

Review of the National Award for Special Educational Needs Coordination Provider Group quality assurance processes

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Jan Georgeson
Rowena Passy

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1. Background

The context for the National Award for Special Educational Needs Coordination ('the National Award') quality assurance (QA) process relates to the introduction of the Award as a mandatory qualification for special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs). Following legislation in 2008⁽¹⁾ that required all SENCOs to be qualified teachers, in 2009 it became law that all new SENCOs should gain the National Award within three years of taking up the post unless they had at least twelve months' experience in the role before 2009. The Award is linked to further statutory requirements and the 2015 *Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice*^(2, 3). These outline the responsibilities of SENCOs working in schools, and place a stronger emphasis on the ideas (introduced in the 2001 Code of Practice) that the SENCO should be a strategic leader for SEN and that SENCOs are most effective when part of the school leadership team. The National Award training is designed to address these enhanced strategic and leadership aspects of the role, together with the everyday aspects in respect of coordination and delivery of SEND provision. It is a 60-credit qualification, undertaken at Master's level.

Initially the National Award was funded by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (now the Department for Education) and overseen by the Teaching Development Agency (TDA). Following a rigorous application process undertaken by higher education institutions (HEIs) and private providers who were experienced in education for children with special educational needs, the TDA accredited twenty-five providers, all of whom were expected to work in partnership with local stakeholders such as local authorities and schools. Private providers were and are obliged to be linked to an HEI for the National Award training for validation of this Master's level qualification. Accredited providers were listed on the Department for Education's (DfE) website.

These twenty-five accredited providers offered training for the National Award between 2009 – 2014 under the terms of a government contract. During this time QA processes were undertaken by the TDA, who undertook a number of two-day pilot inspections and by the DfE, to whom providers reported on a regular basis, and who carried out financial audits in a number of institutions. The TDA developed 'good practice' case studies as a follow up from their inspection visits. It is estimated that over 10,000 SENCOs attended National Award training between 2009 – 2013⁽⁴⁾, and the Provider Group estimated that around 5,000 have attended training post-2014.

¹ Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) (2008) *SENCO Regulations – Explanatory Memorandum*. London: DCSF.

² Department for Education / Department of Health (2015) *Special educational needs and disability code of practice: 0 to 25 years: Statutory guidance for organisations which work with and support children and young people who have special educational needs or disabilities*, p.108, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/398815/SEND_Code_of_Practice_January_2015.pdf.

³ Special Educational Needs and Disability Regulations 2014. No 1530 http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2014/1530/pdfs/ukxi_20141530_en.pdf.

⁴ Editorial (2013) Long-term future for SENCO training: schools to meet costs, *SENCO Update*, Issue 147, July/August.

In September 2014 there were two developments that changed these arrangements. The first was for the DfE to cease funding for the National Award, resulting in schools and individuals being responsible for funding their own training. The Code of Practice states that schools 'should satisfy themselves that the chosen course will meet the learning outcomes for the National Award and equip the SENCO to fulfil the duties outlined in this Code'⁽⁵⁾. The SEND Regulations⁽⁶⁾ state that the 'appropriate authority' (generally the Board of Governors) in schools must ensure that National Award is 'awarded by a recognised body ... under the Education Reform Act 1988'.

The second development was to end the system of national provider accreditation, thereby opening up the National Award training to the market and allowing new providers to offer training without the formal recognition previously granted by the government and its agencies. Aligning the National Award with the 2014 Learning Outcomes framework⁽⁷⁾ continues to be a requirement of all courses bearing the National Award name. It is important to note that the National Award remains a mandatory requirement for all new SENCOs in maintained mainstream nurseries and schools, and the Award training has been met with broad support from school staff. Our National Award evaluation report demonstrates the overall effectiveness of the training in increasing the confidence of National Award holders and trainees in many aspects of the SENCO role.

In response to these developments the Provider Group, supported by the National Association for Special Educational Needs (nasen), formed a voluntary collaborative network through which they aim to maintain the integrity and improve the quality of the National Award training. As part of this, they maintain the Register of Quality Providers, which is currently hosted by nasen <http://www.nasen.org.uk/about/partnerships/>. At the time of writing, there are 29 providers listed on this Register. Other providers offer the National Award. It is not a mandatory requirement for providers to be registered, as the register is voluntary.

The Provider Group consists of representatives of organisations which offer the National Award and which have opted to join the Provider Group and take part in the regular meetings. The Working Group, which has approximately ten volunteer members, represents the wider Provider Group and meets more frequently.

