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## Experiencing NVQs : a qualitative study of the experiences of secretarial/clerical staff at the Open University working on Customer Service NVQs

### Thesis

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**Experiencing NVQs: a qualitative study  
of the experiences of secretarial/clerical  
staff at the Open University working on  
Customer Service NVQs**

**Doctor of Education (EdD)**

**2005**

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**P2324833**

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## **CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION**

This thesis describes a study of the experiences of a sample of people who are either working towards or have completed National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) in Customer Service at levels 2 and 3 while working for the Open University. The research undertaken has an explicit focus on the experience of NVQ candidates<sup>1</sup> and the effect of undertaking the NVQ on their work and learning.

The introduction starts by identifying my interest in the topic and the original stimulation for my research. I then outline my research questions and examine how they express what I wanted to discover as a result of my study. I explain what I have identified about my research which I think will be relevant to other educational professionals. The final two sections of the introduction briefly introduce the reader to how I carried out my research and the structure of the report which follows.

### **MY INTEREST IN THIS TOPIC**

This section of the introduction explains why I was interested in researching people's experience of doing NVQs. My interest in this topic began when I was working as NVQ Manager at the Open University. In my daily contact with people working on NVQs I was surprised by the variety of reactions to the qualification which ranged from ridicule and dismissal as a qualification which no-one thought worth having, to the opinion that the NVQ was a qualification which provided an opportunity for those who had very few previous qualifications to succeed in gaining one associated with their work.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the thesis I have used the term 'candidate' to refer generally to those working on NVQs and 'participant' to those people working on NVQs who I interviewed as part of my study.

On searching for literature about NVQs I was also surprised by the contrasting views of NVQs that were expressed. The literature about the NVQ system seemed to fall into one of three distinct categories. First there was the literature generated by the government and associated departments and organisations such as the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) and the Confederation for British Industry (CBI). This set out the perceived need for the NVQ system and included positive rhetoric about the benefit for employers and the British economy. Next there was a large body of literature concerning the design and conceptualisation of NVQs. There was a small amount of this which was partly descriptive, explaining how the system worked, and also defending the conceptualisations on which the system was built. By far the greatest volume of literature in this category was critical, in some cases vehemently so, of the NVQ system. Most of this criticism related to the conceptualisation of competence which NVQs espoused. The third category was a very small but growing group of texts concerning the implementation of NVQs. These ranged across topics such as the take up of NVQs by employers to an examination of the practicalities and difficulties of implementation, with just a few which explored the experiences of those working on NVQs. The scarcity of literature concerning the experience of candidates working on NVQs was an additional stimulus to my undertaking this study.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

In this section I identify my research questions and explain how I think they will help me to find out what I want to know about people's experiences of doing NVQs. Below I identify the research questions and explain the background to each question in more detail including references to literature which influenced the framing of my questions.

**What factors influence participants' choice to do an NVQ in Customer Service at the Open University?**

This question was stimulated by the differing opinions about NVQs which had been expressed to me as part of my work as NVQ Manager. I wanted to find out whether people actively wanted to undertake NVQs even though they might have been aware of the criticisms of them. I also wanted to know about people's expectations of what working towards the qualification would entail.

**How has doing the NVQ in Customer Service affected participants' approach to, and understanding of their work for the Open University?**

People who had undertaken the NVQs had mentioned to me that it had improved their confidence in themselves. This had also been noted by their managers and assessors working with them. This question was designed to provide me with the opportunity to find out if doing the NVQ had affected their work in any other ways.

**To what extent has doing the NVQ affected participants beyond their immediate work for the Open University?**

I was interested in finding out more about this area as a result of comments candidates had made to me about an increase in their self-esteem as a result of doing the NVQ.

**How do participants view an NVQ in relation to employability and career development?**

Government literature from the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI 1995, 1998) and the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE 1998) stated that NVQs were developed as work-based qualifications with the aim of



providing the UK with a better-qualified workforce. This view was also expressed by Jessup (1991) who designed the NVQ system. I was interested to see whether participants thought that this was the case in their own experience.

**What perception do participants have of the Open University's motivation for supporting the NVQ programme?**

I included this question as I felt that there were particular issues to investigate surrounding the organisational support of a vocational qualification programme in a setting whose main business was the promotion of academic qualifications. Literature about the effect of organisational attitude to workplace learning (Candy and Matthews 1999, Beckett 2001, Cairns and Stephenson 2001) also stimulated my interest in this question.

As my research progressed I realised that the question 'How has doing the NVQ in Customer Service affected participants' approach to, and understanding of their work for the Open University?' drew out aspects of the way in which they were addressing learning. I thought this needed to be explored more explicitly and so added the research question;

**How do participants describe the learning experience of doing the NVQ?**

I noted in my early interviews that participants had some hesitation about describing learning associated with their work on NVQs. This question was constructed to emphasise the focus on how participants spoke about their learning experiences and the implications of this. Reference made by Beckett (2001) to the difficulty some learners found in talking about what they learned is also relevant to this question.

## **RELEVANCE OF THIS TOPIC TO THE READER AND FELLOW PROFESSIONALS IN EDUCATION**

In the following section I explain how I think the topic for my research might be relevant to other educational professionals. This relevance falls into three sections. Firstly I refer to possible changes in practice which might be stimulated by my findings. I then describe how I think the study might lead to a better understanding of candidates' experiences of working on NVQs and why this is important. I conclude by explaining how my research might add to the literature which investigates links between conceptualisation and implementation.

### **Changes in NVQ practice**

The first area of interest relates to the aim of the EdD to improve educational practice. Since the study relates closely to people's experiences of working on the NVQ, the findings suggest opportunities to improve experience by adapting the way in which the qualifications are implemented. This is a realistic proposition as decisions about implementation are mainly taken on a small scale. For example, where a finding has identified a positive outcome for participants in my study it might be possible for a colleague implementing a similar programme to try out this aspect of implementation. It is less likely that the findings of my study will affect the conceptualisation of NVQs or even the standards or performance criteria which are set nationally, however, the structure and standards of NVQs are regularly revised and the organisations carrying out revisions involve practitioners in the revision process. In this way the findings from my study might influence the design of Customer Service NVQs in future.

**A better understanding of the different experiences of candidates**

The findings of the study may provide a better understanding of why the experiences of candidates undertaking NVQs differ so much. Although the study only relates to a small sample of people in one organisation any insight into why people's experiences vary so widely might stimulate others to investigate this on a larger scale. This study might provide a clearer view of the areas of experience in which the difference is most marked and therefore provide focus for future study. This area of work is important as a wide discrepancy between reputation and experience can affect both people's opportunities to undertake a qualification which might prove beneficial for them and also affect external perception of a qualification which is important to those who hold it.

**Exploring links between conceptualisation and implementation**

This study aims to make links between the literature which evaluates the conceptualisation of the NVQ system and the experiences of people of the implementation of the qualification. There are a small number of other studies which do this (Hillier 1999, Grugulis 2000, Spielhofer 2002), and I hope that this study will be considered alongside these. Exploring these links is an important activity as changes in the way NVQs are implemented might enable some of the criticisms of the system to be addressed. The severity of criticism which the conceptualisation of the NVQ system received and also the relatively low take up by employers have had the potential to threaten the survival of the qualification. However NVQs have remained throughout differing governments for 16 years with no sign of an imminent replacement. Any examination of the system as it grows into maturity is important if it facilitates the improvement of the system for those who are working on qualifications.

## **AN INTRODUCTION TO THE WAY IN WHICH THE STUDY WAS CARRIED OUT**

This section provides a brief introduction to the way in which the research was carried out. It notes the attention paid to my own position as researcher and outlines the way in which data was gathered.

### **My position as researcher**

The study was carried out over a period of four years at the Open University starting in 2000. I worked at this organisation throughout the time of undertaking the research. When I started the research I was employed as NVQ Manager at the University and was closely involved with the NVQ programme. Approximately half way through my research I moved to work in the Centre for Widening Participation at the Open University which was unconnected with the NVQ programme. However throughout this time I was a member of the Open University NVQ Assessment Services Steering Group so I retained some involvement with the NVQ programme although not on a day-to-day level. My close relationship with the NVQ programme has influenced my research throughout and indeed was the initial stimulus for undertaking it. It would be impossible and probably undesirable to try to avoid this influence as it has affected both the process and the findings of what I have done. In the first instance my understanding of people's response to the NVQ system has led me to choose the particular questions I have decided to research. My relationship with people who I interviewed and their perception of both my position in the organisation and the purpose of my research has influenced the responses they made when I interviewed them. My understanding of responses in the light of my beliefs, values and attitudes about NVQs, and more widely about adult learning, have influenced the way in which I have presented findings and conclusions. However I do not think this has made the study less valuable. I have tried to take a reflexive approach throughout which considers

my influence on research processes and writing up my research. I have not claimed that this research is widely generalisable but rather that it offers a detailed insight into a restricted setting which provides the stimulus for further exploration of complex areas.

### **The design of the research**

The research described in the report that follows is a qualitative study. Over a period of approximately two and a half years I undertook 25 semi-structured interviews with secretarial/clerical staff who were working at the Open University and who had also either completed or were working towards NVQs. The semi-structured interviews were carried out at their workplaces and the participants included staff from the Open University regional offices as well as the central campus. I recorded and transcribed data from the interviews and coded it to identify themes. I also carried out interviews with four NVQ assessors who worked for the Open University in order to provide a different perspective from which to view participants' experiences.

### **AN INTRODUCTION TO THE REPORT OF THE STUDY**

This final section of my introduction explains the structure of the report of my research.

The report records the background, process, findings and conclusions of my research. Chapter 2 covers a review of the literature relevant to my research. Where a great deal of literature exists on the topics I have addressed, for example learning at work, I have selected writings which seem most relevant to the findings of my study. I have done this by an iterative process, moving between findings and literature to identify new directions for my reading. Chapter 3 reviews literature relevant to the methodological aspects of my research. In this section I start by covering fundamental decisions such as

theoretical issues relevant to my choice between a qualitative and quantitative approach. I review the methods I might use to collect data and then move on to the theory associated with more detailed work such as sampling and access. In this section I also consider the theoretical issues associated with my position researching in the organisation in which I work and the influence which I, as researcher might have on the overall design, undertaking and findings of my research. Throughout this section links are made between relevant literature and examples of how I carried out my research.

Chapter 4 is a brief overview of contextual information about the procedure by which people chose to do an NVQ and how they collected and presented evidence.

Chapter 5 comprises a detailed description of how I carried out my research. It starts with a description of the processes of sampling, interviewing, transcribing and analysing data. A description of how I divided up the data into constructs for analysis follows. The section ends with an identification of the difficulties and dilemmas experienced during the research process.

Chapters 6, 7 and 8 deal with the three overarching constructs which I have used to record and analyse the findings of my research. These are identified as 'expectations and experience', 'NVQs and learning at work' and 'the implications of workplace learning'. Each of these chapters follows the same format beginning with a description of how the construct is defined. A description of how the findings illustrate particular aspects of the construct follows and includes examples from the interviews with participants. I then discuss my findings with reference to literature considered in the literature review. Each chapter ends with a conclusion which summarises my findings.

Chapter 9 concludes my report and begins by summarising my findings and answering my research questions. I then evaluate my research considering my

choice of research questions, methodological influences on my conclusions and my influence as a researcher on the data gathered. I confirm the rationale for claiming originality and validity for my research. The next section considers the implications of my research for practice, policy and theory. The final section of this report makes suggestions for further research and ends with concluding remarks about the research activity as a whole.

## **CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **INTRODUCTION**

This chapter aims to review the literature relevant to my research and is structured to correspond with the key themes of my research. The first section sets the political and social context for the introduction of the NVQ system to the UK and briefly considers changes in context that have occurred between its introduction in 1986 and the present day. The second section gives an overview of the literature which deals explicitly with NVQs. The structure of this section reflects the partisan nature of much of the literature starting with an examination of work which supports the conceptualisation of the NVQ system. The review then moves on to consider the work which critically analyses the system with a particular focus on the NVQ conceptualisation of competence. The final part explores the literature covering people's experience of working towards and completing NVQs. The third section considers literature about learning at work. This literature does not focus explicitly on NVQs although it is relevant to the theoretical background of their implementation. The section starts with a consideration of reasons why people need to learn at work followed by an examination of the literature about learning from doing. Literature considering the conditions which support learning at work is then examined. This is followed by an exploration of the social process of learning at work and theories of situated learning. The section ends with a brief consideration of how people talk about learning at work.

### **THE POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT OF NVQS**

This section starts by reviewing the policy decisions which led up to the introduction of the NVQ system. The consideration begins as far back as the 1960s, identifying concerns that Britain lagged behind its competitors in vocational education and training (VET). The section then moves on to



consider the political standpoints which influenced the policy decisions and the social implications linked to these standpoints. The section concludes with an overview of policy and political changes relevant to NVQs which have taken place between their introduction in 1986 and the present day.

### **An overview of policy**

This section briefly outlines the major policy initiatives leading up to the Review of Vocational Qualifications (MSC/DES 1986) chaired by De Ville which recommended the NVQ system and notes the shift in emphasis from policy concerns about low skills in the UK to a focus on the lack of coherence in the vocational qualifications system.

The developing trend of policy concerning VET was predicated on a belief that the link between a workforce with a high level of vocational skills and a strong and prosperous economy was undisputed. Government policy from the 1980s onwards took no account of suggestions that globalisation might reduce the need for people with a high level of vocational skills in the UK as jobs moved to countries with lower wages and more highly skilled workforces (Brown and Lauder 1996, Keep and Mayhew 1996). Throughout the early and mid 1980s government policy asserted that improvement in the vocational skills of the UK's workforce was essential for maintaining or even keeping up with competitors. Policy also highlighted the importance of a workforce prepared to respond flexibly to the increasing pace of change driven by technological advancement.

‘If the nation is to keep pace with technological and economic change and to succeed against strong international competition it is vital that the workforce should be competent and adaptable.’ (MSC/DES 1986:1)

Since the 1960s and possibly even since the Second World War, concern had been raised about the level of training in the UK. Finegold and Soskice (1988) traced the weakness in training back to the hypothesis that a laissez-faire attitude to this area suited both Conservative and Labour agendas.

‘For Labour, vocational and technical education were seen as incompatible with the drive for comprehensive schooling, while the party’s heavy dependence on trade unions for financial and electoral support prevented any attempts to infringe on the unions’ control over training within industry. In the case of the Conservatives, preserving the grammar school track was the main educational priority while intervening in the training sphere would have violated their belief in the free market.’ (Finegold and Soskice 1988:25)

In the 1960s, concern about the level of training available in the UK led to the creation of Industry Training Boards (ITBs). The boards offered grants to employers to provide training, which were funded by a compulsory levy from all firms. Although ITBs were set up to address skills shortages they were not seen as being successful (Keep 1993), with large firms with strong training provision achieving exemption from the levy leaving the burden to smaller firms. In 1973 the Manpower Services Commission (MSC) was set up to oversee national manpower planning, operate government training schemes in response to skills shortages and have an overview of ITBs.

In 1979, the incoming Conservative government introduced new ideas about VET. Rather than the government driving the planning to deal with anticipated skills shortages they believed that market forces should shape the type and levels of training undertaken by employees (HMSO 1984). They also believed that VET provision should be employer led and employer controlled. Against this ideological background, the Conservatives also introduced a number of

different training initiatives which leaned towards interventionist policy in response to rising unemployment and concerns about the long term unemployed.

In 1981 the MSC, in consultation with employers, trade unions and training specialists, produced a set of strategic objectives for UK training under the banner of the New Training Initiative (NTI) (Keep 1993). The objectives related to the development of skill training, equipping all young people for work and widening opportunities for adults. Initiatives arising from these objectives included the Youth Training Scheme in 1981, designed to provide work related training for the young unemployed, and the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative in the schools sector. The number of schemes that developed as a result of the NTI produced a large number of vocational qualifications accredited by different awarding bodies to varying standards. Concerns were raised about the number of qualifications and the confusion caused when trying to compare them. This concern stimulated the government to set up a Review of Vocational Qualifications in 1986, chaired by De Ville (MSC/DES 1986), which ultimately led to the development of the NVQ system.

‘But nationally there is a lack of pattern or coherence; no overall accountability for vocational qualifications or ensuring standards, no assurance of progression or transferability. In spite of a plethora of institutions there are gaps. In short there is no single focus for action.’(MSC/DES 1986: Preface)

The Review recommended a National Framework for Vocational Qualifications which would encompass all existing qualifications and was based on occupational competence, skills and relevant knowledge and understanding. It also recommended that the government should establish a National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) to provide a

‘sharp national focus as an engine for change.’  
(MSC/DES 1986:2)

Out of the Review and its recommendations grew the NVQ system.

It is interesting to note the change in emphasis demonstrated by the Review. Concern for low levels of skills and a workforce that was poorly trained (HMSO 1984) appears to have shifted to criticism of the vocational training system. This placed emphasis on the system that measured people’s level of skills rather than the training that developed them. The shift might have been attributed to the Conservative emphasis on the importance of the employers’ role in VET, where qualifications were the measure by which the employer sought to judge the suitability of a potential employee. However, if low skills affected the strength of the UK economy it is surprising that the Conservative government was deflected from promoting the training which might build the economy in future. Their policy literature of the late 1980s appeared to confuse the NVQ framework’s focus on qualifications with a focus on the process of training. The report from the CBI (1989) which responded to the development of NVQs, entitled ‘Towards a Skills Revolution’, identified the improvement in training that would be required in the UK to bring it to a level with European competitors and stated that,

‘only a quantum leap in skills levels throughout the workforce’  
(CBI 1989:18)

would be enough to ensure the UK competitiveness, yet the NVQ system developed to drive this change forward was not a training scheme but a system for measuring and accrediting the result of training.

### **Political standpoints**

The summary of contextual circumstances which led to the development of the NVQ system suggested that the Conservative belief in the dominance of the market in directing the growth of the economy affected the way the system was conceptualised. This section considers the relationship between political standpoints and the development of NVQs in more detail. It starts by noting the influence of the Conservative belief in the free market on the development of NVQs, and goes on to describe how NVQs could also be judged to meet the political agenda of the Left.

The Conservative focus on the free market emphasised the flexibility of individuals as workers and this was reflected in the design of NVQs. One of the key purposes of the NVQ system was to establish competences which could be transferred from one work environment to another (Jessup 1991). So where employees moved from one job to another as the market demanded, an employer could expect to use the NVQ system to understand what a new employee would be able to do. The Conservative agenda also put emphasis on the responsibility of the individual to make themselves employable (Avis et al 1996) by updating their skills. NVQs were explicitly designed to be qualifications which could be achieved by an individual working at their own pace, not associated with group training or allocated time in the workplace (Jessup 1991).

The early and mid 1980s were characterised by the Conservative government challenging the strength and influence of the trade unions in the workplace (Keep and Mayhew 1996, Council of Churches 1997, Raggatt and Williams 1999). The reliance of NVQs on competence standards which were available for all to see was the culmination of a move away from the traditional apprenticeship where the standards required for completion were less overt and

depended on time served as well as competence. Williams and Raggatt (1998) identified the start of this move, explaining,

‘The New Training Initiative of 1981 ... was therefore in part an outcome of the concern among policy makers that the anachronistic methods of skills formation associated with the traditional apprenticeship were not only obsolete, ... but should not be exported to other sectors.’ (Williams and Raggatt 1998:88)

However, just as Finegold and Soskice (1988) noted that the post war laissez-faire attitude to training and development suited the agendas of Left and Right, the development of NVQs could also be associated with both agendas. NVQs could be seen to fit with the inclusive agenda of the Left. In formalising vocational qualifications and trying to bring them alongside academic qualifications, giving them a parallel currency, attempts were being made to reduce labour market inequalities (Williams and Raggatt 1998). This was stated as key motivation of the Review carried out by De Ville,

‘The artificial divide between so-called academic and so-called vocational qualifications is unhelpful and obstructive and should be bridged.’ (MSC/DES 1986:8)

De Ville’s use of the word ‘artificial’ suggested that the divide was in some way not real and perhaps fragile and therefore a divide which could be easily bridged. Recognition of the continued existence of the divide in the Dearing Report into qualifications for 16 – 19 year olds (SCAA 1996) and also the recently published interim Tomlinson Report (DFES 2004) suggested the gap might have been more difficult to bridge than De Ville implied.

**From implementation to the present day, 1986 – 2004**

This section describes the way in which NVQs were received by employers and educationalists and notes the main focus of the Beaumont Review in 1996 (NCVQ/SCOTVEC 1996). It concludes by highlighting the way in which successive government reviews of vocational qualifications have been unable to address the perception of relative status of vocational and academic qualifications.

Although this eighteen-year period has seen a change in government, there has been remarkably little change in policy associated with either VET or vocational qualifications. NVQs were launched to fierce criticism from both employers and educationalists which was to last through to the late 1990s. The support for NVQs by employers has been considerably less enthusiastic than policy documents of the late 1980s anticipated (Callendar et al 1993, Doherty 2001), with complaints about the time consuming and bureaucratic nature of the assessment process and little clear indication of positive benefits for industry from having an NVQ qualified workforce. Educationalists criticised NVQs from all sides, questioning the use of competence as a way of describing people's performance at work, the narrowness of the standards developed for NVQs and the validity of the assessment system.

The main review of the NVQ system took place in 1996 led by Gordon Beaumont (NCVQ/SCOTVEC 1996), in response to heavy criticism of the implementation of the system. Criticism focused on the bureaucracy involved in the process of accrediting NVQs and the expense associated with it, the complex and obscure language in which the standards were expressed and the difficulty of managing the assessment process in the workplace. Beaumont made several recommendations to address these criticisms, but in essence there were few fundamental changes and ministers were advised by Beaumont to confirm that NVQs were here to stay.

One of the main aims of the NVQ system was to promote the status of vocational qualifications in comparison to academic qualifications. By 1996, ten years since the De Ville report, policy documents suggested there had been little progress with this aim. This issue was addressed by Dearing, (SCAA 1996) as he recommended the development of a national qualifications framework that encompassed all types of qualification. His stated aim for this work was to,

‘bring greater coherence into the framework of qualifications and challenge pervasive attitudes inherited from the past towards the relative worth of achievement in the academic and vocational pathways.’ (SCAA 1996:3)

It seems, however that neither De Ville nor Dearing could achieve this aim as the recent review led by Tomlinson in 2004 (DFES 2004) recognised that the difference in status still existed. Tomlinson’s suggestion to reduce the rigid demarcation between the academic and vocational curriculum from 14 years onwards demonstrated another approach to address this persistent problem.

## **MAKING SENSE OF THE LITERATURE ABOUT NVQS**

This section aims to provide a way of understanding literature specifically about NVQs by grouping together particular approaches to the subject. First the literature which supported the introduction and conception of the NVQ system is examined. This is followed by consideration of the literature which problematised the conception of NVQs with particular focus on competence as a key criterion for measuring effective performance. The final section considers literature which explores the experience of undertaking NVQs.



### **Literature supporting the NVQ system**

This section identifies how the supporters of the NVQ system tended to have some association with the NCVQ and then goes on to critically examine Jessup's (1991) description and theoretical justification for the system. Burke's (1995) defence of Jessup in the face of criticism is then considered.

There is only a small volume of literature which wholeheartedly supports the NVQ system and much of that has close connections to the NCVQ that was set up to oversee the introduction of NVQs. Initially NCVQ had a dual role where they were responsible for both regulating and promoting the system. Gilbert Jessup who was the chief architect of the NVQ system, was the Director of Research at NCVQ and one of his strongest supporters, Burke, held an NCVQ Fellowship at the University of Sussex in 1994. The anthology of work which is generally supportive of the NVQ system edited by Bees and Swords (1990) is copyright to NCVQ and Madeleine Swords was a Development Officer with NCVQ.

The NVQ system devised by Jessup was based on the assessment of an individual's performance against standards for the particular occupational area in which the person worked. The standards, which were designated by a group of people, including employers, with notable experience in the occupational area, were made explicit to the candidate working towards the qualification. Standards were presented in the format of performance criteria which explained in considerable detail what the competent candidate should be able to do. The standards also included reference to the range of circumstances in which competent candidates should be able to perform tasks and to the underpinning knowledge which a candidate should possess in order to be able to carry out the tasks.

In his book, 'Outcomes; NVQs and the Emerging Model of Education and Training' (1991) Jessup set out the concept and philosophy behind the creation

of the NVQ system. He also included a detailed account of the technicalities of how the system worked. Jessup began with an examination of the relationship between learning, and education and training. To a certain extent this chapter took a superficial approach, and asserted without evidence the way in which a learner approached the central process of learning.

‘The focus on learning would also help to eradicate the distinction between education and training, and the establishment and agencies which divide learning into two camps. As a learner I do not make this distinction. My head does not have separate compartments to receive education and training.’ (Jessup 1991:4)

This comment ignored the possibility that a learner’s expectations about the nature of education and training might affect the way they received particular inputs.

As Jessup expanded his new model he adopted a tone which emphasised the common sense of his approach. Jessup’s critics such as Hyland (1994) and Smithers (1994) challenged the way he was prepared to define an understanding of particular terms, seemingly ignoring their contested nature. The most obvious example was Jessup’s interpretation of the term ‘competence’.

‘Before we look at what is meant by ‘breadth’ we should perhaps clarify that the word ‘competent’ as used here does not refer to a lowish or minimum standard of performance. On the contrary it refers to the standard required successfully to perform an activity or function... In the performance of a service it means meeting the requirements of a customer.’  
(Jessup1991:25)

In this statement, Jessup implied that it was possible to assert what competence meant in a particular case and dissociate other interpretations of the term simply by denying them. Hyland (1994) directly challenged Jessup's assumption that a word such as competence can be dissociated from a common understanding of its meaning. Hyland asserted that the everyday understanding of competence had implications of meaning just good enough to carry out a task to a standard, and that these connotations could not be ignored.

‘Ordinary language is, of course never the last word in discussions about the ultimate meanings of terms, but.... it is the first word.’ (Hyland 1994:20)

In the face of criticism, Jessup's description of the NVQ system was supported by writers such as Ellis (1995) and Burke (1995). In Burke's examination of theoretical issues in relation to Jessup's outcomes model he set out to deconstruct or dismiss six common criticisms. He attempted to counter the criticism that

‘the outcomes approach is based on assumptions and theories from Behaviourist Psychology.’ (Burke 1995:65)

Burke highlighted aspects of Jessup's model which promoted the individual freedom of the learner to negotiate their way actively through the learning experience rather than being the passive subject which a behaviourist approach might suggest. Burke's approach was in contrast to Jessup's critics in that he took no account of people's experiences of undertaking NVQs and focused only on Jessup's early conceptualisation of the system. This was unusual when the date of Burke's work was taken into account as there was already information available from practical experiences of implementation at the time it was written.

The fact that Burke felt the need to write a chapter which dealt head on with theoretical criticism of the NVQ system suggests that such criticism was being taken seriously by the supporters of NVQs. Burke acknowledges this in the introduction to his response,

‘Continuing, close, critical scrutiny of theoretical issues directly affecting the development of NVQs and General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) is clearly very important. On the economic front it would surely be a form of madness to commit huge resources to work based learning, FE, HE and the schools sector to a form of training and education which was fundamentally flawed in its theoretical conception.’  
(Burke 1995:55)

Although the explanation that Jessup (1991) and Burke (1995) offered for the conceptualisation of competence used by the NVQ system seems plausible, there is little evidence of how they reached it. This may be one of the reasons that the NVQ system and the understanding of competence on which it was based received such detailed critical analysis.

### **Critical analysis of the NVQ conceptualisation of competence**

This section considers literature which critically analyses the way in which the NVQ system was devised, with particular focus on its conceptualisation of competence. It starts by identifying concerns raised about the lack of theoretical justification for the NVQ conceptualisation of competence. It then considers three different ways of categorising competence. Firstly it looks at Stevenson’s (1996) explanation of the normative aspects of the construction of competence. It then moves on to Norris’ (1991) and Bridges’(1996) categorisation of the concepts as behaviourist, cognitive and generic. The third

categorisation is that identified by Edwards and Usher (1994). This leads into a consideration of the discourse of competence and its influence on the behaviour of candidates in the workplace.

In the De Ville report (MSC/DES 1986) one of the key purposes of the NVQ system was to raise the skill level of the UK workforce. Both Jessup (1991) and Burke (1995) viewed the NVQ focus on competence as a common sense solution to the complaint that employee training lacked relevance,

‘Until recently about half the UK workforce were described as ‘unskilled’ or ‘semi-skilled’; they received no systematic training and certainly no qualifications relevant to the work they performed.’ (Jessup 1995:35)

Critics of the NVQ system focused on the conception of competence which it promoted, noting that there was little theoretical justification for viewing it as unquestionably relevant as a measure of work related skills (Edwards 1993, Edwards and Usher 1994, Bates 1995a, Gonczi 1999). Bates described the lack of theoretical justification as

‘a colossus skating on very thin ice’ (Bates 1995a:40)

while Edwards and Usher referred to the progress of the competence movement as ‘a tidal wave’ (Edwards and Usher 1994:124). Both writers in their choice of phrase also implied that the NVQ system, as supported by government funding, was disproportionately large and growing quickly.

The sheer variety of literature about competence implied that it was a concept which was particularly difficult to define. In a review of literature on competence Bates identified,

‘the highly fragmented nature of current research’ (Bates 1995a:41)

and remarked on the need to,

‘assemble disparate perspectives.’(Bates 1995a:41)

Stevenson (1996) attempted to categorise these different perspectives in terms of the normative aspects of constructions of meaning. He contrasted the meaning of the term in three different constructions. The first related to the everyday use of the term, where he identified that whether a person is described as competent can depend upon whether the ends they were trying to achieve were seen as being worthy or good– so someone would be unlikely to describe a murderer as competent. He then moved on to consider the vocational and educational construction of competence where he identified that the influence of everyday use of the term had,

‘pre-empted the debate about whether competence is desirable.’ (Stevenson 1996:26)

His final construction was the academic, where he identified that the term competence in academic circles often had negative connotations. He concluded that the normative influence of the circumstances in which the term was used strongly influenced the meaning associated with it. Yet the way in which competence was defined in the NVQ system did not take account of this normative influence. Stevenson noted that the failure to problematise the normative aspects of the term competence had hindered a full understanding of the term, and a complete conclusion had never been reached.

‘The cyclical movement in constructions are likened to an incomplete metamorphosis, continually thwarted by a failure to

address the normative aspects of construction of competence.’  
(Stevenson 1996:24)

Other writers defined the manifestations of the concept associated with education and training as a kind of continuum and identified constructs of competence as ‘behaviourist’, ‘generic’ or ‘cognitive’. (Norris 1991, Bridges 1996). Bridges defined the behaviourist construct by quoting from the work of Norris,

‘Competence is usually treated as something a person is or should be able to do. It is a description of action, behaviour or outcome in a form that is capable of demonstration, observation and assessment.’ (Norris 1991:332)

Bridges defined the cognitive construct as what a person could do under ideal circumstances in contrast to the behaviourist construct which looked at what the person actually does. Bridges used the work of Wood and Power (1987) to define this construct as,

‘An integrated deep structure and the general ability to co-ordinate appropriate internal cognitive, affective and other resources necessary for successful adaptation.’ (Wood and Power 1987:414)

The generic construct was defined as the general abilities associated with expert performance, often identified through critical incident interviewing.

Critics of the NVQ system associated it with the behaviourist construct which was heavily criticised for being narrowly focused both by ignoring values associated with performance in the workplace (Leat 1993, Ecclestone 1994) and being excessively atomised and bureaucratic (Hyland 1996, 1998). The

generic and cognitive constructs were seen as reflecting the complexities of what happened in the workplace more effectively, by taking a holistic rather than an atomised view.

The critics of the behaviourist nature of competence, particularly Hyland (1994), focused mainly on the way in which competence in the NVQ system was defined, rather than in its implementation. This approach took little account of the blurring between constructions which was likely to take place when such programmes were implemented in the workplace.

Those who moved on from considering only the structure of the NVQ system to look more at issues associated with implementation (Eraut 1994, 2001, Hodkinson and Issit 1995) suggested that if the NVQ system were to accept a holistic view of competence which had more in common with the generic and cognitive constructs it would be greatly improved. Hodkinson and Issit noted that the complexity of performance could not be shoehorned into an over-simplified system such as the current NVQ conceptualisation of competence,

‘Such pluralism becomes more acceptable if competence is seen as a tool for achieving part of professional education, rather than some over-arching structure which must contain and define all of it.’ (Hodkinson and Issit 1995:151)

Eraut (1994) also recognised that the NVQ description of competence failed to encompass any notion of an individual’s capability in circumstances beyond those in which performance could be observed.

However both Norris (1991) and Bridges (1996) pointed out that an emphasis on the holistic nature of competence as seen in the generic and cognitive constructs would have made the process of assessment less tidy and clear. One of the political imperatives of the NVQ system was to bring order to the



system of vocational qualifications which was seen as messy and incoherent. In these circumstances it was unsurprising that the construct of competence which was pursued was the one which was seen as the most straightforward. This choice emphasised the strength of the political agenda in comparison to the educational agenda, where the imperative of the system design was to provide a simple framework rather than the stimulation for the development of the workforce. This exemplified the mismatch between a system which needed to improve skills standards and actually only organised the standards which were already there.

