QCF qualifications as a catalyst for learning and performance:
an investigation into the link between vocational qualifications and skills

by
Debbie Ann Tuckwood

A thesis submitted to the Centre of Labour Market Studies
at University of Leicester in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctorate in Social Sciences.

Approved

University of Leicester, England

May 2012

QCF qualifications as a catalyst for learning and performance: an investigation into the link between vocational qualifications and skills

Debbie Ann Tuckwood

Abstract

During the 2000s, the former UK Government introduced the Qualification and Credit Framework (QCF) in an attempt to increase the relevance of qualifications and the qualification level of the UK labour force (HMSO 2006). However views about the value of the QCF and qualifications generally are contested.

Through longitudinal case study research, the thesis finds a vocational purpose for qualifications that supports a culture of continuous improvement. This results in models that contribute to thinking about vocational learning and the role of qualifications, and provide a conceptional bridge between paradigms of workplace learning and concepts of organisational excellence.

The thesis explores common understanding of learning and skills to explain issues relating to National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) and the QCF. In particular the thesis identifies significant implementation problems for the QCF due to differing ontological and epistemological understanding of the meaning of skills and their measurement, and requirements for different delivery and assessment models. In addition, the study identifies that rapidly changing organisational arrangements and regulation hinder the establishment of a more diverse and inclusive QCF.

The thesis concludes that the QCF best fits Hager's (2002) concept of learning that encompasses learning of many different kinds. Also the QCF is valuable as a flexible framework that establishes a degree of order in complex, rapidly changing learning environments. However the qualifications require broadly specified assessment criteria, and links to external communities of practice and associated learning packages.

Key words

QCF, Qualifications and Credit Framework, vocational qualifications, skills, performance, skills development, skills measurement, workplace learning, organisational excellence, Ofqual, Sector Skills Councils, communities of practice, NVQs, learning packages, competence.

Acknowledgements

Preparation for a doctorate as a distance learning student is in many ways a solitary activity; however there are several people that I would like to thank who have helped me.

I wish to thank Dr Johnny Sung for his inspirational support and for persuading me to join the programme in the first place. Thanks to the Centre of Labour Market Studies, University of Leicester for fascinating course materials that challenged me to think differently, and for all who provided encouraging feedback on assignments, without which I would not have reached the research stage. Thanks to Philip King, CEO at the Institute of Credit Management, for his encouragement and helping me build an interesting role that has facilitated this research, and to all who participated in the research. Thanks to my father, George Hayward, who helped get me started, and my daughters, Holly and Sophie, who thought it would be 'cool' for their Mum to have a doctorate and wouldn't let me give up. But I reserve special thanks for my husband, Bob, who has given up much, never complained and provided daily support – so this thesis is dedicated him.

List of tables

1	Design criteria for QCF units	85
2	Research sample and summary of data collection	106
3	Semi-structured interview guide	113
4	Example interview questions	113
5	Distribution of HPWP adoption in 2005	127
6	HR and other organisational practices	128
7	Selection of High Performance Working Practices (HPWPs)	129
8	Credit management roles	130
9	Range of Key Performance Indicators	131
10	Summary of training and qualification activity	132
11	Reasons for support for qualifications for credit management employees	140
12	Features valued in qualifications for credit management employees	154
13	Impact on performance as a result of studying for qualifications	160
14	Summary of data collection methods	Appendix B
15	Operations managers' views of impact of qualifications	Appendix D

List of figures

1	Simplified model for volume of enterprise training	36
2	Organisational strategy and training purpose relationship	37
3	Competitive Strategy Model for Skills Utilisation	38
4	Internal and External Vocational Learning Model	77
5	Summary of methodology	104
6	Vocational Purpose of Qualifications Model	179

Abbreviations

BIS	Department for Business Innovation and Skills
DE	Department of Employment
DES	Department for Education and Science
DfEE	Department for Education and Employment
DTI	Department for Trade and Industry
HM Treasury	Her Majesty's Treasury
HPWO	High performance working organisation
HPWP	High performance working practices
HR	Human resource
KPI	Key performance indicator
LSC	Learning and Skills Council
MSC	Manpower Services Commission
NCVQ	National Council for Vocational Qualifications
NVQ	National Vocational Qualifications
NQF	National Qualification Framework
NQs	National Qualifications System (Scotland)
N/R	Not relevant
Ofqual	Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation
QCA	Qualifications and Curriculum Authority
QCF	Qualifications and Credit Framework
Scotcat	Scottish Credit Accumulation and Transfer System
SCQF	Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework
SSC	Sector Skills Council
SVQ	Scottish Vocational Qualification
VET	Vocational education and training
YTS	Youth Training Scheme

Contents

1 Introduction

1.1 Background to research 11
1.2 Research problem and contribution 14
1.3 Justification for research 16
1.4 Outline of thesis 17
1.5 Delimitations of scope, key assumptions and their justification 19
1.6 Conclusion 21

2 Value of qualifications

2.1 Introduction 22
2.2 The ‘drivers’ for skills development and measurement 24
2.3 Qualifications as measures of skill 25
2.4 Link between qualifications, skills and performance 26
2.5 Individual demand for skills and qualifications 28
2.6 Employer demand for skills and qualifications 34
2.7 Critical appraisal of use of qualifications to raise skills levels 39
2.8 Contrasting competitive strategies in call centres 40
2.9 Government approach to skills development 43
2.10 Conclusions 46

3 Impact of NVQs on skills and performance

3.1 Introduction 48
3.2 Introduction of NVQs 48
3.3 Assessment of impact of NVQs 51
3.4 Conclusion 54

4 Implementation of the QCF

4.1	Introduction	57
4.2	Vision of the QCF	57
4.3	Implementation problems	58
4.4	Scottish lessons	61
4.5	'Insider view' of implementation problems	62
4.6	Conclusion	67

5 Nature of skills, learning and qualifications

5.1	Introduction	68
5.2	Paradigms of learning	68
5.3	Internal and External Vocational Learning Model	75
5.4	Contested nature of skills	81
5.5	Review of QCF qualifications	85
5.6	Conclusion	87

6 Methodology

6.1	Introduction	89
6.2	Justification for methodology	90
6.3	Case study selection	98
6.4	Research questions	100
6.5	Data collection	105
6.6	Administration	117
6.7	Limitations of methodology	118
6.8	Assumptions	120
6.9	Validity and reliability issues	121
6.10	Ethical considerations	123
6.11	Conclusion	125

7 Case study characteristics

7.1	Introduction	126
7.2	High performance working practices	126
7.3	Roles and responsibilities	130
7.4	Performance measures	130
7.5	Investment in training	131
7.6	Impact of ‘credit crunch’	133
7.7	Conclusion	134

8 Impact of QCF on skills and performance

8.1	Introduction	135
8.2	Employer engagement	136
8.3	Qualification design	152
8.4	Qualifications as a catalyst for performance	158
8.5	Qualification achievement	167
8.6	Conclusion	168

9 Research findings

9.1	Introduction	169
9.2	Link between qualifications and skills	169
9.3	Value of the QCF	174
9.4	Vocational purpose of qualifications	177
9.5	Conclusion	180

10 Conclusion

10.1	Introduction	181
10.2	Implications for theory	182
10.3	Implications for policy and practice	187

10.4 Limitations 190
10.5 Implications for methodology 191
10.6 Further research 192
10.7 Conclusion 193

Bibliography 196

Appendices

A Definitions 207
B Summary of data collection methods 210
C Confidentiality agreement 212
D Operations managers' views of impact of qualifications 213

Addenda

1 Summary

1.1 Summary of research activity
1.2` Telecoms companies' summary of contact
1.3 Summary of emails including informed consent form
1.4 Risk assessment
1.5 Structured survey

2 Survey results

2.1 COMPANY A
2.1.1 Survey results
2.1.2 Recording
2.1.3 Transcript
2.2 COMPANY B
2.2.1 Survey results
2.2.2 Recording

2.3 COMPANY C
2.4 COMPANY D
2.4.1 Survey results
2.4.2 Recording
2.4.3 Transcript

3 Survey analysis

4 Interviews

4.1 COMPANY A
4.1.1 Recording
4.1.2 Transcript
4.1.3 Reflection
4.2 COMPANY B
4.2.1.1 Interview frame
4.2.1.2 Recording part A
4.2.1.3 Recording part B
4.2.2 Transcript
4.2.3 Reflection
4.3 COMPANY D
4.3.1.1 Interview frame
4.3.1.2 Recording
4.3.2 Transcript
4.3.3 Reflection

CHAPTER 1 Introduction

1.1 Background to research

> *'Only some types of workplace learning, usually those most easily accounted for using an acquisition metaphor, are susceptible to the clear identification and measurement of possible attainment.'* (Hodkinson & Hodkinson 2004: 261)

> *'Further research is needed to expand our understanding of learning from work and the most appropriate ways of measuring its progress and enhancing its development.'* (Hager 2004: 27)

The role of qualifications is contested. Theoretical studies tend to link qualifications to a 'learning as attainment' model where individuals gain qualifications having acquired knowledge on a course (Beckett and Hager 2002; Felstead et al 2005). However, qualifications equally relate to the certification of prior learning and experience which may not involve a formal course of study. Also, there is confusion around the meaning of qualifications in relation to skill. Official documents often use the terms 'qualifications' and 'skill' as though they were synonymous, which results in a narrative which is imprecise and misleading (Keep 2009b). As Attewell (1990) states:

> *'Like so many common-sense concepts, skill proves on reflection to be a complex and ambiguous idea . . . At the core of all definitions is the idea of competence or proficiency – the ability to do something well . . . (however)*

it is ambiguous whether the term indicates mere adequacy or superior, extraordinary ability.' (Attewell 1990: 422-423)

The literature has long criticised UK vocational education and training (VET) policies and questioned the value of external training and qualifications in raising workplace performance (Finegold & Solskice 1988; Unwin 2004; Eraut 2004; Hager 2004; Hodkinson & Hodkinson 2004; Felstead et al 2005). New forms of working seem to 'discount' certification and formal courses 'in favour of informal learning and demonstrated work performance' (Pillay et al 2003: 763). Also, recent research has tended to focus on the nature of workplace learning with limited interest in the role of qualifications.

In contrast, recent governments have emphasised the importance of qualifications (see (LSC 2006b; Leitch 2006). They use qualifications as a proxy to measure skill, and as a conduit of funds to develop skills for social, political and economic purposes. According to Leitch[1], 'Skill is the most important lever within our control to create wealth and to reduce social deprivation', (Leitch 2006:2). Major policy initiatives in England and Wales include the introduction of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ), the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and more recently a credit-based qualifications framework, the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) to 'enable individuals and employers to establish routes to achievement that are appropriate to their needs.' (QCA 2008:6). In November 2010, the UK Business Plan 2010 – 2015 established a coalition priority to 'safeguard the UK's long term growth by promoting

[1] The UK Government commissioned Leitch in 2004 to undertake an independent review of the UK's long term skills needs. The final report 'Leitch Review of Skills: Prosperity for all in the global economy - world class skills,' argued that the UK must urgently raise achievements at all levels of skills. Keep, Mayhew and Payne (2006) criticise the extent that government policies rely on increasing the supply of skills in order to increase productivity.

skills' in order to 'build an internationally competitive skills base' through the creation of a 'dynamic and efficient skills system with informed, empowered learners and employers served by responsive colleges and other providers in their areas' (BIS 2010: 3).

As a nation, Ofqual states that the UK spends around £1 billion on regulated vocational and general qualifications (Ofqual 2010), excluding education and training, and the number of accredited awarding bodies has grown from 98 in 2002 to 144 in 2009 (Ofqual 2010). In 2009 awarding bodies offered almost 10,000 different regulated qualifications (Ofqual 2010). Ofqual states:

> *'Education and training are critical to the performance of the economy and a key driver of social mobility. Qualifications are awarded to recognise learners' achievements. Without such recognition many of the benefits of education and training would be lost.'* (Ofqual 2010b:5)

However despite this investment in the re-organisation of VET and qualifications, there has been limited success in encouraging progression from qualification levels 2 to 3 (Tamkin et al 2004; LSC 2005; Hogarth & Wilson 2007) which indicates that other factors are significant.

Critics of government policy suggest that it is unrealistic to assume that employers will invest in VET and qualifications if they are pursuing a low-skill, low-value business strategy and making a profit (Keep 2002; Wilson and Hogarth 2003; Unwin 2004; Mason 2004; Keep 2009b). They argue that demand for qualifications depends on the quality of management, the competitive strategy of organisations, job design and

requirements for highly qualified labour. However, multiple case study research into organisations with high performing working practices and established learning environments indicates that demand for qualifications is limited (Sung & Ashton 2005), which raises questions about government policy and the role of qualifications in raising skills and performance. In addition, Wolf (2011) comments that 'using government-driven qualification design as the main policy and reform instrument in vocational education is a serious mistake' (Wolf 2011:139).

The following section explains the research in respect to this contested area and its contribution.

1.2 Research problem and contribution

QCF qualifications as a catalyst for learning and performance: an investigation into the link between vocational qualifications and skills

Through a review of the literature and longitudinal case study research of credit management departments in telecoms companies, I aim to investigate the link between vocational qualifications and skills, and the extent that QCF qualifications are a catalyst for learning and performance. The research area (above) is broad to allow an exploration of existing literature, theory, policy and practice in relation to vocational learning, qualifications and skills. As Mason (2005) says, for qualitative researchers this acts as a 'springboard for launching their own research in ways which connect it with current debates' (2005:20). Specific key questions relate to the link between qualifications and skills, and the value of the QCF as explained next.

1.2.1 Link between qualifications and skills

The literature review focuses on five questions in relation to this link:

- What are the 'drivers' for skills development and measurement?
- What is the demand for qualifications and skills?
- What is the English government's approach to qualifications?

(see section 6.4 for detail)

1.2.2 Value of the QCF

Second, the literature review considers NVQs and credit frameworks generally before focusing on theoretical and practical questions relating to the QCF. Then case study research aims to evaluate the initial success of the QCF and to understand how employers use QCF qualifications. The research focuses on three key questions and six sub-questions:

- What is the nature of skills, learning and qualifications?
- Why has the QCF experienced implementation problems?
- To what extent do employers use qualifications as a catalyst for learning and performance?
    - Does the introduction of the QCF influence an organisation's support for qualifications?
    - What factors influence decision-making?
    - How do organisations design QCF qualifications and assessment to achieve business objectives?

- What factors influence the design process?
- To what extent do employers link QCF qualifications with skills and performance?
- To what extent and in what ways do organisations integrate QCF qualifications with high performance working practices?

This small scale study makes no claims to be representative of all vocational qualifications or the views of all companies. However, due to the importance of the sector under investigation (telecoms), the size of the companies involved, and links between the study, literature and theory, the research provides a valuable insight into vocational learning, qualifications and skills. Also due to my role as an educational practitioner within a professional body and awarding organisation, working closely with employers to develop qualification solutions, I provide a useful 'insider' view to the analysis of the QCF which helps to explain reasons for polarised views about the meaning of skills, qualifications and their role in the workplace. Also I have developed models to identify the vocational purpose of qualifications (Figure 6), and the relationship between internal and external vocational learning (Figure 4).

1.3 Justification for research

Qualifications and their link to learning, skills and performance are important areas which are relatively under-researched, particularly in relation to the QCF, and therefore this research is valuable. Unwin et al (2004) conclude following a review of the impact of vocational qualifications that:

> *'The literature and evidence-base for vocational qualifications is inadequate and policy makers, and often researchers, tend to neglect history, and 're-invent in a slightly different form, ideas/products that have previously failed.'* (Unwin et al 2004: 8.30).

The QCF is significant both in terms of skills development and the level of investment requirement for its establishment. However, despite considerable investment in a new credit-based qualifications framework (see section 4.3), the government has not assessed the ability of the QCF to raise engagement in skills development and qualifications. Instead evaluation has concentrated on QCF regulation (Ofqual, 2010).

Also, there are limited studies that focus on the relationship between qualifications and skills. Research tends to centre on levels of training with limited consideration of the meaning of skills and how this relates to qualifications. Few studies investigate how employers use qualifications to achieve specific workplace objectives or the role of professional bodies.

Through this thesis, I start to redress the balance with a theoretical and practical study of the relationship between vocational learning, qualifications and skills.

1.4 Outline of thesis

The thesis commences with consideration of the value of vocational qualifications to individuals and employers, and considers drivers for skills development and

measurement; the link between qualifications, skills and performance; and the government approach to skills development.

Chapters 3 and 4 focus more specifically on vocational qualifications; first NVQs and other qualification frameworks, then the implementation of the QCF. I offer an 'insider view' to implementation problems from a professional body perspective, and use organisational theory to critique the government's approach.

Chapter 5 attempts to understand the contested role of qualifications through a review of the meaning of vocational learning and skills. This helps identify the importance of broad assessment criteria for the QCF and problems associated with use of the term 'competency'. Also I propose a model that highlights the relationship between internal and external vocational learning.

Chapter 6 explains research methodology, research questions, main assumptions, ethical considerations and validity and reliability issues. This is followed by a detailed description. Then chapter 7 and 8 analyse case study research data in relation to employers' engagement in qualifications, views about the design of the QCF and the impact on performance. This leads to the development of a model that identifies a 'Vocational Purpose of Qualifications'.

Finally, the thesis concludes with a summary of findings, consideration of implications for theory, policy, practice and methodology, and identification of areas for further research.

1.5 Delimitations of scope, key assumptions and their justification

The introductory chapters consider broadly the link between vocational qualifications and skills before narrowing down to NVQs and credit frameworks, in particular the QCF. Research relates specifically to the design of the QCF, although other aspects, such as the value of qualifications and links to performance could equally relate to other qualifications. As most participants have little experience of the QCF, the research did not try to distinguish attitudes about the QCF from qualifications generally.

The research relates specifically to credit management departments in the telecoms sector. These are tightly controlled environments that traditionally have not invested in qualifications. However conclusions relate more closely to high performing working organisations (HPWOs) than credit management departments in other sectors or to restricted working environments generally. The case study companies use a wide range of HR practices and therefore theoretical conclusions in relation to the value of QCF qualifications may extend to other HPWOs (see concluding chapter).

The research makes several assumptions that are typical of qualitative, interpretivist studies. First, the researcher collects data in an active and reflexive way, and therefore interacts with the participant even for the structured survey. Thus participation in the study is likely to encourage favourable views about the QCF because the interviewer is knowledgeable and able to explain the QCF and facilitate implementation.

Also my association with a professional body, the Institute of Credit Management (ICM) will influence my interpretation of social reality. The ICM is a small educational

charity which was established in 1939. The Institute is run by credit managers for people working in credit management, with the mission to promote ‘excellence in credit management’ (ICM 2012). The Institute provides specialised services, including nationally regulated qualifications for the rapidly changing function. The Institute’s vision is to ‘empower credit professionals’ in a range of ways for example, by ‘being a centre of expertise for credit management’; ‘maintaining relevant and up-to-date qualifications and occupational standards’; ‘improving skills and standards through a growing membership’; ‘continuously improving our products and services and being the first-choice provider.’ Influenced by this vision, I understand the value of specialist communities, qualifications linked to shared values and practices (Young 2002: 0) and need for ‘coherent packages of learning’ (Keep and James 2010: 11). Also I am likely to be critical of policies that threaten these services.

Second, the researcher and participants are likely to ‘hear’ and interpret questions in different ways. Therefore interpretation and responses are unlikely to be standardised, and the study makes no claims to understand fully the complexities of any discussion.

Further research assumes that participants are fairly knowledgeable about the value and impact of qualifications, due to their role and level of experience in credit management. Also it expects a high level of congruence between their views and organisational strategy due to the impact of high performance working practices.

1.6 Conclusion

The thesis demonstrates the value of longitudinal qualitative studies that combine a quantitative element and detailed literature view to develop a fine-grained 'insider' view. Also the study highlights the importance of further research into the vocational purpose of qualifications and the value of professional bodies.

The link between qualifications and skills is complex due to polarised views about the meaning of skills and differing ontological and epistemological views about qualifications and their role in the workplace. This results in imprecise terminology, incompatible aims, conflicting policies and regulation issues.

However the thesis considers that the QCF is valuable as a catalyst for performance due to the ability to establish flexible pathways of lifelong learning that can encompass and recognise a range of learning experiences and support a culture of continuous improvement. The thesis concludes that the QCF is valuable as a flexible framework that establishes a degree of order in complex, rapidly changing learning environments.

CHAPTER 2 Value of qualifications

2.1 Introduction

This chapter sets the scene with consideration of the value of qualifications to employers and individuals.

Traditionally qualifications in the UK have acted as a benchmark and 'proxy' for skill (see section 2.3). Thus they have moved increasingly 'centre-stage' as UK policies have emphasised that economic competitiveness and national well-being depends on the skill of our workforce; supported by a growing weight of evidence that indicates a positive link between higher skills and higher productivity (Tamkin et al 2004; IFF 2004; Leitch 2006; Hogarth & Wilson 2007). There have long been attempts to reform qualifications as a means to raise skills levels (Unwin et al 2004: 3.36). However, difficulties suggest a complex link between qualifications, skills and performance.

Eraut (2001) argues that problems in relation to vocational qualifications stem from the range of purposes that governments have for vocational qualifications (VQs) which are sometimes conflicting (section 2.2). Whereas others are critical of the diversity of vocational qualifications and imply that government should 'bring coherence to VQ provision' (Unwin et al 2004: 3.9 referring to reforms in the 1960s – see chapter 3 more detailed explanation). For example Green (1998) asserts that:

> *'The development of VQs has the same characteristics as the development of technical and vocational education: 'localised, fragmented and*

> *voluntaristic'. Unlike the case of general education, there was no state intervention in or co-ordination of technical and vocational education, leaving it 'institutionally marooned between the workplace and mainstream education.' (1998: 299)*

Understanding of the meaning of skills is contested (see section 5.4). Thus critics, such as Ainley (1994), point out that 'the notion of skill has always perhaps been 'essentially indefinable'' (Ainley 1994, in Payne 1999: 1). Also Payne (1999) argues that the skill which vocational qualifications aim to develop in response to employer demand (Leitch 2006) has now become 'both broader and more conceptually equivocal than it has ever been' (1999:1).

Each highlights conflicting views and demands, which suggest that perceptions of the benefits of vocational qualifications, and ideas about how VET should be organised vary not only between learners and employers for different qualifications (Unwin et al 2008), but also between academics and policy makers.

This chapter identifies first the 'drivers' for skills development, the use of qualifications as measures of skills, and the link between qualifications, skills and performance for individuals and employers. Then it critiques the government's use of independent awarding bodies, funding and qualification reform as a policy mechanism to raise skills and performance.

2.2 The ‘drivers’ for skills development and measurement

The vision of a ‘knowledge’ economy competing for high value work in a global market has attracted UK governments. Hence governments tend to be the main ‘drivers’ for skills development and qualifications (Ashton & Sung 2002; Ashton 2004; Coffield 2004; Fuller et al 2004). For example, the 2003 White Paper, ‘21st Century Skill – Realising our Potential’ stated:

> *‘The global economy has made largely extinct the notion of a ‘job for life’. The imperative now is employability for life. Competing on the basis of low wage costs is not an option. We must compete on the basis of our capability for innovation, enterprise, quality, and adding greater value through our products and services. All of that is dependent on raising our skill game.’* (DfES, 2003: 11).

This vision has established priorities for UK policy to develop high level skills for a global context, and successive reports associate economic prosperity, business effectiveness and social well-being closely with the quality of the nation’s human capital (DfES 2003; Campbell & Garrett 2004; Leitch 2006; Hogarth & Wilson 2007). For example in 2007, the ‘Skills in England Research Report’ stated:

> *‘Ultimately the capacity to operate in high value-added sectors of the world economy requires management to have the strategic vision to identify and enter those markets, and a workforce capable of turning that vision into reality.’* (Hogarth & Wilson 2007: 2)

Eraut (2001) identifies six purposes which governments seem to have for vocational qualifications. The first three relate to economic goals, with interest in the development of skills for economic development; the accreditation of skills to assist employers with recruitment, and the creation of a more flexible labour market. The last three relate to social and political policies that reflect ambitions to enhance employability; 'provide a better learning context for low performers or discouraged learners', and delay entry into the labour market in times of high unemployment (Eraut 2001: 88).

In this context, the government uses qualifications as a means to measure and develop skill.

2.3 Qualifications as measures of skill

Governments use qualifications as a benchmark for skills. Qualification level and other proxies such as years of education, investment in training and hours of training, help identify regional, national, international or sectoral patterns and influence the development of policy regarding skill and funding priorities. Other methods such as self-assessment of skill level and skill tests help build a more detailed picture; although are less widely used because they are costly and time-consuming to administer (Borghans et al 2001).

The usefulness of each method depends on the purpose of research, the concept of skill which is the focus of study, and issues of reliability and feasibility (Felstead et al 2007). Researchers use these proxies either in isolation or combined for a general measurement of skill.

As ‘qualification level’ is determined by an external authority, such as an awarding body, it is commonly used for general measurement of country variations and international comparisons, being thought to provide an objective measure of skill. Thus qualifications are valuable as ‘tangible outcomes of training’ for individuals, employers, learning providers and governments (Ridoutt et al 2005 14). For example, data on qualifications help track skill levels over time; compare skill levels in different sectors and sections of the workforce; and identify the strengths and weaknesses of UK skills policies and education system.

Results of such research, though broad and not identifying uncertificated knowledge, help determine the quality of human capital, potential international competitiveness and relative productivity. They also form the basis of studies that investigate a link between qualifications, skills and performance, as explained next.

2.4 Link between qualifications, skills and performance

Evidence of a connection between higher skill and greater productivity has encouraged a policy focusing on skill development and qualification reform (Campbell & Garrett 2004; Hogarth & Wilson 2007). The former DTI and Leitch Review suggest four areas where higher skills raise performance. First, skilled employees are more able to undertake complex work and produce higher value products. Second, investment in innovation and technology is more profitable when combined with skilled labour. Third, higher skilled employees are better able to adapt to changing work environments and implement new technology and processes. Lastly, other employees learn from more

highly skilled colleagues which results in performance 'spill-over' effects within organisations and society as a whole (Leitch 2006; Hogarth and Wilson 2007).

Researchers have used qualification level as a general measure of skill level to investigate the link between skill and performance. For example, Haskel and Hawkes (2003) find the workforce in top performing manufacturing companies are on average an extra qualification level higher than those in bottom performing companies. This suggests that higher level skills lead to greater innovation and more sophisticated production processes and therefore higher quality, higher value products. Also, Mason and Wilson (2003) find that an additional year of education among the workforce of British firms in manufacturing and service industries increases a firm's productivity.

Qualitative surveys show a relationship between general skill levels, skill development and productivity. For example, Spilsbury (2002) finds that 65% of employers in England who ran training for their employees over the previous 12 months identified productivity gains, and 47% of employers in the private sector considered training increased profits (Dearden et al 2000; Cosh et al 2003). Also, research involving matched comparisons between organisations in Britain and Germany concluded that Germany benefitted from higher levels of productivity, quality and a greater range of industries because of a more effective training system (Steedman & Wagner 1989).

However, the contribution of training and qualifications to productivity is hard to isolate due to difficulties in separating variables at organisational level. In addition, Finegold (1991) highlights the role of managers and other actors such as employees and governments in making decisions about training (Finegold and Soskice 1988; Finegold

1991). This leads to a complex relationship between skills, qualifications and performance that results in a fragmented picture.

The following sections explore the extent that individuals and employers link skills with qualifications, and the impact of government intervention.

2.5 Individual demand for skills and qualifications

Grugulis (2006) identifies that individuals develop skill through experience, a course or possess attributes classed as 'skill'. The value of this skill creates demand for qualifications, and depends itself on supply and demand in the labour market as shown next.

First, jobs require different combinations and levels of skill, and this is linked to the organisation of production. Therefore skill requirements alter in response to changing technology and organisational practices. Thus Raggatt and Williams (1999) identify that VET and qualifications grew in a 'localised, fragmented and voluntaristic manner' from the mid-19th century in response to specific employer demands because there was limited central control (1999: 6-7).

Young (2002) records that until the 1970s, vocational qualifications tended to be based on knowledge of areas of science and mathematics relevant to each occupational area. Application of knowledge was left to individual employers due to delivery and assessment difficulties, and the need to protect the 'trade secrets' of individual companies. To some extent this protectionism remains, exemplified by the existence of

restricted units in the QCF and a broad range of vocational qualifications and awarding bodies (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2005: 1.10).

Second, society tends to categorise levels of skill according to its incidence and complexity. Therefore when the nature of production evolves, the meaning of skill changes, because the two elements are inextricably linked, and training and qualification requirements change. For example, Felstead et al (2007) have identified that since 1986 there has been greater use of high-skilled labour in UK workplaces (2007: 166). Surveys show that increasing proportions of employees need to 'keep learning in their role' and require long periods of initial training time. This implies that the nature of work is changing rapidly and has become more complex. Also, it suggests that workplace learning has become more important.

National employer surveys support this view and indicate increased requirements for employee IT skills, customer handling skills, communication, problem solving and team working skills (Shury et al 2006). Also, Felstead et al (2007) report strong demand for computing, complex problem-solving, communication, persuasion and influencing skills (2007: 167).

There are contrasting interpretations regarding the value of vocational qualifications for individuals in these circumstances. Eraut (2001) argues that employers 'select what they believe to be the best talent using general qualifications and personal qualities' (2001: 89), rather than use vocational qualifications as an indicator of specific workplace skills. This supports ideas expressed in the 'screening hypothesis' that employers treat educational qualifications as a signal of underlying favourable qualities, such as

intrinsic ability, motivation and lower propensities to quit or be absent from work (Hogarth & Wilson 2007:204). Furthermore, although Felstead et al (2007) note stable returns for qualifications, they are uncertain if the value of qualifications is attributable to skills gained during a course, or reflect the possession of other skills.

Likewise, Fuller and Unwin's (1999) survey of qualification levels of steel workers finds no link between qualifications and performance, because although a large proportion of employees (45%) had no formal qualifications, there was no evidence of under-performance from unqualified staff. Consequently they question the credentialist view, endorsed by government, that formally qualified employees are more skilled than those without qualifications.

Nevertheless, Unwin et al (2004) are more positive about interest in vocational qualifications, and report continued demand for qualifications that are workplace linked and delivered off-the-job, especially if they are closely associated with areas of work (2004: 9.11). Evidence from employees supports these findings; for example, Felstead et al (2007) find that over half (55%) of employees wanted to gain additional skills or qualifications over the next three years, of which most (34%) look to acquire vocational or professional qualifications (2007: 153).

In particular, Fuller and Unwin (2004) find an appetite for learning in dynamic workplaces. In their survey of older and experienced workers, 88% of employees report that 'it takes a long time to learn how to do my job well'; 70% disagree with the statement that 'training wouldn't help me to do my job better' and 25% are interested in learning beyond the parameters of what they need to know in order to 'perform their

(current) jobs effectively' (2004: 6-7). However individual demand for qualifications depends on the nature of work, organisational culture and a range of socio-economic factors.

First, Fuller and Unwin's (2004) case study research into Modern Apprenticeships shows that learning opportunities for apprentices vary according to the working environment. They distinguish expansive and restrictive approaches to workforce development and argue that expansive approaches include access to a range of qualifications, including knowledge-based vocational qualifications. Likewise Purcell et al (2003: xi) argue that performance is a function of individual ability, motivation and opportunity, and Ashton (2004) relates individual motivation to engage in skill development to prior experience; the extent that an organisation facilitates access to knowledge and information; opportunities to practice and develop new skills; and the level of support and rewards for learning.

Second, Keep (2009) identifies two categories of incentives that influence an individual's decision to invest in qualifications. Type 1 (internal) incentives relate to intrinsic interest in learning that can be enhanced by better access to training and qualifications. Type 2 (external) incentives range from straightforward economic benefits to incentives that are embedded in family and social relationships, the structure of society, labour market and wider economy; examples include wage returns/premia associated with a qualification; career progression through the acquisition of valuable skills; benefits of higher status from qualifications linked to entry into a particular profession or occupation; cultural expectations; labour market regulation; and non-economic benefits such as increased personnel satisfaction and well-being. Keep (2009)

argues that Type 2 Incentives are powerful relative to many Type 1 incentives, with the result that there are limits to the extent that public subsidy or the reorganisation of VET can influence uptake of qualifications in the absence of Type 2 incentives.

Third, research shows that the link between qualifications and skills is often mediated by considerations of power and control (Coffield 1999), with the reality being that qualifications, knowledge and skill are seen as a source of power and authority. Notions about 'power' in relation to the meaning of skill help clarify the link with qualifications. Being 'skilled' can both confer social status and stem from it (Gallie 1994; Penn, 1984, in Grugulis & Vincent 2004: 1). This is exemplified by the growth of professional bodies. Unwin et al (2004) describe how, in the 19th century, occupational groups 'categorised themselves and were, or came to be recognised as 'professions'' (2004: 3.6). These organisations specified the content of qualifications, laid down codes of ethical behaviour and sought legitimacy through royal charter. In addition, they established entry requirements that later became regarded by UK government bodies and others as 'barriers to access' (see for example MSD/DES, 1986 in Unwin et al 2004: 3.12).

In addition, Grugulis and Vincent (2004: 1) identify contradictions in the meaning of skill. For example, work carried out by those classed as 'high status' is sometimes regarded as 'skilled' regardless of complexity (Philips and Taylor 1986). Similarly, employees who gain status or collective power may be regarded as 'skilled' having harnessed this power at work (Turner 1962).