This report, commissioned by the DfE, examines and reports on the QA processes set up by the Provider Group to achieve this aim. We recognise that the Provider Group refer to the operation of their 'Quality Standards Framework' so that their processes are not confused with QA within HEIs, but we call them 'QA processes' in this document, as the Quality Standards Framework is only one aspect of the Provider Group's ongoing work in upholding and improving the quality of the courses they offer.

⁵ Department for Education / Department of Health (2015), p.108.

⁶ Special Educational Needs and Disability Regulations 2014. No 1530, http://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2014/1530/pdfs/uksi_20141530_en.pdf, p.23.

⁷ National College for Teaching and Leadership (2014) National Award for SEN Coordination Learning Outcomes, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-award-for-sen-co-ordination-learning-outcomes>.

2. Research design

The relatively small number of people involved with the QA process meant that qualitative methods were appropriate for this research, in the form of face-to-face focus group and individual telephone interviews. The research was conducted in the spirit of an appreciative enquiry, which seeks to engage stakeholders who are open to the possibility of self-determined change. It draws on Developmental Work Research, which is based on the contributions and insights of those involved in the work and is an established methodology for investigating processes in changing, complex environments. Activity theory provided the framework for the interview schedules and was used to structure this report (Engeström, 1999⁽⁸⁾; 1987⁽⁹⁾).

Data collection activities consisted of:

1. Two focus group interviews with members of the Working Group. In the first we asked the five participants to describe the QA process in detail, using the following prompts:
 - the purpose and intended outcome of the work
 - who is involved and what they use to carry out the work
 - what supports/limits the work and how tasks are shared
 - who else is involved beyond those who do the work.

We then analysed the data and returned for a second focus group interview with members of the Working Group. This had six participants, two of whom had participated in the first meeting. During this interview we:

- clarified issues raised within the data
 - discussed ways in which the process might operate in the future.
2. One focus group interview with five participants from the wider Provider Group, using the prompts listed above. This was informed by the data collected from the first focus group with members of the Working Group.
 3. Telephone interviews with a further ten members of the Provider Group (two of whom were members of the Working Group), again using the same interview schedule and informed by the first focus group interview with Working Group members.

All participants were asked for their permission to record their interview or interviews, and each received a transcript for verification and comment. In total, 24 members of the Provider Group were interviewed from 22 organisations. This met the DfE requirements to interview approximately 80 per cent of providers, and to capture views from those new to providing NASENCO training as well as those from long-term providers.

⁸ Engeström Y. (1999) Innovative learning in work teams: analysing cycles of knowledge creation in practice. In Y. Engeström R. Miettinen, & R.-L. Punamaki (Eds.), *Perspectives on activity theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁹ Engeström, Y. (1987) *Learning by expanding: An activity theoretical approach to developmental research*. Helsinki: Orienta-Konsultit Oy.

Data were analysed using the activity theory framework of the interview schedule. Below we draw on that analysis to report on interviewed providers' views on key aspects of the QA process that they initiated. All quotations are unattributed in order to preserve research participants' anonymity, and are presented *'in italics'*.

3. Setting up the quality assurance processes

At the time of the first focus group interview (December 2016), two years had elapsed from the opening of the National Award to the market. Interviewees reported that they had been concerned that this process might lead to a dilution of the quality of the Award:

'There was an anxiety amongst ourselves, I think, that if you just switched to an open market, some quality control might disappear'.

This led to a concern over who would take responsibility for maintaining the quality of the National Award:

'I think there was a great pride amongst the providers about what had been set up ... I think providers did feel the work they were doing had impact, and that work was valuable and useful. They were proud of that and wanted to be as innovative as possible in creating a way to sustain that. And when the DfE stepped away, there was a void that needed to be filled in terms of the leadership, and moving the group forward. And the Group stepped in to that void'.

From this starting point, and with nasen's support, the Provider Group agreed to meet regularly (they had only met *'once or twice'* as a national group before this time) and to form a smaller Working Group that would take responsibility for developing the Quality Standards Framework and its associated processes. At the same time, providers agreed that they wanted to create *'an open club'*:

'There's a real wishing, though, not to be an elite club, but to be an open club. It's important there was a club. But we wanted to be open to people who wished to join the club with the rules that [with our experience] we felt were the [important] ones'.

The Provider Group then embarked on a number of tasks:

- creating the *National Award for Special Educational Needs Coordination Quality Standards Application Core Principles, Quality Standards and Evidence* template, (known as the Quality Standards Framework), that is used for potential providers' application to become a registered provider. It was decided that all providers would have to re-register every three years to ensure a continuous process of QA. The process for registration was described as a *'supportive peer review'*. The Quality

Standards Framework is subject to review and improvement, drawing on the experience of Provider Group members.

