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Prioritising progression over proficiency: limitations of teacher-based assessment within technician level vocational education

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Prioritising progression over proficiency: limitations of teacher-based assessment within technician level vocational education

This paper examines the evolution of assessment policy and practice in technician level vocational education. Using the example of an advanced level BTEC National programme in Engineering in one college in the UK, the paper highlights how the origins of current assessment practice lie in genuine concerns since the late 1950s about the appropriateness of examination-based assessment for assessing technician engineering skills, resulting in a shift to teacher-based, criterion-referenced assessment and an emphasis on formative feedback. Data are presented from a case study of assessment practice in an Engineering Department of one college of further and higher education in the UK during the academic years 2006-2008, which investigated salient influences and considerations underpinning lecturers' constructs of assessment. The study found a departmental ethos of facilitating students to achieve a pass, and the use of assessment methods that would ensure that students got through. However, lecturers were dubious whether their assessment practices developed the proficiency required for students' progression into HE or employment, and their practices did not appear to have a strong educational or occupational rationale for their approach. We argue that the limitations of teacher-based, criterion-referenced assessment and associated formative assessment practices, of which our study provides an example, contribute to a temptation to simply return to what is deemed more rigorous assessment through examination, which however may well bring back the problems identified in the past, of inappropriate approaches for assessing technician level skills associated with low success rates.

Keywords: teacher-based assessment; criterion-based assessment; formative feedback; vocational assessment; technician engineering education; further education; BTEC

Introduction

Over the past forty years, teacher-based criterion-referenced assessment and formative

1
2
3 feedback have received international attention as a means of recognising and facilitating
4
5 student achievement across school and vocational sectors of education (Tveit, 2014; Räisänen
6
7 and Räisänen, 2014). In England since the late 1980s, criterion-referencing has increasingly
8
9 underpinned the assessment of qualifications such as General Certificates in Education
10
11 (GCSEs), A-levels, the International Baccalaureate, and higher education programmes.
12
13 Criterion-referencing has also been widely used in vocational qualifications such as BTEC
14
15 National qualifications, which are the focus of this paper. BTEC Nationals first introduced
16
17 criterion-based assessment in the mid-1980s. BTEC assessment of the 2000s is based on the
18
19 achievement of specified assessment criteria, and assessment is underpinned by formative
20
21 feedback, which is now integral to the ethos of the qualification. However, concerns have
22
23 remained about the rigour of these assessment practices and the extent to which they may
24
25 support students' progression into HE or employment, without necessarily ensuring the
26
27 achievement of the proficiency required to sustain such progression. [The term progression in
28
29 this context is used to refer to a student's transition beyond their BTEC Engineering
30
31 qualification, and on to HE study or into employment as a technician engineer or trainee
32
33 engineer.](#)

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38 This paper examines these issues by focusing on assessment practice in engineering
39
40 courses at level 3 (European Qualifications Framework level 4¹), based on a study of
41
42 technician level engineering provision in the UK. In this field, level 3 vocational
43
44 qualifications have a long tradition of forming an essential and integral part of the education
45
46 and training of technician engineers (Foden, 1951), and since the mid-1960s have provided
47
48 an alternative route to A-levels (Sutherland and Pozzi, 1995). The current suite of BTEC
49
50 Nationals² (now owned by Pearson Publishing) are considered valuable in the labour market,
51
52 and are recognised and accepted by higher education for entry onto degree courses (Wolf,
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58
59
60 2011).

1
2
3 However, throughout the history of technician engineering education, concerns about
4
5 assessment practice have been raised. One of the major criticisms levelled against the
6
7 assessment regime of National engineering courses in the 1950s and 1960s was its
8
9 detrimental impact on student success rates, with too many students failing their courses
10
11 (Crowther, 1959). The Technician Education Council (TEC) programmes introduced in the
12
13 1970s offered a radical departure in assessment practice, based on the recommendations of
14
15 the Haslegrave Committee (Haslegrave, 1969). The characteristics and ethos of these
16
17 programmes still resonate with modern day BTEC assessment of technician engineers.
18
19 However, in contrast to earlier concerns about the number of student failures, current BTEC
20
21 assessment practice is criticised for allowing students to succeed, when, it is claimed, their
22
23 level of knowledge and skill may not be sufficient to prepare them for progression into
24
25 employment or on to further study (Sutherland and Pozzi, 1995; Mustoe, 2006). [Based on a](#)
26
27 [case study of BTEC National assessment practice within one Engineering programme area in](#)
28
29 [a further and higher education college in the UK, this paper considers how a ‘pass’ culture](#)
30
31 [may now prioritise progression over proficiency, at a point in time when reforms that favour](#)
32
33 [examinations and external assessment are proposed once again to address past failings.](#)
34
35 [While the paper focuses on a particular instance of assessment practice, recent research](#)
36
37 [indicates continuing and widespread interest in teacher-based assessment across all sectors of](#)
38
39 [education \(Bartman et al., 2013; Black et al., 2011; Crisp, 2013; Crisp and Novaković,](#)
40
41 [2009\).](#)
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47 The first section of the paper outlines the historical development of assessment in
48
49 technician engineering education, leading to the BTEC National qualifications of the 2000s.
50
51 The second section considers the development of criterion-referencing and formative
52
53 assessment, which underpinned the teacher-based assessment practice in BTEC Nationals at
54
55 the time of this study. The third section presents data from a study of lecturers’ practices,
56
57 which illustrate how criterion-referencing and formative assessment can be used in an
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1
2
3 instrumental way, developing an ethos that prioritises getting students through over and
4
5 above ensuring the learning of knowledge and skills that are needed by technician engineers.
6

7
8 The paper concludes by cautioning against simply returning to what is deemed more rigorous
9
10 assessment through external assessment and examination, which may well bring back the
11
12 problems identified in the Haslegrave Report (1969), of inappropriate approaches for
13
14 assessing technician level skills and low success rates, at a time of increasing demand for
15
16 technicians and engineers in the economy (Engineering UK, 2015).
17
18

