but less preferred when compared to practical tests (84%). Given that much of our data indicate that observation by assessor often becomes, *de facto*, a simulation in action, because candidates do not have access to the full range of workplace activities and assessment opportunities, and scenarios have to be enacted for the assessor's visit – see 4.8, below – perhaps a series of explicit 'practical tests' would be a better solution. Variations in task would be controlled by the test-setter, and such evidence as we have suggests that learners would prefer practical tests, certainly when compared to simulations. Interestingly enough, a version of this voluntarism already exists in A-level and AVCE courses, where assignments can be submitted in lieu of certain module tests (or vice-versa); likewise in Access programmes where assignments can replace exam credits:

*There were big assignments with quite a few credits and then
I didn't have to take the exam … I thought I don't need to take
the exam because I've got enough credits, why should I put myself
through this, so I didn't take it. I had the credits and I passed
my Access.*
Ex-Access student, now undergraduate

*Say for example you had psychology where you have a written
assignment for the first one, a written assignment for the second
one and then a presentation for the third one and an exam for the
fourth one. If they say, I still can't do presentations they can, of
course, drop that and just get 3 credits in psychology without really
damaging their chances of their certificate too much…*
Access tutor

On the face of it, allowing vocational learners to substitute a
practical test, for a simulation, or vice versa, and indeed other
assessments as appropriate, seems no different in principle from
the above examples. (NB: this lack of consistency in the way
assessment regulations operate across ostensibly comparable
sub-sectors of the LSS, can also be observed with respect to key
skills, discussed in Section 4.7, below.)

| **Section 4.4** | **Supporting candidates: coaching, practising and eliciting evidence – 'assessment as learning'?** |

There is a significant, even overwhelming, culture of support for learners/candidates at every level and across every sub-sector of the LSS. Tutors, supervisors and assessors alike take their responsibilities to promote learning, engender motivation and encourage achievement very seriously. This is very much where the 'second chance' perspective is manifest:

There's somebody worse than me in there and some are better than me. But you don't feel ashamed in there because we're all in the same boat. Nobody's slagging you off like they did at school… We help one another best way we can… Because you know everybody and they're in the same boat as you… It is like a social club.
basic skills learner

Even at A-level, teaching support is provided through the breaking down and interpreting of assessment criteria, and the involvement of tutors in formal examining and moderating roles for ABs, which helps to develop their understanding of the assessment process and which, in turn, they can pass on to students through exam coaching.

AVCE and A-level

This culture of support is apparent in choices of awards and awarding bodies even before tutors begin to provide detailed guidance on assessment tasks and criteria:

We have changed exam board – from [AB1 to AB2]. The practical with the former was too long-winded and complicated, and the moderation system was complicated … [the AB2 syllabus] is also a little bit more compartmentalised … which seems to suit our pupils. With [AB1] the questions went down the synoptic line, which our kids found confusing…
AVCE Sp&L tutor

ABs also came in for criticism about lack of responsiveness to queries, and clearly this will influence choice of AB:

[They] are very good at telling us when we are doing something wrong… Don't try ringing them for an answer – I've given up doing this. There is a lot of unevenness, depending on who you get…
AVCE Sp&L tutor

[AB3] move the goalposts regularly. If you have any queries they are a bit airy-fairy. They sometimes don't get back to you.
AVCE Sp&L tutor

[AB3] are chaotic… They lose things, they don't always keep up with simple logistical matters … [and] don't ring them up with a question – you'll get an Australian or a Kiwi on work experience who won't know how to help you.
AVCE Sp&L tutor

In some colleges in the study, curriculum managers have been returning to BTEC programmes, which they feel are more genuinely vocationally-oriented, rather than AVCEs. Interestingly enough, given our earlier discussion of the different cultures of assessment tracks, although BTEC is part of the merged Edexcel awarding body, it is retaining its vocational 'brand' as a distinct marketing device. Additionally, BTEC students are not counted in national achievement data for Level 3. Thus in one of the colleges where this change was taking place, the overall pass rates for AVCE, while still good, were not as good as A-level, and 'pulled down the college's results'. Taking vocational students out of the data obscures the college's attainment of fewer higher grades in AVCE compared to general A-level. This local decision reflects a national discrepancy in achievement between the two qualifications, but it also illustrates how measures of achievement can be constructed in different ways by diverse bodies and interests in the education system.[8]

8 Savory, Hodgson & Spours (2003) similarly report a move away from AVCE towards offering BTEC Nationals, and note widespread dissatisfaction with ABs responses to queries. They quote one respondent complaining that 'the exam boards have become so big that they are drowning and we find it almost impossible to find a real person to talk to about new specification problems.' (p16)

Once ABs and syllabuses are selected, detailed grade criteria are articulated for learners at A-level and AVCE – the breaking down of awarding body guidelines and instructions into detailed mark schemes, assignment plans, etc. for students to follow:

One of our problems is with our pupils' language and literacy. They can tell you, in their own way, but at A-level [the examining boards] want to hear technical terms and expanded vocabulary… [Students] need to be a little more analytical at A-level… So we have drafted a crib-sheet with words, explanations.
A-level PE tutor

We have spent a lot of time … coming up with a sort of a template to issue to our students as a starting point to give them something to work on … writing frames, templates to fill in, bullet points to follow…
AVCE Sp&L tutor

In turn, students can draft and re-draft assignments, receiving feedback on strengths and weaknesses and what needs to be done to improve the grade. They can also re-take unit and modular tests as necessary to improve grades. Sometimes tutors operate with the 'straight' AVCE/BTEC *nomenclature* of pass, merit and distinction; sometimes they operate with a range of grades which parallel AS and A2 (grades E–A) and which in turn 'map onto' AVCE, thus E/F refer to 'describing and identifying' and would correspond with a pass; D/C involve 'understanding' and 'bringing together', and correspond with a merit; A/B focus on 'critical evaluation and analysis' and correspond with a distinction. When asked what an A grade meant in AVCE Business Studies, one student responded:

It's analyse, evaluate, and stuff like that. You have to explain things but more in-depth. Instead of just summarising, you have to extend it and make it relevant and link it to what you've already put, it's clear and it flows and it's fully described. Not just going off on a complete tangent. You have to include what they ask, not let it get too theory-based. Mind you, actually doing it's another thing. (Laughs)

Other students were equally well-tuned to the criteria and drafting process:

At the start of each module we get like a sheet of paper, it's got 'for an E you have to do this, for a D you have to do that'… They tell you what you have to do to get a good mark.
AVCE student

You do a draft, you get it back and you have a week to change things and hand it back again … can improve it – that's good when we don't know what we are doing! You read their comments and try to do what they say.
AVCE student

Tutors worked very hard to make their feedback as detailed as possible:

I talk through the assessment criteria grid with them and the assignment brief, pinpointing the relationships between P, M and D [pass, merit and distinction] and that it does evolve through to D. [Some] students like to go for the best grade possible and discuss how they could go about getting an M. There again, some students just aim for a basic pass… Then I see a draft work, read through it, make notes, talk to each one, show the good areas in relation to the criteria and explain why and how if they have met them, saying things like 'You've missed out M2…' Some will action it, some won't.
AVCE BS tutor

The process of ongoing assessment means that we use a lot of verbal feedback and we give them formal interim feedback too … they have time to improve and develop and then they must submit formally at a cut-off point. Students find that motivating, they want feedback, it helps to reassure them.
AVCE BS tutor

I assess continuously, especially with sport skills… Also there are summative assessments [written tasks that respond to a specific question and a set of criteria]. These are always worked on in a way where they can improve their grades, and they get a lot more than one chance … you can see a piece of work three times. If there is a large group, this gets out of hand. But I want to get the best I can for my students.
AVCE Sp&L tutor

At A-level, in both colleges where Business Studies was the focus, tutors had chosen a syllabus with 100% external examination. In one college, however, students could opt to do one unit as either a coursework project or an examination and one student chose both options so that she could pick her higher mark to go forward for final grading. Students also take three exams in the first year AS qualification, but can retake poorly-graded papers or simply not progress to Year Two if grades are poor:

They can retrieve poor grades [through re-sitting module tests].
A-level BS tutor

Thus 'good teachers' are those who can handle this workload and schedule this formative feedback within realistic time-scales, offering clear guidance that students feel they can follow. A-level and AVCE alike involve a great deal of criteria-focused 'coaching' of students. The potential downside of such activity is that achievement can come to be seen as little more than criteria compliance in pursuit of grades. Moreover, while the pressure of coursework assignments can become intense, the responsibility for putting in the 'hard work' of assessment in pursuit of achievement might now be said to fall as much on the shoulders of tutors as on the learners, and a great deal of 'hidden work' is undertaken according to tutor disposition (cf. also James and Diment 2003):

The volume of marking we have … 60–70 assignments every few weeks, formal … and informal … [feedback]. It's one of the best ways for them to learn, but there's no time or recognition to that marking – it's hard work.
AVCE BS tutor

Always in every group, you have students who are very weak, perhaps only just got onto the course or … who can't organise themselves. For them, coursework is a nightmare. I've got two in particular who are not passing any of their three units; we're going to start assignment surgeries where they will get one-to-one support.
AVCE BS tutor

In a very real sense we seem to have moved from 'assessment *of* learning' through 'assessment *for* learning' to 'assessment *as* learning', for both learners and tutors alike, with assessment procedures completely dominating both pedagogy and the learner experience.

The exception to this level of assessment transparency and culture of tutor support is in the college-based Sport and Recreation Progression Awards. Here it was reported by the course tutors that the external verifier for the two colleges involved in the fieldwork insisted that AB criteria could *not* be shared with candidates, and as we have seen earlier in the report, the move from Level 2 to Level 3 thus involved more difficult tasks being undertaken by learners but with less direct tutor support.:

When it comes to the progression award … the marking criteria for tasks for the progression… In NVQ they're allowed to see that, with the progression award they aren't … the students are left to their own devices, because of the instruction from the EV… If a tutor gives them a lot of support, the maximum they're allowed to get is a pass … as regards the assignment… It's very difficult to say that a student has done an assignment with no support at all from a tutor… That's why for assignments we limit to an absolute minimum the support the student gets.
Sp&Rec curriculum manager

In some respects, this might be said to parallel the 'objective' approach of A-level, but in others it might more correctly be said to be a parody of A-level, which, as we have seen, actually involves a good deal of detailed help with understanding assessment criteria, re-taking unit tests, and so forth.

Support in the workplace

This injunction applying to the Sport and Recreation Progression Award does not appear in the AB handbook and seems to be an entirely local interpretation by the external verifier, but it certainly illustrates the ambivalent status of technical, vocational awards delivered in college rather than workplace settings. ACVE and A-level students get support from their tutors. So, it transpires, do learners in the workplace:

Basically the assessor stands to the side… All she wants to do is to make sure that you're doing it right [and] if there's no questions you're doing it right … but if she feels you're a bit iffy then she'll say do you think you need to do your stretch twice, so it makes you think, and then if you correct yourself it's noted because at least you then know.
Sp&Rec NVQ Candidate

Our primary form of assessment is through observation and questioning, if … I'm not satisfied that the learner has met the standards, I will make reference to it in the feedback that I give to the learner, obviously I'll try to be as positive and encouraging as I can; I'll say that there's been missed opportunities here, therefore I cannot use this piece of evidence as assessment… If they need additional support I will make every effort to make a weekly visit as opposed to a fortnightly visit for that learner, to give them the encouragement, to give them whatever training needs are necessary, and to encourage them to get through, and obviously I'll liaise with their managers…
external assessor, Training Agency Sp&Rec NVQ

In other workplace settings support can be observed in the way 'leading questions' are asked by assessors of a 'good lad' to help him through observations of his workshop practice and compile his portfolio evidence:

Our lads have got a matrix to follow and that's been a bit of a job to get them to look at it and say well how many brake jobs have you got, how many clutch jobs have you got, how many engine jobs have you got. Well we don't do engines. Well alright you do cooling don't you, you change a water pump or a fan belt which drives the water pump, or a timing belt. Oh yes we do that. Well that's an engine job isn't it… Oh we never thought of it like that… that's how I feel the assessor's job should be is to help them, guide them, show them what's going on.
MVE assessor

In the example below, the interaction is more like a traditional 'teacher-pupil' pedagogic encounter than a workplace assessment:

Fieldwork observation:

Internal assessor[9] *This is a service, yes?*
MVE trainee *Yes.*
IA *Replace two rear brake lights?*
Tr *Just the rear brakes really.*
IA *Did you find anything?*
Tr *No, well it needed a fair bit of adjustment like.*
IA *What did?*
Tr *The shoes.*
IA *Did they?*
Tr *A fair bit of adjusting.*
IA *What were the shoes like then?*
Tr *Oh the shoes were alright.*
IA *What were the drums like?*
Tr *They had a bit of rust on them so we cleaned the drums out and cleaned the shoes out…*
IA *I'm trying to think of something I haven't asked you before. Yes, what causes the rust on a brake pipe?*
Tr *Corrosion.*
IA *So you get outside corrosion, yes, from the weather and then what about the inside corrosion? How does a brake pipe get rusted on the inside, which you can't see?*
Tr *The brake fluid gets warm.*
IA *No.*
Tr *It's something in the brake fluid isn't it?*
IA *Yes, what causes rust?*
Tr *Water.*
IA *So if it's rusty on the inside, what do we say the brake fluid does? Why do we have to change the brake fluid? If I say hydroscopic to you, I'm not swearing. Have you heard of it?*
Tr *I've heard it now.*
IA *Do you know what it means. Can you remember what it means? It absorbs moisture. So that's why you have to change the fluid so that the brake pipes don't become rusty on the inside.*
Tr *I knew it was something in the fluid.*
IA *Well now you know, don't you. Don't forget next time, will you?*