- deciding on a structure that could ensure the National Award was ‘sector-led’, that provider diversity was valued but that all provision was referenced to relevant higher education accreditation requirements (i.e. at Master’s level). Three groups were formed; the Provider Group that is open to all, and the Working Group and the Quality Standards Group that are formed from Provider Group volunteers. The Quality Standards Group, which has a rotating membership, focuses on reviewing applications from organisations that wish to become or re-apply as registered providers. The Provider Group discussed forming an external Framework Advisory Group, with the idea of including representatives from the Provider Group, nasen, DfE, school leaders, members of the voluntary sector, parents and guardians, and children and young people, but this group has not yet been formed.
- drawing up terms of reference for each of their groups. These were sent to nasen and the DfE for information.
- as nasen’s financial support comes to an end, providers have been planning the future of the Group and developing a subscription system, whereby all providers who wish to be part of the Group in future will be required to contribute £600 per annum. This will be used to cover administrative costs.

Providers believe that they have developed an innovative and creative working environment in which they, as competitors, are collaborating, sharing knowledge and learning not only from each other but also from external experts. Provider meetings are not only used to share ongoing developmental work, but also to discuss issues that have arisen in the course of their National Award work, to challenge each others’ practice, to think about future directions that the group should be taking and to engage in professional development as part of a continuous QA process:

‘One of the ... features of the work of the Provider Group and the Working Group is not just to do with trying to enhance the quality of new and current programmes in relation to the Learning Outcomes⁽¹⁰⁾, but I think ... to do with collaboration and cooperation between providers, notwithstanding an inevitable competitive edge, around how we can learn from each other. And so the model of activity ... features professional development activities’.

¹⁰ National College for Teaching and Leadership (2014) National Award for SEN Coordination Learning Outcomes, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-award-for-sen-co-ordination-learning-outcomes>.

4. Who is involved?

The people who are directly involved in the processes for quality assurance of courses leading to the National Award are all drawn from the Provider Group. Nearly all representatives who attend the Provider Group meetings currently have responsibility for leading the course within their own organisations, and many also teach on the course. Others have led the Award in the past, or have oversight of the Award programme. The Group includes the original providers whose courses were accredited by the TDA between 2009 – 2014, and four new providers who have joined since 2014. Potential National Award providers who are interested in registration are also able to join as associates while they are going through the process of validation. The Group is therefore a mixture of people who have a depth of experience with the National Award, including individuals who ran courses for SENCOs which pre-date the Award; people who are new to the Award but who work in organisations with a history of delivering it; and people who are new to the Award and whose organisation has recently started to offer the National Award.

Membership of the Group entails ‘commitment to participation in an ongoing process of peer review and engagement with quality enhancement’⁽¹¹⁾. The Group operates as a community of practice⁽¹²⁾; new members might start on the periphery as they learn about the work of the Group, but are encouraged to move towards the centre, sharing their views and experiences as they become more involved in the ongoing work. They are also encouraged to take on new responsibilities by joining the Working or Quality Standards Groups, thereby maintaining the dynamism of both smaller groups.

All members of the Provider Group are volunteers and none are paid for meeting attendance or for any work arising from their membership. Some, but not all, can claim travel expenses from their employment organisations.

5. What are the intended outcomes and purposes of the quality assurance processes?

Outcomes

Members of the Provider Group reported that they viewed their membership as beneficial in two particular ways; not only does it offer valuable support and development for their role as providers of courses leading to the National Award, but also offers opportunities to contribute to maintaining the integrity and improving the quality of the Award. The main object of the group’s activity during its first year of existence was the development of the registration application template (the Quality Standards Framework) as a self-evaluation document that gives clear specifications on how to provide evidence of the quality of a particular programme supporting the National Award.

¹¹ National Award for Special Educational Needs Coordination Quality Standards Application Core Principles, Quality Standards and Evidence template, p.1.

¹² Lave, J. & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Membership of the group is therefore motivated by concerns about National Award quality assurance, by a belief in the importance of working together in a spirit of collegiality to address these concerns, and by a desire to ensure the National Award's long-term fitness for purpose and sustainability. More specifically, the outcome which the Provider Group seeks to achieve through its activities is to ensure, for each provider, scrutiny of materials pertaining to the management and delivery of the National Award by members of the Quality Standards Group who understand the distinctiveness of the Award and are committed to ensuring its quality. This is so that potential National Award applicants can be confident that each National Award course listed on the Register of Quality Providers is likely to support students in passing the Master's element of the course and meeting the learning objectives as specified in the NCTL Learning Outcomes⁽¹³⁾.