In a similar way, the literature relating to vocational qualifications shows that considerations of power and control, such as the status of the skill, government intervention and power relations within organisations, mediate the uptake of vocational qualifications.

First, qualifications are obligatory for some highly skilled professional areas, such as law and medicine because they 'give some degree of assurance to the public about the competence of members' (Eraut 1994: 163). Second, uptake of vocational qualifications depends on factors such as their currency in the labour market and links to professional and career pathways (Unwin et al 2004: 9.3). Third, government controls demand thorough regulatory arrangements. For example, vocational qualifications are expected in the financial services, care and construction sectors (2004: 9.8). Thus, there is not a simple relationship between qualifications and skills; the value of qualifications is influenced by factors beyond the intrinsic nature of the qualification itself.

Billett (2004) identifies work-based prejudices regarding access to training and the certification of skill, noting that there is evidence of 'deliberate structuring of learning experiences within social practices to maintain their continuity' (2004: 115). This may involve deliberately constraining an individual's access to a demanding new task that would lead to development. Hence workplace participatory practices are often contested and access to certification of skill depends on power relations surrounding organisations and organisational culture.

Thus from an individual's perspective, the link between qualifications, skills and performance is complex and often contradictory. Lack of qualification does not

necessarily mean low skills and performance. A range of social and economic factors influence the value of qualifications for individuals and these vary between organisations even within the same sector as explained next.

2.6 Employer demand for skills and qualifications

Given evidence of a positive link between highly qualified employees and greater productivity, innovation and higher quality products or services, employers might be expected to raise recruitment standards, improve workplace learning and encourage qualification. However, motivation to invest in skills development depends on business strategy, and the value of qualifications depends upon their relevance, validity and cost-benefits. Hence the link between qualifications and skills varies often between and within organisations according to the prevalent managerial approach.

Some employers place limited value on qualifications as tools to nurture and measure skills. For example, research of 500 employers conducted by PricewaterhouseCoopers (2005) finds that one in five thought that training towards qualifications was unimportant or 'not at all important' (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2005: 8.10). The main reasons given for this response are the provision of alternative on-the-job training and greater interest in the practical application of knowledge and skills rather than qualifications. This hints at the potential limitation of qualifications.

Also attitudes about training vary, for example Pettigrew et al's (1989) research of UK organisations concludes that managers make strategic decisions about training based on competitive pressure and strategic aims. Other researchers attempt to identify variables

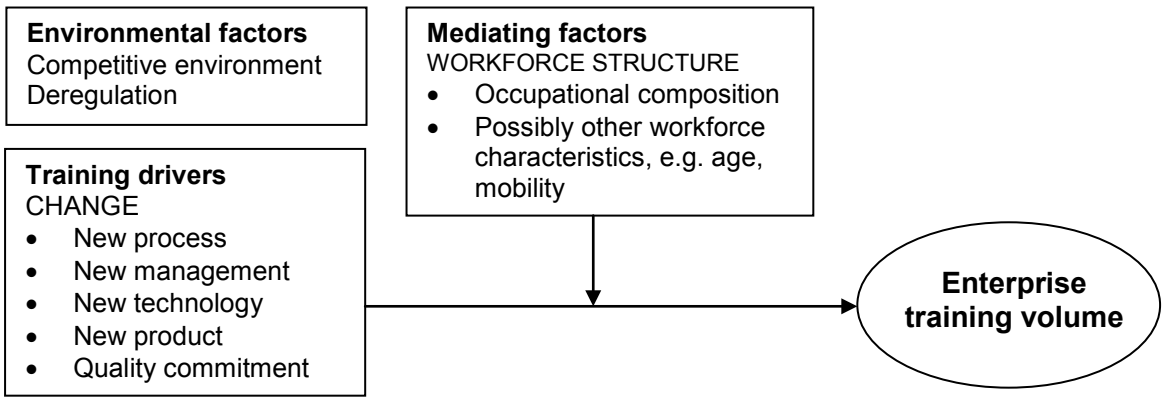
that influence the nature and volume of training. For example, Cosh et al (2003) identifies 10 determinants of training expenditure, including company size, being part of a larger group, growth ambitions, introduction of high involvement working practices and more sophisticated human resource practices, such as Total Quality Management.

Ridoutt et al (2002) groups variables into three categories (Figure 1). The first relates to 'environmental factors' such as the competitive environment and new legislation. The second includes factors which acted as 'training drivers' and are associated with change, such as a new commitment to quality or introduction of new processes, management, products, or technology. The third category relates to 'mediating factors', such as workforce structure and the degree of professionalism.

This links to ideas about organisational excellence. Peters and Waterman (1982) identify characteristics of organisational excellence that include dynamic leadership which focuses customers and aims to establish 'the ability to change and improve as a permanent organisational feature' (Pettinger 2007: 21); flexible and dynamic organisational structures that are non-hierarchical and responsive; a belief that motivation, commitment, training and development of all employees are critical for organisational success; priorities to innovate and improve employee abilities, working practices, technology and customer response times; an outward looking attitude that is receptive to new ideas and influences; and adherence to a concept of 'simultaneous loose-tight properties – measures of control that allow for operational flexibility' (Pettinger 2007: 22).

FIGURE 1

Simplified model for volume of enterprise training



Based on research into the process manufacturing, leisure and entertainment industries in Australia (Ridoutt et al 2002: 69)

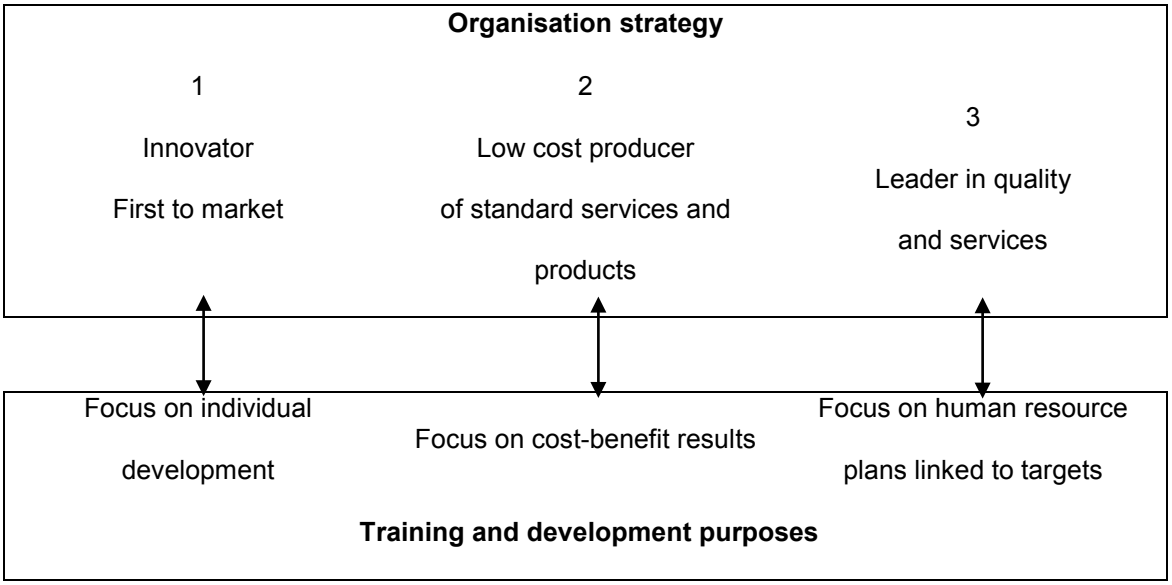
Other research in the UK finds links with high employee skill levels (measured by qualification level), for example with high specification product market strategies; higher levels of computerisation (Green et al 2003); and high value-added product strategies (Mason 2004). Also research in the UK and Australia finds links between increased volumes of training and organsational change, such as the introduction of new technology, equipment, products and services (Smith & Hayton 1999; Ridoutt et al 2002; Kitchin & Blackburn 2002). In particular, Smith et al (2002) focus research on organisational change to find that new management practices, with the exception of lean management, are the most important explanatory factor for training; over and above 'size' which was previously thought to be the main determinant.

Kane, Abraham and Crawford (1994) propose three purposes of training that relate to business strategy (Figure 2). Based on a survey of the top 500 companies, they identify first a short-term focus on individual development for organisations classed as 'innovators – first to market'; a focus on the cost-benefits of training for low-cost

producers of standard services or productions; long-term human resource plans for training and employee development for organisations that lead in quality and service.

FIGURE 2

Organisational strategy and training purpose relationship

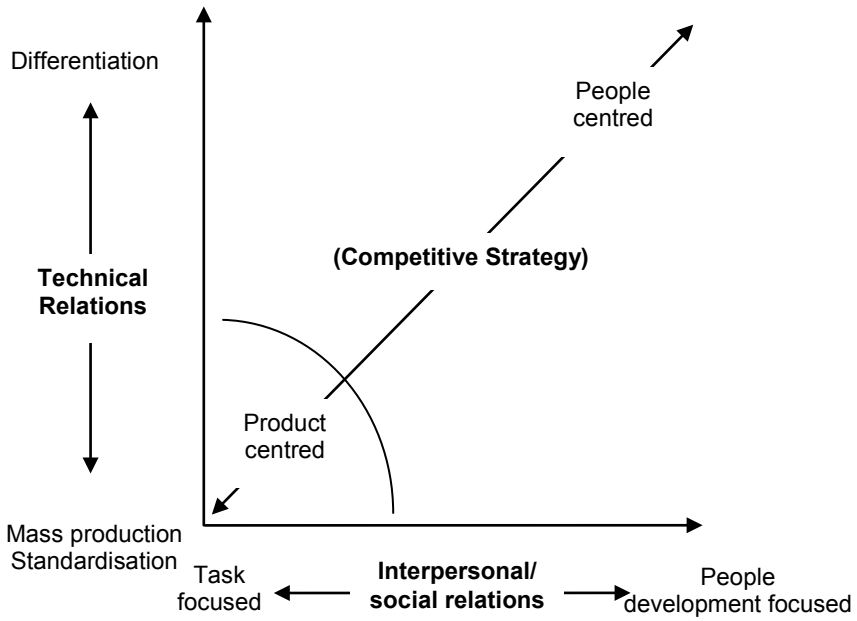


Adapted by Ridoutt et al (2005: 21) from Kane, Abraham and Crawford (1994 114)

Ashton and Sung (2006) move the debate forward with consideration of the impact of components of companies' competitive strategies on the development and use of skills. Their Competitive Strategy Model (Figure 3) explains how levels of training, skills and performance depend on the relationship between technical and interpersonal relations.

FIGURE 3

Competitive Strategy Model of Skills Utilisation



(Ashton & Sung 2006: 19)

Ashton and Sung argue that organisations that focus on low cost, mass produced **products** regard training as a cost, whereas continuous learning is a necessity for organisation with differentiated production because of the reliance on innovation and high skills. They explain that HR practices combine to support skills development:

> *'Because the employees' skills are so crucial to the business success of the firm, skills issues are an integral component of the business model, it is therefore vital that the skill or HR strategy maintains and enhances the skills of the labour force.'* (2006:18)

This model is helpful because it explains why more training will not necessarily raise skills levels in organisations with standardised technical relations or task-focused

interpersonal relations. Additionally, it provides a theoretical background to criticism of policies that link skills and performance closely to qualifications.

2.7 Critical appraisal of use of qualifications to raise skills levels

Grugulis (2003) is critical of policies which rely on qualifications to upskill the workforce, arguing that these bring few benefits if job roles and management practices do not require higher skills:

> *'The nature of the British labour market raises issues that go beyond the design and evaluation of a particular set of qualifications and may well be beyond the capacity of any supply-side intervention, however, well designed to 'solve' – if only because, to be effective, a skill needs to be exercised;'* (2003: 471)

Other research supports this view and documents the continuing existence of large numbers of UK jobs that require neither skills nor qualifications. Unskilled work is common and managers are often comparatively poorly educated and trained. Thus, far from being under-qualified, many employees find themselves over-educated and their skills under-utilised (Green et al 1999).

These views stem from the work of Finegold and Soskice (1988) who first described the UK economy as being in a state of 'low-skills equilibrium'. They argue that low-skill organisations create little demand for vocational education and training. Their 'tailorised' forms of work offer little room for genuine discretion, reflection, innovation

or learning (Keep, 2000), and therefore limited opportunity for more expansive participation to raise demand for learning (Lave & Wenger 1991; Fuller & Unwin 2004). In these circumstances, employers regard vocational education and training as a 'cost to be avoided or cut, rather than an investment in an asset to be valued' (LSC, 2006: vi). With pressures to minimise costs and maximise profits, values associated with 'learning organisations' have limited resonance, and line managers overlook the longer term, broader learning objectives that might eventually lead to a more flexible, innovative and productive workforce (Keep & Rainbird, 2000; Keep, 2000). Thus, researchers argue that there will be little demand for training and qualifications unless governments 'open the black box' of the company, raise management skills and encourage more flexible and expansive high performance working environments (Keep, 2002).

However the relationship between skills and qualifications is not straightforward as demonstrated next by contrasting competitive strategies in call centres.

2.8 Contrasting competitive strategies in call centres

Call centres exemplify a range of competitive strategies from task-focused to people-centred interpersonal relations. For example, Taylor and Bain (1999) describe control systems of call centres that illustrate Ashton and Sung's task-focused competitive strategy (Ashton & Sung 2006). Controls include measurement of the length of time to answer a call, call length, abandoned call rate, quality of greeting, adherence to script and wrap-up time. Managers record calls and listen-in to 'observe' calls remotely. This restricted working environment requires minimum skills, offers basic training, and

provides limited task discretion and low pay. Tightly scripted calls encourage little skill development, and cost-minimisation, 'command and control' management strategies are not conducive with investment in external training and qualifications.

In contrast, Kinnie et al (2000) describe call centres at the companies RAC and Banco[2] that exemplify Ashton and Sung's people-centred interpersonal relations. They demonstrate how some organisations use high commitment working practices to motivate employees and encourage discretionary effort, even in tightly controlled working environments. This results in a paradox between high-commitment, 'fun' working practices and high surveillance. Potentially employers could use qualifications as a catalyst for performance for these organisations.

Kinnie et al explain an organisational strategy that differentiates on the quality of customer service and relies on high employee training and motivation to achieve this:

> *'The very rationale for call centres is that they provide high levels of customer satisfaction and convenience in a cost effective manner,'* (2000: 696)

However, this is not easy to achieve. As Schneider and Bowen (1993) argue, 'it is the way, style or manner with which the service is delivered that contributes to customers' overall impression of service quality,' (1993: 40). Rosenthal et al (1997) reinforce this point:

[2] **RAC**, a motoring services organisation. and **Banco**, a major clearing bank in the UK.

> *'Products, technology and price are vulnerable to emulation by competitors. Thus many companies choose to differentiate themselves by something they assume is less easy to copy: quality of customer service,'* (1997: 481)

This could lead to competitive strategies for call centres which involve increasingly people-focused interpersonal relations. However, achievement of high customer service in tightly controlled working environments is difficult. Knights and McCabe (1998) highlight, 'the contradictory position in which staff are placed, being tasked as they are, with providing a high quality customer service while management limits their ability through work intensification to provide such service' (1998: 182–183). Their study of the banking sector demonstrates a link between how employees feel about their organisation and the customers' perceptions of the quality of service.

Kinnie et al (2000) observe that Banco and RAC achieve enhanced customer service through better alignment between HR systems and control systems. They suggest that:

> *'The ability to manage these potentially conflicting pressures in this fast-changing environment is seen to be one of the key factors in exploiting the potential benefits to be gained from this new way of working.'* (2000: 971)

Both RAC and Banco organise employees in teams. At the RAC, team leaders are responsible for 10 – 15 staff and they are expected to spend 80% of their time coaching teams. New recruits receive induction training and are expected to follow new standards of performance. Trainers provide training on new products and systems and run regular workshops for team managers to help improve management of team performance.

However, no mention is made of qualifications in this context, which suggests that skill development focuses more on the achievement of specific business outcomes and performance rather than 'skills for the sake of skills' (Sung & Ashton, 2005:70). For these types of organisations, sometimes referred to as 'high performing working organisations' (HPWOs), training and skills development are regarded as essential, however the achievement of qualifications, while desirable would be less an end in itself, and more part of an ongoing process of continuous personal development. Instead employers strive to create a work environment in which individuals learn as part of their normal work in order to improve performance and innovation.

Thus the link between skills, performance and qualifications is contradictory. Restricted working environments with limited task discretion may have little demand for training, where as others use require high levels of skill to raise performance and the customer experience. High levels of change and a competitive environment may lead to greater investment in training to raise skills, however there may be little interest in qualifications. Therefore the government's use of qualifications as a policy mechanism is potentially problematic.

2.9 Government approach to skills development

In this context, the UK government has used qualifications as a policy mechanism to raise skills and performance. This has been achieved, in particular, through funding and the use of independent awarding bodies to implement vocational qualification reform.

The UK is unique in the manner that it uses funding and awarding bodies to control the VET system (Unwin et al 2004: 4.6), and the way that government 'treats VQs (vocational qualifications) separately not only from any site of provision but from any *specific* learning context, either workplace or college'. (2004: 4.22). Unwin et al believe that the system is 'path dependent', and reflects first the 'settlement reached in the late 19th century over the organisation of production (and increasingly services) between business interests, organised labour and government' (2004: 4.6).

For example, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the former Manpower Services Commission (MSC) argued first that education and training needed to 'be better aligned to a changing economic climate; second that vocational qualifications 'had become too closely entwined with the needs of further education colleges and therefore, too divorced from what was required by employers'; and third that the VET system needed to be 'made more coherent and transparent' (Raggatt & Williams, 1999: 195).

In 1986, a review of vocational qualifications concluded that provision reflects the demand of users. However, it recorded gaps in provision, ill-defined, limited take-up in some occupational areas and barriers to access.

NVQs were an attempt to address some of these issues and bring greater uniformity to vocational qualifications (chapter 3 reviews this development). Their introduction has had significant ramifications and reflects the government's approach to VET, and their use of awarding bodies to facilitate skills policy. This development was followed by the introduction of the NQF and the QCF (explored in chapter 4).

Unwin et al (2004) argue that encouragement of private awarding bodies where certification is their primary goal has meant that qualifications can be used as 'an instrument of government policy' and treated separately from their institutional context (Unwin et al 2004: 4.15). Also, it explains the increased reliance of colleges and awarding bodies on government funding.

Unwin et al (2004) identifies several implications of this arrangement which help explain the greater dominance in the UK of the assessment-led, outcome-based NVQ system. First, awarding bodies have expertise in assessment rather than pedagogy and curriculum (as in colleges or workplaces). As a result, they develop vocational qualifications in a way which is 'sometimes too detached from both employers and providers of VET.' (Unwin et al 2004: 4.15). This is problematic because the resulting qualifications may be inappropriate for organisations. Also greater emphasis on qualifications sometimes results in increased time spent on assessment, rather than learning activities which could in the long-term 'lead to more appropriate types of learning and more people gaining qualifications' (Young 2002: 50).

Second, Unwin et al (2004) believe that that the promotion of independent awarding bodies has encouraged qualifications to be regarded as a product or 'commodity' which can be bought and sold; with awarding bodies emerging as businesses competing with each other and the professional bodies. In this respect, Senker (2002) is critical, and argues that 'market approaches are cumbersome and expensive to administer' because colleges are forced to prioritise courses which offer maximum funding rather than offer courses which meet current and anticipated skills requirements (Senker 2002: 114).

Likewise qualification supply and demand becomes overly reliant on government funding.

For example the PricewaterhouseCoopers Survey (2005) finds that the availability of funding is the most significant factor to encourage submission of a qualification for accreditation, which demonstrates how the government controls the market for qualifications. Of the 80 nationally recognised awarding bodies, 45% in the study chose this option. Other factors such as quality assurance, demand for accredited qualifications and sector/customer demand are less important.

Likewise, employers rate 'legal requirements' a close third to 'content of training' and 'fitness for purpose' when explaining their choice of external learning providers (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2005: 8.60). Also, colleges report that government policy was the main driver for a change in their college, closely followed by learning demands and funding availability (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2005: 6.60).

Therefore political considerations mediate the relationship between skills and qualifications for individuals and employers.

2.10 Conclusion

Understanding about the meaning of skills and demand for qualifications varies between individuals and employers because it is influenced by a range of internal and external incentives. Thus the 'role and value of qualifications is context dependent' (Unwin et al 2004: 6.62) in the cultural and organisational sense (Keep 2009), and influenced by

wider social, economic, political and institutional factors, such as sectoral and occupational traditions, selection and progression mechanisms, and educational and age profiles.

Thus ultimately, interest in certification depends on the extent that employers are concerned about skill development, and the value they place on qualifications as a means to measure skill and motivate employees. For example, Coffield (2004) argues that the problem at the moment is not the supply of relevant qualifications or the 'low motivation of employees' (2004:286), but the poor quality of jobs and limited job specifications. Likewise, Fuller and Unwin (2004) warn that an 'overemphasis on the individual can divert attention from the influence of the organisational and wider institutional context in which learning at work occurs' (2004: 133).

In this context, the government has reorganised VET and introduced NVQs and the QCF in order to encourage investment in skills development. The following chapters explain the background to these initiatives and review their impact.

CHAPTER 3 Impact of NVQs on skills and performance

3.1 Introduction

From the mid 1980s until 2012, the UK experienced a series of radical qualification reforms as successive governments attempted to bring coherence to the qualifications system and increase uptake. Vocational qualifications and the national qualification frameworks which emerged were distinct from those in Europe (see section 3.4), reflecting a political and institutional environment which favoured voluntarism; academic rather than vocational pathways, and the design of highly specific and technical qualification arrangements.

This chapter summarises reasons why the UK's first attempt to create a single, national system of vocational qualifications 'arguably failed' (Raggatt and Williams 1999: 18). The following chapters extend the critique to the QCF, and use organisational theory, and an analysis of the meaning of leaning and skills to explain problems associated with the approach in England to vocational qualifications.

3.2 Introduction of NVQs

In 1986, the Review of Vocational Qualifications Working Group identified growing dissatisfaction with vocational qualifications in England and Wales in 'Working together – Education and Training' (DE/DES/SO/WO 1986). The White Paper noted some strengths with the VET system such as: 'diversity of provision'; 'established bodies' which had 'credibility with employers'; 'international standing' of many qualifications;

and a ‘well-developed partnership between the further education system and many awarding bodies’ (MSC/DES 1986: 15). However, short-comings included: an absence of a ‘clear, readily understandable pattern of provision’; the ‘existence of ‘gaps in provision’; ill-defined or impractical ‘arrangements for progression and transfer’; and ‘barriers to access’, for example ‘attendance and entry requirements’ and the bias towards testing knowledge or skills, rather than competence’ (1986: 16; Raggatt and Williams 1999: 54).

The White Paper was significant because further to previous critiques of UK vocational qualifications, the Working Group offered a definition of a ‘proper award’ which required a ‘statement of competence’ which assessed: ‘skills to specified standards’; ‘relevant knowledge and understanding; and the ability to ‘use skills and apply knowledge and understanding to the performance of relevant tasks’ (MSC/DES 1986: 17). Additionally the Working Group proposed the establishment of a body to co-ordinate action, which resulted in the establishment of the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ).

Raggatt and Williams (1999) ascribe the highly technical NVQ solution which resulted from this initiative to the particular political and institutional arrangements in England. First, the NCVQ had limited powers and budget because of the Conservative government’s ‘antipathy towards quangos’ and preference for voluntary arrangements for employers and other stakeholders. Thus tight time-scales and expectations to become financially self-sufficient and deliver a full framework of four levels within three years, resulted in the use of a technical committee to define assessable standards, and limited consultation with awarding organisations, professional bodies and employers. Also it

encouraged ‘conditional accreditation’ of a range of existing qualifications which did not comply with tight, NVQ criteria in an attempt to meet schedules to populate the framework.

Second, the convenient priority to pilot certification arrangements through the Youth Training Scheme (YTS[3]), given concern about youth unemployment, gave early NVQs a low level ‘task-based character’ (1999: 87). This lack of priority for high quality, vocational education combined with a ‘longstanding commitment to academic education’ meant that the Working Group excluded general education and higher level qualifications from the remit (1999: 191).

The NVQs which emerged were based on occupational standards which contained performance criteria that candidates were expected to demonstrate in order to achieve the qualifications. As Jessop (1991) explains:

> *‘The shift to an outcome-led system of education and training thus means a qualification-led or assessment-led system . . . As candidates do not have to undergo any particular programme of learning, the award of an NVQ is based solely on the outcome of assessment.’* (1991: 12–18)

The new system resulted in assessment shifting from the provider to the workplace because NVQs required candidates to demonstrate competence, wherever possible, in the workplace. This created significant challenges for providers who had to appoint and train a network of in-house assessors and external verifiers (Unwin et al 2004: 3.17).

[3] Youth Training Scheme – a vocational training course for school leavers, aged 16 and 17, introduced in 1983 by the UK government.

Additionally the adoption of 'functional analysis' as the method of defining standards, and tight guidelines on the language, gave the 'NVQ system a very technicist character' (Raggatt & Williams 1999: 97).

3.3 Assessment of impact of NVQs

The impact of NVQs has been mixed, partly due to insufficient uptake, particularly at higher levels, and partly due to problems associated with complex job roles. NVQs directly measured 'competence' and therefore provided a 'skills audit' and a mechanism for validating what employees already knew and could do (Fuller & Unwin et al 2004). Thus, although they were successful at certificating the competence of many with no or few qualifications, NVQs have not supplanted other vocational qualifications.

Sims and Golden (1998) found from a cross-sectoral study of 312 employers who used and 51 who did not use NVQs that the main reasons for using NVQs were: staff development; to improve company performance; to accredit existing skills; and train to a national standard. Employers reported improved quality of products or services, raised staff motivation and higher levels of training. 81% would continue to use NVQs and 75% intended to offer NVQs to other employees. However, as the sample mainly comprised of NVQ users, it failed to identify many barriers to participation. Non-users merely expressed concerns about the relevance and credibility of the qualifications.

Similarly, Roe et al (2006) found that 7 out of 10 employers who offered NVQs believed they gained some benefits (80% for organisations with over 200 employees). These included more skilled staff (81%), more motivated staff (72%), better quality

outputs (67%) and increased productivity (51%), though only 31% attributed increased profits and 22% raised sales to NVQs (2006: 77).

However despite government incentives, such as funded course fees and tax relief, by 1999-2000, NVQs accounted for fewer than 47% of vocational qualifications (DfEE 2001; Grugulis 2003). Also, there had been little interest in higher level versions of these awards, with only 4% of NVQs awarded at Levels 4 and 5 compared with 70% at levels 1 and 2 (DfES 2003). This lack of impact was partly because many professional bodies resisted these qualifications, but also because NVQs were time-consuming to complete and provided few opportunities for skill development (Grugulis 2003). In addition, as explained later in chapter 5, there were doubts about the extent that awarding bodies and industry representatives could categorise and define occupational skills (Ainley 1988). Thus even after over 20 years, some occupations have no occupational standards.

Swailes and Roodhouse (2003) studied the take-up of higher level NVQs and found barriers included the low status of NVQs compared with traditional vocational qualifications; a mismatch between national standards and job requirements; prohibitive costs due to the time involved; the assessment 'burden', and belief that NVQs were not rigorous enough at higher levels.

Further criticisms of NVQs were that they tended to narrowly define 'performance'; in some cases were over-prescribed; bore little relationship to the complexities of 'real' work; emphasised observed behaviour and provided no possibilities for grading

(Grugulis 2003). Therefore critics contended that NVQs neither reflected fully employee's skills nor encompassed all skills and knowledge needed in employment.

Similarly, Keep and James (2010) argued that NVQs 'tend to encode a narrow and shallow conception of skills required to undertake an occupation/job' (2010:10). Hence the notion of 'competence', and the methodology, was flawed because it tended to 'create qualifications specified on the basis of a lowest common denominator that employers in an industry could agree upon.' (2010:10).

In addition, Green (1998) argued that NVQs failed to encourage the broad general knowledge which characterised highly skilled, well educated and genuinely flexible workers. They may have even discouraged more flexible working and high performance working practices, if not combined with 'expansive' learning environments (Fuller & Unwin 2004). Likewise, Keep and James (2010) were critical of the lack of general education within vocational qualifications which they suggested inhibited progression and the development of high level skills.

Roe et al (2005) found no widespread support amongst non-users of NVQs for these specific criticisms. Instead NVQs simply were 'not part of their business thinking'; didn't fit business needs; or 'staff didn't want them' and employers 'didn't know enough about them' (2005: 62).

NVQs contrasted significantly with competence-based qualifications which emerged elsewhere in Europe and reflected differing ideals and beliefs about the value and purpose of vocational qualifications (Brockmann et al. 2008).

3.4 Contrasting character of competence-based qualifications

VET systems which emerged in northern Europe, for example Germany, France and the Netherlands, contrasted with the narrow, skills-based model adopted in England. The state played a more pivotal role and worked in partnership with social partners, employers and trade unions, to integrate practical and theoretical knowledge with personal and social qualities (2008: 227). This approach resulted in a broader, competence-based qualifications frameworks and more comprehensive VET systems:

> *The process has culminated in a competence-based qualifications framework, which recognises a variety of learning routes, underpinned by a system in which all stakeholders – including employers and unions – embrace social responsibility for the education and, ultimately, social mobility of individuals in a changing labour market'* (2008: 240).

This contrasts with the functional skills approach in England which recognised the performance of 'fragmented and narrowly defined tasks, with minimal underpinning knowledge'. (2008: 227).

3.5 Conclusion

NVQs succeeded in certificating many with few or no qualifications and there is evidence that some employers used NVQs to raise skills and performance. However, due to the UK government's voluntaristic, market-based approach, there was limited

employer interest and continued demand for alternative more knowledge-based vocational qualifications. Also, rather than providing a coherent and inclusive, single framework for vocational qualifications, the number of awards increased, as awarding bodies simply supplemented existing qualifications with suites of NVQs (Raggatt & Williams 1999).

Critics argued that NVQs were too radical and standardised (Field 1995; Wolf 1995 & 2002; Grugulis 200). In particular, Hyland (1994) was fierce in his opposition, stating that NVQs were 'fundamentally flawed, disastrously misguided and entirely inappropriate to our current and future education and training needs' (Hyland 1994: ix). Also Stanton (2007) believed that NVQs reinforced the English class system by not supplying adequate underpinning knowledge and therefore trapping people in sectors which required few skills, thus impeding social mobility,

Towards the end of the 1990s, the government changed direction and introduced an additional qualifications framework, the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) to extend regulation to a wider range of qualifications. This action aimed to accommodate other vocational qualifications, ensure they were of 'high quality', meet the 'needs of learners and employers', and help employers compare levels and progression routes' (QCA 2006: 1). By 2004, the government had increased the number of qualification levels from 5 to 8 to match levels awarded in Higher Education, and started a consultation into a new credit-based framework, following developments in Scotland and elsewhere in Europe. The stated aim was to create a less bureaucratic and more diverse framework:

> *'There is concern that the current NQF (National Qualifications Framework) is too centralised, places too great an emphasis on standardised outcomes and is over-regulated . . . the existing powers of the regulatory authorities may not be fit for purpose for a wider and more diverse range of achievements . . . the range of organisations approved to develop and award qualifications within the NQF may be too narrow . . .'* (QCA 2004:13)

The following chapter evaluates these developments and identifies problems associated with implementation of the new framework.

CHAPTER 4 Implementation of the QCF

4.1 Introduction

> *'If the structure of an organisation and the underlying design principles which construct it are not in tune with the core purposes of the organisation and its many environments then it is unlikely to successfully survive.'* (McMillan 2002: 1)

The QCF is a unitised, credit-based framework that aims to show how different qualifications interrelate and allow learners to transfer credit easily between qualifications. However, implementation of the concept has been problematic due to differing understanding about the relationship between skills and qualifications and an organisational approach akin to McMillan's (2002) classical bureaucracy that is routed by 'principles of hierarchy, authority and notions of control' (2002: 5).

This chapter explains the vision of the QCF, uses organisational theory to explain implementation problems and concludes that the QCF benefits from partnership working and a light-touch regulatory regime.

4.2 Vision of the QCF

According to the former Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), the new credit-based framework would be simpler, more responsive, more inclusive, less bureaucratic and more diverse (QCA 2004: 10-13). Ken Boston, QCA chief executive,

stated that the planned credit-based framework would 'recognise a wide range of achievements, in a more flexible and inclusive way than is currently possible' (2004: 2).

As a result, learners could gain credit for the completion of units and can accumulate this towards 'award', 'certificate' or 'diploma' sized qualifications. Also employers could design qualifications more easily due to flexible 'rules of combination' and a databank of shared units. However implementation has been problematic because the QCF required another radical shift in the design and assessment of many qualifications, including the adoption of common nomenclature.

4.3 Implementation problems

According to the Chartered Management Institute[4], the main issues that related to the initial 'Framework for Achievement'[5] concerned different nomenclature, costs of changes, insufficient details about arrangements, and use of 'disparate assessment methodologies with resultant concerns about quality assurance and comparability' (Chartered Management Institute 2004: 3). Subsequent regulatory arrangements for the QCF and guidance documents clarified arrangements; however the Wolf Review[6] (2011) was critical about re-labelling qualifications and costs involved in redesigning qualifications to meet the new standards.