19 20 **The evolution of assessment in technician engineering education in the UK**

21
22 In the 1950s and '60s the 'National' courses, administered by Regional Joint Committees³,
23
24 were criticised for their consistently low student success rates (Foden, 1951; Ministry of
25
26 Education, 1961). In Electrical Engineering for example, between 1930 and the 1970s,
27
28 success rates were rarely above 60% (Bourne, 1984; Argles, 1964). One prominent reason
29
30 given for low success rates was the assessment regime, which was based on end-of-year
31
32 examinations, where students failed their whole year of study if they failed one examination,
33
34 resulting in having to repeat an entire year of study (Crowther, 1959).
35
36

37
38 A step-change in technician education was initiated in the late 1960s when a
39
40 government-instigated Committee on Technician Courses and Examinations presented its
41
42 findings in the Haslegrave Report (see appendix for a summary of the changes outlined here).
43
44 At this time, advances in technology and the increasing sophistication of engineering
45
46 products were resulting in an increasing demand for well-educated and trained technician
47
48 engineers. Haslegrave (1969) proposed radical changes to all aspects of technician education,
49
50 particularly with regards to assessment practice. The committee considered external
51
52 examinations to be an unsatisfactory way of testing the capabilities of technicians, and
53
54 suggested examinations were very poor predictors of subsequent performance, such as
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3 success at work. Instead, the report advocated teacher-based internal assessment, proposing
4 the use of a variety of methods, and also changes in the frequency of assessment.
5
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7
8 Based on Haslegrave's recommendations, the then UK Department of Education and
9 Science (DES) introduced the Technician Education Council (TEC) in 1973. The concept of
10 a course of study consisting of subjects in the Joint Committee National structure was
11 replaced by a programme of study comprising self-contained units. No longer was a group of
12 subjects to be successfully passed by end-of-year examination in order to progress (Birbeck,
13 1980), but each unit was stand-alone and could be completed in its own right. An emphasis
14 was placed on teacher-based assessment, and students who worked reasonably hard were
15 expected to achieve an award (Blakey and Stagg, 1978; Halliday, 1981). TEC assessment
16 models were developed that encouraged broken-up summative assessment using end-of-unit
17 tests, phase tests (sat at the end of a section of study), practical work, projects and
18 assignments (Halliday, 1981). Another radical feature of the TEC assessment regime related
19 to the use of referral if a student failed an assessment. TEC guidance stated a 'further
20 opportunity should be given to the student to show that he/she has reached the appropriate
21 standard', usually after remedial study (TEC 1979, Guidance notes 8, cited in Halliday, 1981,
22 p. 176).
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40 In 1983, the TEC merged with the Business Education Council (BEC) to form the
41 Business and Technician Education Council (BTEC). In 1986, BTEC released a series of
42 publications in which the use of criterion-referencing and formative assessment were stated
43 as central tenets of assessment policy and practice (BTEC, 1986a). These two concepts
44 underpin BTEC's assessment philosophy, and have evolved to significantly shape modern-
45 day BTEC assessment practice (Wakeman, 2002; Torrance et al., 2005).
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55 **The rise of criterion-referencing and formative assessment**

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57
58 Criterion-referencing offered an alternative to the use of norm-referencing that had
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60

1
2
3 underpinned assessment practice from the 1960s through to the mid-1980s. Norm-
4
5 referencing is founded on psychometric principles, comparing individuals against defined
6
7 norms, which places students in competition with each other (Glaser, 1994). A major
8
9 criticism of norm-referencing is that it provides little or no information about what people can
10
11 do or how proficient they are, and 'is bound to make at least half of those involved appear
12
13 and feel like failures' (Wolf, 1993, p. 5). In contrast, criterion-referenced assessment
14
15 endeavours to assess competence or achievement, using a broad range of tests that consider
16
17 each individual against given criteria (Gipps, 1994). Levels of achievement associated with
18
19 norm-referenced assessment occur after teaching and testing and relate to comparing and
20
21 ranking students, whilst those associated with criterion-referenced assessment are established
22
23 before teaching and testing commence, and so recognise achievement by all individuals who
24
25 achieve established criteria (Biggs, 1999).
26
27
28

29
30 A second major development resulting from the opening up of the assessment debate
31
32 in the 1960s, was the differentiation of formative assessment (to assist learning) from
33
34 summative assessment (to report achievement). Michael Scriven and Lee Cronbach are
35
36 acknowledged as originators of formative assessment, although it was Benjamin Bloom in
37
38 conjunction with Thomas Hasting and George Madaus in the early 1970s who, through their
39
40 Handbook of Formative and Summative Evaluation, helped teachers become aware of the
41
42 different purposes of assessment, and expose them to new methods of assessment to improve
43
44 teaching and learning (Bloom et al., 1971; Newton, 2007). Bloom and colleagues stressed
45
46 the benefits of a range of testing methods and the use of formative assessment as an integral
47
48 part of classroom practice for both students and teachers.
49
50

51
52 Both formative and criterion-referenced assessment gained increasing prominence
53
54 across all education and training provisions during the 1980s and 1990s, but were particularly
55
56 prevalent in the vocational sector through the implementation of workplace competence-
57
58 based National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) (Raggatt and Williams, 1999; Jessup,
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60

1
2
3 1991), and have been associated with BTEC assessment since 1986 (BTEC, 1986a; BTEC,
4
5 1986b). Within BTEC assessment, a literal form of criterion referencing was used, which
6
7 required students to show 'satisfactory performance' against all criteria to achieve a pass.
8
9 This was a departure from the original TEC/BTEC assessment practice of the 1970s and early
10
11 80s, which apportioned marks to solution points and awarded grades at prescribed levels of
12
13 numerical scores (Edexcel, 1996). Another aspect of BTEC assessment practice instigated in
14
15 1986, continuing thereafter, related to the use of assignments as both an assessment and
16
17 learning method (BTEC, 1986b). Using assignments as an assessment method was not new,
18
19 but the emphasis on their diagnostic and formative purposes was (Black and Dockrell, 1988).
20
21