The two elements of the qualification – what was described to us as the '*Masterliness*' (or Master's element) of the National Award, and the professional element of meeting the Learning Outcomes – are what makes this Award distinctive. In contrast to most Master's qualifications, the National Award requires liaison between course leaders and schools to ensure that the trainees have access to the resources and support they need to complete the qualification: '*working with the school is really, really important*'. The second distinctive aspect relates to the Learning Outcomes that are linked to the SENCOs' work in school:

'We look for institutional change. We look for that structural shift, from the person, the SENCO having the vision, to then making it happen in their institution ... We want to see them as leaders. So we expect that, I think, in a quite different way [to most Master's qualifications]. And the assessments are geared towards that.'

Purposes

Provider Group members' reasons for working on this outcome can be summarised as seeking '*to protect and preserve the integrity of a Master's level award*' that '*defines the role of SENCO*' and produces the best possible SENCOs who are able to take on the enhanced leadership roles expected of them through the 2014 Code of Practice. One interviewee summed up the general feeling when commenting that the aim was:

'to ensure the quality of my programme and the quality of the SENCOs, their knowledge, getting them to be the best that they can be.'

Interviewees were nonetheless in agreement that the ultimate purpose behind all their endeavours was to promote the best possible outcomes for children and young people, summarised below:

¹³ National College for Teaching and Leadership (2014) *National Award for SEN Coordination Learning Outcomes*, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-award-for-sen-co-ordination-learning-outcomes>.

'To ensure that the young people on the end of it, in other words the students in schools, have the best possible chance to thrive in school, to learn, make progress and enhance their future life chances ... If you are going to have a course in the special needs area it has to be as high quality as it possibly can be in order to give those young children and students the best possible chance in future life'.

This is not, however, a static definition because the group also intends that the National Award, and the processes for assuring the quality of the Award, will contribute to improving SENCO practice by making sure that courses are up-to-date so that both providers and the SENCOs they teach can adapt to the changing educational landscape. This is both generally:

'We need to adapt and ensure our SENCOs are fit for purpose in this context as it [the educational landscape] moves and shifts and changes'.

And specifically:

'All of us providers ... working with those Learning Outcomes can see that one or two of them need to be changed amended, added to, whatever, because time has gone by [since their publication]'.

Interviewees expressed confidence in the ability of the Provider Group to oversee the development and QA processes for the National Award, agreeing that it was of critical importance to the quality of SENCO work, illustrated in the quotations below:

'Actually having a programme that has a dedicated and committed training Provider Group who do regularly meet and do confront the issues and do look at ways forward is the only way to manage this. It is a big strength'.

'It's very important that those seeking to become the coordinator of special needs within their school have specific training ... I think it's very important that we have quality assurance for the courses that are being undertaken by our future SENCOs'.

Providers also offered a number of other purposes behind the QA process. These included:

- Ensuring **schools were able to make a wise choice of provider**, guided by the list of recognised providers that is currently hosted on the nasen website:

'The principle was always that we wanted to ensure that schools were spending their money wisely [and] SENCOs were getting good quality, high quality, appropriate qualifications ... It's very much about, if you want the best impact, there's a selection of providers here who, it is

reckoned, are quality providers. And this is the structure which that's judged against'.

- In an environment of open competition, registration on the nasen website was linked to **marketing individual institutions' courses**; registered providers are permitted to use the given logo on their publicity materials:

'When we're marketing the course, I think it's a draw to our student population because they can see that we're registered. I think it gives us greater significance in the market because there are obviously lots of providers out there ... that registered label, if you like, I think that adds an extra dimension ... it's something else for us to shout about'.

- Maintaining an **open channel of communication between National Award providers and the DfE**. This relates to the legal responsibilities for the National Award (of legislation, regulation and the Code of Practice) that sit with the DfE as well as with schools, governors and National Award providers. The mutual benefits of liaising formally and on a regular basis would be that the DfE would learn of any issues of concern relating to the National Award, enabling them to contribute to possible solutions; the Provider Group would learn of the latest developments in SEND which, in turn, would enable them to respond quickly.

6. What is involved in the quality assurance process?

The quality assurance process consists first, in completing the application template. This was created with reference to current legislation, mandatory regulations and information requirements, government advice⁽¹⁴⁾, and the NCTL Learning Outcomes. It requires applicants to provide evidence of their knowledge of and processes for:

- programme entry requirements
- programme delivery
- collection, processing and application of data
- programme validation, and teaching and assessment.