Edwards and Usher (1994) offered a different way of categorising conceptualisations of competence. Their first category included those who said that human activity was too complex to be conceptualised by the technicist notion of competence. Ashworth and Saxton (1990) focused on the NVQ understanding of competence which was identified as a behaviourist construct by Norris (1991) and Bridges (1996). They wrote,

‘In general we believe that ‘competence’ is the embodiment of a mechanistic, technically oriented way of thinking which is normally inappropriate to the description of human action, or to the facilitation of the training of human beings. The more human the action, in the sense of being un-mechanical, creative, or sensitive to the social setting, the more inappropriate the competency model of human action is.’(Ashworth and Saxton 1990: 24)

Edwards and Usher identified their second category as those who were concerned that the assessment system devised for NVQs would make it impossible to deliver standardised assessment at a viable cost. They associated critics who had raised other concerns about implementation of competence based qualification systems with this category. Smithers’ (1994) and Hevey’s

(1997) concerns about the rigour of assessment would fall into this group. Their final category, which was similar to the first, aligned with those who criticised the narrow conception of competence in NVQs (Eraut 1994, Hodkinson and Issit 1995). They identified this stance with a concern about the fitness for purpose of the NVQ system. Yet although they offered this categorisation, their main concern with the concept of competence fitted none of these categories. They explained that the arguments identified above are about whether competence works. They, however, wished to take issue with 'the work it does' (Edwards and Usher 1994:1)

Edwards and Usher, suggested that competence was a common sense solution presented in response to the problem of a far from perfect education system,

'We want to suggest that this 'crisis' has provided a climate into which the discourse of competence appears to offer a credible and appropriate solution.' (Edwards and Usher 1994:6)

However rather than following Jessup's (1991) uncritical acceptance of this solution they pointed out that the very credibility of this solution effectively disguised a less straightforward discourse. The superficial but nonetheless powerful sense that competence provided a solution to a previous problem was at the root of comments by Bates (1995a) and Lum (1999) who lamented the ineffectiveness of the critical response to competence based education and training. Whatever doubts and concerns were raised about the adequacy of the concept of competence, the simplistic logic of using it to replace a system perceived as irrelevant and over complex proved too powerful to resist. Norris (1991) observed wryly that the difficulty of defining the term competence was advantageous to those who wished to promote but not to question its purpose.

Edwards and Usher dug deeper into the discourse of competence and like other authors (Jones and Moore 1993, Bridges 1996, Garrick 1998, Gonczi 1999) suggested that the concept of competence had the potential to deceive people about its purpose. They asserted that competence was used as a vehicle for maintaining the current social formations associated with work. As individuals struggled to make sense of the complexity of workplace performance, the standards identified in the NVQ approach seemed to capture the nature of the competent performance that was required. As they pursued an NVQ,

‘The learners’ performance is inscribed as competent or not yet competent and incorporated into a vast bureaucratic web which documents and charts their progress through the various elements and level.’ (Edwards and Usher 1994:7)

The surveillance of assessment which ensured learners met the discipline of the standards was not only carried out through the process of observation by an assessor, but by the candidates themselves who constantly checked whether they were meeting the standards. As Edwards and Usher asserted,

‘there is no space for independent thought or action.’ (Edwards and Usher 1994:7)

This criticism mirrored the comments of critics who raised concerns that NVQs took no account of unexpected learning outcomes which arose from the learning process (Hyland 1994) and so provided evidence of their narrowness. However it directly refuted the claim that the NVQ definition of competence represented crude behaviourism. The authors explained that although the competences were behaviourally expressed, the discourse of competence was liberal humanist. This was demonstrated in Jessup’s (1991) explanation of the

NVQ system which emphasised the power of the individual rather than that of the teacher or the employer,

‘Yet if anyone can exercise control over the process of learning, it is the individual, who might exercise a degree of control over their own learning.’ (Jessup 1991:4)

Edwards and Usher suggested that this liberal humanist discourse seduced learners to discipline themselves into retaining the current social models by ensuring they met the standards which appeared so objective.

To summarise, this section highlights three criticisms of the NVQ concept of competence. Firstly, as Stevenson (1996) notes, that the normative effect of defining competent performance was not taken into account or problematised when the NVQ system was designed. Secondly, that competence can be defined as sitting on a continuum which ranges from a behaviourist through a generic to a cognitive approach, with the NVQ definition of competence being most closely associated with behaviourism. The third criticism is that the NVQ conceptualisation of competence maintains the status quo of work and actually encourages workers to police their own behaviour to ensure it replicates already established norms. These three criticisms are particularly relevant to the research question which explores how doing the NVQ in Customer Service has affected participants’ approach to and understanding of their work. Answers to this question might help to define the extent to which participants’ experiences reflect the concerns of critics.

### **Exploring the experience of doing NVQs**

This section considers the literature about the implementation of NVQs in a variety of settings. There is a smaller volume of literature about implementation than there is about the conceptualisation of the NVQ system.

Comment follows on four specific topic areas – candidate choice and motivation to do NVQs and its effect on experience, the bureaucratic nature of NVQs, raising self-esteem and the perceptions of the status of NVQs. The literature concerning implementation falls into three loose groups which cut across the four topic areas. Firstly there is a small amount of literature about the employers' reaction to NVQs and the effect of doing the qualification on the workforce (Callender et al 1993, Senker 1996, Doherty 2001). Secondly there is literature which focuses on the process of doing NVQs (Bates and Dutson 1995b, Spielhofer 2002). The third area focuses on the experience of candidates undertaking NVQs (McHugh 1995, Hillier 1999, Grugulis, 2000, Hauxwell 2002, Warr 2002). There is some overlap between the second and third category as the process by which NVQs are implemented in the workplace is bound to affect candidates' experience of it.

Studies by McHugh et al (1995) and Hillier (1999) addressed the reasons behind the candidates' choice and motivation to do an NVQ. McHugh et al made clear the difficulty in identifying reasons for choice to do the qualification as a considerable proportion of the sample they were working with were on Employment Training and Youth Training schemes and therefore were obliged to undertake an NVQ. The predominant interest in doing the qualification which was demonstrated in this research was to make it easier to find (another) job. Taking into account the employment status of the sample they were working with, this finding was not surprising. In the studies by Grugulis (2000) and Warr (2002) participants had been selected to undertake the NVQ as recognition of their good performance in their current jobs. This might have suggested that these candidates would be particularly motivated to do the NVQ, but Grugulis suggested that although they might initially have felt like this, the reality of undertaking the qualification soon reduced their motivation. Several of the studies mentioned that the candidates thought that having the qualification might make them more employable or help them to gain work (Hillier 1999, Warr 2002).

The second common theme in literature exploring the experience of doing NVQs was the way in which the complex bureaucratic nature of both the NVQ standards and the assessment regime seemed to get in the way of day-to-day work. This manifested itself in different ways, from the additional time spent turning out filing cabinets searching for evidence and filing it (Grugulis 2000) to the disruption of a carefully created workplace environment for special needs trainees which Bates and Dutson (1995b) identified.

‘The tutors at Chorley, trained as caterers rather than assessors, prioritised the cafeteria service, balancing this largely against a humane struggle to provide a reasonably relaxed and informal environment for trainees. Considerable efforts were channelled towards creating such an environment and the introduction of an NVQ assessment ‘regime’ was felt to be too bureaucratic, anxiety inducing and intrusive, not to mention an administrative burden.’ (Bates and Dutson 1995b:57)

The bureaucratic complexity of the qualification was made worse by the language in which the standards were expressed. Hillier (1999) carried out a small scale and detailed study into the experiences of two groups of candidates undertaking NVQs in training and development at level 4. Although it might be expected that these candidates would have found it easy to understand the language in which the NVQ was described, this was not the case.

‘The most damning comment from all the candidates was their difficulty with the language of the standards, described variously as impenetrable, being completely flummoxed, learning a new language.’ (Hillier 1999:220)

It seemed from both Hillier’s and Spielhofer’s (2002) account that the ability to complete the NVQ was influenced by the candidate’s ability to understand

the terms the standards were expressed in as well as their ability to perform the tasks outlined in the standards. Spielhofer noted that the ability of a candidate to write case studies also influenced the ease with which they were able to complete the qualification.

‘This (case study) approach to generating evidence suited those candidates who felt confident in writing about their work or quickly learnt how to write such accounts... In contrast, those candidates who were not so good at expressing themselves in writing saw the requirement as a barrier to demonstrating their competence and acquiring an NVQ.’ (Spielhofer 2002:635)

In Spielhofer’s account of NVQ candidates in the banking industry he noted that the candidate centred learning experience which Jessup (1991) envisaged, had been sacrificed to the daily demands of the workplace. Candidates had to rely on the preparation of case studies to prove their competence as observation would have been too time consuming for supervisors who also had their regular workload to complete. In Bates and Dutson’s (1995b) case study of the catering staff in a cafeteria, the demands of the workplace also seemed to be at odds with the demands of NVQ assessment. Bates and Dutson noted that even though the staff were supposed to have been working towards NVQs for some weeks she found

‘no visible trace of NVQ linked training or assessment.’ (Bates and Dutson 1995b:45)

The accounts of candidates’ experiences of NVQs were by no means entirely critical. Several identified clear gains for candidates. These ranged from the minimal gain such as the candidate who found it easier to track paperwork they had selected for their portfolio than searching through their whole filing cabinet (Grugulis 2000) to those who gained considerable improvement in

their self-esteem. Improvement in self-esteem was particularly noticeable in the two studies which focused explicitly on nursing and healthcare (Hauxwell 2002 and Warr 2002). Warr noted that the Health Care Assistants which he studied were particularly aware of an improvement in self-esteem especially in relation to the nurses that they worked with,

‘I’m actually treated as an equal, rather than just being there for the messy bits.’ Warr (2002:244)

However the improvement in self-esteem was not confined to those working in areas with traditionally low status. Hillier also noted that it provided a ‘confidence boost’ (Hillier 1999:217) for one candidate who was an experienced trainer. Yet in both the healthcare and educational settings, candidates were aware that some people in their workplaces attributed low status to NVQs in comparison with more traditional qualifications. Warr (2002) quoted from a Health Care Assistant who took part in his study saying,

‘We are going to be a sub-profession aren’t we?...the poor relations to nursing because it’s a non-professional qualification.’ (Warr 2002:246)

Hillier (1999) and Warr’s (2002) questioning of status stemmed from the judgement of others of NVQs. Grugulis (2000), however, noted that one of the candidates in her sample questioned the status of NVQs because of his disillusionment with the poor quality and repetitiveness of the evidence he was required to produce to complete the NVQ. To achieve a management NVQ he felt that he actually had to give up the managerial aspects of his work.

All these studies describe the experience and process of candidates working towards NVQs in the workplace and in many cases the main focus is on their



experiences of the process of undertaking the NVQ and their feelings about themselves when they had completed it. This resonates with the focus of Jessup's (1991) conceptualisation of the NVQ system where the emphasis is on accreditation and qualification rather than the learning and development process of working towards the qualification. However two studies of NVQs do mention that candidates have learnt in the workplace as a result of working on the NVQ. To a certain extent this learning could be described as taking place in spite of the NVQs as it is often identified as an unexpected reward in the relentless slog of matching standards and collecting evidence (Hillier 1999, Spielhofer 2002). A quote from a candidate in Hillier's analysis of people working on a training and development NVQ neatly captures this bittersweet experience,

'The (NVQ) was unwieldy, but that's life. Some of the best learning comes from suffering. I don't regret it at all. I would not have made the moves, the strides or the changes I did. It has changed the way I approach people and reflect on how I do things and why.' (Hillier 1999:218)

Literature which addressed choice and motivation to do an NVQ highlights examples where candidates have little choice about whether to do one and also suggests that the reward of being selected to do one can actually be a poisoned chalice. Where candidates did choose to do the qualification, a key motivation seemed to be employability. The processes associated with completing the NVQ often hindered rather than supported the gaining of the qualification. This happened in two ways. Firstly candidates found it difficult to understand the NVQ standards and secondly they found it difficult to cope with the demands of gathering evidence alongside the demands of work. In some cases candidates noted improvements in self-esteem from doing the NVQ although this seemed to depend on individual perceptions of their own worth and the relative status of their jobs. Candidates seemed sensitive to the

status of NVQs, paying particular attention to the unfavourable judgement of others about the value of the qualification.

## **LEARNING AT WORK**

This section considers literature about learning at work and how the focus of this literature relates to NVQs. It starts by exploring literature which addresses why people need to learn at work, taking particular account of topics such as technological change and new complexity in the workplace. A consideration of how people learn by doing follows. The next part looks at the importance of context to workplace learning, first in terms of the conditions experienced by workers which are conducive to learning and then in terms of situated learning. The section ends with a brief discussion of why some workers find it hard to articulate the learning that takes place at work.

### **Why people need to learn at work**

This section reviews literature which considers why people need to learn at work and also why this need seems to be increasing. Several authors suggested that the increased need for workplace learning was related to the rapid change in workplace environments brought about by technological change (Barnett 1999, Boud and Garrick 1999, Candy and Matthews 1999, Davies 1999). Some authors suggested that learning at work was essential for those currently employed to keep up with the pace of change (Boud and Garrick 1999, Lowe 2000). Boud and Garrick wrote,

‘There are few places left for employees at any level who do not continue to learn to improve their effectiveness throughout their working lives.’ (Boud and Garrick 1999:1)

This assertion was also found in government publications in the 1990s (DTI 1995, 1998) putting forward the view that the key to Britain’s economic

prosperity was to increase the level of skills of the workforce. Barnett (1999) described the current workplace as a site of supercomplexity suggesting learning at work as a kind of defence against what might otherwise become overwhelming,

‘Under conditions of supercomplexity ...work has to become learning... work has to be understood as presenting infinite learning opportunities. There is no resting place’  
(Barnett 1999:42)

while Boud and Garrick recognised the

‘competing interests, and the personal, political and institutional influences’ (Boud and Garrick 1999:3)

on learning at work. Neither Boud and Garrick nor Barnett provided evidence to show how they identified the imperative of learning at work, nor did they consider the problematic notion that change might actually have reduced the number of skilled workers required as technology took over their work or allowed it to be carried out by workers with higher skill levels and lower wages in the Far East. (Brown and Lauder 1996)

Although the government justified the introduction of NVQs by stating that they would support the development of a more highly skilled workforce, the retrospective nature of the qualification implied that new skills to address technological change, such as the learning of new software packages, would not be delivered by the NVQ. It was also unlikely that NVQs would address issues of supercomplexity in the workplace as they took little account of the complex mix of social, contextual and personal influences on workplace learning. (Schon 1983, Boud and Walker 1991, Lave and Wenger 1991, Billet 1996, Hager 1999)

Authors such as Billet (1999a) and Beckett (2001) suggested that rather than being a response to change, workplace learning was more closely associated with the need of workers to 'get by' and was a response to dealing with day-to-day problems in the complex context of the workplace. Beckett described this learning to get by in the workplace in the context of dementia care in Australia,

'Staff grapple with embodied 'disruptions'. There is a viscerality about the caring which grounds discourse with residents and with other staff and generates activity based learning at its most immediate.' (Beckett 2001:153)

Beckett also highlighted postmodern insights into the workplace learning in dementia care, noting the diversity of behaviour in dementia which staff must respond to, the power structure in the care of the elderly with dementia and the discourse of managing residents as sensitively as possible.

To a certain extent it could be said that NVQs were a vehicle to accredit the learning to get by identified by Beckett in that they drew on evidence from the day-to-day action of workers. However Beckett recognised that to make workplace learning effective in such circumstances the experience and learning of staff members must be formalised to develop competences.

' The next steps in this model of workplace learning involve formalising these practices in public ways, such as through appropriate competencies or models of professionalism.'  
(Beckett 2001:155)

This suggested that the work of the carers should generate competences and models. However in the NVQ system the competences are already defined before the workers start to evidence them, with most of the work on defining

competences being undertaken by managers and training consultants (Field 1995). The competences are then imposed upon the NVQ candidates.

A tension could be seen between Beckett's scenario in dementia care and the NVQ situation, where the NVQ system attempted to formalise workplace learning into a system which could be assessed and quality assured, yet the evidence provided for such an assessment is drawn from a situation which embodies the fluidity of post modernism.

Just as Edwards and Usher (1994) noted the way competence was offered as a common sense solution to an education system which was seen as imperfect, the need to learn at work was also presented as an inevitability which it would be foolish to challenge. The literature considered above suggested that the NVQ system which was intended to bring coherence to workplace learning was ill designed to help workers gain new technological skills or deal with complexity. The NVQ system might have been better suited to accredit the learning at work which enabled workers to 'get by', however Beckett (2001) suggested that the benefits of accrediting this type of learning were delivered when the learners took part in developing competences from their own experience rather than having them imposed as is the case with NVQs.

### **Learning from doing**

This section explores literature about how adults learn from doing and applies this to the NVQ system. The tension between the rigidity of the NVQ standards and the complexity of the work which NVQs aim to accredit is again highlighted.

The exploration of how adults learn and more particularly how people learn at work has been the subject of debate for many years. Schon (1983) examined the close relationship between practice and learning, identifying the type of learning which must take place as professionals approached the

‘shifting, ambiguous ends and ...unstable institutional context of practice.’ (Schon 1983:40)

He identified the condition of ‘knowing in action’ where a person knew implicitly how to carry out

‘actions, recognitions and judgements’ (Schon 1983:54)

spontaneously as a result of their developed expertise at work. Beckett added to this description saying,

‘Life at work is typically experienced as an integration of thinking, feeling and doing.’ (Beckett 1999:86)

Schon (1983) identified the importance of the activity of reflecting in action where the person applied previous knowledge to adapt current performance or thought on their feet. Eraut (1994) extended and developed this idea associating the development of knowledge in practice with the context in which the practice occurred. He explained that it was impossible to detach knowledge from the context in which it had been learned,

‘An important argument... is that professional knowledge cannot be characterised in a manner that is independent of how it is learned. It is through looking at the contexts of its acquisition and its use that its essential nature is revealed.’

(Eraut 1994:19)

He identified that each time knowledge was used to carry out a different activity in practice, it was transformed into new knowledge. Schon (1983), Kolb (1984) Marsick (1988) Eraut (1994) and Ecclestone (1996) also recognised the key role which reflection played in enabling people to adapt

new action in the light of what they had learned from comparable activities carried out previously. In relation to these understandings of learning at work the NVQ system was in an ambiguous position. NVQs did not recognise the integrated nature of the complexity involved in performance – in fact their purpose in providing a generic set of standards for several occupations within the same area precluded this. Standards were deliberately reduced to describe small and detached actions. The reasoning behind this was to enable assessment which appeared rigorous and capable of standardisation (Gonczi 1999). However, the atomised description of what constituted successful performance in the workplace in no way promoted the joined up thinking, the recognition of unexpected relationships and consequences of events which Schon (1983) and Eraut (1994, 2001) suggested made up an important part of learning at work.

The literature described above emphasises the fluid and iterative nature of the way in which learning by doing occurs. The learning described is also deeply embedded in practice and so it is not possible to separate the learning from the context in which it takes place. This implies that the conditions in the workplace have the potential considerably to influence the nature and success of learning.

### **An appropriate environment for learning at work**

This section considers literature which discusses the conditions which support learning in the workplace and comments on the way in which these conditions might be met when NVQs are introduced. The importance of context in workplace learning has led several writers to aim to identify the best conditions to promote learning at work (Billett 1998, 1999a,, Candy and Matthews 1999, Beckett 2001, Cairns and Stephenson 2001). Cairns and Stephenson carried out a study which examined how NVQs in the UK and the Vehicle Industry Certificate in Australia,

‘might contribute to and interact with elements of a healthy learning milieu and thus contribute to the enhancement of organisational capability.’ (Cairns and Stephenson 2001:444)

They noted that case studies from a previous piece of research by Williams et al (1997) completed on behalf of the Royal School of Arts (RSA) had suggested that the informal workplace learning which occurred as a result of undertaking the NVQ might have,

‘longer term benefits for individuals and organisations than the specific competences that NVQs were designed to develop.’ (Cairns and Stephenson 2001:445)

Cairns and Stephenson suggested a series of conditions which created the healthy learning milieu. They identified the importance for learners of

‘See(ing) their learning linked to improved performance for the organisation.’ (Cairns and Stephenson 2001:446)

Billet (1999a, 1999b) emphasised the relationships between work colleagues as being one of the key drivers for learning at work. He noted that one of the most important conditions for learning was the support and guidance of other expert workers and the possibility of solving problems working collaboratively with other people doing the same job.

‘This idea holds that task accomplishment is likely to be far greater when assisted by another, than by individuals’ solitary experience alone.’ (Billett 1999a:156)



Billet explained that the nature of the tasks people are asked to do at work might affect opportunities for learning, suggesting that routine tasks would only generate weak learning. He also hinted, but did not explore in depth, that it was unlikely that learning would take place where there was not the culture of more experienced staff guiding those who were less experienced. He did not, however, mention the situation where workers perceived asking for help as a sign of weakness and so avoided it.

Candy and Matthews (1999) focused on the importance of managerial approaches which facilitated workplace learning in creating a climate conducive to learning. They noted that where management supported and encouraged experimentation, learning thrived. However, they suggested that where managerial practices were

‘predicated on the exercise of control, seek to diminish experimental behaviours ( and) were not geared to the central importance of learning’( Candy and Matthews 1999:22)

little learning would take place.

Where a workplace introduced NVQs there would be no guarantee that a healthy environment for learning would already exist or be created. It was conceivable that an organisation might have introduced an NVQ programme to stimulate an environment where workplace learning was encouraged however the retrospective nature of NVQs meant that it would be quite possible to gain an NVQ while making no changes to future practice. However, one of the requirements of the Customer Service NVQ promoted Candy and Matthews’ (1999) notion of a climate of experimentation. Candidates were required to test out new methods of solving problems which

encouraged them to innovate and so gave them the opportunity to make at least temporary changes to the way in which work was carried out.

Cairns and Stephenson (2001) also noted that it was important for those pursuing a qualification to see some reward for their workplace learning in terms of organisational improvement. The nature of the NVQ which promoted the competences of the individual rather than the organisation meant that to achieve this aim required additional effort from those setting up the NVQ programme to develop opportunities for collaborative working. The bureaucratic nature of the NVQ process which focuses on building portfolios of evidence can mean that the purpose of the qualification as a whole can be unclear to candidates.

The focus on the individual in the NVQ system also made it difficult to achieve the benefits of collaborative working suggested by Billet (1999) and Candy and Matthews (1999). The structure of the NVQ system did not take any account of the way in which managers could potentially support those working on the qualification. In designing the NVQ system, Jessup (1991) deliberately focused on the individual nature of the NVQ, describing it as candidate led and transferable between jobs and workplaces. This design ignored the potential richness which could be brought to learning in the workplace by the collaborative process.

Certain aspects of the design of the NVQ system imply that it works against the conditions which are highlighted as conducive to workplace learning. However, candidates' experiences of NVQs are likely to be affected by the culture and structure of their workplace regardless of the way in which NVQs are designed.

### **Situated learning**

The importance of both the contextualised nature of learning at work and the effects on learning of relationships between colleagues is explored in further detail by Lave and Wenger (1991) who introduced the concept of situated learning. This section considers the relevance of theories of situated learning to NVQs.

In his design of the NVQ system Jessup (1991) suggested that skills learned in one context could be transferred in a fairly straightforward way to another similar context. This assumption is made whether vocational skills are learned in the classroom and transferred to the workplace or transferred with the learner from one workplace to another (Brown et al 1989). Jessup (1991) associated the effective transfer of skills with the underpinning knowledge a candidate was required to have to achieve the NVQ. This assumption suggested that work on the situated nature of learning had not been taken into account by the NVQ system. Lave and Wenger (1991) stated that learning, whether at work or otherwise was

‘a social process rather than the learning of knowledgeable skills.’ (Lave and Wenger 1991:29)

In their analysis of various groups learning to do a particular job, they described a process of gradual understanding of the historical, social and cultural aspects of the work they did as ‘legitimate peripheral participation’. The learner took on a variety of tasks as an apprentice, gradually being absorbed into the socio-cultural aspects of full participation. Lave and Wenger commented on generality stating,

‘Generality is often associated with abstract representations, with decontextualisation. But abstract representations are meaningless unless they can be made

specific to the situation in hand.’(Lave and Wenger 1991:33)

The NVQ system partly recognised the situated nature of learning, but more by accident than design. The nature of the evidence which a candidate must provide is contextually rooted and likely to describe social aspects of practice. However, in order to achieve the NVQ the candidate must have identified how their evidence matches the decontextualised statements of the standards, so prioritising an understanding of their skills which is detached from the context in which they were demonstrated.

Lave and Wenger (1991), Wenger (1998) and Avis et al (2002) highlighted the importance of the way in which people learned as social beings. People learnt, whether they intended to or not, as they participated with others in social activity. Wenger used the term ‘communities of practice’ to describe the numerous social groupings to which people belonged as they pursued the activities which made up their life.

‘Being alive as human beings means we are constantly engaged in the pursuit of enterprises of all kinds from ensuring our physical survival to seeking the most lofty pleasures. As we define these enterprises and engage in their pursuit together, we interact with each other and with the world and we tune our relations with each other and the world accordingly. In other words we learn.’ (Wenger 1998:45)

Wenger’s emphasis here was on the social and historical context of practice, the way in which a community of practice had been built up over a period of time,

‘things have been done, relationships worked out, processes invented.’ (Wenger 1998:49)

To a certain extent the NVQ system takes account of the social, historical and contextual situation of the candidate. In most cases evidence is drawn from the work of a community of practice whose rules, customs and relationships have built up over a long period of time. Yet to complete the qualification evidence of individual achievement must be provided. The benefit of shared experience is recognised in the process, but the role of the individual must be unpicked from their position within their community of practice for the purpose of achieving the qualification.

Although Lave and Wenger’s emphasis on the importance of the social aspect of learning highlighted the ambiguous position of the NVQ system in relation to the context of the workplace, their research did not suggest how knowledge might develop within communities of practice. Their work focused mainly on the handing over of the skills of the experienced to the less experienced. It did not suggest, as Schon (1983) and Eraut (1994) did, that reflection whilst carrying out particular work could further develop the practice of the group beyond the initial level of knowledge.

In some ways it can be hard to draw detailed inferences in relation to NVQs from Lave and Wenger’s research as their case studies are quite idiosyncratic and hard to generalise, however in problematising the notion of transferable skills and also the influence of being part of a group when learning, their work is enlightening.

It can be seen from the above commentary on NVQs and learning at work that the process required to complete the qualification may stimulate the conditions under which people learn at work, but in many cases this does not happen in any systematic and planned way. Perhaps this haphazard approach to learning

should not concern us – Wenger suggests it is something which happens over which we have less control than we might imagine

‘Learning is something we can assume – whether we see it or not, whether we like the way it goes or not, whether what we are learning is to repeat the past or to shake it off.’ (Wenger 1998:9)

However there is a certain frustration that the learning at work that is stimulated by working towards an NVQ could be enhanced if slightly more attention were paid to the process of understanding how people learn at work in the design of the qualification.

### **Talking about learning at work**

Workplace learning has only recently become a recognised phrase and warranted the attention of educational theorists (Candy and Matthews 1999, Hager 1999, Beckett 2001), and as yet is only in the early stages of achieving traditionally accepted status as a site of learning. Beckett explained that the subjects of his study working in dementia care found it hard to speak about the learning at work which they experienced. He wrote,

‘The way staff interact and share their raw data is vital, but hard to capture, since some staff may believe they ‘know’ nothing if their formal education and training experiences are limited or because their location in a hierarchy is such that they ‘should know nothing.’’(Beckett 2001:155)

It appears that this difficulty in speaking about such learning is exposed when Beckett wrote about workers in a traditionally low status occupation. No such difficulty is mentioned by Schon (1983) and Eraut (1994) whose investigations focused on the experience of professionals. Recent investigations about people

in poorly paid or low status work (Hager 1999, Beckett 2001,) highlight the additional demands of gathering data about workplace learning where participants find it hard to recognise it as such and so may find difficulty in responding to questions about workplace learning.

The nature of NVQs might make it easier for people to talk about experiences of workplace learning as they could be seen as legitimising and giving credit for everyday work. This might be the case particularly in the area of customer service where the NVQ is the only nationally recognised qualification in this traditionally low status area of work. Providing qualifications and accrediting experience for those who do not already have them was a key aim of Jessup's NVQ system.

Hager (1999) recognised that there were already a bewildering number of theories of workplace learning. He explained that this was because workplace learning was truly interdisciplinary and could be viewed from many different perspectives such as sociology, cognitive psychology, education and management theory. He also recognised the importance of situated learning as a theory when discussing work. Hager suggested that the complexity of workplace learning could be surmounted in terms of theory by accepting that several theories rather than one may be useful in helping us understand how learning is taking place. Hager's view is reflected in the approach to workplace learning taken in this thesis.

## **CONCLUSION**

To a certain extent the literature review above has framed the direction of the study described in later chapters of this thesis. The analysis of the political background to NVQs and the rhetoric associated with it has stimulated consideration of the extent to which the findings of the study suggest successive government expectations have been met. However the findings of

the study have also influenced the review of literature, suggesting choices about areas of focus particularly relation to the topic of learning at work where the volume of literature has meant that comments have had to be limited to three areas. The relationship between the literature reviewed in this chapter and the findings from the study is examined in detail in chapters 6, 7 and 8.



## **CHAPTER 3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **INTRODUCTION**

This chapter sets out to describe the choices I made about how to carry out my research. It refers to literature about research methodology and notes how methodological examples from this literature are relevant to my study. A more detailed examination of how I carried out my research follows in chapter 5. The first section of chapter 3 explores how I chose my over-arching research approach, contrasting qualitative and quantitative methods. The next section looks more closely at individual methods used to gather data with particular emphasis on the interview. I then consider the methodological literature concerning sampling and access and explain how I decided on my approach to this aspect of my study. I move on to discuss methodological issues about generating theory from data with a focus on the grounded theory method. The final section considers methodological literature in relation to ethical issues associated with my research.

### **CHOICE OF RESEARCH APPROACH**

This section outlines the theoretical rationale for my choice of research methods. First I explain how a qualitative approach is most appropriate to respond to my research questions, with reference to the work of Burgess (1985). I briefly compare Burgess's approach with an ethnographic approach as described by Hammersley (1992) to highlight how Burgess might have failed to problematise the qualitative approach he describes. I then explain why a quantitative approach would not have been appropriate for my study.

I have chosen a qualitative approach to explore the experiences of people working towards NVQs to ensure that the importance of the influence of the

social, historical and cultural aspects of their work is recognised (Kirk and Miller 1986, Hutchinson 1988, Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). A qualitative approach takes account of the context of what is being researched. In my study, the influence of working in a university which delivers traditional academic qualifications such as degrees and diplomas is likely to have a considerable effect on people's experiences of working towards NVQs. The qualitative approach also provides the opportunity to explore the influence of the researcher on what is researched. This is particularly important where, as in my case, the researcher is working in the organisation where the research is taking place.

Since the 1970s the dominance of quantitative techniques in educational and social research has gradually lessened and

‘some space has been cleared for qualitative research.’

(Burgess 1985: 1)

Burgess identified four characteristics of qualitative research. Firstly he noted that qualitative researchers worked in a natural setting. They aimed to gain understanding of the setting in which they worked and acknowledged that this understanding would be influenced by the historical, social, cultural and organisational context of the setting. Instead of trying to detach what was being researched from the complex influences of previous happenings, the influence of context was seen as a critical part of the research. Secondly Burgess noted that qualitative studies might be ‘designed and re-designed’ (Burgess 1985:8). As the research developed, researchers might adapt both the way in which data was gathered and even the research questions. The option to make such changes was particularly important as the complexity of the context of qualitative research made it difficult for researchers to judge how best to approach it until some contextual understanding of the research

had been gained and it is most likely that this would be achieved by carrying out the initial research.

The third aspect of qualitative research which Burgess identified is that it was

‘concerned with social processes and meaning.’ (Burgess 1985:8)

This aspect of qualitative research was echoed by Usher (1997) who stated,

‘In social research, it is argued, the test of knowledge ...  
should be interpretive power, meaning and illumination.’  
(Usher 1997:5)

Qualitative research which relies on observation or interviews provides a wealth of data. To gain insight, researchers must interpret the data and suggest meaning in what is presented. They should, however, beware of suggesting that there is only one meaning for what they record. The interpretation they make is influenced by their values and beliefs as is the data which they collect and the methods they use to collect it. The fourth aspect of such research, Burgess noted, was that data gathering and data analysis took place at the same time. He identified the links between this style of work and the development of grounded theory by Glaser and Strauss (1967) where early data analysis informs future data collection in an iterative process.

Burgess’s identification of these four key aspects of qualitative research indicate that it is a flexible process which allows for researchers to develop a deeper understanding of what is being researched. His first point about the importance of the historical, social and political context of the research setting is relevant to my study where people’s expectations of what having an NVQ meant in an organisational context influenced their experiences. In carrying out my study of NVQs I also designed and re-designed the study as I became

more familiar with the data gathered. This included adding a research question as I realised the importance of learning at work to my study and producing a revised interview schedule twice to refocus my questions on the themes emerging from my data. Burgess's third point about the importance of social processes and meaning is relevant to my study where the purpose of my work has been to interpret meaning from the experiences of people working towards NVQs, recognising that the meaning they ascribe to their experiences is influenced by the social context of their experience. In my study, as Burgess suggested, data gathering and data analysis has taken place at the same time with the analysis of data informing the collection of further data as described above. The qualitative approach has encouraged me to take a reflexive viewpoint throughout the research process, taking account of the effect of values and beliefs of respondents on what they describe.