[4] An Ofqual accredited awarding organisation and chartered professional body for management and leadership with more than 90,000 members.

[5] QCF was called provisionally the Framework for Achievement in 2004 before being taken forward through development and trialing phases, and officially launched in 2008 as the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) (Lester 2011).

[6] The UK government commissioned Professor Alison Wolf to carry out an independent review of vocational education for 14 to 19-year-olds, and provide practical recommendations to help inform future policy direction, taking into account financial constraints.

For example, implementation of the QCF involved: the redesign of all regulated vocational qualifications; the creation of Unique Learner Numbers (ULN), Personal Learner Records and a Regulatory IT System (RITS) which have replaced the Web-based Accreditation System (WBA) and the National Database for Accredited Qualifications (NDAQ); modification of IT systems to recognise ULN, award credit and 'rules of combination'; and development of new awarding body processes to meet regulatory criteria and gain QCF Recognition status.

Wolf (2011) criticised a range of other features. First she was 'sceptical about the labour market value of small, unknown unit qualifications and of 'personalised records' (2011: 93), and believed that 'formal equivalencies of 'level' and credit' cannot and do not translate into substantive equivalence' (2011: 86). She believed that these characteristics made QCF qualifications 'ill-suited to delivery within education and training institutions' (2011:88) and resulted in 'large costs in time and money spent assessing, recording and re-assessing' units because QCF qualifications were 'broken down into separately assessed units' (2011: 88). This linked to concern that an awarding body had to accept credit from another awarding body in a system with shared units, which Wolf argued 'is likely to further increase downward pressure in standards and reduce the incentives or ability of awarding bodies to create or protect a 'quality' brand' (2011:88). Wolf was also critical of the use of non-statutory bodies (Sector Skills Councils) as 'de facto first-line accreditation bodies' (2011: 97).

I can confirm the validity of some of these criticisms having had personal experience of working with the QCF; in particular: the use of SSCs; the cost of implementation; and initial problems associated with changes to qualification names. However, I believe that

some claims seem to reflect common misconceptions about the QCF and traditional views about the relationship between qualifications and skills. The thesis explains the former next and discusses the latter in chapter 5.

First, *all* QCF units are not 'competency-based', as Wolf (2011:88) claimed, and units *can* cover knowledge areas or combine knowledge and skills elements (Ofqual 2008: 11). Second, awarding bodies can grade QCF qualifications or components of qualifications (2008: 16) and they can include assessment criteria for different levels within units, and units of different levels within qualifications therefore, contrary to views expressed in the Wolf Report (2011: 88) there *is* opportunity for progression within a course/qualification.

Third, awarding bodies currently recognise exemptions from other awarding bodies for similar qualifications, therefore acceptance of credit from other awarding bodies should not be an issue. Although this viewpoint could have been provoked by government policies in 2010, that sought to increase competition and seek further efficiencies from awarding bodies, for example by comparing fees and fee-capping (Ofqual, 2010b & 2010c) and requirements to accept QCF credit (QCA 2008).

Generally the government has increasingly mediated the link between qualifications and skills due to its use of funding and independent awarding bodies as instruments of government policy. This contrasts with the credit and qualifications framework in Scotland which is 'one of the longest-established comprehensive qualifications frameworks and is often perceived as one of the most successful (Young 2005; Raffe 2007: 59). The next section identifies its key features before using organisational theory

to explain why the UK government's approach to skills has moved the QCF away from the original vision of a simpler, more responsive, more inclusive, less bureaucratic and more diverse framework (QCA 2004: 10-13).

4.4 Scottish lessons

Scotland started with favourable political, geographical and institutional conditions for a NQF: a small country; a 'relatively homogenous and cohesive education system'; a tradition of partnership and consensual policy-making'; a single awarding body and regulator, the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA); and most courses delivered in colleges or universities (Raffe et al 2007: 60).

The country began to build a more cohesive and unified system in 1984, with the move towards a national system of outcomes based modules, initially in schools and colleges (National Qualifications (NQs) system), and later in universities (Scottish credit accumulation and transfer (Scotcat) system). It later developed competency-based SVQs along similar principles to NVQs delivered elsewhere in the UK.

The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) was launched formally in 2001 as a meta-framework to encompass the NQs and Scotcat frameworks. It aimed to include work-based SVQs, although this has taken longer to achieve due to the difficulties of credit-rating and leveling these qualifications based on tight NVQ style descriptors (Raffe et al 2007: 62).

The SCQF is successful because it started early, set realistic expectations and timescales, and adopted an 'incremental and pragmatic strategy for introducing a learning-outcome

approach' (Raffe et al 2007: 59). In particular the SCQF was designed as a 'descriptive or communication framework' rather than a regulatory framework, with the aim to 'assist people of all ages and circumstances to access appropriate education and training over their lifetime' and 'enable employers, learners and the general public to understand the full range of Scottish qualifications' (Raffe et al 2007: 61).

Thus the architecture of the SCQF is much looser than the three Scottish sub-frames and the QCF. Qualifications only have to meet three criteria to join the framework. They need to be credit-rated (1 credit point per 10 hours notional learning time); assigned one of 12 levels; and assessment must be quality-assured. Unlike the QCF, the SCQF does not guarantee that credit will be recognised by another institution, however the framework proves a 'useful tool and language' to help underpin decisions about credit transfer (Raffe et al 2007: 63).

Raffe et al (2007) ascribe the relative success of SCQF to the adoption of a descriptive rather than regulatory framework, and a voluntary partnership approach which worked towards gradual incremental changeover twenty-five years. This contrasts with the approach adopted for the QCF, as explained next from an 'insider's' viewpoint.

4.5 'Insider view' of QCF implementation problems

As manager of an awarding body involved in the development of QCF qualifications, I have an 'insider view' of implementation problems. Various theories about organisational structure can be applied to forewarn of the government's approach for

the QCF. This shows the continued path-dependency of a contested VET system that is reliant on government funding and central control.

By the end of the 20th century, large bureaucracies were 'slimmed down' in order to become more flexible and effective (Mabey, Salaman & Storey 2001). However successive reforms to the 'English' VET system (NVQ, NQF and QCF) have resulted in the introduction of bodies such as the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), Qualifications and Curriculum Development Authority (QCDA), Learning and Skills Councils (LSC), Sector Skills Councils (SSC), Skills for Business Network and Ofqual (Unwin et al 2004) which have in effect increased bureaucracy and the complexity of the system. Thus although Conservative governments of 1980s and 1990s frequently claimed to have reduced the size of the state through privatisation, in areas such as VET, its 'central powers' and regulation have grown significantly (Raggatt and Williams 1999: 198).

Mabey, Salaman and Storey (2001) show that many organisations use downsizing and outsourcing to become more effective, and each series of reorganisation tends to result in new problems associated with loss of expert knowledge and experience. In a similar way, the UK VET system has experienced challenges that have mediated the relationship between qualifications and skills over the last decade.
McMillan (2002) describes classical bureaucracies as being structured on 'principles of hierarchy, authority and notions of control' in which use of 'rational approaches and long term planning' is seen to be highly desirable (2002: 5). Parallels can be drawn with the 'English' VET system, for example in the way that the government required each Sector Skill Council (SSC) to formulate a Sector Qualification Strategy (SQS) in order

to establish skills and qualifications action plans. These in turn formed the basis of government funding for qualifications in order to target support for skills development. Thus the government established, in effect, a mechanism to control the development and delivery of qualifications.

McMillan (2002) identifies several issues relating to organisational structure and change that are relevant to the UK government's management of the VET system over the last 25 years. She argues that despite efforts of most modern organisations to find efficiencies, design principles continue to be based on 'traditional notions of bureaucracy and hierarchy' (2002: 13) that are 'supported by linear and reductive thinking' (Morgan 1986 from McMillan 2002: 13). Similarly Senge (1992) identifies difficulties that arise from the application of linear thinking to contemporary complex, dynamic and non linear situations.

For example, the government has attempted to take control of the VET system in order to rationalise vocational qualifications and make them more understandable for users on the assumption that this has caused limited demand (Leitch 2004). However, this does not take into account firstly 'a reluctance of more than a minority of employers to be significantly involved in vocational education and training' (Unwin et al 2004: 4.6) or the government's failure to take into account employer interests and skills requirements through rushed implementation of NVQs and the QCF or an insistence on market principles and voluntarism (Raggatt & Williams 1999; Leitch 2004; Unwin et al 2004: 4.6).

Wolf (2011) is critical of government attempts to reduce the number of awarding bodies and qualifications, 'all in the name of greater efficiency' (Wolf 2011: 19). She points out that a number of developed countries involve employee and craft associations in the design of qualification, not specialist awarding bodies. She argues that:

> *'The great strength of the English system of independent awarding bodies is that it allows for multiple direct links between qualification development, the labour market and higher education. However this feature has been systematically undermined by government policies and regulatory changes.'* (2011: 19)

Wolf believes that a centralised approach and 'micro-management' of qualifications reduces the ability of awarding bodies to 'respond directly and effectively to specialised markets . . . and their ability and motivation to innovate' (Wolf 2011: 139).

Eraut (1999) accounts for this approach results from a policy to challenge monopolies and organisations which could be seen 'as self-serving rather than altruistic' (Eraut 1994: 5). He believes that a change in 'public mood' has enabled increased government regulation of professional work:

> *'concern for both citizens' rights and the increasing cost of public services has given rise to prominent accountability measures to promote the potentially conflicting aims of efficiency, effectiveness, economy, responsiveness and quality'* (Eraut 1994: 5)

However, this approach overlooks the important role of professional bodies in representing occupations, ascertaining and codifying the personal knowledge; and facilitating the import of concepts and ideas from other subjects to build credible programmes of learning (1994:14). Eraut identifies that occupations use a range of training, which usually includes a period of apprenticeship of up to 5 years, learning from an expert, enrolment in a college, collection of evidence or practical competence and a qualifying exam.

Professional bodies tended to be reluctant to engage with government-led NVQs being 'determined to protect the independence of their standards and qualifications', and because they found state action 'heavy handed' (Raggatt & Williams 1999: 86), and the 'process intellectually suspect' (1999: 109). In contrast, government-instigated quangos, such as NCVQ (and later Sector Skills Councils) failed to win adequate employer representation. As a result, some observers assert that the English qualification policy was not employer led at all (Field 1995), but 'shaped and guided more by officials and, sometimes, educationalists' (Raggett & Williams 1999: 172).

Young (2002) is critical of the government's market-oriented approach and emphasises the importance of building 'communities of trust' between companies, colleges, universities and professional bodies, in order to link qualifications to shared values and practices (2002: 60). To some extent PricewaterhouseCoopers (2005) identify the importance of these communities of practice having recognised that a 'great deal of specialist sector expertise resides' in many smaller awarding bodies and therefore recommends that the qualification regulator safeguards this provision (2005:10.187).

Also Keep and James (2010) argue that vocational qualifications are unlikely to meet even the short-term needs of employers without,

> *'Coherent packages of learning and understanding upon which subsequent learning development, career change and labour market progression can be built.'* (2010: 11)

4.6 Conclusion

The government's market orientated approach to skills has led to the use of awarding bodies as instruments of government policy to reorganise VET rather than increase employer regulation and introduce further licences to practise. This has resulted in legislation, more strategic, risk-based regulation of awarding bodies, and consultation documents that propose economic regulation of awarding bodies.

During this period, many vocational qualifications have converted to the QCF, although some have resisted the change with the result that government has decided to retain the NQF for the foreseeable future. The following chapter considers the meaning of learning and skills in order to understand these developments; to consider issues that might relate to the design of the QCF, and understand the link between vocational learning, qualifications and skills.

CHAPTER 5 Nature of skills, learning and qualifications

5.1 Introduction

Qualification issues arise from differing ontological and epistemological positions about the meaning of learning and skills, particularly in a rapidly changing environment. This chapter reviews paradigms of learning, presents a model that represents the relationship between internal and external vocational learning and assesses the validity of qualifications as measurements of skills.

I propose that the principles of the QCF best fits Lave and Wenger's concepts of 'situated' learning and 'communities of practice' (Lave and Wenger 1991), and Hager's (2002) alternative understanding of learning. The latter encompasses 'learning of many different kinds', theory and practice, thought and action (Beckett & Hager 2002: 150). Also, I argue that the QCF model is flawed due to retention of the concept of 'competency' in relation to skill that is misleading for stakeholders and has similar problems as when attached to NVQs.

5.2 Paradigms of learning

5.2.1 Situated learning and communities of practice

The QCF relates closely to principles of Lave and Wenger's situated learning and communities of practice. Lave and Wenger (1991) identified from observations of a range of apprenticeships that individuals tend to learn by a process of social

participation. In particular, they noted that learning results more from observation and experience than the 'acquisition' of knowledge, as new recruits advance gradually from discrete simple tasks to more complex and critical processes. For example, Lave and Wenger found that Vai and Gola[7] apprentice tailors started by learning finishing stages of a garment before moving onto sewing and cutting out. This reversal of steps focused apprentices' attention on the shape of the garment and construction to build experience while minimising failure. Thus apprentices tend to learn at the periphery of a community and then become involved in the main processes of the community as they become more competent. Similarly, they found that trainee quartermasters commenced with limited duties before progressing to more complicated procedures, however once at sea, they undertook all duties of a quartermaster, although their work was closely supervised by a 'watch stander' (1991: 74).

This concept of learning fits well with a qualification framework, such as the QCF, which is composed of small units, especially if pathways relate to established communities of practice. Also the opportunity to combine different combinations of units is valuable because it suits varying roles, contexts and progression routes as learners move from 'legitimate peripheral participation' to 'full participation'.

Lave and Wenger's ideas about 'communities of practice' are significant because they help explain the continued demand for qualifications and training from professional bodies and trade associations, despite government efforts to attract learners to a revised 'simplified' qualification offering[8].

---

[7] Tailors based in West Africa. Lave and Wenger's insights were based on Goody's (1982, 1984) research into apprenticeships.

[8] The DfEE 'position paper' in late 1996 recognised that 'the relationship between professional accreditation and vocational qualifications is complex and politically sensitive' and that 'there would be little point in attempting to supplant existing and adequate professional accreditation arrangements with NVQs/SVQs which performed much the same

Wenger (2004) observes that communities of practice form 'by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavour' and they involve 'groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do, and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly' (2004: 1).

From personal experience, I observe that many of Wenger's ideas about 'communities of practice' relate to professional bodies. Wenger's description of activities 'created over time by the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise' which are the property of the community (Wenger 1998: 45) links to qualifications developed by occupational experts in professional bodies. Also, the concept helps explain the heterogeneous nature of qualifications, relevant content, appropriate assessment methods and stakeholders' trust.

Wenger (2004) comments that communities of practice 'value their collective competence and learn from each other, even though few people outside the group may value or even recognise their expertise' (2004: 1). This helps explain why our small professional body, formed in 1939, has continuing value to people working in credit management, even though automation and outsourcing have reduced the numbers employed in the occupation and therefore demand for ICM qualifications.

The value and nature of communities of practice help explain why short time scales and market principles limited the success of government-led NVQs (see chapter 3). Communities of practices are more organic, take time to evolve and have characteristics that make them a challenge for traditional hierarchical organisations (Wenger 2004: 3).

---

function' (DfEE 1996 18-19), despite the 'interventionary role of the state' regarding funding for NVQs (Raggett and Williams 1999: 197).

As Eraut et al. (1996) notes, it is 'impossible to have a national system of qualifications based on current competence at work; because we do not have a national system of working practices' (1996: 67). Also Raggett and Williams (1999) comment that the reform of vocational qualifications related to NVQs has:

> *'highlighted the tension that existed between the desire of policy-makers for a simple, comprehensive and rational framework of awards and the rather more messy, complex and heterogeneous world of industry and the professions'* (1999: 172).

5.2.1 Hager's alternative understanding of learning

Hager (2002) identifies two conflicting paradigms of learning, often referred to as 'learning by acquisition' and 'learning by participation', and an alternative, more holistic understanding of learning. Each influences opinions about the best form of education or training, and the value of qualifications in relation to skill, however I argue that his alternative concept is more applicable to the QCF.

First, Hager states that society regards learning that is associated with the 'acquisition' of knowledge as more important (2002:2). This would usually involve off-the-job learning where learners receive instruction in specific facts, concepts and theories. Thus a common image is of an individual's mind 'steadily being stocked with propositions' (2002: 5). The dominance of this concept of learning helps explain preference for 'academic' courses to vocational courses (Wolf 2011). Also according to Raggatt and Williams (1999), it explains the dismissive attitude of some professional bodies about

the intellectual rigour of NVQs which do not require any off-the-job tuition and assessment (Green 1998; Keep & James 2010).

Associated with this paradigm is the assumption first that an individual must be able 'bring the learning to mind' (2002:5) for learning to be complete. As a result, other forms of learning such as tacit knowledge, which a person may have acquired through informal learning, or interpersonal and practical skills are regarded as inferior unless a person can describe or explain their understanding (Hirst & Peters 1970). Second, it presupposes that 'learning' is 'stable and enduring' and 'replicable' (Hager 2002:5) and therefore can be incorporated into curricula and textbooks and assessed in examinations.

This paradigm of learning is not dismissive of learning from experience, and many professions that traditionally ascribe to this paradigm, for example law, architecture and medicine, require long periods of post-qualification practice to achieve fully qualified status. However, it assumes a long period of theoretical knowledge at the 'front-end of vocational preparation' before learners can apply their knowledge in practice. As Hager explains,

> *'This model views the main business of vocational preparatory courses as supplying novices with the stock of theoretical knowledge that they will apply later on to solve the problems that they encounter in the workplace.'* (2002: 7)

Hager believes that this paradigm is limited because 'learning is not *stable* as contexts continually change and evolve.' (2002: 14). First, expertise that was relevant a decade

ago loses value or has become redundant. Also with increasing technological change, some roles disappear or different knowledge and skills are required. Additionally, new roles emerge without a codified body of knowledge. For example the Wolf Report (2011) identifies some occupations are growing rapidly, such as conservation and environmental protection officers (+124%) and paramedics (+114%), whereas others are fast declining, for example credit agents (-63%) and telephonists (-55%) (Wolf, 2011: 147).

Hager argues that learning is more of a 'process' than a 'product' because 'finished products of learning are not as readily identifiable' (Hager 2002: 14) and 'the front-end model of occupational preparation' is increasingly breaking down (Beckett & Hager 2002: chapter 6). Recent skills surveys support this assessment as a growing proportion of employees need to 'keep learning in their role' (Felstead et al 2006: 166) and new forms of working favour the development of 'soft' rather than technical skills (Shury et al 2006).

Thus secondly, a contrasting paradigm has emerged, referred to as 'learning by participation' that regards learning as being trained 'how to behave in ways that mimic activities licensed by practice as custom' (Hager 2002: 11). This assumes a more social process where 'all *meanings* are created in the public domain in the context of *collective* situations and activities' rather than in individual minds (Toulmin 1999: 58). Also 'training in techniques creates the regularities of behaviour necessary for any judgement of sameness' (Hager 2002: 11). New forms of working reflect this understanding of learning. Organisations strive to create working environments in which employees learn as part of their normal role to promote individual and organisational learning (Senge

1990, Sung & Ashton 2005). Thus the achievement of qualifications is not an end in itself, more part of an ongoing process of continuous personal development.

Finally, Beckett and Hager (2002) propose an alternative more inclusive understanding of learning that seeks to 'avoid dualisms' such as 'theory/practice', 'learner/world', 'thought/action', 'pure/applied' and 'education/training' that arise from the concept above. It aims to encompass 'learning of many different kinds', for example it includes knowledge that 'resides in individuals, teams and organisations'; is 'integrated in judgements'; underpins choices on how to act in the world; includes 'propositional understanding and 'in the process of its acquisition, alters both the learning and the world (since the learner is part of the world); and is not 'all expressed verbally or written down' (2002: 150). This approach to learning is significant because it adopts a more holistic approach and does not reject 'learning by acquisition' or 'learning by participation'. Instead it regards each perspective as a sub-component of 'the mix that underpins judgements' (Hager 2002: 16).

Hager believes that this understanding supports the concept of lifelong learning. Also, he believes that scepticism about the concept within educational literature relates to the dominant paradigm of learning by acquisition. He agrees that 'if learning is centrally about minds acquiring propositions, lifelong learning is potentially about perpetual enrolment in formal accredited courses' (2002: 17). However, he believes that his alternative concept suggests that 'much learning, including informal learning at its best, is accurately described as a form of lifelong learning' (2002: 17). He also argues that 'changing social and contextual circumstances may be creating conditions in which the concept of lifelong learning is potentially a fruitful one' (2002: 17) that could usefully

apply to individuals, communities and organisations. The following model represents this relationship between internal and external learning.

5.3 Internal and External Vocational Learning Model

Current attempts to understand vocational learning have tended to focus on specific areas, such as the nature of workplace learning and the return on investment in training, and therefore are limited in their ability to represent the full range of vocational learning including qualifications. Also, descriptions tend not to identify partners involved in the delivery of VET. In order to address this gap, I propose a model (figure 4) that reflects the views of Hager (2002) and Keep (2006) and aims to put into perspective each form of vocational learning and highlights the importance of Type 2 (external) incentives.

In keeping with the original vision of the QCF, the model aims first to encompass internal and external vocational learning. Second, the model is flexible, and can represent, according to the elements included, the vocational learning of individuals or organisations, either at one point or over a period of time. In particular, it highlights that workplace learning is central to skills development; the lifelong nature of vocational learning.

Third, the model identifies the complexity of the link between qualifications and skills. It identifies various actors in the VET system, for example professional bodies, learning providers, awarding bodies, employers and the government, and highlights barriers to progression. The key features are as follows:

Workplace learning is central to skills development

First, the model identifies that the level of internal learning is dependent on business strategy and therefore is market driven (see section 2.6). Whereas a large proportion of qualifications are government driven in England due to links to funding, informal workplace learning is given prominence and occupies a larger segment because it is the source for skills development for all people (see sections 2.5, 4.3, 5.2). For many, learning from a more experienced colleague, 'sitting next to Nellie', is the main form of training; other vocational learning is 'on-the-job' and skills build over time with experience.

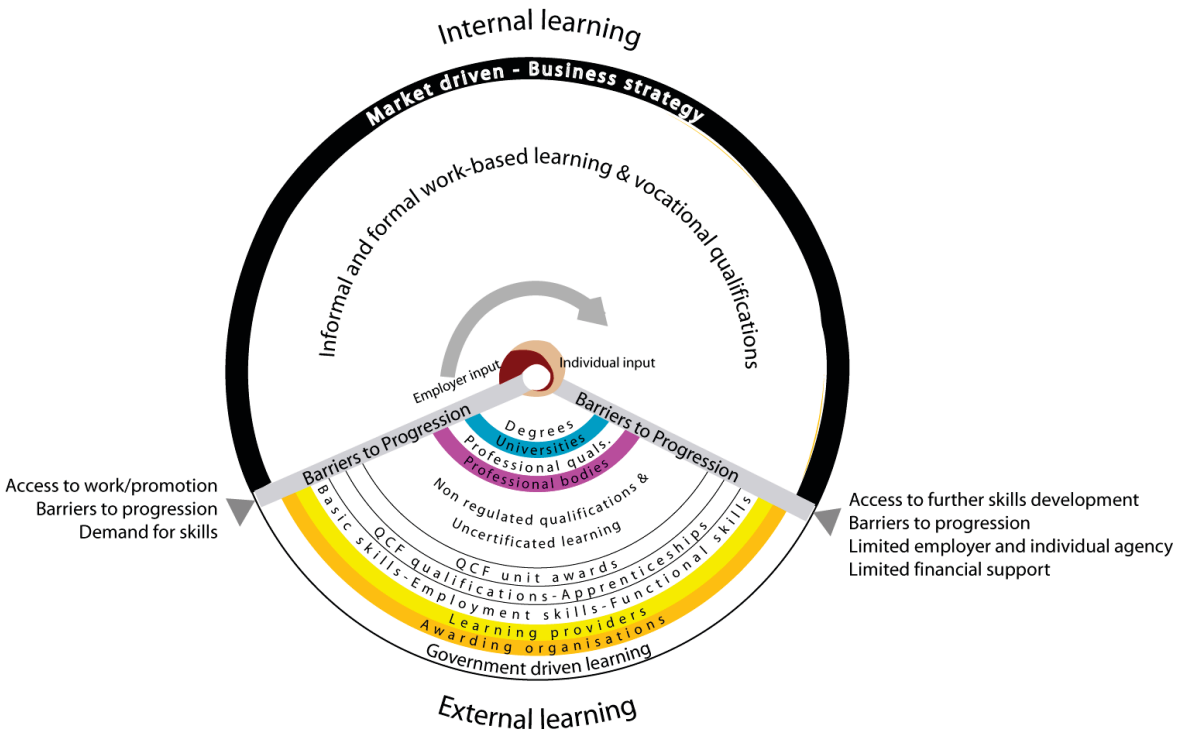
The size of the circle and segments, and composition of external learning would vary between learners and workplaces. For some, the circle would be small due to periods of unemployment or employment in restricted learning environments (Fuller and Unwin 2003). A small segment of external learning may cover, for example basic skills training and a government-funded Level 2 course, for example in customer service, or it may not exist at all. For others, a larger model would represent a wealth of learning gained over a rich and varied career. Expansive work environments provide many opportunities for continuous professional development, including access to a range external training, such as professional qualifications and further degrees. In this case, decision-making may be influenced by communities of practice, such as professional bodies.

From an organisational perspective, the size of the circle and proportion of informal learning reflects its competitive strategy and the relationship between technical relations and social relations. Some organisations offer extensive on and off-the-job training in order to develop skilled employees for differentiated production or to maximise

employee contribution through collective values (Ashton & Sung 2006). Thus there are variations to the extent that organisations fund investment in training and qualifications. The inner segments demonstrate the extent that training and qualifications are funded by the employer and individual. Generally employers fund initial development, although levels of support for ongoing development vary. However, companies that associate skills and performance closely with qualifications may fund all skills development.

FIGURE 4

Internal and External Vocational Learning Model



© The author (2011)

Lifelong nature of vocational learning

In contrast to standard qualifications frameworks, including the QCF, that only offer a static representation of achievement of full, regulated qualifications at different levels, the Internal and External Vocational Learning Model shows that vocational learning is

ongoing, lifelong and flexible. One diagram could represent the vocational learning of an individual or organisation over time or a series of diagrams.

During a lifetime, individuals build skills informally in the workplace and dip in-and-out of formal internal and external vocational learning. Only some courses would lead to regulated qualifications, although potentially more training and qualifications could lead to credit in the QCF. Individuals do not necessary progress to higher levels of learning; they are more likely over a lifetime to take a range of courses at different levels that reflect their wider interests. For example, they may combine a series of short Level 2 qualifications in health and safety and first aid, while studying for a degree in their own time.

Likewise, from an organisational perspective, in a changing external environment, new products and systems mean that employees need to update knowledge and skills. Versions of this model could identify this learning and link it to other learning. Individuals learn through a wide range of mediums; and therefore qualifications capture only a small sum of this knowledge and skills (see sections 5.2).

Barriers to progression

The model highlights barriers to progression. During a lifetime, an individual is likely to experience various barriers to skills development. Some might limit access to employment such as a lack of qualifications, limited personal skills or high competition for work. Within employment, access to skills development is likely to depend on factors such as business strategy, technical specialism, availability of funding for skills development, regulatory requirements and competition from other employees.

Individual motivation may depend on employer's expectations, especially in organisations with increasingly flatter structures and fewer opportunities for promotion (see section 2.5).

For organisations with people-focused interpersonal relations, barriers to entry might be based on soft skills and 'personality fit', for example call centres seek people with good team-working and communication skills (see sections 2.4 and 2.6).

However, 'barriers' not only limit progression; additionally they provide powerful incentives that motivate individuals and organisations to invest in qualifications. Keep (2006) refers to these as Type 2 incentives, without which there is little motivation to invest in skills development and vocational qualifications. Type 2 incentives depend on cultural expectations regarding the value of qualifications and skills development. Governments, professional bodies and organisations can influence these through setting requirements for certain levels of experience and qualifications in order to access particular roles, for example through licences to practise or organisational policies that link job roles to specific qualification requirements to encourage investment in qualifications. However, I contend that flatter structures provide less incentive to employees to overcome these barriers and invest time, money and effort in personal development.

Rich and varied nature of vocational learning

The model highlights the rich and varied nature of vocational learning. The VET system includes a range of partners: employers, professional bodies, learning providers, awarding bodies and the government that contribute to the provision of vocational

learning. Some such as universities and professional bodies focus on higher level qualifications. Others such as some learning providers and the government focus on developing basic skills. The complexity of a model would depend on the range of provision that was relevant to an individual or an organisation.

The Internal and External Vocational Learning Model is valuable for two reasons. First, it places into perspective each form of vocational learning, to encourage a more balanced VET policy and shift away from further qualification regulation to partnership working with learning providers, professional bodies and employers. Therefore it represents Hager's more inclusive concept of vocational learning. In particular, it gives prominence to the important role of informal workplace learning to encourage a shift in skills policy from the reorganisation of VET to 'open the black box' of the company and look for ways to build expansive working environments (Keep 2002). Also, significantly, the model supports the creation of the QCF as originally conceived in the 'Framework for Achievement'*;* a simpler, more responsive, inclusive, less bureaucratic and more diverse framework (QCA: 2004). This vision gives recognition to a wide range of achievement and encourages flexible pathways and inclusion of a range of specialist providers.

Second, variations of the model show the dynamic nature of workplace learning and the unique nature of vocational learning paths. It demonstrates that the link between skills and qualifications is not regular or linear. The model is useful for individuals and organisations for a range of purposes; it can capture a moment in time; a life of learning; or through a series of diagrams show how opportunities for learning change over time.

However the model is descriptive and does not seek to explain the link between qualifications and skills. Thus the next section will explore further the nature of skill and evaluate the extent that the QCF can accommodate contrasting paradigms of learning.

5.4 Contested nature of skills

Attewell's (1990) classic paper about 'skill' provides a useful exploration of the contested nature of skill. He traces distinct notions of skill including positivist, ethnomethodological and the 'situated learning' paradigm to exemplify contrasting views about skills and qualifications.

First, awarding bodies and qualification regulators who seek rigorous, valid and reliable methods to measure skills reflect a positivist position. Attewell identifies tensions between those who aim to measure skill in a precise way and those who seek to recognise a wide range of skills by a uniform measure.

This conflict currently exists within the QCF, between unit writers and assessors from a NVQ tradition, and those from a general or professional qualifications background. The former have a tradition of detailed performance criteria and an audit approach to assessment, whereas the latter tend to specify assessment criteria more generally and adopt sampling assessment methods.

However, the problem relates more specifically to the use of QCF shared units and assessment criteria to define learning outcomes. Qualifications from the 'learning by

acquisition' tradition are 'content rich' and therefore are concerned about a potential loss of content and falling standards if assessment criteria are specified more broadly. Also assessment criteria expressed in more detail could result in 'an unmanageable assessment burden' (Ofqual 2010: 29).

Attewell identifies problems with each approach and states that attempts at precise quantitative measurement often results 'in a measure that is so narrow that critics will charge that it is too simplified and fails to present the complexity of skills in the real world'. Alternatively 'high-level abstractions do not easily lend themselves to rigorous measurement, and so reliabilities and validities tend to suffer. Critics may then argue that what appear to be rigorous measures of skills in fact involve arbitrary or unreliable judgements' (1990: 424).

Ofqual (2010) states that regulatory arrangements may need amendment to 'require more specificity in the quantity and type of evidence expected from a learner' (Ofqual 2010: 24). However, there is a danger that this increases the assessment burden and reduces the relevance of units in different contexts.

The situated learning perspective adds further complications (see section 5.2.1), as psychologists from this tradition, such as Lave and Wenger (1991), believe that skills are so 'grounded' in the work context that 'they cease to be the property of any individual worker . . . but, instead, reside in the interactive work of the group as it unfolds in a particular setting' (Attewell 1990: 425). Hager (2004) is sceptical about the value of formal qualifications in measuring skill because they do not take into account informal or communal learning. He argues that skills are unique for each person

because they are developed from work experience; therefore qualifications have little value because they fail to reflect the contextuality and particularities of learning. Likewise, Hodkinson & Hodkinson (2004) question whether the measurement of skill on an individual basis is appropriate. Skills are contextually-based and often socially situated, thereby relying on collaborative practices. Therefore even if an individual's attainment can be identified, skill might be better described as 'outcomes of existing or changed organisation practices' (2004:272), especially if judgements are developed at team or organisation level rather than on an individual basis (Hager 2004).

In particular, ethnomethodologists object to a positivist's approach to skills measurement. They believe that a person who is skilled can do something without thinking, as a violin virtuoso would not think about fingering notes (Attewell 1990: 433). They grant no primacy to consciousness and do not believe that tasks that require more deliberation are necessarily more complex. As Attewell (1990) sums up:

> *'Whereas exceptions and conscious problem solving are the essence of skill in the positivist formulation, for ethnomethodology, a virtuoso recognises fewer exceptions than a learner.'* (1990: 433)

Thus they argue that novices mainly rely on context-free rules and require more decision-making as they are confronted with confusing, new situations. In contrast, experts move away from abstract rules towards more context-bound knowledge as they master a role. This differs from the positivist's view that abstract knowledge is more difficult.