Such interactions beg questions of how such relationships are established and how a 'good lad' is identified in the first place. From the employer's perspective, this seems to derive as much from the apprentice's attitude to work as from their initial competence, and an identity is constructed between workplace supervisor, internal assessor and external verifier:

His boss was putting a cylinder head back on a bus ready for a school run the following morning and he couldn't manage it himself and this was 7pm at night, the lad's already been working all day and he'd gone home. The boss rings up, can you come down and give me a hand. Yes, OK I'll be there in 5 minutes. Comes down, works till 4am in the morning … and he's there again at 7.30am in the morning ready to see the bus out. You don't get that with modern kids these days. His boss thinks he's the best thing since sliced bread.
MVE assessor

They'd started a cam shaft on the … by-pass so they'd been out till one o'clock in the morning bringing it back into the garage to sort it out… So he'll do that, but he won't stay here to learn about numbers because he doesn't like numbers… You speak to him and it's all '…errr…'
FE college tutor and MVE assessor

Similarly in Social Care we observed assessors asking leading questions to help candidates articulate what they (supposedly) already know and can do:

Fieldwork observation:

Assessor *Why is it important to explain these limits to clients – if they could speak, if they were old enough?*

Learner *I don't know. My mind's gone blank.*

A *So what if a child came home from school and they're going on a trip in two days' time and they want you to sign the form?*

L *I'd say to him because I'm not your legal guardian, I'm not allowed to sign so we'd have to try and get in touch with the parent or social worker for them to sign. I wouldn't be stopping them from going on the trip. It's not me that's stopping them; it's that I'm not allowed to sign.*

A *So right, they know what their expectations are then. When you've got older children, Julie, it's always important to explain everything to them. Not just saying I can't sign it, that's no good for the child, the child wants to know why you can't sign it… So let's think, say for instance you get a child who's not going to school at all … but you managed to work with them and they start going to school and start going regular, why is it important that you sit down and talk to that child about what they've achieved by going?*

L *Well it's to help them further their education; get a better start in life.*

A *How do you think that would make them feel about themselves?*

L *I think they'd feel more secure and confident about themselves.*

A *That's what I'm looking for.*

L *I finally got there!*

Adult learning

In Access courses and adult basic education settings, similar levels of support, coaching and practice were observed. Assignments were drafted, read, commented on and then re-submitted:

I tend to lay out fairly clearly what I want… I've broken it down into four discrete sections and lay out exactly what they have to do for each and then they get handouts which will support them.
Access tutor

We try to keep it constructive but sometimes you have to point things out and you try and do it in a very supportive and gentle sort of way. Some people are not very good at taking negative stuff at all no matter how kindly you are…
Access tutor

They do give you a lot of feedback on your assignments… The first assignment in Psychology I got a [level] 2 and she went through it and she said if you define that a bit better than that and she gave me another week and I did it all and she gave me a [level] 3.
Access student

In basic skills programmes there are continual efforts made to relate literacy and numeracy tasks to relevant social and vocational activities, and render the adult basic skills Unit (ABSU) national curriculum into 'small chunks', but with the additional proviso that in college-based settings as much testing as possible was embedded in ordinary classroom activities:

We all have small chunks for the students to cover and so they are doing activities in the classroom and they can self-assess. They can peer-assess as well. They are doing group work and they are doing listening as well, so they are assessing all these skills as we go along. You need to do that to show progress.
adult basic skills tutor

Right now I have been working through units, I am just working through the units each time… I tend to do them one by one, make sure they are OK, and get them out of the way… I think how it works is that you do one paper, and if you get it all right, then you can move on to the next one… It is the set-up to work through each unit and you take your time going through it, make sure it is correct, and you get to the end and do the final test.
basic skills learner

In this respect it is a moot point if some candidates even realised they were taking a test. A number of learners had progressed from one level to another without being able to remember that they had taken tests:

You have to be very low key about it… You don't want people to feel as if they've sat a test when they go out.
adult basic skills tutor

We try and make [testing] less formal because it's in a classroom environment, they're not on individual desks in rows or anything like that.
adult basic skills tutor

The English teacher is quite clever, she's given me a few tests without me [realising]. When I go on the computer she says 'Well that's Level 1 or Level 2', so she says 'You passed that.' I don't know … which is kind of good because of the psychology of it…
basic skills learner

Observational evidence demonstrates this in action:

Fieldwork observation

The tutor sets each of the new students a task, Alice to write an autobiographical piece about herself and Beth to write a letter to her sister. When they have completed these, the tutor goes through the work with each individual, feeding back lots of positives about what the student can do… The tutor asks Alice if she has done an initial assessment, and she replies no. The tutor then says, 'That's part of one you've done already, actually.' She passes Alice a sheet of questions, and says casually, 'Just do this for me, it'll only take 15 to 20 minutes.' It is the rest of an initial assessment. Later she goes back to Alice and goes through the … test… She feeds back to Alice that she appears to be at the top end of Entry level 3 – 'nearly at Level 1 GCSE'. The student expresses her surprise and pleasure, and at the end of the session thanks the tutor for the way she has created a supportive atmosphere in the lesson…

Significant levels of tutor 'hidden work' were also observed in this sub-sector as in others:

If you've got problems you know who to talk to. You haven't got to go hunting for somebody… I think [tutor] R feels like the mother of the group. She's the mother hen that goes round and worries about everybody… If you need help or you need extra time, you go and talk to R and it's sorted.
Access student

Last year [named tutor] had them from [village] and it's quite a way out, I mean it's right up in the hills really. And they don't have cars because it's a poorer area… And she brought them down in her car. She went up, collected them all, brought them all back. They did their exams and she took them back again. Because you do worry about them. Well, I worry about them. I know it's stupid.
basic skills tutor

Quality and equity in learner support

None of this support, even coaching, is necessarily inappropriate or unfair in and of itself. Such practices are at the heart of professional judgments about the performance/competence interface which assessors must make. But they raise issues of equity if they are not pursued uniformly, and the questionnaire data suggest that there can be wide variations in the frequency and length of assessor visits. Thus for example, while the most frequently reported timing of assessor visits among the NVQ takers was 1–2 hours every 4–6 weeks, one reported that they saw their assessor once a week for 2–3 hours, while four reported that they saw their assessors only every 3 months or less, *and* for one hour or less (Appendix 3). There is also evidence from the case records that such discrepancies may derive from the different cultures that develop in colleges and training agencies, with college tutors not only seeing apprentices in college, but also often visiting them in their workplaces to conduct assessments, and thus developing a much closer pedagogical relationship than that of training agency staff, who simply travel around workplaces assessing full time:

Nobody's looking at my portfolio or nothing … [the named training agency] don't even come to work any more … [he] came when I first started about 4 months ago and … I haven't seen him since. I tried ringing him and he's just said, 'Oh I'll get back to you or ring up a bit later,' but nobody ever rings back or anything…
MVE trainee

Equally important is the attitude of internal and external assessors and the quality or vitality of the relationships they develop with candidates:

Most of the feedback you get is that [candidates] don't enjoy it [ie the process of assessment], it's tedious, it's cumbersome, it takes time out of your real job [but] there are people who enjoy it and benefit from it and I guess a lot of that is down to the quality of the assessment, I think cos if you've got a good assessor who's enthusing you, it will have a different effect on you than if you've got someone you're not getting on with. It's like anything: whoever's involved in it, is crucial.
internal verifier, Social Care NVQ

Some regulation of and minimum recommendations for such visits would seem to be appropriate, as would be clear instructions to assessors that the *quality of the assessment interaction* is likely to be as important to 'fair' and motivating assessment as the accuracy of the observations and record. Stasz *et al.* (2004) and Fuller & Unwin (2003) similarly note the importance of the vitality and range of workplace relationships for the quality of trainee learning.

Helping candidates 'complete the paperwork' is also an important element of the assessor's role in assessment interactions:

The work itself isn't difficult because that's what I do every day in my job; it's the entire assessment process, that's the hard bit – getting it all on paper … [it's] … time consuming, complicated with all the codes and all the cross-referencing and terminology…
Social Care learner/candidate

Yes, it's a learning process for everybody. When the assessors know the language but the candidates don't, then the assessors can do all this cross-referencing for candidates…
Social Care manager/assessor

In garages it appeared to be a very common practice for MVE apprentices simply to keep their garage 'job-sheets' up to date and filled in with brief descriptions of the jobs undertaken and completed. The assessor then 'deconstructs' this basic information into the relevant 'competences' and maps and transfers the detail into the apprentice's evidence portfolio:

MVE trainee   *In the workshop itself we have to do a job-sheet for everything we do, whether it be change a tyre or anything else. Basically whenever there's a defect put on the screen we have to do it and sign it off and then we have to keep it in the files for however long it is needed… [The assessor] said that you just write down every single one and he'll look at them.*
Interviewer   *So eventually he'll come in and look through them all and pick out the relevant ones?'*
MVE trainee   *Yes, that's right.*

Such practices also accord with the findings of other recent studies of portfolio completion in the workplace, which indicate that younger workers do not usually take responsibility for portfolio completion (Kodz *et al.* 1998, Tolley *et al.* 2003). Indeed Fuller & Unwin (2003), in their study of apprenticeship in various sectors of the steel industry, note, almost in passing, that:

Responsibility for recording the apprentices' progress towards the achievements of the qualifications was taken by the external training provider at the regular review sessions. An important part of his job was to help apprentices identify how the day-to-day task in which they were engaged could be used to generate evidence that they were meeting the competence standards codified in the NVQ…
(Fuller & Unwin, 2003, p422)

In all of this it is also important to note the different definitions of 'fairness' which tutors and assessors work with, which in turn relate back to the introductory discussion of different constructions of achievement, viz:

i helping the learner to achieve the grade or the qualification they 'deserve' and, especially in NVQ, helping a 'good lad' get through who can do the job; or helping a care worker who 'can do it anyway' get the evidence to prove it. This in turn begs questions of how the assessors 'know' they 'can do it'. There are issues here to do with the validity and submissability of informal assessor observations and how candidates' identities are constructed over time – how do assessors 'know' certain learners 'deserve it'?

ii testing the learner under 'exam' conditions – precisely without the interference of the tutor. NB: this construction is not restricted only to certain tutors. It is also apparent among learners, including those who avoid external testing if possible but nevertheless see the argument for it and even concede the status that flows from it. For example, as we have seen, some Access course learners were unhappy that their peers had 'so many chances' to submit acceptable work; similarly some adult English as a Second Language (ESOL) learners preferred formality in teaching and testing.

Transparency promotes instrumentalism

A corollary of the level of support provided is that not only is it both demanded and expected by learners, it is also expected to be very specifically focused on achieving the qualification:

Sometimes we have to do other tasks but the bottom line is 'Is it relevant'… [There's] no time to do irrelevant stuff.
AVCE student

In Economics, he just loves his Economics – he loves it too much! He knows his stuff, don't get me wrong, but he watches all these programmes and records them for us and we have to watch them, even if there's no exam question for them.
A-level student

In turn the instrumentalism of learners both drives and validates the level of tutor support. Similarly, institutions themselves are also target-oriented and instrumentally driven:

We certainly have a target system … where every month we have pre-determined targets as to who's got to be complete, who's due in for an interim verification, who's due in for reviews, etc … it comes down to the issue of: is it feasible to get a learner through a Foundation or Advanced Modern Apprenticeship programme within the time-frame… I want everyone to achieve the best possible for them. If they need additional support I will make every effort to make a weekly visit as opposed to a fortnightly visit.
assessor, training agency, Sp&Rec NVQ

Thus learners seek and expect details of assessment specifications, evidence requirements and so forth. They want support and appreciate it when they get it; but their instrumentalism reinforces tutor moves to focus on grade criteria, the elucidation of evidence, etc. As a consequence, assignments and portfolios from some institutions can often look very similar – in structure, format, types of evidence included, etc – so it seems that some institutions are becoming very adept at 'coaching' cohorts through assignment completion; exam cramming by another means. To reiterate, this is what we term *assessment as learning*, with the assessment process ensconced at the heart of the learning experience and defining every key aspect of the learning experience.

This finding of extensive support, manifest across all sub-sectors of the LSS through coaching, practice, drafting and the elicitation of evidence, coupled with an associated learner instrumentalism, seems to derive in large part from the move towards transparency in assessment processes and criteria. The more clearly requirements are stated, the easier it would appear for them to be pursued and accomplished. This can in turn lead to a very boring 'paperchase' for tutors and learners alike, especially in college-based NVQs, which lack the advantage of being located in a working environment where the paperchase does at least relate to authentic working activities:

The trouble with the NVQ is that it breaks everything down into tiny bits, and you can spend ages just trying to find some direct evidence that will allow you to tick a box. It is difficult to come up with a way of running the course so that they get a lot out of it, but don't have to sit for hours in a classroom ticking boxes … They could divide down making a cup of tea into 10 criteria … and did you wring out the tea bag afterwards? You didn't? Oh well, we can't tick that box then…
college-based NVQ tutor

Equally, however, the imperative to compliance and the 'expulsion of failure' (except with respect to non-completion) begs questions about what should now constitute a legitimate learning challenge in the context of post-compulsory education and training. The danger is that as the number of enrolments and awards achieved increase, the underlying purpose of such expansion – increasing the numbers *and* improving the standards of vocationally-qualified workers – may be compromised, with candidates being 'coached to 'comply', rather than 'learn'.

Two cautionary riders have to be added at this point, however. First, we are dealing with learners who are in the system, rather than outside it, and hence will have a propensity to continue to comply and achieve, albeit while perhaps avoiding tasks or activities perceived as being too difficult. Second, we have encountered evidence of more intrinsic orientations and rewards, particularly in the adult education sector, with respect to the development of self-confidence, as noted previously. In training contexts, the development of practical competence following school-based academic failure and/or disinterest has also brought a sense of achievement. By their very nature, however, such achievements are difficult for learners to identify and articulate in more than a cursory manner. When asked in the questionnaire to state how they knew they were making progress, learners' answers varied from 'because I'm passing the tests' and 'because I'm getting more knowledge' through 'holding my job down at work' to 'because I just re-fitted the brakes on my car'. Clearly there is a sense of personal achievement linked to developing competence in these latter responses, but such responses are unusual and hard to 'call forth' in the context of assessment tasks and events where achievement and progress are normally interpreted much more narrowly in terms of awards and certification.