(Hammersley 1984)

Burgess's approach placed emphasis on interpreting meaning and seeking explanations for what is seen and heard in the course of the research. This differs from an ethnographic approach where less emphasis is placed on interpretation and more on description of what the ethnographer sees and hears (Hammersley 1992). My approach to this study is more closely associated with the one suggested by Burgess.

In identifying the four characteristics of qualitative research, Burgess implied that they are unproblematic. Hammersley (1992) suggested that in relation to ethnography, Burgess's approach might make the process of qualitative research seem more straightforward than it actually is, especially in relation to data analysis. Hammersley explained that ethnography aims to produce theoretical descriptions which both adhere closely to

‘the concrete reality of particular events, but at the same time reveal general features of human social life.’(Hammersley 1992:12)

However, he suggested that descriptions could not be theories because descriptions are located in specific time-bound context and theories relate to generalisations, nor can description ever be completely free of theories because in making a description, the researcher would implicitly be accepting certain concepts and theories in the structure and assumptions embedded in the description they record.

While the problematic nature of theoretical description which Hammersley identified does not make an ethnographic approach less useful or valid, it highlights the potential complexity of generating theory from qualitative data which is to a certain extent passed over in Burgess’s (1985) explanation and also alerts the researcher to the importance of a reflexive approach to the generation of theory from qualitative data.

I have chosen not to undertake a quantitative approach to my study as it would have been difficult to answer my research questions which related to people’s experiences using this method. My aim was to probe the experiences of a relatively small sample of people in some depth. Cohen and Manion (1980) described such a purpose as

‘to probe deeply and to analyse intensively the multifarious phenomena that constitute the life cycle of the unit.’ (Cohen and Manion 1980: 125)

A quantitative approach could have relied on questionnaires to a larger sample of respondents which might have meant conclusions were more generalisable but yielded less detail. I was keen, as far as possible, for the participants in

my research to inform me about which were the important areas of their experience rather than my making judgements about this from my own assumptions. In order to start the process of gathering data by interview I needed to make some assumptions, but a questionnaire approach would have made it harder to ensure the participants' experiences were prioritised over my estimation of what their experience might be. It would also have made it harder to change and develop research questions and questions to participants in the light of data gathered.

A qualitative approach makes it hard to generalise beyond the setting in which the research takes place as much of the meaning of the research has relevance only to the organisation where people's experiences are explored. As Devine and Heath (1999) stated,

‘ In comparison (to quantitative research) qualitative research does not seek to be either representative or generalisable in quite the same manner as quantitative research or at all.’

(Devine and Heath 1999:10)

However it is possible to evaluate the extent to which conclusions drawn in one setting may be relevant to another as explained by Power (1998).

‘In order to address whether similar conclusions would be reached by other researchers and in other schools we need to consider how far the research findings were dependent on the idiosyncrasies of these two schools, the personal attributes of the researcher, or the product of the theoretical framework being used.’ (Power 1998:20)

I have used Burgess' (1985) definition to help to define the appropriateness of a qualitative approach to my study although I note that his definition is to a

certain extent uncritical and assumes that this approach is straightforward. A qualitative approach allows close emphasis on the context of my study, however, the narrow focus means that it is hard to generalise widely from my findings. The lack of potential for generalisation does not undermine the value of my research as it will have relevance to the setting in which it is undertaken and it will also be a useful source of comparison for research carried out in similar settings.

## **CHOICE OF RESEARCH METHODS**

This section explains the rationale behind my choice to gather data to answer my research questions using semi-structured interviews. I discuss literature describing different types of interviews. I then move on to consider other influences on interviews such as the way the interviewer presents themselves. Finally I briefly consider how validity may be achieved in qualitative interviews.

The emphasis of qualitative research on understanding, interpretation and meaning in context and the production of detailed description, to a certain extent dictates the methods that are used to gather data. Participant observation and interviews are the most frequently used methods to collect the sort of data which will generate the detailed description required to find out more about meaning in context. Participant observation focuses on the present experience of participants as it happens, sometimes over long periods of time. For the purpose of my study participant observation would have been inappropriate as participants' work on their NVQs tended to happen sporadically over a period of months or even years interspersed with long periods of day-to-day work which were not relevant to my study. In this situation, it would have been very difficult to identify times when participant observation should have taken place. The study of people's experiences of NVQs also requires a different approach as it addresses experiences which

have happened in the past. In order to answer the research questions it is important that people have had time to reflect on their experiences which have taken place over a considerable period in time – in many cases more than a year. However, this benefit may be tempered by people's inability to remember their experiences accurately after a long period of time.

The type of interview carried out has considerable influence on the data collected. Drever (1995) drew a clear distinction between the structured interview, the semi-structured interview and the ethnographic or naturalistic interview. The structured interview involved questions being decided before the interview and asked of all respondents in the same order and using the same phraseology. In a semi-structured interview the interviewer had a framework of topics that needed to be covered. Drever (1995) explained,

‘In a semi-structured interview you create a structure mapping the topics to be covered, control the interview to ensure coverage and probe for reasons.’ (Drever 1995:14)

Drever distinguished between the semi-structured interview and the ethnographic interview explaining,

‘ A key difference between semi-structured and ethnographic interviews is that in the former it is usually assumed that the interviewer and the interviewee can share a common frame of reference...In ethnography the interviewer is trying to find out the interviewee's frame of reference.’ (Drever 1995:15)

Drever's descriptions were aimed to guide the novice interviewer in choices of approach to interviewing and as such are legitimately straightforward, but it should be considered that some interviews might fall between the categories described here. It should also be noted that frames of reference might differ



between writers indicating that labels for types of interviews should be used with care. An example of a different frame of reference is provided by Moser and Kalton (1971) who categorised different types of interview as being on a continuum between formal and informal.

I chose to use a semi-structured, informal type of interview. This allowed the interviewee's construction of their experience to influence the way and order in which they answered questions, but also ensured that the same topics were covered with each interviewee.

The decision about the type of interview to use is important, but once this has been made there are several more detailed issues to be covered. Measor (1985) examined the influence of the researcher on the interview, focusing particularly on planning to present a chosen image to the interviewee. She wrote about the importance of appearance,

‘My experience is that appearance and particularly clothes has been an important issue in researching both pupils and teachers, but there are different aspects to each. Each group had different requirements in a sense but the issue mattered to them all.’

(Measor 1985:58)

Measor was researching in a school with a dress code for staff as well as students. In an organisation such as a university the issue may simply be that the interviewer does not dress or look noticeably different – for example wearing a suit when all are wearing jeans – from the people they are interviewing.

Measor (1985) also addressed the difficult issue of the validity of data gathered from interviews. Firstly she explained that it was possible that interviewees put off responding to particular questions about personal issues because they

felt that this was an invasion of their privacy. As Measor identified, it is quite possible that respondents would deliberately avoid telling the interviewer about certain issues, and this should be their right. In the research into NVQs, personal issues were not addressed head on, but it is entirely possible that people avoided talking about bad learning experiences, for example at school. Measor explained how validity of interview data could be enhanced by using triangulation by working from

‘a number of different vantage points.’ (Measor 1985:73)

In the study of the experiences of people doing NVQs interviews have been carried out with NVQ assessors as well as candidates. Although these assessor interviews do not provide triangulation they have given a different vantage point from which to look at data gathered and have highlighted some ways of looking at what people said which I might not have identified if I have been looking from solely my own viewpoint.

In her discussion of validity Measor also makes another telling point,

‘When I was challenged about the validity of data, my own reaction was that really I felt the data were valid. .. Such an emotive statement of course has no validity in social science terms, and it has no ornamentation of scientific rigour.

Nevertheless I felt that after spending eighteen months with a group of pupils I did have a sense of what was accurate, the data were based on a well established relationship.’ (Measor 1985:73)

This comment highlights the insight which researchers can gain as a result of being immersed in data, and though this familiarity cannot be used as an excuse for lack of rigour it may be one legitimate aspect of a raft of measures

of validity. I have noted a similar experience to Measor built on my growing experience of working with participants in my research. As I gathered data from participants and became familiar with the broad range of their experiences I gained confidence that the data I had gathered was representative of what they thought about undertaking an NVQ.

One measure of the success of any methodological choice should be the extent to which it enables the researcher to answer the research questions. Semi-structured interviews have provided detailed data concerning the experience of people working towards NVQs and have proved manageable for both the researcher and the respondents in their work setting. The validity of data from interviews can be challenged as anecdotal (Silverman 2000) and it can be tempting for the interviewer to ignore deviant responses which do not seem to fit the categories that emerge. I aimed to ensure my interview data was valid by covering the same topics with interviewees and constantly comparing the responses from previous interviews with those I was carrying out at the time.

## **SAMPLING AND ACCESS**

This section starts by considering the differences in approach to sampling in quantitative and qualitative research. It then defines theoretical sampling and explains how I have used this in my study, also referring to practical constraints on sampling as a result of limits to access.

Sampling is one of the areas in which qualitative research differs fundamentally from quantitative research. In quantitative research the validity of the data collected is likely to be strongly influenced by the number, characteristics and variables of what is sampled. The research sample is likely to be planned before the research takes place and it is important to the findings that the initial plan is adhered to throughout the process. The process of sampling in qualitative research is less rigidly fixed although this is not a

licence to work with anyone the researcher might choose (Burgess 1982, Silverman 2000). Ball (1984) suggested that the notion of sampling might be problematic in ethnography, and his comments have relevance for my study,

‘Sampling is not something talked about by ethnographers except for theoretical sampling. It carries with it a set of working assumptions about the nature of social realities which in general are alien to ethnographic methodologies.’ (Ball 1984:75)

However Ball explained that when researching in schools or other complex institutions, sampling was an issue which could not be avoided.

‘The fieldworker is engaged in both explicit and implicit forms of sampling. I do not refer here to sampling in any statistical sense, but in terms of naturalistic coverage and the problems of selectivity.’ (Ball 1984:75)

Theoretical sampling was defined by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as,

‘the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes and analyses his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them in order to develop his theory as it emerges.’ (Glaser and Strauss 1967: 45)

Theoretical sampling is a fundamental part of the process which enables researchers to generate grounded theory. It is a way of developing theory from the detailed descriptive data which qualitative research yields.

This approach to sampling reinforces both the second and the fourth key characteristic of qualitative research which Burgess (1985) identified.

Theoretical sampling relies on constant comparison of data so that each time the researcher analyses data this suggests further characteristics of those being sampled which they might want to bring to the forefront of their investigation. In the study of experiences of NVQs, several participants suggested that people's age or how close they were to retirement affected their approach to the qualification, so when choosing the next sample, age was taken into account as a relevant criterion. Towards the end of the sampling process when the theme of the status of NVQs as a qualification had arisen, I ensured my sample included people with few previous qualifications as well as those who were graduates.

From a positivist viewpoint this might seem a haphazard way of choosing a sample which would affect the validity of the research and also would be open to bias as the researcher's viewpoint might affect choices (Drever 1995). However, this criticism reflects a misunderstanding of the purpose of both theoretical sampling and the whole data collection and analysis process leading to the development of grounded theory. As Bartlett and Payne (1997) emphasised, the process of theoretical sampling, which is inextricably linked to other coding activities carried out during data analysis, is dependent on the researcher developing a detailed understanding of those they are researching. As the research progresses the researcher develops an understanding of the key concepts involved in their research and the variables within these concepts. The researcher's sensitivity to the concepts and variables within them suggest future samples which should be selected to test the limit of such concepts. Combined with a reflexive account of how the characteristics, values, beliefs and position of the researcher are likely to affect this process (Hammersley 1984, Coe 1994, Smyth and Shacklock 1998) it is far from the ad hoc approach which a critical positivist might suggest.

Yet the best intentions of the researcher using theoretical sampling may be subverted by difficulties of gaining access to the sample they would like to work with. There may be problems accessing the chosen respondents early in the research such as those described by Scott (1997) where letters requesting access to particular schools and accompanied by a research proposal were left unanswered. A similar situation occurred in my study where my request for people to volunteer to speak to me about their experience of NVQs drew only two responses out of a potential seven. More complex are the restrictions placed on sampling choices once the researcher is known within the research setting, perhaps because of fears from gatekeepers about what the research might reveal. Kelly (1989) explained how this problem was exacerbated in the action research which she and her colleagues carried out where change and innovation was on their agenda. In some cases her access to participants was restricted as teachers feared questioning pupils might make them supportive of changes which would be difficult to implement.

Such restrictions may be presented as practical difficulties. For example in a longitudinal research study carried out by Wallace et al (1998) into student secondary school and post school careers, changes in sampling choices had to be made because of the constraints of the school timetable before exams. While such practical difficulties are bound to occur in any organisation, the researcher sometimes has to disentangle the extent to which these might be used by the gatekeepers to influence who the researcher talks to. The influence of gatekeepers is even more strongly felt where the researcher must ask for volunteers to take part in research, especially where the request is mediated through gatekeepers, as was the case in this NVQ research. Although in a reflexive account of research these influences should be taken into account, the detailed description yielded by semi-structured interviews suggested that even though choice of respondents might be restricted, the depth of data gathered should mitigate against any superficial bias which the

influence of such gatekeepers might have. An important point was also made by Power (1998) who said,

‘Even not getting data can be informative. The ease with which I gained access can be seen to reflect the degree of openness/closure of the settings.’ (Power 1998: 17)

And of course the sampling process may also be restricted by the circumstances of the researcher. Wallace et al (1998) explained how as the researchers changed jobs, research activities were affected, and such simple issues as the cost of travel might affect to whom the researcher would speak. In the process of undertaking research for my study I changed jobs from an area where I was working closely with NVQ candidates as part of my day-to-day work to one where I had to take time out of my job to conduct interviews. To a certain extent the change of job broadened my choice of sample as I had always tried not to interview those I had worked with as an assessor and my change in circumstances gave me a wider choice, however the distance I was able to travel to see participants was reduced providing an element of restriction.

In selecting a sample for qualitative research of the type undertaken in this study the researcher is constantly faced with choices for which there are no correct responses. The selection of those sampled is based on the growing understanding of data collected and is influenced by the researcher’s early interpretations of data as well as more practical issues of access. The validity of such sampling is achieved by frequent reflection and questioning of sampling choices made and a willingness to make transparent issue of access which affected the choice of sample.

## DATA ANALYSIS AND GENERATING THEORY

This section covers theoretical issues associated with generating theory from data. It explores the grounded theory method described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and then explains how I applied this to my research. It includes a brief section on the implications of using computer data analysis software to work with data. The section finishes with some criticisms of grounded theory.

Gathering data using semi-structured interviews generates large volumes of description. Once data has been collected, the researcher must then analyse it and attempt to generate theory from it. It has already been noted that qualitative research using a small sample or limited to one organisation may not generate theory that is generalisable but it may reveal patterns of behaviour or meaning which help to enlighten beyond the limits of the initial research. Hutchinson (1988) explained this in relation to grounded theory,

‘Grounded theories are guided by the assumption that people do, in fact, have patterns of experience. They order and make sense of their environment, although their world may appear nonsensical to the observer. The order or pattern derives from their shared social and symbolic interactions.’  
(Hutchinson 1988:125)

Grounded theory is a method of analysing data and generating theory from qualitative data devised by Glaser and Strauss (1967). It was designed to focus on the action of generating theory from data, placing more emphasis on this process than on the testing of the validity of a theory which had already been suggested by the researcher.

‘Previous books on methods of social research have focused mainly on how to verify theories. This suggests an



overemphasis in current sociology on the verification of theory, and resultant de-emphasis on the prior step of discovering what concepts and hypotheses are relevant for the area that one wishes to research..' (Glaser and Strauss 1967:2)

It is interesting to note that Glaser and Strauss devised this method with the intention of refuting claims that generation of theory from qualitative data was less valid than from quantitative data, as Bartlett and Payne (1997) explained,

‘ Grounded theory adds to the toolkit of the social scientist by allowing the investigator to enter the life world of the participants’ own understandings while maintaining the search for justified belief central to a scientific enterprise’ (Bartlett and Payne 1997:178)

The method described by Glaser and Strauss focuses most closely on what people say and therefore is usually associated with data gathered by interview. It involves constant comparison of data collected to identify similarities or themes and sections of the data are coded to link sections with similar themes. Birley and Moreland (1998) described this process as,

‘the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualising, and categorising data’ (Birley and Moreland 1998:61)

Once this process is well established the researcher then begins to rebuild the data, making connections between the categories assigned in the open coding process. The whole process is designed to focus on what respondents say, in many cases using their own words to identify categories and so achieving the emphasis on discovery of concepts and hypotheses associated with the

research questions. Glaser and Strauss (1967) suggested that in the grounded theory approach the data is the starting point for the research.

The method which Glaser and Strauss suggested is difficult to follow exactly as researchers are likely to have made some assumptions about what they expect to find from their research when they formulate their original research questions. So the relationship between the data and the research may not be as pure as Glaser and Strauss suggested. In my study I have aimed to place emphasis on what the participants have said, but have started from a position of identifying some problematic contradictions from my previous knowledge of NVQ candidates in the Open University and my reading of the literature associated with NVQs. I have aimed constantly to compare data and have used the method of theoretical sampling described by Glaser and Strauss although to a certain extent this has been affected by the practicalities of the situation of my research. In developing themes and codes for my research I have followed the detailed advice of Boyatzis (1998) particularly in relation to seeing themes emerge from data which originally seemed unmanageable.

In order to manage the large volume of data generated by semi-structured interviews, researchers need to develop a system for allocating data to descriptive codes and making connections between codes. Although this can be done manually, most qualitative researchers now use computer software to help with this task. It is important to recognise that the software is only a tool to support the researcher's interpretation and analysis and does not replace the need for the researcher to think analytically about the choice of categories and the relationship between them. (Coffey and Atkinson 1996, Denzin and Lincoln 2000). However use of the computer can,

‘help implement more comprehensive and more complex searching tasks than can be performed by manual techniques.’  
(Coffey and Atkinson 1996:171)

Yet the choice of software to support the analysis of data is not a neutral activity. I used QSR N5 to work on data for this study and as Coffey and Atkinson explained, this software influences the conceptual framework for data gathered by dictating an index system which is based on hierarchies or node trees.

Fielding and Lee (1998) suggested that the ease of manipulation of data using a programme such as QSR N5 could also have disadvantages. They noted that it might be harder for a researcher to get close to their data using a computer rather than a manual system. I did not experience this in my study and found that the speed of manipulation of data afforded by the computer enabled me to spend more time thinking about the data itself.

As noted above, for practical reasons it can be hard to follow Glaser and Strauss's methods exactly. Other researchers have also suggested grounded theory raises theoretical problems. Hammersley (1992) questioned the generation of theory from ethnographic descriptive data saying that it was problematic to derive theory from description as description is essentially time bound and contextual whereas theory should be context free. Hammersley et al (1985) noted that some ethnographers refuted the implicit questioning of data which the generation of theory must involve.

‘Some writers go even further, drawing upon ethnomethodology, to argue that the goal of ethnography must be limited to description of the methods by which accounts are produced. From this point of view one must not argue with data, and so theory, at least under most definitions is ruled out’  
(Hammersley et al 1985: 49)

Hammersley et al also questioned Glaser and Strauss's identification of the relative importance of testing the validity of theory and suggest that

assessments of the likely validity of theory should be made as it is developed. Several writers (Burgess 1985, Hammersley et al 1985, and Taylor and Bogdan 1997) contrasted the method of generating theory described by Glaser and Strauss with the analytic inductive method which focuses on the testing of validity of theory. The analytic inductive method is more concerned with enabling researchers to extend the generalisability of their studies (Taylor and Bogdan 1997) and less with the exploration of meaning.

In my study I have chosen to follow the key principle of grounded theory by using data to generate theory rather than suggesting a hypothesis and testing it against data gathered. However I have not achieved the purity of approach suggested by Glaser and Strauss as my initial research questions were generated by a questioning of people's experience of NVQs built on knowledge acquired before any data was collected.

## **ETHICAL ISSUES**

This section covers methodological issues in relation to the ethics of my research. It starts by considering ethical issues in relation to sampling and access to participants in my research. It then moves on to consider how participants were informed about the purpose of the research. I discuss the effect of carrying out research where it may appear to question the behaviour of an educational organisation. Next I consider the perception of my position with regard to NVQs in the eyes of participants. Finally I review the importance of a reflexive approach to research.

Carrying out any research, whether qualitative or quantitative is likely to raise many ethical issues. Some can be addressed in the planning of the research. Scott (1997) and Wallace et al (1998) explained the complexities of planning research in schools where researchers expected to hear about issues which were critical of teachers and school organisation and needed to decide how to

deal with these in agreement with the headteacher in order to gain access to the school as a research site. Fairly straightforward ethical issues associated with access had relevance to the study of NVQ candidates. Permission to interview candidates had to be sought through their line manager as this is the way in which all approaches were considered acceptable in the Open University. Although there was no evidence to suggest line managers selected candidates to speak to me, I had no way of knowing how candidates were asked to take part. A standardised approach direct to candidates from myself might have yielded a different sample of people, and would perhaps have included more of those who reacted to the NVQ less favourably, but to override the accepted system of approaching secretarial/clerical staff through line managers might have resulted in permission being refused altogether.

Another quite straightforward ethical issue relates to how the purpose of research and the identity and intentions of the researcher are explained to respondents. Punch (1986) stated that prior to entry into organisations, especially where there is a clear hierarchy for negotiating access, a formal statement of purpose would usually be required. However he also said,

‘Thereafter it may be situationally inappropriate to repeat continually that purpose and identify oneself. The ‘subjects’ of research in an organisation may not even have been consulted by superiors about the presence of a researcher in their midst, and may scarcely be in a position to refuse to co-operate.’

(Punch 1986:37)

When researching NVQs I found it necessary to consider whether people felt pressured to co-operate because they had been asked by line managers, and although I asked them if they were happy to take part privately before arranging the interview and immediately before starting it, they too may have felt in no position to refuse.

Many ethical issues associated with qualitative research cannot be foreseen in the planning stage and often the correct ethical course of action is not clear. The researcher must protect the people being researched, but in protecting one group, another may be put in danger of harm. Kelly (1989) explained how action researchers with an agenda to promote change might be seen as manipulative and not as neutral outsiders. She also highlighted the issue that as a researcher she had identified her own belief in encouraging girls in school to become more involved in science and technology. However, she wrote

‘Our case for intervening in schools clearly rested - as does most educational activity - on our assessment of what is in the children’s best interests, even if they may not recognise it themselves. What if we were wrong? What if the changes which we thought would advantage pupils turned out not to do so?’ (Kelly 1989:103)

Although research into NVQs did not have the purpose of changing the system, a similar ethical issue was raised. If offering an NVQ to secretarial/clerical staff in the Open University was looked on as a positive developmental opportunity for them by line managers and those responsible for training and development, perhaps asking searching questions about the status of NVQs and what is learnt from them was actively encouraging those who had worked on them to doubt their validity and so setting them at odds with the organisation they work for.

Burgess (1989) and Cotterill and Letherby (1994) identified the relationship between the researcher and the researched as being

‘at the heart of the ethnographic enterprise.’ (Burgess 1989:60)

Burgess explained how the position of the researcher can affect both the outcome of the research and the data collected, a point also mentioned by Punch (1986). Barnes (1979) explained how the researcher must often make a choice about how much of a personal stance is made obvious to those being interviewed,

‘The scientist has to balance the advantages of being associated with one viewpoint and thus of gaining a fuller understanding of the aims and relationships of its supporters against the necessity of learning about their opponents as well if he is to understand the struggle between them adequately. If he has to collect all his data by himself, he cannot avoid being a somewhat lukewarm supporter of any side, wherever his sympathies may happen to lie.’ (Barnes 1979:117)

Barnes’ comment has relevance to the study of people’s experiences of NVQs as it was important for me to seem neither to be favouring NVQs nor criticising them. However, when I started the research I was working in the department of the Open University which managed NVQ provision, so it was likely that I was seen by some respondents as generally supporting NVQs. As my research progressed I moved into a different job that was not associated with NVQs. It has been important to take a reflexive view of the influence my position may have had on people’s responses and record that in my account of how my research was undertaken in chapter 5.

Carrying out research where one works also raises many ethical dilemmas, although it should not be assumed that ethical dilemmas are greater than when one researches in an external organisation, just different. Such complexities should not be ignored, rather they should be examined for the light they can throw on the whole research process from the choice of topic to research, through choice of research methods, gathering and analysis of data to

reporting of findings. In these circumstances Smyth and Shacklock (1998) explained the fundamental importance of a reflexive approach,

‘As we see it, the process of reflexivity is an attempt to identify, do something about and acknowledge the limitations of the research: its location, its subjects, its process, its theoretical context, its data, its analysis and how accounts recognise that the construction of knowledge takes place in the world and not apart from it.’ (Smyth and Shacklock 1998:7)

A reflexive approach has been taken throughout and this is outlined in detail in chapter 5.

This section demonstrates the complexity of ethical issues which may affect the research. Since some issues only become evident when research is in progress it is impossible to avoid them completely. In my research I have aimed to be sensitive to the effect they might have on findings and take them into account during interpretation and analysis of data.

## **CONCLUSION**

The above chapter outlines the methodological literature which has influenced choices made about the conduct of the research. Where appropriate, brief examples of what actually happened as the research was carried out have been used to contextualise methodological commentary. The next two chapters describes in detail how the research was carried out.



## **CHAPTER 4 RESEARCH CONTEXT**

### **INTRODUCTION**

In this chapter I provide information which describes the context in which my research was carried out. The first section provides information about the Open University. This information is included to take account of the importance of the social, historical and cultural aspects of experience in qualitative research (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). The second part of this section outlines the typical process which people take part in to gain an NVQ. More detailed contextual information about participants is included at Appendix A. The final part of this section outlines how my job changed while working on my research and the effect this had on it.

### **OPEN UNIVERSITY BACKGROUND**

The research took place between 2000 and 2004 at the Open University in the UK. The Open University is the UK's largest university, and was established in 1969. At any one time approximately 150,000 students are studying with the Open University. Nearly all students study by distance learning using study materials provided by the Open University with support from an associate lecturer and administrative staff. Entry to all undergraduate courses is open, meaning that students do not need any entry qualifications for undergraduate courses. The Open University was originally set up to provide a chance for people to gain a degree who had not had the opportunity to do this after leaving school – so called second chance learners. The average age of students is currently 34 although the fastest growing group of students is aged between 18 and 25. In most cases students pay for their courses themselves, although a certain number receive financial assistance from the government and some are sponsored by employers. The University also receives funding

for most students from the Higher Education Funding Council in England or its counterpart in Scotland , Northern Ireland and Wales.

Staff at the Open University answer students' questions about a wide variety of study matters ranging from payment of fees to questions about submission of assignments. They also deal with questions about study from prospective students. Most of the contact with students and prospective students is by phone or e-mail. Staff providing administrative support for students are divided into two grades or categories – secretarial/clerical and administrative. Administrative staff are at higher grades than secretarial/clerical staff although both categories of staff carry out administrative work.

Secretarial/clerical staff responsible for answering student questions are either based at Milton Keynes at the main Open University campus at Walton Hall or at one of the thirteen regional offices based round the UK. Although the work carried out in the regions and on the main campus differs slightly in the way it is organised, it is all based on responding to student queries in some way.

Since 1998 secretarial/clerical staff at the Open University have had the option of undertaking an NVQ at level 2 or 3. In most cases staff have undertaken NVQs in Customer Service, but a small number have done NVQs in Administration if their job was less customer focused. Most staff have volunteered to do an NVQ but in a few areas such as the Course Information and Advice Centre (CIAC), Registration and Fees Centre and some of the regional offices, new staff have been required to do an NVQ as part of their contract. Below the process of undertaking the NVQ is outlined. This describes the typical way that staff experience the NVQ process.

## TYPICAL PROCESS OF UNDERTAKING AN NVQ

- A manager of secretarial/clerical staff finds out about Customer Service NVQs from targeted e-mails or an information event
- The manager contacts the Open University NVQ Assessment Centre to request a briefing event for staff. Secretarial/clerical staff are invited to attend
- The process of doing an NVQ is outlined at the briefing event which takes place at the workplace of the interested staff and is run by the NVQ Assessment Centre. Staff and managers are informed of the time commitment of undertaking the NVQ and it is explained that the work for the NVQ will be carried out in work time
- Managers (who may be secretarial/clerical or administrative grades) are asked if they are interested in training to be assessors. They can also do a Customer Service NVQ instead of or as well as assessor training
- Staff who are interested in doing an NVQ inform their manager who informs the NVQ Centre. Staff taking part are sent information packs
- A group is formed from the staff who have said they want to work towards the NVQ. If enough people from one department have decided to do an NVQ the group will comprise just staff from this area. If not, groups may be made up from more than one area. Group sizes range from about four members to twelve members. There are no shared regional groups because of the logistics of travelling for workshops

- The group is allocated at least one qualified NVQ assessor. This person may work for the Open University or may be an external consultant
- Dates for up to five workshops are organised, approximately one month apart. At these workshops the assessor describes how to gather evidence and build it into a portfolio
- After the first or second workshop the assessor organises a date and time to carry out a workplace observation with each NVQ candidate. This observation takes about 30 minutes
- When the NVQ candidates think they have gathered evidence to meet all the standards they submit their portfolio for assessment to their assessor
- When portfolio assessment has taken place the NVQ candidate may need to have a professional dialogue with their assessor to gather further evidence. They may also need to collect additional documentary evidence
- When the assessor is satisfied that the NVQ candidate has provided enough evidence to demonstrate that they are competent, the assessor will sign the portfolio off for verification
- When verification is complete the candidate will receive their NVQ certificate

Although the workshop programme usually spans a period of approximately six months there is no time limit for candidates completing the gathering of their evidence. However, it would be possible for their assessor to judge that evidence might become out of date after a period of two years.

## **CHANGES TO RESEARCHER'S JOB**

From the start of my research until February 2002 I worked as NVQ Manager at the Open University NVQ Assessment Centre based at the Oxford region. As well as managing the Centre I also acted as assessor for a small number of groups and as internal verifier for others. After February 2002 I moved to work at the main campus at Walton Hall, Milton Keynes as Widening Participation Programme Manager. This work was not connected to NVQs. However from Feb 2002 I was a member of the NVQ Assessment Service Management group which was the committee overseeing the work of Open University NVQ assessment services.

## **CONCLUSION**

The contextual information in this chapter is referred to throughout the rest of the thesis as I explain how I gathered data and then describe and analyse my findings.

## **CHAPTER 5 RESEARCH METHODS**

### **INTRODUCTION**

In this chapter I describe the research methods I used. I start by outlining the original plan for my research and explain how I had to adapt this plan as my research progressed. The next section explains how I made sampling choices covering a variety of criteria. I also mention briefly how I chose my sample of assessors. I move on to consider how I gained access to participants,. Following this section I describe how I carried out interviews. The next section refers to transcription and analysis of data. I then explain how I decided on the theoretical framework which I have used to write about findings in chapters 6, 7 and 8. The final section of chapter 5 highlights some particular difficulties and dilemmas associated with the research process.

### **RESEARCH PLAN**

This section outlines the original plan for my research. It then identifies the changes that I made to the plan as my research progressed.

The plan for my research was to carry out the following activities to gather qualitative data about the experiences of secretarial/clerical staff at the Open University who were working on Customer Service NVQs. Originally I intended to do the following:

- Carry out up to 30 semi-structured interviews with secretarial/clerical staff who were working on NVQs to find out about their experiences of this work. Staff interviewed would be from a variety of different locations

- Carry out up to 5 interviews with assessors working with secretarial/clerical staff on NVQs to provide background data
- Carry out participant observation where possible at candidate workshops or with the candidates in the workplace when they were working on NVQs
- Collect data about when people worked on their NVQs by asking a number of people to keep diaries of the times they carried out this work.

In fact I did not manage to undertake all this data collection for the reasons described below. I completed 25 interviews with secretarial/clerical staff who were working towards or who had completed Customer Service NVQs at levels 2 or 3. I was unable to complete the 30 I had anticipated because of my job change. Although I continued to work for the Open University it became harder to negotiate time to talk to NVQ candidates as this was in addition to my main job. I completed interviews with 4 assessors.

I started the process of carrying out participant observation by making notes about times when I was working closely with candidates, for example when I was running workshops or visiting to carry out an observation or professional dialogue. When I met candidates at the beginning of a workshop session, I explained to them that I might make notes about what they said and did as part of my research. Although they all agreed to this I felt uncomfortable about this aspect of my research. I was concerned that although they initially gave their consent, in the informal atmosphere of a workshop they might say something which they did not wish me to take note of, but it would be difficult for them to withdraw consent. Since I had decided that the most important data gathering method would be by interview I decided not to continue with the participant observation since I could not guarantee informed consent.

