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Review of Post-16 Quality Standard
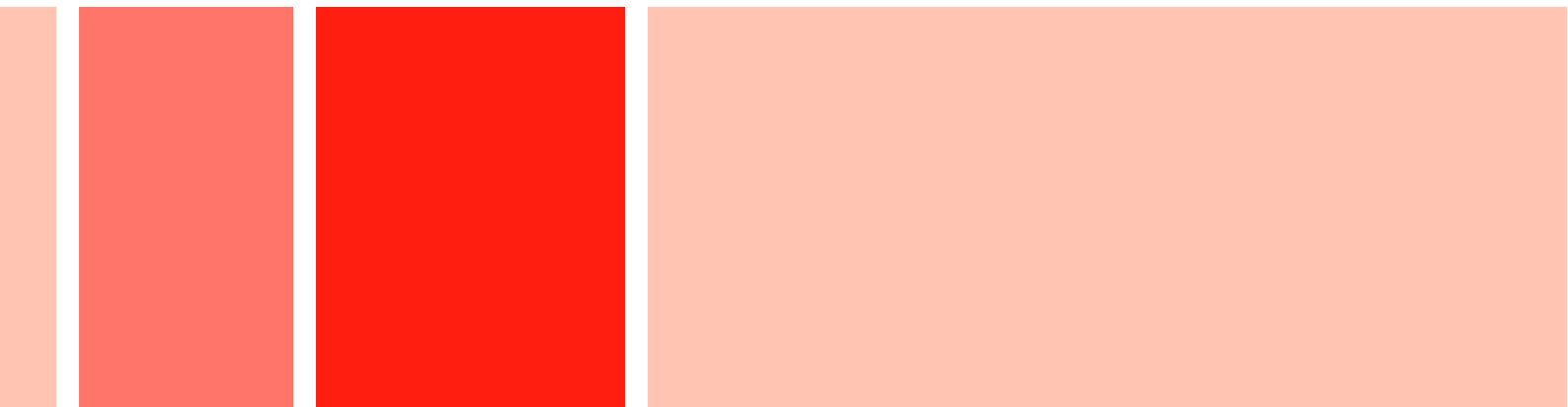
Review of Post - 16 Quality Standard

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Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government.

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Acknowledgement

1   Background and Context

Introduction

1.1   The Welsh Government is currently reviewing the effectiveness of the Post-16 Quality Standard (the Standard) on the strategic planning, delivery, resourcing, monitoring and evaluation of post-16 basic skills providers. York Consulting was commissioned to carry out a literature review and series of consultations with providers to contribute to this review.

Purpose of the Review

1.2   A system of accrediting providers in Wales with a basic skills award has been a key element of basic skills quality assurance since the introduction of the Quality Mark in 1992. Wales adopted an all age approach to quality assurance in basic skills; the Secondary Quality Mark for Schools was introduced in 1996 and the Primary Quality Mark was introduced in 1997. The Quality Standard came into being in 2008 following the Quality Mark as a way of improving the quality assurance of providers.

1.3   The review of the Standard is part of a wider evaluation of the Basic Skills in the Workplace (now Essential Skills in the Workplace) programme. The basic skills agenda is changing, and a new programme of Essential Skills Wales Qualifications has been developed to support the development of learners' essential skills. There are other changes relating to the initial assessment of learners and a greater focus on learner outcomes that all contribute to the need to review the relevancy of the Standard today.

Method

1.4   The report is based on provider consultations and a small scale literature review.

Provider consultations

1.5 As part of the evaluation of the Essential Skills in the Workplace programme, the Welsh Government requested that a sample of providers be interviewed to gain their views and recommendations for improving quality assurance in post-16 basic skills provision.

1.6 The Welsh Government forwarded a list of consultees (seventeen provider contacts and three Quality Standard assessors). In total, fifteen providers and three assessors were interviewed.

1.7 Consultations were conducted over the telephone using a pre-designed set of questions, these were forwarded to consultees prior to the interview to allow time to prepare responses if necessary. These questions were approved by the Welsh Government and are attached in Annex A.

1.8 In addition to the telephone consultation, six providers submitted written responses (one of these providers had previously been consulted over the telephone). The sample of providers who views are represented in this report includes:

- 4 Work Based Learning providers;

- 5 Adult and Community Learning providers;

- 10 Further Education colleges;

- The National Training Federation for Wales[1].

1.9 The sample was not created to be representative of the population of providers in Wales. Providers were included in the sample as a result of them being contracted to deliver under the Essential Skills in the Workplace programme. As a consequence, this report does not reflect the wider population of providers and views expressed should be considered to be indicative.

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[1] A list of providers consulted is included in Annex B.