Linked to transparency and instrumentalism are perceptions of progression and routes to success.

College-based factors

The main route to learner success, certainly in college-based work, is criteria compliance. This is supported by the provision of detailed guidance and feedback, and multiple opportunities to achieve.

A key problem with this, however, is that it may foster a lack of ambition – aiming low, working in the 'comfort zone' of 'pass/merit' rather than 'distinction', or Cs and Ds rather than aiming for As and Bs at A-level. Thus learners aim to achieve the minimum 'necessary' for (already decided) progression, which is relatively easy to identify and accomplish within a 'widening participation' agenda and the expansion of higher education, rather than achieve the maximum possible which might be aspired to and which might, crucially, open up new tracks/pathways.

I'm heading for a C and that's OK.
AVCE student

I'd be happy to get a C but I know I could do better. It works on points so it's easier to set that target.
AVCE student

We get students thinking 'Ok, we can just re-do it,' so there's no sense of urgency or effort… Last year two girls were confident of getting a B and so they put less effort in so they could concentrate on other subjects but they could have got an A.
A-level BS tutor

Thus for example the decision of one college in the study to return to BTEC National Diplomas 'to do all the things these kids love … to move away from all this written assessment' also meant that vocational students were 'more supported, it's to do with comfort zones – a more protected environment'. The problem is that students perhaps become over-protected, and the very perception of the provision made for them may restrict their horizons rather than broaden them.

The possibility of attempting to achieve beyond expectations and thus open up the opportunity to do something different was virtually never articulated. Where it was, it tended to be in the context of mature learners aspiring to 'better' themselves – gaining qualifications to move into more professional employment roles. Complicating this issue even further in some programmes at college level is the criteria for 'distinction' which, as we have seen, demand that very little tutor help is given to the learner. Thus good formative feedback and encouragement to do better might, by bureaucratic definition, mean that college students who do become motivated to achieve more are denied the 'distinction' grade that such pedagogy has encouraged them to pursue. This tension was acknowledged by a senior awarding body manager we interviewed, though he also reflected that it was not an issue his organisation had previously recognised or addressed.

Work-based routes

A key indicator of success is also the development of practical competence(s) – becoming, for example, a skilled mechanic, and a more confident operative in the workplace. However, this doesn't feature immediately in learner accounts. The explanation for this may be that the development of such practical competences are thought of as somehow taken-for-granted, with skills being seen as bound to develop with instruction and practice; in contrast, 'passing the test' and accumulating 'the paperwork' is seen as difficult, and hence a notable achievement. Articulating the developing nature of practical competence is also difficult to do and, as we have seen, tended to be illustrated by brief indicators such as 'holding down my job alright' and 'mending the brakes on my car'. Supervisor and assessor support for transforming observed activities into written descriptions of practical competences is certainly important for the achievement of awards (cf. Sections 4.4 and 4.9). Thus the data indicate that, just as trainees could not easily articulate competence development to the research team, nor do they do this in the contexts of their awards in any case; supervisors and assessors act as intermediaries in this process.[10]

A further feature of developing and displaying competence, however, is having the opportunity to do so. Much of the data relating to problems with workplace training and assessment pointed to poor workplace support and lack of opportunity for candidates to demonstrate competence – with apprentices being given inappropriate jobs (eg helping with vehicle recovery rather than actually working on repairs) or employers not providing the full range of equipment or workplace activities for candidates to practice and complete tasks:

I work in an old-fashioned garage where we've only got basic tools, I can't take it [NVQ Level 3] without having diagnosis equipment.
MVE trainee

Essentially all the facilities which we … deal with sign a learner and training agreement which basically says for every learner they'll be given sufficient time and support to achieve the units of competence required of them. However, in many of the facilities that we deal with … the limitations on time within this environment tend to prevent that from occurring … the demands placed on [learners] by their employer are such that they don't get sufficient time and support during work hours to collate and collect their evidence for their NVQs.
assessor Sp&Rec NVQ

I'm not actually being allowed any time at work at the moment to do it… There's an agreement that we should be allowed a certain amount of time … [but] there's not much staff here at the moment… We've been put in a locked room for an hour and a half to scrub toilets, and it's not really my job, to be honest but … when staff leave, you've all got to muck in haven't you…
Sp&Rec NVQ Level 3 learner

10 It is also important to note that, even with respect to professions with graduate entry, whole research projects have been devoted to, and typologies developed for, investigating and representing competence in action. It is actually very difficult for individuals to articulate what they know and how they have come to know it (Eraut 2000).

A lot of the time the boss will say come into work instead of going into college because we're busy… It was just happening now and then and then it started being nearly every week so I just said I'm leaving because I need to go to college and he lets me go now every week but the other apprentice, he's not allowed to come, he never goes to college… He's missed most of the year so I think he'll have to start again next year.
MVE trainee

The learning environment in workplaces can also vary enormously with some apprentices becoming very isolated:

Fieldwork observation:

It is a fairly rundown-looking building. The workshop is like a barn … and the office is in a mobile caravan. The workshop is cold and dirty. The proprietor is eating fish and chips out of newspaper in the office and he says the apprentice is also having his lunch. We find the apprentice in a different office, a small shed-like construction, eating his lunch alone. When they have finished [MVE assessor] talks to the apprentice about his work. The trainee has been working on changing a complete engine… He has been doing most of the work alone. [MVEA] fills in the job card as he talks. The trainee doesn't say much while [MVEA] spends almost 30 minutes explaining technical details to him about engines and asking him questions. Eventually, the trainee begins to ask a few questions. [MVEA] tells him he is very lucky to do such interesting work and most lads weren't doing things like changing engines. [MVEA] explained [to observer] that he spent more time with this trainee because he is quite isolated and very difficult to talk to.

And just as a learner's opportunities may be limited by circumstance, so may the employer's:

The other issue … is: are the employers occupationally competent? And are they fully conversant with the standards that we need to address? Managers or the supervisors at the facility may well be conversant with the standard operating procedures of their individual facilities, they are not fully conversant with the national standards as stipulated in the technical specifications and the standards for the NVQ, and therefore … witness testimonies don't tend to prove a valid piece of evidence…
assessor Sp&Rec NVQ

Thus an external assessor's job can also be to inspect and educate the employer as much as the trainee:

Observe how he's being trained by the employer… Sometimes you have to tell the employers off, you're expecting too much of this lad, have you shown him what to do? Have you taken a bit of time and explained how to do this? How do you expect this poor lad to do what you want him to do if you haven't got the time and patience to show him how to do it?
MVE assessor

Even when candidates receive direct instruction in the workplace from supervisors and/or visiting training agency staff, the quality can also vary:

Some of the lessons we had were appalling and I just used to sit and think how insulting it was… I remember once talking about hydrating a client and she said, 'How do you hydrate a client?' and started talking about drips and I'm like well would you not offer him a drink first.
candidate completing Social Care Level 3

At the same time, properly presented 'underpinning knowledge' can help to motivate as well as inform employees:

They get a question which says: 'Pressure care is important, do a reflective account on what measures you undertake to prevent pressure sores'. Now it's a very big subject, it's not just about them lying in a bed or sitting in a chair, you've got to know a whole lot about nutrition, about the blood supply, about the nerves supply. Now some people would argue they don't need to know all that … but … I expect them to understand that if the bum is lying on the bed like that, hour on hour, the blood which is taking food to the skin … cannot get there, so the skin isn't getting the food it needs. That's how I explain it to them … before we started on NVQ … they didn't understand why they should mobilise … before we came they put a pad on them when they got them up in the morning and they sat them there and they gave them their dinner there and they gave them their tea there and at 8 o'clock they took them to bed and that's what they did and that's why the place was going to be closed and I'm going on about mobilising, walking, going to the toilet, pressure care … the underpinning knowledge…
internal assessor Social Care NVQ

Similar issues are discussed in Section 4.8 below regarding the validity, reliability and equity of assessments. Such findings also accord with Fuller and Unwin's (2003) observations on 'expansive-restrictive work environments' with respect to the opportunities for learning offered to apprentices by different workplaces. They argue that 'expansive' participation allows access to multiple communities of practice, as well as to on-the-job and off-the-job learning opportunities, and to knowledge-based as well as practical qualifications. Expansive work environments offer mentor-rich communities that support learners, and they encourage experienced colleagues to welcome the new knowledge that novices themselves bring into the environment.

Adult learning

The development of self-confidence also featured in the data, and the interaction of confidence with achievement, especially in the context of adult and community education. Facilitating success in this sector involved a very delicate pedagogical balancing act between gentle support and encouragement, coupled with very small incremental steps to achievement, eventually leading to more substantial challenges and achievements. Interestingly enough, e-assessment of basic skills seemed particularly helpful in this context because of the capacity for learners to take tests virtually 'on demand' (when ready) and receive immediate feedback. Section 4.6 develops this theme.

E-assessment was encountered in the context of MVE Underpinning Knowledge tests, and Adult basic skills testing. It was also the focus of a small extension project funded separately by Ufi with respect to the use of e-assessment in NVQs and Learndirect centres. Evidence from the extension project is drawn on here as appropriate, and the project is also the subject of a short, separate report (Jarvis & Torrance 2005).

E-assessment is becoming more widespread across the LSS but comprises two distinct elements – *e-testing*, ie the online provision of multiple-choice tests, and *e-portfolios*, these being online provision for the *recording* of assessments and other forms of evidence. Sometimes respondents use the term 'e-assessment' when they only have experience of one or other of these elements and take the term to mean only that activity.

The use of e-testing is much more widespread than that of e-portfolios, which are still largely in the development and piloting stage, and the benefits of e-testing are much more apparent in the data than those of e-portfolios. In principle, e-testing is available online 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. In reality, e-testing is much more likely to be accessible on screen via a local area network. Tests are downloaded through an online administration interface.

Institutional benefits of e-testing revolve around efficiency of administration and motivation of candidates. Candidate programme registration can be easily integrated with test submissions, and substantial fee savings can accrue for colleges by only entering candidates when they are ready. One college in the study had previously wasted up to £18,000 pa on test fees for candidates who had to be entered well in advance of sitting paper-and-pencil tests, but didn't appear on the day:

We put 7500 students through the end tests last year, which is a hell of a lot. And of them, 48% failed to turn up. We paid for that. So that is 3000 students at least who failed to turn up for an exam that cost us £5–6 plus the invigilators.
adult basic skills tutor

With online access, the tests are simply not 'unlocked' on the computer unless and until the candidate is available and the fee is not incurred until the test is taken. However, there can also be problems of access to hardware and software if a dedicated e-assessment suite is not part of college provision, and sometimes even when it is:

We haven't got a dedicated room here… We have a teaching computer room which is laid out and we're using it for online testing and every time we come to do testing somebody's either loaded some other packages on the computer or changed the profile so we can't do it and I am running round like a headless chicken trying to get the IT to sort it out.
FE college MVE head of department

The trickiest thing is when you come to download your scripts and they're not there on the morning… Something gone wrong. A hitch with the Board, they haven't uploaded their system or our exams haven't uploaded … or whatever … There is a helpline for City & Guilds, and they are very good, if you ring them they'll tell you if it's their mistake, or they'll say you've made a mistake on such a thing…
test centre administrator

The combination of multiple-choice format and electronic processing means results are available almost immediately. Learners and tutors alike comment on the educational benefits of taking tests when ready, and the immediate feedback of results. A pass allows learners to move on quickly rather than waiting weeks for a result. Equally, however, if a fail is received learner and tutor are usually still together in college and able to sit down and review the situation. Re-takes can then be scheduled to suit the learner:

You know within half an hour to an hour… It's a provisional grade but then they go away, and they know, and they're happy. Even those that haven't passed don't have to wait to be told … [it's] … horrible to wait to be told you've failed something. So it means it's done and dusted, and it's not as painful for them … you're there on the spot to say, 'Never mind, do it again,' instead of them stewing and winding themselves up about it.
adult basic skills tutor

I am happy with [online testing], because I think it is good for the students' morale. They get an immediate response and that is good for the students. They are not waiting for the results and they know straight away whether they need to re-sit or not. I think this is a big advantage for all students, in particular mature students, who tend to worry a lot about how they are doing.
Adult basic skills tutor

The multiple-choice format might suggest too much formality in the test situation, given some of the views previously reported about the anxieties which can be generated by testing, but in fact both tutors and learners liked the relative *informality* of e-testing when compared to the formality of the traditional 'exam room':

I enjoy it on the computer. [The test] is easy, because if I make a mistake, I correct it … It's like a game, it's not difficult. When I do the computer test, it's like a game [laughs]. It's no pressure for us, because if I write with pen and paper, we think it's something hard. I think, 'Oh, is it right or wrong?' I think like confused, but computers are not confused, I think it's like a game.
basic skills learner

You are not sat in an old school sports hall or cold classroom in uniform rows and some sort of writing against the clock. You're in a nice assessment centre, informal-looking, it's warm, it's modern-looking…
adult basic skills tutor

They've actually used [computers] before they come in to do the online testing and are quite used to them and don't see it too much a problem … they have done all the practice testing … a lot of work on the computers for the course and practice tests on the computers…
college test centre manager

E-testing also allows students to have multi-modal access to the test items, and this can facilitate their response:

On the PC version, it's clearer more, you get pictures, you get all this sort of colour and everything, and on the paper you don't get nothing like that. You get all the visual everything [on computer]. Paper work is like … things written down in black and white, but when you go on the PC, it's explained in colour, the same kind of things, but it's in more depth. And that way makes it easier, a lot easier.
basic skills learner

[On the computer] it's more colourful. It stimulates your brain a bit more.
basic skills learner

A number of learners also liked the multiple-choice format and 'point-and-click' mouse controlled technology, because it limited the need for extended writing and (they thought) was open to guessing:

It's good … [there's] … less time used on computer than in writing. We use our eyes, very quickly, time-saving. It's painful, writing!
basic skills learner

I did [the initial assessments] on paper and on computer. I'd rather do it on computer, that's easy to use … cos I just have to look at the question and then just click the answer… On the paper, I need to write everything out. It's a bit hard.
basic skills learner

Tutors, while generally welcoming e-testing, disliked multiple-choice formats for exactly the same reasons that the student liked them – tutors thought that they were an invalid way to test literacy – see below.