22
23 Throughout the 1990s the development of BTEC Nationals became side-lined with
24
25 the then Conservative government's emphasis on the introduction of a suite of General
26
27 National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs). However, because BTEC qualifications were
28
29 well-established (Raggatt and Williams, 1999) and still being offered in colleges (Dearing,
30
31 1996), BTEC issued 'new' National qualifications in 2002. These new Nationals, influenced
32
33 by the outcome-based model used in GNVQs, placed stronger emphasis on criterion-
34
35 referenced assessment and formative feedback (Ecclestone, 2010).
36
37

38
39 *Despite the proposed positive attributes of both criterion-referencing and formative*
40
41 *assessment, there is much research evidence across both general and technical education*
42
43 *courses, to show that these concepts can be problematic to implement in practice.* One of the
44
45 principal problems associated with criterion-referenced assessment is defining explicit and
46
47 unambiguous criteria (James and Knott, 1994; Harlen, 2007). In the early 1990s, Alison
48
49 Wolf's (1993) research found problems with interpretation which could lead to much
50
51 subjectivity associated with what were intended to be clear and unambiguous criterion-
52
53 referenced outcomes. Perfect transparency or explicitness of criteria (Jessup, 1991), however
54
55 detailed the definition or atomised the objectives, was not a practical possibility. Wolf's
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3 findings showed that specifications provided minimal guidance to test developers as to the
4
5 level of difficulty and mastery to be assessed. Wolf also highlighted concerns associated
6
7 with a decentralised criterion-referenced assessment system demanding 100% compliance to
8
9 a written standard, such as BTEC Nationals. She argued that implementation of decentralised
10
11 criterion-referenced specifications rely on common understandings to help develop and
12
13 implement standards, and commented:

14
15
16
17 *ambiguity or economies with the truth very quickly become institutionalized. What is more,*
18
19 *there is no way of knowing whether one centre applies its assessments more accurately or*
20
21 *unambiguously or allows more compensation than another, and therefore no control over*
22
23 *how much ambiguity has been created, or how much 'slippage' from standards there has*
24
25 *been.* (Wolf, 1993, p. 21).

26
27 Subsequent studies drew similar conclusions (Ecclestone, (2001); Price, (2005)). In
28
29 practice, 'criterion referencing requires considerable negotiation to arrive at agreed criteria
30
31 and standards' (Dunn et al., 2002, p. 2), is problematic in ensuring consistent assessment
32
33 between assessors, centres and Awarding Bodies (James and Knott, 1994), and therefore
34
35 poses concerns about validity and reliability.

36
37 Similar concerns have been raised about the purported benefits of formative
38
39 assessment. Although formative assessment is described as basic to good teaching (Biggs,
40
41 1999; Yorke, 2003), it does not have a well-defined and widely accepted meaning, which has
42
43 hampered classroom implementation (Black and Wiliam, 1998; Ecclestone, 2010). Black and
44
45 Wiliam's (2002) definition states that formative assessment pertains to all tasks creating
46
47 *feedback* to students about their learning achievements, from where both students and
48
49 teachers can take steps to improve classroom learning and teaching. In contrast summative
50
51 assessment is often considered a terminal event, a judgement against referenced standards,
52
53 goals and criteria, used for accounting, ranking and certifying purposes, suggesting that
54
55 formative assessment opportunities have ended (Taras, 2007).
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3 However, if feedback is information about the gap between the actual level attained
4 and the reference level (Ramaprasad, 1983), it cannot be generated until a summary
5 judgement is made against set standards, goals and criteria. With such 'a fuzzy distinction'
6 between summative and formative assessment in the literature (Knight and Yorke, 2003, p.
7 34), it is easy to see why teachers in the pressurised and time-constrained environment of the
8 classroom may struggle to understand and implement formative assessment, particularly as
9 Knight and Yorke (2003, p. 38) suggest, assessors 'typically do not have any substantial
10 grounding in the theory (limited as it is) and practice of assessment'.
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21 Researchers have found that lack of clarity in the theoretical underpinning of
22 formative assessment has caused confusion between formative and summative assessment,
23 which has led to conflation of summative and formative purposes in practice (Taras, 2008).
24 This 'uneasy conflation of two distinct models of evaluation and assessment' (Roos and
25 Hamilton, 2005, p. 9) is a cause for concern as it inhibits the use and effectiveness of
26 formative assessment within classroom practice. As a consequence this may mean 'either
27 there is little genuine formative assessment (or what there is may not be recognised as such),
28 or that teachers are struggling to meet both requirements and experiencing assessment
29 overload' (Harlen and James, 1997, p. 365).
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42 **Assessment practice in vocational courses**

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45 Assessment practice in engineering courses has been a cause for concern over a number of
46 years. An evaluation of TEC programmes in the 1970s expressed disquiet as to how these
47 qualifications prepared students for undergraduate study, particularly with regards
48 Engineering Mathematics (Moor et al., 1983). In the mid-1990s, Sutherland and Pozzi
49 (1995) researched the changing mathematical background of students entering undergraduate
50 Engineering programmes at four English universities, and found students entering via the
51 vocational route, 'in most instances to be weaker than students with a poor A-level result'
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2
3 (Sutherland and Pozzi, 1995, p. 6; similar findings from Shaw and Shaw, 1997). This was
4
5 despite the fact that ‘both the syllabuses [sic] and examinations of these [vocational] courses
6
7 have high face validity and look very similar to those of more academic courses’ (Gill, 1999,
8
9 p. 560). Sutherland and Pozzi suggested it was the variability of BTEC assessment practice
10
11 which was contributing to problems of student progression: ‘BTEC students are assessed
12
13 internally and this results in more variable quality’ (Sutherland and Pozzi, 1995, p. 16;
14
15 similar finding from James, 1995). In 2005, the UK Qualifications and Curriculum Authority
16
17 (QCA, 2005) identified weaknesses associated with use of assessment and grading criteria
18
19 and incorrect assessment decisions within BTEC National Engineering programmes. The
20
21 QCA found great inconsistency in opportunities for re-assessment, ranging from very limited
22
23 to unlimited, with some re-submissions occurring ten months after the final deadline.
24
25
26