Ethnomethodologists are sceptical of the validity of positivistic approaches to measuring skills. They argue that many activities become taken for granted (Schutz 1970) and 'socially invisible to both the actors performing them and to observers familiar with them' (Attewell 1990: 430). As Attewell points out, this is problematic in relation to skills measurement because first, 'widely shared skills tend to become perceptually devalued, while esoteric activities seem complex' (1990: 431). Second, it is hard to assess a person's skill level because self-reporting is difficult once an activity is mastered and therefore often results in highly truncated accounts. Third paradoxically, assessors tend to regard an activity as immensely skilled if they have not seen or done it before themselves. Thus, Attewell warns that 'judgements by outsiders as to uncertainty and routine in work tasks reside in the eye of the beholder' (1990: 434).

Consequently, Attewell argues that a more valid strategy from an ethnomethodological perspective would be for sociologists to assist in assessment and become 'thoroughly immersed in the minutiae of the daily work while resisting the worker's 'natural attitude' of allowing the knowledge and skill to become invisible and taken for granted.' (1990: 435). This explains the apparent difficulty which qualifications have in 'capturing' skills. However, to counter the ethnomethodological view, and from a practical perspective, the ability to codify skills, knowledge and understanding is a useful skill which would enable an individual to teach another. Also qualifications could encourage a more critical reflection of skill and therefore act as a catalyst for performance. However, the success of the QCF as a qualification framework depends on the extent that the design can accommodate differing ontological and epistemological positions, as will be reviewed next.

5.5 Review of QCF design

The QCF addresses these issues to some extent because units do not specify assessment methods (Table 1) and therefore they can accommodate differing epistemological positions.

TABLE 1

Design criteria for QCF units

1.5	All units must contain assessment criteria that: a specify the standard a learner is expected to meet to demonstrate that the learning outcomes of that unit have been achieved. b relate to an individual learning outcome in language consistent with it. c are sufficiently detailed to support reliable, valid and consistent judgements that a learning outcome has been achieved, without creating an undue assessment burden for learners or assessors. d do not include any explicit references to the methods or instruments of assessment to be used.

Extract from QCA (2008) *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework*

Likewise QCF regulatory arrangements state that assessment criteria should not create 'an undue assessment burden for learners or assessors' (QCA 2008: 12). Thus the QCF tries to avoid dualisms such as theory/practice, general/specific and theory/practice and achieve a balance, as advocated by Hager (2002). For example QCF guidelines state,

'There is no maximum number of assessment criteria: it should be the

minimum number that will support consistent and accurate assessment judgements; (however) working to the minimum helps to prevent over assessment of the unit.' (2008b: 41)

Also QCF level descriptors are reasonably broad, although they do associate higher levels of complexity with increased skills and suggest that people working at higher levels have a degree of mastery of this complexity. However, learners would not be expected to demonstrate all criteria at each level. In addition, the QCF allows for assessment criteria at different levels for the same learning outcomes. Thus in contrast to NVQs, the QCF does recognise that the level of skills and performance for each activity varies.

However, there are pressures for Ofqual to tighten QCF arrangements, exemplified by the comment in the '2009 Evaluation of QCF Regulation' that regulatory requirements may need amendment 'to require more specificity in the quantity and type of evidence expected from a learner' (Ofqual 2010: 24). Likewise in Australia, Misko (2010) from the National Centre for Vocational Education and Training recommends a tightening of regulatory processes, 'in view of the continuing requests from industry for more rigorous assessments to determine competency more adequately, we suggest a concerted effort to increase assessment verification processes' (Misko 2010:60).

Nevertheless, the thesis argues more specificity would conflict with the principles of the QCF, and reflects a misunderstanding of the purpose and vision of the QCF and tethered thinking grounded in a competency-based, NVQ tradition. In particular, the thesis contends that the QCF model is flawed due to retention of the concept of 'competency'

as an optional purpose category for QCF qualifications because this is misleading for stakeholders, has similar problems when attached to NVQs and conflicts with the principles of the QCF.

Thus the thesis recommends that the term 'competency' should be replaced with various levels of 'qualified status'. This would allow sector bodies to continue to set minimum qualification levels and specify assessment criteria in detail for any critical functions. However, the QCF generally could retain broad assessment criteria in order to recognise the achievement to a range of learners and enable 'individuals and employers to establish routes to achievement that are appropriate to their needs' (Ofqual 2008: 5).

5.6 Conclusion

Conflicting understanding of the link between skills, performance and qualifications result from differing ontological and epistemological positions, in particular in relation to paradigms of 'learning by acquisition' and 'learning by participation'. Hager's (2002) alternative understanding of learning is helpful because it encompasses a range of learning and theory and supports the principles of the QCF. Also the author proposes a model that can be adapted to represent the relationship between internal and external vocational learning and provide a less static and more inclusive representation of the link between skills development and qualifications.

However, there are several issues in relation to the QCF that stem from a positivist position which seeks to define skills and competence in a precise way in order to achieve rigorous, valid and reliable measurement. This may be appropriate to verify

minimum standards for licensing purposes. However, this approach tends to result in onerous assessment that limits the scope and value of vocational qualifications to employers and learners. Also the concept of 'competency' in relation to skill is misleading for stakeholders and has similar problems. As Keep and James (2010) argue this 'methodology tended to create qualifications specified on the basis of a lowest common denominator that employers in an industry could agree upon' (2010: 10).

The QCF appears to provide a more flexible framework than the NVQs to recognise achievement. However, will the QCF raise interest in qualifications as a means to achieve specific business outcomes? If so, what factors influence decision-marking? Also to what extent do employers regard QCF qualifications as a catalyst for performance? The thesis aims to investigate these questions through case study research in the telecoms sector, as explained in the following chapters.

CHAPTER 6 Methodology

6.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to explain the methods used to investigate the extent that QCF qualifications are seen as a catalyst for learning and performance.

To this end, the study focuses on three areas: employer engagement, qualification design and performance, and will centre around the following research questions:

Employer engagement

Does the introduction of QCF qualifications influence an organisation's support for qualifications? What factors influence decision-making?

Qualification design

How do organisations design QCF qualifications and assessment to achieve business objectives and performance? What factors influence the qualification design process?

Performance

To what extent do employers link QCF qualifications with skills and performance?
In what ways do organisations integrate qualifications with high performance practices?

Answers to these questions provide an early indication of the success of the QCF to inform ongoing policy. Critics of government policy suggest that it is unrealistic to assume that employers will be convinced by the worth of investment in VET and qualifications if they are pursuing a low-skills, low value business strategy and making

a profit (Keep 2000; Wilson & Hogarth 2003; Unwin 2004; Mason 2004; Keep 2009b). If HPWOs find little value in credit-based qualifications, then it is unlikely that the QCF will encourage organisations with standardised technical relations or task focused interpersonal relations to invest in skills development. Also the questions help to assess the value placed on the specific design of the QCF and on qualifications as a catalyst for performance.

I use case study research that combines qualitative methods with some quantification to investigate employer engagement and views about the design of the QCF and links with performance. Research presents an insider view and centres on the credit departments of telecoms companies. This chapter considers the ethical issues that arise from this form of research; considers assumptions and limitations of methodology; and explains research questions, case study selection and methods of data collection.

6.2 Justification for methodology

6.2.1 Introduction

I use case studies of high performing organisations as the basis for research because these best assess the rationale behind the QCF in the context of a small scale study. Qualitative techniques combined with some quantification allow a detailed exploration of decision-making and are appropriate when little is known about a subject area. Engagement with qualifications depends on the agency of people and organisations, and qualitative techniques help explore individual and collective reasoning in situations that involve complex social interactions. Quantitative research techniques generally have limitations in this context.

First, a small scale study would have little validity; quantitative research requires a large, representative sample that would be costly and time consuming to achieve. It would be hard to control for internal and external factors in relation to each organisation, or to establish an experimental research design with a control group.

Second, there would be issues regarding the internal validity of variables. Assessment results could be collected to represent qualification achievement; however performance data is difficult to obtain in a stardardised form across organisations. Also, it is unlikely that variables which represent 'skills' would be meaningful, consistent and coherent, given the contested nature of this concept (see section 5.4). In these situations, as Mason (2002) warns, there would be a risk that any measures would be 'too flat, static, one-dimensional or simplistic' (Mason 2002: 126). However, I use some quantification through the initial use of structured surveys to enable cross-case comparability and ensure a clear focus at the start of the study.

The inclusion of some quantitative data in qualitative research, sometimes called 'triangulation' is problematic because it is interpreted in different ways. For quantitative researchers the measurement of the same phenomenon using different methods aims to achieve a more accurate reading. This suggests that 'there is one, objective, and knowable social reality' that is waiting for discovery with the use of appropriate methods (Mason 2005: 190), which is ontologically and epistemologically untenable for qualitative researchers.

However, Mason (2005) advises that some quantification is helpful for qualitative researchers to explore research questions in a 'rounded and multi-faceted way' (2005:

190). Also some quantification, for example Linkert Scales in the structured survey, according to Silverman (1985) add some precision to relative values and help combat accusations of anecdotalism (Bryman 2001: 439). These help participants define their response over time which is useful in longitudinal studies and cross-sample analysis.

The following sections explain my interpretivist approach, the value of an insider view and case study research.

6.2.2 An interpretive approach

As Mason (2002), I am concerned about how the social world is 'interpreted, understood, experienced, produced and constituted' (2000: 3), and therefore value an interpretivist approach. I believe that the social world is complex, multi-layered and textured, and therefore people should be the main data source. This is important because, as Blaikie (2000) explains,

> *'In order to negotiate their way around their world and make sense of it, social actors have to interpret their activities together, and it is these meanings, embedded in language, that constitute their social reality'* (2000: 115).

The literature review forms an essential part of the study. Research questions emerge from the initial review (section 6.4 and figure 5) and steer conclusions drawn from the data. However, this is not a 'one-off' exercise and regularly during the data collection period, the literature is revisited as questions arise from survey data and interviews. This

helps to relate theory to practice and vice versa and steers the collection and interpretation of data.

I used survey and interview techniques to explore individual and collective understanding about the value of qualifications and their impact on skills and performance, because I am interested in the interpretation and reasoning behind any beliefs, policy or action in relation to vocational learning and qualifications. I prefer to collect people's accounts and perceptions to gain what Blaikie (2000) calls an 'insider view' rather than imposing an 'outsider view' (2000: 115). Also as Mason (2002) advises, I adopted a flexible data collection methodology which adapts according to responses from participants (see section 6.5), and an ethical approach which is sensitive to the social context of the study (see section 6.10).

This interpretivist approach includes interest in the context of decision-making, in order to understand factors that shape beliefs and the extent that these are translated into action (see section 6.5.4). Hence methodology extends to collect both perceptions about socio-economic factors, such as the effectiveness of working practices and the impact of the 'credit crunch', and quantitative data about investment in training and qualification achievement.

Based on this approach, I hope to achieve, as Mason (2000) describes, a 'rounded and contextual' understanding of the QCF, on the basis of 'rich, nuanced and detailed data', and a more 'holistic' form of explanation, rather than 'charting surface patterns, trends and correlations' (2000: 3-4). Mason advises that such an approach does not have to

rely on ‘total immersion in a setting’ (2000: 56), although I explain next the value of my role as a key partner in relation to the QCF.

6.2.3 Value of my insider view as a key partner

The value of insider or outsider views in research depends on ontological and epistemological perspectives (Bartunek & Reis Louis). Positivists are concerned about potential biases (Merton 1972) and regard insiders as organising knowledge ‘not in terms of a scientific system but in terms of relevance of . . . actions’ (Schutz 1964: 92). Thus they favour an outsider, who they regard as ‘the disinterested scientific onlooker of the social world’ who tries to ‘observe, describe, and classify the social world as clearly as possible in well-ordered terms’ following ‘scientific ideals’ (1964: 92).

Merton (1972) suggests that an insider with social scientist training could develop sufficient detachment, however Bartunek and Louis (1996) are wary of this approach, and advocate insider/outsider team research in order to ‘bring different perspectives vis-à-vis the research setting’ (1996: 15). I occupy both roles (insider and outsider) and as an interpretivist, agree with Brodkey (1987) that ‘all stories, including their own, are told from a vantage point (1987: 71), and therefore believe that this research provides a useful perspective.

I am an outsider as a researcher and external learning provider, from an employer’s point of view, and an insider from the qualification regulators’ viewpoint in relation to this study because I work for an Ofqual accredited awarding body and design QCF qualifications. Therefore as a qualification practitioner working in partnership with

employers, I am in a good position to capture multiple perspectives about the QCF and vocational learning.

I have not adopted an ethnographic stance and engaged in, as Patai (1994) terms, 'proliferative' reflexive techniques (1994: 64), in an attempt to legitimise or increase the validity of my research. I agree with Patai that 'we do not escape from the consequences of our positions by talking about them endlessly' (1994: 70). However, as a qualitative researcher, I must be open and transparent about my role and reflexive in order to demonstrate that I understand my 'analytical lens', and show that I have tried to read data from 'alternative interpretive perspectives' (Mason 2005: 192). Thus, I will explain next how my professional role has influenced the research process. Also, at relevant points in the thesis, I will reflect briefly on the impact of my role as an insider researcher.

As a manager of an awarding organisation and professional body, the Institute of Credit Management (ICM), I work with a range of employers to design QCF qualifications for people working in credit management, and manage quality assurance arrangements for the awarding body. Also I develop and sell a range of learning materials and membership services. This role influences the way that participants respond (see section 6.8 Assumptions) and my judgement about the choice of research area. In addition, my professional role affects my reading of the literature, steers the direction of the enquiry, and will guide my interpretation of data and conclusions (see sections 6.8, 6.9 and 6.10). Potentially this provides a unique perspective of the social world.

In particular, my role encourages a focus on the theoretical and mechanical questions in relation to vocational qualifications, professional bodies and workplace learning. I hope that robust research will help understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the QCF, and potentially will facilitate the design of better vocational qualifications and services.

From my organisation's perspective, entries for ICM qualifications have declined in the last 10 years, and it is unclear whether this reflects a restructuring of the credit management function, changing management practices or different skill requirements. Survey results offer a rather superficial picture, and fail to capture the detail, nuances and complexity of rapidly changing organisational arrangements. Feedback from learners, employers and learning providers suggest that ICM qualifications are highly valued and have a positive impact on performance; yet demand continues to fall. Qualitative, case study research will help build deeper understanding of the complex, socio-economic processes that relate to ICM qualifications specifically, and workplace learning and investment in skills development and qualifications in general.

6.2.4 Value of case study research

Case study research, coupled with a detailed literature review, enables a conceptually rich interpretation (Mason 2002) and gains what Blaikie (2000) calls an 'insider view' of the link with skills, performance and the QCF, as oppose to the 'outside view' of a positivist ontological or epistemological tradition (Blaikie 2000: 115). As Stake (2005) says:

> '*In a social process, together people bend, spin, consolidate, and enrich their understandings . . . The case researcher emerges from one social experience, the observation, to choreograph another, the report. Knowledge is socially constructed – or so we constructivists believe – and through their experiential and contextual accounts, case study researchers assist readers in the construction of knowledge'* (2005: 454).

Thus I will achieve a 'fine-grained' picture of the impact of the QCF through case study research. Also a study conducted over a period of time will track changes in perspectives and actions. In order to achieve this objective, I engaged with those who know most about employee development and performance within organisations.

A key issue will be the fact that the QCF is very different from previous qualification arrangements, and therefore initial responses may not give a fair assessment of its worth. Thus I used a longitudinal approach and a range of qualitative techniques, as described by Mason (2002), to 'read' data literally, interpretively and reflexively. Although a small scale study will struggle to address all the questions raised by the literature review, quantitative techniques will help assess the value of the QCF in relation to case study organisations. Additionally, longitudinal methodology and multiple case studies will give the opportunity to check responses and clarify meaning in order to reduce misinterpretation.

Although I identified general working practices and the context of each case study in depth, I am not interested in the intrinsic qualities of each case study for its own sake. Instead I treat case studies as instrumental to the study and have chosen them to

investigate the value of the QCF and the link between vocational qualifications and skills. Stake (2005) suggests that researchers use multiple instrumental case studies in the belief that 'understanding them will lead to better understanding, and perhaps better theorising, about a still larger collection of cases' (2005: 446) because through exploration of the research questions and reflection, a researcher can begin to understand interactions, relationships, meanings, perspectives and patterns in context and generally. Stake explains that this 'triangulation' of multiple perceptions helps clarify meaning, and identify 'diversity of perceptions' and the 'multiple realities with which people live' (2005: 454).

6.3 Case study selection

In qualitative research, the primary concern in the selection of case studies is the 'opportunity to learn' (Stake 2005: 452). Additionally, case studies should represent a population of cases and give opportunities to observe the phenomenon of interest (Huberman & Miles 1994; Ryan & Bernard 2000; Stake 2005). Random selection is inappropriate due to the small sample size. Thus I have drawn a purposive sample based on conclusions draw from the literature review. This aims to study the link between vocational qualifications and skills and the value of the QCF.

The literature suggests that the value of qualifications depends on the competitive strategy of an organisation, which leads to the assumption that differentiated technical relations and people development interpersonal relations are more likely to favour routes to qualification (Ashton & Sung 2006). However, the relationship between business strategy and investment in qualifications is not straightforward. Case study research into organisations with high performing working practices and established

learning environments indicate that demand for qualifications is limited (Sung & Ashton 2005). Also, the literature shows that the value of qualifications and certification depend on their ability to raise skills, motivate employees (Grugulis, 2004), the perceived cost-benefit of qualification, and prevailing business strategy and management practices. Hence research which assesses the value of QCF qualifications for high performing working organisations is interesting because it challenges the view that qualifications are a catalyst for performance. I selected case studies from the telecoms sector because they represent high performance working organisations and have large, centralised credit management functions that offer a good opportunity to learn.

First, the telecoms sector is highly competitive, with organisations differentiating their offering on price and the quality of customer service. Thus they exemplify operations that Kinnie et al (2000) identify which use high commitment working practices to motivate employees and encourage discretionary effort. Therefore the sector will illustrate the potential problems associated with using qualifications to raise skills because the organisations are only likely to invest in the QCF if they see value; if the rationale behind the QCF is correct, theoretically the organisations will show interest in the qualifications.

Second, the telecoms sector is significant in terms of output and therefore should be of interest to policy-makers. Total operator revenue in the UK was over £30 billion in 2009 and the four operators which make up the study contribute 75% of total service revenue for the UK communications industry (Ofcom 2010: 279) and the combined global annual revenue of over £194 billion (Annual Reports 2009).

Third, although a large sector, it comprises of eight main operators and therefore is a manageable size for study. Also, the study centres on credit departments rather than organisations as a whole because they are more likely to identify with ICM qualifications. Large credit management departments are ideal subjects for this research for several reasons. First, they typify call centres that require high communication, negotiation and team-working skills, all qualities that qualifications struggle to nurture and assess. Therefore it will be interesting to see the extent that employers are interested in units which relate to these skills.

Second, credit management departments are highly controlled environments with individual and departmental performance measured on an hourly basis in order to maximise collections and cashflow. Consequently participants are likely to have an opinion about the link between qualifications, skills and performance.

6.4 Research questions

The study focuses on developmental questions in relation to the QCF that arise from the literature review. The aim is to evaluate the initial success of the QCF and inform ongoing policy. The questions focus on three areas, employer engagement, qualification design and the link to skills and performance, as explained next.

6.4.1 Employer engagement

The literature suggests that demand from high performing companies will be limited because they tend to use other HR practices to build commitment and performance (Sung & Ashton 2005). Also it is likely that telecom call centres that compete on price and the quality of customer service would find qualifications less relevant due to their

difficulty in capturing soft, generic and transferable skills (Ainley 1994; Green 1998; Payne 1999). Therefore the sub-questions focus on building understanding of the value that sample companies place on vocational qualifications and the extent that the QCF encourages participation.

Related research questions

Does the introduction of the QCF influence an organisation's support for qualifications?

- Will the QCF raise the perceived value of qualifications?
- What value, if any, do organisations place on the acquisition of QCF qualifications in recruitment and promotion?
- Has investment in the QCF been value for money?
- What factors influence decision-making?
- What aspects of QCF qualifications do employers value?
- How do employers engage with the QCF?
- Are employers self-reliant or do they seek external expertise and partnerships to support skills development?
- To what extent do employers use QCF qualifications to assess in-company and on-the-job training?
- To what extent do employers use QCF qualification to measure skills?
- Are employers interested in measuring more than basic competency? Are they interested in measuring excellence?
- Are job roles linked to qualification requirements?
- Are there any issues with the QCF for employers?

6.4.2 Qualification design

Introduction of the QCF has required awarding bodies to completely redesign the structure of their qualifications. This has involved the development of smaller common units, new qualification structures based on rules of combination and standard titles. Potentially the QCF provides organisations and learners with the opportunity to design qualifications and assessment to meet specific requirements.

This section investigates the ways in which organisations use the QCF to design qualifications in order to achieve business objectives and the factors which influence this process.

Related research questions

How do organisations design QCF qualifications and assessment to achieve business objectives?

- What aspects of QCF qualifications do employers value and why?
- Which units and qualifications do employers select and why?
- Do attitudes and ideas about QCF qualifications change as employers gain more experience at working with the QCF?

What factors influence the design process?

- Who or what influences design of qualification?
- Are QCF units able to recognise soft skills?

6.4.3 Performance

This section aims to assess the link between vocational qualifications, skills and performance. The study aims to discern if QCF qualifications could act as a catalyst for performance and if so, in what way?

Related research questions

To what extent do employers link QCF qualifications with skills and performance?

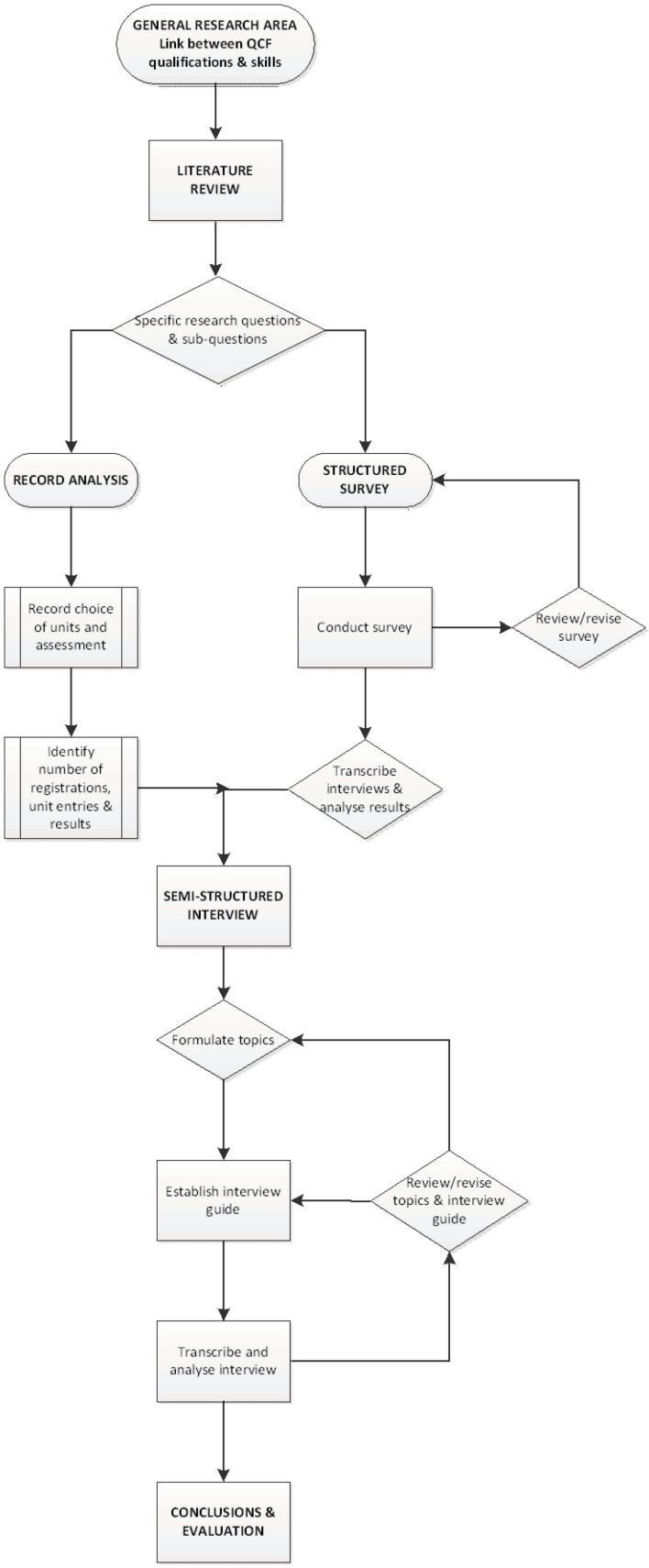
- To what extent do employers believe that investment in skills development can transform performance?
- What type of incentives do employers use to encourage participation in qualifications? How successful are these?
- To what extent do employers believe QCF qualifications reflect skills levels?
- To what extent do QCF qualifications encourage progression from Level 2 to higher levels?
- To what extent do employers believe that QCF qualifications raise skills and performance?
- Will the QCF give better access to qualifications?
- Will achievement of QCF qualifications confer status?
- Will employers link QCF qualifications to new career pathways?

In what ways do organisations integrate QCF qualifications with high performance working practices?

- Do employers believe that the QCF has value for HPWOs?
- Do employers recognise value in linking job roles to qualification requirements?
- What factors influence the extent that organisations integrate qualifications with other working practices?

FIGURE 5

Summary of methodology



This section explains the overall approach, sample selection, record analysis and how the survey and interviews are designed and conducted.

6.5 Data Collection

I used qualitative and some quantitative techniques to address the above research questions (Figure 5). This included record analysis of qualification activity, structured surveys and interviews followed by semi-structured interviews. Although methods of data collection focus on initial questions, methodology was flexible and influenced by the feedback from participants. Also I collected data over time in order to track opinions and action in relation to the QCF. The initial structured surveys were important to ensure coverage of main research areas and facilitate comparisons between participants. The semi-structured interviews enabled further exploration of opinions. In both cases, I revised the content if necessary to improve effectiveness and explore any additional enquiry.

6.5.1 Sample selection

I used the Institute's database to identify 10 telecoms companies and each was contacted by email in May 2009 (see Addenda 1.1-1.3). The Institute's data protection policy allows use of member's personal data for research purposes and no members have opted out of this clause. A credit manager at one company and training managers at three companies agreed to join the research project referred to as Company A, B, C and D. A fifth company, referred to as Company E, did not join the research project, however, agreed to an informal telephone interview. I targeted participants who are responsible for the organisation of training and qualifications, because they are more likely to influence take-up and have a better understanding of the relationship between

qualifications, skills and performance. Over a period of fourteen months, I collected survey data on three occasions from training managers at Companies A and B, twice from a Company D training manager and twice from a Company C operations manager (Table 2). Also I recorded unstructured interviews with three companies (A, B and D).

Later I sought responses, with limited success, from operations managers and learners to provide a more rounded picture (see chapter 8). I put plans to seek responses from studying and non-studying employees at Company B on hold due to organisational change (see section 8.2.3).

Appendix B summarises data collection methods, their justification, and practical and ethical issues.

TABLE 2

Research sample and summary of data collection

	Qualification data	**Structured survey data**				**Semi-structured interview**
		Operations Managers	Training Managers			
		1	1	2	s3	
Company A	1.1.08 to 1.3.10	11.10.10 **(9)**	14.12.09	8.4.10	10.9.10 **R**	5.1.11 **R**
Company B		27.9.10 & 5.10.10 **(2)**	23.11.09	24.5.10	19.8.10 **R**	7.1.11 **R**
Company C		8.12.09 & 24.5.10				
Company D				31.3.10	1.10.10 **R**	21.1.11 **R**

R = recorded interview **(x)** No of participants if >1

6.5.2 Structured survey

The structured survey collects data about organisational characteristics and views about the QCF to ensure coverage of the three research areas: engagement, qualification design and performance (Addenda 1.5). This is important to facilitate cross-sample comparisons and link the study to other research. Initially, I conducted the survey by

telephone with notes taken of comments. However, the survey proved such a valuable source of information that I recorded and transcribed the last call.

The structured survey contains three parts. Part 1 records general information about the credit department and their strategy regarding people development and performance measurement. Part 2 investigates credit department and employee performance measures. Part 3 collects data about training and qualifications and opinions about the impact of studying on performance. The following explains the design of each section.

Part 1

This part collects the following background information:

Contact details and credit department characteristics

This section aims to identify the structure of the credit department in terms of job roles and number of employees. These relate to QCF level descriptors to help participants associate specific functions to qualification levels. This exercise provides a helpful insight into the size of the operation and initial perceptions about the complexity of each role and qualification expectations.

HR and other organisational practices

Effectiveness of HR and other organisational practices

These collect information about HR practices based on Sung and Ashton's (2004) survey into high performing working practices to establish a basis of comparison with a wider population.

I made a slight modification to the original research by asking companies to state whether a working practice was 'recently introduced' or 'well established' in addition to

‘not used’. In addition, I asked participants to rate the effectiveness of the credit department in achieving a range of twenty HR and organisational goals ranging from meeting business goals to motivating staff and managing change. Both these questions help relate the sample to a wider population.

Part 2

This part collects information about the measurement of credit management department and employee performance to facilitate cross-sample comparisons and help relate the sample to a wider population. Also it gives an indication of the extent that roles are task-focused and tightly controlled.

Part 3

Part 3 relates most closely to the research questions. The following explains how it investigates views about engagement, qualification design and impact on performance.

Engagement

Engagement with training and the qualifications is recorded with five questions. I encouraged participants to specify the level and type of training over the previous three month period; views about the impact of the ‘credit crunch’ on training; the numbers registered with the ICM for qualifications or membership; views about the importance of employees working in credit management gaining a relevant qualification and reasons for this opinion.

I asked participants to score 1 – 5 for six aims:

- improve knowledge
- develop skills

- raise performance
- motivate
- give more job satisfaction
- encourage progression.

At first I based aims on key goals for HPWOs (Sung & Ashton 2004). However, following feedback from participants and a further literature review I expanded the choice to include:

- give recognition to in-company training
- raise the status of credit management internally and externally
- benchmark knowledge and skills
- reward skills, knowledge and good performance
- give recognition for skills and knowledge

(see section 10.9 for recommendations for further research).

The question relates to ICM qualifications that are credit-based, however responses are likely to relate the value of qualifications generally. Hence I used record analysis and the semi-structured interview to investigate more specifically engagement with the QCF.

Qualification design

As the QCF is new, a longitudinal study is potentially interesting because it tracks views. I recorded changing views about various aspects of the Institute's qualifications that use all features of the QCF. This helps 'ground' what is a rather abstract concept for participants who are relatively new to qualifications and the QCF. I asked participants

to score 1-5 the extent that they value thirteen features. Additionally I used record analysis and a semi-structured interview to investigate design feature of the QCF.

Performance

Apart from recording views about the effectiveness of HR and organisational practices (part 1) and how sample companies measure performance (part 2), I investigated the extent that participants associate study for qualifications with various benefits for employees.

I deliberately asked participants to consider the impact on individuals studying towards qualifications, rather than the impact on the department as a whole, because individual performance is monitored closely and therefore participants are more likely to have a view. I expect that if employees have studied for other non-QCF qualifications during this period participants may form their opinion based on experience with this and I consider the implications of this in the analysis and conclusion (Section 9.7). However, the aim is to assess the extent that participants regard qualifications as a catalyst for performance rather than to prove in a positive way a causal link between qualifications and performance.

I tabulated scores for engagement and views about the impact and features of QCF qualifications in more detail. I summarised the change in response over time for each training manager (Appendix D) and compared the last response of each training manager with average responses of operations managers (Table 13).

6.5.3 Record analysis

The record analysis is important because it identifies the extent to which, and how, the sample companies engage with the QCF. I interrogated of the ICM Awarding Body database to ascertain the QCF units and amount of credit awarded to learners from participant companies between September 2008 and December 2010 (Section 2.5 and Addendum 3).

6.5.4 Semi-structured interview

The semi-structured interview provides the opportunity to explore in depth all research questions and points that arise from the literature review and surveys. The aim is to attain a fuller and fairer interpretation of participants' perceptions. This is not to assume that participants' accounts are 'a direct reflection of understandings 'already existing' outside the interview', as Mason (2005) warns these are only 'constructed or reconstructed' in the interview and depend on people's ability to 'verbalise, interact, conceptualize and remember' (2005: 64). However, participants proved to be knowledgeable and articulate representatives of their companies, with clear views about training and qualifications strategies.

I constructed interviews carefully to encourage a 'conversation with a purpose' (2004: 67) and facilitate construction of accounts. I achieved this first by supplying in advance a summary of survey results and topics for discussion.

Next I prepared a writing frame to guide discussion which I tailored for each participant and used a range of questions to encourage conversation (Table 3). I started the interview with an icebreaker to create a supportive environment and help them 'construct' their accounts.

Kvale (1996) suggests nine different types of questions, including 'silence' to encourage a quality interview (Table 4). I used these to 'think through' each interview, not as a rigid script; more to prepare the interviewer to 'think on the feet . . . quickly, effectively, coherently and in ways which are consistent with (the) research questions' (Mason 2005: 67).

As I am a manager at the ICM, participants' answers may 'reflect the response that they believe would fit my expectations' (Keep et al 2002: 36). Therefore quantitative scores from the structured survey are helpful to challenge responses because they record previous perceptions about the relative value of the QCF and details of actual registrations and unit achievement. Also they direct participants to explore perceptions about the design of qualifications and value of vocational qualifications in more depth.