I had intended to ask a number of NVQ candidates to keep diaries of when and for how long they worked on their NVQs. This was to help me to gather background information about the theme of time spent working on NVQs. In November 2001 I piloted this activity with five NVQ candidates asking them to keep a simple diary sheet recording when they worked on their NVQs. When I requested the return of the completed diaries only one person had been able to do this. The others had felt that any spare time they had been allocated for their NVQ should have been spent working on their portfolio. I decided that in these working circumstances it was inappropriate to ask people to complete a diary. This situation alerted me to the severity of the pressure of conflicting demands on their time when undertaking the NVQ.

Although I was unable to complete all the interviews I had planned, I found that by the time I had completed 21 interviews I was gathering little new information from people and I felt that my data was saturated. At this stage I revised my interview schedule to focus particularly on two issues. The first of these was the status of NVQs and the second was the way in which participants found time to work on NVQs alongside their day-to-day work. I would like to have used a wider variety of methods to gather data to see if this gave a broader picture of people's experience, but in the circumstances this was not possible.

## **SAMPLING**

This section describes how I selected the sample of people to interview for my research. Each section considers a particular sampling criterion and explains how this affected my choices. The section ends with a brief note about how I sampled assessors to interview. A list of the location and date of the interviews carried out is included as Appendix B.



### **Geographical location**

By the end of my study I had carried out interviews with people based in four different regions of the Open University and at the main Milton Keynes campus at Walton Hall, within five different departments. I chose the geographical location of my sample for several reasons. Firstly I wanted to ensure I had interviewed people who were working in regions and at the main campus to account for the fact that their experience might differ as a result of the type of work they carried out. I also wanted to consider the effect working in a smaller department in the regions in comparison to the large campus department might have on their experience. In regions, NVQ workshop groups were always made up of people from that region who would know each other, whereas at the main campus, groups could be made up from people working in different departments who might not know each other.

I started the interview process in the Oxford region where I was working as NVQ Manager. I carried out interviews with staff that I knew and who knew me. I had been involved with the promotion and assessment of their NVQs. Shortly after, I also interviewed people working towards NVQs in the Courses and Information Centre at the main campus. These people did not know me personally and I had not been involved with their NVQ assessment, although in some cases they knew I worked on NVQs at the Open University. I found that when interviewing the people I knew well, the atmosphere was relaxed and friendly, but that it was difficult to address the questions I hoped to answer. This was partly because it was tempting to talk widely about everyday things and felt false to be restricting our conversation to the areas relevant to my research, and also the participants in the research often assumed I already knew a great deal about their experiences and so did not explain them in detail. I therefore chose the rest of my sample where possible from people who I had not worked closely with on NVQs. This became easier as I progressed with my research as I was no longer working specifically with NVQs. My experiences described above illustrate the point made by Holstein and

Gubrium (1995) that the interviewer plays an active part in the construction of what takes place in the interview and can never be a neutral facilitator.

The geographical location of my sample was to a certain extent dictated by practicalities. Not all of the thirteen Open University regions had staff who had undertaken NVQs. I was also constrained in the latter part of my research by the travelling time for me to visit regions as once I no longer worked in the area of NVQs I needed to keep time spent on travelling to a minimum. I therefore interviewed participants in Bristol, Nottingham and London. I visited Bristol and London. I had planned to visit Nottingham, but just before my visit a participant broke her ankle and requested that I carry out the interview by phone as she was on sick leave. I carried out both interviews with staff from the Nottingham office by phone.

At the main campus of the Open University in Milton Keynes I interviewed people from five different departments. I wanted to work with a sample from different departments to take account of the difference in the type of work they did and its potential effect on experience. The departments I worked with were

- The Courses and Information and Advice Centre (CIAC) where potential students call to find out more about study with the Open University
- The Registration and Fees Centre where potential and current students call or e mail to find out about queries to do with their registration as students or their payment of fees
- The Credit Transfer Office where students and potential students call or e mail to find out about whether they can be excused any study because of credit gained for previous qualifications

- The Open University Student Union Office which deals with enquiries from students about issues to do with the student union
- The Communications Team working on preparing written materials for students telling them about Open University courses

### **Length of time working for the Open University**

In my initial choice of sample I hypothesised that the length of time people had worked for the Open University might affect their experiences of doing an NVQ. In my first group of participants from the Oxford region I aimed to select a group of people with a varied length of service. I was able to interview staff whose service ranged from less than two years to more than ten years. This followed the advice of Powney and Watts (1985) who suggested the importance of sampling,

‘To give a range of views relevant to the purpose of the research.’ (Powney and Watts 1985:121)

However once I had carried out the first set of interviews I realised that as well as length of service, participant age might also be an important factor in my research, particularly in relation to the stages people saw themselves as having achieved in relation to their career. This realisation arose from interviewing staff who were close to retirement and mentioned that this affected their choices associated with doing the NVQ and also those who were returning to work after having a career break to bring up children.

## **Gender**

I did not originally intend to pay attention to gender in my sample as I realised that since the number of male members of secretarial/clerical staff was so small it would be difficult to ensure I sampled them. I would need to have asked managers if I could speak to specific individuals which I felt would have been inappropriate (see section below on access). However in the total sample I interviewed 3 men out of a total of 25 which equates reasonably well to the overall percentage of male members of staff at secretarial/clerical grades within the Open University.

## **Previous educational qualifications and experience**

By the time I had interviewed approximately 10 people I realised that people's previous educational experience seemed to influence the way they described their experience of NVQ particularly in relation to their choice to do an NVQ, and their perception of its status and value. This illustrates the way in which constant reference to data collected informs future sampling choices (Glaser and Strauss 1967). In my later sampling I made sure that I selected people with different educational backgrounds, specifically requesting this from the person with whom I was arranging to see people. In my final sample from the London region where I focused my questions particularly on status, three out of the four participants were recent graduates. I realised that there might also be a difference in experience between people who were graduates from the Open University and graduates from traditional universities as a result of a comment from one of the assessors I interviewed, but was unable to address this in my later sampling because of access constraints described in the relevant section below.

### **Sampling assessors**

My aim in interviewing assessors was to provide additional information about the process of working towards an NVQ from a point of view which differed from that of the participants. Carrying out interviews with assessors could not be called triangulation as assessors were not experiencing working towards an NVQ, however hearing about their views on candidates' experience helped me to see the process the participants were undergoing from a viewpoint other than my own. In selecting assessors to interview I chose people who had worked with the participants I interviewed.

The way in which I addressed my sampling for this study to a certain extent follows the suggestions of theoretical sampling but decisions were often overtaken by issues of access. However all the issues raised above arose as a result of constantly comparing data as it was gathered.

### **ACCESS**

This section explains how I gained access to the participants I had selected for my sample and highlights particular approaches that I made taking into account the context of my study. The section concludes by describing how issues of access were affected when my job at the Open University changed.

To a certain extent negotiating access to participants was straightforward. Working within a university it would be unlikely that access to undertake research would be refused. What made the process slightly less straightforward was that management attitudes to NVQs for secretarial/clerical staff depended to a great extent on the individual manager's commitment to the NVQ programme. Even where managers supported the NVQ programme, if they were under time pressure to get their day-to-day work done, time spent on NVQs could be resented. In areas where a certain level of telephone cover had

to be maintained managers might have to organise cover to enable participants to take part in interviews away from their desks.

### **Working with gatekeepers**

In the Open University management of secretarial/clerical staff tends to be hierarchical so it was essential to approach gaining access taking this into account (Powney and Watts 1985). First I sought permission to carry out interviews from the gatekeeper for each area. In most cases this was initially an assistant director who was in overall charge of the area where I wanted to work. They would then respond and forward the request to the immediate manager of the specific department where staff were working on NVQs. Once in contact with the immediate manager I supplied them with more details about the research I wanted to undertake. I ensured I made clear in this approach exactly how long people would need to be away from their desks to take part and how I would organise times and locations for interviews, to suit their working priorities rather than mine.

I asked managers if they would prefer to contact potential participants or whether they would prefer to give me a list and for me to contact them. In some cases managers asked me to contact potential participants direct and in some cases they made contact and supplied me with the names of people who would like to take part. I felt it was particularly important to give managers the option to handle the process of contacting their staff if they wished, firstly because if people did not want to take part it might be easier for them to say this to their managers rather than to me, and secondly since managers had to cope with the logistic issues associated with providing cover, they might want to retain control over who they asked to do interviews. However if managers in some way selected the sample I was to speak to I would not have known this, nor would I have known if any pressure was exerted on people to take part

by managers. All assistant directors and managers that I contacted gave me permission to work with staff for whom they were responsible

Where I contacted potential participants I made clear that if they wanted to take part they had the permission of a named manager. With the provisos explained above, all participants were volunteers. When I met them for the interview I explained what would happen and the purpose of my research and checked again that they were happy to continue, but I am aware that it might have been difficult for a participant to refuse at this stage. This would have been emphasised if the participants were aware of my position in the Open University which was senior to theirs.

### **Changes in negotiating access**

When I ceased to work in the NVQ office, negotiating access to participants became more complex. This was for two reasons. Firstly when I no longer worked for the NVQ Centre I felt it was appropriate to gain permission to carry out interviews with the new NVQ manager. Permission was gained with no problem and I then followed the same route for gaining access as before. Secondly as I no longer knew where NVQ programmes were taking place in the University or the background of candidates I needed to ask those working in the field who I should interview. Where I was looking for a particular characteristic of my sample such as previous educational background of candidates I had to rely on the knowledge of my 'go-between' to recommend particular people to me. Both people I worked with in this capacity felt it was appropriate to seek permission from potential participants before passing on their names to me, so access to them was gained in a slightly different way.

For my final two regional samples in Nottingham and London, gaining access also became more difficult as due to financial cutbacks at the University, staff were under more pressure to maintain a daily level of service. Although I

could not claim that this meant I saw fewer or different people I sensed that managers found it harder to release people from their daily work to take part in interviews.

## **INTERVIEWING**

This section describes how I undertook interviews with participants and notes how and why the interview schedule I used changed over the period of time when I was carrying out my research. More detailed information about the location and timing of interviews concludes the section.

The interviews could best be described as semi-structured (Drever 1995). I prepared an interview schedule with a list of questions which ensured all the required topics were covered, but I adapted the way in which I phrased the question to suit the direction of each conversation with individual participants. I also did not keep to a particular order for asking questions as I was keen for the participants to make links between topics where possible. This gave me insight into the way they associated topics with each other, which was informative in terms of their experience.

### **Interview schedules**

I used three different interview schedules which are included as Appendix C. Appendices A and B note which schedule was used with which participant. The schedules differed as follows

- Schedule one: this was my first interview schedule which I used with the first nine interviewees
- Schedule two: this schedule was a revised version of schedule one. I undertook this revision because I found that when I asked participants



whether they had learned anything from their NVQ they tended to give very brief answers. Schedule two was designed to elicit more detailed responses. In practice it was no more successful than schedule one and the questions which focused on people's learning experiences more broadly seemed to confuse them, so I returned to schedule one

- Schedule three: this schedule was used with the final four participants who I interviewed at the London region. For these interviews I decided to focus on two topics which I wanted to investigate more deeply. These topics were firstly participants' perception of the status of NVQs and secondly the way in which they fitted their NVQ work into the time frame of their day-to-day work

I used a separate interview schedule with assessors which is attached as schedule 4 in Appendix C.

### **Carrying out the interviews**

Interviews took place in a variety of locations. Most participants worked in open plan offices so in many cases they had organised a private room where we could talk. However in some cases this was not possible and two interviews took place in the staff café. Two also took place at the participants' desks. This was because they had not been able to arrange cover for their phones and therefore had to stop to take phone calls. This situation made it difficult to carry out the interview, however, after checking with these participants that they were happy to do the interview in this way I felt it was best to go ahead rather than cancel the interview. In both cases this happened at a region so it would have been hard for me to return at another time. Most interviews lasted approximately 30 – 40 minutes, although there was no time restriction. The duration of the interview was dictated by the length of time it took for us to cover all the questions in the interview schedule.

Before starting each interview I explained the purpose of my research and also explained to participants how I intended to use what they said. I assured them that where I quoted from what they said it would be anonymous and that it would be hard to identify individual contributions from the way in which I intended to use examples from what they had said in my write up. I also explained that I was trying to find out about their experiences of doing the NVQ and that the focus of the interview would be on this rather than the process of doing the NVQs. I felt it was important to make this clear as I did not want them to feel that I was asking them to comment specifically on how workshops had been run or assessments carried out especially as in many cases these had been delivered by their colleagues. Before the interviews took place I checked that participants were happy for me to tape record their interviews and I explained how I would transcribe them. No participants objected to being taped and none questioned me further on confidentiality. In the first interviews at Oxford, I asked participants if they would like to have the opportunity to hear back what they had said on the tapes, but they all refused with one saying that she would not be prepared to go ahead with the interview if she had to listen to the tape. After this response I decided not to ask other participants if they would like to hear the tapes back.

## **TRANSCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS OF DATA**

This section outlines how transcription and analysis of data took place with particular reference to the way in which qualitative data was coded and analysed using QSR N5 software.

### **Transcription**

The first 21 interviews were fully transcribed. By the time I had completed these I realised that in several areas I was gathering few new ideas. For the final four interviews I used a different interview schedule and I selectively transcribed these interviews focusing only on new themes which were relevant

to my narrower focus at this stage. Assessor interviews were also selectively transcribed. An example of a fully transcribed interview using schedule two is included as Appendix D. An example of a selectively transcribed interview using schedule three is included as Appendix E.

### **Analysis of data**

I analysed data using the QSR N5 software. This allowed me to select sections of text from what people had said and group them together where there appeared to be themes or similar or related ideas expressed. When using QSR N5 this process is called allocating sections of text to free nodes. I started this process as soon as I had loaded the first transcriptions on to QSR N5 at the beginning of my data collection activities and carried on allocating text and adding free nodes as I loaded on more interviews. When I added new free nodes I then had to return to interviews loaded previously to re-check for data relevant to the new free nodes. A list of free nodes that I used on QSR N5 is attached as Appendix F.

I divided up transcriptions for allocations to nodes using the sentence as the measure for division. I had transcribed texts using sentence punctuation as indicated by people's voice tone on the tapes and sentences seemed to be a useful measure to capture individual ideas. However using sentences as the measure meant that I had some overlap in coding data to free nodes with sentences appearing under more than one node.

I tried to label the free nodes using concepts raised by participants in their interviews and to avoid allocating categories which I thought might be appropriate. In some cases I used the participants' own words to label the categories for example 'catching up – I've not done Uni'. I worked quickly, identifying free nodes using titles to distinguish between categories especially where concepts were similar. For example where participants mentioned how difficult they found it to complete their NVQ I distinguished between 'leaving

it' referring to feelings about participants ignoring the feeling that they ought to work on their portfolio and 'taking so long' which referred to the length of time it took participants to match evidence to standards. I used memos freely to define the boundaries of free node categories and note possible links between them. Once I had listed about thirty free nodes I started to build node trees, where free nodes were built into hierarchies according to links between the data. I ended up with nine top-level nodes. A diagram outlining the node trees and their branches can be found at Appendix G. In some cases free nodes and their associated data were moved straight into node trees, in others two free nodes were merged together, or free nodes were divided and data recoded into one or the other branch.

In the final stage of data analysis I deserted QSR N5 for pen and paper to try and draw links between the top-level nodes and confirm my theoretical framework.

I initially found using QSR N5 time consuming and frustrating as it seemed to take a long time to load data into it and gain confidence in learning systems to manipulate it. Eventually, however, I found that the hierarchical system enabled me to make sense of a large volume of data and to try out and sometimes discard possible relationships between data quickly. At the final stage of the analysis process when I was attempting to select a small number of overarching themes to use when writing up my findings I found the way in which relationships between categories could be represented on QSR N5 constraining. However this might have been because of my relatively limited technological understanding of the programme rather than its shortcomings.

## **HOW I REACHED MY THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

In order to write coherently about the findings from my research it was necessary to develop a framework which enabled me to write about what I had discovered and link it to the literature relevant to my study. The framework

also had the purpose of enabling me to demonstrate how I had answered my research questions and fulfilling the criterion of demonstrating how my findings might be useful to other educational professionals. Using the top level nodes in QSR N5 as a starting point I identified three key constructs which enabled me to address all the key findings from my research and demonstrate relevance to the literature reviewed. The constructs were identified as a result of an iterative process of reviewing the literature, analysing data collected and returning to review the literature in the light of the data gathered. I went through this cyclical process several times before identifying constructs. The constructs I decided upon were

- Expectations and experiences
- NVQs and learning at work
- The implications of workplace learning

The construct of **expectations and experiences** arose from consideration of the difference between what doing an NVQ meant to those undertaking it and the purpose of the NVQ system as expressed in government documentation. Initially the government purpose for NVQs was to raise the skill level in the UK, but as the system developed this purpose seemed subtly to change to providing an organising framework for vocational qualifications and a system of accrediting current expertise. To a certain extent this difference between expectation and experience was made possible by the newness of the NVQ system where expectations about purpose were clouded by confusion about the practical way in which the system worked. The novelty of the qualification and lack of pre-conceptions about what it involved also influenced the second aspect of this construct which explored the difference between the expectations held by the individual about the qualification and their actual experience. This area of exploration had particular relevance to the research questions which covered finding out about people's choice to do an NVQ as well as their expectations of its affect on their career development and employability.

The construct of **NVQs and learning at work** was the part of the framework which was most clearly apparent from my findings. I had originally been motivated to carry out my study by an interest in whether and what people learned from doing an NVQ. Within this construct I would be able to explore the differences between the understanding of the term learning expressed by participants which emerged as I carried out my study and the broader understanding used by educationalists. Again, the development of this construct was achieved by an iterative process of moving between consideration of literature and data. This construct also provided the opportunity to explore the relationship between competence and learning which engaged so many of the critics of the conception of the NVQ system. As I gathered data I noted that some participants were describing a new approach to their work as a result of working on their NVQ. Within this construct I was able to find a way of describing that approach and assess how it compared to existing theories about learning at work.

The final construct of **the implications of learning at work** arose to a certain extent from the previous construct of learning at work and also from the volume and breadth of comments made by participants about the effect on their experience of fitting in working on a qualification alongside their existing work commitments. This construct encompasses the way in which participants view the demands of working on their NVQ and maintaining a level of customer service as conflicting with each other and the implications for this conflict both on their experiences of undertaking the qualification and their relationship with colleagues at work.

The process I used to develop these constructs demonstrates how I used the data collected to generate theory but it also shows that I was not able to focus as specifically on data as the pure grounded theory method which Glaser and Strauss (1967) might have required. However, returning to the literature to

support my development of constructs has ensured that the theoretical framework I have used has the potential to develop the argument which is sustained in literature about NVQs a little further.

## **DIFFICULTIES AND DILEMMAS ASSOCIATED WITH THE RESEARCH PROCESS**

This section focuses particularly on difficulties and dilemmas associated with the research process. The first part identifies a difficulty caused by an unexpected change to the sample of candidates I was expecting to interview. The second part considers how I developed my interview techniques. Part three addresses the issue of informed consent. The final part describes difficulties encountered in interpreting participants' responses.

### **Unexpected changes to the sample of candidates**

Access to participants was not always straightforward. In one of the departments at the main Open University campus a participant who I had originally expected to interview was absent and a line manager had substituted another person who seemed a little unwilling to take part. I had to choose between not doing the interview and perhaps causing difficulties for the participant or going ahead. I chose to go ahead and spent extra time explaining about the purpose of the research which reassured the participant so I concluded that this situation eventually did not affect the data greatly. Another participant who volunteered to be interviewed clearly had a particular agenda of her own that she wished to pursue – a risk which the researcher takes when asking for volunteers (Drever 1995). This interview took place when I was still working as NVQ Manager and the participant wanted to tell me, as the representative of Open University support for NVQs, about problems that she had experienced with the NVQ delivery system. This was quite a legitimate response to my questions about experience, but initially dominated the

interview. However, once she had told me about her difficulties, she went on to discuss her experiences in some depth, and way beyond issues of process.

### **Interviewing techniques**

My own interview technique was initially the source of some difficulty. I needed to learn how to formulate probing and follow up questions while still concentrating on what the participant was saying. I also needed to learn to ask open questions, and to allow and feel comfortable with silence when an interviewee needed time to think. I gained these skills as I carried out more interviews and became more practised. However I still found that with participants who talked less freely, initially I had to talk more than I would have liked to help them to relax and feel comfortable with the situation. In the early interviews, which took place at Oxford where I was working at the time I found a different problem. Here, as people were my work colleagues I had a relaxed and friendly relationship with all the participants I interviewed which had grown out of seeing them and chatting with them almost every day. The formality of the interview situation seemed at odds with our day-to day more familiar relationship. Interviewees' body language and manner of expression suggested they felt uncomfortable in a situation which seemed to a certain extent false, and I was unsure how far to use informal chat about local circumstances to put people at ease and how far to keep to the questions I wanted to cover. I tried to tread a middle path, talking informally where interviewees mentioned a familiar topic, but moving them on with a question related to my research. I also had some anxiety about the fact that interviewees might say things to me because of our relationship which they would otherwise not have mentioned to a researcher and might have regretted afterwards. Jarvie (1982) identifies this as the ethical dilemma of the researcher being viewed as stranger and friend at the same time. I addressed this by choosing my second sample of interviewees from a group who did not know me, and taking particular care with what data I quoted from participants from the Oxford region to preserve anonymity.



### **Informed consent**

The situation described above gives us insight into the dilemma of deciding how far a participant's consent is truly informed. Although I made efforts to explain to people why I was doing the research, who would see what I wrote and how I intended to protect people's anonymity, they often did not really listen to or engage with my explanation – quite a reasonable situation when they were focused on doing an interview or answering some questions. This caused me an ethical dilemma about how I should use notes made about observations or snatches of conversation I had had informally with NVQ candidates. I had asked permission from those I was working with to use information gathered from our informal discussions and meetings, but since permission was sought before the participants knew what they were going to say, I felt eventually that I should not use specific information gathered in this way. I did however, use my diary notes to provide background to my understanding of what was said in the interview. Many of my notes also related to what people did rather than what they said, and here I felt it would have been impossible to gain true consent from them to use such observations.

### **Interpreting participants' responses**

When asking participants about what they had learned as a result of doing an NVQ almost all replied that they had learned nothing. I could have simply accepted this but I noted that while talking about other aspects of their experiences of doing their NVQ they mentioned experiences which I would have categorised as learning. For example people identified that they had learned which aspects of their job were more important than others, but explicitly excluded this experience from their definition of learning. In order not to lose data which was potentially useful for my study I needed to work on my analysis with two definitions of learning – the narrow definition by my participants and the broader, more inclusive definition which I would typically

use. This situation ultimately yielded interesting data on different understandings of the term learning and its implications for the NVQ system but it was important throughout the data collection process to ensure I was not using my interpretation at any time to override what participants actually said. Where I have considered differing interpretations in my write up of findings in the following chapters I have distinguished between mine and participants' interpretations of the term learning.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have described how I carried out my research. I have set the context for my research in the Open University and noted how that context has influenced the way I approached data gathering and analysis. I have described my original research plan and explained how it changed as I progressed, partly due to changes in my personal circumstances throughout the research period and partly as a result of the organisational situation. The chapter has covered the process of sampling, interviewing, transcription and analysis in some detail. Throughout this chapter I have aimed to note where my personal influence has been most marked and how this has affected the process and outcomes of my research. I have included a section on how I have developed the theoretical framework in which to conceptualise and write about my research. I have recognised that this is a way of presenting my findings, the choice of which is influenced by my beliefs and understandings about NVQs and vocational qualifications more broadly. The chapter ends with a consideration of some of the difficulties and dilemmas faced in carrying out the research, some of which have been resolved during the process of researching and others where I have had to decide on the best solution and follow it.

## CHAPTER 6 EXPECTATIONS AND EXPERIENCE

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter addresses the theme of expectations and experience. The theme is approached from two separate but related viewpoints. Firstly the extent to which participants' experiences demonstrate that the expectations of the NVQ system as identified by the government has been met is considered.

Government expectations of NVQs can be categorised into three areas

- the delivery of a workforce with higher skills
- a coherent framework for vocational qualifications which would allow comparison across different occupational areas and promote the development of transferable skills
- a boost for the status of vocational qualifications in comparison with academic qualifications

The second viewpoint takes account of what individuals expected of NVQs and the extent to which these expectations have been met, investigating two particular areas – the nature of choices people made when undertaking an NVQ and their expectations about the work that would be required of them.

The third section of this chapter discusses the effect of a difference between expectation and experience on people's overall experience of undertaking the NVQ and also compares the experiences of the participants in my study with the critique of the NVQ system identified in the literature review.

As I have worked on gathering data, the concept of expectation has seemed particularly important. Although NVQs have existed since 1986 both the NVQ framework and the individual qualifications within it are still seen as being relatively new by participants and also seen as embracing a new way of accrediting what people do. The novelty of the qualification and uncertainty

both about how it will be achieved and what it will mean for those who achieve it has stimulated detailed accounts of participants' expectations in terms of personal experience and their expectation of the currency and status of the wider qualification.

The findings described in this chapter have helped to provide answers to the following research questions,

**What factors influence participants' choice to do NVQs at the Open University?**

**How do participants view an NVQ in relation to employability and career development?**

The answers are summarised in the conclusion to this chapter.

### **EXPECTATIONS AND EXPERIENCE – TO WHAT EXTENT HAVE GOVERNMENT EXPECTATIONS BEEN MET?**

This section describes participants' experiences of undertaking NVQs in the light of government expectations of the qualification framework. It is divided into three areas of expectation which were associated with the introduction of NVQs.

#### **A workforce with higher skills**

One of the key expectations of the NVQ framework was that it would raise the skill level of the UK workforce (CBI 1989). The experience of one participant in my research cast doubt on this expectation. When asked if she had learned any new skills as a result of doing the NVQ she replied,

‘I don't think so, not at all. If I did learn anything I was quite surprised by how much I did do and how much I'd learnt

during the years I'd been here...I didn't acquire any extra skills by doing the NVQ.' (Theresa)<sup>2</sup>

Ten participants, when asked whether they learned anything new from doing the NVQ, said that they gained a better understanding of what they did in their current jobs. This understanding was linked to an increase in self-esteem for people who had felt that their job was routine or undemanding. The recognition of the complexity of their work had increased the value they attached to their work.

'There's quite a lot of expertise you don't always acknowledge in yourself I think ...and I suppose that this qualification is then recognising that you've got that expertise.' (Ruth)

When asked about new skills, participants mentioned that as a result of doing the NVQ they had developed a different approach to their work. For one this was as a result of increasing customer awareness, so that she was delving into the implications of a student's decision-making rather than accepting the student's request at face value,

'What I do do is make sure the student is aware of what the effects of what they're doing through credit transfer might have on what they're currently studying for example, so it (the NVQ) has made me look beyond the initial picture.' (Claire)

For another, undertaking the NVQ stimulated her to reflect on what she was doing in her day-to-day work.

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<sup>2</sup> In order to preserve anonymity all participants have been given pseudonyms. Male participants have been given female pseudonyms and referred to as though they were female to avoid identifying them.

‘Even the work I do everyday, because it was part of my Customer Service, it made me reflect on the work I was doing at the time and how I could make that easier for me.’ (Pratima)

No participants in my research identified that they had developed new skills other than the rueful recognition that they had developed skills in ticking boxes to match evidence to criteria. They recognised that the provision of evidence for their NVQ required them to look back at what they were already doing rather than requiring them to develop new skills. It seems that the experience of participants emphasises the retrospective element of an assessment led qualification system. The experiences of the participants outlined above suggest that some of the conditions which might be part of developing competence, such as thinking beyond the superficial response and reflecting on practice have been stimulated by doing NVQs.

### **A coherent framework for vocational qualifications**

As well as increasing the skill level of the UK workforce the NVQ system was designed to bring coherence to a vocational qualification system which was seen as being confused and confusing (MSC/DES 1986). The system was intended to bring clarity for both employers and for those undertaking NVQs so that employers would know that a potential employee who held the relevant NVQ would bring the skills needed to do the job they were employed for. It was also intended to make it easier to compare vocational qualifications of similar levels. Participants in the research were asked about the effect they thought having an NVQ might have on their employability. Twelve participants expected that having the NVQ would improve their chances of getting another job, with one respondent pointing to the evidence of her friend’s recent experience,

‘My friend who was here got a new job and they were impressed with her having that (the NVQ). It made me realise that they are properly recognised by other institutions and worth having.’ (Lucy)

A participant also thought that the NVQ provided a benchmark against which a prospective employer could accurately judge performance of a possible employee.

‘I’ve got experience, so this is the kind of benchmark, it’s saying I’m at that level and other employers would think right, OK, you’ve got that. You’ve shown that and perhaps you’re the sort of person we might want to employ.’ (Diana)

This person’s experience reflects the way in which the government expected the NVQ system to work for candidates and employers. However, since this study did not examine the experiences of employers it is not possible to judge whether employers also think that the NVQ provides a benchmark. The participant’s expectation of how the NVQ might be received by employers may have been influenced by a knowledge of the government’s aims for the NVQ system.

Participants had clear expectations that having an NVQ would make them more employable. The Beaumont Report (NCVQ/SCOTVEC 1996), however, suggests that employers may have less understanding of the NVQ system than participants anticipate,

‘Whilst there was a growing employer awareness of NVQs, the level of understanding did not appear to be high, nor was there a widely held appreciation of the benefits.’(NCVQ/SCOTVEC 1996:98)

Although holding a minority opinion amongst the people I interviewed, one participant put it more forcefully,

‘It’s a bit of a Mickey Mouse type qualification and it’s sniggered at.’ (Vanessa)

These findings indicate that the expectations of participants at the Open University and potential employers in relation to the NVQ being a reliable measure of performance in a particular job may differ considerably. This implies that the clarity which it was intended the NVQ system would bring might not have been realised.

The government’s intention was that NVQs would bring coherence to the UK system of vocational qualifications which had become confused as a result of numerous different and unconnected training initiatives. I did not ask participants about their knowledge or understanding of other vocational qualifications, however, as they aimed to quantify the value they ascribed to NVQs in many cases they compared them to traditional academic qualifications. When asked whether she would do a level 3 NVQ after completing her level 2 a participant replied that she would,

‘Because level 3’s equivalent to two A levels so it’s a higher qualification.’ (Rose)

This response suggests that this participant used the framework of traditional academic qualifications to measure her interpretation of the value of NVQs. This demonstrates the influence of traditional qualifications on people’s understanding of a new system. It might also imply that the academic system is seen as being superior to any vocational system.



### **Boosting the status of vocational qualifications**

De Ville (MSC/DES 1986) and Dearing (SCAA 1996) after him raised concerns about the low status of vocational qualifications in comparison to academic qualifications. De Ville hoped that the development of the NVQ system would help to bridge the divide between the two systems. One participant in my research said that she felt NVQs were undervalued at the Open University specifically because it was a university where people were encouraged to take degrees which were a key part of the academic system.

‘I just wonder how much they value the NVQs because I think that a lot of them are academics who have passed exams, they’ve had the benefit of going to Uni and NVQ isn’t the same.’ (Amelia)

Another noted that she thought qualifications that were not assessed with a traditional exam were less valued. However the division between the academic and the vocational did not appear to preoccupy respondents. The judgement of status relied on their personal experience of where they had seen NVQs as a requirement in job advertisements or where they knew colleagues or friends who had undertaken NVQs. With this fairly narrow outlook participants seemed to find the status of NVQs generally favourable. One participant explained,

‘You’ve only got to read job descriptions and they all say NVQs now in Customer Service, more so than O levels or whatever, S levels you get these days, they do specifically ask for NVQ training.’ (Brenda)

The findings described above suggest that government expectations of NVQs were not fully met in the experiences of the participants in my study. I discuss the implications of this situation in the final section of this chapter.

## **INDIVIDUAL EXPECTATIONS – CHOICES AND WORK**

This section covers the expectations which individuals had of the NVQs they undertook and the extent to which their experiences measured up to them. I look at their broad expectations about undertaking the NVQ with particular focus on their choice to do the qualification and their expectations about the work this would involve.

### **Choosing to do an NVQ**

Not all participants in my research were able to choose whether they undertook an NVQ or not, nor were they all able to choose the level of NVQ they did.

New employees of the University in some areas were expected to undertake a level 2 NVQ in Customer Service as part of their induction training. Six out of the 25 I interviewed (Christine, Harriet, Heather, Isobel, Rose, and Wavenie) were expected to do the NVQ as part of their contract. The people I interviewed told me about a variety of expectations which they had when they started to do the NVQ which I have grouped and described below.

One participant was delighted to have the opportunity to do a qualification at work describing the chance she had as ‘brilliant’. She had found school difficult with a particular fear of exams and had left with few qualifications. She initially feared that she lacked the writing skills that she thought would be demanded of her in doing the NVQ, but when she realised that she would only have to write about what she did, she lost that anxiety,

‘It all sort of fell into place and it was really easy, eventually, just writing about any little thing that happens and you have to sort it out – it was just all good common sense.’ (Rachel)

The participant’s choice of words is particularly interesting as she refers to the common sense of NVQs. Her use of the word ‘good’ also suggests that she

viewed common sense as being a favourable attribute for a workplace qualification. Generally, participants with few previous educational qualifications, for example Rachel, Rose and Pratima, attached more personal value to achieving the NVQ than those who already had degrees such as Harriet and Josie.