27
28 These concerns are compounded by other studies that highlight issues about
29
30 assessment practices and standards in vocational courses more widely. Ecclestone’s (2002)
31
32 research into GNVQs found criterion-referenced assessment, implemented through the use of
33
34 assessment and grading criteria or ‘bullet points’ as they were colloquially termed, had a
35
36 significant influence on both teachers’ and students’ micro-level assessment practice. Their
37
38 focus on the criteria impacted negatively on both assessment and achievement. Teachers
39
40 tended to use assignments that were broken into discrete and easily accessible tasks, and both
41
42 teachers and students ‘viewed assessment as ‘meeting the requirements’ and not about
43
44 deepening learning’ (Ecclestone, 2002, p. 167). If students did not meet criteria, teachers
45
46 would refer work back to fill gaps. Referrals proved to be common practice in Ecclestone’s
47
48 study, as within each unit most students had to repeat parts of assignments more than once to
49
50 meet the criteria for pass. Feedback given to students was often aimed at closing gaps in
51
52 coverage as opposed to enriching learning, a response to teachers wanting students to pass
53
54 but at the same time being scrutinised for compliance with national standards. Ecclestone
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1
2
3 described formative assessment in this context as akin to a 'pre-emptive extension of
4
5 summative checking, tracking and evidencing' (Ecclestone, 2002, p. 167).
6

7
8 Research by Boys (2000) into assessment in Advanced GNVQ Business Studies also
9
10 found 'confusion between formative and summative assessment' (Boys, 2000, p. 311).
11
12 Formative and summative assessment became part of the same process, as students were
13
14 permitted to draft and redraft assessments, and resubmit assignments multiple times. He
15
16 found that criterion-referencing lacked 'precision about the standards to be achieved' and
17
18 there was a 'failure of internal and external verification⁴ to establish high standards' (Boys,
19
20 2000, p. 311). Both Boys' and Ecclestone's research also suggest how cultural
21
22 considerations can have a significant impact on assessment practice:
23

24
25
26 *engagement within any 'assessment community' occurs within largely tacit boundaries*
27
28 *formed by expectations of students' ability, motivation, dispositions to learning and their*
29
30 *prospects for progression into jobs or more education* (Ecclestone, 2002, p. 171).
31

32
33 In an exploration of the impact of different modes of assessment on achievement and
34
35 progress in the Learning and Skills Sector, Torrance (2007, p. 285) notes an 'overall
36
37 orientation towards the pursuit of achievement', with an 'overwhelming culture of support for
38
39 learners/candidates at every level and across every sub-sector of the Learning and Skills
40
41 Sector'. This was in part, attributed to the 'high stakes accountability and financial
42
43 insecurity' (Torrance, 2007, p. 292) that institutions experience relating to funding. [Torrance](#)
44
45 [et al. \(2005\) use the term assessment as learning to describe a negative focus on criteria](#)
46
47 [compliance, as opposed to assessment for learning \(William et al., 2004\), which indicates a](#)
48
49 [positive emphasis on developing learning](#). Thus within the FE sector, formative assessment
50
51 on vocational courses is often associated with instrumentalism, where assessment comes to
52
53 dominate content, process and outcomes of education, and formative and summative
54
55 assessment practices become almost indistinguishable from each other.
56
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1
2
3 The mounting concern about vocational courses and their assessment outlined above
4
5 culminated in a UK government review undertaken by Professor Alison Wolf in 2011. Wolf
6
7 (2011, p. 76) emphasised that ‘the changes wrought over recent years have seen a systematic
8
9 deskillling of the quality of provision with the emphasis on achievement of a qualification
10
11 being primary and the dumbing down of the content, quality and rigour.’ In the next section
12
13 of this paper we show how the concerns raised in Wolf’s report unfolded in the assessment
14
15 practices of one college of further and higher education in the UK in the decade preceding the
16
17 report.
18
19

20 21 22 **BTEC Engineering assessment practice in one college in the UK** 23

24
25 The study reported in this paper sought to uncover how BTEC assessment practice was
26
27 constructed and functioned at the micro-level of classroom practice, in a BTEC National
28
29 Engineering Programme offered in one college of further and higher education in the UK.
30
31 During the period of this research, the college had 817 students enrolled on its full-time
32
33 courses, of which 109 were studying engineering courses and of those, 35 students were
34
35 enrolled on BTEC National Engineering Programmes. It should be noted that the College
36
37 was not subject to the same funding arrangements as colleges in England and Wales, which
38
39 receive funding relating to annual student retention and achievement rates. The College in
40
41 this study received funding purely based on the number of student enrolments in each
42
43 academic year.
44
45

46
47 During 2006-2008, one-to-one, semi-structured interviews were undertaken with
48
49 seven lecturers and thirteen National technician engineering students, to ascertain their
50
51 perspectives on BTEC assessment practice (Carter, 2012). [Ethical approval for the study was](#)
52
53 [received from the University of the West of England’s Ethics Committee \(March 2007\), and](#)
54
55 [all data have been anonymised; names used in this paper are pseudonyms.](#) The fieldwork was
56
57 undertaken by one of the authors (Carter) in the college in which he worked. Although
58
59
60

1
2
3 concerns are expressed about the validity of such insider research (Burgess, 1984; Ashcroft,
4
5 1996), it is due to the fieldwork being undertaken by a practitioner researcher, that more
6
7 detailed insights into local assessment practice were gained. This helped to overcome the
8
9 problems in gaining access to examples of assessment and assessment instruments faced by
10
11 researchers such as Sutherland and Pozzi (1995, p. 50), who found that lecturers on BTEC
12
13 Engineering courses in their study were 'often very reluctant to make their assessment
14
15 instruments available for analysis'.
16
17

18
19 In this paper, data from the lecturers are presented and discussed. The seven lecturers
20
21 involved with delivery of the programme were initially interviewed in July 2007. They were
22
23 issued with copies of their interview transcripts a year later to determine if changes to their
24
25 assessment practices had occurred. All the lecturers were male.
26

27
28 Table 1 about here.