Students also appreciated the very fact that they had to become familiar with computers in order to sit the tests. Learning to use a computer was an additional 'embedded' skill that they enjoyed learning. However, this is very much associated with the 'point-and-click' technology. Extensive compilation and manipulation of e-portfolios is likely to prove far more challenging for new computer users. Some students were resistant to word-processing in any case, and therefore to e-testing, and this led most tutors to favour a continuing dual system wherein learners would have the option of paper-and-pencil tests:

I don't like using the computer. I don't know why. I don't like it. Always I told myself I can learn the computer at any time, the important thing now is learning English.
basic skills learner

If I write it down on paper, I know which spelling is right and which is not, remembering. That's why it's best writing down on paper – not computer. Some people are lazy, they do it on computer, problem solved, no brainwork.
basic skills learner

I wouldn't know how to turn a computer on. It's hard enough with a pen trying to spell something, without having to look for every single letter. Whoever designed [keyboards] and put them letters in that order wants shooting at dawn. It's ridiculous.
basic skills learner

Laptop technology, including wireless access, also allows such testing in a wide variety of workplaces, and this seemed to be an important selling-point in persuading management and unions to become involved in workplace Basic Skills programmes; the tutors and the test can 'come to them', rather than the learners having to go to the college. At the same time, however, small and/or isolated workplaces such as care homes may well find it difficult to offer or take up such opportunities, lacking the hardware, the wireless and/or broadband connectivity and/or the IT skills.

The negatives of online testing, especially with respect to literacy, largely derive from the fact that the tests are narrow multiple-choice tests of reading and recall – using a mouse to tick boxes via 'point-and-click' technology. There is no testing of extended *writing* or application of knowledge. However, this is not a specific feature of e-testing *per se*; it is also a feature of the paper-and-pencil version of the tests:

That's true of the paper-based as well … it's all multiple-choice. You could pass this exam and not be able to write a piece of continuous text… But having said that, this is going to sound awful to say, but I've got two students who are dyslexic, and it's working in their favour, because they wouldn't pass a Level 1 exam if they had to produce some free writing, to be honest…
adult basic skills tutor

You get students who have very good Level 2 results, and when they come to written work, they can't construct a sentence…
adult basic skills tutor

I can foresee problems where you are issuing a student with a Level 2 literacy qualification that they go out into industry and we say this is an A–C equivalency at GCSE and they're struggling to write coherent sentences.
adult basic skills tutor

Tutors teach and assess extended writing through classwork and the compilation of a portfolio of evidence. But the portfolio is not considered by policy-makers to be 'objective' enough for basic skills accreditation at higher levels. Thus basic skills Entry Levels 1, 2 and 3 (the most introductory or elementary levels, equivalent to primary school and early secondary school standards of literacy and numeracy, and currently accredited by NOCN in the colleges studied) require both a portfolio and an end test; but basic skills Levels 1 and 2, which also correspond with key skills Levels 1 and 2 taken by work-based trainees, are only tested by multiple-choice tests. These are accredited by City & Guilds in the colleges studied. The awarding bodies acknowledge problems of validity with multiple-choice testing, but state that they are operating under direct instructions from the QCA to employ this multiple-choice format for external testing of key skills and basic skills. It is ironic that that the very body established to oversee quality assurance in the assessment industry should insist on the use of such an invalid measure for the assessment of communication skills.

In one instance, the elements that made the whole enterprise very efficient – setting up a dedicated assessment centre with properly equipped computers and an administrator always available to invigilate, etc – brought criticism from the Inspectorate about lack of 'embedding' of Basic Skills teaching and assessment in vocational settings. This was not wholly an issue to do with e-testing; it also reflected the college's commitment (as the college saw it) to providing properly trained basic skills tutors to teach in vocational areas:

Vocational staff haven't necessarily got the skills to teach basic skills, they've got an awareness of it, they can support the basic skills, they do that in some groups … but to actually teach the basic skills to get people up a level which you need to do, you need someone who knows what they're doing in basic skills. FE college programme manager

However, the problem betrays an interesting ambiguity about whether or not it is more effective and efficient to teach Basic Skills completely embedded in vocational areas or not, an issue we will return to below in Section 4.7.

E-portfolios were claimed to bring efficiency to evidence management for assessors and verifiers – they could deal with far larger numbers of candidates – but we have found little evidence of extensive practice benefiting learners. The evidence we have suggests that most claims for e-portfolios are just that: claims for how they might be able to be used in the future, rather than what they are actually used for now.

E-portfolios are designed to be used as huge e-archives so that candidates for NVQs can add evidence to their portfolio over time, cross-referencing pieces of evidence to the standards or assessment criteria. Indeed, the software is intended to do much of the cross-referencing for them, as long as it is correctly inputted and indexed to the relevant national standards. Thus, in principle, instead of compiling very large paper portfolios and trying to work out where particular pieces of evidence 'fit', progress can be shown much more easily, even to the extent of having bar charts produced of completed elements and profile components so that candidates are encouraged by seeing such incremental progress. Evidence can be captured on video or audio and stored digitally in the e-portfolio, and candidates may also produce evidence which can be used at a higher level, and this can be stored appropriately. However, there is not currently a single technical standard for e-portfolios, and the platforms they use are all different. This could cause difficulties if a candidate leaves an employer or training agency to go elsewhere. The information could be transferred to a CD-ROM and then re-entered on to another system, but if candidates wanted to transfer a record of progress across into another package they would probably have to start again in terms of cross-referencing the evidence of achievement.

The most significant potential problems with e-portfolios, however, concern the level of IT skills which would have to be employed to use them effectively, and the implication from training managers and assessors that face-to-face visits to candidates would take place less often as each assessor would be dealing with much larger numbers of candidates. The implication that assessors might physically visit candidates less often could potentially undermine much of the 'pedagogy of assessment' that helps supports learners through the 'evidence elicitation' noted in Section 4.4, above. As we have seen, the quality of candidates' relationships with their assessors is a very important element in the production of achievement. We have also seen that, in many cases, especially with younger workers on apprenticeships, the assessor actively interprets trainees' tasks and job-sheets in order to record the NVQ competences from them for the trainee, rather than the trainee doing it themselves. E-portfolios probably could not be similarly completed at a distance from the workplace. Thus use of e-portfolios could raise issues of equity with respect to time spent with assessors and even jeopardise completion of portfolios and awards if most interaction was expected to be online. Guidelines on the use of e-portfolios, including the maximum numbers of candidates that can be taken by assessors and external verifiers, and the necessity for the continuation of site visits, would be appropriate before their use becomes too widespread and driven by concerns about efficiency rather than pedagogy – see also 4.4, above, regarding the frequency of assessor visits.

Having discussed e-testing of basic skills and underpinning knowledge, and noted its popularity with learners, it is also important to report that key skills tests were universally loathed – by learners and tutors alike.

There are significant differences in the way that basic skills tests and key skills tests are perceived by learners. Basic skills start with three 'Entry levels' which are below 'Level 1' and remain separate from key skills. However, basic skills levels and tests and key skills levels and tests are exactly the same for Levels 1 and 2 (ie up to GCSE-equivalent level) and are often conflated in discussion. Nevertheless, they carry very different connotations for different categories of learners. There are very clearly perceived differences between the following three test areas:

■ basic skills tests for adults

■ 'underpinning knowledge' tests for other (often younger) learners, including apprentices, which test substantive underpinning knowledge of specific vocational areas, usually in tandem with NVQs

■ key skills tests which can probably best be described as 'basic skills' tests for 16–19 year olds, including apprentices.

Basic skills tests for adults are seen as an inevitable and in some respects helpful element of the modernisation and rationalisation of ABS teaching. They are increasingly accepted by tutors and learners alike as a prerequisite for progression to further study, including, if necessary, Access to HE programmes. Underpinning knowledge tests, including those for technical 'progression awards', are accepted by apprentices as relevant to the job and the NVQ. Key skills tests – tests of supposedly generic, transferable competencies in communication, application of number and ICT – are not so accepted.[11] Young trainees with relatively poor prior academic qualifications dislike key skills tests because they remind them of school failure; in contrast, relatively well-qualified trainees (eg with 4, 5 or more GCSEs at A*–C) regard them as an 'insult to their intelligence'. Apprentices with good grades at GCSE have initial exemption from key skills tests, but only for three years. After this their GCSEs are regarded as 'out-of-date currency', and candidates are required to take the tests to complete their apprenticeship. Given that this is most likely to happen to apprentices on Level 3 programmes which take longer to complete, but who are likely to be the best qualified entrants in the first place, it seems both ironic and perverse:

It's very difficult. I've got lads that are coming on these block-release courses who've got 3 or 4 O-levels at good grades and I'm having to tell them because they won't achieve their NVQ for three years they'll have to do their key skills because the currency of those qualifications will not generate the evidence to give them a bye.
FE college MVE head of department

11 Formally, basic skills tests assess literacy, numeracy and ICT; Key Skills tests assess communication skills, application of number and ICT.

12 See also Hodgson & Spours 2002, Savory, Hodgson & Spours 2003, for similar findings regarding the introduction of Curriculum 2000; Savory *et al.* also note that key skills were required for the award of GNVQs, but are no longer required for the award of AVCEs.

This situation does not pertain to any other uses of GCSEs; they are not regarded as 'out-of-date' for employer selection purposes, or university entry, if these take place more than three years after the examinations have been taken. Similarly, key skills tests are meant to feature in AVCE and A-level programmes but do not – schools do not have to offer key skills, and they are not required for receipt of the awards, or for progression to HE, so they are largely ignored.[12] In colleges, however, provision of key skills teaching and testing is linked to funding so that colleges are in effect obliged to offer them. Key skills are also required for the successful completion of Foundation and Advanced Apprenticeships (FAs and AAs), though many such trainees do not take them, or do so with very negative attitudes towards them. Non-completion of key skills tests seems to be a major factor in the formal non-completion of apprenticeships, even though the trainees in question become competent workers, attain their NVQs and remain in employment. As such, key skills tests would seem to require either immediate reform to ensure that they are operated consistently throughout the sector, or abolition.

A further particularly disliked feature of both key skills and basic skills tests, by tutors and learners alike, is the generic nature of the tests. Key skills and basic skills teaching usually attempts to 'embed' such skills in vocationally-relevant tasks, for example learning about ratios through calculating additives to the cooling system in a motor vehicle. However, the tests are generic because they have to apply to a wide range of candidates across different vocational sectors: for example, testing ratios by reference to cake recipes; not surprisingly, MVE apprentices do not always take kindly to being asked questions about cake recipes):

The big drive [is] on … embedding basic skills, making things contextualised – and then the qualifications aren't!
FE college programme manager

Key skills and competences are also thought by many to be better assessed on-the-job rather than through being identified and assessed separately:

Get rid of key skills altogether. Because there's problem-solving … built in [to the standards] … when he's done some repairs he automatically covers problem-solving. Now if my student has completed unit 12, diagnostic and repair, those two tell me has sorted problems out for the customers. He's done it … communication skills – that student cannot do that task unless he gets some data or information from somewhere or he talks to somebody. He can talk to his employer, he can talk to the customer, so there's communication going on there … he's doing communication.
FE college MVE head of department

In this, the respondent seems to be absolutely at one with the original NVQ philosophy, but doubts over coverage and enforcing standards have clearly led policy-makers, and in turn awarding bodies, to develop hybrid approaches to assessing such skills.

We have hinted at many issues of validity, reliability and equity already. Tutors, supervisors and assessors at local level go to great lengths to support candidates, but often particular interpretations of standards or a lack of resources or workplace opportunities for assessment can compromise validity and reliability.

Thus what one might call 'opportunities to verify' vary greatly across work-based and college-based settings. For example, small garages may not provide NVQ Level 3 opportunities to conduct diagnostic work with the latest computer technology. Equally, however, and somewhat ironically, well-resourced main dealers for leading car makers do not always provide NVQ Level 2 opportunities for basic repair:

How often does a Toyota go wrong? Some of these kids on these programmes, it's really difficult to get the evidence.
MVE lead verifier

Volvo gearboxes don't go wrong. Now the standards say he must show four pieces of evidence for transmission so we have to do a driveshaft, clutch and gearbox. In two years he's been there they haven't had a clutch or a gearbox in the whole place to do … the standard says no simulation for that unit. He's got to wait until one comes in. Now what if that's 10 years?
FE head of MVE department

This can also lead to some boredom and disillusionment for trainees who do not experience sufficient variety of work. Because modern cars are so reliable, repair work can be very limited, and usually involves replacing parts or whole assemblies rather than actually working on them and repairing them:

Another reason they drop out I think is I don't think they get the variety of jobs … a lot of the work that most of the garages are doing is very mundane. It's the odd service, set of brake shoes, it isn't very often they strip the engine down.
FE college head of MVE department

In such circumstances, local colleges either provide 'real' repair work in the college by getting apprentices to work on staff cars or sometimes orchestrate temporary exchanges of apprentices across garages to extend their experience of different work. On occasions, however, this has led to more problems than it solves, as the 'new' apprentice may be more or less competent than the 'old' one, leading employers to try to poach the better one.