Three participants, Isobel, Vanessa and Diana, mentioned that they felt being given the chance to do an NVQ funded by their employer in work time was an opportunity which they should take because it was at no cost to them in terms of time. Isobel expressed enthusiasm for the opportunity – contrasting the Open University favourably with her previous employer where she had done similar work but had not had the chance to gain a qualification. For Vanessa there was little enthusiasm but the feeling that others might get a qualification which she might miss out on for doing the same kind of work encouraged her to sign up.

One participant actively did not want to do the NVQ and expected that taking into account her levels of experience, undertaking it would be a waste of time. She had been obliged to do a level 2 NVQ as part of her employment contract. She said,

‘My initial feeling was that I didn’t want to do it and I was told that it was part of my induction plan, because I felt that a woman of my age and my experience, you know, customer service was second nature to me, so I felt very negative at the beginning.’ (Heather)

The expectations about doing the NVQ seemed to be related to whether people felt that the qualification was appropriate for their level of experience and position at work. However, this judgement seemed to be based on a superficial understanding of what having an NVQ would say about an individual. When asked what they knew about NVQs prior to starting work on one, participants

knew little other than anecdotes from friends or colleagues who had worked on one. One participant, when asked what she knew about NVQs said,

‘I suppose the fact that they were more kind of portfolio based than exams, other than that not a great deal really.’ (Diana)

Generally, few participants were keen to undertake an NVQ although some were pleased to be offered the opportunity and others felt more enthusiastic about it when they discovered what it entailed. The importance to participants of the qualification being done in work time suggests that they may not have seen the NVQ as desirable enough to want to spend their own time working on it.

### **Expectations about work involved**

Once the initial choice to do an NVQ had been made, people also had a variety of expectations about what work would be involved. Participants expressed confusion when they initially saw the standards,

‘I was absolutely at sea - I hadn’t a clue where we were supposed to start. Completely confused I would have to say by it right at the beginning.’ (Isobel)

Two participants, Heather and Isobel, mentioned that they were actively put off by the volume of paperwork associated with the standards and the language in which they were expressed, confirming the findings of the Beaumont Report (NCVQ/SCOTVEC 1996).

‘It was starting it that was a bit off-putting because it looked huge, immense, bulky, detailed, difficult.’ (Isobel)

Participants also noted their confusion at the new way of approaching a qualification which differed from their previous experience. One participant expected that she would have preferred a traditional approach which she was familiar with from her school days, but was surprised to find she enjoyed the NVQ process, feeling that the individuality of the qualification gave her the opportunity to get credit for her own way of doing things. When asked which bits of the NVQ suited her she replied,

‘The individuality of it, you can take it away and do it yourself and do your own stuff, your own answers. It’s not like two plus two is four and if you think it’s five well you’re wrong cause two plus two is four. With an NVQ you create your own, not question, but you create your own scenario.’

(Christine)

The experience of doing an NVQ for participants proved better than their initial expectations although the confusion of the early stages made one participant reluctant to say she had found anything positive about the process. When asked if doing the NVQ had made any difference to the way she did her work, she replied,

‘I’d like to say no, but subconsciously I think it probably has.’

(Vanessa)

When asked why she would like to say no, she answered,

‘Because I keep saying it was a waste of time and I’m not deliberately being negative and it was a chore to do but having said that it made me re-look at things I’d taken for granted.’

A positive expectation of the qualification seemed to lead to a positive experience, with Rachel who had described the chance as 'brilliant' maintaining her positive experience throughout. However, Heather, who had initially found the focus on standards tedious mentioned that by the end she could see the logic of the process. All the participants who completed the NVQ thought that having the qualification on their Curriculum Vitae (CV) would be of some benefit to them.

One participant, however, started with high expectations but found that the difficulty of fitting in the work on her NVQ with the day-to-day demands of the office caused problems for her, which in the end meant that she did not finish the qualification.

' I felt it was very, very positive to begin with and I thought it was really good. The setbacks came with the reality when I was still expected to do my work here.' (Katharine)

Again, the initial expectations of a participant and her experience of working on the NVQ did not match. Where initial fears about the complex nature of the process of the qualification aroused strong feelings of confusion and anxiety it is surprising that participants showed the determination to persist. A variety of reasons for such persistence were given. Diana explained that she did not want to let down the supervisor who had supported her and felt a desire to complete something she had started. Diana, Heather and Vanessa said that the overwhelming feeling when they had finished the qualification was relief.

The findings in this section show that generally participants' experiences of doing the NVQ proved better than they expected. Initial confusion was caused mainly by the way in which standards were written and the complexity of the system required to demonstrate competence. The participants who

overcame initial confusion found some aspects of doing the NVQ much more rewarding than they had expected.

## **DISCUSSION**

This section analyses the effect of a difference between expectation and experience on people's overall experience of undertaking the NVQ and also compares the experiences of the participants in my study with the critique of the NVQ system identified in the literature review.

### **Delivering government purpose for NVQs**

The findings outlined above suggest that in my study NVQs were not consistently delivering a work force with higher skills and achieving the purpose the government had ascribed to them. This inconsistency is at the heart of the confusion and criticism surrounding NVQs. The government rhetoric surrounding the development of a new system for VET in the mid 1980's was closely associated with a commitment to the importance of raising skill levels in the workforce (CBI 1989) yet the NVQ system developed as a result of the De Ville Report (MSC/DES 1986) was more concerned with bringing coherence to the mass of vocational qualifications that already existed. The system for NVQs which was designed by Jessup (1991) was assessment led and by its nature looked back at what people could already do rather than encouraging them to develop new skills. In these circumstances it is unsurprising that participants in my study refer frequently to the way the NVQ made them look back in detail at what they did as part of their job rather than develop new skills. This is what they were required to do to achieve the qualification. It is interesting to consider the comments by Edwards and Usher (1994) who suggested that the NVQ version of competence was used to maintain the status quo in the workplace. The retrospective nature of the process experienced by participants in my study could support the view that

there is little room for encouraging change. The participant who associated the NVQ with being 'just good common sense' confirms this view, as well as that expressed by Stevenson (1996) who notes the normative aspects of competence.

Yet the situation is not quite so straightforward. Although participants did not develop new skills, some said that they developed a more thoughtful approach to what they did, analysing which areas of their work they could make improvements in. This finding could be understood to confirm the view of Edwards and Usher (1994) – that those who had done NVQs were eager to work more efficiently in the current system, but it could also be viewed as an indication of their capacity to challenge the status quo. This interpretation is supported by a comment from an assessor that I interviewed who said that staff who had undertaken the NVQ were more accepting of imminent changes needed to introduce a new customer relationship management system than those who had not undertaken the qualification.

The findings from my study suggest that in the experience of the participants the introduction of the NVQ system has not brought coherence to their understanding of vocational qualifications. Their knowledge of the system before they started working towards NVQs was in most cases very superficial. Taking into account that at the start of my study the NVQ system had been in place for 15 years this finding implies that an understanding of the way it works had not sunk into the general consciousness. It was interesting to note that when comparing the NVQs they were working on to other qualifications participants referred back to the academic currency of O levels, GSCEs, A levels and degrees. This might be because they felt more familiar with the currency of these qualifications from their schooldays or their workplace, but it might also be that these qualifications were seen as being more desirable than NVQs and therefore a comparison to an academic qualification confirmed the legitimacy of a vocational qualification. This finding suggests that to achieve a



coherent system associated with vocational qualifications may still require an acceptance that overt cross referencing to academic qualifications is necessary to take account of the deeply embedded associations between these qualifications and educational quality. Jessup (1991) mentioned that people do not notice the difference between education and training when they are receiving it, but my findings imply that for the participants in this study there are subtle implications in terms of the qualifications they aspire to, with those seen as education related valued more highly than those seen as vocational.

### **Meeting individual expectations about the qualification**

Amongst those who I interviewed for my research, expectations about the qualification were coloured by their view of where they were positioned with regard to their previous education and experience. Examples of this ranged from Rachel who saw the NVQ as a great opportunity for her, to Heather who saw it as demeaning and beneath her current experience level. Participants who felt that the demands of the NVQ they were working towards were beneath their experience level highlighted a particular difficulty with the NVQ system in terms of individual expectations. Since the qualification must be evidenced by looking back to what you can do already, there is little or no sense of self development or challenge for the individual looking forward to undertaking the qualification. The ambitious candidate who would like to move up the levels of the qualification will inevitably be blocked by the constraints of their job at some stage where what they do does not give them the opportunity to demonstrate the higher level skills required for the higher level qualifications. This situation reinforces the criticism of the NVQ system as behaviourist, looking at what a candidate has done rather than what they can do (Norris 1991, Bridges 1996).

The potential for a candidate to be prevented from working towards a higher level of NVQ because of the nature of their work, even though they would like to do it, highlights a fundamental difference between the academic and

vocational qualification structure. In the framework of academic qualifications it is feasible that the only limiting factor is the potential of the individual. This can be highly motivating. In the system of NVQs there may not be room for a participants' potential to be recognised, a situation noted by Eraut (1994).

The blocking of pathways to higher levels and the retrospective nature of the qualification may be what generates the neutral attitude to doing an NVQ demonstrated by my findings, where people are motivated to do it because it is paid for in work time and will be useful for their CV rather than actively desiring it as a qualification. The low levels of enthusiasm for doing an NVQ are also noted by Hillier (1999) and Grugulis (2000) in their studies. The finding that the qualification is actively desired by those who have very few previous qualifications and scant experience adds little to the status of NVQs. The weak motivation for most people may also affect the reasons given for completing the qualification – more often stated as to get it out of the way rather than to gain the advantages of having the qualification

However, to say that the findings of my research only reinforce the view that NVQs support a behaviourist conception of competence as Chown and Last (1993), Hyland (1994) and Ecclestone (1997) infer would be an over simplified response. Christine, who felt that the NVQ system provided her with the opportunity for individuality of expression of competence illustrates the counter argument to behaviourism favoured by Jessup (1991) and Burke (1995) who say that the NVQ system promotes the individual freedom of the learner to negotiate their way through the system in a way that is relevant to them and their work. Participants in my study were clear that they had expected the NVQ to be relevant to the work they did and that this expectation was met. In one case the NVQ was compared favourably to a degree gained by the participant (Josie) as being more relevant to work.

Many of those who I interviewed confirmed the comments of critics of NVQs such as Hyland (1996, 1998) who identified the atomisation of the concept of competence and the excessive bureaucracy surrounding it. The confusion caused by the sheer volume of standards which needed to be met was off-putting for many participants. However the focus of the evidence gathering on the holistic process of what they did made the activity less confusing and more meaningful, resulting in the situation where most felt they understood the purpose of the qualification and thought that it provided a fair record of what they could do by the time they completed it. In my study participants chose evidence from case studies in which they described work where they had solved particularly complex problems. This approach reflects the performance under ideal circumstances or expert performance associated with the cognitive and generic definitions of competence respectively identified by Bridges (1996). This might suggest that despite the fears of NVQs generating a behaviourist approach, in the implementation that I studied, the more holistic approach to competence praised by Eraut (1994) and Hodkinson and Isset (1995) was demonstrated to a certain extent. This situation highlights how the experiences of candidates of the NVQ may vary widely depending on how the qualification is implemented in the workplace. A more holistic view of competence is achieved as a result of choices made about implementation rather than as a condition of the qualification. Variations in implementation, and therefore the experiences of candidates do not depend only on the decisions taken by those organising the programme but also on the workplace situation (Grugulis 2000, Hauxwell 2002, Spielhofer 2002, Warr 2002).

Although not a key focus of my study, the findings suggest that people's expectations about the usefulness of having an NVQ when applying for a new job may be unduly positive. It is difficult to prove this as my study did not look at the experience of people trying to find new jobs, but literature about the employers' experience of NVQs suggests the optimism with which people viewed the value of their qualification might be misplaced. It should be noted,

however, that most of the literature about employers' experiences focuses on the implementation of NVQs in their workplace where problems due to the bureaucracy of the qualification and its assessment occurred similar to those experienced by participants in my study. Their criticism may not therefore be of the value of a qualification when already held by a potential applicant which is the focus of judgement of the participants in my study.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have considered the difference between expectations and experience both in terms of what the government proposed for NVQs and in terms of the expectations which individuals had concerning the qualification they were undertaking. My findings indicate that the outcomes which the government proposed for NVQs have not been met in the case of my study, and I have suggested that this might have been because of initial confusion about their purpose at the time of their conceptualisation and design. My findings have also demonstrated that in my study some of the individual expectations have been met but the limited knowledge of NVQs upon which people based their initial judgements of what the NVQ might do for them have been highlighted. My findings also suggest that people might have unrealistic expectations about the value of NVQs in terms of employability. However to make a more definite judgement about this situation, further research would be required into the judgement of value which employers ascribe to NVQs.

The findings of the research have provided some insight into the research questions identified in the introduction. In response to the question concerning the factors that influence choice to do an NVQ, participants indicated that where they had made a choice to do an NVQ this was influenced by their previous educational experiences and their knowledge of the experiences of other people they knew who had done NVQs. Their choice also appeared to have been influenced by their judgement that the NVQ would enhance their

employability. In relation to the second research question identified in the introduction, I found that participants in most cases thought having the NVQ would be positive for their employability and would be looked on favourably by prospective employers. Further consideration of research questions is included in chapter 9.

## CHAPTER 7 NVQS AND LEARNING

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines the findings from my study which relate to the learning people experience when working towards NVQs. Exploring whether NVQ candidates learn anything as a result of undertaking the qualification is particularly important in the light of criticism of the type of competence they accredit. If, as Norris (1991) Hyland (1994) and Bridges (1996) assert, NVQs assess a behaviourist concept of competence, looking only at what people can already do, it may be inferred that little learning is likely to take place. However, findings mentioned in the previous chapter suggest that the participants in my study experienced learning which went beyond what Bridges defined as behaviourist. This chapter explores participants' experiences of learning in more detail including considering the way in which they described their experiences. Participants' understanding of what competence means to them is also explored, comparing their experiences with comments noted in the literature review.

The first section of this chapter considers how people describe their learning experiences associated with undertaking the NVQ. It outlines examples of how people did not associate examples of change engendered by doing the NVQ with the concept of learning and suggests why this might be. It concludes by examining the implications which different understandings of the term learning might have on the way the NVQ system is evaluated.

The second section examines what the concept of competence means to participants in comparison with what it means to educationalists. The section starts by considering the positive connotations of competence and explores how participants associate their competence with their level of experience. The link between competence and self-esteem is then examined. The importance of the confirmation of competence by an external body is

addressed. The section concludes with a consideration of the backward looking nature of NVQ competence and examines the relationship between competence and achieving the NVQ.

The third section outlines the changes which participants identified in their approach to their work which they attributed to doing the NVQ. The chapter concludes with discussion of the findings of my study in relation to learning and the literature examined in chapter 2.

The findings in this chapter relate specifically to the following research questions

**How do participants describe the learning experience of doing an NVQ?**

**How has doing the NVQ in Customer Service affected participants' approach to and understanding of their work for the Open University?**

## **DESCRIBING LEARNING EXPERIENCES**

This section considers how people describe their learning experiences associated with undertaking the NVQ. It includes examples of how people did not associate examples of change engendered by doing the NVQ with the concept of learning and suggests why this might be. The section finishes by examining the implications which different understandings of the term learning might have on the way the NVQ system is evaluated.

When I interviewed participants, ten people told me that they had learned nothing from doing their NVQ yet went on to identify experiences that I would have categorised as learning. Their responses, when asked if they had learned anything from doing the NVQ, suggested that if they had learned something it

was somehow different from what they would traditionally have defined as learning. In response to my question one participant replied,

‘Perhaps not from the normal learning curve. I learnt to appreciate what I was doing.. and relating to (NVQ) units has allowed me to interpret that so I can understand what I’m doing.’ (Claire)

Having recognised that participants might not associate learning with their experiences of NVQs I adjusted my interview schedule to try to encourage them focus on different types of learning experience they had had, before asking them about NVQs and learning. This approach did not appear to make any difference to the way they described their NVQ experiences, but when asked about other learning experiences, two participants (Theresa and Diana) referred to a defined course where they had learned new information technology skills.

‘I did a word processing course and I learnt. That was a computer programme that I learnt that way and I felt that I learnt that very well.’ (Diana)

This suggested that people might associate learning with an activity which was identified by another person or an external authority as being a specific learning opportunity with the aim of learning particular skills.

Participants who said they had learned nothing from doing the NVQ often went on to explain what had changed in their approach to work as though this was in contrast or opposition to their definition of the term learning. One participant identified that although she learned nothing from doing the NVQ



‘It highlighted what customer service was. It confirmed the bits that were important.’ (Isobel)

Another noted that it made her approach work in a more systematic way,

‘I’ve never really sat down before and looked at what I was doing and how I could improve that, so it’s made me more systematic.’ (Pratima)

One of the assessors interviewed suggested that part of the difficulty people had in describing what they had learned from doing the NVQ might be associated specifically with the customer service qualification where many of the skills candidates needed for the NVQ were to a certain extent part of their personal characteristics. The assessor noted that people who had undertaken the Administration NVQ often said they had learned something from doing the NVQ, citing specific skills such as learning to use spreadsheets.

‘I think it’s fair to say people who are in work and have been for a period of time, don’t learn new skills through doing an NVQ and certainly not an NVQ in Customer Service because there’s very little that’s new that they need to know. In Admin they may have to actually learn to do spreadsheets in order to get the full qualification’.

The learning that people did describe as a result of doing an NVQ was deeply embedded in their workplace practice and for them was dissociated from the type of learning which takes place as a defined course or training opportunity. This finding suggests that the claim that NVQs do not deliver a workforce with a higher level of skills should be investigated more carefully. The government documentation associated with developing the skills of the workforce implies that people will need to learn new and different skills to

cope with the pace of technological change. However the findings of my study suggest that at the Open University participants felt that they had developed more embedded skills that affected the efficiency of what they already did.

People's understanding of what the term learning means and the associations they make with terms such as training and education are relevant to the popular critique of the NVQ system where it is contrasted unfavourably with vocational training in Europe, particularly Germany. In these countries much of the training is classroom based. Critics of the UK system claim that the knowledge requirements of NVQs are so deeply embedded in practice as to be impossible to assess. The favouring of classroom assessed work in European vocational qualifications, a method of study which participants in my study felt equated with learning, makes an easy point in favour of this system, but perhaps ignores the learning that might potentially take place in the NVQ system which is not as easily identified.

### **THE PARTICIPANTS' UNDERSTANDING OF COMPETENCE IN NVQS**

This section examines what the concept of competence means to participants. The section starts by considering the positive connotations of competence and explores how participants associate their competence with their level of experience. The link between competence and self-esteem is then examined. The importance of the confirming of competence by an external body is addressed. The section concludes with a consideration of the retrospective nature of NVQ competence and examines the relationship between competence and achieving the NVQ.

Critics of the NVQ system highlight its conceptualisation of competence as being narrow, over-simplified and unlikely to stimulate learning. In investigating participants' conceptualisation of competence I rarely asked

participants about competence directly, judging that asking them to define the term might seem like a test of their NVQ understanding. Information about this topic was elicited in more general discussion of their NVQ experiences.

When speaking about their competence or their capacity to do their job, all participants seemed to accept that to be competent was a positive attribute. One participant explained how she felt disappointed that her competence in her previous job had not been certificated.

‘I felt quite disappointed that I’d never had the opportunity to get a certificate to say that you were competent in that (customer service) in any other place of work.’ (Isobel)

No one expressed the view that doing the NVQ was going to make them competent, but rather that it was going to confirm the competence they had already. Their description of their own competence was frequently closely associated with their experience in their particular line of work. Those who had been working in a job for some time referred to the experience they had.

‘I’m doing this day in, day out.’ (Lucy)

Those newer to their current job explained about their previous experience,

‘They were all customer service based jobs so I felt that added up to over 20 years of dealing with customers and knowing how important your role is.’ (Heather)

However, six participants (Amelia, Claire, Isobel, Pratima, Rachel, and Rose) felt that doing the NVQ highlighted that the competence they achieved in their jobs was something to be proud of and raised their self-esteem. It was

definitely more than the 'just good enough to get by' definition which critics of the system suggested the NVQ generated. Amelia explained,

'You think of yourself as a secretary, a typist and I work for somebody who tells me what to do, but you realise you're actually in control of the job. I actually do it and I suggest things without referring to anybody.' (Amelia)

The idea that doing the NVQ validated competence with reference to a set of standards external to the Open University was also seen as a positive aspect of undertaking the NVQ. The NVQ Customer Service standards are the first to provide any sort of national benchmark for performance in this diverse occupational area which can be perceived as lacking legitimacy. A participant explained that she felt pleased that the way she was working had been confirmed by an external source.

'I think it just reinforced that what you did was correct and how you handled situations was correct rather than making your job easier.' (Wavenie)

Although the participants' understandings of competence in relation to NVQs did not have the dismissive overtones expressed by some educationalists, their views did confirm the retrospective nature of the qualification suggesting that they did not experience any notion of future capability or potential in what was assessed.

'It's a case of validating what you're already doing at work to give you a qualification to say yes you've reached this level.'  
(Diana)

Eight participants felt that they were working at a higher level than the standard of competence required by the NVQ they were working on. This was particularly evident where people had started with the level 2 NVQ as newcomers to the University (Heather and Christine) but some doing the level 3 NVQ also expressed this (Sharon and Vanessa). One participant described how she felt she made the NVQ more difficult by looking for examples of her work that were more complex than were required.

‘I was looking for complex things and the assessor said no, think about something that’s very straightforward. I wasn’t looking for easy things.’ (Sharon)

When asked why she was looking for more complex things she replied

‘Because of the standards you set yourself.’

This participant expressed disappointment in the NVQ as she felt it did not recognise the high standard at which she was working. An assessor suggested that a common cause of dissatisfaction with NVQs was that people were assessed for a standard of competence and there was no opportunity for a grade to be recorded indicating excellent performance or otherwise. She explained,

‘You’re either competent or you’re not. You can’t really have a distinction, you can’t have an A plus competence.’

It is interesting to note that where a participant, Katharine, was unable to complete the NVQ she did not feel this had any influence or indicated any judgement upon her competence at work. She felt that her inability to complete the qualification was because of the process required to gain certification rather than her lack of competence.

‘ I liaise with all the colleges, I pay everybody’s wages. I’m the one who inputs everything on the computer for the main database, so we do work at a very high level.’ (Katharine)

While I would not expect a person to say that they were not competent at their job, this situation raises the question that the NVQ might be an inadequate instrument to benchmark a level of competence however that level is defined. If it is possible to be competent but fail to achieve the NVQ because of the assessment process required this suggests it may have flaws as measure of competence.

These findings suggest that the criticisms of the concept of competence used by NVQs are to a considerable extent confirmed by the experiences of the participants in my study, particularly in relation to the lack of measurement of potential or capability. However the findings demonstrate that the detailed retrospective examination of performance does have some influence on future ways of working. This influence is examined in the following section on a new approach to work.

## **A NEW APPROACH TO WORK**

This section considers the way in which participants identified that doing the NVQ had made them change their approach to work. Although people did not identify that they had learned from doing their NVQ eleven reported a new approach to their work as a result of doing it. These changes fall into five different areas which come together to describe a continuum of process. The areas are reflecting, validating and confirming, formulating, changing, and progression. In this section I provide evidence of people’s experience and aim to define each aspect of the changes made to their performance as a result of working on the NVQ.

## Reflecting

Participants noted that the process of reviewing their jobs which they had undertaken in some detail for the NVQ, encouraged them to think reflectively about their work.

‘Even the work I do every day, because it was part of my Customer Service (NVQ), it made me reflect on the work I was doing at the time and how I could make that easier for me.’

(Pratima)

Four (Brenda, Claire, Isobel and Pratima) mentioned that they had not reflected on their work in this way before. The imperative of completing day-to-day tasks had made it hard for them to think about particular aspects of their work. Collecting evidence for their NVQ had given them a new insight into their work and in some cases had emphasised the complexity of work they previously thought was routine.

‘I suppose at the time you’re dissecting what you do, ‘cause with a normal telephone conversation you just get on and do it. I think when you’re actually saying, I spoke to this person and I needed to arrange that for them and get back to them and put this in place, it did actually make you feel there’s quite a lot involved in a simple phone call. It’s not just straightforward.’

(Isobel)

The recognition that their job involved complex procedures raised the self-esteem of participants which gave them renewed enthusiasm for their work and motivated them to look for more effective ways of doing things.

‘So even now after I’ve finished it, I think about the work I’m doing and just sit down and look at what I’m doing and think about ways I can improve it.’ (Pratima)

Although participants did not always define the process they undertook as reflection, they used this process of thinking back over what they had done frequently in order to gather the best evidence for their portfolios.

### **Validating and confirming**

Earlier in the chapter I have included examples of the ways in which participants have viewed the process of working on an NVQ as confirming their competent performance against an external measure. Once participants had noted this confirmation they also went on to describe how the process gave them confidence in their own ability and raised their self-esteem.

‘It probably helps you to feel a bit more self-assured as well, that what you’re doing is being looked at by somebody outside and it meets with an approval as such, not just in your own office.’ (Claire)

The process of validating and confirming customer service activity seemed to be important to the participants in my study especially where the wide-ranging context of customer service meant that there were few workplace definitions of correct working practice. Theresa explained,

‘I think it (the NVQ) just reinforced what you did was correct and how you handled situations and went about tasks was correct.’ (Theresa)



The confirming and reassuring aspect of NVQs seemed important to participants who were both experienced and inexperienced in customer service.

### **Formulating**

The process of formulating was originally described by a participant in response to a question about the process of preparing written evidence for her NVQ. She described the process of sorting out what had happened in preparation for writing a case study as

‘formulating it in my head.’ (Isobel))

When pressed to explain what formulating meant to her she replied,

‘So formulating what you’re doing is actually dissecting how you helped the customer, looking at what ways, how did you help that person and how was it by talking to them, how did you help them, how did you put them forward, or for instance how did you get them to change from one course to another or send them the extra information they weren’t aware about.’

Having identified this deconstructing process as an important part of the learning associated with undertaking an NVQ I found further evidence of formulating in responses from other participants. The important factor seemed to be that the process of searching for evidence in response to the atomised NVQ standards was the stimulation for breaking down complex work activity into its constituent parts. A participant said,

‘I think it really made you sit and look at some of the tasks and think how can I do this in an easier way.’ (Brenda)

This process appeared to give participants insight into the way they did their work and in some cases this insight enabled them to change aspects of it and work more efficiently.

The process of formulating also seemed to be linked to the way in which participants related the NVQ standards to their work. The NVQ standards seemed extremely complex and detailed for participants. One said,

‘I haven’t read too much detail in the whole of the NVQ to be honest with you because it’s too frightening and off putting. I’d rather concentrate on once I was established that I needed to put down how I was helping somebody in a number of different ways. That’s what I’m doing so I’m actually hardly looking at the standards.’ (Isobel)

As participants became more experienced in what the NVQ required they became adept at moving between the evidence they produced as a description of holistic performance and the process of breaking this down to match the minutiae of the atomised standards.

### **Changing**

For many participants the process of validating what they did was an end in itself and simply confirmed that they were working to the correct standard. For others, however, such as Brenda, Claire, Isobel and Pratima, the reflecting and formulating process enabled them to break down a complex task and consider re-building the way they worked to do things more efficiently. Brenda and Pratima took the opportunity to revise a series of systems where a simple change to the way in which they handled data saved several people a great deal of time. Claire recognised that her detailed understanding of the way in which she approached a customer query enabled her to change her approach to future customer questions.

‘What I do do is make sure the student is aware of what the effects of what they’re doing through credit transfer might have on what they’re currently studying, so it has made me look beyond the initial picture.’ (Claire)

She then summarises,

‘I will expand the conversation and go that bit further. I think it’s the appreciation of what I’ve done in the past through the NVQ that’s encouraged me to do that.’

Other participants did not identify a change in what they did, but said that the process of understanding the components of their own work helped them to get a better appreciation of the way the work of different departments of the University came together to provide a total service for the student.

### **Progression**

Of the participants who had found that doing the NVQ had stimulated them to make changes, four (Brenda, Christine, Diana and Pratima) identified that they would maintain this reflective way of working after the NVQ had finished.

‘And even now after I’ve finished I think about the work I’m doing.’ (Pratima)

Brenda used this way of thinking to improve the work of the department she manages and encouraged the more junior staff working on the NVQ to continue with suggesting improvements.

The process described above was not experienced by all participants, although certain parts of it were experienced by several people. Typically those who seemed to go through most of the process of reflecting, unpicking what their work consisted of and using this knowledge to review their performance were those who felt positively towards the NVQ from the beginning and felt that it was worthwhile qualification for them.

## **DISCUSSION**

In this section I discuss the findings outlined above in relation to the literature examined in chapter 2. The section starts with an examination of the reasons why participants might not have identified that they had learned from NVQs where educationalists would have described their experiences as learning. The implications of this discrepancy are considered with particular reference to the way in which NVQs were promoted as preparing people for the fast pace of technological change. The discussion moves on to explore the differences between the participants' view of competence and that expressed in the literature examined in chapter 2. The next section relates my findings to literature on reflecting on practice. The final section considers the extent to which participants experienced practice as atomised or holistic.

### **Describing learning associated with NVQs**

The findings of my study have shown that some participants do not identify the changes in their work practice engendered by doing an NVQ as learning. However they do describe going on a course or gaining a specific skill as learning. This finding has implications for the government's stated purpose for NVQs to raise the skill of the working population, particularly to respond to the fast pace of technological change. (MSC/DES1986, CBI 1989) Later academic literature has also noted the link between training, learning and

responding to technological change (Barnett 1999, Boud and Garrick 1999, Hager 1999).

The findings from my study suggest that the seeming common sense of this statement in relation to the NVQ system should be questioned in the context of work in the Open University. Work carried out at the Open University is affected by technological change as all of the participants in my study use ever changing complex software systems for managing student records. The findings of my study show that the assessment led nature of the NVQ system which accredits what people can already do does not encourage people to learn new techniques for using software or developing technological skills.

However the reflection stimulated by working on NVQs may deliver the less obvious characteristic of an ability to review current ways of working to devise more efficient approaches. Although this approach will not teach people to use new types of software it may develop the problem solving skills which are important to support the introduction of any new ways of working. This outcome is to a certain extent unexpected given the structure and perspective of the NVQ system where the focus is clearly on what people can do rather than their attitudes and characteristics.

The reluctance of participants to identify the work they have done on their NVQs as learning might also be similar to the situation described by Beckett (2001) who noted the way in which the subjects of his study working in dementia care found it difficult to talk about their everyday job in terms of learning. This was because they felt the low status of their work did not warrant the use of such a term. This might also have been the case with the participants in my study, several of whom mentioned that they thought of their work as straightforward and in some cases mundane.

### **Differing views of competence**

Participants in my study seemed to reinforce the view that the NVQ system does not encourage the questioning of the concept of competence (Edwards and Usher 1994, Stevenson 1996). Those working on the NVQ saw some logic in standards which set down the correct way which a job should be done. For those who were sensitive to the relatively low status of customer service as an occupation, proof that they were meeting recognised standards was a welcome confirmation of the value of their work. This confirmation of the value of low status jobs by the NVQ system was also noted by Warr (2002). However the confirming and validating effect of a nationally recognised qualification was also recognised by Hillier (1999) in those working in the higher status roles as trainers or part-time lecturers.

Responses from participants in my study do, however, support critics of the NVQ system who suggest that the NVQ concept of competence should be problematised further (Norris 1991, Hyland 1994, 1996, Bates 1995a). The finding that people were discouraged from making the evidence collection process too onerous and advised to look for examples of work which were more straightforward suggests that the NVQ does not support the pursuit of excellent performance. And the participant who was convinced of her own competence, and clearly managed to discharge her duties adequately yet not be able to complete an NVQ because of the complexity of the process involved suggests that the NVQ concept of competence may be flawed.

The ambiguity of the way in which competence is manifested in the delivery of NVQs seems to reflect the view of Hodgkinson and Isset (1995) who recognised that NVQs had some positive elements particularly where they stimulated an interest in learning and accreditation for those who might otherwise not have wanted to gain a qualification. However the potential legitimately to question the view of competence they espouse does not improve the reputation of qualification for a potentially vulnerable audience.

### **Reflecting on practice**

The encouragement to reflect on practice experienced by participants in my study has, to a considerable extent been as a result of the way in which the collection of evidence for the qualification was implemented in that particular setting. The amount of assessment which could be carried out by observation was limited by the demands of keeping up with day-to-day work so participants had to prepare reflective case studies to ensure the full breadth of NVQ evidence requirements were met. The use of case studies to supplement evidence by observation was also noted by Spielhofer (2002) as a response to lack of time and personnel to carry out assessment by observation. In my study, the positive outcome of stimulating reflection might not be attributed to the structure of the NVQ as originally devised, as it would be perfectly possible to gather evidence entirely by observation which would limit the opportunities for reflection. So the opportunity for reflecting on work done has almost happened by accident – a condition which Hyland (1994) attributes to other types of learning from NVQs. The use of case study evidence of holistic performance was noted in chapter 6 as evidence of Bridges' (1996) definition of generic or cognitive competence, however, the example of the participant cited above who was advised by her assessor that seeking for complex examples was making the process of the NVQ too difficult perhaps reinforces Bridges' comments about the behaviourist nature of NVQ competence rather than challenges it.