6.5.5 Analysis and conclusions

This is a small qualitative study and therefore it is helpful that I am an insider and can on draw on experience from work with employers from a range of companies, and the qualification regulators, to interpret the literature and data. I took care to record the basis of any interpretation.

6.5.5.1 Structured survey

Analysis of the structured survey evolved, and comprised of five stages. The analysis formed the basis of the semi-structured interview; provided background information about the case studies (chapter 7); and summarised the relative value placed on a range of factors in relation to vocational qualifications (chapter 8).

TABLE 3

Semi-structured interview guide

Icebreaker	Tell me a little about your background and experience. How long have you worked for the company? How did you get into your current role? Do you have any specific qualifications related to your role? QCF has changed ICM qualifications significantly – used to have very academic courses – 4 units in core business subjects at L3 and L5 tested by 3-hour written exams. Now a whole range of QCF units and qualifications tested by a range of methods, assignments, online exams. What is your opinion about this?
Impact of the QCF on engagement with qualifications	
Supports and challenges to implementation of QCF qualifications	
Factors influencing QCF qualification design	
Link between QCF qualification, skills and performance	
Role of QCF qualifications in 5 years time for credit management	
Potential future challenges	

TABLE 4

Example interview questions

Introducing questions	Please tell me a little about your background and experience
Structuring question	I'd like to start with thinking back to the time when you first contacted the ICM **silence** in early/middle of 2009, I think?
Introducing questions	Please tell me about the reasons for getting in touch with the ICM
Follow up question (if necessary)	How important is working with organisations like a professional body?
Probing questions	If you look at table x 'both training and operations managers rated 'raising the status of credit management internally and externally' as important. Why do you think that this is?
Direct/Interpreting questions	So to clarify, do you mean that . . .?
Indirect questions	So what do most people think about . . . ?
Specifying questions	Which units do you think are most valuable?

First, I summarised data and ranked responses in Excel tables for each company to show changing views over time. This formed the basis of future discussions with respondents in subsequent data collections and helped build a shared understanding of views about the QCF and its impact on performance. After each data collection, I reflected on responses and revisited the literature. This led to new insights and encouraged minor changes to the survey for subsequent collections (see section 6.5.4).

Second, I recorded and transcribed the last call because previous responses had proved such a valuable source of information. However conversations were not as in depth or valuable as those held on the first occasion and no reference was made in the final report.

Third, I displayed scores collected on the final occasion for training managers, and average scores for Company B's department managers, in single Excel tables per research question. This facilitated cross-sample comparisons in the final report and formed the basis for discussion in subsequent semi-structured interviews (Tables 11-13).

Fourth, I presented a selection of the data to summarise for the reader the main characteristics of the case studies. This involved comparing the number and type of HPWPs with results from the Sung and Ashton (2005) to discern the extent that the case studies where typical (Tables 5-7); summarising job roles and performance measures to show organisational structure and level of performance monitoring (Tables 8-9); and tabulating training provision to show subject areas, length of course and level of learners (Table 10).

Fifth, I presented summaries of responses to research questions about the value of vocational qualifications, features of the QCF and the impact on performance in chapter 8 to help the reader judge the relative value respondents placed on differing factors (Tables 11-13).

6.5.5.2 Semi-structured interview

Data resulting from the semi-structured interviews formed the main basis of discussion about the impact of the QCF on skills and performance (see chapter 8). In all cases, I recorded and transcribed interviews to enable a post-interview review and a literal, interpretive and reflexive reading of the conversations. This involved five stages which culminated in the creation of the model showing the 'Vocational Purpose of Qualifications' (Figure 6).

The first review occurred immediately after the interview when I summarised first impressions in the interview frame about responses, meaning, coverage of research questions and role of interviewer in the interaction.

Second, I transcribed the interview and added line numbers for reference, highlighting, in colour, comments which gave a particular insight about the research questions. I did not code or categorise the transcript initially because each was short, and conversations covered research questions in discrete sections with little overlap.

Third, I returned to the literature to compare immediate interpretations of the data and personal views with the literature to try, as Mason (2005) advises, to read 'data from alternative, interpretive perspectives' (2005: 192). This interpretive and reflexive

‘reading’ involved ‘reading through or beyond the data’ (Mason 2005: 149) to compare my interpretations and understandings with the participant’s, and guide preparation for the next interview.

Fourth, I tailored subsequent interviews, adapting questions based on mutual understanding of the context, and exploring any emergent themes or questions from the previous reviews and as they emerged during the conversation.

Fifth, having concluded the interviews, I drew cross-sample comparisons by reading across the transcripts with the recordings. To achieve this, I highlighted themes across each transcript in one colour and selected quotes in another. I compared areas of interest with survey data, themes that had arisen from the literature and personal reflections of working with organisations. Then I presented findings around the themes of engagement, qualification design and performance (chapter 9).

Next, I returned to the literature to consider the vocational purpose of qualifications. This led to the development of diagrams to combine views drawn from the case studies with the literature.

Finally, I returned to the research questions and literature review to summarise to main finding and consider implications for theory, policy, practice and methodology.

6.6 Administration

Mason (2005) advises that methods should be 'thorough, careful, honest and accurate' to ensure reliability (2005: 188). This section explains how research was administered to achieve this goal.

First, I managed the administration, conducted all interviews and carried out the analysis, with the assistance of an ICM administrator to set up meetings, and a newly qualified history graduate to produce transcripts from the recorded interviews. I checked transcripts and inserted line numbers to facilitate referencing. The graduate provides administrative support on an ad hoc basis and was briefed to ensure she understood the confidential nature of the work and confirmed that any files were deleted from her laptop at the end of the work.

Second, I password-protected all files to protect the original source of the data, and stored it on my laptop and the ICM server which is backed up daily to protect against a potential loss of data. I maintained the names of companies and participants in the original, password-protected data (see Addenda 1.1 and 1.3). However I removed this information from any summarised, published data.

Several methods protect the source of data. Apart from information about working practices, I included no individual data about the participant companies' location, size of operations or job titles because this information is too readily identifiable and may infringe confidentiality agreements. In all cases I referred to company names uniformly as Company A, B, C and D, and replaced participants' names with the generic job titles

of training manager and operations manager. I shredded any hard copies that contained possible sources of identification.

I recorded contacts with companies on password-protected Excel spreadsheets (Addenda 1.1 and 1.2) and arranged for addenda information to be stored at the University of Leicester with access restricted for a period of 2 years due to the commercial sensitive nature of the content.

I shared initial analysis of results with participants to check that the steps had taken to protect identity were appropriate and to provide a basis for further discussion (ethical considerations are discussed further in section 6.11).

6.7 Limitations of methodology

According to Keep (2002 et al) small studies are of little interest because they have limited wider applicability and there are reporting biases if results are based on self-reporting due to reliance on the impressionistic judgement of a few individuals. In particular, managers' comments are likely to be influenced by the researcher and perceptions of performance may be 'coloured by notions of self-worth' (2002: 36).

However, this research is grounded in an 'interpretivist' philosophical position that is interested in how the social world is interpreted and therefore seeks to see the world through the eyes of the people being studied. As Mason (2005) argues, social meanings, interpretations, practices and discourses are important because they provide 'meaningful elements in a complex – possibly multi-layered and textured – social world.' (2005: 3). For example, the study aims to identify employers' individual and collective

understanding of the value of qualifications; views about the importance of different features of QCF qualifications; opinions about the impact of qualifications in the workplace; and how these views translate into action. Thus it is better to be explicit about the social interaction between the researcher and participants than to suggest that the researcher is a neutral data collector and bias can be eradicated from any structured and unstructured interviews (see assumptions in section 6.8). Being a qualitative research means that the study has other implications.

First, the study does not seek to verify a specific hypothesis nor regard 'fixed solutions' as 'existing out there ready for collection'. Instead research questions are used more 'as devices for guiding and focusing' the study (Bryman 2005: 20) and theoretical generalisations are drawn on specific themes across data.

Second, although the structured survey gathers scores on the value, features and impact of QCF qualifications, I do not aim to establish a causal link through analysis of qualification achievement and scores for performance. This would be difficult to achieve because many factors influence performance particularly in HPWOs. It would be hard to isolate variables or ascertain causal direction even in a large, longitudinal quantitative study. Also such positivistic analysis of variables creates a static view which suggests that social life is independent of people's lives and therefore overlooks 'the process of interpretation or definition that goes on in human groups' (Blumer 1956: 685).

Third, I will not try to achieve comparisons on the basis of a straightforward assessment of respondent's answers to survey questions to establish a broad understanding of

surface patterns. Instead, I aim to build an in-depth and rounded understanding of context and process. Thus as Bryman (2005) suggests, points of comparisons are 'likely to be conceptual rather than straightforwardly empirical, and 'inductively' generated' through data (2005: 66).

6.8 Assumptions

I make several assumptions that are typical of qualitative studies. First, I assume that I collect data in an active and reflexive way, and therefore interact with the participant even for the structured survey. Thus participation in the study is likely to encourage favourable views about the QCF because I am knowledgeable and able to explain the QCF and facilitate implementation.

Second, participants are likely to 'hear' and interpret questions in different ways, even with guidance from the researcher and the use of a structured survey. Also, I assume that the way that I 'hear' and interpret responses depends on the circumstances surrounding the interview and the ability of participants to communicate their response. Therefore interpretation and responses are unlikely to be standardised and I can make no claims to understand fully the complexities of any discussion.

However third, I assume that participants are fairly knowledgeable about value and impact of qualifications due to their role and level of experience in credit management. Also, I assume that participants' beliefs, values and behaviour are influenced and constrained by the context within which they work. Therefore if participants' companies have a range of high performance working practices, I assume a high level of congruence between their views and organisational strategy.

6.9 Validity and reliability issues

As a qualitative study, judgements of validity are most important. This concerns questions about conceptual clarity and how this is translated into 'meaningful epistemology' (Mason 2005: 188) and involves concerns about the validity of data generation methods and interpretation.

First, the research question is broad to allow an exploration of existing literature, theory, policy and practice in relation to vocational qualifications, skills and performance. As Mason (2005) says, for qualitative researchers this acts as a 'springboard for launching their own research in ways which connect it with current debates' (2005: 20). In this case, I cover development questions about the drivers for skills development, the impact of NVQs and the development and implementation of the QCF; mechanical questions about how the VET system works, such as the meaning of learning and skills, problems associated with assessment, and the social and political context of qualifications; and theoretical questions about the nature of workplace learning and skills and the link with performance.

Next, some qualitative researchers choose not to delimit closely areas of enquiry because of concerns that any structured method is 'bound to be the product of an investigator's ruminations about the object of enquiry' and risk 'imposing an inappropriate frame of reference on people'. They argue that an ethnographic approach gives better access to 'people's world views' and provides more flexibility (Bryman 2001: 280). However, I have adopted a more structured approach for two reasons.

First, research focuses on three areas: employer engagement, qualifications design and the link between skills and performance, in order to evaluate initial success of the QCF and help inform policy (see section 6.4). Use of a longitudinal study gives the flexibility to adjust data collection methods to explore lines of enquiry as they emerge and helps build understanding of development and mechanical questions in relation to the QCF.

Second, I aim to build theoretical generalisations from the analysis of data. Therefore it is important to collect information in a structured way, at least initially. This facilitates what Geertz (1973a) calls a 'thick description' that supports judgements about the transferability of findings (Guba & Lincoln 1994) or claims of 'no reason to suspect atypicality' (Mason 2005: 195) that facilitate 'cross-contextual generalities' (2005: 197). Thus, first, an adaptation of the Sung and Ashton's study (2004) facilitates a comparison of the HR and organisational practices of case study companies with a wider population. Second, details about job role and key performance indicators help compare organisation of the credit management function. Third, Linkert Scores help participants assess the relative value of reasons for encouraging people to take qualifications, features of QCF qualifications and the impact of qualifications.

In addition, validity depends upon the quality of analysis and interpretation. In particular this requires clear explanations of the logic of any interpretations in a reflexive way and engagement with alternative viewpoints that may not be supportive of personal standpoints.

The issue of reliability is conventionally associated with quantitative research due to concerns that methods are standardised, non-biased and accurate to enable precise

measurement and the production of results that are repeatable. However, I demonstrate reliability through the accuracy of research methods and practice. In this respect, I have conducted a thorough review of the literature; collected data from subjects carefully and honestly; and reported the interpretation openly and transparently. For example, I record all contacts with participants (Addenda 1.1 – 1.3); have ensured and explained informed consent (section 6.10); included company survey data in addition to data analysis (Addendum 3); recorded and transcribed semi-structured interviews (Addendum 4); and provided line references for any reported speech to enable verification of context.

6.10 Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations are important to ensure the credibility and integrity of research and to protect the interests of those involved. Mason (2005) emphasises the importance of 'operating a moral research practice at every stage in the research process,' because qualitative researchers have to make 'intellectual and practical decisions on the spot' particularly in qualitative interviewing (2005: 79). This section establishes and applies an ethical code of practice.

First, it is important to check assumptions and identify potential influences on the independence of research or ethical problems. Second, credible research is based on a worthwhile and practicable subject. In addition, ethical practice aims at openness and honesty, with care taken not to mislead or misuse the researcher's role. To avoid this, informed consent should be obtained for all aspects of research.

Third, methodology design should be appropriate, and research inclusive and non-discriminative. Fourth, care must be taken to ensure that results are presented in a manner that protects the interests of those involved. Data should be anonymised to

protect identity and confidentiality maintained by storing data securely and agreements made for the retention of data at the end of research.

A fairly wide range of interests relates to this study directly or indirectly. My overall aim is to develop abilities as a researcher to gain a doctorate qualification. Adherence to the above ethical code is therefore important to ensure the quality of work for the University of Leicester.

As the manager of a small awarding organisation that works with a number of large companies, I am an insider in the world of vocational qualifications, professional bodies and workplace learning. This influences my judgement as a researcher, raises various potential conflicts of interest (see section 6.2.3, 6.5.6 and 6.7) and poses risks to my personal reputation and the ICM should research not be conducted ethically. Also, the study has a responsibility to policy makers and the research community, if findings are disseminated further.

Particular ethical concerns relate to relationships with participants. Due to the potentially commercially sensitive nature of content, methodology has been designed to protect the identities of participants and their organisations (see section 6.6). I took care at the start to explain methods and data use to agree ways of working through informed consent (Addendum 1.3).

Also, I made an application to restrict access to raw data for a period of two years, although participants understand that data may be used in academic research papers, presentations and summary reports for circulation to participants and other interested

parties. All participants agree with these measures and two have subsequently used data collected from interview transcripts in articles published in the Institute's magazine, 'Credit Management' following clearance from their legal teams (Addenda 5.1 & 5.2).

6.11 Conclusion

Longitudinal case study research of credit management departments in telecoms companies allows a detailed exploration of the QCF. A qualitative study helps overcome issues associated with an insider view through an interpretive and reflexive approach. Some quantification ensures coverage of research questions, and links to Sung and Ashton's study and the literature on workplace learning, qualifications and skills help 'ground' the research, and provide a basis of comparison with a wider population. Careful administration and management of ethical issues ensure the credibility and integrity of research. The following chapter describes case study characteristics before chapter 8 explores the extent that the QCF is a catalyst for performance.

CHAPTER 7 Case study characteristics

7.1 Introduction

The four case studies are telecoms credit management departments that range in size from approximately 100 to 600 employees in the UK. Evidence from the structured survey demonstrates that these operations are well established HPWOs that use a wide range of HR practices to motivate, involve and raise the skills of employees. Three of the four companies give access to evening classes although only about 5% of employees take up this option. Employees are organised in teams and roles are tightly controlled.

This chapter identifies roles and describes working practices, performance measures, investment in training and the impact of the 'credit crunch' on skills development.

7.2 High performance working practices

The case study credit management departments exemplify call centres operations which achieve high performance through tightly controlled and high commitment working environments, as described by Kinnie et al (2000). High performance working practices (HPWPs) are essential in the competitive telecoms sector to ensure high levels of cash collections with excellent customer service.

The four case study companies have adopted between 22 and 29 of the 34 HPWPs included in the survey (Table 6). This is well above the average of 18 practices which were identified in 2005 CIPD/DTI survey into HPWPs (Table 5) (Sung & Ashton 2005: 12). In particular, Company A has established 29 of the survey's working practices and

therefore matches closely the level of HPWP profile of the top percent of organisations in the 2005 sample.

TABLE 5 **Distribution of HPWPs adoption in 2005**

Number of practices	% sample
Less than10	5.1
10 - 19	4.2
20 - 29	39.3
30 or more	1.4

CIPD/DTI survey. Sung & Ashton 2005:12[9]

Consistent with the findings of Sung and Ashton (2005), through the adoption of 'bundles' of HPWPs, the case studies in this study achieve two mutually reinforcing goals of high levels of employee satisfaction and sustained performance improvements (2005: 9). People development focused competitive strategies aim to maximise employees' contribution through collective values, clear targets, extensive training, support and regular feedback. Staff development is central to management thinking and integral to team leaders and managers' roles (Ashton & Sung 2006).

In these tightly controlled environments, flexibility in job design, for example through flexible job descriptions, job rotation, family friendly policies and self-managed teams are more difficult to achieve, although three of the four organisations have flexi-time around core hours and job shares. The following table exemplifies some of the HPWPs for each category (Table 7) and the next section describes the range of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for the case study credit departments.

[9] The level of adoption of HPWPs in the sample of 294 organisations ranged from one to 33. Around 60% of sample companies had fewer than 20 HPWPs.

TABLE 6 **HR and other organisational practices**

Q2 Which of the following practices does the credit department use? x *indicates practices are well established* [10]		% reported in 2004 HPWPs survey	Companies			
			A	**B**	**C**	**D**
HRP	Annual appraisal	94.9%	x	x	x	x
HRP	Structured induction training	92.5%	x	x	x	x
HRP	Annual review of employees' training needs	89.8%	x	x	x	x
HI	Circulating information on organisational performance & strategy	82.0%	x	x	x	x
HRP	Formal feedback on job performance from managers/employers	79.3%	x	x	x	x
R&C	**Family friendly policies**	**78.6%**	**x**			**x**
HRP	Review of vacancies in relation to business strategy	74.6%	x	x	x	x
HRP	Formal assessment tools for recruitment, e.g. competencies	73.6%	x	x	x	x
HRP	Continuous skills development programmes	70.9%	x	x	x	x
HI	Internal staff surveys	68.5%	x	x	x	x
R&C	Benefits covering spouse or family members	68.1%	x	x	x	x
R&C	Flexible working, e.g. hours, locations, job share	65.0%	x	x		x
HRP	Training to perform multiple jobs	62.4%	x	x	x	
R&C	Non-pay benefits, e.g. free meals, gifts or health packages	60.7%	x	x	x	x
HI	**Cross-functional teams**	**59.3%**		**x**		
HRP	QA Assurance, e.g. ISO9000 or other similar schemes	56.3%	x	x	x	x
HRP	Mentoring	54.6%	x	x	x	x
HI	Staff suggestion schemes	51.9%	x	x	x	x
R&C	Performance pay for *some* employees	51.9%	x		x	
R&C	**Flexible job descriptions**	**45.4%**			**x**	**x**
HRP	Formal feedback on job performance from customers/clients	44.1%	x	x		x
HRP	Work (re)design for improved performance	42.7%	x	x		x
HI	Providing all employees with copy of business plan & targets	42.4%	x	x	x	x
HRP	**Workforce diversity for competitive edge**	40.7%	x	x		x
R&C	Performance pay for all employees	35.5%		x		x
HI	Quality circles/total quality management	35.3%	x	x	x	x
HI	Staff association(s)	31.5%	x	x	x	x
R&C	Share options for *some* employees	30.9%	x			x
HI	**Self-managed or self-directed teams**	**25.9%**	**x**			**x**
R&C	**Job rotation**	**24.1%**			**x**	
HRP	**Business Excellence Model e.g. QICM (planned)**	**23.1%**			**x**	**x**
R&C	Profit-sharing for *some* employees	22.0%	x			
R&C	Profit-sharing for all employees	19.7%	x	x		
R&C	Share options for all employees	15.9%	x	x		
Total number of practices [11]		**34**	**29**	**26**	**22**	**27**

Based on CIPD/DTI 2005 Survey (Sung & Ashton 2005: 11)

[10] **HPWP categories** HRP - Human Resource Practices. HI - High Involvement. R&C - Reward and Commitment.

[11] One category from 2005 Survey ('Kaizen' specific efforts on continuous improvement in work systems) excluded

TABLE 7

Selection of high performance working practices (HPWPs)

Human Resource Practices

Individual performance development plans.
Monthly review of training needs – targeted minimum of 20 learning hours per annum per employee (manager required to review progress on this).
Immediate feedback from customers' survey to employee's dashboard and their manager.
Monthly formal review of performance with team leader looking at top 10 debtors and discuss any issues (work and home-related).
One-to-one coaching to embed any training and for continuous personal development.
All encouraged to have a mentor.
Performance improvement plans.
E-performance system records training, performance review, appraisals, and course bookings.
Managers recruited from a 'Talent Pool'.
Internal audit of processes.
Drive for 'professionalism' through qualifications and membership of Institute of Credit Management (ICM).
Change management workshops.

High Involvement Practices

Quarterly review meeting for employees - led by directors covering performance, targets, strategies, new product information and important 'wins'.
Targeted internal staff surveys to check understanding of recent management presentations.
Regular general surveys to check employee happiness and well-being.
Stress assessment tool available for employees to help managers identify any issues.
Employees encouraged to find opportunities for efficiencies and cost-savings.
'New ideas' website and 'Challenge Cup' for business improvement ideas.
Unions, social clubs and a wide range of staff associations.

Reward and Commitment Practices

Annual bonus paid on company and/or department performance.
Monthly individual bonus.
Employees allowed to work from home if they are not customer-facing.
Extended (unpaid) maternity and paternity leave.
Free drinks and discounted meals.
Health care.
'Share save' schemes.

7.3 Roles and responsibilities

Training managers assess credit collections roles as Level 2 or 3 (Table 8). All employees work in teams that vary in size from 7 – 12 and are led by a more senior collector (team leader, coach or manager), assessed as a role at Level 3 or 4. All operations have flat structures with 5 – 7 managers for operations ranging in size from approximately 90 – 400 employees.

TABLE 8

Credit management roles

Level descriptor	Level	Job roles
Roles take responsibility for completing tasks and procedures and exercising autonomy and judgement **subject to overall direction and guidance.** Use of skills and knowledge to address **straight forward problems.**	**Level 2 - 3**	Credit risk controllers. Credit risk analysts. Debt recovery clerk. Collections contact centre clerk. Collections operations clerk. Business collections clerk. Pseudo agency clerk. Business collections adviser. Corporate collections adviser. Consumer collections adviser.
Roles take responsibility for **initiating** and completing tasks and procedures as well as exercising autonomy and **judgement within limited parameters.** Able to address problems which, while well defined, have a **measure of complexity.**	**Level 3 - 4**	Team leader. Team coach. Team manager.
Roles involve **broadly defined tasks and problems** which are **complex and non-routine**. Role requires autonomy, judgement and **self-directed learning** with **responsibility for courses of action.**	**Level 4**	Collections support specialist. Manager.
Roles involve broadly defined tasks and problems which are complex and non-routine. Role requires autonomy, judgement and self-directed learning with responsibility for **developing courses of action.**	**Level 5**	Collections operations manager. Billings and collections manager. Call centre operations manager. Senior business support process manager. Business line managers. Operations line managers. Debt management manager. Corporate collections managers. Director. Head of UK Collections.

7.4 Performance measures

The case studies use a range of KPIs to monitor employee and departmental performance (Table 9). Employees in one company report daily and weekly to line managers; employees in the other companies report monthly. In all cases, team and departmental managers report weekly and monthly to line managers. This information, coupled with feedback from regular performance reviews, mean that department and

training managers are likely to have a good understanding of individual and departmental performance levels and the factors that influence them.

TABLE 9

Range of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)

Employee KPIs	**Departmental KPIs**
Daily	**Weekly**
30 day and 60 day aged debt Customer queries - age outstanding	Cash collected Total debt Number and age of outstanding debt 30 and 60 day aged debt Missing payments
Weekly	
Missing payments	
Monthly	**Monthly**
Collections rate Over charge per month Debt overall balance Debt 61 days overdue Quality check Customer churn/cash collections	Cash collected versus previous month's invoice Days Sales Outstanding (DSO) Bad debt Number of disputes Value of credit notes raised Customer satisfaction
Quarterly	
Employee engagement	

7.5 Investment in training

During this period, employees of all levels at each company are involved in a wide range of training activities and qualifications (Table 10). There is no evidence of power relations that restrict employees' access to training and certification as identified by Billet (2004) and Unwin et al 2004 (2004). Three of the four organisations encourage participation in external qualifications, although take-up is low, involving only 5% of employees.

TABLE 10

Summary of training and qualification activity November 2009 – October 2010

3 month courses	
Credit Management (trade, export and consumer)	All levels
NVQ in Accounting	Level 2
Business Law	Level 3
Business Environment	All levels
Accounting Principles	Level 3
Credit Management Law	Level 5

2 week courses	
New to company and department training	Level 3
Induction training and follow-up	All levels
Line manager coaching	All levels
Credit management skills	Levels 2 & 3

I week courses	
Management and leadership	Level 3
Raising customer experience	All levels
Advanced collections	Levels 3 & 4

1 - 1½ day training	
Communication skills	Levels 3 & 4
NVQ in customer service	Level 2 & 3
Technical training on products & services	All levels
Advanced collections skills	Levels 3 & 4
Negotiation skills	Levels 3 & 4
Buddy training	Level 3
Advanced credit risk analysis	Levels 3 & 4
Export credit management	Levels 5
Process and system training on pre-collection activity	All levels

Half day training	
Customer behaviour	Level 2
Refresher course on collection techniques	All levels
Introduction to credit management	All levels
Post induction training on overcoming barriers	Level 3
Team manager coaching related to change management	Level 4
External debt collection agency training	All levels
Debt collection agency training	Level 2 & 3
Technical training on billing awareness sessions	Levels 3 & 4
Technical training on new service plans	Levels 3 & 4
Technical training on high usage and unbilled accounts	Level 2 & 3
Range of computer-based training on telephone collections, negotiation and influencing, accounting and business communications and personal skills	All levels

All are involved in half day workshops that tend to cover technical training on collection techniques, customer service, company products and organisational arrangements. 75% take part in 1 - 1½ day training workshops that include advanced collections, communication and negotiation skills and training for an NVQ in customer service, in addition to technical training on products and service. 20% are involved in week long courses in advanced collections, raising customer experience and leadership. Induction training is required for approximately 20% employees, which suggests fairly high internal and external churn rates.

7.6 Impact of the 'credit crunch' on training

Three companies reported an impact of the 'credit crunch' on training. One company identifies lower purchases of external training, although employees are still encouraged to attend college courses; another reports more intensive induction and training that focuses on customer retention and management of the impact of redundancies; the third describes a different approach that focuses on increased professionalism led by senior management. Training has specific targets, and budgets are linked to strategic goals and reviewed regularly. The company aims to raise general awareness of the wider economy and company strategy through better communication, and encourage employees to 'think about what they could do differently in their roles' (Training Manager Company A 2010: Q7 response). This response is consistent with research into training behaviour which finds that many companies maintained or even increased training during the 1990s' recession in response to regulation, quality standards or market competition (Felstead & Green 1994).

7.7 Conclusion

At surface level, surveys suggest a high level of homogeneity between case study departments in their approach to skills development. Consistent with the findings of Sung and Ashton (2005), they have adopted bundles of HPWPs to raise skills and achieve mutually reinforcing goals of high levels of employee satisfaction and sustained business performance improvements. Activity has intensified as organisations face adverse trading conditions over the period of study. The next chapter investigates the impact of the QCF on skills and performance in case study departments.

CHAPTER 8 Impact of QCF skills and performance

8.1 Introduction

This research is set against a background of academic literature that tends to be sceptical of government policies in relation to qualifications and skills. The thesis presents in a more optimistic view of the potential role of QCF qualifications. First, even though cash collections roles in the case study companies are task focused, routine and tightly focused, some departments in the study have adopted QCF qualifications as an additional HR practice in order to encourage higher levels of motivation, commitment and performance. Second, employers are attracted to qualifications because the QCF is more flexible and they are able to customise qualifications to suit their specific working environments. Finally, research indicates a positive link between QCF qualifications and performance based on a range of measures.

However several factors counter-balance these benefits which demonstrate the complex link between skills, qualifications and performance. First, engagement with qualifications is path dependent, reliant on commitment from senior management and interrupted by organisational change. Second, results reinforce concerns (raised in sections 4.4 and 5.5) about assessment methodology and the implementation of the QCF.

The following sections explore the extent that the introduction of the QCF has influenced employers' support for qualifications and factors influencing decision-making; how organisations design QCF qualifications and assessment to achieve

business performance; and lastly the value that organisations place on QCF qualifications as a catalyst for performance.

8.2 Employer engagement

The study tracks over a period of 2 years and 4 months (September 2008 – December 2010) levels of engagement with ICM qualifications following the introduction of the QCF. Results from structured surveys of operations and training managers support other quantitative data and facilitate a comparison of interest in the QCF and the value placed on qualifications. Semi-structured interviews give the opportunity to verify interpretation and explore additional lines of enquiry.

Results find that case study companies seem to adopt qualifications as an additional HR practice in order to encourage higher levels of productivity, motivation and commitment. This supports patterns observed by Kinnie et al (2000) in call centres where training teams introduced mentoring schemes and training packages linked to career paths. The following tracks three stages of engagement: initial response, early development and embedded practices. Notably, initial response is path dependent and, as with other high performing practices (Sung & Ashton 2005), success is dependent on organisational culture, commitment from senior management, and interrupted by organisational change. Additionally, the study identifies that only companies that employ training managers specifically for the credit team have invested in QCF qualifications.

8.2.1 Initial response

Before the introduction of credit-based QCF qualifications in credit management, only two of seven telecoms companies on the ICM database had run in-company evening classes towards ICM qualifications during the previous two years.

The operations manager at one company joined the study (Company C). She had studied with her team and rated highly the ability of qualifications to motivate and give greater job satisfaction (both scored 5 in survey – Table 11). However, she was not responsible for training and the company did not transfer to the new smaller QCF units even though she showed interest. Subsequently, the company stopped evening classes to focus on short, targeted, skills training sessions. They have not approached the ICM to link training to QCF units.

Likewise the second company stopped evening classes when the cohort of learners completed their ICM programme. They did not join the study and therefore the reason for this decision is unknown, although they experienced major organisational change during the period that involved redundancies.

Of the five remaining companies, three (in the study), who had not previously offered qualifications formally to the credit team, were early adopters. A fourth (not in the study) showed interest in the QCF but did not establish any classes during the period, although following a period of re-organisation, a consultant has investigated how training might link to QCF units, and learners have now started evening classes.

Finally, a training manager linked to the credit team at the fifth company planned to replace an NVQ in customer service with training linked to QCF units, in response to requests from the credit team. However reorganisation led to redundancy and the general training manager (not in the study), who took over responsibility, commented that they offered the NVQ in customer service to give consistency across the company and did not actively encourage collectors to study for any other qualifications. He stated that their priority was to achieve assessment for the minimum cost and disruption to the organisation. Subsequently some of the credit team joined evening classes for the Institute's knowledge units at the local college.

Thus, the QCF has encouraged greater interest in qualifications for credit teams in the telecoms sector. Three companies which introduced programmes had nothing formally in place for credit teams and a fourth company is considering QCF qualifications following employment of a management consultant.

However qualification choices are path dependent and disrupted by organisational change: one non-adopter has merged with another and the company which had established its own assessment systems to manage NVQs was reluctant to change.

The next section explores the early development of QCF programmes.

8.2.2 Early development

The three companies that introduced QCF programmes adopted different approaches reflecting differing organisational structure, training management systems and traditions. What distinguishes them from the other four companies is a strong commitment to 'professionalisation' from senior management, and employment of a training manager or team specifically for the credit management function.

The company with the largest credit management training department (Company B) invested most quickly in QCF qualifications, building a programme of six units linked to externally sourced training from the ICM on a 'train-the-trainer' basis. This resulted in 151 employees passing one six-credit unit in telephone collections.

Company D used ICM QCF units to select an appropriate programme of online learning from a suite of over 30,000 company online courses. Their course combines online assessment with ICM assignments.

Company A was a fairly slow adopter, offering a range of ICM training days without linking the training to QCF units and funding places at evening classes for managers and top performers at a couple of locations in the country.

All three exemplify call centre operations which achieve high performance through tightly controlled and high commitment working environments as describe by Kinnie et al (2000), having adopted 26, 27 and 29 high performance working practices respectively and a wide range of KPIs (see section 7.4). Survey results give an indication of reasons for their support for qualifications (Table 11 and Appendix D).