In Sport & Recreation NVQ small hotel leisure facilities can be very limited in the equipment available, and indeed in client activity, so simulation is often called for, with another member of hotel staff acting as a client for the purposes of assessment. But doing a 'fitness appraisal' on a colleague who you know well, is clearly going to be very different from doing one on an unknown guest or visitor. Often, therefore, 'ways and means' are found to observe and verify competences, but this can stretch claims to validity to the limit. A related issue with respect to 'opportunities to verify' is that candidates may not necessarily be in a position to gather relevant evidence. For example, candidates already have to be in a supervisory position to demonstrate a lot of Level 3 competences in Sport & Recreation, but they wouldn't be in such a position and cannot secure such a position, if they are not yet considered competent:

One of the issues we've had … a learner who'd completed the operational services at Level 2 and therefore wanted to progress onto Level 3 but as yet was not in a supervisory position.
Sp&Rec NVQ assessor

Similar issues pertain to client safety in Social Care, even at lower levels of the awards. Ideally care workers will not be in a position to exhibit evidence of safe practice until they are already competently safe. Similarly, emergency situations cannot be engineered, they can only be simulated:

With the NVQ … direct observation is obviously essential … there will always be direct observation, unless it's specified why you don't have it … for example, if it was about certain health and safety issues, you wouldn't wait until the place was burned down to show that you know how to evacuate the building… You have simulation.
internal verifier, Social Care NVQ

The policy issues here are whether current national standards are still appropriate to workplace activities (and if not, how they can be updated quickly) and in turn whether, and if so to what extent, simulation is acceptable. Changing a clutch in a college workshop because no such job has occurred in the workplace would seem to be acceptable simulation (if still deemed necessary), whereas 'pretending' to do a client fitness appraisal on a colleague that one works with every day is clearly less appropriate:

The main [thing] is … using real people … [for] … simulations. I always say to them that they can bring somebody in if they want to … in the past we've done that and it seems to work better … it's somebody who doesn't know them and is not used to them, somebody who doesn't expect certain things to happen because students are expecting the same thing, they know what they should be doing…
internal verifier Sp&Rec NVQ

As discussed in Section 4.3, perhaps simply providing candidates with the option of a defined practical test would be the simplest solution to these problems.

Other examples of problems with validity and reliability have been encountered. In particular, issues with respect to the intermediary power of external verifiers and moderators have been raised. These agents are crucially important fulcrums of the system and sometimes their interpretations can frustrate:

[The moderator] came in and wanted to see an 11-a-side football game, when we only had five A-level students, and we had to pull in other students. He said, 'They are not really A-level standard,' and we had to say 'Well, they are not all A-level students.'
A-level tutor

I was doing this presentation on evidence, and somebody stood up and said well we can't get transmission evidence, our external verifier won't allow that. I said well what do you mean… So he said well we're doing a clutch on an Escort, we're not allowed to use that. Our EV has told us we must have a piece of evidence off a bigger car, that's more difficult to do than an Escort. I said well standards don't say that… Oh but the EV thinks the Escort is too easy or the Fiesta is too easy, he has given us a list of vehicles that he would like…
FE head of department and external assessor

The notion that NVQs are national is just barmy… Every different place we walk into – they have a different notion of what it is. The classic is the amount of evidence required for each PC. So you go to some places and they'll say there must be 3 pieces of evidence for each PC. Well who says that then, well nobody, but that's our level … probably if you track it back it'll be some EV saying it somewhere.
training agency manager

Providing too much learner support can also threaten validity; not so much in terms of 'traditional' concerns about reliability and the authenticity of the evidence produced, but in terms of the overall congruence between programme procedures and workplace demands. We have already noted the popularity of e-testing among learners, along with problems of the validity of testing 'literacy' through use of point-and-click mouse technology. Some tutors wondered openly about the supposed equivalence with GCSE and the disservice potentially done to learners who might not be able to cope with extended writing if it were required of them in the future. Other tutors commented on the culture of drafting and re-taking assignments and unit tests in AVCE when such programmes were supposedly preparing learners for the transition to work:

How vocational is that? Give me one work setting where there are no real deadlines and where it doesn't matter if you take ages and ages to get it right.
AVCE tutor

These are issues of programme structure and assessment design, rather than the attitudes and practices of individual tutors.

13 Savory, Hodgson & Spours (2003) use the term 'academic drift' to summarise similar findings from their Nuffield-funded study of Curriculum 2000 and the introduction of AVCEs.

Similarly, some tutors and assessors noted what we might term a 'comprehension drift' – ie *writing* about Business or Sport & Leisure, rather than *doing* Business or Sport & Leisure, and thus essentially testing language and comprehension rather than practical competence.[13] Similar views were expressed about the development of vocational GCSEs:

True vocational education embraces employers, and is almost employer-led … but … Instead we have a sort of tenuous work experience… And then the government have fudged it totally, they have gone for these VGCSEs. That's an anomaly in itself. All they are is academic subjects looking at a vocational area. A GCSE in Travel and Tourism is really a study of the travel and tourism sector, it's not vocational.
awarding body manager

There are echoes here of our earlier observation about a lack of clear vision for vocational education. At the same time, however, writing about activities may also be a feature of a more general drift towards Quality Assurance performativity – being seen to prove that you're doing something, rather than just doing it, or even irrespective of whether you are actually doing it or not.

Another element of discussions of validity, reliability and equity is the enduring opaqueness of the outcomes-based, competence-based language of many LSS awards. While improvements have been made to many of the original specification documents, successive generations of learners, and indeed assessors, have to learn the language anew:

The candidates will all tell you that it is understanding the language of the actual award itself… City and Guilds have made valiant efforts on various occasions to simplify the language and format of the standards, and it is easy for me … but that is one of the big things that they will tell you…
external verifier, Social Care NVQ

We induct them over a day, and we try to keep it as simple and straightforward as we can, we repeat the information and try to … just reassure them. I remember my first day on NVQ – it sounded like gibberish, and it is very wordy. I have found that people don't really understand it until they have done one or two units…
internal verifier, Social care NVQ

That one I did there, it said 'relevant available information on the communication differences likely to be experiences obtained from the appropriate sources and appropriate times', so I simply ask the question, 'What is communication, what are different forms of communication? Think of A and B and the way they communicate and then talk about it.
internal verifier, Social Care NVQ

Paradoxically, because NVQs also demand that routine workplace competences are demonstrated, including such things as ordinary health and safety precautions, some questions and behaviours to be demonstrated can be very patronising:

The health and safety bit at the beginning I thought was pointless … the fire exit is in the building I've worked in for a couple of months and obviously know, what's the point in me sending that off to get assessed … [and] I think they should look into your qualifications before they test you because it was quite insulting being asked what a monitor was…
Sp&Rec NVQ candidate

The only way round this is to say, 'I know this is silly but do you mind explaining…' This gives a very bad impression of the NVQs.
internal verifier, Social Care NVQ

Such problems derive not only from the language of competence, criteria, range statements and the like, but also from the generic terminology designed to encompass different specific areas of work. In this extract from an observation, a Social Care candidate is confused by the generic term 'client':

Assessor *Why is it important to review the placement with the client and why is it important to provide the clients with positive feedback on their achievements?*

Candidate *When you say client, is that the child?*

We have already seen how college tutors support learners by providing detailed mark schemes, assignment templates and so forth, while workplace assessors support learners through the process of identifying evidence. This can lead to the sort of narrow instrumentalism discussed above, with students learning to accumulate marks rather than accomplish worthwhile tasks:

There are issues around the interpretation of assessment criteria… Students find the whole … business very difficult to understand. In the end, they just come to understand how to get marks … and end up in a position of simply needing to know, 'What do I have to do?'
AVCE tutor

There are many other examples in the data of tutors and assessors interpreting awarding body specifications and criteria and providing simple translations of what they 'really mean':

I'll say the questions as they are, if [they] don't understand them, I'll try and re-phrase them in English…
assessor, Social Care NVQ

I had this book and they did exactly the same that I had to do … they had to put the PCs down and then put underneath it, in everyday language what it really means … and I thought, wow, it's not just us …
internal verifier, Social Care NVQ

Equally, however, assessors themselves can sometimes be confused:

The language, it's a big problem, not just with the staff who are doing the NVQ but sometimes with the assessors as well, if we didn't have our moderation meetings once a month, then try to decide what that actually means they'd have lots of problems.
internal verifier, Social Care NVQ

Clearly, there are major implications here with respect to the interpretation and mediation of assessment procedures and practices at local level. There are also fundamental epistemological issues with respect to the nature of the 'knowing' that such assessment produces: in what sense do unit specifications, range statements and so forth 'represent' the reality of workplace competences if they are not recognised as such in the workplace, have to be 'translated' into 'plain English' for workplace use, and then observed competences have to be translated back again into acceptable evidence statements?

Effective criterion-referencing and its workplace corollary, competence-based assessment, depend on clear and detailed statements of programme specifications and the criteria by which they are deemed to have been met. Validity and the appropriateness or fitness-for-purpose of assessment methods are considered of more importance than reliability; reliability is assumed to 'take care of itself' if assessments are valid and judgements made in accordance with extant criteria. Thus national standards are ensconced in the specifications and criteria, and enacted and judged at local level.

As we have already seen, however, considerable variation exists at local level in terms of both the general assumptions that tutors and learners make about the nature and purpose of assessment, the specific resources available, and the procedures and practices that develop. Thus there is significant variation in the amount and quality of support provided for learners through the assessment process – the same regulations can be interpreted in very different ways as awarding body guidelines, procedures and performance criteria are distilled by tutors and assessors into understandable, accomplishable activities, and learners given support and feedback in these terms. Sometimes this is manifest in detailed mark schemes and assignment templates. Sometimes it is manifest in intuitive judgements and practices – helping a 'good lad' get through 'the paperwork'. Some vocational sectors and assessors/verifiers seem to regard this as a significant problem:

Managers or the supervisors at the facility may well be conversant with the standard operating procedures of their individual facilities, they are not fully conversant with the national standards … for the NVQ … certainly witness testimonies don't tend to prove a valid piece of evidence.
Sp&Rec external verifier

Others, however, see the issue more as an inevitability, and, in a supposedly employment-led activity, a problem that ought simply to be addressed by more employer involvement in work-based assessment:

At the end of the day the employer is the best person to say whether that person is competent or not. He's got him for 6 days of the week… So if that person is doing a good job it's the employer who really needs to sign him off in my opinion.
FE college head of MVE department

The divergence of perception and opinion expressed here may derive, at least in part, from the history of the two vocational fields. Sport and Recreation is relatively new, and still emergent as a major industry and field of training. Perhaps trainers and assessors feel that they have to 'attend to the traditional' in assessment design. Certainly we have seen how over-assessed is the 'Progression Award' in this field. Motor Vehicle Engineering, on the other hand, has developed over 100 years, and perhaps therefore includes more practitioners who are confident of their own and others' judgments. Both Stasz *et al.* (2004) and Fuller & Unwin (2003) note similar tendencies in what we might term 'emergent' and 'traditional' fields, with Stasz *et al.* (p31) reporting higher completion rates for apprenticeships in fields where they have traditionally been offered and accepted as the appropriate way of entering skilled employment. Additionally, no-one in a local car-using community of college tutors, employers, learners and their friends and families has an interest in unsafe apprentices being certified to practice; so it may be that this particular 'community of practice' will be more vigilant, and will need less centralised oversight and control than some others.

This issue arises in two forms/contexts:

■ What we termed in the introduction the *'vertical community of practice'* – delineated, as the case may be, by industrial practices and/or academic disciplines; these define and embody the assumptions which are made about what counts (or should count) in gaining an award, communicated from awarding body, to assessors/external verifiers/moderators, to curriculum managers/supervisors, to tutors/trainers, to learners.

■ What we might term the local, geographical, *horizontal community of practice* involving college-based tutors, assessors, training agencies and employers – the context of operation and culture of support for different 'sorts' of learners.

How the two interact was briefly discussed in the opening part of the report in terms of 'reification' and 'participation'. In this respect, the research has identified the self-selection and induction of learners into different 'communities of practice'.

The policy issue is the extent to which these communities of practice are part of the problem or part of the solution with respect to defining and ensuring 'national' standards. The vertical community is obviously central to policy; the horizontal local community less so, with variation at this level having been seen as something which must be written out of the system (literally) by ever more detailed specifications. Yet it is the horizontal local community which realises standards in action. Perhaps central control has run its course, and rather than trying to extinguish local judgement it is now time to recognise it as inevitable, but seek to improve it by supporting it. Fuller & Unwin (2003, p422) similarly conclude that the development of a much more self-consciously integrated pedagogy of apprenticeship in college and workplace – rather than further development and reificiation of standards – is the way to improve the quality of both the process and outcomes of apprenticeship. Likewise Stasz *et al.* (2004, p64) identify local capacity-building as the most important factor in improving processes and outcomes. Certainly there are very significant Continuing Professional Development (CPD) opportunities to be exploited by awarding bodies, not necessarily as providers of CPD, but as commissioners and orchestrators, legitimating a new approach. Their involvement would signal that they were happy to view CPD as involving more than training in compliance with AB procedures; rather it should involve the strengthening of local judgement, and furthermore their regional structures could facilitate local groups drawing on the experience of parallel communities elsewhere.

Section 4.11	Innovation without change? The enduring academic/vocational divide and the need for a national vision for vocational education

A significant factor in the development and implementation of policy and practice with respect to the assessment and certification of learners in the LSS is the constant level of innovation and perturbation in the system. This is the case with respect to all aspects of the system involving:

- the institutional and financial arrangements under which colleges and other training providers operate, including new forms of public sector management and the use of targets to drive change

- awarding body organisation (including mergers and increasing commercialisation) and the national quality assurance regime under which they now operate

- the details of programme specifications and assessment methods employed in the sector.