For the few participants in my study who used the reflective process and the detailed examination of their work to adapt and refine their performance, the NVQ process has provided a clear example of the close relationship between practice and learning explored by Schon (1983). He describes learning by doing as 'shifting and ambiguous' (Schon 1983:40) which may be part of the reason why participants found it so hard to identify what they had learned from doing an NVQ. Participants in my study also to a certain extent demonstrated

Schon's description of reflecting in action or thinking on their feet, but in addition they noted a later phase of reflection which took place when they matched what they had learned to the NVQ standards. Although this proved tedious for some it also served to reinforce what they had started to learn by reflection in action. The process of matching what they did to the NVQ standards required people to detach what they had learned from the context in which they had learned it in – an activity the difficulty of which both Schon (1983) and Eraut (1994) highlighted. Although this process was difficult for some and for some seemed pointless, for others it confirmed the validity and value of their work beyond the immediate context of their workplace.

The new approach to working which participants identified demonstrates the example of using reflection to change future performance (Schon 1983, Kolb 1984, Eraut 1994). A small number of participants even suggested that this process of reflecting, reviewing and adapting performance had become embedded and had continued after they have finished the NVQ process. However for many the structure of the NVQ provided little encouragement to apply this process consistently, particularly after they had finished working on their NVQ. This situation implies that the NVQ process in itself does not promote reflection strongly and whether it takes place depends not only on the implementation of the NVQ but also the nature of previous experiences of the individual undertaking it.

### **Atomised or holistic performance**

The criticism of NVQs as atomised and neglecting the holistic nature of competent performance (Eraut 1994, Hodkinson and Isset 1995, Gonczi 1999) is not reflected in a straightforward way in the experiences of participants in my study. Again this appears to be as a result of the way in which NVQs have been implemented at the Open University. Initially participants took the standards as the starting point for their evidence collection, but in response to



the confusion and complexity they experienced, they re-focused on their holistic performance at work. Participants gathered evidence of holistic performance and then, in order to satisfy the checking mechanism required by the NVQ divided up that holistic performance to see how it met the atomised standards. This was a cause of frustration and of no value other than proving that they had completed the process of evidence collection. However for some participants the breaking down of the complexity of performance stimulated by considering the NVQ standards provided the stimulus for reflection on their work which as a whole was too complex to consider in this way. These findings suggest that the participants in my study skillfully managed the process of skipping between a holistic and complex view of their performance and an atomised one. In one way the NVQ made this process more difficult and bureaucratic requiring them to tick lists of performance criteria to see if they had met standards, yet in another it stimulated them to break down complex performance and reflect on it in a way they might not otherwise have done.

## **CONCLUSION**

In this chapter I have investigated the way in which participants have experienced learning at work as a result of undertaking their NVQs. Having noted that people I interviewed appeared to ascribe a different definition to the term learning from the one I would typically use, I have explored the implications and meaning of this situation. I have also compared the assessment of the concept of competence as made by educationalists with the understanding of competence as expressed by participants in my study, noting where their view both supports and contradicts the views highlighted in the literature review. I have described the new approach to work which some participants found had been stimulated as a result of working on their NVQs. Finally the chapter concludes by comparing learning at work experienced by

NVQ participants with theories about learning at work and learning associated with NVQs which were examined in the literature review.

The findings described in this chapter have provided considerable insight into the two research questions mentioned in the introduction. In response to the question which asks how participants describe the learning experience of doing an NVQ I have found that some have drawn a distinction between the learning that has taken place as a result of their NVQ and learning which is identified externally as part of a course or training session. In response to the second question I have also ascertained that in several cases doing the Customer Service NVQ has affected the work of participants, even when they approached the qualification with the expectation that it would not. By referring to people's experiences I have suggested a continuum of process which describes their new approach. I have also found that for a small number of people the effect on their work lasts after they have completed their NVQ.

## **CHAPTER 8 THE IMPLICATIONS OF WORKPLACE LEARNING**

### **INTRODUCTION**

This chapter considers participants' experiences of working on a qualification in the workplace. It investigates how they manage to complete an NVQ while maintaining the services to students and other customers. Three particular aspects of experience are explored. Firstly I examine the way in which participants attempt to balance their commitment to completing their NVQ with their regular workload. Secondly I explore evidence of where participants undertake work on their NVQ both in terms of a choice between home and work, and the specific physical location they choose in the workplace. This consideration of the influence of context on participants' experience leads on to an examination of how the particular nature of the Open University as an organisation might have affected this. The final aspect of experience explores the difficulties some participants found in completing their NVQs, including both the reasons for this and the feelings they expressed as they moved towards completion. The chapter ends with a discussion of the findings in relation to the literature review in chapter 2

When I started the interview process I did not anticipate that the practical influence of workplace demands would have such an important effect on participants' experiences. This has meant that the findings in this chapter are not explicitly associated with one or two particular research questions, however the findings help to provide answers to several of the research questions, especially,

**To what extent has doing the NVQ affected participants beyond their immediate work for the Open University?**

**What perception do participants have of the Open University's motivation for supporting the NVQ programme?**

## **BALANCING THE COMMITMENTS OF THE NVQ AND MAINTAINING SERVICE LEVELS**

Five participants (Diana, Isobel, Katharine, Sharon and Vanessa) mentioned a conflict between working on their NVQ and maintaining service levels for students contacting the Open University. The NVQ programme was organised so that participants had dedicated time at work to work on their NVQ when they would not have responsibility for maintaining service provision. However this arrangement appeared to be a source of considerable difficulty for participants. I was alerted to the importance of this topic by participants who described strong emotions associated with attempts to organise time to work on their NVQ. I have divided my consideration of the topic of balancing commitments into two sections, firstly considering how participants made time to work on their NVQ and secondly how they negotiated cover for service provision with colleagues.

### **Making time to work on NVQs**

The promise of time away from work was looked on by participants as a particularly positive aspect of the opportunity to do an NVQ. One participant who had had to do the level 2 NVQ as part of her induction programme had initially been worried about the time commitment involved, even to the extent of discussing her concern with her partner and the effect working towards the qualification might have on her family life. 'She was relieved when she heard she would be working on her NVQ in work time.

'It's like this is all done in work time, you don't need to take it home, we give you an hour off every week to do it which is great cause you think I have got that chance to do it and I'm quite motivated.' (Rose)

Another participant welcomed the change from the work she normally undertook answering phones explaining why she valued the time working on her NVQ at work,

‘Probably it was the fact of getting off the phones – it was still connected to the job but it was something different to do with the job.’ (Heather)

In some departments participants had a set time allocated each week, and in some cases this worked well. A participant explained,

‘It’s like that’s what I’ve got to do, great I’ll get on and do it, so I liked having a time set.’ (Rose)

But this did not always work so well and participants often missed the time allocated because of the demands of their workload. One found it difficult to ask for the time she needed to do her NVQ and this situation persisted for several weeks.

‘But I’ve missed about eight hours so I’m hoping to take my hour, be quite strict and say I do need to take this hour.’  
(Isobel)

One participant found this both a barrier to completing her NVQ and a source of considerable stress, feeling as though her job and working on the NVQ were competing for time. She explained,

‘I knew what to do – don’t get me wrong – it was just that I found it was impossible to try and cope with doing this (the NVQ).’ (Katharine)

It might be expected that anxieties about dividing up a participant's time to enable them to manage both their work and the NVQ would be influenced by the type of job they did, with those who were pressured by constantly answering the phone or working to targets and deadlines feeling this most strongly, but this did not appear to be the case. There appeared to be little correlation between the pressured nature of participants' work and their reaction to time constraints. Christine from the Registration and Fees area which is effectively a call centre with call handling targets, explained that she managed the time element of her work with no problems, yet Sharon felt that the pressure of work piling up in her tray made it difficult for her to focus on her NVQ. This suggests that the reaction to time pressure might be influenced by personal traits. It is also likely that the way on which managers allocated time for NVQ study influenced people's experiences, but this aspect of work was not studied here.

### **Negotiating cover to maintain service levels**

Since the participants in my study were mostly drawn from areas where certain levels of service to students had to be maintained, negotiating cover also caused some difficulties. The experience of individuals varied considerably, with some finding that managers had already arranged cover for them to work on their NVQs. These managers encouraged participants to take the time, even though the participants perhaps might have preferred not to.

'The NVQ is one of those things where I think I can't be bothered. If there's something else I could be doing I'd rather be doing that. But like A says, we must just stop.' (Stephanie)

Others had a different experience, struggling to keep up with both their NVQ and getting through their daily workload. This situation partly arose from an individual's commitment to keeping up with their workload rather than

providing cover, but their feelings that they ought to make up time spent on the NVQ even though it was not officially required of them, added to the perception that the NVQ was time consuming. A participant explained,

‘I sort of spent time on it during the day and then would stay late to catch up on the other, so I found it very time consuming.’ (Sharon)

Participants such as Lucy explained that they had made arrangements which allowed them to answer phones as well as work on their NVQs but these sometimes proved less than satisfactory with their concentration being interrupted by calls. At the extreme of this experience, the participant who found it impossible to cope with finding time to work on her NVQ also found the shift in workload required to provide others with time to work on their qualification caused her upset,

‘The setbacks came with the reality when I was still expected to do my work here and carry on and I just admit to being very resentful when I was answering calls for other people who were saying ‘I can’t answer the phone, I’m doing my NVQ.’ I felt very bitter and very annoyed.’ (Katharine)

These findings suggest that balancing the commitment between doing an NVQ and maintaining service levels can be complex and in some circumstances can cause a barrier to completing the qualification. Even where time was allocated by a manager, participants still felt the pressure of their workload building when they took time to do their NVQ, although the impression this made on them varied between individuals. In these circumstances, the benefits of allocating work time for participants could be outweighed by their sensitivity to a conflict of demands on their time. In the next section I consider the importance of where participants chose to work on their NVQ. These findings

also have relevance to the concept of balancing commitments all but two participants (Diana and Katharine) worked on NVQs at home in order to avoid the conflict described above.

## **WHERE PARTICIPANTS WORKED ON THEIR NVQs**

In this section I consider the importance of where participants chose to work on their NVQs. The first section considers the importance which participants ascribed to whether they undertook their work on their NVQ at home or at work. The second section explores the location in which participants chose to do their work, when they did do it in work time.

### **At home or at work?**

The NVQ programme at the Open University was designed so that all the work which participants needed to do should be undertaken at work. This was partly to make the programme more attractive to people who might otherwise not have chosen to undertake the qualification. In interviews it soon became clear that the issue of whether participants took their portfolios home to work on had considerable importance for them. This was an area of the NVQ work where participants frequently compared their own approach with that of others who they knew were doing the qualification, and sometimes felt it necessary to justify their approach. A participant explained her decision saying,

‘I did it all within work time, ‘cause originally we were told time will be made available for you to do this and I felt that’s what it’s got to be. I’m not going to take it home. I’ve got enough other things to do at home without taking this home as well.’ (Diana)

Other participants started off by feeling as adamant that they would not take their qualification home to work on, but the pressure of work and the desire to



get the qualification finished after it taking much longer to complete than they had anticipated meant that their resolve lessened.

‘I just didn’t feel that the NVQ had priority, in fact it had no priority in comparison to all the other things going off, so I found that I just went to a meeting, promised myself faithfully I’d do some and then didn’t touch it, and then it got to the stage where I took half a day off, leave, and took it home with me.’

(Vanessa)

The lack of priority which this participant ascribed to the NVQ seemed to make it harder for her to allocate time to complete it at work. Another participant who enjoyed working on the NVQ and valued the qualification as something she really wanted to have gave a very different reason for taking it home to work on.

‘I did the last part at home because I wanted to submit it so that it went in for a particular submission rather than wait six months for it to go into the next one. That was my choice as much as anything.’ (Christine)

This participant, even though she worked in one of the busiest areas of the Open University, found no problem with taking her allocated time, explaining that although there were times when she could not take this as expected

‘if you say you need it , it’s given.’

Variations in the opportunity to take time at work could not specifically be associated with the way in which the NVQ programme was organised in different departments or regions, as people from the same department described different experiences.

It is interesting to note that six participants (Amelia, Christine, Esther, Pratima, Lucy and Rose) were working on Open University undergraduate qualifications alongside their NVQ, for which the majority of work would be carried out in their own time. These qualifications were rarely directly connected to work. Working on these qualifications was entirely voluntary and the work was undertaken willingly at home by participants. Although this difference in attitude was not explored in depth in my research it could indicate that some felt the NVQ was less valuable to them as individuals than an undergraduate qualification.

The importance which people attached to being able to do the qualification in work time might also have indicated that they felt that their employers were making a serious demand on them which was as much for the Open University's benefit as for the individuals. This is indicated by the determination with which people tried to complete work on their NVQs in the workplace, suggesting that it would have been unreasonable for the Open University to expect them to do it at home. A participant explained,

‘ I think a lot of people did take their work home to do and did it at home which unfortunately I can't, I say unfortunately I was not prepared to do.’ (Katharine)

The reluctance which participants showed in completing any work towards their NVQ in their own time suggests that they may have had doubts about its value to them which they were not prepared to express more explicitly. This mirrors the ambivalent attitude to the qualification noted in chapter 6 in terms of the participants questioning the value of the qualification yet assuming employers would universally welcome it as an indication of their ability.

### **The location of doing NVQ work in the workplace**

Although it might seem to be a trivial issue, four participants (Katharine, Isobel, Stephanie and Vanessa) also commented on the difficulties they experienced in choosing the best place to do the work on their NVQ when they were in the workplace. In order to work effectively on their NVQ they needed to be at their own computer terminals to access relevant documentation, but then they were frequently disturbed by phone calls or people wanting to discuss their everyday work with them. Vanessa explained this,

‘I was determined not to bring it home to do because we were told that we could do it in work time, but having said that you really need to be at your own desk because all your information is there. If you start doing that, you’re still next to the phone – people asking you questions, from that point of view I found it difficult.’ (Vanessa)

In some departments a particular time was arranged where all the people who were working on NVQs could get together to work, but this was unpopular as the fixed time often coincided with a particularly heavy workload for some and they could not leave their desks to join the group. A participant explained why she did not join the group work time arranged,

‘I think timing. I don’t think it was a good time. I had work that I needed to do and didn’t have time available.’ (Diana)

The length of time people could be away from their desks was often short - usually an hour at a time, but sometimes two hours. Participants found this was not long enough and noted that often they had just got out all their notes and records and familiarised themselves with where they had got to at their previous work session when it was time to get back to their day-to-day work.

‘You get something into your head and you just get into it and your hour’s over and you have to stop.’ (Isobel)

The difficulties of this situation were exacerbated when participants missed several work sessions because of workload demands as it then took longer to familiarise themselves with the work they had done previously and remember what they had been told they needed to do. A participant said,

‘It felt like starting all over again because it had been left for months.’ (Diana)

The practicalities of where work on NVQs was carried out clearly had important implications for participants with the difficulties experienced adding to the tensions felt about whether work should be taken home or completed in the workplace.

## **GETTING IT FINISHED**

This section describes how some participants found it very difficult to complete their NVQ and considers the reasons why this might have been.

As a result of finding it difficult to make time to work on their NVQs and attaching a low priority to completing the qualification, people took much longer than they expected to complete it. Although there was not a deadline for completion, potential candidates were advised that they should be able to complete either level 2 or level 3 comfortably within a year. However nine people (Bernadette, Brenda, Diana, Isobel, Lucy, Sharon, Stephanie, Theresa and Vanessa) took far longer than this. The pattern that those who found it difficult to complete seemed to follow was one of an initial period of enthusiasm followed by a period of finding little motivation to work on the qualification.

‘I kind of started it and did a fair bit and then it got left because I just didn’t have time to do anything.’(Vanessa)

In most cases participants who noted that the qualification had taken them much longer than they expected to complete said that their workload was what had made it difficult to make progress, although one explained that it was the timing of the start of the NVQ programme in relation to the annual cycle of the work in her department.

‘It falls that we should have completed it in September, October which is Tutor Services’ busiest time and there was just no way we could have time to finish it. You have to be realistic about these things.’ (Brenda)

The lack of deadlines for participants did nothing to make the situation easier, with one noting the benefit of an assessor who imposed her own deadlines.

‘Once the other person started we were given deadlines, we knew we wouldn’t get into trouble if we didn’t meet the deadlines, but sometimes you need deadlines don’t you?’  
(Sharon)

Participants who took a long time to complete their qualification were finally motivated by two factors. Firstly they felt that they had made a commitment to complete the qualification and that until they did it would cause them disquiet as something they had left undone.

‘I knew I’d made a commitment to do it and it wasn’t going to go away and it was a case of let’s get this out of the way and I could put it to bed and never give it another thought.’  
(Vanessa)

The second factor was that a participant felt she was letting down the colleague who had supported her through the process by not completing it. She explained that she was partly motivated by wanting to deliver on her initial commitment and

‘also P saying to me, you haven’t got much more to do, just get it done and then it’s done. I think if there wasn’t anyone in the office to motivate me I think I probably wouldn’t have finished it.’ (Diana)

Participants who mentioned both these factors said that leaving their NVQ unfinished had made them feel guilty and also noted the sense of relief when they had finished. One participant noted,

‘You do start to feel guilty and then you’re under pressure.’  
(Sharon)

Another said of her feelings when she had finally completed the qualification after more than two years,

‘Relieved – I was just glad it was done then. I was glad it was finished.’ (Diana)

It should be noted that only some participants experienced difficulty in finding time to complete their NVQs. For most of these the reasons behind this difficulty seemed to be a combination of little motivation and workload difficulties. However as in previous sections, those who found it difficult to complete their NVQ were not always those working in the departments with the most pressured workloads. It is interesting to note that even those who had

little motivation to complete their NVQ expressed such strong feelings of guilt and relief as they moved towards completing the qualification.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Interaction between qualification and workplace learning**

The difficulties which participants had in balancing the commitments of completing their qualification and maintaining a level of service suggests that they viewed the gaining of their NVQ as separate from their day-to-day work. Comments from participants suggest that that they found it difficult to make time to work on their NVQ. Eraut (2002) notes that in some cases working towards a qualification may have a detrimental effect on the learning that takes place at work. It appears from my findings that the complex and bureaucratic demands of preparing a portfolio had a negative effect on participants. The complexity of the system required to report evidence meant that they needed to be away from their desk to maintain the concentration to complete portfolio building effectively. Also the time for which they could be released from operational duties was seldom long enough for them to grapple with the task of organising and checking paperwork which was required. To a certain extent this finding supports the criticism of the NVQ system being bureaucratic and encouraging candidates to police their own adherence to the status quo of work (Edwards and Usher 1994). However it should be noted that participants specifically found difficulty with making time to meet the demands of the NVQ assessment system. The NVQ may still have provided the opportunity for learning to take place by actively stimulating the reflection in action as described by Schon (1983).

Although for some the building of a portfolio encouraged them to reflect on their work, an effect noted by Boud et al (1985), the requirement to complete one in such detail is mainly because of organisational demands which mean that to reduce cost the minimum of observation by an assessor is carried out, a

situation also noted by Spielhofer (2002). At the Open University, the difficulties and anxieties experienced by participants as they tried to make time to complete their portfolios could have perhaps been avoided if additional observations were included and smaller portfolios submitted. However a decision to change this aspect of process would have cost implications. The Beaumont report (NCVQ/SCOTVEC 1996) which drew together the views of both candidates and employers using NVQs noted the time consuming process of assessment but suggested no solution. The report confirmed that to complete NVQs either assessors or candidates would need to spend considerable amounts of time away from their day-to-day responsibilities to complete the qualification. This aspect of NVQs makes them particularly vulnerable to the pressure of work. My findings show how time to work on the qualification was frequently missed when departments were especially busy.

### **Conditions for effective learning at work**

The view of most participants that the time they needed to complete their NVQ and the time allocated for their day-to-day work was in competition suggests that their workplace might not be providing the conditions described by Beckett (2001) and Cairns and Stephenson (2001) which would support successful workplace learning. These writers stress the importance of participants being aware of how their organisation would gain as a result of them undertaking learning at work. Several participants felt that day-to-day work took priority over their NVQ and often felt guilty about time spent on their qualification. This implies that participants did not see how their working towards an NVQ might benefit the Open University. This might partly be because they did not think that they learned new skills by doing the qualification and therefore could not see how the organisation might benefit, but it might also be because they associated the time consuming activity with portfolio building which appeared unconnected with the work they were carrying out with customers. Participants might find it difficult to see the connection between doing their NVQ and benefits to the Open University



because of the way the NVQ programme was promoted, with emphasis on the benefits to the individual of doing the qualification.

In contrast, however, several participants seemed unwilling to complete the qualification in their own time, suggesting that they felt it was more for the benefit of their employer that they finish it than for them individually. To a certain extent the confusion about motivation for doing the NVQ illustrated above bears out the importance ascribed by Beckett (2001) and Cairns and Stephenson (2001) to employees being clear about the position of their organisation with regard to workplace learning.

Candy and Matthews (1999) considered the importance of managerial approach and its effect on candidates' experience of workplace learning. My findings suggest that some managers at the Open University did not make it easy for participants to take time to work on their NVQs evidenced by the fact that some people reported missing weekly sessions over a period of months. In some cases this was because participants were not keen to work on their NVQs and had not reminded managers about sessions, but in others participants who wanted to take time had found it difficult to ask for it, implying that managers would see this demand as a nuisance. However, in other cases managers had made it easy for participants to take time insisting that they left day-to-day work and motivating participants to complete their qualification.

### **The NVQ and relationships at work**

Anxieties about the way in which others might view the requirement to maintain service levels for those doing NVQs suggest that an important part of the workplace context is the relationship between colleagues. Theories of situated learning (Lave and Wenger 1991, Wenger 1998) recognise the importance of relationships between workers in an organisation but focus on the transfer of knowledge between the expert and the novice worker. My findings show that the relationship between colleagues associated with

workplace learning is less clear cut than Lave and Wenger describe, perhaps suggesting the lack of clarity and consistency in roles which can be associated with a post modern view of learning at work (Hager 1999, Beckett 2001). Participants noted the anxieties caused by the need to hand work over to others to complete to enable them to find time to get on with their NVQs with some expressing feelings of guilt and resentment.

My findings provided little evidence that people worked collaboratively on their NVQs. This seemed to be partly because of the arrangements made to provide cover for service delivery, meaning that often only one member of staff could be working on their NVQ at any one time, and partly because of the concentration required to complete the complex task of compiling a portfolio which was not conducive to group work. This situation meant that the benefits of collaborative work cited by Lave and Wenger (1991), Wenger (1998) and Billet (1999a, 1999b) were only experienced infrequently. However there was one example of a participant who managed a section encouraging the sharing of experience by the more experienced members of staff helping the newer employees to complete their NVQs.

Billet (1999a, 1999b) explained that in a workplace where more experienced staff did not support those who were less experienced, little learning would take place. Although there were not many examples of this happening in my findings there was evidence of an experienced member of staff acting as an assessor and urging a participant to complete his NVQ. The participant identified this support as a major factor in his completion of the qualification. Billet also noted the opportunity for learning to take place through collaborative problem solving, but the practicalities which made working on an NVQ in many cases a solitary activity in my findings implied that there was little opportunity for this type of shared working. My findings show that in general participants felt under considerable pressure to complete their NVQs, especially where the work involved took much longer than they expected. This

pressure meant that most approached the task in an instrumental way, aiming to do the minimum possible to enable them to complete the qualification. This situation is unlikely to support the shared and explorative learning which Lave and Wenger (1991) and Billet (1999a, 1999b) describe.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have considered the effect of contextual issues on the experience of learning at work for NVQ candidates at the Open University. The findings have highlighted the difficulties experienced in balancing the demands of maintaining customer service and completing an NVQ at work. I have also considered where participants carried out their work on their NVQs and how their attitude to the qualification influenced their choices. Some participants emphasised how difficult they found it to complete their NVQs partly as a result of low motivation and partly because of the difficulty in finding time to complete their work.

In relation to the research questions noted at the beginning of the chapter my findings have shown that participants have been concerned about whether doing the NVQ will impinge on their own time away from work. In most cases they have not wanted to take their NVQ home to work on, but have used this as a last resort when there was pressure to get the qualification completed. Their view of the Open University's motivation for supporting the NVQ is uncomplicated and they seem to equate the promotion of the NVQ with wholehearted organisational support, even though at an operational level it has sometimes proved difficult for them to find time to work on their NVQs.

The discussion which concludes this chapter considers the way in which the demands of the workplace have a major effect on people's ability to learn at work especially where a qualification requires them to complete additional written work. I also consider the importance of participants being aware of the

importance of their learning to the organisation in providing good conditions for learning at work to take place. Finally I look at the way the NVQ effects and is affected by relationships at work.

## **CHAPTER 9 CONCLUSIONS**

### **INTRODUCTION**

I conclude by summarising the findings of my research and then draw together the answers to my research questions which have been derived from the findings. I evaluate my research, focusing on my choice of research questions, the effect of my chosen methodology on my findings and the influence which I, as researcher had on my findings. I restate my claims for the originality and validity of my research and then summarise implications for practice, policy and theory. The chapter ends with recommendations for future research.

### **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

In this section I summarise the findings of my research and relate this summary to what was previously known about NVQs and learning at work as described in my literature review.

#### **Expectations and experience**

In my study I have found that on both a policy and an individual level there are considerable discrepancies between expectations and experience. In terms of policy there is lack of clarity in government documentation about the overarching purpose of the NVQ system. The drivers for change in the UK system of vocational qualifications are described in policy documentation as firstly being the comparatively low level of vocational skills held by UK citizens in comparison to our economic competitors and secondly the growing need for people with a high level of skills to address the rapid pace of technological change at work. However the NVQ system introduced to address these issues is a system of qualifications designed to measure and certificate people's current skill level by viewing retrospectively what they can already do rather than encouraging the development of new skills.

These findings emphasise the difference between literature produced by the government which associates the development of the NVQ system with the development of higher levels of skills (CBI 1989, DTI 1995) and the focus of the De Ville Report (MSC/DES 1986) which sees the purpose of the system as giving coherence to a confused system of vocational qualifications. The divergence in purpose for NVQs made Jessup's (1991) task in delivering both objectives with one qualification system particularly challenging.

Individuals who are choosing to do NVQs also have confused expectations of the qualification. The structure and language of the qualification are off-putting to potential candidates. Despite this, the qualification can prove attractive to some people, particularly those with few other qualifications but with considerable work-related experience. NVQs have also provided a valued opportunity for those who have not succeeded in traditional educational systems to gain credit for what they can do.

Some who may have found traditional qualifications difficult have welcomed the assessment of performance in NVQs as 'good common sense', which emphasises Stevenson's (1996) recognition of the normative aspect of competence and also confirms Edwards and Usher's (1994) concern that the NVQ system could be used to encourage individuals to police the status quo of the workplace without questioning how and by whom NVQ standards are designed. Yet in contrast, the potential for individuality of the qualification noted by Jessup (1991) and Burke (1995) is also recognised by some participants.

Those who work towards and even complete the qualification seem to have a positive expectation of the importance which potential employers would attach to the qualification yet in contrast participants doubt the value of the NVQ in comparison to 'academic' qualifications. The status of NVQs is still measured by participants in comparison with traditional qualifications such as A levels

and degrees which are perceived as being implicitly more valuable than vocational qualifications.

The issue of the status of vocation qualifications was raised in several aspects of my findings. I found that participants who achieved NVQs, particularly those who had few other qualifications were delighted with their achievement and thought that it made a significant statement about their competence and performance at work and their personal abilities. However even those who were pleased to have achieved their NVQs expressed some doubt about the value which the Open University places on these qualifications. This could cause a difficult ethical situation for those in the University such as line managers who promote NVQs as the University appears to be supporting a qualification structure for secretarial and clerical staff which some suspect it might view as less valuable than more traditional qualifications such as degrees. Although it would be possible for the University to address the disparity between individual and institutional perspectives and seek out ways in which it might increase the status of NVQs, participants also recognised the low value given to vocational qualifications and particularly NVQs in the outside world. The plans for 14 -19 education proposed in the Tomlinson Report (DfES 2004) aim to promote parity of esteem between vocational and academic qualifications and suggest this as an important and necessary aspiration, but my findings demonstrate the embedded nature of the relative desirability of traditional academic qualifications.

The question therefore arises whether it is ethical for the Open University to promote NVQs where their value in comparison to the other qualifications such as degrees available to staff are held in higher esteem, even if the more academic qualifications have less relevance to the work of those staff. The personal benefits to staff who might otherwise not have undertaken any additional qualifications which my research revealed might suggest that the

University should continue to provide the opportunity for staff to achieve NVQs.

The difference between expectations and experience of participants highlights the influence of the way in which NVQs are implemented. It would be possible for candidates to achieve an NVQ taking an entirely behaviourist approach as identified by Norris (1991) and Bridges (1996). However, where the demands of efficient evidence collection at work drive candidates to gather information about complex incidents, their experience moves towards the holistic description of expert performance which Eraut (1994) and Hodkinson and Isset (1995) associate with both the demonstration of competence and potential.

### **NVQs and learning**

My study suggests that participants found it difficult to associate the changes to practice that they made as a result of doing the NVQ with the concept of learning. Their definition of learning focused on the learning of new skills which they felt that the retrospective nature of the NVQ did not encourage. This finding highlighted a discrepancy between their experience and the government aspiration for NVQs to deliver a workforce who would be ready to face the rapid pace of technological change (MSC/DES 1986, CBI 1989). They may also have found it difficult to associate learning with jobs that they perceived as being straightforward and in some cases mundane – a situation also noted by Beckett (2001) in the area of dementia care.

Participants thought that the NVQ was an effective measure of their competence or their ability to carry out their job to a high standard. Unlike academic writers who problematised the concept of competence (Norris 1991, Chown and Last 1993, Bridges 1996, Lum 1999), participants did not feel the meaning of this word was problematic. They defined competence as doing their job well and to high standards rather than doing just enough to get by



(Hyland 1994). They agreed with academic critics who said that the NVQ conception of competence did not allow the demonstration of potential or capability (Eraut 1994, 2001) and some participants found this lack of scope in the NVQ frustrating.

Some participants described changes to the process of carrying out their work as a result of doing the NVQ. These changes can be summarised into five key stages. Firstly participants noted how doing the NVQ made them reflect on their current practice. They then described how they validated and confirmed their practice against the NVQ standards. Next they broke down their actions into constituent parts – a process one participant described as formulating. Once they had this view of their work they made changes as they thought appropriate. Finally they described how they maintained changes in work practice which had proved effective beyond the time period of working on their NVQs. The importance of the process of reflecting on practice is similar to the process of reflection in action described by Schon (1983), Kolb (1984) and Eraut (1994).

These findings illustrate some of the processes which have been highlighted in theories of adult learning (Schon 1983, Kolb 1984, Eraut 1994) and theories about learning at work (Barnett 1999, Boud and Garrick 1999, Hager 1999, Beckett 2001). They provide some support for criticisms of the NVQ system for taking an atomised rather than a holistic view of competence (Hodkinson and Isset 1995, Gonczi 1999) but show that the way in which the NVQ was implemented could affect participants experience of the process of gathering evidence to meet NVQ standards.

### **The implications of workplace learning**

The findings in this section explore how the practicalities of doing an NVQ at work affect the experiences of participants. Participants highlighted the difficulties they experienced in balancing their commitment to providing

service cover with completing their NVQ. The anxiety experienced by participants trying to achieve this balance highlighted the importance of creating conditions which are conducive to learning in the workplace (Candy and Matthews 1999, Cairns and Stephenson 2001). The difficulty of providing service cover alongside doing an NVQ also drove some participants to take an instrumental approach to completing their NVQ which meant that in some cases completing the qualification assumed more importance than any learning which might have taken place (Eraut 2002).

The difficulty of balancing the commitment to both providing service cover and completing their NVQs led to some participants feeling that their relationship with colleagues was affected as workload had to be adjusted to accommodate NVQ work. Little time was found for collaborative work as a result of the demands of providing service cover. The passing on of knowledge and expertise from more experienced to less experienced practitioners which is identified as supporting workplace learning by Lave and Wenger (1991), Wenger (1998) and Billet (1999a, 1999b) rarely took place.

Some participants attached particular importance to being allowed to complete their NVQ at work. I found that where people worked on their NVQ was also important and the subject of some anxiety for participants. The convenience of working at their own desk often had to be balanced with a greater likelihood of interruption. The combination of the difficulties in finding time and a good place to work on their NVQ meant that some participants took much longer than they expected to complete their NVQ and their motivation faded considerably over time. In several cases their motivation for completing the qualification after a long period of time was simply to get it done and their final feeling on completion was relief. These findings suggest that participants were uncertain about the extent to which their doing the NVQ would benefit them or the Open University or both. Cairns and Stephenson (2001) noted the importance of learners being clear about how their learning would benefit the

organisation they worked for as well as themselves. Participants in my study did not demonstrate that they had this clear understanding of organisational purpose in relation to doing their NVQs.

## **ANSWERS TO RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The findings from my research summarised above have enabled me to answer all my research questions to some extent, although I have gathered more detailed answers for some than others. I have explored the reasons why I have been unable to answer two of my original questions in detail in my evaluation of my research later in this section.