This process draws on much of the QA processes within HEIs, but has extra elements that relate to the distinctive aspects of the National Award that involve schools, often local authorities, and possibly other stakeholders such as consultants and/or steering group members.

The evidence documents that are submitted with the template, either for a first or re-application, can include:

¹⁴ Department for Education (2016) *Special educational needs and disability: managing the September 2014 changes to the system. Advice for local authorities and their partners*, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/567622/Special_educational_need_s_and_disability_managing_the_September_2014_changes_to_the_system.pdf.

- tutor CVs
- module handbook
- organisational data protection policy
- HEI course audit information, such as an annual monitoring report, minutes of an Examination Board meeting, external examiner's report
- HEI Master's committee minutes
- minutes of meetings with local authority stakeholders
- assignment examples
- student feedback
- feedback from headteachers
- letters of agreement to support the student from his or her headteacher
- publicity materials.

These, together with the application, are examined by the Quality Standards Group and are judged whether or not to be of an acceptable standard. Those whose applications have not reached the required standard are encouraged to re-apply, and are supported in revising their application; as part of the Provider Group's inclusive ethos, members welcome new entrants:

'Because of the nature of the work of the group, we've tried not to see it [the application process] as a kind of, you know, here's the threshold, you're in or you're out ... [We ask] what can we do to support you?'

This inclusive approach was confirmed by one interviewee, who valued:

'being able to have a line in ... to [name] ... answering any questions that I had about the course. Just because I was new to it, I would ask her the question and she would very easily just give me a very clear answer which would help me understand what to do next'.

Once an application has been accepted, the organisation is listed on the Register of Quality Providers that is currently hosted on the nasen website and will remain on the list for three years. A few interviewees commented that, once accepted, there was no mechanism for monitoring the quality of National Award delivery: *'There is no proper process for withdrawing accreditation'*. However the process of accreditation was seen as constituting a *'peer promise that you're meeting those standards'*.

The second part of the quality assurance process relates to discussions about the National Award during Provider Group meetings. The following comment summarises interviewees' views on the importance of these discussions:

'I just think it's important that the Provider Group meet on a regular basis; that there's a network, not just in terms of the provision that's

made but there's also a kind of professional network there for any queries you might have, [so] you're not working in isolation'.

Discussions are wide-ranging:

'We talk about peer reviewing of each other's practice and delivering of the course ... The process of providing information for peers in the group to review enables other providers to learn, to challenge practice'.

Discussing and challenging practice means that the Group develops a greater consistency between members' offer of National Award training:

'By working together we are in fact impacting on each other, and by that very nature, giving more of a consistency to the course by our shared use of perspectives'.

7. Who else is interested in the Provider Group work?

Interviewees reported that **nasen** has been highly supportive of the development of the Provider Group QA processes, and has contributed in a number of practical ways since 2014; the organisation has provided administrative services, provided funding for initial Provider Group meetings, dedicated a page of their website to the National Award, hosted the list of registered providers on their website and enabled continued links with the DfE. The conclusion of the period of financial support from nasen has prompted the Provider Group to explore a subscription-based membership system, in which recognised Providers will contribute £600 per year to continue their association with the Provider Group.

The **Department for Education** have a standing invitation for a named point of contact in the DfE's SEND Unit to attend key meetings and have attended a number of Provider Group meetings. The DfE have offered the Group meeting accommodation in London should it be needed.

The Provider Group QA processes also include members of the **local education community**. Local Authority personnel, professionals from different agencies (e.g. educational psychologists and legal experts), staff from schools and/or teaching school alliances, and headteachers are sometimes directly involved in teaching or mentoring on the National Award and can therefore become involved in university QA processes. Students are regularly involved through course evaluations. Some providers also set up regular meetings to keep abreast of local sector requirements:

'We engage with students all the time as part of QA, but also we have steering groups. And this is another thing that makes it different, I suppose, from other postgraduate courses we run. We have regular steering group meetings with the local authority, or teaching school

alliances, or heads. You know, or ex-SENCOs, or current SENCOs, that we can then keep everything sort of dynamic in terms of the content and make sure we're addressing not only the national issues, but the local issues on the ground'.

'We've started having termly – I'll say bi-annually rather than termly – breakfast meetings where we actually bring everybody ... together, and we start off with a big group meeting, and kind of find out what's bothering everybody, you know, what are the issues, what's going on ... Everything from private voluntary sector and nurseries right through to schools to secondary, local authorities, other consultants or advisers from networks, steering group members, you know. We just kind of get together who we can, and just kind of have a big conversation'.