TABLE 11

Reasons for support for qualifications for credit management employees [12]

	Training Managers		Operations Managers				
	Ave A, B & D	Rank	A	B	C	Ave	Rank
To improve knowledge	4.7	3=	4.9	4.0	4.0	4.3	8=
To develop skills	4.7	3=	4.7	4.0	4.0	4.2	10
To raise performance	5.0	1=	4.9	4.5	4.0	4.5	6=
To benchmark knowledge and skills	4.0	10=	4.3	3.0	N/R	3.6	11
To reward skills, knowledge and good performance	4.0	10=	4.6	4.0	N/R	4.3	8=
To motivate	**4.7**	**3=**	**4.4**	**4.5**	**5.0**	**4.6**	**4=**
To give more job satisfaction	**4.7**	**3=**	**4.7**	**4.5**	**5.0**	**4.7**	**2=**
To encourage progression	4.3	9	4.6	**5.0**	4.0	4.5	6=
To give recognition for skills and knowledge	4.5	8	4.4	5.0	N/R	4.7	2=
To give recognition to in-company training	**4.7**	**3=**	**4.1**	**5.0**	**N/R**	**4.6**	**4=**
To raise the status of credit management internally and externally	**5.0**	**1=**	**4.6**	**5.0**	**N/R**	**4.8**	**1**

Typical of expansive working environments, there was considerable support for qualifications. Training managers from Companies A, B and D rated as ‘important’ or ‘greatly important’ that, ‘employees in credit management departments gained relevant qualifications’ (scores 4.5, 4 and 5 respectively) and their positive response tends to strengthen with time. Unexpectedly, operations managers, from all but one company (Company C mentioned in the previous section) support qualifications more highly than the training managers (average scores 4.6 and 4.5).

[12] Q12B. If you scored positively (scores 3 - 5) for question 11, rate the following reasons for encouraging employees to take qualifications in credit management? Score 1 – 5 (Score 1 for ‘little importance’ to 5 for ‘great importance’). Values represent average scores collected December 2009 – October 2010 and on the final occasion for training managers (August – October 2010).

All training managers judged as 'important' or 'greatly important' almost all reasons in the survey for encouraging employees to take qualifications in credit management. This result is consistent with earlier research into training in high performance organisations (Sung & Ashton 2005) and qualifications in expansive working environments (Fuller & Unwin 2003). Training managers in Companies A, B and D appear to regard qualifications as additional HR practices to motivate employees, give more job satisfaction, and improve knowledge and skills (average scores 4.7) in order to raise performance (average score 5). Company D training manager explained,

> *'the company needs to project a more professional attitude and a more professional image towards our customers; therefore we require that a certain percentage of your staff have a degree.'* (Training Manager Company D 2011: 96-97)

Company B training manager made no mention about the value of qualifications in recruitment or promotion, however she said that qualifications form an important part of their strategy to retain and develop people within the organisation. She thought that national and industry recognition is important because it gives status, a sense of achievement and belonging. She also thought that membership of wider communities of practice, not necessarily qualification related, 'gives people a lift' (Training Manager Company B 2011: 290).

One training manager (Company B) regarded qualifications less favourably for their ability to benchmark, and to reward skills, knowledge and good performance which brought the average score down to 4, because the company had 'existing better ways to achieve this'. Also notably training managers in the sample companies rated as 'most

important' the role of qualifications to raise the status of credit management departments internally and externally (average score 5) and to give recognition to in-company training (average score 4.7).

The interviews investigated this response and found that the main reason for support for qualifications reflects the increased importance of credit management (internally and externally) due to the economic situation. Training managers made this point strongly. Increased demands on the function, in particular since the 'credit crunch' require greater skills not only to carry out the function well but to command respect from other departments, particularly the sales team. Operations Managers at Company B also held this view, placing greater emphasis placed on the use of qualifications to raise the status of credit management; give recognition of in-company training, skills and knowledge; and encourage progression (average score 5). As training manager Company D explained,

> *'education of a credit controller these days has to be more than 'straight from school' . . . we expect a lot more of credit controllers today. . . everybody thinks they can just come in and do the job. But it's not . . . it's so much more - there's the risk element, the profitability element. These are all things you need an education to be able to understand. It's the effect of the market place on the economy - on your market place.'* (Training Manager Company D 2011: 20–22 and 24-27)

> *'Long gone are the days where a credit manager is just a 'collections manager'. We now look at whether we should be dealing with this company; we look at the profit line and we look at the profit margin of the deal and*

> *say that you're not going to sell at that rate - it doesn't make sense. So I think we need to raise our profile so sales don't look at us as a sales blockage but as part of their team.'* (Training Manager Company D 2011: 145-149)

Operational pressures are apparent in all these companies as they seek to benchmark their operations and training through linking with the Institute as their professional body. Company A training manager said that the company has tried other providers such as colleges but has been disappointed, 'they don't always have the quality of tuition.' The Manager values working with a professional body, especially if it is Ofqual accredited, because it has expertise in a specific area; acts as a 'one-stop-shop' for training, qualifications and membership; and has qualifications which are well recognised, 'reputable' and 'credible'.

Company A training manager believes that,

> *'Businesses are keen on seeing something that has a standard linked to it so that they know what they're really getting . . . what level is it? . . . what is it equivalent to? Companies want to know that because it gives them a comfort factor in terms that it's an accredited course; it has value and merit.'* (Training Manager Company A 2011: 126-131)

Company D training manager reinforced this point saying that they looked to ICM to provide guidance on best practice,

> *'We didn't know what we were looking for. . . we had these 30,000 courses and I had a pretty good idea of what I thought a credit controller needed to know from a statutory, legal, and knowledge standpoint. But I really needed a framework in which to fit it and the ICM provided me with that framework.'* (Training Manager Company D 2011: 111-114)

Likewise Company B training manager explained,

> *'We wanted to provide some qualifications for the team, primarily to ensure that what we were doing was best practice within the credit industry, because up until then the internal training was very much driven by our KPIs.'* (Training Manager Company B 2011: 10-13)

These companies do not restrict their interest to the telecoms sector but seek to learn lessons from communities of practice. As Company A training manager said.

> *'I think what we've tried to do, that we've had to do, is look outside and that's one of the benefits of the ICM, to find out what Shell are doing, what are Centrica, British Gas doing?'* (Training Manager Company A 2011: 52-54)

Company B training manager also said that they wanted to make sure that 'we were as up-to-date as we could be,' and to work with the ICM because 'you were providing for everyone on a broader scale, rather than just looking at the telecoms.' They wonder if there are 'other techniques elsewhere that we could apply within a telecoms

environment . . . rather than limiting to what we know already through working in this industry.' (Training Manager Company A 2011: 29-39)

The interviewer explored the Government's concern about value for money and requirements to register with professional body and found a varying response,

INTERVIEWER '(A) big issue for the government at the moment is the issue of value for money and also value from additional services for example, not just doing an award but also being part of their professional body. What are your views about that? Do you think that's value for money or is that superfluous to what you require? Do you just require the qualification?'

TRAINING MANAGER COMPANY D: 'No I don't . . . I think it is value for money – no I don't think it's superfluous – I do think it's value for money.'
(Training Manager Company D 2011: 215-221)

Company B training manager was more pragmatic emphasising the importance of demonstrating return on investment,

> *'Yes, it is always a challenge . . . as long as we can demonstrate that for short term costs or a comparatively low cost we have long-term benefits.'*
> (Training Manager Company B 2011: 299 - 304).

Company C operations manager has a slightly different emphasis to the training managers. She rated most highly the ability of qualifications to motivate and give more

job satisfaction (both scored 5). Company D training manager suggested a reason for this:

> *'operational managers are the ones dealing with the staff on a day-to-day basis, on the basis that happy staff - motivated staff - are more productive staff. Also their view is very limited because they're looking at a very limited picture - they've got targets to achieve and happy motivated staff achieve targets. De-motivated staff don't achieve targets - unhappy staff don't come to work regularly and don't achieve targets.'* (Training Manager Company D 2011: 168-173)

She accounts for differing responses between training and operational managers because,

> *'Training managers are looking at a bigger picture for the company and not just at that department level.'* (Training Manager Company D 2011: 173-174)

For Company A, operations managers gave equal importance to 'motivation' as the development of skills (average scores of 4.7). However they rated as most important improvements in knowledge as highly as performance gains (both scored 4.9).

Company A's training manager believes that operational managers are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of encouraging people to become professionally qualified because they are noticing how qualifications can change people and 'switch them on to their work' (Training Manager Company A 2011: 4). He summed up thoughts about the benefits of qualifications,

> *It's to motivate, but it is also knowledge gaps . . . and building confidence as well. Also it gives an indication of their potential and where they see themselves going.'* (Training Manager Company A 2011: 58-60)

Thus, although the three organisations have adopted different approaches to implementation of QCF qualifications, they all value qualifications as an additional HR practice to build skills, commitment and performance. However, the role of qualifications as a method to certificate or 'benchmark' employees is of minor importance; of more significance is the ability to ally with a professional body, as a centre of expertise in order to benchmark training and operational processes.

The next section explores the longer term impact of QCF qualifications.

8.2.3 Embedded practices

Company A's programme has gained momentum with in-company evening classes extending over five locations since site managers have been given the responsibility to drive the programme. As the training manager explained,

> *'We moved to a more site-based approach, where we said to the site manager, 'we can offer you one-day seminars; we can offer you further education courses; you know who your best people are. What do you want to do? It's really your responsibility to drive it.'* **(**Training Manager Company A 2011: 86-89)

Company A is typical of the HPWOs described by Sung and Ashton (2005) because it seeks long-term cultural change and realises that this takes time, leadership and

delegation of responsibility. Company A training manager explained that it is very important to have,

> *'a stakeholder (senior management) that supports it and gives air time to it, in teaching the message and saying what's expected and why we're doing it and what the benefits are for . . . individuals and the organisation, and keeps those messages coming out on a regular basis.'* (Training Manager Company A 2011: 208-211)

He believes that it is important that the programme is voluntary. He said that they say to employees,

> *'We want to train, invest in you to improve our business results and also reward and recognise your knowledge and skills and we'd like you to do this . . . it's more like an offer. . . You get better results doing it this way because you get people (who) really want to buy in and really want to do it.'* (Training Manager Company A 2011: 181-187)

They hope to offer smaller units linked to training days, and managers at each site have attended coach training. However, most employees currently prefer larger, traditional knowledge units linked to evening classes. Company A's training manager explained that it is difficult to 'get that moving' when people have started on one particular course of learning. They are still 'in the mindset where they think they need to complete . . . four papers . . . I'm on that treadmill almost of going to evening classes.' He described the path dependency of organisations regarding qualifications and the value of local support in the following,

> *'That's one of the challenges, to do things differently. Even though we've spent a lot of time explaining ICM awards and membership, and we've had events, (we must have several hundred members now) we still get very basic enquiries . . . about what's in the course, what sort of content, how long they last . . . that's what I want to use the coaches for, so they would become the focal point for their organisations.'* (Training Manager Company A 2011: 170-175)

He explained how cultural change through qualifications takes time to achieve; that it is not a 'quick fix,'

> *'Yes, any time takes time, but as the percentage of people with an ICM award or who are studying goes up (momentum increases). The real trick is to actually keep that going, sort of keep them on the point . . . rather than say, you went through a three month course or three month training process and got an award and leave it like that. You sort of want them to come back in month four or week sixteen and say, 'Right, now I'm going to put this into action . . . do this thing differently . . . I'm going to . . . be . . . a different person.'* (Training Manager Company A 2011: 200-205)

Company qualification standards drive progress with the QCF programme at Company D and consequently they are now piloting the ICM Level 5 Diploma in Credit Management (QCF).

The training manager explained that the qualifications are open to all and everybody is encouraged to do at least the Level 3 because 'it covers really fundamental things' and 'We have committed that 95% of our management team will have the Level 5 programme or above.' (Training Manager Company D 2011: 119 & 307-309).

Everybody receives an induction explaining the benefits of the ICM programme and all are expected to undertake a minimum of five hours study in work time a month.

At Company D, promotion depends upon qualification, 'one of our first questions is, 'have you done the ICM? And everybody in the department knows if they want to be a team leader then they had better do the ICM because that is one of the defining characteristics in the long run' (Training Manager Company D 2011: 277-280).

The operations manager at Company D emphasised the importance of qualifications,

> *'Encouraging staff development is a key priority. Not only does it ensure that we can give the very best service to our customers, it also enhances staff satisfaction and retention levels.'* (Operations Manager Company D 2009: 15-17)

In a presentation, the Operations Manager (2011) stated that credit management was once 'considered a function' and now it has 'evolved into a profession'. He described the complexity of their organisation and the importance of building high level skills to help make improvements to systems. He emphasised the importance of employee development in an organisation 'born of merger' where there are many billing systems, disparate processes with inconsistent supporting documentation, decentralised teams spread over Europe and complex reporting lines. Quoting from 'Credit Management' and 'Raconteur' he said,

> *'Success depends on the ability to harness the ideas of a company in a culture of continuous improvement.'*

'Profitability and cost-effectiveness are driven by having talent at all levels.'

'ICM qualifications provide new knowledge and skills to enhance work performance.' (Operations Manager Company D 2011)

However, he identifies a 'high turnover of new talent' and 'long-term staff are reluctant to implement change' and 'low uptake of existing career development programmes and tools', e.g. computer-based and internal training courses. He believes that 'the harsh reality is that employees will only participate if there is an expectation to raise their game.'

As a consequence he explained that Company D have made the requirement for employees to complete a minimum of one training course a month (over 20 hours a year) and complete one QCF unit every six months in addition to other promotions, rewards and recognition HR practices. He explained that they use a balance score card to set objectives and measure performance in relation to improvements to financial, process, customer and people measures. He believes that the people dimension is usually 'underdeveloped' and therefore this approach will address this.

In contrast, Company B has withdrawn from the ICM programme since the recent merger. As a consequence, the training team has joined a cross-sector team, with responsibilities for credit training transferred to operations managers. As the training manager explained, it is a matter of allocating resources to the area of greatest need,

'It shouldn't be down to resources - it should be around what's the most appropriate proposition and what's going to be most effective, but the reality

> *is (this) sort of training at the moment certainly, won't be given a focus . . . because they see collections as being very, very successful and ticking over and very, very positive results compared with other parts of the operations, so then to move the focus to prioritise them collections will get neglected.' (*Training Manager Company B 2011: 518-521)

The Training Manager is keen to keep in touch and has established a revised QCF programme of smaller ICM units which link their performance management systems to unit awards. However these plans are on hold and the company may consider other qualification options.

Thus the introduction of the QCF has attracted three more companies to invest in qualifications. However, implementation seems reliant on the existence of a training manager with particular focus on the credit team and long-term success is dependent on clear senior management leadership and fairly stable organisational arrangements.

The next section looks more closely at the ways that the companies have used features of the QCF to design qualifications in order to achieve organisational objectives.

8.3 Qualification design

The QCF aims be simpler, more flexible, inclusive, responsive and recognise a wide range of achievements (QCA 2004). Results from this study demonstrate that these features are valued, combined with a variety of ways to study. Due to the flexible nature of the qualification, three organisations have customised the qualification in different ways to suit their specific working environment and employee needs. During the period of the study, the qualifications have recognised achievement ranging from Level 2 to Level 5 for a range of learning experiences (company training and coaching, online learning, evening classes and supported distance learning). Merit and distinction grades have rewarded 'excellence' and two companies have recruited more learners and expanded their programmes to Level 5.

Survey results demonstrate consistency in views about qualifications for credit teams (Table 12). Training managers and operations managers regarded four features of the choice of thirteen as most important: specialist units which relate to credit management roles; the opportunity for company training to lead to an accredited award; a variety of ways to study; and flexibility. However reasons for choices varied.

Training managers are unanimous in their support for the first three of these features, awarding a top score (5) whenever this question was asked over the 12 month period. They have a more strategic view of the link between qualifications, skills and performance; however, subtle differences in approach influence choice of programme that reflects varying organisational arrangements and culture.

TABLE 12

Features valued in qualifications for credit management employees [13]

	Training managers					Operations managers				
	A	B	D	Ave	Rank	A	B	C	Ave	Rank
Flexibility	**4.5**	**5.0**	**5.0**	**4.8**	4	**4.3**	**5.0**	**4.0**	**4.4**	**1=**
Choice of a wide range of relevant units	4.0	5.0	4.0	4.3	8=	4.4	4.0	4.0	4.1	5
Specialised units which relate to credit management roles	**5.0**	**5.0**	**5.0**	**5.0**	1=	**4.9**	**4.0**	**4.0**	**4.3**	**3**
Option to develop bespoke specialised units	4.0	5.0	5.0	4.7	5=	3.9	4.0	3.0	3.6	9
Opportunity for company training to lead to an accredited award	**5.0**	**5.0**	**5.0**	**5.0**	1=	**4.6**	**5.0**	**3.0**	**4.2**	**4**
Option for assignments rather than exams for some units	2.5	5.0	3.0	3.5	13	3.7	5.0	3.0	3.9	7
(Option) For an e-test rather than a written exam	4.0	5.0	3.0	4.0	10	3.3	3.0	4.0	3.4	10
Option to include credit from other qualifications	5.0	4.0	5.0	4.7	5=	3.9	5.0	3.0	4.0	6
A variety of ways to study	**5.0**	**5.0**	**5.0**	**5.0**	**1=**	**4.3**	**5.0**	**4.0**	**4.4**	**1=**
The award of Level 2 and Level 3 passes for every unit	4.0	5.0	4.0	4.3	8=	3.9	3.0	2.0	3.0	12
Option to include up to 15 credits from the Level below in a L3 Diploma	2.0	5.0	4.0	3.7	11=	4.0	3.0	3.0	3.3	11
No limit to the time for completion of an Diploma	5.0	4.0	2.0	3.7	11=	3.4	2.5	2.0	2.6	13
Opportunities to progress to degree level	5.0	4.0	5.0	4.7	5=	4.1	5.0	2.0	3.7	8

For Company D, which employs mainly bilingual graduates, decisions are based on the priority to build high level knowledge and skills, as the training manager said, it's 'content every time' (Training Manager Company D 2011: 200-202). Their focus is on the development of practical skills units covering telephone collections, customer service, business communications and accounts analysis. This involved the development of a new unit to match their requirements and bespoke assessment systems that combine their online testing with externally marked assignments. They also offer the business

[13] Q10. As an employer, to what extent are the following features valuable in a qualification for a credit management team? Score 1-5 (Score 1 for 'little importance' to 5 for 'great value'). Values represent average scores collected December 2009 – October 2010 and on the final occasion for training managers (August – October 2010).

units (business environment and law) for employees who plan to progress to the Level 5 Diploma or degree programme.

In 2011 they expanded their programme to include specialised Level 5 units in credit risk management and legal proceedings and insolvency, and general management units covering mapping the business environment, building customer focused organisations, compliance and leading teams.

For the tightly controlled environment in Company B, which has a training team, 'it's all about driving improvement for performance.' They selected Level 2 and 3 units in telephone collections and negotiation and influencing because the small, bite-sized units match training, keeps employees 'more engaged' and can be tailored to specific roles within the operation (Training Manager Company B 2011: 224).

For Company A, which outsources its training, choice of programme is more about building cultural change (involvement and commitment) with minimum disruption to the working day. In this environment, learners tend to select the units which they regard as having more status, i.e. the larger academic units in credit management, business environment, business law and accounting, and as Company D, they plan to offer Level 5 classes.

However, regardless of organisational approach, all training managers focus on finding the best qualification solution for employees that might offer opportunities to specialise, develop new skills or prepare to move to other areas of the business. Thus they believe that a variety of ways to study are important to suit differing learning styles and personal circumstances. Also credit is important so that learners can customise programmes and transfer credit especially if they move to another company - 'I think

it's really good that you award credit so people can mix and match.' (Training Manager Company D 2001: 211-212). In addition, Company A training manager thought that in time courses which award credit would have more status in the eyes of the learner.

Similarly operational managers value the option for specialised units which relate to roles and opportunities to accredit company training. This is consistent with training managers' interest in raising the profile of training and the department, and is integral to the achievement of performance goals. However they ranked equally first 'flexibility' and a 'variety of ways to study'. Company A training manager suggests that they value these features most highly because operations managers have to balance learning with business priorities and cannot afford to have employees 'offline' for too long, particularly at busy times during the financial year. Training managers at Companies B and D support this viewpoint.

Otherwise support for further features of the QCF is split. Features include the ability to award credit from the level below; the award of Level 2 and Level 3 passes for similar units; the inclusion of credit from other qualifications; no limit to the time for completion of an ICM Diploma and the use of other assessment methods; for example assignments or online exams rather than written exams. In all cases, negative views reflect concerns that changes may lower the status of the qualifications.

Also choice of assessment method is important. In particular Company B training manager commented that assignments do not work well where outcomes do not match company performance measures. She believes this adds to stress levels of employees who are excellent collectors, but not 'strong on the academic side' (Company B

Training Manager 2011: 59-60). She believes that alternative methods which link skills assessment to performance review measures are better because it would be 'based on what they're doing already and the evidence we're already collecting in terms of operational performance. So that's more appealing because 'A', it's obviously less time consuming and 'B', it's more relevant and linked to the actual job.' (2011: 67-71)

Company B training manager has had experience of NVQs and was critical of this approach and lack of take-up,

> *'Over the years we have actually had NVQ programs but there was a very small uptake of people wanting to use them. At the time we were using them, they were cumbersome in terms of the amount of paperwork they generated and the amount of time offline, so at that time we didn't see that as being a very viable option because it is getting the balance between people studying and getting their qualifications and actually applying that back in the workplace and doing the job. And the few people that did take the NVQs up, it did take them offline and it wasn't necessarily hitting the spot in terms of giving them the skills they needed to just do the job.'* (2011: 41-49)

Thus, although it has taken time for some organisations and learners in the study to adapt to the new style QCF qualifications, generally feedback is positive. Organisations value the flexibility of the framework; the ability to customise qualifications and assessment to suit specific roles, organisational arrangements and individual needs; the opportunity to gain credit for company training; and for learners to transfer credit if they move to a different role or organisation. The framework appears to address many concerns related to NVQs (Roe et al 2005; Keep and James 2010).

The next section considers their link to performance.

8.4 Qualifications as a catalyst for performance

A link between qualifications, skills and performance is difficult to measure due to problems of isolating the contribution made by training to productivity (Bishop 1994; Fuller and Unwin 1999; Keep et al 2002; Hager 2004; Hodkinson and Hodkinson 2004). However, this study centres on credit management departments where the impact of any intervention such as additional training or qualifications is potentially measurable because they are highly controlled environments.

Research combines quantitative and qualitative methodologies to achieve a 'fine-grained' picture of the impact of the QCF. The research targets training and operations managers who are responsible for the organisation of training, because they have a good understanding of the relationship between qualifications, skills and performance and are more likely to influence uptake. Data collected from learners' assignments help verify responses. Unfortunately data was not available related to individual performance during this period. However, the study records Company B's analysis of the impact of QCF qualifications on performance.

This small scale study makes no claims to be representative of all companies or qualifications. However, due to the importance of the sector under investigation (telecoms); the size of companies; and homogeneous nature of working practices, the research provides a useful insight into potential use and value of QCF as a catalyst for performance in high performance working organisations. Generally, survey results

(Table 13; Appendix D) indicate the following impact of studying towards qualifications:

Improved knowledge and skills

- Improved understanding of the general environment in which they work.
- Improved ability to communicate in the business environment.

Increased involvement and commitment

- Increased motivation towards work

Raised performance

- Increased confidence
- New knowledge and skills which employees have used to enhance their work performance.

The following summarises evidence which relates to the link between qualifications, skills and performance for each company.

Company A

The following account is based on a semi-structured interview with the Company A training manager and quantitative data (collected on three occasions - 13.12.09, 8.4.10 and 10.9.10) and nine operations managers (11.10.10).

Company A's collections operation is a high performing function which met all targets for the year ending March 2010, including stretched targets. Company A has well-established high performance working practices (29) and measures collector performance daily. Managers and collectors receive immediate feedback from customers on their dashboard (compared with other employees). They have a stress

assessment tool which sends messages to managers and the training manager. Therefore training and operations managers can make an informed decisions about performance. Expectations are high: 7 out of 9 operations managers agree that 'my job requires that I keep learning new things'.

TABLE 13

Impact of studying for qualifications [14]

	Training managers					Operations managers				
	A	B	D	Ave	Rank	A	B	C	Ave	Rank
New knowledge and skills which they have used to enhance their work performance	**3.0**	**5.0**	**5.0**	**4.3**	**3=**	**4.2**	**3**	**3.0**	**3.4**	**3=**
Improved understanding of the general environment in which they work	3.0	4.0	5.0	4.0	6=	4.2	4	4.0	4.1	1
Improved ability to communicate in the business environment	**4.0**	**5.0**	**5.0**	**4.7**	**1=**	**3.7**	**3.5**	**3.0**	**3.4**	**3=**
Increased confidence	**4.0**	**5.0**	**4.0**	**4.3**	**3=**	**4.2**	**2.5**	**4.0**	**3.6**	**2**
Increased motivation towards work	**4.0**	**5.0**	**5.0**	**4.7**	**1=**	**4.2**	**2**	**4.0**	**3.4**	**3=**
Raised interest in gaining further qualifications	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.0	6=	3.5	2	2.0	2.5	7
Higher status at work	3.0	4.0	4.0	3.7	9	3.5	2	1.5	2.3	8
Better chance of promotion	3.0	4.0	5.0	4.0	6=	3.5	2.5	3.0	3.0	6
Increased likelihood of a pay increase	5.0	4.0	4.0	4.3	3=	3.3	2.5	0	1.9	9
Average score	3.7	4.4	4.6	**4.2**		3.8	2.7	2.7	**3.1**	

The training manager uses qualifications to achieve broad organisational goals and has evidence of increased motivation, job satisfaction, employee involvement and commitment.

[14] Q14. As a result of studying towards qualifications, to what extent do you believe that your credit teams have gained the following? Score 1 – 5 (Score 1 for 'little importance' to 5 for 'a great extent'). Values represent average scores collected December 2009 – October 2010 and on the final occasion for training managers (August – October 2010).

First, ‘care surveys’, which measure job satisfaction and have specific questions about training, scored more highly for cash collections in March 2010 than other parts of the business, which the Training Manager believes relates to their investment in people. Also in March, he cited that collectors in three centres had ‘gone above and beyond’ expectations and had studied by unsupported distance learning for one ICM course. At the time, he had hoped for a ‘step change in culture’ because they had run so many courses during the quarter. Ten months later, he said that the programme had increased involvement in qualifications.

The author can corroborate this claim because the number of evening class programmes which Company B offered increased from three starting in September 2010 to five in January 2011. Also during this period nine operations managers have attended an ICM coach workshop and the company plans to deliver additionally the Level 5 programme in September 2011.

Evidence of performance gains is based on survey feedback from operations managers and the training manager. Interestingly the operations managers scored more highly (October 2010) than the training manager (September 2010) for the extent that studying for qualifications had developed new knowledge and skills which they have used to enhance their work performance, and improved understanding of the general environment in which they worked.

Company A training manager thought that they had responded more confidently because they are closer to teams. Also he commented that some managers have been surprised by the positive impact, particularly if a team member, who was not well-

known, has passed an exam with ease and progressed to the next level. Twice he mentioned that studying has been an 'eye opener' for some operations managers because they have found that even after a couple of classes, learners have returned to work with ideas about how to improve processes or they have altered the way that they talk to customers.

In the structured survey he remarked that managers' involvement in the programme has helped employees through the courses; driven managers' awareness; and raised their ability to understand and manage the 'credit crunch'. Also he said that the courses had engendered more discussion and interest, encouraging better team-working through information and knowledge sharing (Training Manager Company A 2010: Q3).

The increased investment in qualifications for the credit team suggests that Company A believe in a link between qualifications, skills and performance. The operations managers offer three additional comments about the value of qualifications for people working in credit:

> '*Qualifications are an excellent way of improving performance standards and raising the profile of credit management as a desirable career path*.'

> '*Allows . . . a wider view of credit management as a whole, especially . . . (if you) work in only one area.'*

> *'They recognise the knowledge and skills required to run a successful credit department can be easily transferred to other areas.'*

Company D

Company D is similar to Company B and has adopted a large number of high performance working practices (27). Collectors and managers monitor performance daily and team leaders review collectors' performance fortnightly in 'one-to-one' meetings. The company conducts customer satisfaction surveys biannually.

The training manager described the vocational purpose of qualifications for Company D through responses to the survey (31.3.10 and 1.10.10) and an interview (21.1.11). Over the period of the study, Company D Training Manager increased support for the impact of study towards qualifications on performance for all factors in the survey from an average score of 3.8 (some importance) to 4.6 (important), with the four following categories scoring 5 (to a great extent): new knowledge and skills which they have used to enhance their work performance; improved ability to communicate in the business environment; motivation towards work and better chance of promotion (Table 13).

She believes that the qualifications have improved process and efficiency,

> *'I think it's a lot to do with improvements in process and efficiency. I mean like most companies we have made head-count reductions – we made head-count reductions last year and yet our collections have not dropped. So what does that tell you? That tells me that we must be much more efficient.'* (2011: 283-286)

She exemplified how learners are coming up with ideas to improve processes and efficiencies,

> *'I'll give you an example, someone said to me, 'any invoice over twenty thousand, I don't want it on my work list as overdue, I want it on my work list ten days before it's due so I can make sure that it's all ok and paid on time'. So I changed the rule set for them - now every invoice over twenty thousand hits their work queue so that they can make sure they are being proactive in their collections.'* (Training Manager 2011 291-295)

She believes that investment in qualifications has had a positive effect on employees' views about the company, 'people value (Company D) more. I think that they recognise that it's a supportive company. I think some of them recognise how lucky they are.' (Training Manager Company D 2011 236-237). Also she said that 'staff turnover has dropped significantly.' (2011: 266).

Company D operations manager supports this assessment, stating that staff retention is now almost 70%, which is important because it is more cost effective to retain and develop talent rather than to recruit and train new employees. He says that training hours have increased significantly from 2008 to 2010 and there is a '30% improvement in positive response to 'I have access to tools and training that helps me own my career.''

Additionally he can evidence that 'improved staff knowledge and efficiency' has supported change management (Company D Operations Manager: 2011). For example, they had reduced billing systems from 42 to 6; established robust core processes and comprehensive documentation in the same format; fully centralised credit control and aligned the operation to the sales department. He said that high level skills are essential because of the number of projects running simultaneously (over 30 projects). He said

that some employees had developed the skills to work with specialist consultants on change projects. He believes that the qualification programme has 'improved staff progression through the department and wider organisation' stating that over the last three years there have been 3 promotions, 14 organisation moves and 9 role changes.

Company B

Over the period of the study, Company B Training Manager increased support for the impact of the training/qualification on performance for all factors in the survey from an average score of 1.8 (some importance) to 4.4 (important), even though the programme has now stopped due to organisational change. Four categories scored 5 (to a great extent): new knowledge and skills which they have used to enhance their work performance; improved ability to communicate in the business environment; increased confidence and motivation towards work (Appendix B. Table 15).

The training manager explained in the semi-structured interview that they had 'seen a really strong increase in performance this year.' (Training Manager Company B 2011 372-373). She relates this to investment in training and qualifications on the basis of a performance benchmarking exercise. Her team have compared pre-training performance levels for individual collectors with results immediately after training, and then one, three and six months later, taking into account the economic climate and length of service of individual collectors.

Their approach is particularly innovative because unlike many other companies, they have tried to assess the return on investment in qualifications in terms of performance gains. In addition, following this exercise they adopted a new post-qualification

coaching system which has helped sustain higher performance levels. As the training manager explained, the maintenance of performance levels is difficult following any training investment:

> *'The key for us is maintaining performance at that level . . . what you tend to find is that you do the training, or you do some kind of intervention, and performance improves for a while and then people drop off and go back to old habits or they can't sustain that . . . so it's actually how you keep that performance at the higher level that's the biggest challenge for us.'* (2011: 310-316)

As a result of the benchmarking exercise, they have focused their coaching 'more intelligently on the people that actually need support . . . rather than giving everyone two hours a week. . . it's focused a lot more strategically' (2011: 354-358). Through this method they have raised the performance of some who were 'falling under the radar' and others have 'moved on' (2011: 364-369). Although the training manager emphasises that their main goal is to 'improve performance based on our business drivers' (2011: 392-393), she sees benefits in employees broadening their skills and gaining better business awareness. She believes that this improves customer handling and provides progression opportunities into other parts of the business or promotion,

> *'broader knowledge . . . enable(s) them to handle the customer more effectively because that's our key driver at the end of the day, . . . customer satisfaction, an equal value between that and the cash collection.'* (2011: 416-419)

However, Company B training manager commented that ‘some collectors are ‘really motivated to do lots of work and study out of work hours, but a lot aren’t’ (2011: 252-253). Therefore they have to provide time for the collectors to study offline which has to be managed carefully.

Thus there is strong support from the three organisations for the role of qualifications as a catalyst for performance. Training and operations managers believe that qualifications have improved knowledge and skills, increased involvement and commitment, and raised performance. Company A describes the increased ability to meet ‘stretched targets’ and improve working practices; Company D identifies higher level skills, better retention of talent and internal promotion, increased efficiency through employee involvement in process improvements; Company B has measured a ‘strong positive increase in performance’ (Training Manager Company B 2011: 372-373) and explains how they have since targeted coaching more strategically.

8.5 Qualification achievement

During the period June 2008 – January 2011, learners at the sample companies completed a total of 250 units and gained 1,866 Level 2 or Level 3 credits. This is a significant achievement because few employees had gained qualifications in the previous 2½ years.

However this represents only a small proportion of workplace learning, only 1-2 credits per employee over the period when divided by the total number of employees (Addendum 3.2). Also only eight learners completed full Level 3 Diplomas in Credit

Management (≥ 37 credits) during this period and these all studied in evening classes and completed pre-QCF, large knowledge-based units.