29
30 Curtis (Assistant Programme Manager), Dominick and Neville had taught on BTEC
31
32 programmes at the college for ten or more years; Marvin and York (Programme Manager) for
33
34 five or more years, but Bernard and Boris were new to the college. Boris, Curtis and York
35
36 had taught on BTEC programmes at other colleges, whilst Bernard had taught on City and
37
38 Guilds programmes. At the time of the study, two of the lecturers were External Verifiers for
39
40 the Awarding Body Edexcel, one (York) with responsibility for three colleges in England,
41
42 and one (Marvin) responsible for five colleges and eight schools.
43
44

45
46 It should be noted that in what follows, we do not address specifically issues related to
47
48 key skill or functional skill attainment, though we recognise that achievement in these areas
49
50 has given rise to considerable concern regarding the attainment of level 3 vocational learners
51
52 (see for example Shaw, (2007)). The requirement for learners to achieve additional key skills
53
54 qualifications as part of different qualifications has a complex history in England, and at the
55
56 time of our study, key skills did not form an essential component of BTEC Nationals.
57
58 Nevertheless, we recognise that sufficient knowledge of mathematical skills in particular is a
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60

1
2
3 critical concern in relation to engineering education (Moor et al., 1983; Sutherland and Pozzi,
4
5 1995; Shaw and Shaw, 1997) and forms an important part of the wider picture of learning and
6
7 assessment in vocational qualifications.
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10 ***The construction of assessment practices***

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13 At the time of this study, BTEC National qualifications were assessed through tasks prepared
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15 by teachers for their own students, which were marked internally, and were then subject to
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17 internal and external verification. Internal verification involved lecturer peer review of all
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19 assessment material and a sample of students' scripts. External verification involved review
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21 by the Awarding Body's appointed representatives, of a small sample of assessment tasks and
22
23 associated students' work, undertaken to monitor standards and coverage of the lecturer-
24
25 written assessments and lecturer decision-making when assessing their students' work.
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29 All assessments devised and decisions made by lecturers were based on the learning
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31 outcomes specified by the Awarding Body for each BTEC unit. These learning outcomes are
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33 stated in the form of assessment criteria, and Edexcel emphasised that to achieve a pass a
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35 learner must have satisfied all the pass assessment criteria (Edexcel, 2002; Edexcel, 2010).
36
37 This approach to assessment is akin to that used in competence-based occupational NVQs,
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39 where competence is defined as the demonstration of all criteria listed in a particular unit
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41 (Wolf, 1995; Colley and Jarvis, 2007).
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45 On the one hand, therefore, lecturers had to meet the requirements of the Awarding
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47 Body. On the other, they had considerable input and influence over the construction of
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49 assessment and the interpretation and application of the assessment criteria. As Boris, one of
50
51 the Engineering lecturers commented:
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54 *I feel there is a bit of responsibility on me to maintain a standard, because nobody is going to*
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56 *disagree with it, so I could let people through that I felt were weak, or I could fail people*
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3 *being pedantic. So there are some grey areas, I don't think that the assessment as such is*
4 *exact. [Boris]*

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7 Moreover, there was a driving assumption, that the philosophical underpinnings of BTEC
8
9 qualifications only offered lecturers opportunities to pass students and not fail them:

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11
12 *How, or what the actual [BTEC] philosophy for failing people is quite, you know, there*
13 *seems to be, you are given the opportunities to pass people, you are not really given the*
14 *opportunities to fail people. [Boris]*

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16
17 While lecturers' assessment practices worked within Awarding Body regulations and
18 requirements, they were also strongly influenced by their perceptions of students' orientation
19 to study, their capabilities in relation to college study, and their likely future progression
20 route. A typical pass grade student was defined as one who 'turns up and does what he is
21 told' [Marvin, Lecturer], who 'tends to give you back what you have given him' [Curtis,
22 Lecturer] and someone who 'has just slugged his way through' [York, Lecturer]. This type
23 of student fitted with lecturers' understandings of Awarding Body expectations:
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34 *I think what they [BTEC] are looking at are people who are generally interested, will stick at*
35 *it and eventually get through. [Boris]*

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38 Perceptions of the progression path from the National also influenced lecturers'
39 constructions of assessment practice. Most students were expected to enter employment, so
40 that preparation for the assessment demands of further study were put to one side:
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46 *I do say though that I let my students down dramatically badly if they want to go to uni, as it*
47 *gives them no insight into uni exams. I think that is a real let down, however I do feel that I*
48 *am not here for the odd person who goes to uni, I feel that I am here for the 9 out of 10 lads*
49 *who just progress, get a job locally and crack on with life. [Dominick]*