8. What values support the work?

There is a strong message from members of the Provider Group that a spirit of collegiality and shared core beliefs were important in making the QA processes between competitors a success.

'There are differences as providers; our courses are different, our setups are different, our numbers are different, from some working with local authorities and some having huge groups, and some having very small groups. And they are all very, very different, but we have a very common core and belief system'.

'We started off as competitors, we are competitors and now there is no competition between us; it's a totally and utterly supportive group ... Every provider helps each other and that's been very noticeable over the years from September 2014, when in the beginning there was a little bit of kind of caginess with some people, and that has completely disappeared now'.

The values that were mentioned in interviews and focus groups fall into two categories; qualities that support working together and qualities that were valued about the National Award itself.

Values underpinning the Provider Group work

Several respondents referred to the Provider Group as highly unusual in terms of the levels of commitment shown by its members:

'I've worked on loads of things in education over the years and it seems that they've had money thrown at them and lots of things, and I have never, ever been on a group like this Provider Group, and everybody

says the same thing. They don't normally last this long, [I've] never seen such commitment from every person on it and people working to the greater good of the Award and SEN in schools. I think it is incredibly unusual and we are very, very keen to continue it'.

Comments on aspects of collegiality as a motivating factor for Group membership featured in each focus group and were echoed by interviewees. The following quotations have been chosen to capture the qualities of this distinctive way of working, which need to be endorsed by all Group members if the QA processes are to be successful.

- **Consensus / working together**

[When] I went to my first provider meeting, I think what it gave me was a sense of [being] very collegiate'.

'I think that the strength of the national Provider Group is that we are together and we are united'.

- **Learning together / professional engagement**

'Education is a sort of collaborative process. We're not experts on our own. We stand on the shoulders of giants. So we need to support – 'I learn from others'. So it's collaboration and education and learning together, isn't it?'

'I think there's a group sense of ... professional engagement among the cohort of people that are there'.

- **Collective voice**

'It's that ... collective voice of the importance of putting children with special educational needs at the heart of our education system, not at the side. There's the value of strength in numbers. Sort of protecting and supporting the National Award by coming together and having a stronger voice as a group'.

- **Democracy / openness / transparency**

' [The development of the Quality Standards Framework] as a piece of project work, it was consultative, and it was very democratic, to the extent that we didn't really have a Chair. We had agreed agendas, and with the core aim of assuring quality provision'.

'The Working Group would do some detailed work, and then at a bigger meeting which happened every sort of six months, we would then say, 'This is what we've done', and here's the paperwork that would be distributed beforehand. And the question would be asked, 'Is that okay?''

- **Dedication / goodwill**
[There is] a very strong level of professional collegiality and goodwill - that's really the bottom line. And a real dedication to ensuring that the quality provision is maintained'.
- **Dynamism**
'It's just a good working group, you know. It's people who are really productive ... it's a dynamic group of people. An action-oriented group of people who want to make a positive difference'.
- **Commitment to professional development**
'The provider meetings often invite particular speakers who will present a paper or present a particular position which we then reflect upon professionally. That's another important aspect of the Provider Group. In terms of your own professional development, I've found it very helpful'.
- **Challenge**
'[We] challenge, and make something [the Award] that we clearly feel is very important, even better'.

Values in relation to the National Award

The final quotation from the previous section introduces the values either held or desired about the National Award itself, and how these values engendered a sense of responsibility to take a lead in preserving its special qualities.

- **Pride / responsibility**
'It is back to how proud are we of this qualification. I think it's a great qualification'.

'There was a great nervousness that as we were going to be in an open market, that other providers could train SENCOs and give them the National Award and yet the training was never going to be monitored in any way by anybody. And it could be really not of a very good standard. So, in order to safeguard the Award, which we all feel had some great good, we wanted to have a quality standard and all the providers were very keen to do so'.
- **Rigour**
'I think [university QA processes] are a lot more rigorous than they ever were. There's a lot more bureaucracy, in a good way. It's a lot more rigorous'.

'[Endorsement by the Provider Group] means the rigour by which we are all scrutinised as providers ... also needs to be transparent and rigorous'.

- **Protection of quality / high standards**

'[We wanted to] ensure the high profile of this Award [and that] SENCOs were getting good quality, high quality, appropriate qualifications'.

- **Consistency**

'We are absolutely dedicated and committed to developing that professional role of the SENCO so that there is as much consistency as there can be in an inconsistent code of practice and inconsistent local authority interpretations, that there is much better consistency in terms of understanding expectations, the role of the SENCO, which will drive forward improvements and better outcomes for the children'.