There appears to be little difference in the success of approaches. Employee engagement is limited if employers do not set a requirement for study unit completion, and interest quickly drops off following an initiative unless priorities are set to raise knowledge and skill levels, as in the case of Company A and D.

8.6 Conclusion

The telecoms sector is highly competitive and therefore organisations in this study use a range of HR practices in order to achieve sustainable business success through a culture of continuous improvement to service and operational efficiency. They reflect the characteristics of organisational excellence identified by Peters and Waterman (1982).

Despite routine and tightly focused work, three companies use the QCF to develop distinct qualification pathways; each involving the selection of different units, methods of delivery and assessment. This has been possible due to the flexible unit-based design of the QCF and broad assessment criteria, and would not have been as easy to achieve under previous qualification arrangements, for example NVQs, due to highly specified assessment arrangements. However qualification achievement only reflects a small proportion of workplace learning. Also the companies seem to use qualifications as a catalyst for performance in a variety of ways as explained next.

CHAPTER 9 Research findings

9.1 Introduction

The thesis set out to investigate the link between vocational qualifications and skills, and the extent that QCF qualifications are a catalyst for learning and performance. The following chapter summarises key findings and proposes a model that identifies a vocational purpose for qualifications.

9.2 Link between qualifications and skills

9.2.1 What are the 'drivers' for skills development and measurement?

Qualifications grew in a 'localised, fragmented and voluntaristic manner' from the mid-19th century in response to specific employer demand (Raggatt and Williams 1999: 6-7). This continues to be the case, although professional bodies and the government require qualifications for some roles to ensure a minimum level of competence in order to protect the public interest. Also, over the last 25 years, the UK government has reorganized VET and used funding to encourage qualification for a range of social, political and economic reasons (see sections 2.1 – 2.3).

9.2.2 What is the demand for qualifications and skills?

The thesis confirms that the link between qualifications and skills is complex and often contradictory. Understanding about the meaning of skills and demand for qualifications varies between individuals and employers because the 'role and value of qualifications

is context dependent' (Unwin et al 2004: 6.62) in the cultural and organisational sense (Keep 2009), and influenced by wider social, economic, political and institutional factors such as sectoral and occupational traditions, selection and progression mechanisms, education and age profiles. I have developed a model (Figure 4) that helps to highlight the extent of internal and external vocational learning, and identify barriers to access.

Ultimately, interest in certification depends on the extent that employers are concerned about skill development, and the value they place on qualifications as a means to measure skill and motivate employees. The literature tends to argue that problems relate less to the supply of relevant qualifications or the 'low motivation of employees', but more to poor quality of jobs and limited job specifications (Coffield 2004:286). However this research finds the level of employee engagement depends on the extent that employers require qualifications as part of the role.

9.2.3 What is the 'English' government's approach to qualifications?

From the mid 1980s until 2012, the 'English' government has attempted to create a single, national system of vocational qualifications to bring coherence to the qualifications system and increase uptake. A review of the literature finds that national qualifications frameworks which emerged in England were distinct from those in Europe, including Scotland, because of differing ontological and epistemological views about the concept of 'competency', and political and institutional factors that influenced their design and implementation.

These resulted in radical, centrally-designed, highly specific and technical qualification frameworks which excluded general qualifications and learning provision, and overlaid rather than incorporated existing qualification frameworks. Also ironically it has increased the complexity of the VET system, with three qualifications frameworks (NVQ, NQF and QCF) and an even larger range of vocational qualifications.

Critics have ascribed issues to political and institutional arrangements which prioritised academic rather than vocational pathways and the government's market-oriented approach. In particular, this favoured voluntarism and performance targets which resulted in rushed implementation; linked NVQs to the YTS (see footnote 3) to resolve short-term problem of youth unemployment, which resulted in a narrow, task-based conception of competency; regarded the wide range of vocational qualifications as a problem, and preferred to ignore the interests of learning providers and professional bodies; used funding to influence demand and independent awarding bodies, separate from learning provision to implement new arrangements (Raggett & Williams 1999; Brockmann et al. 2008).

Following Unwin (2004), this research identifies the continued path-dependency of qualification arrangements. Ironically QCF implementation problems seem to relate less to the initial concept, and more to conflicting aims that resulted from the NVQ legacy; the government's approach to qualification reform and implementation, and misunderstanding about the vocational purpose of qualifications.

First, the qualification regulators developed two incompatible aims for QCF qualifications: acknowledgement of a wide range of training and learning; and the

recognition of competence to carry out a specific role. These reflect differing ontological and epistemological approaches to skills and qualifications. QCF unit assessment criteria need to be broad to recognise the training and learning solutions of a wide range of working environments. However, the precise measurement of occupational skills with broad assessment criteria is difficult. Thus use of the term 'competency' as a purpose category for QCF qualifications is misleading and conflicts with the principles of the QCF. Also, attempts to incorporate NVQs style qualifications and NVQ assessment methodology within the QCF framework are misguided.

Problems are accentuated by linking funding to qualifications specified as 'competency' because this encourages a positivist position that defines competence in a precise way in order to achieve rigorous, valid and reliable measurement. This may be appropriate to verify minimum standards and ensure valid assessment for licensing purposes. However, the approach neither captures nor nurtures high level skills or any notion of excellence.

Second, political and institutional arrangements have resulted in continued radical, market-orientated approaches, rather than gradual evolution based on partnership, and solutions that integrate academic and vocational pathways. First, flexible, unit qualifications and delivery and assessment models which are significantly different from NVQs, challenge the business models of many learning providers. Second, requirements to accept unit awards from any awarding bodies, regardless of assessment methodology and quality assurance arrangements, challenges the right of professional bodies to determine standards. Also rushed implementation resulted in the inclusion of poor quality units in the QCF unit bank (Ofqual 2010).

Finally, a lack of understanding about the vocational purpose of qualifications has resulted in retention of a narrow 'NVQ' style conception of competency; continued focus on certification; and an underestimation of the value of learning providers and professional bodies. This is particularly problematic because it underestimates the ability of employers to measure performance and over-estimates the ability of vocational qualifications to capture the full range of employee skills. Also, the study shows that employers regard qualifications as 'frameworks for learning' and not merely 'frameworks for achievement' or measures of performance or competence; therefore links to high quality learning experiences are important (see section 9.4).

In particular, organisations in this study emphasise the importance of links to the professional body to give access to best practice techniques. This supports views about 'communities of practice' involving employers, learning providers and professional bodies that provide important sources of expertise, and links qualifications to shared values and practice (Young 2002; PricewaterhouseCoopers 2005; Wolf 2011). In contrast, promotion of a competitive environment through use of awarding bodies that are separate from learning provision or specific learning contexts limits the diversity and spread of the QCF, and threatens the viability of small specialist professional bodies.

9.3 Value of the QCF

9.3.1 Does the introduction of the QCF influence an organisation's support for qualifications?

For this group of case study companies, the QCF has increased support for qualifications because it enables companies to 'accredit' their training, and build relevant qualifications and assessment. Prior to the introduction of the QCF, none of the companies in the study had required any specific qualifications for their credit employees. Instead recruitment and promotion decisions were based on the 'right personality type' and experience. However, eighteen months after working with the new framework, three of the four companies have invested in QCF qualifications, and two companies have made qualification a requirement for promotion.

9.3.2 What factors influence decision-making?

Engagement of the QCF seems to be associated with employment of a manager who has particular responsibility for training. Also long-term success seems dependent on fairly stable organisational arrangements and a senior manager that supports skills development through qualification.

Employers seem attracted by the flexible structure of the QCF because they can find a wide range of specialised units that are relevant to roles and can integrate qualifications more easily with other HR practices. This is important because people development arrangements differ, even within the same sector, and organisations have adopted varying qualification solutions for their teams. Also links to credible learning provision and agencies that are able to link training to QCF qualifications are important.

It is significant that even though all case study companies had extensive training programmes, they were still interested in the additional status of links with national awards. Additionally, although they had experienced trainers, they required assistance to develop and implement QCF programmes. Thus delivery of the QCF would have been difficult if the Institute did not offer learning materials and a range of additional qualification services.

For example during the period of the study, the Institute matched QCF units to company training and job roles (all companies); designed bespoke units (Company D); developed customised assignments (Company B and D); trained coaches (Company A); supplied learning materials (all companies); provided consultancy services to link company's online learning materials to QCF units (Company D) and explained the programme to learners in presentations and webinars (all companies). The latter was particularly important because many managers and learners were familiar with the Institute's pre-QCF qualifications and therefore were confused by changes following the introduction of the QCF. In particular, they struggled to understand changes to titles (from 'Certificate' to 'Diploma'); the large choice of units; and complex rules of combination, such as the ability to transfer credit from the level below.

One training manager stated that their company prefered to work with a professional body, especially if it was Ofqual accredited, because it has expertise in a specific area; acts as a 'one-stop-shop' for training, qualifications and membership and has qualifications that are well recognised, 'reputable' and 'credible' (Company A). Another reinforced the point saying that they looked to ICM to provide guidance on best practice.

None of the companies in the study implemented QCF qualifications to establish or measure 'basic' competency for roles because they have a range of HR practices in place to achieve this. Thus employers regard qualifications as a means to raise skills and performance rather than a 'skills audit'.

9.3.3 How do organisations design QCF qualifications and assessment to achieve business objectives?

It is significant that approaches to qualification design are path dependent and vary even for companies in the same sector with similar organisational practices. This helps to explain the difficulty in developing common qualification solutions. All four organisations designed qualifications and assessment in different ways to meet specific people development strategies. Also all changed their approach to the QCF during the period of study.

9.3.4 To what extent do employers link QCF qualifications with learning and performance?

The thesis finds that case study companies regard QCF qualifications as being important for performance because they support a culture of continuous improvement.

Results are consistent with the outcomes of other larger quantitative studies into NVQs (Sims and Golden 1998; Roe et al 2006). The research indicates that training and operations managers associate study for qualifications with raised performance. New knowledge and skills combine with greater confidence and motivation to give increased overall performance. Operations managers note in particular 'improved understanding of the general environment in which they work'; 'improved ability to communicate in

the business environment'; and new knowledge and skills which employees have 'used to enhance their work performance'. Also they identify 'increased confidence' and 'increased motivation towards work'.

9.3.5 To what extent and in what ways do organisations integrate QCF qualifications with high performance working practices?

All three companies integrated QCF qualifications with other HR practices and held presentation events and information sessions to promote the qualifications. However, the level of employee engagement depends on the extent that employers require qualifications as part of the role. It is only when companies oblige employees to raise their skills that participation in qualification programmes increases.

9.4 The Vocational Purpose of Qualifications

Lave and Wenger (1991) contend that employees gain knowledge and skills in 'communities of practice' rather than by acquiring knowledge externally for example through qualifications. However, the organisations in this research reflect more the 'expansive' environments described by Fuller and Unwin (2004) that encourage innovation, access to a range of qualifications, including knowledge-based courses, and 'participation in multiple communities of practice inside and outside the workplace' (2004: 511). Also, this research suggests value of a broader interpretation of Lave and Wenger's communities of practice (Wenger 2004). Consequently, I identify a purpose for vocational qualifications that extends beyond the narrow human capitalist view of qualifications as signals of knowledge and skills or measures of competence.

The model in Figure 6 summarises the findings of the literature review and case study research and includes the establishment of knowledge and skills to achieve basic competency and meet regulatory requirements because from the perspective of the government and regulators, these are the main purposes of qualifications and funding is linked to the 'achieve competency' classification. However knowledge and skills to cover these areas are not a priority for the case study companies because they have excellent induction and ongoing training arrangements. Of more importance is the ability of qualifications to build high level skills, develop employees and increase motivation to support a culture of continuous improvement and to raise performance; all organisations emphasise the latter.

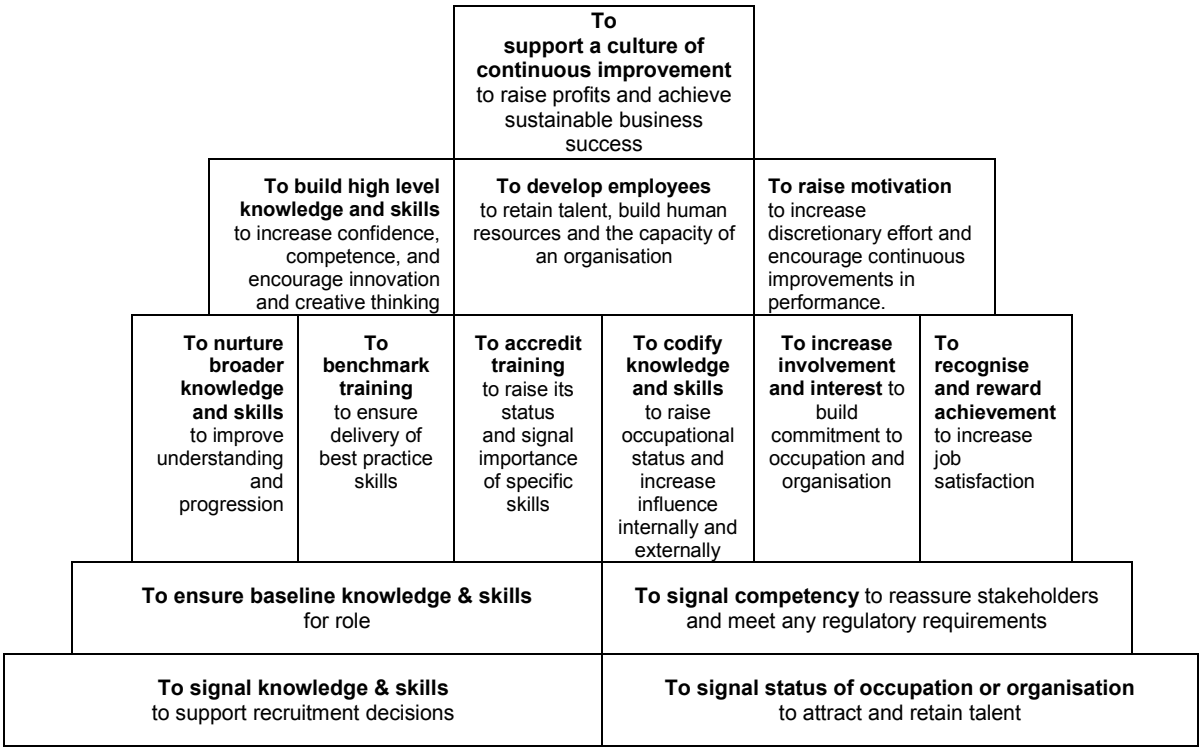
Thus the model in Figure 6 identifies three core purposes and a range of interlinking goals that support these aims. First, training and operations managers rated most highly the ability of qualifications to signal the status of an occupation. The model suggests that qualifications help codify knowledge and skills to raise occupational status and increase the influence of the function within the organisation and externally. Participants suggest that this helps to attract talent and increases involvement and commitment to the occupation and organisation. This was a particular concern for Company D and reflects the difficulty of retaining talent in organisations with increasingly flat structures and few opportunities for promotion.

Second, highly competitive organisations seek to build high level skills to increase employees' confidence and competence, and their ability to embrace change and contribute to improvements to practice. In this respect, the accreditation of in-company training raises its status and signals to employees the importance of developing specific

skills. Additionally, the ability to benchmark training ensures the delivery of best practice skills and in-company evening classes in general business subjects help to nurture broader understanding. All participants in the study rate as important the development of knowledge and skills, and report that employees have to a great extent 'improved understanding of the general environment in which they work'.

FIGURE 6

Vocational purpose of qualifications



© The author's own 2011

Last, all participants emphasise the importance of qualifications to motivate and give greater job satisfaction which according to concepts of high performing working increases discretionary effort and encourages improvements in performance (Sung & Ashton 2005).

This Model is important because it demonstrates the role of qualifications to support a culture of continuous improvement. These conclusions are consistent with results of larger quantitative studies into the value of NVQ qualifications, such as Sims and Golden (1998) and Roe et al (2006) (see section 3.3). The Model also draws ideas from work of Peters and Waterman (1982) on organisational excellence.

9.5 Conclusion

The research finds that the link between qualifications and skills is complex and although there is value in the QCF, the role of qualifications is as a catalyst for learning and performance. There is evidence that supports views that uptake is path dependent (Unwin et al 2004) and success is dependent on business strategy (Finegold & Soskice 1988; Green 1999; Keep 2000 & 2002; Unwin et al 2008); organisational culture (Keep 2000; LSC 2006); management commitment (Keep & Rainbird 2000; Keep 2000 & 2002); and the economic climate and funds available for people development. Also programmes of learning are disrupted by changes to organisational strategy and government policy. These areas will be explored in more detail in the concluding chapter.

CHAPTER 10 Conclusions

10.1 Introduction

Qualifications and their link to skills and performance are important areas for research. The QCF is significant both in terms of its potential as a catalyst for skills development and the level of investment requirement for its establishment.

This research explores understanding of the link between qualifications and skills, and finds that the QCF is able to accommodate the range of skills development needs of three organisations and the study provides a useful insight into the link between vocational learning, qualifications and performance.

However, the QCF is not a panacea. Qualification achievement increased for case study companies but only reflects a small proportion of workplace learning. Investment in qualifications is dependent on business strategy and the extent that organisations seek to sustain business success through a culture of continuous improvement. With increasingly flat business structures and few opportunities for promotion, there seems little motivation for employees to invest in qualifications for personal development unless they are required by employers or are concerned about job security.

The concluding chapter explores implications for theory, policy and practice; and assesses limitations in understanding and areas for further research.

10.2 Implications for theory

The literature review finds that views about the value of qualifications are contested and research is fragmented. Theories about workplace learning usually focus on the nature of workplace learning and query the extent that qualifications can measure attainment in the workplace (Lave and Wenger 1991; Hodkinson & Hodkinson 2004; Keep & James 2010). They tend to link qualifications to a 'learning as attainment' model where individuals gain qualifications having acquired knowledge on a course (Beckett and Hager 2002; Felstead et al 2005), and question the value of external training and qualifications in raising workplace performance (Eraut 2004; Felstead et al 2004; Hager 2004; Hodkinson & Hodkinson 2004; Felstead et al 2005).

From a different perspective, theoretical studies that relate to high performance working and learning organisations propose that organisations are better able to adapt to changing competitive pressures if they promote individual and organisational learning (Senge 1990). They suggest that skills development focuses more on the achievement of specific business outcomes and performance rather than 'skills for the sake of skills' (Sung & Ashton, 2005: 70), and therefore argue that organisations should embed learning in work processes rather than invest in any particular qualifications or classroom based-learning. Thus this approach seems to 'discount' certification and formal courses 'in favour of informal learning and demonstrated work performance' (Pillay et al 2003: 763).

Similarly, Wolf (2011) questions the extent of demand for high level skills and observes that many skilled manual jobs and 'mid-level white-collar clerical jobs have been squeezed out by new technologies' (Wolf 2011: 35).

This study encourages a slightly different viewpoint and finds that the case study companies use qualifications to raise skills and performance. Additionally, I find that organisations value professional bodies because their qualifications and services raise the status of an occupational area, increase motivation and give access to credible progression routes and communities of practice. This encourages a wider interpretation of Lave and Wenger's concept of communities of practice (Wenger 2004).

I find that the flexible nature of the QCF means that some organisations have linked qualifications to other HR practices to achieve a range of purposes that ultimately aim to raise skills and improve organisational performance. These findings are consistent with the work of Fuller and Unwin (2003) that identifies expansive environments which give 'access to a range of qualifications, including knowledge-based vocational qualifications' and 'plan time off-the-job for knowledge based courses, and for reflection' (Fuller and Unwin 2007: 4).

The research shows that employers value the flexibility of the QCF framework because they can customise qualifications, delivery and assessment to match their training and suit specific roles, organisational arrangements and individual needs. Also employers are supportive of a qualification structure that allows learners to transfer credit if they move between roles and organisations.

The Internal and External Vocational Learning Model in section 5.3, in keeping with the original vision of the QCF and the ideas of Hager (2002), Wenger (2004) and Keep (2009), is important because it encompasses all forms of vocational learning, including workplace learning, and encourages a more balanced view of VET. Also it is a helpful,

descriptive tool to identify the nature of individual and organisational vocational learning.

The model gives prominence to informal workplace learning and a larger model would represent the wealth of learning gained over a rich and varied career in an expansive working environment that gives access to a wide range of training, including qualifications – a lifetime of learning. Alternatively, it could portray the nature of vocational learning in an organisation or department.

The model identifies barriers to progression such as into employment or further skills development or promotion. However results from this study suggest that a lack of individual agency poses the greatest barrier to progression in organisations with increasingly flat structures and few opportunities for promotion. Thus credible progression routes linked to external communities of practice such as professional bodies are important.

The model which identifies a vocational purpose for qualifications (Figure 6) is useful because it explains how companies can use vocational qualifications to build higher level skills, commitment and performance. The model identifies three core purposes for qualifications and a range of interlinking goals that support these aims that are consistent with theories of workplace learning, communities of practice and organisational excellence.

The study is interesting because it focuses on credit management departments that do not easily fit criteria for ‘expansive’ working environments. Job roles are tightly

focused, routine and task-focused. Also technological innovations have resulted in increased rationalisation, centralisation and flat organisational structures that offer few opportunities for promotion. The study builds from the work of Kinnie et al (2000) that describes the paradox in some call centres of high surveillance with high commitment and 'fun' working practices. However in contrast, the three companies in this study use qualifications in a range of ways to raise motivation, build high level knowledge and skills, and develop employees.

I find that qualification issues arise generally from differing ontological and epistemological positions about the meaning of learning and skills, particularly in a rapidly changing environment. Thus I contends that the QCF best fits a broader interpretation of Lave and Wenger's community of practice and Hager's (2002) alternative understanding of learning, and my Models, because they encompass 'learning of many different kinds' (Beckett & Hager 2002: 150) and recognises that contexts 'continually change and evolve' (Hager 2002: 14).

The study finds divergent paradigms of 'learning by acquisition' and 'learning by participation' unhelpful and agrees with Hager that 'these basic dualisms have created intractable problems of their own' (Hager 2002: 7). This conclusion is drawn from three pieces of evidence.

First, both paradigms of learning are relevant to the case study companies. They value off-the-job learning or 'learning by acquisition' because this teaches general principles, raises the status of courses, encourages participation in skills development and does not interrupt the working day. However, they also recognise that employees learn by participation and therefore seek to create expansive working environments, linked to

internal and external communities of practice, in order to maximise individual, team and organisational learning.

Second, both paradigms seem to have limitations for organsations that seek to raise performance; 'learning by participation' provides an inadequate mechanism to raise skills because of the pace of change. Also due to rapid technological change, 'learning is not *stable'* (2002: 14) and therefore 'learning by acquisition' is not sufficiently tailored and up-to-date. In particular some roles disappear and others emerge and contexts change that require different knowledge and skills. The thesis supports the views of Beckett and Hager (2002) that 'the front-end model of occupational preparation' is increasingly breaking down (2002: chapter 6).

Third employers value the QCF because it raises the status of training and encourages participation in learning, which the case study companies regard as important to support a culture of continuous improvement. Thus qualifications are less important for their association with a particular body of learning, to support the 'learning by acquisition' paradigm, or to audit skills to verify competency in a role and support the 'learning by participation' paradigm. Instead they are valuable as flexible pathways of lifelong learning, linked to internal and external communities of practice that can encompass and recognise a range of learning experiences.

10.3 Implications for policy and practice

This research has implications for government VET policy and professional bodies. I have considered the design and implementation of the QCF, and on the basis of the experience of a professional body working with credit management departments, presents a small window on a world where demand is weak for qualifications. From this perspective, the QCF promises much, but may fail to deliver. Decision-making is path-dependent and issues related to political and institutional arrangements in England that deter the formation of a more comprehensive VET system. Also a challenging, regulated and competitive environment threatens the viability of small, specialist professional bodies, such as the ICM.

First I argue that government could learn lessons from organisational theory and the case studies in this research. These high performing companies have senior management with a clear vision about their value proposition. They apply a wide range of HR, high involvement, reward and commitment practices in a consistent manner to develop a strong supporting culture (see table 7). They understand that cultural change takes time to implement (see feedback from Company A training manager).

The thesis uses organisational theory in section 4.4 to reflect on the implementation of the QCF and finds that current government management practices, including short-termism, increased qualification regulation and a market-orientated approach to the VET system, could threaten the establishment of a more diverse and inclusive framework. Likewise, Wolf (2011) is critical of the centralising approach and micro-management of qualification development and awarding bodies.

The government seems to have strayed from the original vision of the QCF as a credit-based qualifications framework that is simpler, more responsive, more inclusive, less bureaucratic and more diverse (QCA 2004: 10-13) and recognises a 'wide range of achievements, in a more flexible and inclusive manner than is currently possible' (QCA 2004: 2). Thus rather than 'floating' above the real problem, as Keep (2009) warns, reductionist policy interventions that aim to 'make the market work' and encourage innovation actually miss the point of the vocational qualifications. Also rather than working towards a meta-framework that encompasses academic and vocational learning, as in Scotland, rapid imposition of another technical framework solution reflects a lack understanding of the purpose of vocational qualifications and the value of communities of practice.

Additionally, as Company B exemplifies, organisational change often disrupts rather than supports skills development. Thus the Ofqual's consultation on economic regulation, for example, creates uncertainty, reduces trust and ironically would increase bureaucracy, and decreases rather than increases innovation in the VET system (Ofqual 2010c).

Criticism about the Government's approach to skills development tends to focus on limits of any supply-side intervention 'however, well-designed' because 'to be effective, a skill needs to be exercised' (Grugulis 2003: 471). In this respect, the study finds support for this view that uptake depends upon business strategy (Finegold & Soskice 1988; Green 1999; Keep 2000 & 2002; Unwin et al 2008), organisational culture (Keep 2000; LSC 2006) and management commitment (Keep & Rainbird 2000; Keep 2000 & 2002).

However, I identify issues that extend beyond concerns about restrictive roles. First organisations take time to change because a range of social, political and economic factors influence choice of qualifications, as explained in chapter 2. This does not mean that introduction of the QCF will be, as Wolf suggests 'an expensive failure' (2011: 139), all depends on the ability of the government and Ofqual to stay true to the underlying principles of credit frameworks and reposition the QCF as a meta-framework. Thus adjustments to arrangements in 2011 that allows qualifications to remain on the NQF, at least temporarily, are a sensible compromise. Rapid changes in qualification policy seems to destabilise the VET system.

Second, the research supports Hager's view that 'learning is not *stable* as contexts continually change and evolve.' (2002: 14). Organisational change disrupts programmes of learning and technological developments alter job roles and skill requirements. However, this provides new opportunities for learning, informal and formal, which a flexible qualification structure, such as the QCF, is more able to capture, especially if linked to credible learning packages and communities of practice,

Finally, the research finds a broader and more inclusive and emancipatory role for professional bodies, which is linked to organisational development. Traditionally professional bodies have focused on individual development. However, this research suggests that there is demand for a more extended role involving corporate membership because organisations value the range of products and services that professional bodies offer. This includes potentially differentiated and controlled access to learning packages, qualifications, membership grades and communities of practice with credible progression routes. Thus I find further opportunities for professional bodies to expand their remit through partnership with forward-thinking organisations.

10.4 Limitations

This is a small scale study based on credit management departments in the telecoms sector and the experiences of one awarding body. Limitations relate to the extent that favourable outcomes can be generalised theoretically to other working environments and awarding bodies.

First, conclusions reflect the views of training and operations managers and assumptions are made about the agency of learners, however they were not involved in the research.

Second, although the sample companies are tightly controlled environments that traditionally have not invested in qualifications, they do not necessarily typify other credit management departments or restricted working environments generally. Instead they exemplify HPWOs.

Third, I have collected data in an active way and therefore participation in the study is likely to encourage favourable views about the QCF. Other awarding bodies may not have similar expertise or a direct relationship with employers to explain the QCF and facilitate implementation. Also managers of larger awarding bodies or professional bodies may not have the same level of control and independence to create units, build learning materials and alter assessment methodology to suit wide ranging employer requirements.

Fourth, although the structured survey collected favourable scores on the impact of qualifications, I have not established a causal link between qualification and

performance. This was not the aim of the study and would be difficult to achieve because many factors influence performance. Also it is hard to isolate variables and it is also difficult to ascertain causal direction even in a large, longitudinal quantitative study.

Last, I have not narrowed responses to QCF qualifications and therefore have not assessed the relative value of the QCF compared with other vocational qualifications. However, I have focused on the design of the QCF and its impact on engagement.

10.5 Implications for methodology

The study demonstrates the value of longitudinal, qualitative studies that combine quantitative element and detailed literature review.

First an interpretivist and reflexive approach facilitates an 'insider view' of the QCF that is potentially more balanced as a longitudinal study. Second, inclusion of a quantitative element helps clarify relative values and encourages cross-sample generalisations. Also, it shows the extent that views are translated into action, for example the extent that company policy regarding skills development results in qualification achievement.

However, the research is most significant because it demonstrates the value of insider, interpretive research to present the views of specific stakeholders, in this case a small, specialised professional body. This has allowed an alternative view of the literature to provide additional support for the interpretation of a range of researchers, in particular, Eraut (1994), Kinnie et al (2000), Hager (2002), Young (2002) and Wenger (2004).

10.6 Further research

It would be valuable to apply an improved version of the survey to other contexts, for example different sectors, occupations and qualifications to assess wider applicability of the model. The survey would benefit from the addition of further reasons for encouraging employees to take qualifications, including 'to help us recruit staff', 'to help us retain staff', 'to ensure reliable standards of competence and skills' (Roe et al 2006), and 'to improve company performance', 'for staff development' (Sims and Golden 1998), and on the basis of this study, 'to increase confidence', 'to nurture broader knowledge and skills', 'to support a culture of continuous improvement', 'to encourage innovation and creative thinking'.

It would be interesting to investigate further ways that HPWOs engage with the QCF. For example, the banks are working increasingly with the ICM to link performance review systems to QCF units and ICM membership. This usually starts from an initial approach to accredit training or help develop new 'blended' learning programmes[15].

Also, the value of qualifications in 'fledgling' areas of the economy would be an interesting focus. For example, over the last two years the ICM has developed QCF qualifications for new areas of consumer credit and enforcement.

It would be interesting to track the government's approach to credit frameworks; the extent that it retains the vision of the QCF as a flexible framework; its success in encouraging smaller organisations to gain access to relevant packages of learning and QCF qualifications; and the role of funding.

[15] These combine online learning with internal and external courses, linked to performance review systems and job roles.

As regards qualification design, it would be worth extending research to awarding bodies, companies and job roles because the study suggests that the 'Vocational Purpose of Qualifications Model' could apply to a range of vocational qualifications.

It would be worth tracking employer and employee views about the value of different brands and types of qualifications to identify reasons for their relative value. In particular, there needs to be more research into the role of professional bodies and educational institutions to help identify successful practice and the changing nature of 'communities of practice'. For example, the ICM finds the internet, online bulletin boards and online communities developed from social networks, such as LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook, are building interest in skills development and qualifications. Also, it would be useful to assess the value of National Occupational Standards (NOS).

Finally, the research has collected positive views about the role of qualifications in performance management. This matches similar results from ICM learners in earlier surveys. Thus there would be value in research that investigated the link between qualifications and performance. In particular, it would be interesting to identify conditions that support vocational purposes of qualifications, for example increased motivation, the development of high level skills and long-term employee development.

10.7 Conclusion

In a challenging and rapidly changing economic market, increasingly employees report the need to 'keep learning in their role' (Felstead et al 2006) and employers seek greater involvement in organisational change (Peters & Waterman 1982). However, I conclude that increasingly flat structures offer few opportunities for promotion and therefore little

incentive for employees to invest time in qualifications and high level skills development.

I find that the flexibility of the QCF means that some companies link qualifications to other HR practices as a catalyst for performance. This achieves a range of outcomes including increased knowledge, skills and motivation. However, qualification achievement still represents only a small proportion of workplace learning; employers place low priority on certification for certification sake, unless used to raise the status of their own training; employee engagement is limited if employers do not set a requirement for unit completion; and interest drops following an initiative unless priorities are set for skills development.

In addition, I find that qualification uptake is path dependent and strongly affected by the culture of organisations; existing perceptions about qualifications (individual and organisational); company practices in relation to training and qualifications; and access to high quality training. Companies can encourage employees to invest their personal time in qualifications; however, cultural change takes time and is easily interrupted by changes to HR or management practices and government funding.

Thus, I conclude that the link between qualifications, skills and performance is complex and often contradictory. The internal design of qualifications is important, however mere design will not encourage investment in qualifications. The QCF has the ability to recognise a wide range of knowledge and skills, however engagement depends on business strategy, and QCF qualifications are likely to reflect only a small proportion of workplace learning. Association with a particular body of learning is less important,

although access to high quality learning packages is valued. The role of qualifications to verify competency is irrelevant for some, but for others, it is essential to meet regulatory requirements.

I identify significant problems in relation to the implementation of the QCF. These stem from incompatible aims for QCF qualifications; a government approach that threatens the establishment of a more diverse and inclusive framework; and requirements for different delivery and assessment models. However, I conclude that the QCF is valuable as a catalyst for performance and is consistent with theories about high performance working, communities of practice and organisational excellence.

It helps establish flexible pathways that can encompass and recognise a range of learning experiences and support a culture of continuous improvement.