Additionally, and more specifically, the provision of general vocational education in schools and colleges has been subject to continual re-organisation and the production of an 'alphabet soup' of successive initiatives over the last twenty years: CEE, CPVE, GNVQ, AVCE.[14]

14 Certificate of Extended Education, Certificate of Pre-Vocational Education, General National Vocational Qualifications, Advanced Vocational Certificate of Education.

Many of these developments relate to, and in some key respects derive from, the issues identified in the introduction. In particular, a full political commitment to any sort of properly comprehensive education system only came about in the mid-1980s with the absorption of O-levels and CSE into GCSE, and even then only up to 16 years of age. This was closely followed by advocacy of competence-based training and assessment. As such it is perhaps not surprising that many aspects of current policy and practice are still very much a 'work in progress' and that operations at local level can be hard-pressed. It is important to recognise this and posit findings in terms of the options and trade-offs that any assessment regime must deal with.

At the same time, however, all this innovation does not seem to have had much of an impact on the basic problem of a lack of status for vocational education and training, and the lack of a national vision for what we want from vocational education and training. Change applies far more to the vocational track than to the post-compulsory academic track. As one of the college tutors put it, there is 'endless, endless change, constant change,' in the further education sector generally and in vocational education especially. The contrast of constant change in qualifications and assessment in vocational education with the stability of teaching and assessment in GCE A-level, despite the changes to AS and A2 in Curriculum 2000, is an important contextual factor in this study.

It is also worth noting that this change brought pressure at local level which affected, and in some key respects restricted, fieldwork access, with colleges being unable to cooperate as fully as might have been desirable, and some independent training agencies being uninterested in cooperating at all. Inspection also had a negative impact on fieldwork access, as colleges and individual tutors indicated that they really could not cope with any further investigations or, as they saw them, intrusions. Research in the LSS seems likely to become more difficult to negotiate and accomplish in these circumstances, just as the necessity for it becomes more apparent.

Enduring social reproduction, in the context of individual success and achievement

There is also a need, finally, to recognise the importance of different levels of analysis in the report, and the implications this has for discussing findings. There is overwhelming evidence of the enduring nature of the academic/vocational divide, with relatively low levels of status/expectation in the vocational sector, and the self-selection of learners into communities of practice which match the 'assessment career trajectories' with which they feel most comfortable. This might be considered to be disappointing, even depressing. Yet within this broad picture of continuing social reproduction, there is also evidence of widespread individual success and the opening up of opportunities for the future. Tutors and assessors alike work hard to support learners through assessment processes and the accumulation of marks and evidence made possible by the move towards criterion-referencing and outcomes-based assessment has certainly benefited achievement and progression. More, still, could be accomplished at this level with widespread dissemination of coaching guidance, exemplary tasks and activities, and so forth. And insofar as some element of external testing is considered important to qualification in particular vocational and skill sectors, electronic testing is much preferred by learners when compared with paper-and-pencil tests. Such developments cannot address the more structural issues of the status of vocational educational and the vision that we wish to develop for the future, but they can certainly assist individuals to succeed in current circumstances.

Section 5

Conclusions and recommendations

We have compared and contrasted the assessment experiences of learners in different settings and attempted to identify what assessment regime works best in enabling learners to progress in which contexts and in which sectors. The comparing and contrasting have been particularly instructive. It is apparent that there are very important differences in the organisation of assessment activities and the opportunities open to learners across different sub-sectors and assessment settings. Major anomalies and contradictions in the structure of awards, the assessment methods employed, and the approach of assessors and moderators have been identified. Significant paradoxes have been revealed, such as:

- the pressure to maintain standards of academic excellence at A-level while also increasing the numbers who pass and achieve good grades

- the use of formative feedback throughout the sector which could nevertheless prevent the award of 'distinctions' in AVCE since these can only be gained by independent work

- the problem of reconciling authentic vocational assessment with limited provision of workplace tasks and the use of simulation

- the move towards embedding basic skills in vocational programmes but assessing them through generic test items

- the use of multiple-choice tests (both paper and electronic) to assess 'literacy' at higher basic skills levels, without any further requirement for extended writing

- and, perhaps most unfair and revealing of all, the denigration of good GCSE grades achieved by some groups (apprentices, who must 'replace' them with relevant key skills achievements after three years) compared to others (eg A-level takers who can still use them for university entrance and/or job applications many years later).

Yet it is also clear that the move towards criterion-referenced assessment, and its vocational sibling, competence-based assessment, which has underpinned the move towards greater transparency of intended learning outcomes and the criteria by which they are judged, has significantly benefited learners in the LSS in terms of the numbers of learners retained in the system and the awards which they achieve.

Clarity in assessment procedures, processes and criteria has underpinned the widespread use of coaching, practice and provision of formative feedback to boost individual and institutional achievement. Coaching, practice and the possibility of retaking module tests to improve grades, have boosted A-level awards. Coaching, practice and the constant drafting and redrafting of assignments, have underpinned the development of AVCE and comparable Level 3 programmes such as the Access courses which we investigated. Similar approaches, but broken down into even smaller steps, have developed in Adult basic skills teaching and assessment. Use of assessment events in NVQ, not just for the assessor to observe trainee performance, but to interact with the trainee in order to feed back advice and elicit and organise emergent evidence for portfolio completion, is widespread across the vocational training sector.

These are practices which have developed out of the clarifying of objectives and the intimate relationship between assessment, pedagogy and learning. They greatly help learners to achieve. In this respect, a key finding of the research, as reported in Section 4.3, is that it is not so much assessment methods *per se* which make a difference to learner achievement, but rather their congruence with learner perceptions of appropriateness to the learning task at hand, and the opportunities they provide for detailed communication of required knowledge and competences. Transparency of procedure and criteria are most important, irrespective of the method employed. This applies as much to the language of competence and the elicitation of evidence (Section 4.9) as to multiple-choice tests.

In saying this, however, we have perhaps identified the greatest paradox of all, the symbiotic relationship between transparency and instrumentalism. The clearer the task of how to achieve a grade or award becomes, and the more detailed the assistance given by tutors, supervisors and assessors, the more likely are candidates to succeed; but succeed at what? Are we now content to accept *assessment as learning*? Wherein does the challenge of learning reside? From where does an intrinsic sense of achievement arise? Where is the overall, holistic vision of what it is to understand 'business' or become a competent and confident motor vehicle technician? The research team members themselves are rather divided on the matter. Some see what we might term as the 'cognitive costs' of incremental and aggregatory achievement being outweighed by the social and economic benefits which accrue to individuals in terms of improved achievement, employment prospects and life chances. Others are less sure, and wonder about whether this isn't, actually, dumbing down, after all: just because the Daily Mail complains about it, doesn't mean it isn't true.

The issue is not just to do with criterion-referenced and competence-based assessment, however. It also derives from the current accountability context in which assessment operates. Helping learners to achieve in the ways we have identified could be carried out in a much more educational context in which the goal really was learning and self-development, rather than the inexorable certification of individuals and the measurement of systemic efficiency. Perhaps the more important general finding here is that no approach to or method of assessment is immune from distortion when too many consequences ride on the results.

With respect to more specific findings and recommendations, it is apparent that even in current circumstances, positives are identifiable, while problems also remain to be addressed. Thus:

1 Assessment methods *per se* do not directly affect learners' choice of award or likelihood of success, but the association of certain awards with methods which employ extensive writing (coursework assignments, exam essays) does. Thus for example, practical tests and/or multiple-choice tests are seen as acceptable – and indeed unavoidable – across most groups of learners in the sector, especially younger trainees, but extensive written work is disliked and largely avoided, except by A-level takers. Even in school and college-based AVCEs, the view is emerging that these are becoming too based on *writing about* the vocational field being studied, rather than engaging in the practical development of competence.

2 Detailed tutor and assessor support, in the form of exam coaching and practice, drafting and redrafting of assignments, asking 'leading questions' during workplace observations, and identifying appropriate evidence to record in portfolios, is widespread throughout the sector and is effective in facilitating achievement and progression. In current circumstances the further development of such strategies, underpinned perhaps, by more formal recognition of them by ABs as acceptable, and provision of relevant and appropriate AB guidelines and CPD material in order to address equity issues, is likely to lead to further individual success and rising numbers of awards achieved – see also 10, below.

3 Further development of such strategies would also be helped by rendering one-year or two-year programmes more accomplishable through credit accumulation (eg the Progression Awards and NVQs which we studied). Achieving formal, certifiable 'stepping stones' along the way of an NVQ Level 2 or Level 3 would probably increase retention and completion rates. Such credit accumulation would also render NVQs more directly comparable with other awards at the same level and possibly facilitate credit transfer across awards. Discussions over credit accumulation are under way between ABs and QCA, and a policy decision should be taken as quickly as possible so that effective development work can begin.

4 A longer-term implication of 1–3 above is that inconsistencies across the sector should be reviewed, and a wider range of assessment methods should be employed across all awards, with QCA and ABs allowing more candidate choice with respect to method of assessment. This could further mobilise learner engagement with the assessment process, while also addressing the anomaly of, for example, A-level takers being able to replace a module test with an assignment, or vice-versa, while NVQ takers must produce evidence-in-action, even if only through a (poor) simulation, when taking a practical test might be both more reliable and more welcomed by the candidates. Currently 'fitness-for-purpose' arguments justify AB provision of methods, yet, as we have seen, actual provision emerges out of a much more murky set of compromises between assessment theory, policy and practice. In a social and economic environment which supposedly privileges the consumer over the producer, perhaps consumer choice in LSS assessment, coupled with the need for equality of consumer choice across the sector, should be given more weight when such compromises are being struck. A range of assessment methods could be made available for all awards, with the candidate choosing that combination of methods which most suits their learning style and maximises their chances of success.

5 The same issue of consistency and candidate choice arises with respect to the shelf-life of GCSEs and the necessity for some candidates in the sector, but not others, to take key skills tests. Why are key skills mandatory in the further education and training sector but not within the academic A-level track? Why are GCSEs no longer considered to be valid and reliable indicators of achievement after three years for apprentices, but are so accepted for everyone else? Key skills tests are not serving the purposes for which they were ostensibly designed, and should be reformed to become uniformly applicable across the LSS, or abolished.

6 In contrast, e-testing has proved popular and effective where we observed it. Wider use of e-testing across programmes and via wireless technology in workplaces could improve completion rates, pass rates and speed of progression in 'underpinning knowledge' tests and adult basic skills. Piloting and evaluation would be an appropriate way to develop, being sensitive to issues of learner IT capability. Equally, however, such development would have to be sensitive to issues of validity. This further underpins the need for a wider range of assessment methods to be employed across all awards in the LSS.

7 The 'wider benefits of learning' are very apparent in the data but are not currently identified or recorded systematically. Pursuing and recording them more specifically could go some way to counteracting the narrow instrumentalism noted above, and the pressures of accountability which ultimately drive such instrumentalism. It might also, if it were developed across the sector, feed into the wider debate about what we wish to achieve through vocational education. Recording work-based learning across the sector, rather than key skills test results, for example, might help to refocus attention on the *purpose* of post-compulsory education as well as measure its outcomes with more validity. The recording of wider competencies could be pursued fairly easily, since evidence is likely to exist already – eg evidence of writing CVs and job applications, attending interviews, helping with children's homework and after-school clubs, etc. The recording of increasing confidence and/or social capital would be more challenging but might be an interesting topic for a pilot study by an AB – identifying and accrediting the *collective social* achievements of a community involved in a Sure Start programme for example, rather than just the particular achievements of individual candidates.[15]

15 South Yorkshire and Humber OCN have explored similar possibilities with a small pilot on Group Accreditation (see Hawkins, no date) and Sanders (1995).

8 Whether or not the more radical implications of 4, above, are accepted, with respect to consumer choice of assessment methods generally, attention must be paid to key issues of comparability and equity, such as variations in workplace resources and 'opportunities to verify'. A poor simulation is no substitute for a well-designed practical test which could be carried out in better-resourced locations (including colleges of FE) and which candidates would probably prefer in any case. The tyranny of what we might term 'NVQ competence theory' which insists on assessment *in situ* must be replaced by a more pragmatic approach to issues of validity and reliability, with FE colleges and other major local infrastructures (such as local authority sports facilities, in the case of Sport and Recreation) being employed as necessary and available for practical tests. Electronic simulation via virtual reality technologies could also be employed where appropriate, eg for analytic tasks such as client fitness appraisals, though probably not for more obviously hands-on tasks such as replacing a faulty clutch.

9 Similarly, the numbers of visits which assessors and verifiers make to candidates, and the importance of the quality of the relationship when such visits take place, must be addressed. In principle NVQ assessment is intended to take place when candidates are 'ready'. A workplace supervisor should be in the best position to judge this and either conduct the assessment themselves or call in the relevant person to do it. In practice the working schedules of supervisors and especially of other assessors who move around a series of workplaces do not easily allow this. Candidates are assessed and their portfolios amended according to the visiting schedule of the assessor, whether or not candidates are ready, or perhaps, have been ready for several months. Training agency assessors working with MVE apprentices seem to be particularly elusive in the cases we studied, though similar problems arose with at least one social care training agency. By contrast, assessors who were also local college lecturers and saw apprentices both at college and in the workplace were probably best placed to conduct regular assessments and develop high quality relationships with trainees. QCA, the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI), Sector Skills Councils (SSC) and ABs should highlight the issue and provide examples of good practice for centres. ALI's 'Excalibur learning network' may be helpful here. It already provides examples of good practice and using this would provide a sector/regulator focus. This is especially urgent with respect to the introduction of e-portfolios and the possibility that assessors and verifiers may come to operate almost wholly at a distance, especially those in commercial training agencies who may be faced with even more pressing financial targets than college-based assessors.