### **What factors influence participants' choice to do an NVQ in Customer Service at the Open University?**

I have found that the answer to this question varied widely depending on the individual position of those who I interviewed. Key factors which were mentioned by interviewees were

- Previous educational qualifications and experience
- Age and/or stage in an individual's career
- Perception of the status of the NVQ
- Organisational policy

In general, those who had few other qualifications were pleased to have the opportunity to do an NVQ and felt that it was a valuable addition to their CV. In some cases those who already had several qualifications were less excited by the NVQ, but those who were the most sceptical about the NVQ were not always those who already had several qualifications. Of those who did not feel enthused by the prospect of doing the NVQ, most felt that overall doing the NVQ was a neutral activity which was made acceptable by the fact that work on the qualification did not take place in their own time.

The age of a participant and the stage of their career which they felt they had reached also influenced their choice to do an NVQ. However the effect was not consistent, with some participants saying they were too old for the qualification to make any difference to their careers yet another saying she felt that the NVQ was ideal for older workers who had a wealth of experience but no qualifications to show for it. Some participants valued the opportunity to certificate their experience while others felt it was insulting to be asked to do so by the organisation which had employed them because they already judged they had such experience.

The perception of status of NVQs both inside and outside the Open University did not seem to affect people's choice whether to do an NVQ but it did appear to influence the level of enthusiasm with which they approached it. Those who had heard criticisms of the qualification maintained doubts as to its value throughout the process of working on it and expressed surprise at any benefits they identified from doing the work. Although most people felt that an employer would be impressed by an NVQ on a job applicant's CV, by no means all who thought this judged that this would be a good motivation for doing an NVQ.

It should be noted in answering this research question that six people interviewed did not have a choice about whether they did an NVQ, as a result of organisational policy. For some this caused resentment, especially where they had to do the level 2 NVQ which they felt was beneath their capabilities. However all the people in this situation had decided that they would go on to do the level 3 NVQ and some had started on this process already. They explained that they attached more value to the level 3 NVQ because it could be compared with other qualifications which they valued such as A levels.

Findings in relation to this question suggest that the choice to do an NVQ is related to a variety of factors, most of which are personal and individual. This

makes it a difficult task for an organisation to promote such a qualification to its workforce as it appears that each person may have a combination of different reasons for choosing, or not choosing to do such a qualification.

**How has doing the NVQ in Customer Service affected participants approach to and understanding of their work for the Open University?**

Some participants reported changes to their work as a result of doing the NVQ. These resulted from participants being required to look closely and analytically at what they were doing already to see how their work matched the NVQ standards. For some this structured process of reflection provided the stimulation to seek new ways of doing work which were more effective, often saving them, and others, time. Some reported that this process made them feel more in control of what they did and also increased their self-esteem as they gained a sense of the complexity of their work which previously they had been unaware of.

Participants generally felt that the NVQ provided a clear measure of what they were able to do at work, in other words their competence, and that the system used by NVQs to infer competence was justified and valid.

As part of the process of matching NVQ standards to their work, some participants began to see the personal aspect of their work as a constituent part of the whole student experience. This gave them a better understanding of their small part in a large service organisation which helped build relationships with other departments.

Other participants reported little or no change to the way in which they worked as a result of doing the NVQ. They felt that it confirmed the standard of what they were doing already. In some cases they felt that the NVQ measured only an adequate standard when they were already performing at a higher level and they did not think the NVQ stimulated any change in approach.

**To what extent has doing the NVQ affected participants beyond their immediate work for the Open University?**

Some participants reported that doing the NVQ had improved their self-esteem and their personal levels of confidence in their work. For some this was quite marked and they noted changing feelings about their personal status in relation to work. For two participants the success in completing their NVQs led to them undertaking further study, using the study methods learned from their NVQ as a starting point for undergraduate courses. For others, doing the NVQ confirmed the value of what they do. This has been a particularly important aspect of doing a qualification in customer service as this is an occupational area where workers traditionally have low status.

In contrast the only influence beyond work for some participants was a negative one where they felt that because of time constraints, work on the NVQ encroached on their time at home. Some of those who decided to work on their NVQ at home did so only to get it completed and were unhappy that they felt it necessary to do so.

I was unable to gather as much information as I would have liked about this research question. I discuss the reasons for this in my evaluation of the research process.

**How do participants view an NVQ in relation to employability and career development?**

Participants generally viewed having completed the NVQ as likely to be beneficial to their prospects for employability. They expected that if they applied for a new job outside the Open University they would find the NVQ valuable and employers would recognise the qualification and be interested that they had it. Their expectations were supported by anecdotal evidence from colleagues who had moved jobs as well as information they had seen in

job advertisements where NVQs were required. Despite the fact that some people expressed doubts about the reputation of NVQs this feeling did not appear to influence their judgement of the positive effect they thought the NVQ would have on their employability. Being able to put the NVQ on their CV was a frequent reason for participants' choice to do an NVQ. Participants said that they thought the NVQ would provide employers with a benchmark about the standard of customer service they were able to provide, and also would demonstrate that they were the type of employee who was interested in self-improvement.

Participants were less confident that having an NVQ might advance their career in the Open University with some participants saying that the University attached much more status to academic qualifications and was not interested in vocational qualifications.

**What perception do participants have of the Open University's motivation for supporting the NVQ programme?**

I have found it difficult to answer this question as a result of my research. This has partly been because this is an area which participants had not given much thought to. Almost all felt that if the Open University funded them to gain an NVQ they must have been fully supportive of the programme. I had expected them to question the Open University's position. In retrospect this is because I had not taken account of the difference between their outlook on NVQs and my own. Although I was unable to find out much from participants I think this is an important question which might warrant further research as my findings reveal that participants did not experience a fully supportive environment in their workplace which appeared to be affecting both their efforts to complete the qualification and their judgement of its worth when completed. I have considered possible topics in this area for further research later in this chapter.

**How do participants describe the learning experience of doing an NVQ?**

Where participants ascribed changes and improvements in their practice to working on the NVQ they appeared reluctant to describe this as learning. They did, however, identify a process by which they made these changes that I would describe as learning through reflective practice. The changes in practice seemed to illustrate learning at a deep level and in some cases provided them with systems which they could use repeatedly to analyse and improve current practice. This could be described as learning how to learn rather than learning any specific skills and processes associated with the NVQ. The reluctance to describe this as learning seemed likely to be because participants associated the term learning with traditional assimilation of knowledge or facts or the accomplishment of a particular skill.

**BEYOND ANSWERING RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

In summarising the findings of my research and noting how the original research questions had been answered I was able to draw some broader conclusions from my work. These can be divided into two additional areas

- The emotional response to undertaking a qualification
- The balancing act between managing the demands of work and undertaking a qualification

**The emotional response to undertaking a qualification**

Throughout my research I was surprised by the strength of emotions aroused in participants who were undertaking NVQs. This emotional response could not be ascribed to all participants in my study, but several, as identified in Chapter 8, tried to explain to me quite strong and lasting feelings which had been triggered by doing the qualification, particularly in relation to their feelings



about themselves and their position at work. It is hard to generalise about the feelings aroused as they appear to be closely related to an individual's personal circumstances associated with previous educational qualifications, however, a small group of participants who felt they had not done well at school expressed sincerely felt pride in the completion of a work related qualification. This pride seemed to stem from a confidence that they were good at their job, perhaps in contrast to previous schoolwork, and the NVQ had given this confidence legitimate foundation.

In contrast those who did not enjoy doing the NVQ also expressed surprisingly strong emotions including anger and frustration at the difficulty in completing what was required of them. For them the close relationship between their work and the qualification added to the frustration felt as they knew they were good at their job but this did not make getting the qualification any easier or more straightforward.

The strength of emotion expressed was greater than I would have expected in relation to a qualification which did not guarantee any advancement in career terms or salary. The way in which participants spoke about their feelings in my study implied that the depth of emotion felt could have been because the qualification might have been perceived to pass judgement upon someone's ability at work. For many, one's ability at work is a fundamental aspect of judging one's own status and worth. This might have been emphasised where participants had struggled to achieve that status with what they thought to be inadequate educational qualifications.

The implications of the emotional response to this qualification are important. Firstly, in an organisation such as a University where the focus is on academic or high level administrative work, the importance which secretarial and clerical staff ascribe to their work could be ignored. If it is assumed that getting an NVQ for secretarial and clerical staff is straightforward and generates little

emotional involvement, it would be possible to both ignore the potential emotional barriers which might hinder achievement and also to undervalue the achievement and importance for those who complete their NVQ. The potential for emotional upset for those who do not achieve could also be ignored. These findings suggest that the level of emotional involvement of secretarial and clerical staff with vocational qualifications such as NVQs should be recognised by those delivering the qualification and staff should be given the opportunity to explore such feelings.

### **The balancing act between managing the demands of work and undertaking a qualification**

One of the most frequently cited barriers to working on NVQs and one of the issues which seemed to fuel the frustration of participants struggling to complete them was the difficulty in achieving a balance between the demands of work and completing the qualification. I was surprised how the subtle undercurrents of the working context affected participants' experience of and approach to the NVQ. The areas of work which influenced their experience of the NVQ included, people's understanding of what aspects of work were and were not their responsibility, their perceptions of personal relationships in the workplace and their judgement of their position in the hierarchy of work.

Where more than one person in a department was working on an NVQ there would be a requirement to share the workload to enable people to get time away from their normal duties to prepare their portfolio. Although managers were able to allocate time for people to undertake this work, informal arrangements were often necessary to provide cover for phones or personal enquiries. The success or otherwise of these arrangements depended heavily on the relationships between staff in the departments. Although I suspected that the attitude of managers would influence this activity it was certainly not formally arranged by them but agreed between individual members of staff.

For some, the support of colleagues was offered without question, but for others the difficulty of arranging time at work was such that they found it easier to do their work at home.

Almost every participant felt that their day-to-day work took priority over working on their NVQ and few were able to achieve a balance between completing their work and their qualification. Feelings of guilt were commonly expressed with some people unable to escape it, feeling guilty for taking time out from their day-to-day job to work on their qualification and guilty for not completing their qualification. Others expressed considerable anxiety about asking for time away from their desk to complete their NVQ. Some managers were able to avoid this situation by reassuring participants that it was of value to the Open University that they should complete their qualification but others appeared unaware of the emotions aroused.

Achieving balance between day-to-day work and the NVQ was further complicated by the fact that participants had little understanding of why their employers wanted them to complete an NVQ. With no perception of the value of NVQ qualified staff to the University it is not surprising that in most cases work was seen as more important than the NVQ. This finding highlights the importance of organisations making their motivation for staff gaining qualifications explicit.

The complexity of people's emotional response to undertaking NVQs appears to derive from their individual circumstances, both in terms of their previous educational experience and their perception of their own position at work. To a certain extent this makes it difficult to take decisions about implementation for groups of people working on NVQs together as responses will vary between individuals, however it highlights the importance of explicit consideration of the emotional aspects of people's responses to undertaking the qualification.

My research enabled me to answer the research questions I posed and also provided evidence for wider conclusions beyond the specific questions. Once I had finished my research I was able to look back and identify where it could have been improved in terms of the construction of research questions. In the evaluation of my research which follows I have also considered the effect which the choices I made about methodology affected both the data collected and the conclusions of my research.

## **EVALUATION OF RESEARCH**

In this section I consider how I could have designed my research questions more effectively and also the effect of the methodological choices I made on the findings of my research. The final part of this section considers the influence of my position as researcher on the data gathered and conclusions reached.

### **Choice and expression of research questions**

At the end of my research I realised that I had been a little ambitious with the scope of two of my research questions. I had expected that participants would tell me about the way in which the doing the NVQ had affected them beyond their immediate work for the Open University. Most of them responded to questions on this topic in the most general terms relating to their study plans, their levels of confidence or more practical issues about how they did or did not intend to take work home. Participants did not go into any more detail and I did not feel it was appropriate to probe in this area of questioning which might have suggested I was expecting them to reveal personal details to me which they were unwilling to divulge. My difficulties with this research question emphasised to me that participants might think about work and their home life in completely separate terms.

With hindsight I also realised my question concerning the motivations of the Open University for supporting the NVQ programme could have been improved, although my research confirmed that I was right to have noted the relevance of this area. My findings concerning the way in which the attitude of an organisation to the qualification might affect participants' understanding of their purpose in doing the NVQ demonstrated this relevance. In framing this research question I did not realise that participants were unlikely to have given this topic much thought simply because it was of little interest to them. They accepted that if the Open University was paying for them to do the NVQ then they must support it. I made the mistake of expecting the preoccupations of participants to be the same as mine as a researcher. I also realised that it would be inappropriate for me to imply in any way by my questioning that the Open University somehow doubted the value of NVQs as this might have suggested to participants that either I or their employers did not recognise their achievements in completing the qualification. When I had completed my research I realised that the question would have delivered more useful information if it had been related to the ways in which the support or otherwise of the University had been manifested to participants particularly in relation to their experiences of managing time in the workplace to work on their NVQs.

### **Methodological influences on conclusions**

For a variety of reasons outlined in chapters 3 and 5 of my research I chose to gather data using semi-structured interviews with people who had undertaken NVQs. When I had finished my research I recognised that this method was probably the only one which would have enabled me to collect detailed qualitative data which also was compatible with the constraints of the workplace. However I also realised that using this method influenced the data collected and the findings from that data. As I was asking participants to reflect on their experiences, often some time after they had been working on NVQs, the account they gave was sometimes an overview of their experiences rather than a detailed account of what things felt like when they were

happening to them. I was also only able to interview participants once, so this meant that the data gathered reflected what they thought at the particular time I interviewed them and I was unable to gain a sense of any change of attitudes over time. Although these constraints did not make my research less valid I recognise that it did produce a particular type of data which emphasised a single view of participants' experiences bound by a particular time.

I was only able to interview participants in their workplace, usually physically very close to the actual area where their desk was located. Often the time when the interview took place felt quite pressurised for participants as they knew they had to finish by a particular time to relieve a colleague covering for them. This situation may have made it difficult for participants to take time to reflect on what they said and they may also have felt uncomfortable about being critical about colleagues and managers. The constraints I experienced as a result of needing to carry out interviews at work suggest that when planning to research in the workplace such practical issues need to be carefully considered. Although I think my research might have benefited from analysis of people's experiences more contemporaneously, observation would not have yielded such data. The only way to achieve this would have been to work over a period of time with a smaller group, interviewing the same people several times.

### **My influence on the data gathered and conclusions reached**

As the researcher, my values and beliefs as well as my position in the Open University have influenced both the data gathered and the conclusions drawn from it. On a practical level the demands of my work and the time available to interview participants has affected sampling choices made and the timing and location of interviews to some extent. I have also been aware that my position in the Open University may have affected what participants said to me about their experiences especially taking into account that they may have refrained from being critical of the organisation when speaking to me. However, my

understanding of the culture and working environment of the Open University has enabled me to understand some of the workplace situations described to me by participants.

I am aware that the values I have in relation to specific issues such as NVQs and wider issues such as lifelong and adult learning are likely to have affected the way I have developed theory from the data gathered both when choosing ways to categorise and manage data and also in the creation of the final theoretical framework which I have used to make sense of my data.

Although my methodological choices and my influence as researcher have affected the final result of my research, this does not mean it is less valid. It is impossible for any research to be neutral, however it is important to be aware of the influence of the researcher and I have tried throughout to make explicit where I think this effect has been strongest.

In the next section I confirm the rationale for claiming the originality and the validity for my research.

## **RATIONALE FOR CLAIMING ORIGINALITY AND VALIDITY OF MY RESEARCH**

### **Originality**

There are very few studies which address the experiences of people undertaking NVQs. I have identified five studies which explore candidate experiences of NVQ, completed by McHugh et al (1995), Hillier (1999), Grugulis (2000), Spielhofer (2002) and Warr (2002). The studies by Grugulis, McHugh et al and Spielhofer explore the candidate experience in close relation to the organisation they are working for, considering whether undertaking the NVQ made them more effective employees. Grugulis' and Spielhofer's studies focus particularly on the process of collecting evidence for the NVQ at

work. Warr's study looks specifically at the effect of working on the qualification on relationships between employees at different levels. Hillier's study focuses more on the effect which working towards an NVQ has on those undertaking them at a personal level taking particular account of their professional recognition as teachers and trainers.

My study differs in that it focuses almost entirely on the personal experience of participants looking at the reasons why they chose to do an NVQ. It addresses the way in which their judgement of the status and value of the qualification affects their learning experience and explores how learning takes place as they work towards their NVQ. There is minimal focus on the process of doing the NVQ in my work.

The value of my study is in two key areas. Firstly it considers what doing a qualification means to an individual and more particularly what doing a vocational qualification means. Secondly it explores the way in which doing the qualification changes the individual in terms of their learning and self-esteem and the effect this has on their future work. Where the study does focus on the organisation it is on the effect which organisational attitude has on the experience of the employees.

The learning from this study is likely to be useful to those planning, designing and implementing workplace learning, especially where it is competence based so that they can be aware of how such training is experienced and how it affects individuals. Since the NVQ was designed to be a qualification which met individual as well as organisational needs, the focus of my work on how it feels to do an NVQ from the candidates' view has implications for future practice and policy.

The research has enabled me to question a theoretical approach in two areas associated with NVQs. Firstly I have been able to question writers who state



that the competence espoused by NVQs is narrow and behaviourist and provides little opportunity for learning. Secondly I have been able to question assumptions about the practical conditions necessary to promote learning in the workplace. Although the evidence from my research is too narrow to refute or support claims by other researchers it has stimulated questioning of their theories based on the evidence of my study.

### **Validity**

This research claims only to be valid in relation to the experiences of the group of 25 participants undertaking Customer Service NVQs in the Open University. It is an in depth study of their experiences and as such the experiences are likely to be particular to them. However the findings from this group have suggested possible changes to practice which might be tested by practitioners working with similar groups. The findings have also indicated an area of policy which might warrant reconsideration to make the promotion of NVQ more accurate.

The next section outlines the possible implications for practice, policy and theory drawn from my study.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE, POLICY AND THEORY**

In the introduction to my thesis I noted that I hoped my findings from my research would provide information which would be relevant to other professionals working in the area of learning at work. I defined three areas where I hoped my research would be particularly relevant. These were

- Changes in practice
- Providing a better understanding of participants' experiences of doing NVQs

- Adding to the literature which investigates links between conceptualisation and implementation NVQs

Below I explain the extent to which I have achieved my aims.

### **Changes in practice**

My research has suggested that it is possible for learning to be stimulated by working on an NVQ and when this does happen it is a type of learning which may be particularly useful to adults in the workplace. Some of the adults in my study appear to have learned how to systematically apply what they already know from their work experience to new problems and develop solutions by a combination of previous experience and new ideas. However, my findings suggest that this learning often happens in an unplanned way and participants are only aware of it after it has happened. It would be possible for practitioners designing and delivering NVQ programmes to recognise that this type of learning might take place and design their approach to support it. It would also be possible for practitioners to discuss the potential for learning explicitly with candidates and employers so that they were aware of it as a benefit of working on the qualification.

My findings also suggest the benefit of changes to practice and policy in the promotion of NVQs. The rhetoric surrounding NVQs suggests that candidates will learn new skills. Candidates do not appear to define the application of current experience to new problems as a skill, preferring to use this definition for skills associated with areas such as using information technology.

Therefore candidate expectations about the skills they will learn are not being met by NVQs and the skills which they do learn, which might be especially valuable to employers as they imply flexibility and initiative, are not being identified or acknowledged.

If this situation were found to be repeated with other candidates in different organisations it would be wise to review policy concerning how NVQs are promoted and to publicise the skills in applying experience which candidates have identified, both to employers and those choosing to work on NVQs. There is evidence that employers are recognising the value of employees who have the skill of learning how to learn which encompasses the skills noted by participants in my study.

### **Providing a better understanding of participants' experiences of doing NVQs**

A clearer understanding of participants' experiences associated with the practicalities of undertaking an NVQ at work has important implications for the relationship between the employer and its employees. This study has demonstrated how the attitude of the Open University to NVQs has influenced the experiences of staff working on the qualification. This situation suggests that where an organisation is considering offering NVQs to its staff it needs to be quite clear about its purpose in encouraging staff to achieve qualifications. To create the best conditions for effective workplace learning, organisations should consider how they expect the fact that employees are working on their NVQ to influence the performance of both the organisation and the individual doing the qualification. These expectations should be explicit and should be made clear to the individuals undertaking the NVQs and their managers. The expectations should also be reflected in practical organisational arrangements for people to complete work on their NVQs. Although it is easy for guidelines about such organisational issues to be given to those employers considering using NVQs, it might be more effective to produce a checklist of practical actions and decisions which should be taken before beginning an NVQ programme to ensure optimum conditions for candidate success.

My study has also highlighted the emotional experiences which might affect staff when undertaking a vocational qualification especially if they feel that their performance at work is being judged. Where managers introduce NVQs,

they should think through how the anxieties which candidates might experience can be explicitly considered to give them the best chance of success in their working context.

### **Adding to the literature which investigates links between conceptualisation and implementation NVQs**

My findings suggest that the concerns of those writing about the conceptualisation of NVQs may differ from the concerns of those undertaking them. The focus of much of the literature about the NVQ system is on its conceptualisation of competence. However my study implies that for the participants, the notion of competence is unproblematic. Although writers are concerned that NVQs espouse a behaviourist manifestation of competence, the way in which candidates approach the imperative of gathering evidence to a certain extent refutes this, as they draw on critical incidents to provide the richest source of evidence to meet the demands of the qualification, so going well beyond the constraints of behaviourism.

My findings also have relevance to theories of learning at work as they suggest that some theories have relevance to idealised situations which do not take into account what might be considered the trivial details of day-to-day working circumstances. My research suggests that such small practical details may negate large scale plans to provide an ideal environment for learning.

As I have identified these implications of my research I have also noted areas where I would need to know more before drawing conclusions. In the next section I make recommendations for further research which might allow broader conclusions to be drawn.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

As a result of my research I have identified two areas of work which would benefit from further investigation. Firstly I was surprised by the extent to

which participants judged that employers would respond positively to job applicants who had an NVQ on their CV. This seemed to be in contrast to research which surveyed the views of employers and also anecdotal evidence about employers' opinions of NVQs. It would be useful to find out what value employers placed on an NVQ when it was included in the job application of a prospective employee. If there is a discrepancy between what the employer and the employee thinks the NVQ signifies, it is likely to cause confusion in the recruitment process. If employees think that employers are undervaluing their NVQ, this will affect the take up of NVQs. Several surveys have already been carried out which show that employers know little about NVQs, or doubt their value as qualifications. I would suggest that further research should aim to gather detailed qualitative information about employers' reactions to job applicants with NVQs and so find out more about why they might or might not value the qualification.

The second area I would suggest for further research relates to my findings about people's experiences of finding time to work on their NVQs at work. My research made me aware of the complexity of people's feelings about the purpose of doing the NVQ and who was going to benefit from their doing the qualification. In my research people expressed ambiguous feelings about why they were doing the qualification and who it would benefit. These were manifested in their attitude to whether they should complete their qualification at home or at work. The confusion seemed to hinder their completion and affect their perception of the value of the NVQ once they had finished. Although it would be a difficult area to research I think it would be useful to find out more about the value of employees completing the NVQ to the organisation. The way in which this value was conveyed to employees and the effect that had on their experiences of doing the qualification could be explored.

To a certain extent the second area for further research described above relates closely to my original research question ‘What perception do participants have of the Open University’s motivation for supporting the NVQ Programme?’ With hindsight I realise that the scope of this question is as large on its own as my original research topic. However after carrying out my research I think that the influence organisational issues have on candidates is greater than I expected. Research into this area would need to explore in detail how candidates felt about organisational attitudes as well as attempting to find out how and from whom these attitudes were generated. Again with hindsight I would have found it very difficult to carry out this research as it would have been hard to ignore what I already knew about organisational attitudes from my work as NVQ co-ordinator and focus only on candidates’ perceptions of this aspect of research. I would also have found it difficult to report on this aspect of work whilst still employed by the organisation.

## **CONCLUDING COMMENTS**

This research set out to consider the experience of NVQ candidates in the Open University, promoting their voice in telling me how it felt for them to be working on this qualification. The resulting findings have provided insight into their experiences and have clear implications for changes to the delivery and promotion of NVQs which have the potential to make the experiences of future candidates more rewarding.

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## APPENDIX A

### DETAILED INFORMATION ABOUT NVQ CANDIDATES

Note: to preserve anonymity all candidates have been given pseudonyms. Male candidates have been given female pseudonyms

Participant pseudonym	Level of NVQ	Completed/not completed at time of interview	Secretarial/Clerical Staff Grade	Date of interview and schedule used	Work location
<b>Amelia</b>	3	Completed	4	19/9/01 1	Regions
This participant was in the age group 51-60 and was actively considering retirement. She had completed vocational qualifications in typing and office skills and also an OU degree. She worked in Student Services responding to complex queries and had no line management responsibilities. She had been at the OU in excess of 10 years and had been promoted from a grade 3 clerical worker to a grade 4.					
<b>Anoop</b>	3	Completed	4	20/11/01 1	Walton Hall
Aged between 41 and 50, Anoop had completed an OU degree. Her job was a traditional secretarial role with no line management responsibilities. Anoop had been at the OU for in excess of 5 years					
<b>Bernadette</b>	3	Completed	4	3/12/03 3	Regions
Bernadette was aged between 41 and 50. She was educated to A level or equivalent at school and had also undertaken additional vocational qualifications. She was responsible for dealing with complex student queries. She had been at the OU in excess of 10 years					
<b>Brenda</b>	3	Completed	5	10/12/02 2	Regions
This participant was aged between 41 and 50. She was educated to O level or equivalent at school but had undertaken additional vocational qualifications outside work. She was an experienced clerical worker who had been at the OU for more than 10 years. She had management responsibility for a small department.					



<b>Christine</b>	2 and 3	Completed/not completed	4	14/3/03 1	Walton Hall
Christine was aged between 41 and 50 and her highest previous educational qualifications were A level or equivalent. She was undertaking an OU course with a view to completing an OU degree. She was responsible for responding to complex student queries and had no line management responsibilities. She had been at the OU for 2 years. Christine had had to undertake the level 2 as part of her contract but had chosen to do the level 3.					
<b>Claire</b>	3	Completed	4	12/5/03 1	Walton Hall
This participant was aged between 41 and 50. Her highest educational qualifications were O level or equivalent. She was responsible for dealing with complex student queries but had no line management responsibilities. She had been at the OU for in excess of 5 years.					
<b>Diana</b>	3	Completed	3	10/12/02 2	Regions
Diana was aged between 21 and 30. She was educated to A level or equivalent standards. She was responsible for responding to routine student queries and had no line management responsibilities. She had been at the OU for 3 years.					
<b>Esther</b>	3	Completed	5	5/9/01 1	Regions
Esther was in the age group 31- 40. She had done A levels and was also undertaking further undergraduate level study with the OU. She had extensive line management responsibilities for in excess of ten staff working in Student Services. Esther had been at the OU for 3 years.					
<b>Hannah</b>	2	Completed	3	3/12/03 3	Regions
Hannah was aged between 21 and 30 and had just completed a degree at a traditional University. She was now studying for a Masters Degree. She was responsible for responding to routine student queries. She had been at the OU for less than a year					
<b>Harriet</b>	2	Not completed	3	14/3/03 1	Walton Hall
This participant was aged between 21 and 30 and had recently joined the OU after completing a degree at a traditional University. She was responsible for supplying information and advice to prospective students. She had no line management responsibilities. Harriet had been at the OU for less than a year. She had had to undertake the NVQ as part of her contract.					
<b>Heather</b>	2	Not completed	3	20/11/01 1	Walton Hall
Heather was aged between 31 and 40. She was educated to A level standard. She was responsible for supplying information and advice to prospective students. She had no line management responsibilities. Heather had been at the OU for less than a year. Heather had had to undertake the NVQ as part of her contract.					

<b>Isobel</b>	2	Not completed	3	4/12/01 1	Walton Hall
This participant was aged between 31 and 40. She was educated to A level standard. She was responsible for supplying information and advice to prospective students. She had no line management responsibilities. Isobel had been at the OU for less than a year. Isobel had had to undertake the NVQ as part of her contract.					
<b>Josie</b>	2	Completed	3	3/12/03 3	Regions
Josie was aged between 21 and 30 and had just completed a degree at a traditional University. She was responsible for responding to routine student queries. She had been at the OU for less than a year					
<b>Katharine</b>	3	Not Completed	4	10/12/02 2	Regions
This participant was aged between 51 and 60 and was considering retirement. She was educated to A level or equivalent standards but had undertaken additional vocational and other qualifications outside work. She was responsible for responding to complex student queries and had no line management responsibilities. She had been at the OU in excess of 10 years.					
<b>Louise</b>	2	Completed	4	3/12/03 3	Regions
Louise was aged between 21 and 30 and had completed a degree at a traditional University. She was responsible for responding to complex student queries. She had been at the OU for a year.					
<b>Lucy</b>	3	Completed	3	19/9/01 1	Regions
Lucy was aged between 31 and 40. Her highest level of qualification before joining the OU was A level, but she had completed 2 OU courses towards an undergraduate degree. She was responsible for responding to routine student queries. She had been at the OU in excess of 5 years.					
<b>Pratima</b>	3	Not completed	4	10/12/02 2	Regions
Pratima was aged between 21 and 30. She was educated to GCSE at school and had done some vocational qualifications at College straight after school. She had also done an OU undergraduate course. Her job was that of a traditional secretary with no line management responsibilities. Pratima had been at the OU for 2 years.					
<b>Rachel</b>	2	Completed	2	29/08/01	Regions
Rachel was in the age group 41-50. She had no previous qualifications. She had a clerical job providing office support for a group of secretaries and clerical workers. She had no line management responsibilities. She had been at the OU for 2 years and was seeking promotion to a grade 3 post.					

<b>Rose</b>	2	Not completed	3	20/11/01 1	Walton Hall
This participant was aged between 21 and 30. Her highest previous qualification was GCSE although she had undertaken some previous vocational qualifications in a different occupational area. She had just signed up for an OU course at the time of her interview. She was responsible for supplying information and advice to prospective students. She had no line management responsibilities. Rose had been at the OU for less than a year. Rose had had to undertake the NVQ as part of her contract					
<b>Ruth</b>	3	Completed	4	5/9/01 1	Regions
This participant was in the age group 51 – 60. Her highest level of qualification was O level or equivalent. She was responsible for responding to complex student queries but had no line management responsibilities. She had worked at the OU for in excess of 10 years and in this time had been promoted from a grade 3 clerical worker to a grade 4.					
<b>Sharon</b>	3	Completed	3	6/6/03 1	Regions
This participant was aged between 41 and 50. She was educated to A level or equivalent at school. She was responsible for responding to routine student queries and had no line management responsibilities. She had been at the OU for 3 years.					
<b>Stephanie</b>	2	Not completed	2	12/5/03 1	Walton Hall
Stephanie was aged between 31 and 40. Her highest educational qualifications were O level or equivalent. She was the first point of contact for student queries and was responsible for straightforward administrative tasks. She had no line management responsibilities. She had been at the OU for 5 years					
<b>Theresa</b>	3	Completed	4	10/12/02 2	Regions
Theresa was aged between 41 and 50. She was educated to A level or equivalent standard. She was in a clerical role responding to complex student queries associated with finance. She had been at the OU for in excess of 5 years. She had line management responsibility for two staff.					
<b>Vanessa</b>	3	Completed	4	6/6/03 1	Regions
Vanessa was aged between 41 and 50. She was educated to A level or equivalent at school and had undertaken additional vocational qualifications. She was responsible for managing a small team of staff and had been at the OU for less than a year.					
<b>Wavenie</b>	2	Not completed	3	13/2/03 1	Walton Hall
Wavenie was aged between 21 and 30 and had recently joined the OU after completing a degree at a traditional University. She was responsible for supplying information and advice to prospective students. She had no line management responsibilities. Wavenie had been at the OU for less than a year. She had had to undertake the NVQ as part of her contract.					

**APPENDIX B****DATES, LOCATIONS AND SCHEDULES OF INTERVIEWS WITH ASSESSORS**

<b>Assessor identification</b>	<b>Workplace location</b>	<b>Working with Participants in these areas</b>	<b>Date of interview</b>	<b>Interview schedule used</b>
Assessor 1	Region	Oxford region Walton Hall Nottingham region	17/1/02	4
Assessor 2	Walton Hall	Walton Hall	7/8/02	4
Assessor 3	Region	Bristol region	10/12/02	4
Assessor 4	Walton Hall	Walton Hall	24/3/03	4

## **APPENDIX C**

### **INTERVIEW SCHEDULES**

#### **Interview Schedule 1**

##### **NVQs and learning**

Has doing the NVQ made any difference to the way in which you do your work now?

Has the NVQ made any difference to the way you approach your work?

Has doing the NVQ made any difference to what you think about your work?

Do you think you've learned anything from doing the NVQ?

How do you like to learn?

Did you apply this in any way to doing the NVQ?

How did you learn as a result of doing the NVQ?

How did it feel to write about what you do?

Was it different writing about what you did rather than just telling someone?