Literature Review

1.10 A small scale (two consultancy days) literature review was carried out in order to provide context and background to developments in quality assurance in Europe. Searches were conducted using Google Search and open source literature. Research criteria included Quality Assurance and Quality Mark. What is presented in this report is a précis of findings that were considered pertinent to issues and developments in Wales. References to reports are contained within footnotes.

Structure of the Report

1.11 The report is structured as follows:

- Chapter Two provides a literature review of quality assurance systems in vocational education training in Europe;

- Chapter Three details the findings from the provider consultations;

- Chapter Four discusses implications of a withdrawal of the Standard;

- Chapter Five draws conclusions from the research;

- Chapter Six offers options and points for further discussion.

2   Literature Review

Introduction

2.1   The purpose of the literature review is to provide context to the development in quality assurance practices and procedures in post-16 education in Europe. This was not an extensive literature review. It focussed on identifying key documents that highlighted current drivers of quality assurance systems, policy and practice in Europe. Some of the reports drew comparisons of quality assurance procedures in Europe and these have provided a useful context.

2.2   There are considerable developments at the European level which are worth detailing, in additional to looking at some national approaches to quality assurance in vocational education training and adult learning.

2.3   We begin by looking at some of the reported drivers of quality assurance as a way of contextualising the decision to review the process for quality assuring essential skills provision in Wales.

Drivers of quality assurance systems and procedures in adult education

2.4   Two reports for the European Commission offer interesting contextual background to the development of quality assurance systems within Europe. The first of these reports, A Workshop on Quality discusses the concept of quality and why assurances regarding quality in adult learning are required.

2.5 This report details five key drivers that influence the need to promote and improve the quality of adult education in European Union countries. The first of these relates to the broader utility of adult education in promoting social cohesion and inclusion for the most vulnerable adults. Therefore, education needs to be of sufficient quality to attract and retain so called 'non-traditional' learners to provide them with the opportunities to contribute their skills to the demands of economic development. The second is fiscal constraints that demand public funds to be utilised to maximum efficiency and effectiveness, which in turn calls for greater accountability and quality assurance in adult education and training. Thirdly, deregulation is a trend that is ultimately leading to greater autonomy and responsibility for the quality of provision with providers. This increased provider autonomy is balanced by public authorities' development of frameworks, quality guidelines, systems and procedures. Fourth, is the increase in providers' management, monitoring and review of effective performance to improve provision and ultimately their marketability. Finally, learners are more mobile, placing a demand on the network of learning providers to ensure their learning is of sufficient high quality to meet learners' needs.

2.6 These drivers of quality are common across Europe and demonstrate a need for a review of the system in Wales in order to ensure that current practices and procedures are fit for purpose.

2.7 Significantly, according a review of quality assurance systems in Europe the relationship between accreditation and quality assurance is not considered to be a given. A summary report drawing views from twenty European Countries (including the United Kingdom, Germany, Denmark, Holland, Sweden, Hungary and Ireland), reported that notable impact of provider accreditation on quality was perceived to be small. Participating countries in a round table discussion argued that assessment is often the weak link and that accreditation is expensive and does not necessarily ensure quality.

"The main danger and potential negative effect of accreditation is that it becomes a bureaucratic process and that VET providers lose the ownership of their quality process."

2.8 There was also a divergence in opinion as to how systems of quality should operate for VET providers. Some discussions focussed on the need to embed quality assurance of adult learning in a continuum of learning at all levels, using common and generic indicators of quality structures. Other discussions focused on the need to have dedicated quality assurance for adult learning due to the specific learning and skills needs of adult learners.

2.9 At this point it is perhaps useful to consider what quality assurance in adult education means and what, therefore, quality systems are designed to promote and maintain.

What is quality in adult learning?

2.10 Demands from quality assurance systems change, depending on current economic climates, policy drivers and best practice developments[2]. According to current thinking[3], quality constitutes four key dimensions:

- equity in terms of equal access and participation in learning and training at all levels;

- efficiency, ensuring that resources are used as effectively as possible while achieving the specific aims of programme delivery;

- provision is delivered as part of a learning pathway that supports the learner in their individual goals and motivates a continuation in learning;

- effectiveness in terms of learners achieving the desired aims – this is usually measured by completion rates and outcomes.

2.11 In a set of guidelines[4] on basic skills provision for adults a key tenet of quality assurance in the field of basic skills provision, is considered to be that practitioners are suitably qualified:

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[2] GHK (2010) *Workshop on Quality*, European Commission, Directorate General for Education and Culture.
[3] Unesco Institute for Lifelong Learning (2009) Global Report on Adult Learning.
[4] GHK (2010) *Action Plan on Adult Learning, Basic Skills Provision for Adults: Policy and Practice Guidelines.*

"Quality is essentially generated and maintained in basic skills provision by the quality of teaching and learning processes."[5]

2.12 In 2009, the European Parliament and Council adopted a recommendation of having a European Quality Assurance Reference Framework (EQARF) which allows member states to establish their own systems for quality assuring vocational education and training. EQARF constitutes four elements in the quality assurance cycle:

- Planning and purpose: clarified by government, guidelines and frameworks that determine how quality will be ensured and measured;

- Implementation: key principles that underpin quality assurance systems (production of guidelines and a set of indicators that determine how quality will be ensured and measured);

- Assessment and evaluation: methods put in place to assess inputs, outputs, processes and outcomes;

- Feedback and procedures for change: these should be systematic, transparent and related to the goals and objectives set out at the planning stage.