10 The problem of the frequency and quality of the assessment event brings us back to the issue of national, comparable standards and the role of the local, horizontal, 'community of practice', be it composed of subject-specific tutors and moderators within and across local colleges, or tutors, employers and assessors within a regional, vocational sector. Central prescription of national standards in academic subjects and vocational fields has been prominent for more than 20 years. Some would argue that such prescription is necessary, and has in any case arisen from widespread involvement of practitioners and employers in analysing national needs and specifying appropriate outcomes and competences. Thus such definitions of national standards represent widely agreed 'good practice'. All recent studies, however, be they research reviews (Stasz *et al.* 2004) or new empirical investigations (Fuller & Unwin 2003) point to the fact that central prescription of 'standards' has run its course. The present study confirms this. Centrally-orchestrated analysis of sector needs and associated definitions of what local practitioners should be trying to achieve may still be pursued and produced. But lack of sufficient, relevant and appropriate resources at local level, coupled with the inevitable need to induct successive generations of trainers and assessors and the unavoidable interpretation and mediation of national criteria which this entails, means that further improvement of both the numbers of successful candidates, and the quality of the experience and awards they receive, will be dependent on capacity-building at local level.

The provision of clear national programmes of study, the intended outcomes of training, and the criteria by which success can be judged, have certainly led to increasing numbers of learners achieving awards by the means we have identified. But this very process has led to too narrow a reliance on accumulating marks, or elements of competence, and a narrowing of the quality of the learning experience. Moreover, even the closest attendance to objectives and criteria cannot expunge local variation; on the contrary, it conceals it, and also conceals the potential unfairness of some of the judgements made. Further specification of assessment detail is only likely to exacerbate the problem. What is required is an acknowledgement that local communities of practice are the context in which all meaningful judgements are made, and thus should be the level of the system at which most efforts at capacity-building are directed. Such local communities of practice are also the contexts of action in which holistic visions of achievement and career development in particular fields are enacted and made manifest to learners. Recognising assessor interaction with candidates as inevitable, and encouraging it as part of the learning experience rather than attempting to 'write it out' of the process, would be an important first step. Thereafter, its further development and capacity to accomplish fair assessment for learners will depend on the provision of local and regional CPD which draws on the experience of parallel communities elsewhere. Awarding bodies could be important brokers and commissioners of such CPD in tandem with local Learning and Skills Councils. Although it may be the case that AB involvement would reinforce rather than disrupt the expectation that training should simply focus on compliance, their involvement could also signal that they were happy to view CPD as involving the strengthening of local judgement, thereby legitimating a new approach, and their regional structures could facilitate local groups drawing on the experience of parallel communities elsewhere. Disseminating evidence from this report could even provide the focus for early discussions at regional level.

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| Appendix 1 | **Methodology and summary of case study data sources** |

Table 5
Methodology and
summary of case study
data sources

C&G NVQ Sport & Recreation levels 2&3 + Progression Award
ie workplace and college-based training & assessment

| Product manager, curriculum managers, tutors, assessors, EVs | 7 |

| Learners/candidates | 30 |

+ document analysis & observation
Resulting in 33pp case report

C&G, NVQ, Motor Vehicle Engineering levels 2&3 focusing on FMAs & AMAs
ie workplace and college-based training & assessment

| Product manager, CV, LV, EVs, tutors, assessors, employers | 18 |

| Learners/candidates | 23 |

+ document analysis & observation
Resulting in 48pp case report

C&G, NVQ, Social Care levels 2&3
ie workplace assessment and accreditation

| Product manager, EVs, IVs, assessors, supervisors | 24 |

| Learners/candidates | 36 |

+ document analysis & observation
Resulting in 34pp case report

AS & A2 PE & Sport, AVCE/BTEC Leisure & Recreation and Sport & Fitness
ie sixth form and college-based AVCE and A-levels in vocationally-related subjects

| AB manager, HoDs, course leaders, tutors | 10 |

| Learners/candidates | 42 |

+ document analysis & observation
Resulting in 28pp case report

AS, A2 and AVCE Business Studies
ie college-based AVCE and A-level in vocationally-relevant academic subject

| Curriculum managers, tutors | 5 |

| Learners/candidates | 31 |

+ document analysis & observation
Resulting in 21pp case report

NOCN accredited Access to Higher Education
ie adults returning to learning in an academic context

| NOCN development officer, curriculum managers, tutors | 5 |

| Learners/candidates (including 6 access course graduates now on u/g courses) | 37 |

+ document analysis & observation
Resulting in 29pp case report

C&G adult basic skills testing (NQF Levels 1 & 2; including online testing)
& NOCN ABS testing (Entry levels 1, 2 & 3, and Levels 1 & 2)
ie adults returning to learning in basic skills, largely college-based
but including some workplace testing via wireless laptops

| Curriculum managers and tutors | 25 |

| Learners/candidates | 9 |

+ document analysis & observation
Resulting in 81pp case report

NOCN accreditation of informal learning in adult and community education
ie adults involved in community development activities via Sure Start and
having informal learning accredited

Programme organiser	7
Learners/candidates	30

+ document analysis & observation
Resulting in 16pp case report

Totals

Total managers/supervisors/tutors/assessors/etc	95
Total learners/candidates	237
Total pp case report drafts	320

Additionally, interviewing has been taking place in the context of the Ufi-funded extension specifically to investigate e-assessment in Learndirect contexts. The summary of findings regarding e-assessment draws on this data in addition to examples observed in MVE and basic skills testing noted above.

Similarly, the questionnaires (numerical data reported in Appendix 3) included open response comments on the best/worst features of the assessment methods and procedures which candidates encountered, and these are used in the final report as appropriate.

The basic research design involved a series of parallel case studies of 'assessment-in-action' in the learning and skills sector (LSS), with the boundaries of each case being established with respect to particular qualifications/awards and the contextual and regional factors which influence the assessment of awards in practice, including awarding body procedures and processes. The aspiration was to collect data across a wide range of LSS contexts and awards in order to describe and analyse assessment practices across the sector. Thus the study is broad in scope but focused in terms of topic and depth of analysis. The intention is to learn lessons about assessment across sub-sectors and contexts, by comparing and contrasting experience of different awards and methods of assessment in different settings.

MVE, Social Care and Sport & Recreation were selected to afford a cross-section of learners in terms of age, gender, race, and prior educational experience and attainment, along with a range of assessment methods and contexts of practice from relatively formal college-based settings, including formal knowledge testing, to less formal but still structured work-based settings (eg MVE apprentices), to informal work-based social care settings.

A-level and AVCE PE and Business Studies were selected to afford the opportunity directly to compare assessment procedures, methods and experience across 16–19 academic and vocational subject areas, and establish some overlap across fieldwork activities for purposes of triangulation (eg Sport and Recreation). Gender, race, and prior educational experience and attainment also informed selection of learner respondents.

Access courses and various adult basic education settings were included to investigate learners' responses to paper-based testing, online testing, other less formal assessment methods at Entry level, and contrasts between 'separate' teaching and assessment of basic skills and 'contextually-embedded' learning and assessment; along with assessment processes and progression opportunities into HE. As with fieldwork in other sub-sectors, age, gender, race and prior educational experience also informed the selection of learner respondents.

Figure 1
Theoretical model
and research design
of assessment
in the learning and
skills sector

Social currency, myth, recognition,
achievements & knowledge:
Social and technical competence outcomes

Assessment regime,
awarding body: qualification
structure & outcome(s)

Institutional/
workplace culture

Immediate
assessment context

Practice   Assessment events
and episodes   Ritual?

adult basic skills testing, etc   Motor Vehicle Engineering NVQ

Business Studies
A-level AVCE   PE, A-level, AVCE

Sport &   Social
Recreation NVQ   Care NVQ

Appendix 3   **Examples of questionnaires**

Questionnaires were distributed to a wider sample of learners in the case study sites derived from the same cohort of learners; ie, if 10 or 15 learners in a particular setting were interviewed, and their peer group consisted of a total of 50 learners in the same cohort or year group, the questionnaire was given to all of these peers in the same cohort. The intention was to validate and extend the interview data with the larger group.

a
Example for NVQ and related workplace learners

This questionnaire aims to explore your experience of the assessment procedures for your qualification. Following analysis, results will be passed on anonymously to the awarding bodies.

To encourage you to complete and return the questionnaire, you can be entered for our prize draw. Your answers will be **anonymous** but if you would like to be entered into our **free prize draw to win £50**, please include your name and contact details at the end. Your responses will not be connected to these details in any way.

Please write your answer in the space provided or tick the appropriate boxes

About you

1 Are you?
□ male
□ female

2 How old are you?

3 How would you describe your ethnicity?
□ White British
□ Other British (please specify)

□ Other (please specify)

4 What is your first language?

5 Have you any previous qualifications?
□ None
□ GCSEs – none at level C or above
□ NVQ 1 or Progression Award 1
□ GCSEs – less than 5 at level C or above
□ GCSEs – 5 or more at level C or above
□ GNVQs
□ A-levels
Other (please specify)

About the qualification

6 Please state which subject(s) and qualification(s) you are taking

7 When did you enrol?
Month   Year

8 When do you expect to finish?
Month   Year

9 Why did you choose this qualification instead of other options?

_____

_____

10 Did anyone help you decide to enrol for this qualification?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If so who?

_____

11 Do you feel you are making good progress?

☐ Yes

☐ No

How do you know?

_____

12 Are you intending to take further qualifications after this one?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Don't know

If yes, please state which one(s)

_____

_____

13 Would you recommend this qualification to others?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Please explain your answer

_____

_____

About the assessment process

14 How are you assessed? **Please tick all that apply**

☐ Written assignment

☐ Key Skills test

☐ Observation by assessor

☐ Witness testimony

☐ Spoken questions/interview

☐ Internal exam

☐ External exam

☐ Online tests

☐ Presentations

☐ Group work

☐ Simulation/mock situation

☐ Practical test

☐ Project work

☐ Video/audio recording

☐ Other

Please state

_____

15 Did anyone explain to you the way(s) in which you were going to be assessed?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If yes, who explained them to you? **Please tick all that apply**

☐ Assessor

☐ Supervisor

☐ Tutor/teacher

☐ Other (please specify) _____

16 How often do you see your assessor for a formal assessment?

_____

_____

17 How long does a formal assessment meeting with your assessor usually take?

_____

_____

18 Do you receive help or guidance from your assessor at other times?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If yes, please state where and when

_____

_____

19 If your assessor is not a work colleague how do you contact them?

_____

_____

20 Does anyone help you with difficulties apart from your assessor?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If yes, please say who

_____

_____

21 Which of the following best describes your view of the **amount** of support available to you in the run-up to being assessed?

☐ There is lots of support

☐ There is adequate support

☐ There is not enough support

22 Which of the following best describes the **quality** of the support available to you in the run-up to being assessed?

☐ Support is of high quality

☐ Support is of satisfactory quality

☐ Support is of poor quality

23 We are also interested in which assessment methods you prefer. Please rank the top 3 in order of preference with 1 = first preference, 2 = second preference, 3 = third preference

___ Written assignment

___ Key skills test

___ Observation by assessor

___ Witness testimony

___ Spoken questions/interview

___ Internal exam

___ External exam

___ Online tests

___ Presentations

___ Group work

___ Simulation/mock situation

___ Practical test

___ Project work

___ Video/audio recording

___ Other

Please state

___

About your ideas for improving the way you are assessed

24 What has been most positive about the way you have been assessed for this qualification?

1 _____

2 _____

3 _____

25 What has been most negative about the way you have been assessed for this qualification?

1 _____

2 _____

3 _____

Thank you for your time. The sponsors for this research are City and Guilds and the Learning and Skills Research Centre and they will take your views into consideration when reviewing their awards. Please include your details if you want to be entered for the prize draw and return in the prepaid envelope provided.

Name _____

Contact details _____

_____

_____

b
Example for A-level and related college-based learners

This questionnaire aims to explore your experience of the assessment procedures for your qualification. Following analysis, results will be passed on anonymously to the awarding bodies.

To encourage you to complete and return the questionnaire, you can be entered for our prize draw. Your answers will be **anonymous** but if you would like to be entered into our **free prize draw to win £50**, please include your name and contact details at the end. Your responses will not be connected to these details in any way.

Please write your answer in the space provided or tick the appropriate boxes

About you

1 Are you?

☐ male

☐ female

2 How old are you? _____

3 How would you describe your ethnicity?

White British

Other British (please specify) _____

Other (please specify) _____

4 What is your first language? _____

5 Have you any previous qualifications?

☐ GCSEs – 5 or more at level C or above

☐ GCSEs – less than 5 at level C or above

☐ Other (please specify) _____

6 Are you working in some kind of employment currently?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If yes, how many hours per week on average? _____ hours

About the qualification

7 Please state which subject(s) and qualification(s) you are taking

_____

_____

8 When did you enrol?

Month _____ Year _____

9 When do you expect to finish?

Month _____ Year _____

10 Why did you choose this qualification instead of other options?

_____

_____

11 Did anyone help you decide to enrol for this qualification?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If so who?

_____

12 Do you feel you are making good progress?

☐ Yes

☐ No

How do you know?

_____

13 What grade(s) do you expect?

_____

14 Are you intending to take further qualifications after this one?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Don't know

If yes, please state which one(s)

_____

_____

15 Would you recommend this qualification to others?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Please explain your answer

_____

_____

16 **About the assessment process**

How are you assessed? **Please tick all that apply**

☐ Written assignment

☐ Key Skills test

☐ Observation by assessor

☐ Witness testimony

☐ Spoken questions/interview

☐ Internal exam

☐ External exam

☐ Online tests

☐ Presentations

☐ Group work

☐ Simulation/mock situation

☐ Practical test

☐ Project work

☐ Video/audio recording

☐ Other

Please state

_____

17 Did anyone explain to you the way(s) in which you were going to be assessed?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If yes, who explained them to you?

18 How often are you formally assessed?

19 Which of the following best describes your view of the **amount** of support available to you in the run-up to being assessed?