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53 However, this approach also affected students who might seek to progress on to the BTEC
54 Higher National Programmes, rather than university. York suggested that the piece-meal
55 approach of BTEC National assessment and the methods used did not develop students'
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3 cognitive skills, and so hampered their preparedness for Higher National study:
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6 *I think the way we set the Nationals it is not helping them to progress to Higher Nationals, it*
7 *is not trying to develop this thought process, so overall I think that the methods we are using*
8 *are stymieing. It goes back to passing that particular bit and forgetting it, so it goes back*
9 *to your question on progress. So they may have passed but they have not progressed as they*
10 *cannot put it together. [York]*
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15 Lecturers accommodated their perceptions of students through various aspects of
16
17 assessment practice. A wide variety of assessment methods were available to lecturers,
18
19 although the most common across the majority of units was the open assignment, and within
20
21 Mathematics and Science units, the open-book test. Open assignments are written
22
23 assessments that can be completed outside of the classroom and submitted on or before a
24
25 specified date, usually within a two or four week timeframe. In contrast, open-book tests are
26
27 written assessments undertaken under exam conditions in a classroom, but within which
28
29 students can access their handouts and notes. Open-book tests are usually of one or two hour
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31 duration.
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35 While open assignments and open-book tests were the most common methods used to
36
37 assess students, four lecturers expressed a preference for written closed-book tests or
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39 examinations, because they were traditional, unseen, and showed understanding [York],
40
41 required preparation and retention of knowledge over a year [Curtis, Bernard], proved
42
43 authenticity and focused the students. Marvin emphasised: ‘an exam is the ultimate
44
45 summative assessment’. However, at the time of this research, exams and closed-book tests
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47 were not used, because of lecturers’ perceptions of students’ capabilities, and concerns over
48
49 low success rates:
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53 *The problem we have very simply, I believe, is that the level of students that we have here will*
54 *not do the work required to pass an exam. So what they will do is that they will turn up to the*
55 *exam ill-prepared if at all and fail, a lot of them. [Marvin]*
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3 In any case, assessment through tests did not solve the question of the level of
4
5 achievement required to pass. Marvin explained the problem as he saw it:
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8 *... you have to say to yourself how do you decide what a pass is and this is where I see a*
9 *problem with the people [lecturers] who set [their own] tests like this, their problem is when*
10 *has the student passed the criteria? Does he have to answer every question 100%? [Marvin]*
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13
14 In practice, assessment practices had developed that aimed to get students through. Lecturers
15 used classroom-based worked examples to prepare students for assessments, an approach
16 aimed at allowing the majority of students to achieve a pass without the need to resort to
17 additional study outside of the classroom, thus accommodating their perceptions of a typical
18 pass grade student. From a comparison of students' classroom notes and handouts with
19 associated assessment questions, a strong overlap was found between questions used in
20 classroom lessons and those set in assignments and tests with regards format, wording and
21 tasks, the only differences being changes in numerical values used. There was a sense of
22 lecturers providing students with an array of focussed examples and questions to help prepare
23 them for assessments, and in particular open-book tests, where the students could access
24 reference information, for example through lecturers' workbooks.
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38 When developing assessments, a careful balancing act was required, in order to
39 comply with the Awarding Body requirements whilst endeavouring to accommodate
40 lecturers' perceptions of students' capabilities, as described by Dominick:
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46 *I look for questions that fit the performance [assessment] criteria. That is probably my prime*
47 *objective, because if I don't then the IV [Internal Verifier] is going to get you out. I then*
48 *have to balance what I feel is a fair question. Now this is where your national standard*
49 *comes. We all know, I can ask a quadratic question, or I could ask a circuit question of these*
50 *students, that there is no hope in hell that they will ever answer. I have to get a balance*
51 *there and that is probably, in my mind, maybe one of the more difficult things to do.*
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55 [Dominick]
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58 Ambiguity in the assessment criteria could be used to accommodate perceived differences in
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3 capabilities of different cohorts of students, by limiting or extending content coverage and the
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5 academic difficulty of the content. Curtis explained:

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8 *you are always looking at your cohort and think I can stretch these lads a bit, because every*
9 *one of them they are coming through with this ability, so we will do an assignment which is*
10 *deeper in-depth. You might get a cohort who just scrape through and come to you and you*
11 *might change your philosophy on it. You're still describing 3 manufacturing processes, but*
12 *you might choose different ones, you might choose higher tech ones for one group, or lower*
13 *tech ones for another group. You're still meeting 3 criteria. [Curtis]*

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19 Dominick described a similar process:

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22 [Dominick] *let's say I've got 10 students, I need to think how deep is this question, that 9 of*
23 *them will be able to get it and one of them will have to work quite hard to get it. So you have*
24 *to say to yourself, pass criteria, who is the weakest student?*

25
26
27 [Interviewer] *Is that how you would gauge it?*

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29
30 [Dominick] *Maybe not on the class you have got, but on the classes that you've had. The*
31 *more experience you have got the more you get it.*

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34 [Interviewer] *So your national standard has like evolved over the...?*

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37 [Dominick] *I have never really looked at it that way, but when I look back at what I think*
38 *about, I look at 80 to 90% of my students over the last 5 or 6 years, in this subject area, can*
39 *pass this without really going to town on it.*

40
41
42 [Interviewer] *When you say 'not going to town', does that mean doing work outside of the*
43 *lesson?*

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45
46 [Dominick] *No I think maybe to the point of if they haven't just read it, then they will*
47 *probably get referred and they could do it on a second retake.*

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51 Dominick's comment about getting referred relates to the Awarding Body stipulation
52 that students should have opportunities to resubmit work (Edexcel, 2006; see also Edexcel,
53 2010b). Marvin explained how this policy requirement was applied in practice:
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3 *you can't really do anything else for the simple reason that if you suddenly turn around and*
4 *say I will not accept any more from you, the student has failed. With pass grade I am*
5 *pretty reasonable, if people continue doing it I will continue [assessing] it until we run out of*
6 *time. [Marvin]*
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9
10 Students' work was therefore 'referred' back to them, rather than awarded a fail grade. The
11 referral system then involved the use of feedback and support, in line with Awarding Body
12 policy, to help students who had not yet passed to develop their understanding.
13

14
15 Rather than providing lengthy written feedback, students whose work was 'referred' were
16 supported primarily through individualised, verbal feedback, as outlined by Dominick:
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18
19 *on a one-to-one basis I am inclined to actually tell them, you need to do this; this is no good,*
20 *turn to page 86 in the workbook. I tend to do that. I will give them a lot of direction that way.*
21 [Dominick]
22