2.13 The important element of note for this study is the recommendation that there is feedback and on-going procedures for change, that these should be systematic and transparent.

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[5] *Ibid* (page 31).

The importance of self-assessment and external evaluation in quality assurance

2.14 Looking at developments in practice with regards the balance between the use of internal self-assessments and external evaluation and accreditation systems is interesting in the context of this review. According to the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, "*self-assessment is both the starting point for better quality…and one of the most effective methodological tools for improvement*".[6] It is also an inexpensive tool when compared to systems of accreditation.

2.15 However, self-assessment alone is not considered to be a guarantee of quality as there is a lack of transparency to both learners and funders. There is increasingly, a consensus on the need for self-assessments to be counter balanced by external evaluations as part of the broad accreditation process. Forms of external evaluation or assessment vary considerably across nation states.

Quality assurance approaches in European Nation States

2.16 The accreditation of providers of adult learning opportunities according to explicit quality criteria is in place in at least 15 countries across Europe. The establishment of national frameworks for quality assurance alongside forms of independent accreditation is also well established. Although forms of accreditation are organised in quite different ways, they often result in a quality mark or label of some kind that demonstrates the quality of provision to potential customers.

2.17 It is recognised that accreditation is a costly process, but nevertheless, is a precondition for delivering awards from national qualification frameworks and for accessing public funds in many European countries. Support is provided for VET institutions to prepare for accreditation, particularly with support on developing self-assessment reports.[7]

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[6] European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (2009) Accreditation and quality assurance in vocational education and training: Selected European Approaches.
[7] Ibid.

2.18 Accreditation is referred to in a number of ways, sometimes approval, inspection or licensing instead of accreditation. According to the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, the process of accreditation or quality assurance should include a system of negative and critical feedback to providers on recommendations for improvement that are then reassessed by an external assessor[8].

2.19 European Nation States have adopted a range of methods for quality assuring providers. In Germany quality assurance is achieved by a two-step accreditation and certification process. VET providers are certified to deliver training through expert agencies (private organisations) who certify that providers meet set quality criteria. Certification is always limited to three years, and certification agencies are also required to carry out monitoring visits to VET providers each year, assessing the provider's internal quality management systems.

2.20 In Austria, the focus is on two key pillars of quality assurance, the quality of the provider and the quality of the professionals (practitioners). Adult education in Austria comprises up to 3000 agencies. A range of quality management systems are in place across the various federal states, and providers are obliged to spend time and money in achieving accreditation.

2.21 Switzerland also levies a charge (circa £2000) on providers to become quality assured through a common organisation (EduQua). Interestingly, EduQua do not provide support or advice, apart from information on the procedures. Private consultants are available for advice on how to secure a positive assessment.[9]

2.22 In Ireland quality assurance systems and programme delivery is reviewed by the Further Education and Training Council within a maximum period of every five years. This system appears to be a lighter touch in terms of quality assurance of providers and programme delivery being undertaken by one single agency.

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[8] Ibid.
[9] www.eduqua.ch.

2.23 In Sweden, quality assurance begins from the perspective of whether the learning programme meets employers and learners' needs. Approved training courses, rather than providers receive a label indicating the course is quality assured. There is no benchmarking of activities between providers and no links are made between provider outputs achieved and public funding.

2.24 England no longer use a quality standard to quality assure basic skills provision. Currently, The Skills Funding Agency is responsible for quality assuring further education learning for learners 19 years and over. The government's policy document *'New Challenges, New Chances'*[10] sets out a revised approach to quality assurance. Providers who are judged to be outstanding by Ofsted, will no longer be required to be inspected, unless their performance drops. Providers are required to continually review and assess their own performance through self-assessment reports, but submission to the Skills Funding Agency is to be made voluntary (although encouraged). The Learning and Skills Improvement Service support providers with performance issues.

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[10] BIS (2011) *New Challenges New Chances. Further Education and Skills System Reform Plan: Building and World Class Skills System.*

2.25 In Wales, the Standard operates as a way of quality assuring basic skills provision from across the FE, WBL and ACL provision. The Quality and Effectiveness Framework (QEF) was introduced in 2009 by the government[11] as a result of a lack of consistency in the quality of provision and too many providers being assessed as 'satisfactory'[12]. Self-assessment is a key function of the QEF with a focus on allowing providers with high performance records, a greater degree of autonomy. In addition to self-assessment, Estyn inspect all learning provision in Wales against the Common Inspection Framework and the Standard was designed to complement areas of inspection. The 2010 Common Inspection Framework has more of a focus on learners' experience and outcomes rather than provider's systems and processes.