What effect did working on the NVQ as part of a group have on you?

##### **NVQ assessment**

What did you think about the way in which the NVQ was assessed?

What previous experiences of assessment have you had?

How did the NVQ compare?

##### **Choosing to do the NVQ**

Why did you choose to do the NVQ?

Was it the same for others choosing to do the NVQ?

Would you make the same choice again?

Will you choose to do another NVQ (if appropriate)?

Do you expect it to be different?

Do you feel different about doing other qualifications after doing the NVQ?

##### **Status of the qualification**

Do you think doing the NVQ has made you more employable – within the Open University/within another organisation?

Have you told other people that you've got the qualification?

What was their reaction – within the Open University/outside the Open University?

How did you feel when you'd completed the NVQ?

##### **The Open University and NVQs**

What do you think is the Open University's attitude to NVQs?

What do you think is the Open University's attitude to learning?

Did the Open University's attitude to NVQs have any influence on your choice to do an NVQ?

**General**

What did you think about doing the NVQ as a whole?

Was there anything you especially liked/didn't like about doing the NVQ?

Respondents have not been asked all these questions – in many cases one question will automatically lead to people answering other questions from the same group or even from one of the other groups. I have aimed to allow respondents to negotiate their own way through the topics, just ensuring that all these broad areas have been covered, as the way in which they link topics, without prompting from me is also interesting to my research. This applies to all interview schedules

## **Interview Schedule 2**

### **NVQs and learning**

How did you first hear about NVQs in the Open University?

What did it feel like/how did you feel when you started on the NVQ?

How has doing the NVQ made a difference to the way you approach your work?

Has doing the NVQ made any difference to what you think about your work?

What do you think you've learned from doing the NVQ?

Can you tell me about a time you really felt you learned something?/How did you feel?

Can you tell me about a time when you had a bad learning experience?

How does doing the NVQ compare to these?

How did it feel to write about what you do?

Was it different writing about what you did rather than just telling someone?

What was it like working with the group on your NVQ?

### **NVQ assessment**

Can you tell me about an experience you've had of being assessed? How did it feel?

Can you remember how you felt the first time you had an NVQ assessment?

How was the NVQ different from other assessments?

How did the NVQ compare?

### **Choosing to do the NVQ**

What made you choose to do an NVQ?

How did you feel you fitted into the group doing the NVQ?

Would you make the same choice again?

Will you choose to do another NVQ (if appropriate)?

How do you expect it to be different?

If you choose to do another qualification now after doing the NVQ how do you think you would feel different?

### **Status of the qualification**

How do you think doing the NVQ has affected your employability?

Who did you decide to tell about doing the NVQ inside and outside the Open University?

What was their reaction – within the Open University/outside the Open University?

How did you feel when you'd completed the NVQ?

**The Open University and NVQs**

What do you think is the Open University's attitude to NVQs?

What do you think is the Open University's attitude to learning?

Did the Open University's attitude to NVQs have any influence on your choice to do an NVQ?

**General**

What did you think about doing the NVQ as a whole?

Was there anything you especially liked/didn't like about doing the NVQ?



### **Interview Schedule 3**

#### **Educational background**

Would you mind talking me through your educational background?  
What did you think of NVQs before you did them?  
What had you heard about NVQs?  
Has your view changed since you started working on the NVQ?  
Can you identify what's different between the work you had to do to get your degree and the work you had to do to get your NVQ (if relevant)?  
What is the value of NVQs for you?  
Can you compare the experience of doing the NVQ with other Open University training?

#### **NVQs and learning**

Have you done anything differently as a result of doing the NVQ?  
Do you think you've learnt anything from doing the NVQ?

#### **Status of the qualification**

What do you think gives a qualification high status?  
Where will you put the NVQ on your CV in comparison to other qualifications?  
Can you envisage using your NVQ to get a job?  
How did your experience of doing the NVQ affect your attitude to the qualification when you had finished?  
What will the NVQ say about you?

#### **Time and NVQs**

How have you managed to fit in the time to do an NVQ?  
How long has it taken you to complete the NVQ?  
Have you experienced difficulties finding time to complete the NVQ?

#### **Interview Schedule 4 (Assessor interviews)**

##### **NVQs and learning**

What's your opinion of what people learn from doing an NVQ?

What would you say people get from doing the NVQ?

Do you think having the NVQ affects their performance after they've completed it?

Why do you think a lot of people say they don't learn anything?

##### **NVQ assessment**

How do you think they feel about NVQ assessment?

##### **Choosing to do an NVQ**

Why do you think people choose to do the NVQ?

What criticisms do candidates make of the NVQ?

##### **Status of the qualification**

How do you think it helps them with their career inside the Open University/outside the Open University?

##### **Differing effects of NVQs**

Do you think the effect doing an NVQ has on people differs according to whether they are Secretarial & Clerical or Administrative/depending on their age/depending on their gender?

How do you think staff who've got an Open University degree or have done Open University courses compare them to the NVQ?

##### **General**

What do you think managers in the Open University think about their staff doing the NVQ?

## **APPENDIX D**

### **TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW WITH 'PRATIMA'**

J How did you first heard about NVQ's in the Open University.

P When we were invited to a meeting because I was new to the Open University. They invited all the new employees which I think its part of the contract to come along and speak to, someone came down from MK.

J Was it R?

P Yes and then we sat down with A who was the assessor and P who was my assessor and just went through what the NVQ is and the outline of what would be required of us and we were given the option to start it, or to like leave it for a few more months and I just thought I want to get on and start doing it now while it's all fresh in my mind so that's how I first heard about them. I had heard about them before in my previous job cause I was a secretary and I'd heard about NVQ's but I wasn't much aware of how important it was and I suppose in the OU we deal with people all the time so it made me more aware of who our customers are.

J What did it feel like when you started on the NVQ?

P I didn't know where to start cause so much information that you were given. I know that everyone went through the information with you and tried to make it simple and give you some examples of what to do but when you're sat on your own and you're looking at your first blank sheet (laughs). I do so much every day dealing with customers, but just trying to put it down on a bit of paper very simplistic I think at some stage I looked too much into the actual question. I didn't just write down the first thing which came into my head

which was the correct answer. I had to like really really go deep into the question. It was quite frightening at first. And a lot of people around me that was doing the NVQ at the same time were building up lots of information for their portfolio and putting it all in ring binders and I wasn't quite sure how much I needed but once I got going I was OK.

J How did you get over feeling like that?

P I went the opposite way. I collected so much paper work for each case study it was like how am I going to put all of this information into my first case study and the first three case studies I did were really really long but then I managed to slow down and take some paperwork out. It was quite good for me cause we were all told you're writing your case studies as though no-one knows of the OU before or anything in it. So I was trying to explain this so simply.

J Do you think working on the NVQ made any difference to the way you approached your work.

P Yes definitely. I am a systematic person anyway but the way that I developed my case studies and the way that I collected my information into my case studies it made me think of new systems. Even the work I do everyday, because it was part of my customer service, it made me reflect on the work I was doing at the time and how I could make that easier for me. I made up a student query log of all the queries that came in because even though we record it on to CIRCE and all these different systems, there was nothing in the office to log which student contacted us on which day and what the outcome was and who we passed it to, so it made me reflect on my work and how I could improve that. I've never really sat down before and looked at what I was doing and how I could improve that, so it's made me much more systematic. And even now after I've finished it I think about the work I'm doing and just

sit down and look at what I'm doing and think about ways I can improve it so it has done me good.

J If you could isolate what you've learned from doing the NVQ could you tell me anything about that?

P The good things I've got out of it do you mean?

J Yes

P It's made me work as well on my own. I'm so used to working in teams it's made me sit down and just do things on my own and think for myself, think through the criteria and information and read through all the different items and to work it out for myself and not having to work in a team and think about other people's thoughts on it. So I thought this was a good thinking process just for me, for myself.

J I want to talk to you a little bit about how you individually like to learn, so can you think about a time when you've really learnt something? It doesn't necessarily need to be from a time when you were doing your NVQ, but any time that you can really notice that you've learnt something.

P I think it was the really good thing, we had a training course here on how to be assertive and how to deal with awkward customers, people that get irate and that kind of thing and I found that training session because I'm quite young, I'm only 24 years old, and I've been a secretary for 6 years and I've got all my training, I've got my RSA's, but I haven't got the experience and I found the training that we did in that session how to deal with customers and how to speak to them and how to make them feel that they have got the answer or they're going to get the answer. I felt that training sessions really helped me word how I would speak to a customer or how I speak to a student or even just

to a colleague who's upset and how to deal with it. I know a lot of it's common sense, but it's quite good being able to go through in a session. It was only an afternoon session, but it made me feel so much more confident when I was speaking to people and how to deal with it and I also applied that into my case studies as well so it was really helpful.

J Can you tell me in a little bit more detail how you applied that to your case studies?

P I had a student that I picked up the query that came through, it was from a regional manager, but the student had been passed around, or had tried calling so many times by the time the regional manager wasn't available and the student didn't want to know that, he just wanted to speak to somebody and I managed to apply the information that I was given in the training to like calm the student down.

J Did you particularly like the way it was delivered? The person who did that.

P It was good because there were a few other people as well from my area, but there were other people from study support, and courses and enrolments who deal with more students than I do, so they had a bit more experience. When it comes to the business school the students by that time are usually the ones that are really unhappy. They've gone through the other areas and they haven't got the answer they want, so when they came through to us they're usually very unhappy, coming up to a complaint level so it was quite nice being involved with people from the other areas who I'm not really involved with because they can tell you how a student first comes into the region and it's not usually that bad it just escalates over time. It made me feel better that when they came through to us I always get the really horrible student, but they're not always that bad and they do get solved and at the end of the day even though they do come to us really unhappy they usually do come away with the right answer

they need, and what to do next - it's something good that comes out of it sometimes it's quite hard because you don't see that.

J Did you get involved with people from other areas doing your NVQ?

P I did a little bit. I worked closely with A and she works for the advisors with their diary logging and like student queries and it was quite good cause we worked closely together and we were quite the same level in our portfolio putting it together and then she kind of like went ahead of me. It was quite good because even though it was quite difficult because I was a secretary and she was in the advisors and she deals with more students she could show me an example of her case study and I could show her an example of my case study it was surprising how differently we did it. She managed to get hers on one page whereas I managed to get mine on several pages but it made me realise I could do it simpler than it was. I think I made too much of it.

J Have you carried on talking to her about work things? As a result of that.

P Yes. It was really nice cause some of the people that I probably wouldn't have been involved with as much I speak to and even though I've hopefully submitted my final version of my NVQ there are still people who are still behind me who started with me but it's nice because I say hello to them and they say how am I getting on and yeah it's brought us all together and it's nice, it's good.

J How did you feel about actually having to do the writing down about what you did because it's quite different isn't it?

P Difficult, because once I get going I can write lots of things down and then I stopped for about a month and then I went back to it and I read through my notes and it was really hard to try and get back into thinking of NVQs and

thinking of the way they did it. I found that quite hard. I wrote quite a lot of information and I tried as I was going along to write the information down but sometimes I didn't- when I went back to it I found I struggled to pick it up but once I'd picked it up I was fine but I found I stopped and started quite a lot.

J And did writing down about cases make you think differently about what you'd done?

P I think so and I also I didn't hand write it I typed it. Because I type a lot in my job it's easier for me to type it although I find that when I write things down I reflect more. When I type them I'm not thinking when I'm typing as much as when I'm sitting reading through what I've written and making sure I've spelt it right cause the computer does that for you. But it does make me think more. I did about four case studies and it did make me think more about what I was doing. How I was approaching the situation, how I was thinking it through and how I could maybe improve the next time over. It was only until like the last case study that it made me think – I was developing a system, I think I've developed it more now although I don't write things down in as much detail though I still do write if queries come through now I've got my query log set up. It still has made me reflect more about how I do things in a system.

J It was the level 3 you were doing?

P Yes, level 3.

J I'm going to move on to thinking about the assessments now - you had an observation?

P Yes I did yes.



J How did that feel?

P Fine- it was right at the beginning of my NVQ and it was nice because P, because I know her and I've had a lot of involvement with her because I pass a lot of cases, queries on to her as an advisor so I had a good working relationship with P anyway so it wasn't too bad. After a while I just forgot she was there but the only thing is on the day we had my observation we had no phone calls, nobody actually came in (laughs). But she went through, how's your desk set up, what are your systems, what are your filing systems. It made me realise that I've got some really good systems and I didn't realise I had these systems that were so good. P was really surprised and pleased with that and there were some things she said. You could go away and make a little plan of your office in case you were unwell and people could come in and pick up all these folders that you've made such a good job of so even though I had all these good systems she had a point that well actually if I'm ill I've got all these great systems but no-one could use them cause they don't know where they are on my desk and it made me think a bit more.

J She sounds as if she was really supportive.

P Yeah, it was really supportive and it was really positive. The only problem was, after she did my observation we moved down to another floor so my responsibility for my line managers, they changed a little bit as well, so from my observation when I first started my portfolio it changed from the end, but it was still really good to think when I moved down I'm going to set up a map of my desk from when I first start here and where the useful information is.

J Can you compare that to other experiences of when you've been assessed in different ways? Like being assessed in school in exams or anything like that.

P I think when I, the assessment I've had the examinations assessments, its never been talking. I don't really like exams and it was really nice to have someone I could sit and talk through the information. It felt much more natural. I felt much more comfortable. I didn't feel so nervous and cause I knew P at work it was fine. I was just reeling off all this information and just wondering where it had all come from. It was much better than I think before how I've been assessed.

J How did you feel about yourself at the end of it?

P Yeah I felt impressed that I had some of these systems in place already that I didn't think I had and also that I could improve on them cause I suppose when you get to a certain place in your job you get complacent and you just accept what's there, and it was quite good that I was put into the system of reflecting more and when I have a spare half an hour or an hour and it's quiet I don't think what can I do, I sit down and think about things and how everything's going. I don't feel like I have to rush around everywhere now. I feel a bit calmer and now I've got all these systems in place I don't feel like I've got to panic.

J Can you think what made you choose to do the NVQ or did you have to do it?

P Well first we were told we had to do it because we were new members of staff but now I have done it I did enjoy it. I did enjoy it because we could do it in our own working time as well so I know that some stages I couldn't actually have time to do that in my work time. It was nice that I could allocate a few hours away from the office and sit in a room and go through my work but still in work time. I hadn't got to take it home. I hadn't got to sit there in my evenings and take up time. I know a lot of people did, but it was quite nice having the time to go away and everyone accept that I was going to go upstairs

and do my NVQ's and everyone around was so supportive and so helpful, it was really positive. And I think I'll go on and do some more. I'm going to have a little break cause I'm going to do a course next year, an OU course and also there are quite a lot of changes in the business school and I don't want to take too much on at the moment but I think I'd like to go on and do something else. M mentioned something maybe doing some kind of assessing.

J Oh yes that sounds good.

P Yes or moving on cause a lot of other secretaries because of the nature of our jobs we don't deal with a lot of students as our customers. I think the business administration, a lot of the secretaries are moving on to that and I've heard that I can make up some of the units to do another part of my NVQ on that. So there's all different possibilities which have opened up to me which I've never really looked at and also it looks really good on my CV.

J Yes, definitely. You know you said you were going to do a course- do you think doing the NVQ made any influence on your decision to do that?

P When I started my NVQ I also was doing DD100. But actually I thought it would be too much for me to do both of them but because I did my NVQ in my work time and my other cause in my evening time it was quite good because the way I structured my assignments, it made me think and the thinking process was there more than I think before I did my NVQ and also it was quite good because all the students I was with they weren't aware I worked for The Open University, but I felt like my NVQ was quite good because it made me more aware that these people around me are just normal people and even though they are our customers they are people and they're students, the NQV made me think even though they are students, as customers they are normal people which was quite nice.

J You said the NVQ's are going to look good on your CV. Do you think they'll make you more employable having an NVQ?

P I think so- as soon as you mention, a lot of it now is about meeting the needs of the customer and I think a lot of companies are looking at that. You just look through the papers every now and again and you see all the information about all they need customer services and there's an NVQ in that. I think before I came here I had a BTec and I felt like NVQ's were frowned upon from where I came before but actually in a working environment, in the kind of area that I'm in at the moment I think it's really important to have that customer awareness which it's given to me.

J Was this at college that you felt they were frowned upon?

P Yeah- I was at like college- I don't know if you'd say frowned upon, but they weren't promoted as well as they could have been. It seems like if you had an NVQ – well yes NVQ and it just like swept under the carpet, but it's made much more of a point here that NVQ's are important. I lived in Plymouth before moving to Bristol and there's much more employment around, there's much more companies around, a lot of Customer Service based companies, and it's made me more aware that I'm quite lucky that I have done this and hopefully I'll get my NVQ.

J I'm sure you will. Did you tell people like your friends outside the OU.

P My partner he's also done NVQ's, he's got NVQ 5 so he knew exactly what was happening although it was quite difficult cause I think even though you are like doing NVQ's with different companies with different customers it's completely different. So but a lot of my friends were surprised that I was doing an NVQ and an OU course at the same time, but I managed it really well, it was really good. Once I got stuck into it and I managed to balance the

workload between doing a TMA and then I'd do a bit of my NVQ. I managed it really well and people were pleased.

J What did you think your friends thought about the actual qualification – did they say anything about that at all?

P Not really cause a lot of my friends are in different areas, but they were pleased I was doing something positive towards my career that would help me.

J What do you think about the status of NVQs in the OU as a whole?

P I think it's much more recognised now. When I first - I've been here for 2 years now I hadn't heard a lot about NVQs but now I've seen a lot on the intranet about NVQs and then there announced a lot of the regional centres about people passing their NVQs and there always seems to be one room booked out for NVQ work. Every month there's a meeting about NVQs and every new person you meet is talking about NVQs in the staff room so I think it's much more apparent than it used to be when I first started so

J Do you speak to people beyond Region 03

P I do and it's not really much spoken about. I've only had at the bit of involvement with Wales and Birmingham but it's not really spoken about. It's quite noticeable at Walton Hall, and I'm always seeing things in Open House about people passing their NVQ's which is nice, but I don't really hear a lot about it in the regions.

J Was there anything you didn't like about doing it?

P The only thing I didn't like about doing it at the beginning even though we were given some way of working it out I went off in my own little tangent and

I think I did too much work and I collected too much information and P's really great but she's really really busy and I found that because she couldn't assess my work on regular intervals it was like every 3 to 6 months. It's now come to the end and she's got to go through so much of my work. By the time I did my final case study I'd worked out exactly how to do it and I wish I knew that at the beginning and I found that quite frustrating and it must be quite hard for P and she's taken a long time to do it and I can understand that. So that was the only thing I didn't like about it. Even though I know people were trying to explain to me how to do it, it was still difficult and I think I spent more time than what I should of –but maybe that's a good thing, in future when I move on to another part of NVQ at least now I know exactly what to do.

J Now that you've finished it what do you think was the thing you liked best about it?

P Being able to reflect on my work-being able to think of more systems. Being more aware that even though I thinking my primary customers are students it's made me think actually no they're not. The people around me are my customers and I'd never thought that way before –I'd just looked at the outside public that's my customers.

## APPENDIX E

### SELECTIVE TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW WITH 'JOSIE'

*In this transcription I have only transcribed in detail where a participant has given new information that has not been covered in earlier interviews with other participants. Within square brackets I have provided a description of the general context of discussion.*

[Discussion of details about participant's job]

[Introduction to the topic of status]

J Can you talk me through what you think of the NVQ as a qualification?

[Initially wasn't really interested in doing the qualification, already had a lot of experience, didn't really need to do the NVQ. Decided to do it as another qualification to add to CV. Made her look at skills and how she dealt with people. Confirmed that she was good at her job]

J Can you compare what you learnt from the NVQ with what you learnt for your degree. Is it a different type of learning?

Jo It's different. Not in the sense of the support, I think you get roughly the same amount of support on each. Obviously the NVQ's more vocational. It does look at more practical skills and service skills rather than the academic skills you learn for your degree.

J Can you analyse why you weren't keen to do the NVQ in the first place?

[Details of experience she already had]

Jo It wasn't because I already had a degree and it was lower than a degree. I saw it purely as a vocational qualification, not an academic one.

J Did you feel like you were going backwards at all doing a level 2 NVQ after a degree?

Jo I did find the work very easy, but I didn't feel as though I was going backwards. I feel as though it's helping with my job. I just feel as though it's furthering my skills with my job.

J What aspects of it are easy do you think?

Jo I think probably just the exercises, the written part of it. I mean considering I'm doing a very theoretical MA I find the writing part very easy.

J Does the fact that you find it very easy affect how you value it?

Jo Probably – I don't put as much time into it as I should, so I think it probably does.

J If you wanted to spend more time on it, what would you do more of?

Jo I'd probably collect a lot more evidence and I'd chose the best from it. I'd build up my portfolio more than I have done.

J Do you notice that that's a different approach between you and other people?

Jo There's one of my colleagues, she's on about the same level as me, we have our meetings together with M and I think she does the same as me. She's also got a degree. She doesn't build up her portfolio like I do, we just do what's necessary.



[Questions about what employers think about NVQ. It would look good on a CV and if you were applying for a customer service type job it would be useful]

J Had you heard about NVQs before you did one at the Open University?

[General opinion that people did not think much of NVQs]

J Has your impression of NVQs changed since you've done it yourself?

Jo I think if I had the choice again I'd go ahead with it straight away because I think it has helped me with my job.

[Examples of how it has helped with job. NVQ has provided evidence of how much she was doing and skills she had. NVQ has made her think more about what she was doing. This has carried on after the end of the NVQ especially in terms of policy issues]

J How do you see the NVQ in comparison to other things on your CV?

Jo If I was writing a list of my qualifications and it wasn't in date order it would be near the end.

J What do you think gives a qualification high status?

Jo I think a degree

J So what is it about a degree that makes it high status?

J I think the length of time it takes to do it. The amount of work, the level of difficulty, especially the difficulty of understanding and reading texts.

Jo What does your degree say about you?

J It says I'm creative.

[Discussion about creativity in NVQs]

J How have you managed to fit in working on your NVQ alongside your day to day work?

[Manager gives slot each week to do NVQ. Sometimes this is not possible. Difficulty with not having deadlines]

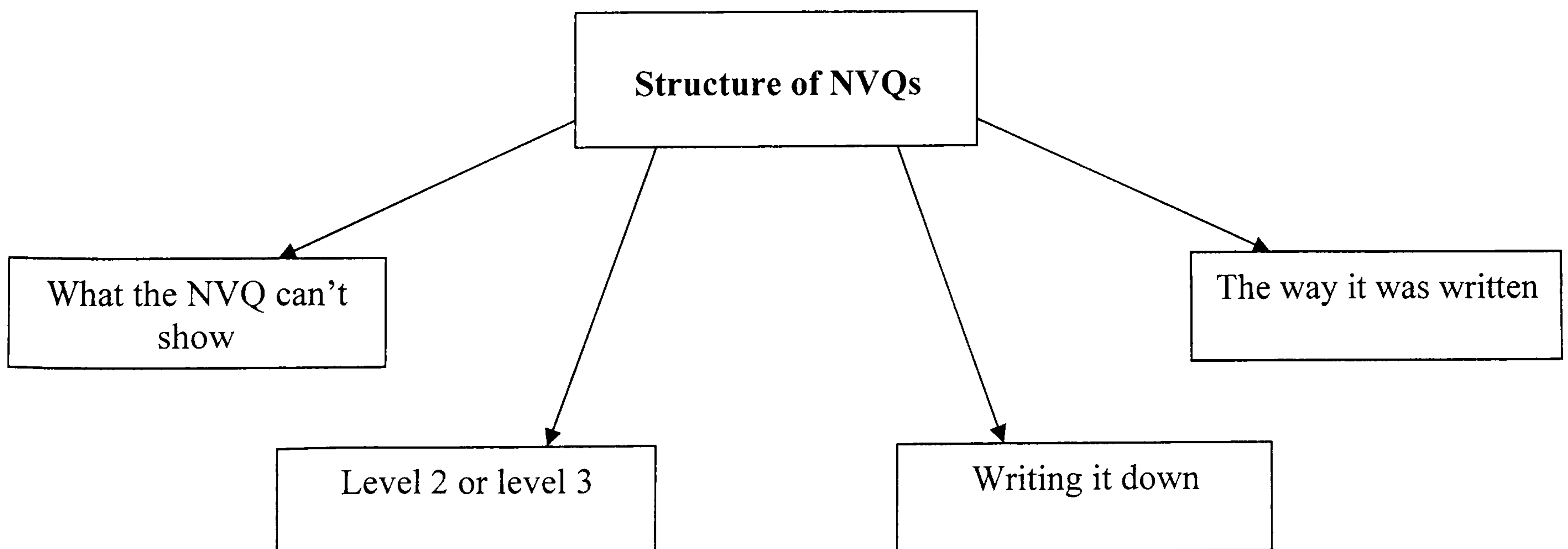
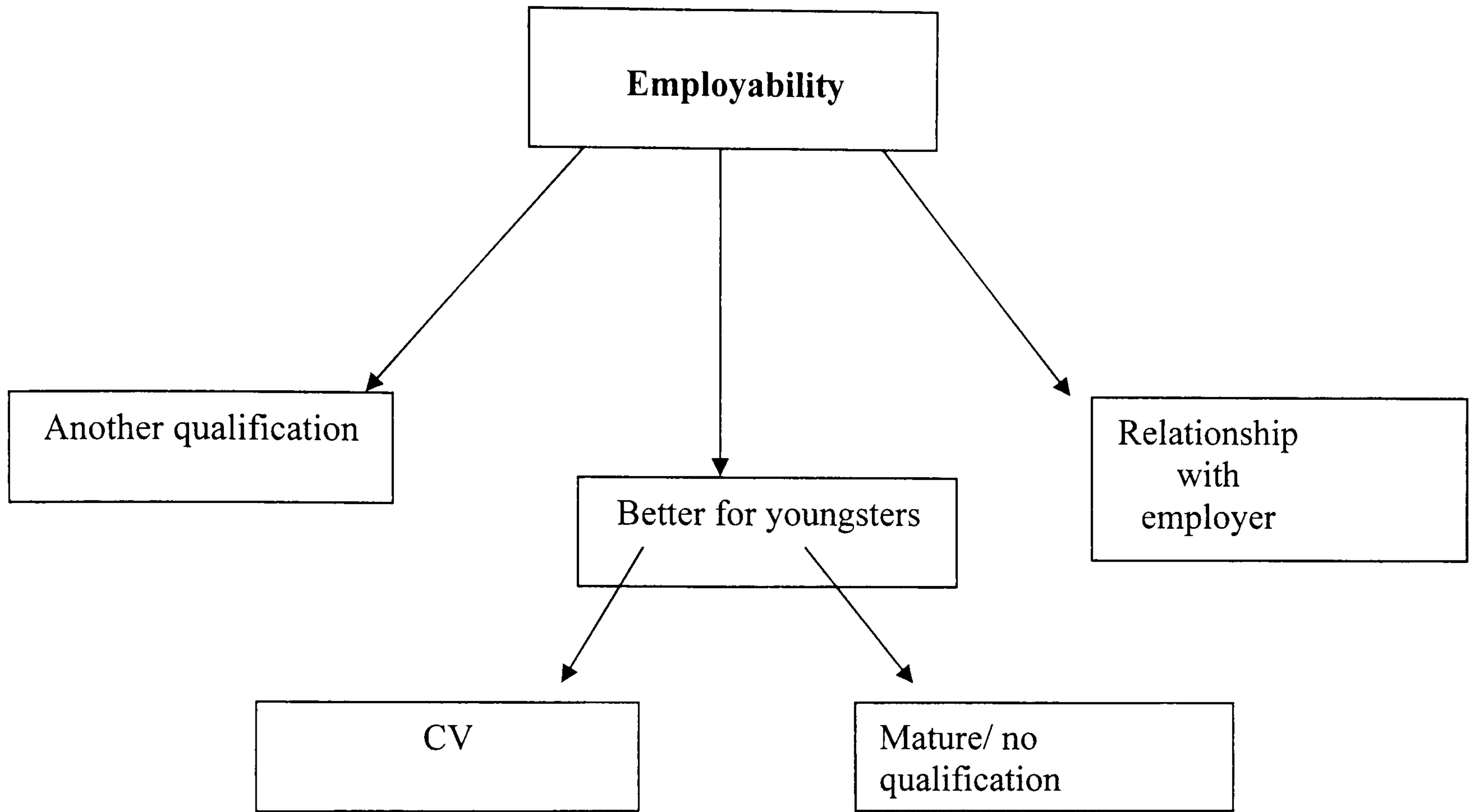
## **APPENDIX F**

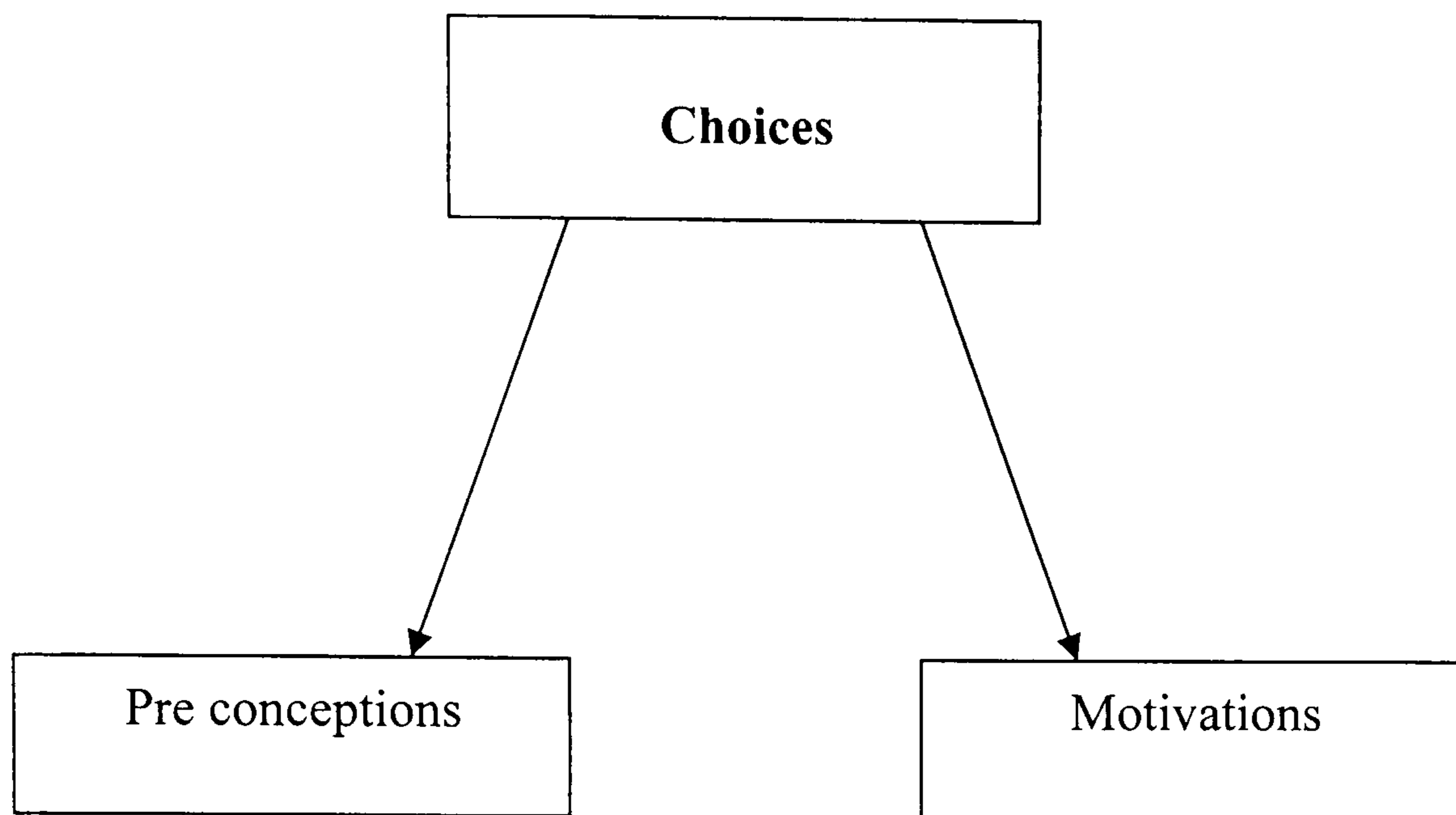
### **LIST OF FREE NODES ON QSR N5**

1. Knowledge and learning
2. Another qualification
3. Validating what you're doing
4. The way it was written
5. Leaving it
6. What the NVQ can't show
7. Doing it in work time
8. Changing the way you work
9. The extent and complexity of my job
10. Thinking about my job
11. Alone or in a group
12. I'm already an expert in customer service
13. Feelings about observation
14. Writing it down
15. Taking so long
16. Motivation
17. Feelings on finishing
18. Employability
19. Telling my friends
20. Better for youngsters
21. Management opinion
22. What you didn't like
23. NVQs or exams
24. New skills
25. Feeling better about myself
26. Just what you do every day
27. Catching up – I've not done Uni
28. Status of NVQs

### APPENDIX G NODE TREES FROM QSR N5

**Bold** indicates top level nodes





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**How did it make me  
feel**

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**Finishing it**