- **Distinctiveness**

'I think it's distinctive ... And as we keep saying, the Learning Outcomes frame the programme, which is essential for knowing whether it's having impact on schools. ... So there has to be something that shows something that's happening in their school, their setting, college, that is not just showing what they're doing as a SENCO, but what impact and what changes are happening for pupils, for a group of pupils, for their school system, in relation to SEN and inclusive practice'.

9. What makes the work more difficult?

In this section we examine factors that hamper the work of the Provider Group on the QA process itself and highlight some tensions between the work and the wider context.

The major limitations concern **issues of capacity**; time and funding to carry out the various aspects of the work, given that the group operates on a volunteer basis. Some funded administrative support has been available, and members' own organisations might cover travel expenses, but attendance at group meetings and work on the Working Group and Quality Standards Group must be fitted in on top of existing work commitments.

'There are roles within the Provider Group, unpaid roles, and you've got to be careful about how much time you can give to maintaining that Provider Group when you've got other commitments'.

Payment of the **newly introduced subscription** and a **lack of understanding** about how the course works have created difficulties in some institutions:

'[My institution] value it as a course because it brings money, but they don't necessarily understand what the course is about ... We were recently asked to support this [Group] with some money, and you know, that was a hard conversation, in a number of arenas, to actually justify what this course is about and why involvement here was useful'.

Some members identified a **potential tension with external examining roles** outside the Provider Group:

'Personally, I'd feel uneasy about ... taking [issues with a provider's offer] back to the training Provider Group because I have a professional obligation in an external examiner role, which is different to being an inspector of the training Provider Group. So I think that there would be a conflict there in my roles'.

The need to ensure relevance to day-to-day practice and policy developments reinforced the importance of **some kind of external oversight of the QA process** by stakeholders from the classroom to the government. Financial uncertainty and changes in the education landscape could make planning and matching the course to schools' needs difficult, reinforcing the importance of maintaining good channels of communication with local stakeholders and with the DfE to limit the effects of uncertainty:

'We'd seen [the introduction of a steering group] as having a role in monitoring everything that happened within the group, so therefore, in our thinking a year or so ago, that could have involved a representative from the Department for Education, parent, young person, relevant members of the teaching profession... their view was to kind of just give us a steer overall on what we're doing, and add a transparency and a rigour to our activity'.

'There is no kind of institutional external review. If there was an external review of the provider group by a group of headteachers, I think that would be very healthy'.

The **reality of the financial pressures on schools** was also a source of concern. Hard-pressed headteachers, who must manage a budget while still complying with the need to fund the training of their SENCO to achieve the National Award, might be influenced to look for the cheapest possible option for that training. In the open market, providers operating outside the Provider Group QA processes could offer '*cheap and cheerful*' courses. The attractiveness of cheaper options in times of budget constraints could lead to inconsistency, or even a two-tier system, in the quality of training undertaken by SENCOs, which ultimately would influence provision for children and young people with SEN:

'I'm worried about the consistency. Let's say we have a provider not part of the rigorous quality assurance process of the Provider Group offering, to schools, an Award at 50 per cent of the price. Schools, as we all know, are under a lot of pressure. It's mandatory to have a SENCO and have a SENCO trained and if the price is half that of the Provider Group but you get the certificate, then there's a concern that there may be standards of quality which might be affected by delivering this course at half the cost, i.e. half the tutor time, half the resources, far less contact and advice, weaker tutors in terms of their experience and interest. That's my concern'.

The distinctive qualities of the course, which Provider Group members were clear that they wanted to preserve, are not easily captured by normal HEI QA processes. This distinctiveness is concerned with ensuring direct impact on practice guided by an enhanced, research-informed and enquiry-led approach to improving outcomes for children and young people. Experienced Provider Group members described how they had developed ways to evidence this across the forty-nine learning outcomes within their own courses, and reflected on their experience of other ways that had proved less successful. Provider Group members were confident that the members of the Quality Standards Group could spot potential difficulties in submissions and offer advice on how to address these difficulties:

'I have a lot of confidence in them as a group. They are very experienced people who are involved in that, so they do know what they are looking for, they are running it themselves and they know where things should look right and where they might not, and they will all have that experience to pick that up. And as a group; it is not just one person who would do it'.