☐ There is lots of support

☐ There is adequate support

☐ There is not enough support

20 Which of the following best describes the **quality** of the support available to you in the run-up to being assessed?

☐ Support is of high quality

☐ Support is of satisfactory quality

☐ Support is of poor quality

21 We are also interested in which assessment methods you prefer. Please rank the top 3 in order of preference with 1 = first preference, 2 = second preference, 3 = third preference

___ Written assignment

___ Key skills test

___ Observation by assessor

___ Witness testimony

___ Spoken questions/interview

___ Internal exam

___ External exam

___ Online tests

___ Presentations

___ Group work

___ Simulation/mock situation

___ Practical test

___ Project work

___ Video/audio recording

___ Other

Please state

About your ideas for improving the way you are assessed

What has been most positive about the way you have been assessed for this qualification?

1

2

3

What has been most negative about the way you have been assessed for this qualification?

1

2

3

Thank you for your time. The sponsors for this research are City and Guilds and the Learning and Skills Research Centre and they will take your views into consideration when reviewing their awards. Please include your details if you want to be entered for the prize draw and return in the prepaid envelope provided.

Name

Contact details

All students

260 completed questionnaires returned from 890 distributed = 34% return.

Table 6
Previous qualifications
Missing responses: 35

Qualification	N	Valid percentage
Degree	2	0.8%
A Levels	5	2.2%
NVQ 3	1	0.4%
GNVQ	8	3.5%
High School Diploma	1	0.4%
BTEC	2	0.8%
GCSE 5 or more at level C or above	95	42.2%
GCSE less than 5 at level C or above	82	36.4%
GCSEs none at level C or above	9	4.0%
NVQ 1 or Progression Award	7	3.1%
None	13	5.8%
Total	225	100.0%

Table 7
How are you assessed?
(Tick all that apply)

	N	Valid percentage
Written assignment	224	86%
Observation by assessor	138	53%
Spoken questions/interview	87	34%
External exam	112	43%
Presentations	137	53%
Simulation/mock situation	69	27%
Project work	106	41%
Key skills test	133	51%
Witness testimony	62	24%
Internal exam	100	39%
Online tests	80	31%
Group work	112	43%
Practical test	95	37%
Video/audio recording	14	5%

Table 8

How would you prefer to be assessed?

(List top three in rank order ie 1 = highest ranking)

a
Analysed by mean score

Assessment method	N	Mean score
1 Written assignments	133	1.53
2 Online tests	44	1.77
3 Practical tests	80	1.86
4 Observation by assessor	59	1.95
5 External exam	52	1.98
6 Project work	73	2.21

b
Analysed by numbers of students who chose the type of assessment as one of their top three

Type of assessment	N
1 Written assignments	133
2 Practical tests	80
3 Project work	73
4 Observation by assessor	59
5 External exam	52
6 Group work	47

NB:

These figures need to be linked to experience of assessment methods (previous question) and possible over-representation of sub-samples in the total. For example, 44 chose online tests as one of their top three methods of assessment but only 80 report having experience of it, virtually all of whom will be MVE apprentices who prefer online testing over paper and pencil testing; hence it is highly ranked in (a), but not (b).

Table 9
Percentage of students
choosing form of
assessment as
preferred top three in
relation to experience

Assessment method	N = experience of	N = choosing 1 of preferred top 3	Percentage
Written assignment	224	133	59.%
Observation by assessor	138	59	43%
Spoken questions/interview	87	33	38%
External exam	112	52	47%
Presentations	137	44	32%
Simulation/mock situation	69	18	26%
Project work	106	73	69%
Key skills test	133	11	8%
Witness testimony	62	2	3%
Internal exam	100	28	28%
Online tests	80	44	55%
Group work	112	47	42%
Practical test	95	80	84%
Video/audio recording	14	1	7%

This shows that the most popular forms of assessment by those
who have experience of them are:

1 Practical test

2 Project work

3 Written assignment

4 Online tests

5 External exam

6 Observation by assessor

Table 10
Are you intending
to take further
qualifications?

Missing responses: 6

Type of assessment	N	Valid percentage
Yes	152	59.8%
No	32	12.6%
Don't know	70	27.6%
Total	254	100.0%

Results by sub-groups

NVQ Level 2 and 3, Modern Apprenticeships, Progression Award (Care and Motor Vehicle)

102 completed questionnaires returned out of 460 distributed to this group of learners.

Table 11
Previous qualifications
Missing responses: 23

Qualification	N	Valid percentage
A-levels	3	3.8%
GNVQ	7	8.9%
GCSE 5 or more at level C or above	18	22.8%
GCSE less than 5 at level C or above	26	32.9%
GCSEs none at level C or above	9	11.4%
NVQ 1 or Progression Award 1	7	8.9%
None	9	11.4%
Total	79	100.0%

Table 12
How are you assessed?
(Tick all that apply)

How assessed	N	Valid percentage
Written assignment	75	73%
Observation by assessor	86	84%
Spoken questions/interview	53	52%
External exam	46	45%
Presentations	29	28%
Simulation/mock situation	27	26%
Project work	14	14%
Key skills test	76	74%
Witness testimony	56	55%
Internal exam	32	31%
Online tests	76	74%
Group work	31	36%
Practical test	30	35%
Video/audio recording	3	3%

Table 13
How would you prefer to be assessed?

(list top three in rank order ie 1 = highest ranking)

a
Analysed by mean score

Type of assessment	N	Mean score
1 Written assignment	24	1.75
2 Online tests	42	1.76
3 Practical tests	35	1.80
4 Observation by assessor	41	2.00
5 External exam	9	2.00
6 Internal exam	5	2.00

b
Analysed by numbers of students who chose the type of assessment as one of their top three

Type of assessment	N
1 Online test	42
2 Observation by assessor	41
3 Practical tests	35
4 Written assignment	24
5 Spoken questions/interview	20
6 Group work	12

The above results are rather counter-intuitive, especially the top ranking in (a) of 'written assignments' and (b) online tests. Most candidates will encounter 'written assignments' either in college-based study or in writing reports on patients/clients (care plans etc). However, the *preference* for 'written assignments' in (a) may be skewed by Social Care NVQ candidates also interpreting their completion of portfolios as evidence of 'written assignments'; the *preference* for online testing in (b) derives from MVE apprentices who prefer online multiple-choice tests over paper-and pencil multiple-choice tests. It may also be the case that some respondents identify methods of 'assessment' with formal classroom study and/or tests, and perhaps don't even know that they are being formally assessed by, for example, routine observation in the workplace.

Table 14
How often do you see your assessor? (Organised by contrasting categories)

How often	N	Valid percentage
Once a month or more	30	48%
Every three months or less	10	15%

There was a low response to this question, with only 63 responses. The remaining 23 who *did* respond reported that they saw their assessor every 6 weeks.

Table 15
For how long? (Again, organised by contrasting categories)

77 students responded to this question

How long	N	Valid percentage
One hour or less	47	61%
Two hours or more	19	28%

NB:

■ 4 students reported that they saw their assessor every 3 months or less and for one hour or less (one for about an hour every 6 months).

■ 1 student reported that he saw his assessor once a week for 2–3 hours.

■ The most reported frequency and duration of visit was every 4–6 weeks for 1–2 hours (25 students).

Table 16
Are you intending to take further qualifications?

Missing responses: 2

How long	N	Valid percentage
Yes	33	33%
No	26	26%
Don't know	41	41%
Total	100	100%

A-level (Business Studies and Sport)

33 completed questionnaires returned out of 120 distributed to this group of learners.

Table 17
Previous qualifications

	N	Valid percentage
GCSE 5 or more at level C or above	32	97%
GCSE less than 5 at level C or above	1	3%
Total	**33**	**100%**

Table 18
How are you assessed?
(Tick all that apply)

How assessed	N	Valid percentage
Written assignment	27	82%
Observation by assessor	2	6%
Spoken questions/interview	2	6%
External exam	25	77%
Presentations	5	15%
Simulation/mock situation	6	18%
Project work	16	48%
Key skills test	2	6%
Witness testimony	0	0%
Internal exam	8	24%
Online tests	1	3%
Group work	5	15%
Practical test	15	45%
Video/audio recording	4	12%

Table 19
How would you prefer to be assessed?

(List top three in rank order ie 1 = highest ranking)

a
Analysed by mean score of rankings

Type of assessment	N	Mean score
1 Practical test	16	1.56
2 External exam	20	1.65
3 Simulation/mock situation	3	2.00
4 Presentations	2	2.00
5 Written assignment	21	2.10
6 Project work	22	2.27

b
Analysed by numbers of students who chose the type of assessment as one of their top three

Type of assessment	N
1 Project work	22
2 Written assignment	21
3 External exam	20
4 Practical test	16
5 Group work	5
6 Internal exam	4

Table 20
Are you intending to take further qualifications?

Missing responses: 1

How long	N	Valid percentage
Yes	20	62.5%
No	2	6.3%
Don't know	10	31.3%
Total	32	100.0%

BTEC/AVCE/BND (Sport and Business Studies)

38 completed questionnaires returned out of 130 distributed to these learners.

Table 21
Previous qualifications
Missing responses: 3

Qualification	N	Valid percentage
Degree	2	5.7%
NVQ 3	1	2.9%
GCSE 5 or more at level C or above	21	60.0%
GCSE less than 5 at level C or above	9	25.7%
None	2	5.7%
Total	35	100.0%

Table 22
How are you assessed?

How assessed	N	Valid percentage
Written assignment	36	95%
Observation by assessor	21	55%
Spoken questions/interview	11	29%
External exam	15	39%
Presentations	30	79%
Simulation/mock situation	13	34%
Project work	22	58%
Key skills test	23	60%
Witness testimony	3	8%
Internal exam	5	12%
Online tests	1	3%
Group work	14	37%
Practical test	14	37%
Video/audio recording	3	8%

Table 23
How would you prefer to be assessed?

(List top three in rank order ie 1 = highest ranking)

a
Analysed by mean score of rankings

Type of assessment	N	Mean score
1 Written assignment	19	1.16
2 Practical test	10	1.60
3 Observation by assessor	9	1.78
4 External exam	9	2.11
5 Spoken questions/interview	4	2.25
6 Simulation/mock situation	8	2.38

b
Analysed by numbers of students who chose the type of assessment as one of their top three

Type of assessment	N
1 Written assignment	19
2 Presentations	13
3 Project work	11
4 Practical test	10
5 Observation by assessor	9
6 External exam	9

Table 24
Are you intending to take further qualifications?

Missing responses: 2

How long	N	Valid percentage
Yes	17	47.2%
No	4	11.1%
Don't know	15	41.7%
Total	36	100.0%

Access students

87 completed questionnaires were returned out of 180

Qualification	N	Valid percentage
A-levels	2	2.6%
Advanced GNVQ	1	1.3%
High School Diploma	1	1.3%
BTEC	2	2.6%
GCSEs 5 or more at level C or above	24	30.7%
GCSEs less than 5 at level C or above	46	59.0%
None	2	2.6%
Total	78	100.0%

How assessed	N	Valid percentage
Written assignment	86	100%
Observation by assessor	29	33%
Spoken questions/interview	21	24%
External exam	26	30%
Presentations	73	84%
Simulation/mock situation	23	26%
Project work	54	62%
Key skills test	32	37%
Witness testimony	3	3%
Internal exam	55	63%
Online tests	2	2%
Group work	62	71%
Practical test	36	41%
Video/audio recording	4	4%

Table 27
How would you prefer to be assessed?

(List top three in rank order ie 1 = highest ranking)

a
Analysed by mean score

Assessment method	N	Mean score
1 Written assignment	69	1.38
2 Observation by assessor	8	1.88
3 Project work	34	2.00
4 Spoken questions/interview	9	2.11
5 Internal exam	17	2.35
6= External exam	14	2.36
6= Presentations	28	2.36
6= Group work	25	2.36

b
Analysed by numbers of students who chose the type of assessment as one of their top three

Type of assessment	N
1 Written assignment	69
2 Project work	34
3 Presentations	28
4 Group work	25
5 Practical test	19
6 Internal exam	17

Table 28
Are you intending to take further qualifications?

Missing responses: 1

How long	N	Valid percentage
Yes	82	95.3%
Don't know	4	4.7%
Total	86	100.0%

Which course/qualification?

All students were intending to enrol at university, most to do a degree (including teacher training and nursing) and some to do a diploma in nursing.

To assess school attendance of the two groups, a one-tailed independent samples t-test was used. Results. iv. demonstrated that kindergarten children who received the IPAC program increased their physical activity and reached the academic performance level of the control group by the end of the school year. Most recently, two recent studies are the first to explore changes in the preadolescent brain by use of (fMRI) techniques. Chaddock, Erickson, Prakash, VanPatter, et al. (2010) explored the association between childhood aerobic fitness and basal ganglia structure and. 7. function. The researchers used the MRI technique to detect changes in the basal ganglia that is involved in attentional control. 283 The research The findings on which this paper is based derive from a Learning and Skills Research Centre (LSRC) funded research project, 'The impact of different modes and methods of assessment on achievement and progress in the learning and skills sector' (additional support was provided by City & Guilds and the 'University for Industry', UfI). The project was commissioned to investigate whether or not, and if so, how, use of different assessment methods makes a difference to learner achievement and progress in post-compulsory education and training. A review of the literature on asse... The impact of different modes of assessment on achievement and progress in the learning and skills sector. London: Learning and Skills Development Agency.Google Scholar. Unit for Development of Adult and Continuing Education. (1989). Understanding learning outcomes. Cite this chapter as: Ecclestone K. (2009) Instrumental or Sustainable Learning? The Impact of Learning Cultures on Formative Assessment in Vocational Education. In: Joughin G. (eds) Assessment, Learning and Judgement in Higher Education. Springer, Dordrecht. First Online 13 November 2008.