Also, through the ability to recognise a range of workplace learning, the QCF establishes a common framework of understanding about units of vocational learning which supports Peters and Waterman's (1982) adherence to a concept of 'simultaneous loose-tight properties – measures of control that allow for operational flexibility' (Pettinger 2007: 22). As the eminent mathematician and philosopher, Alfred North Whitehead states,

'The art of progress is to preserve order amid change and to preserve change amid order' (North Whitehead 1929).[16]

[16] English Mathematician and philosopher. Cambridge scholar who wrote three books on mathematics with Bertrand Russell and was Chair of Philosophy in Harvard in 1920s from North Whitehead, A. (1929) *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*. 1979 corrected edition, edited by David Ray Griffin & Donald W. Sherburne, Free Press.

Bibliography

Ainley, P. (1988) *From school to YTS: Education and training in England and Wales 1944-1987*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

Ainley, P. (1994) *Degrees of difference*, London: Lawrence & Wishart.

Ashton, D., Davies, B., Felstead, A. & Green, F. (1999) *Work skills in Britain,* Oxford: ESRC Centre of Skills, Knowledge and Organisational Performance.

Ashton, D. (2004) 'The impact of organisational structure and practices on learning in the workplace', *International Journal of Training and Development,* 8(1): 43–53.

Ashton, D. & Sung, J. (2002) *Supporting workplace learning for high performance working,* Geneva: ILO.

Ashton, D. & Sung, J. (2006) 'How competitive strategy matters? Understanding the drivers of training, learning and performance at the firm level', *Centre for Labour Market Studies Research Paper no. 66,* Leicester: Centre for Labour Market Studies, University of Leicester.

Attewell, P. (1990) 'What is skill?' *Work and occupation,* 17(4): 422-448.

Bates, I. (1995) 'The competence movement; conceptualising recent research', *Studies in Science Education,* 25: 39-68.

Bartunek, J.M. & Louis, M.R. (1996) *'Insider/outsider team research',* Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Beckett, D. & Hager, P. (2002) *Life work and learning: Practice in postmodernity,* London: Routledge.

Brodkey, L (1987) 'Writing critical ethnographic narratives', *Anthropology and Education Quarterly,* 18(2): 67-76.

Billet, S. (2001) 'Learning throughout working life: activities and interdependencies studies', *Studies in Continuing Education*, 23(1) 19-35.

Billet, S. (2004) 'Workplace participatory practices: conceptualising workplaces as learning environments', *Journal of Workplace Learning*, 16(6): 312-24.

BIS (2010) 'Business plan. 2011 – 2015', London: BIS

Bishop, J. (1994). *The incidence of and payoff to employer training: A review of the literature with recommendations for policy,* Centre for Advanced Human Resource Studies Working Paper, no. 94-117. New York: Cornell University, School of Industrial and Labor Relations, Center for Advanced Human Resource Studies.
Blaikie, N. (2000) *Designing social research,* Cambridge: Polity.

Borghans, L., Green, F. & Mayhew, K. (2001) 'Skills measurement and economic analysis: an introduction,' *Oxford Economic Papers* (3): 375-385.

Bryman, A. *Social research methods,* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Campbell, M. & Garrett, R. (2004) 'The UK skills and productivity agenda: The evidence based for the SSDA's Strategic Plan 2005-2008', *Sector Skills Development Agency Research Report 6*, Wath-upon-Dearne: Sector Skills Development Agency.

Chartered Management Institute (2005) 'A Framework for Achievement – Recognising qualifications and skills in the 21st century – response by the Chartered Management Institute', http://www.dodsdata.com/Resources/epolitix/Forum%20Microsites/Chartered%20Management%20Institute/RESPONSE_TO_QCA_FfA.pdf 3.5.11

Coffield, F. (1999) *Breaking the consensus: lifelong learning as social control,* Newcastle: University of Newcastle.

Coffield, F. (2004) 'Relationship between research and policy', in H. Rainbird, A. Fuller & A. Munro (eds.) *Workplace learning in context,* London: Routledge: 279-298.

Cosh, A., Hughes, A., Bullock, A. & Potton, M. (2003) 'The relationship between training and business performance', *DfES Research Report no. 454,* Nottingham: DfES.

Dearden, L. Reed, H. & Van Reenan, J. (2000) *Who gains when workers train?* London: Institute for Fiscal Studies.

Debling, G. (1991) 'Developing standards', in P. Raggatt and L. Unwin (eds.) *Change and intervention: Vocational Education and Training,* London: The Falmer Press.

BIS (2010) *Business Plan 2010 – 2015,* London: BIS.

DE/DES/SO/WO (1986) *Working together – education and training,* London: HMSO.

DfEE (1996) *Higher level vocational qualifications: A government position paper,* London: DfEE.

DfES (2003) *21st Century skills – realising our potential,* Norwich: HMSO, White Paper.

DTI (2002) *Full and fulfilling employment: creating the labour market of the future'.* London: HMSO.

Eraut, M. (1994) *Developing professional knowledge and competence,* London: The Falmer Press.

Eraut, M. (2001) 'The role and use of vocational qualifications', *National Institute Economic Review,* October: 88.

Eraut, M. (2003) 'National Vocational Qualifications in England – description and analysis of an alternative qualification system', in G. Straka (ed.) *Zertifizierung non-formell und informell erworbener beruflicher Kompetenzen,* München & Berlin: Waxmann.

Eraut, M. (2004) 'Informal learning in the workplace', *Studies in Continuing Education,* 26(2): 247-273.

Felstead, A. & Green, F. (1994) 'Training during the recession', *Work, Employment and Society,* 8(2): 199-219.

Felstead, A., Gallie, D. & Green F. (2002) *Work skills in Britain, 1986 – 2001,* London: DfES.

Felstead, A., Fuller A., Unwin L., Ashton, D., Butler, P., Lee, T. & Walters, S. (2004) 'Applying the survey method to learning at work: a recent UK experiment', paper presented to the European Conference on Education Research (ECER), Rethymon Campus, University of Crete, Greece, 22–25.9.04.

Felstead, A., Fuller, A., Unwin, L., Ashton, D., Butler, P. and Lee, T. (2005) 'Surveying the scene: learning metaphors, survey design and the workplace context', *Journal of Education and Work,* 18(4): 271-289.

Felstead, A., Gallie, D., Green, F. & Zhou, Y. (2007) *Skills at work, 1986-2001,* Oxford: ESRC Research Centre on Skills, Knowledge and Organisational Performance.

Felstead, A., Fuller, A., Jewson, N. & Unwin, L. (2011) 'Working to learn. Learning to work', *Praxis,* no. 7, Wath-Upon-Dearne: UK Commission for Employment and Skills.

Field, J. (1995) 'Reality testing in the workplace: are NVQs 'employment-led?'', if P. Hodkinson and M. Issitt (eds) *The challenge of competence,* London: Cassell Education.

Finegold, D. & Soskice, D. (1988) 'The failure of british training: analysis and prescription', *Oxford Review of Economic Policy,* 4: 21-53.

Finegold, D. (1991) 'Institutional incentives and skill creation: preconditions for a High Skill Equilibrium', in P. Ryan (ed.) *International comparisons of vocational education and training for intermediate skills,* London: Falmer Press.

Fuller, A. & Unwin, L. (1999) Credentialism, national targets, and the learning society: perspectives on educational attainment in the UK steel industry, *Journal of Education Policy,* 14(6) 605-617.

Fuller, A. & Unwin, L. (2004) 'Learning as apprentices in the contemporary UK workplace: creating and managing expansive and restrictive participation', *Journal of Education and Work,* 16(4): 406-427.

Fuller, A., Munroe, A. & Rainbird, H. (2004) 'Conclusion' in H. Rainbird, A. Fuller & A. Munro (eds.) *Workplace learning in context,* London: Routledge: 300-306.

Fuller, A. & Unwin, L. (2008) 'Older and wiser? Workplace learning from the perspective of experienced employees', *International Journal of Lifelong Learning,* 24(1): 21-39.

Gallie, D. (1994) 'Patterns of skill change: upskilling, deskilling or polarisation?' in Penn, R., Rose, M. & Rubery, J. (eds.) *Skill and occupational change,* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Geertz, C. (1973) 'Thick description: toward an interpretive theory of culture,' in C. Geertz, *The interpretation of cultures,* New York: Basic Books.

Goody, E. (1982) *From craft to industry,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Goody, E. (1989) 'Learning and the division of labor', in M. Coy (ed.) *Anthropological perspectives on apprenticeship,* New York: SUNY Press.

Green, A. (1998) 'Core skills, key skills and general culture: in search of a common foundation for vocational education', in *Education and Research in Education,* 12(1).

Green, F., McIntosh, S. and Vignoles, A. (1999) ''Over-education' and skills: clarifying the concepts', discussion paper no. 435, Centre for Economic Performance, London School of Economics.

Green, F., Mayhew, K. & Molloy, E. (2003) *Employer perspectives survey,* Nottingham: DfES.

Grugulis, I. (2003) 'The contribution of national vocational qualifications to the growth of skills in the UK', *British Journal of Industrial Relations,* 41(3): 457–475.

Grugulis`, I. & Vincent, S. (2004) 'Whose skill is it anyway? 'Soft' skills and organisational politics', paper for Economic and Social Council Future of Work Programme, Bradford: Bradford University School of Management.

Grugulis, I. & Vincent, S. (2005) 'Changing boundaries, shaping skills: the fragmented organisational form and employee skills', in D Grimshaw, M. Marchington, J. Rubery & H. Wilmot (eds.) *Fragmenting work: blurring organisational boundaries and disordering hierarchies,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, chapter 9: 199-217.

Grugulis I. & Stoyanova D. (2006) 'Skills and performance', *SKOPE Issues Paper no. 9*, Universities of Oxford and Warwick.

Guba, E.G. & Lincoln Y.S. (1994) 'Competing paradigms in qualitative research,' in N.K. Denzin and Y.S. Lincoln (eds) *Handbook of qualitative research,* Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.

Hager, P. (2002) 'Philosophical accounts of learning', paper for the Philosophy of Education Society of Australasia 2002 Annual Conference, Brisbane, 29 November – 1 December.

Hager, P. (2004) 'The conceptualisation and measurement of learning at work', in H. Rainbird, A. Fuller & A. Munro (eds.) *Workplace learning in context* London: Routledge: 242-158.

Hanf, G. & Rein, V. (2007) 'European and national qualifications frameworks – a challenge for vocational education and training in Germany,' *European Journal of Vocational Training,* 42/43(3): 113-128.

Haskel, J. & Hawkes, D. (2003) 'How much of the productivity spread is explained by skills? UK evidence using matched establishment/workforce survey data', *CeRIBA Discussion Paper*, London: UKCES.

Hirst, P.H. & Peters R.S. (1970) *The Logic of Education,* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Hodkinson, P. & Hodkinson, H. (2004) 'The complexities of workplace learning. Problems and dangers in trying to measure attainment', in H. Rainbird, A. Fuller & A. Munro (eds.) *Workplace learning in context,* London: Routledge: 289-275.

Horrell, S., Rubery, J. & Burchell, B. (1994) 'Gender and skills' in R. Penn, M. Rose & J. Rubery (eds.) *Skill and Occupational Change,* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hogarth, R. & Wilson, R. (2007) *Skills in England 2007. Volume 2: Research Report,* Warwick and Cambridge: University of Warwick, Institute for Employment Research and Cambridge Econometrics.

Huberman, A.M. & Miles, M.B. (1994) 'Data management and analysis methods', N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (eds.) *Handbook of qualitative research,* Thousand Oaks: Sage, *428-445.*

Hyland, T. (1994) *Competence, education and NVQs,* London: Cassell Education.

Institute of Credit Management (2012) 'The vision, mission and value statement,' http://www.icm.org.uk/home/mission-vision-and-values 2.5.12.

Jessup, L. & Moore, R. (1995) 'Appropriating competence: the competency movement, the New Right and the 'cultural change' project, *British journal of Education and Work,* 8(2): 78-92.

Kane, R., Abraham, M. & Crawford, J. (1994) 'Training and staff development: integrated or isolated?' *Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources,* 32(2): 112–132.

Keep, E. (2000) ‘Learning organisations, lifelong learning and the mystery of the vanishing employers’, *SKOPE Research Paper no. 8,* Oxford: SKOPE, Oxford University.

Keep, E. & Rainbird, H. (2000) 'Towards the learning organisation?' in S. Bach & K. Sisson (eds.), *Personnel Management* (third edition), Oxford: Blackwell: 173-194.

Keep, E. (2002) ‘The English vocational education and training debate – fragile ‘technologies’ or opening the ‘black box’: two competing visions of where we go next’, *Journal of Education and Work*, 15(4): 457-479.

Keep, E. (2002b) ‘Creating a knowledge driven economy: definitions, challenges and opportunities’, *SKOPE Policy Paper no. 2,* Cardiff: SKOPE, School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University.

Keep, E., Mayhew, K. & Corney, M. (2002) ‘Review of the evidence on the rate of return to employers of investment in training and employer training measures’, *SKOPE Research Paper no. 34,* Coventry: SKOPE, Warwick Business School, University of Warwick.

Keep, E., Mayhew, K. and Payne, J (2006) From skills revolution to productivity miracle—not as easy as it sounds? *Oxford Review of Economic Policy*, 22(4): 539-559.

Keep, E. (2009) ‘Internal and external incentives to engage in education and training – a framework for analysing the forces acting on individuals?’ *Monograph. No 12,* Cardiff: ESRC Centre on Skills, Knowledge and Organisational Performance, Cardiff University.

Keep, E. (2009b) ‘The limits of the possible: shaping the learning and skills landscape through a shared policy narrative.’ *Learning as Work Research Paper no.86,* Cardiff: SKOPE, School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University.

Keep, E. & James, S. (2010) ‘What incentives to learn at the bottom end of the labour market?’ *SKOPE Research Paper no. 94,* Cardiff: SKOPE, School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University.

Kinnie, N., Hutchinson, S. & Purcell, J. (2000) ‘‘Fun and surveillance’: the paradox of high commitment management in call centres’, *International Journal of Human Resource Management,* 11(5): 967–985.

Kitching, J. & Blackburn, R. (2002) ‘The nature of training and motivation to train in small firms’, *DfES Research Report no. 330,* Nottingham: DfES.

Knights, D. & McCabe, D. (1998) ‘What happens when the phones go wild? Staff, stress and spaces for escape in a BPR telephone banking work regime’, *Journal of Management Studies,* 35(2): 163-194.

Kvale, S. (1996) *Interviews: An introduction to qualitative research interviewing,* Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Lafer, G. (2004) 'What is skill?' in, C. Warhurst, I. Grugulis & E. Keep (eds.) *The Skills that Matter,* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Lave, J. and Wenger, E. (1991) *Situated learning,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Leitch (2005) *Skills in the UK: The long-term challenge,* London: HMSO.

Leitch (2006) *Leitch review of skills. prosperity for all in the global economy – world class skills. Final report,* London: HMSO.

Lester, S. (2011) 'The UK Qualifications and Credit Framework: a critique', *Journal of Vocational Education and Training,* 63(2): 205-216.

LSC (2005) *Skills in England 2004. Volume 1: Key messages,* Coventry: LSC.

LSC (2006) *Skills in England 2005. Volume 1: Key messages,* Coventry: LSC.

LSC (2006b) *Skills in England 2005 Volume 2: Research Report,* Coventry: LSC.

Mason, G. & Wilson, R. (2003) *Employer skills survey. New analysis and lessons learnt,* Nottingham: DfES.

Mason, G. (2004) 'Enterprise product strategies and employer demand for skills in Britain: Evidence from the employers' skill surveys', *SKOPE Working Paper no. 50*, Coventry: SKOPE, Warwick Business School, University of Warwick.

Mason, G. (2005) 'In search of high value added production: how important are skills?' *Department for Education and Skills Research Report no. 663.* Nottingham: DfES.

Mason, J. (2002) *Qualitative researching,* London: Sage.

Mabey, C., Salaman, G. & Storey, J. (2001) 'Organisational structuring and restructuring', in G. Salaman (ed.) *Understanding business organisations,* London, Routledge.

McMillan, E. (2002) 'Considering organisation structure and design from a complexity paradigm perspective' in G. Frizzelle & H. Richards (eds.) *Tackling industrial complexity: the ideas that make a difference,* Cambridge: Institute of Manufacturing, University of Cambridge.

Merton, R,K. (1972) 'Insiders and outsiders: a chapter in the sociology of knowledge,' *American Journal of Sociology,* 78(1): 9-47.

Misko, J. (2010) *Responding to changing skills demands. Training packages and accredited courses,* Adelaide: NCVER.

MSC/DES (1986) *Review of vocational qualifications in England and Wales,* London: HMSO.

Morgan, G. (1986) *Images of organisation,* Newbury Park, California: Sage.

Mulder, M., Weigel, T. & Collins, J. (2006) 'The concept of competence concept in the development of vocational education and training in selected EU member states. A critical analysis', *Journal of Vocational Education and Training,* 59(1): 65-85.

Ofqual (2010) *The 2009 evaluation of Qualification and Credit Framework (QCF) regulation,* Coventry: Ofqual.

Ofqual (2010b) *From transition to transformation. Strategic regulation of awarding organisations and qualifications,* Coventry: Ofqual.

Ofqual (2010c) *Consultation on economic regulation and the fee-capping process,* Coventry: Ofqual.

Ofqual (2010d) *Conditions of recognition,* Coventry: Ofqual.

Ofcom (2010) *Ofcom Communications Market Report*, London: Ofcom.

Patai, D. (1994) '(Response) When method becomes power', in A. Gitlen (ed.) *Power and method*, New York: Routledge, 61–73.

Payne, J. (1999) 'All things to all people: changing perceptions of 'skill' among *no.1*, Coventry: SKOPE, Warwick Business School, University of Warwick.

Penn, R. (1984) *Skilled workers in the class structure,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Peters, T. J. & Waterman Jnr., R. (1982) *In Search of Excellence*, New York: Harper& Row.

Pettigrew, A., Sparrow, P. & Hendry, C. (1989) 'The forces that trigger training', *Personnel Management,* December: 28-32.

Pettinger, R. (2007) *Introduction to management,* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Pfeffer, J. (1994) *Competitive advantage through people,* Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.

Phillips, A. & Taylor, B. (1986) 'Sex and skill', in Feminist Review (ed.) *Waged Work: A Reader,* London: Virago.

Pillay, H., Boulton-Lewis, G., Wilss, L. & Lankshear, C. (2003) 'Conceptions of work and learning at work: impressions from older workers', *Studies in Continuing Education,* 25(1): 95-111.

PricewaterhouseCoopers (2005) *The market for qualifications in the UK. Final report to QCA, ACCAC, & CCEA:* London: QCA, ACCAC & CCEA.

Purcell, J., Kinnie, N. & Hutchinson, S. (2003) *Understanding the people and performance link: unlocking the black box,* London: CIPD.

QCA (2004) *A framework for achievement. Recognising qualifications and skills in the 21st century. Stakeholder consultation.* London: QCA.

QCA (2006) *Test and trial prospectus. Framework development,* London: QCA.

QCA (2006b) *The National Qualifications Framework. Helping learners make decisions,* London: QCA.

QCA (2008) *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework*, London: QCA.

QCA (2008b) *Guidelines for writing credit-based units of assessment for the Qualifications and Credit Framework,* London: QCA, version 3.

QCA (2010) *Report referencing the qualifications frameworks of the United Kingdom to the European Qualifications Framework,* London: QCA.[17]

Raffe, D., Gallacher, J. & Toman, N. (2007) ' The Scottish credit and qualifications framework', *European Journal of Vocational Training,* 42/43(3): 59-69.

Raggatt, P. & Williams, S. (1999) *Government, markets and vocational qualifications,* London: Falmer Press.

Ridoutt, L., Hummel, K., Dutneal, R. & Selby Smith, C. (2002) *Factors influencing the implementation of training and learning in the workplace,* Leabrook: NCVER.

Ridoutt, L., Hummel, K., Dutneal, R. & Selby Smith, C. (2005) *The place of recognised qualifications in the outcomes of training,* Adelaide: NCVER.

Roe, P., Wiseman, J. & Costello, M. (2006) 'Perceptions and use of 'NVQs: a survey of employers in England', *Department for Education and Skills Research Report no. 714,* Nottingham: DfES.

Rosenthal, P., Hill, S. & Peccei, R. (1997) 'Checking out service: evaluating excellence, HRM and TQM in retailing,' *Work, employment and society,* 11(3): 481-503.

Ryan, G.W. & Bernard, H.R. (2000) 'Data management and management methods', N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (eds.) *Handbook of qualitative research,* Newbury Park: Sage, *769-802.*

Stake, R.E. (2005) 'Qualitative case studies', N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (eds.) *The Sage handbook of qualitative research,* Thousand Oaks: Sage, 443-466.

[17] The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) operated in 2010 under the name of its non-regulatory function, the 'Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency' (QCDA). However, the legal entity remained QCA.

Schneider, B. & Bowen, D.E. (1993) 'The service organisation: human resource management is crucial', *Organisational Dynamics,* 21(4): 39-52.

Schutz, A. (1964) *Collected papers II,* The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, A. Brodersen (ed.).

Senker, P. (2002) 'Education and training for small and medium sized enterprises', in K. Evans, P. Hodkinson & L. Unwin (eds.) *Working to learn,* London: Kogan Page.

Senge, P. (1992) *The Fifth Discipline: the art and practice of the learning organization,* London: Century Business.

Shury, M., Winterbotham, Carter K. & Schäfer S. (2006) *National Employers Skill Survey 2005, Main report to the Learning and Skills Council,* Coventry: LSC.
Silverman, D. (1985) *Qualitative methodology and sociology: describing the social world,* Aldershot: Gower.

Sims, D. & Golden, S. (1998) *A study of employees' use of NVQs and SVQs across industrial sectors,* Research Report no. 1, Nottingham: DfEE.

Spence, M. (1973) 'Job market signalling', *Quarterly Journal of Economics,* 87: 355-374.

Spilsbury D. (2002) *Learning and training at work 2002,* Nottingham: DfES.

Smith, A. & Hayton, G. (1999) 'What drives enterprise training? Evidence from Australia', *International Journal of Human Resource Management,* 10(2): 251-272.

Smith, A., Oczkowski, E., Noble, C. & Macklin, R. (2002) *New management practices and enterprise training,* Leabrook: NCVER.

Steedman, H. & Wagner, K. (1989) 'Productivity, machinery and skills: clothing manufacture in Britain and Germany', *National Institute Economic Review,* May, 40-57.

Sung, J. and Ashton, D. (2005) *Achieving best practice in your business. High performance work practices: linking strategy and skills to performance outcomes*, London: Department for Trade and Industry, in association with CIPD.

Swailes, S. & Roodhouse, S. (2003) Structural barriers to the take-up of Higher Level NVQs, *The Journal of Vocational Education and Training,* 55, (1): 85–105.

Tamkin, P., Giles, L., Campbell, M & Hillage, J. (2004) 'Skills pay: the contribution of skills to business success', *Sector Skills Development Agency Research Report no. 5,* Wath-upon-Dearne: SSDA.

Taylor, P. & Bain, P. (1999) 'An 'assembly line in the head': work and employee relations in the call centre', *Industrial Relations Journal,* 30(2): 101-117.

Taylor, S. (1998) 'Emotional labour in the new workplace', in P. Thompson and C. Warhurst (eds.) *Workplaces of the Future,* London: Macmillan Press: 84-103.

Training Agency (1988) 'Development of assessable standards for national certification: developing standards by reference to functions', *Technical Advisory Group Guidance note 3,* Sheffield: Training Agency.

Turner, H.A. (1962) *Trade union growth, structure and policy, a comparative study of the cotton unions in England,* Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Unwin, L., Fuller, A., Turbin, J. & Young, M. (2004) 'What determines the impact of vocational qualifications? A literature review', *Department for Education and Skills Research Report no. 522,* Nottingham: DfES.

Unwin, L. (2004) 'Growing beans with Thoreau: rescuing skills and vocational education from the UK's deficit approach', in *Oxford Review of Education,* 30(1): 147–160.

Unwin, L., Fuller, A., Bishop, D., Felstead, A., Jewson, N. and Kakavelakis, K. (2008) 'Exploring the dangers and benefits of the UK's permissive competence-based approach: the use of vocational qualifications as learning artefacts and tools for measurement in the automotive sector', *Learning as Work Research Paper, no. 15,* London: Institute of Education, University of London.

Wilson, R.A. & Hogarth, T. (2003) *Tackling the Low Skills Equilibrium: a review of issues and some new evidence*, London: DTI.

Wolf, A. (1995) *Competence Based Assessment*, Buckingham: Open University Press.

Wolf, A. (2002) *Does Education Matter? Myths about education and economic growth*, London: Penguin Books.

Wolf, A. (2011) *Review of vocational education – The Wolf Report,* Runcorn: Department for Education

Young, M. (2002) 'Contrasting approaches to the role of qualifications in the promotion of lifelong learning', in K. Evans, P. Hodkinson & L. Unwin (eds.) *Working to learn,* London: Kogan Page.

Young, M. (2005) *National qualifications frameworks: their feasibility and effective implementation in developing countries.* Geneva: International Labour Office, Skills working paper, 22.

Definitions

As discussed earlier, terms 'qualifications' and 'skill' are often used as if they were synonymous (Keep 2009b). The thesis tries to avoid this and discusses in section 7.3 the contested nature of 'skill'. The following explains usage of the terms 'skill', 'qualifications' and 'performance'.

Skill

The McMillan Dictionary states two definitions of 'skill' that the thesis has adopted. This first is a general, 'uncountable' definition for skill that is the 'ability to do something well, usually as a result of experience and training'; the second, 'countable' version relates to 'a particular ability that involves special training and experience' (McMillan 2011)[18].

Qualifications

Although the thesis focuses on the QCF, many themes discussed apply more generally to vocational qualifications. Thus reference to 'vocational qualifications' or 'qualifications' (used for brevity) refer to QCF qualifications, vocationally-related qualifications, NVQs, occupational qualifications and professional qualifications.

Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) qualifications are flexible unit-based qualifications that use standard qualification sizes (award, certificate and diploma) and recognise learner achievement through the award of credit. The framework was jointly developed and implemented by the qualifications regulators of England, Wales and Northern Ireland: Ofqual, DCELLS and CCEA.

[18] http://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/skill

National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) are 'made up of units taken from the National Occupational Standards (NOS), which defines the knowledge, understanding and skills required to perform a particular role. Assessment is work-based and is meant to measure 'competency' in a role.

Vocationally-related qualifications (VRQs) are work-related qualifications designed to 'provide learners with learners with the skills and knowledge needed to do a job' but unlike NVQs 'do not necessarily require a work placement and are not purely based on National Occupational Standards' (Ofqual 2010: 11).

Occupational qualifications develop to an industry standard, skills and capabilities for a particular occupation or job. They are based directly on NOS but are not NVQs.

Professional qualifications may or may not be recognised by the qualification regulators. They tend to be developed and awarded by professional bodies. Learners usually have to register as a member to study and gain entitlement to designatory letters and enhanced membership status on completion of different levels of qualifications.

Performance

There are various definitions of performance. Two in the McMillan Dictionary refer to the countable or uncountable 'standard to which someone does something such as a job' and 'the process of doing a job or action'[19]. The online Business Dictionary defines performance more specifically as 'The accomplishment of a given task measured against preset known standards of accuracy, completeness, cost, and speed'[20]. This relates more closely to the NVQ approach to performance.

However this thesis is more interested in the use of qualifications as a 'catalyst' for performance and therefore definitions associated with performance management are

[19] http://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/performance

[20] http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/performance.html

more applicable. For example 'Performance management is the process of creating a work environment or setting in which people are enabled to perform to the best of their abilities.'[21] Thus this understanding of performance is related to concepts of operational excellence and high performance working (Sung and Ashton 2005).

Definitions for more specific QCF qualification terminology can be found online or in the *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework (2008)*.

[21] Susan M Heathfield (2011) 'Performance Management', About.com Guide. http://humanresources.about.com/od/glossaryp/g/perform_mgmt.htm, 2.5.11.

APPENDIX B

TABLE 14

Summary of data collection methods

Research question	Data sources & methods	Justification	Practicalities and ethical issues
ENGAGEMENT Does the introduction of the QCF influence an organisation's support for qualifications? What factors influence decision-making?	**Records search** No of ICM registrations and unit entries from September 2008 – December 2010.	Registrations and entries will demonstrate: • level of engagement during the period. • extent the employers beliefs are translated into action and level of control over individual agency.	Access should be negotiated to ICM Target database. Confidentiality issues – data should not be related to a specific person. Company names should not be revealed.
	Credit manager/training manager: **structured interview survey**. Possibly: offered more widely depending on feedback from participants.	Structured interview surveys from managers who are responsible for training will capture interest in the QCF and the value placed on qualifications in a way which will facilitate comparison. Further distribution to explore additional lines of enquiry.	Contact required with credit manager/ training managers at telecoms companies and their participation negotiated. Informed consent required. Permission to distribute survey more widely required. Records kept confidential: password protected in accordance with data protection, freedom of information and privacy legislation. Share findings with participants to check interpretation.
	Credit manager/training manager: **Semi-structured interview.**	Semi-structured interviews will enable further exploration analysis of initial responses.	

QUALIFICATION DESIGN How do organisations design QCF qualifications and assessment to achieve business objectives? What factors influence the design process?	**Records analysis** Records of choice of units, assessment and links to training September 2008 – December 2010.	Action will reveal value placed in QCF concept and different organisational approach.	Permission required from participant and ICM CEO to incorporate information.
	Credit manager/training manager: **structured interview survey** regarding support for features in QCF qualifications.	Structured interview survey collects opinions about value of specific features of QCF qualifications to aid comparison between participants and track changes views. Interviews clarify responses.	Findings shared to check that participants are happy with the level of anonymity.
Performance To what extent do employers link qualifications with skills and performance? How do employers measure performance gains? To what extent and in what ways do organisations integrate QCF qualifications with high performance working practices?	Credit manager/training manager: **structured interview survey** regarding: • Human resource practices • Key performance indicators • Assessment of the impact of qualifications.	Structured interview survey collects organisational details to establish business strategy and establish human resource practices. Credit manager/ training managers are close to the operation and are more likely to be able to judge the impact of qualifications.	Potential problems in accessing financial information due to commercial sensitivity. Structured survey questions are less sensitive. Interview checks basis for responses.
	Possibly supply participants with names of those who have studied to enable them to verify changes in performance level.	Activity would help participants verify their response.	Time consuming. Some participants may not have easy access to the information if they manage the training operation remotely.
	Credit manager/training manager: **Semi-structured interview**.		

APPENDIX C

Confidentiality agreement and research consent

Research into the link between employee development and performance

1. I am willing to complete surveys and interviews for this research.

2. I understand that no-one will have access to my responses beyond the researcher, her ICM administrator, her doctorate supervisors at the University of Leicester and two examiners.

3. I understand that responses will be confidential. The researcher will code data to protect its identity and password protect information to store it securely. Also the researcher will summarise data and exclude company and people names, job titles and other means of individual identification from any feedback and reports.

4. I understand that the researcher will share results and analysis with me before publication to give me the opportunity to provide further insights and check wording and conclusions. In this way, I will be able to check that the outcomes of research are correct, do not conflict with the reputation and commercial interests of my company, or infringe my data protection rights or those of my employees. Also I agree to limit access to draft reports until all parties have agreed a final version.

5. I understand that I will be offered a copy of my responses and provided with the opportunity to take out or amend any part of it that I do not wish to be reported in the findings.

6. I understand that taking part in the research is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time.

7. I understand that the data from this research will be used for:
   i) Researcher's doctorate thesis - Doctorate in Social Science (work, employment and learning) with Leicester University.
   ii) Academic research papers and presentations.
   iii) Summary report summary report for circulation to participants and other interested parties.

Name of respondent _____

Signature of respondent _____

Date _____

Name of researcher Debbie Tuckwood BA(Hons) PGCE FCIA FIfL

ICM Head of Education

University of Leicester doctoral student

Signature of researcher

_____

TABLE 15

Operations managers' view of impact of qualifications [22]

Operations managers	**Company A** October 2010								**Company B** Sept/Oct 2010			**Comp C** April 2010
	1	2 [1]	3	4	5	6	7	Ave	1	2	Ave	1 [1]
New knowledge and skills which they have used to enhance their work performance	5	N/R	4	4	4	5	3	4.2	2	4	3.0	3.0
Improved understanding of the general environment in which they work	4	N/R	4	5	4	4	4	4.2	5	3	4.0	4.0
Improved ability to communicate in the business environment	4	N/R	4	3	4	4	3	3.7	4	3	3.5	3.0
Increased confidence	4	N/R	5	4	4	4	4	4.2	2	3	2.5	4.0
Increased motivation towards work	5	N/R	5	4	3	4	4	4.2	1	3	2.0	4.0
Raised interest in gaining further qualifications	4	N/R	4	4	3	3	3	3.5	1	3	2.0	2.0
Higher status at work	4	N/R	3	4	3	4	3	3.5	1	3	2.0	1.5
Better chance of promotion	4	N/R	3	4	4	3	3	3.5	2	3	2.5	3.0
Increased likelihood of a pay increase	4	N/R	3	3	4	3	3	3.3	1	4	2.5	0

[1] Team not yet studied for any qualifications

[22] Q14. As a result of studying towards qualifications during the period to what extent do you believe that your credit teams have gained the following? Score 1 – 5 (Score 1 for 'little importance' to 5 for 'a great extent'). Values represent average scores collected December 2009 – October 2010 and on the final occasion for training managers (August – October 2010).