23
24 Using the original assessment as the basis of further re-submissions was common
25 practice amongst all lecturers, even when a student had referrals on the same assessment
26 multiple times. Even where the assessment method was a time-constrained, in-class open-
27 book test, the same assessment paper could be re-used multiple times. In one Science test for
28 example, four students achieved merit grade during the first sitting, two more on the second
29 sitting and one on the third attempt at the same paper.
30

31
32 Lecturers sometimes changed the assessment method during referrals to help students
33 complete an assignment, especially where they only had 'a few bits missing':
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36 *The other thing I will do sometimes is oral questioning. I have done that with a few students.*
37 *I have got there and got them to think about it on their feet and give me an answer and*
38 *sometimes, with a few students, that is how I have dealt with it, where they have got bits of it*
39 *and a few bits missing, I have actually done it orally and signed it off. [Marvin]*
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42 Yet at the same time there was concern amongst lecturers about the referral process. Marvin
43 worried about repeated submissions of the same assessment:
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3 *Well in the end you can end up doing it for them and there are times when I say to them, you*
4 *need to go away and do this and sort it out for yourself. And the problem with that is that if*
5 *you are not careful, they will just go and copy from somebody else. [Marvin]*
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9 Although Dominick spoke above of devising assessment to suit the majority of
10 students, who would progress into the local labour market, this high level of coaching
11 through to a pass was not necessarily what lecturers intended. Boris, for example,
12 commented that multiple submissions of the same assessment did not prepare students for
13 future employment, but suggested that this was an Awarding Body requirement:
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20 *On the BTEC philosophy of, there are no max retakes, this student has got to pass in a unit,*
21 *but he couldn't go into a company and do a good job. [Boris]*
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25 As his comment indicates, there was a contradiction at the heart of their practice, between the
26 'pass' culture aimed at getting students through, and lecturers' concerns that their approach
27 would not prepare students adequately for progression, even to local employment.
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32 33 **Discussion and conclusion**

34
35 The construction of teacher-based assessment practices in the Engineering department in this
36 study shows how assessment approaches such as criterion-referencing and formative
37 assessment, intended to support learning and encourage achievement, can turn into a means
38 of getting students through, with less attention paid to the levels of knowledge and
39 proficiency achieved. The approach in the case study department became one of assessment
40 *as learning* (Torrance, 2007), where assessment dominated decisions about content and
41 learning processes. There was a focus on criteria compliance at the expense of learning, and
42 formative assessment practices, particularly a referral system, were used extensively in
43 pursuit of student achievement.
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56 However, while Torrance (2007) attributes this in part to a context where
57 accountability and financial insecurity of funding is the norm, this was not true for the
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3 Engineering department in this study. Due to the different funding regime in the region of
4 the UK in which the college was located, funding was based on the number of students
5 enrolled each academic year, and not the number of students retained or successfully passing
6 the course. There were no concerns expressed by lecturers in the interviews that their
7 approach was influenced by retention and achievement rates or their own job security.
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14 Nevertheless, the construction of the teacher-based assessment practice in the
15 Engineering department involved interpretations of BTEC policy that were based on the
16 importance of getting students through. These practices did not appear to be based on either
17 a strong educational or occupationally-oriented rationale, and lecturers expressed conflicting
18 views about the appropriateness of their approaches to assessment, suggesting that achieving
19 a pass took precedence over proficiency, and that students were not just ill-prepared for
20 further study, but also for entry into the labour market.
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30 The practices described above have been associated with the perverse incentives that
31 are created under current conditions related to audit, league tables and so on. However,
32 current practices can also be traced back to very different concerns that were raised in the
33 1950s and '60s as highlighted in the early part of this paper. The Haslegrave Report (1969)
34 instigated changes in response to arguments that inappropriate assessment practices resulted
35 in excessive numbers of students failing technician level engineering qualifications. The
36 introduction of criterion-referencing and formative assessment was intended to remedy this
37 problem, by enabling and recognising success, rather than identifying failure. Although
38 lecturers in this study were not necessarily aware of it, the 'pass' culture in the Engineering
39 department could be said to have evolved not just from current interpretations of Awarding
40 Body policy, but out of a historical concern about the possibly inappropriate high failure rates
41 of technician-level students in the past. The reservations voiced about current practices
42 highlight how criterion-referencing and formative assessment have turned this problem on its
43 head, and resulted in concerns about possibly inappropriate *success* rates.
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3 The recent Wolf review of vocational education in England (Wolf, 2011) has led the
4 UK government to set out requirements to increase the rigour of assessment within vocational
5 qualifications (DfE, 2014). This has already involved a tightening up of internal assessment
6 from September 2014, and further proposals for the implementation of a greater proportion of
7 external assessment within the next generation of BTEC Nationals (Pearson, 2014a; 2014b).
8 These actions may go some way towards addressing the problems highlighted in this paper,
9 and we would support the move to a combination of both internal and external assessment
10 methods within future vocational qualifications. However, we would distinguish this from
11 privileging what is often deemed more rigorous and robust assessment by external
12 *examination*. External examinations could prove counter-productive and have the potential to
13 return to the problems identified at the time of the Haslegrave Report, of inappropriate
14 approaches for assessing technician level skills, leading to low success rates, at a time when
15 once again there is considered to be a significant, long-term requirement for technician-level
16 engineers.
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39 ¹ *Referencing the Qualifications Frameworks of the UK to the European Qualifications Framework*
40 http://scqf.org.uk/content/files/europe/QFUK_Joint_Report_-_Updated_March_2010.pdf.
41 Accessed November 2014.