However, the current rubric of the Quality Standards Framework itself does not provide a very clear steer on this distinctive quality. The relevant section of the Quality Standards Framework is Core Principle: Programme Validation Teaching and Assessment 3:

Teaching and assessment should: support and enhance the capacity of the SENCO and hence school setting to improve provision and outcomes for children and young people with SEND, focus on developing the leadership skills of the SENCO and support the development of the SENCO as a research informed practitioner⁽¹⁵⁾.

The phrase 'to improve provision and outcomes for children and young people with SEND' relates to strong messages from Provider Group members that the National Award should ensure that SENCOs should have an impact on practice. There is the possibility, however,

¹⁵ National Award for Special Educational Needs Coordination Quality Standards Application: Core Principles, Quality Standards & Evidence, p.6.

that the wording of the first line of this section - 'support and enhance the capacity' (our emphasis) of SENCOs to do this - leaves open the possibility that a course could work on SENCOs' potential without actually requiring (and assessing) that they set something in motion that makes a difference within their school.

This difficulty was highlighted by some interviewees, and represented a **potential weakness in the application document** on how aspects of practice are assessed:

'So in terms of those quality assurance mechanisms, I think that there are still some gaps and, linked to that how, as individual training providers, we are actually assuring ourselves that those SENCOs do meet all of those 49 Learning Outcomes'.

The gap referred to above also related to the question of whether aspiring SENCOs should be able to achieve the National Award, which seemed to be open to individual provider interpretation.

Finally, a recurrent theme during the interviews was the **absence of a national register of SENCOs who had completed the National Award**. This was contrasted to the maintenance of a list of teachers who have achieved the National Professional Qualifications for middle and senior leaders and headteachers. Anecdotal evidence suggests that there are schools in which there is no appropriately qualified SENCO, which could have an impact on the quality of education that pupils with SEND are receiving in those schools:

'Thousands of SENCOs will now have gone through this but, until we reach a point where ... somebody is actually checking up that schools have a qualified SENCO and there is a list of who is a qualified SENCO, then there are still a lot of schools and SENCOs getting away with not having the accreditation even now, seven or eight years on from the legislation'.

Anecdotal evidence also suggests an inconsistent approach from Ofsted in relation to checks during inspection to confirm whether a school's SENCO is appropriately trained or currently undertaking training.

10. Recommendations

The QA processes clearly work well, in that they provide the rigour and checks that the Provider Group were seeking. Members' commitment to and belief in the importance of the National Award have led to the generation of a collaborative approach between competitors, and this is proving to be innovative, dynamic and supportive. However, to ensure they can continue to maintain the integrity and improve the quality of the National Award, the QA processes would benefit from:

- Revisions to the language of the Quality Standards Framework to clarify how providers might evidence direct impact on practice, thereby capturing the distinctiveness of the National Award.
- Enacting the planned introduction of an external reference group of government and local authority representatives, other professionals, school leaders, students and pupils to ensure assessment of National Award is responsive to changing concerns in classrooms and the wider community.
- Involvement with external professional bodies such as the Chartered College of Teaching and the Teaching Schools Council to ensure a wide appreciation of the National Award's distinctive qualities and their implications for school improvement and teachers' practice.
- Continuing to publish a list of approved providers. The list currently appears on a dedicated page of the nasen website; however, it would be more appropriate for a relevant government agency to take on this function.
- Public endorsement from a recognised outside agency, such as the DfE, to overcome any external perceptions of partiality in the QA processes.

The above points would help to continue to inform schools' and other settings' choice of provider and ensure that this decision is guided by understanding of the ways in which the National Award can impact on SEND practice. The following recommendations relate to future Provider Group planning for the National Award. We suggest that the Provider Group:

- Continue to pursue avenues to secure sufficient funding to provide administrative support for the voluntary work of the Provider Group and planned external engagement.
- Consider collecting and collating data centrally about recruitment, attrition and completion, in discussion with DfE and other agencies supporting government in relation to teacher development, to help track the national picture of demand for the National Award and supply of accredited SENCOs.
- In particular, it would be beneficial to liaise with the DfE to explore ways of setting up a national register of teachers who hold the National Award. Data pertaining to recruitment, training, retention and impact would assist the government to meet its responsibility in relation to the enhanced SENCO role in national SEND policy by providing definitive information to inform discussions about the supply and demand for SENCOs, and by offering an authoritative point of reference, for example for SENCO appointment panels or for possible legal challenges to the quality of SEN provision in schools.
- Build on the collaborative ways of working which have succeeded in establishing a rigorous system of quality assurance in the absence of any other system. The particular circumstances in which National Award providers found themselves have led to the generation of an innovative and collaborative QA model which should be recognised and incorporated into any future system for quality assurance of this mandatory National Award.