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43 ² BTEC originally stood for the Business and Technician Education Council but was later renamed the
44 Business and Technology Education Council (Fisher, 2003). BTEC was set up in 1983, to offer
45 vocational qualifications, with the purpose of advancing the quality and availability of work
46 related education for those in, or preparing for, employment. In 1996 BTEC and the University
47 of London Examinations and Assessment Council (London Examinations) merged to form a
48 new company, Edexcel. BTEC continues to be used as the brand name for work-related
49 qualifications offered by Edexcel, which since 2003 has been owned by the private company
50 Pearson. The BTEC National qualification introduced in 1983 was reclassified as the BTEC
51 Level 3 National Diploma under the National Qualifications Framework (Edexcel, 2009). The
52 qualification is still designed to provide the knowledge, understanding and skills needed for
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5 employment and for career development of those in employment, but it is also intended to
6 prepare for progression into higher education, degree and professional development.
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8 ³ The Regional Joint Committees consisted of representatives from industry, and professional and
9 educational bodies, and were responsible for determining the syllabus and standards of the
10 examination (Crowther, 1959).
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12 ⁴ The purposes of external verification are to monitor assessment practices and procedures to ensure
13 that national standards are applied consistently (Boys, 2000).
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Table 1: Profile of the Engineering Lecturers in the study (n = 7)

Lecturers' teaching background				BTEC units taught to level 3 BTEC engineering students	
<i>Pseudonym</i>	Qualifications	Length of employment at college	Teaching experience prior to college	2006-07	2007-08
<i>Curtis</i>	City & Guilds (C&G) Full Technological Certificate (FTC) in Production Engineering; Higher National Certificate (HNC) in Production Engineering.	10 years	Yes	1 unit	2 units
<i>Marvin*</i>	A-levels (Maths, Physics, Chemistry); Bachelor of Technology (BEng Hons) in Production Engineering and Management.	7 years	No	1 unit	3 units
<i>Neville</i>	A-levels (Maths, Further Maths & Physics); Bachelor of Engineering (BEng Hons) in Electrical and Electronic Engineering.	>10 years	Yes	None**	2 units
<i>Dominick</i>	Technician Education Council (TEC) Certificate in Mechanical/Production Engineering; HNC in Production Engineering; HNC in Electrical & Electronic Engineering; Bachelor of Engineering (BEng Hons) in Manufacturing Engineering.	>10 years	No	4 units	3 units
<i>York*</i>	TEC Certificate; Higher Technician Certificate (HTC) in Mechanical Engineering; Bachelor of Science (BSc) Mechanical Engineering.	5 years	Yes	None**	1 unit
<i>Boris</i>	BTEC National in Mechanical Engineering;	1 year	Yes	2 units	None**

Lecturers' teaching background				BTEC units taught to level 3 BTEC engineering students	
<i>Pseudonym</i>	Qualifications	Length of employment at college	Teaching experience prior to college	2006-07	2007-08
	Higher National Diploma (HND) in Mechanical Engineering.				
<i>Bernard</i>	C&G Electrical Installation	1 year	Yes	None**	3 units

Note: * BTEC External Verifier at time of the study

** Taught BTEC units but not with research cohort of students

APPENDIX

Table 2: Development of level 3 vocational qualifications and assessment in England

Date	Development
1920s	'National' qualifications introduced in England for Mechanical Engineering. Administered through Regional Joint Committees responsible for determining the syllabus and standards.
1959	Crowther Report on the education of 15-18 year olds. Expressed concerns about high wastage and failure rates associated with the then National qualifications, which it attributed primarily to the assessment regime.
1961	Government White Paper <i>Better Opportunities in Technical Education</i> proposed solutions to address wastage highlighted by Crowther Report.
1969	Government instigated Committee on Technician Courses and Examinations, leading to the Haslegrave Report, which further highlighted the high wastage and failure rates from National qualifications. The report proposed radical changes to all aspects of technician education, particularly with regards to assessment practice, with the intention of increasing achievement rates.
1973	Technician Education Council (TEC) introduced by the UK Department of Education and Science (DES), which instigated a radical departure in assessment ethos and practice to that of the previous fifty years, based on Haslegrave's recommendations.
1974	Business Education Council (BEC) established by UK Government with similar remit to TEC, but within the business sector.
1983	TEC merged with BEC to form the Business and Technician Education Council (BTEC).
1986	BTEC released a series of publications in which the use of criterion-referencing and formative assessment were stated as central tenets of assessment policy and practice.
1991	BTEC changed its name from Business and Technician Education Council to Business and Technology Education Council.
1991	General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) introduced by the Department of Education and Science and the Department of Employment, with the intention of replacing other vocationally-related qualifications, including BTEC Nationals.
1993	BTEC becomes independent of UK Government.
1996	BTEC and London Examinations merged to form awarding body Edexcel.
2002	Edexcel released new BTEC Nationals accredited to the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), which were significantly influenced by the outcome-based model used in GNVQs, and placed stronger emphasis on criterion-referenced assessment and formative feedback.
2003	Edexcel bought by the private company Pearson.
2007	BTEC Nationals updated in-line with revised National Qualifications Framework. All units internally assessed, not all units have to be passed to

Date	Development
	achieve the qualification, but a specified minimum aggregated point score has to be achieved across all units.
2010	BTEC Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications aligned to the Qualifications and Curriculum Framework (QCF) instead of the National Qualifications Framework. All units have to be passed to achieve the qualification.
2011 (March)	Findings from the Government instigated <i>Review of Vocational Education</i> published in the Wolf Report, which included a recommendation for more rigorous assessment, including a percentage of external assessment.
2011 (May)	Government response to the Wolf Report accepted and proposed action in response to Wolf's recommendations.
2014	<i>Guide to Internal Assessment for BTEC Firsts and Nationals</i> issued by Pearson, instigating increased academic rigour of teacher-based internal assessment from September 2014. Tightening up of submission deadlines, limiting opportunities for re-submissions and retakes. Proposed a move to 30% external assessment of BTEC Level 3 qualifications from 2016.