Summary

2.26 Drivers of quality assurance systems indicate the relevancy of reviewing the Standard to ensure that it is effective, efficient and fit for purpose. Developments in quality assurance in Europe show the increasing use of self-assessment and external/independent review of provision. Some countries have levied a fee on providers to quality assure themselves; some countries focus more on the quality of teaching staff and the quality assurance of qualifications, as opposed to systems and processes.

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[11] Welsh Assembly Government (2008) Skills that Work for Wales: A Skills and Employment Strategy and Action Plan.
[12] Department for Children, Education and Lifelong Learning and Skills (2009) *Quality and Effectiveness Framework for post -16 learning in Wales.*

3 Key Findings from the Consultations

Introduction

3.1 This section provides a summary of the key points raised by the consultations and written submissions from providers, as well as from the Post-16 Quality Standard assessors. It begins with an overview of the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the Standard, then goes on to detail consultees views about the value of each element of the Standard.

Strengths of the Standard

3.2 All but one interviewee recognised the value of having a quality standard for basic skills in Wales. This includes those that had and had not been accredited with the award.

3.3 Positive aspects of the Standard were reported as:

- ensuring providers deliver to a nationally defined quality standard of delivery;

- increasing the level of engagement in the basic skills needs of learners in other areas of learning;

- encouraging internal reviews of skills and capacity among basic skills practitioners;

- encouraging self-assessment and improving practice;

- helping providers in marketing their learning programmes to businesses.

The standard ensures providers deliver to a nationally defined standard

3.4 There is an overwhelming support for having a nationally defined set of standards that providers can be assessed against and accredited as having achieved. Providers gain a sense of assurance that provision across the sector is assessed effectively.

"The Quality Standard is very important in ensuring consistency and maintaining high standards which are widely recognised, have credibility and value."

"[The Quality Standard] *provides a vital national standard for the promotion and development of literacy and numeracy skills amongst providers which is more necessary in the current economic climate than it has ever been."*

"It provides a degree of rigour to the delivery of literacy and numeracy amongst the broad range of providers."

3.5   Having a national standard that discretely accredits the quality of basic skills provision appears to be a valued concept by all but one provider. This provider considered the Standard unnecessary due to other forms of quality assurance (Estyn inspection, and Self- Assessment Reports).

The standard raises levels of engagement in basic skills

3.6   Having the Standard is seen as benefiting basic skills practitioners and providers more generally because of the increased profile this affords basic skills provision. This was noted particularly among FE providers where basic skills needs are being identified in learners on other learning programmes. .

"[Having the Standard] *ensures that the development of literacy and numeracy skills is a priority to be promoted throughout the college by senior managers and all staff. This combined responsibility is the only way to ensure that the skills agenda is driven forward to the long term benefit of learners."*

"It focuses organisations on the essential elements required to develop and deliver a quality provision. The framework helps to develop good practice across the whole organisation."

3.7   A number of interviewees stated that there has been increased engagement with, and awareness of, the importance of basic skills as a result of the Standard.

"It's taken basic skills across the curriculum and the organisation, taking away the stigma of discrete provision."

3.8 As basic skills provision has become integrated across other areas of learning in colleges, this in turn has benefited learners who receive a skills check on recruitment for a learning programme.

"It ensures that all learners have a skills check and encourages individuals to see that we all have skills needs, to a greater or lesser extent."

3.9 The emphasis on the whole organisation approach appears to help ensure that learners' basic skills needs are identified, regardless of the choice of learning programme.

The standard encourages a review of practitioner skills and provider capacity to meet learner needs

3.10 Interviewees stated that having a standard that requires staff to be suitably qualified, provides a lever for basic skills managers to obtain funds/support for staff training. One private training provider was very clear that the reference to a minimum Level 4 qualification for tutors (Element 3) added weight to his call for additional funds for training.

3.11 One FE college preparing for accreditation stated that the principal had made basic skills a priority in the college due to their impending assessment. This in turn led to a review of internal structures and an increase in capacity with an additional 4.5 tutors appointed.

The standard encourages self evaluation and improves practice

3.12 Many providers, particularly FE colleges review their own basic skills provision regardless of the Standard as part of internal quality controls. There are examples of colleges purchasing auditors to carry out internal audits of basic skills provision. This is activity that *'would have happened anyway'* but helps generate evidence required for the Standard. In this case the added value to the provider of the Standard's self-evaluation element is minimal but fulfils criteria for the Welsh Government with regarding quality assuring the provision.

3.13 However, a few providers agreed that the monitoring and review of systems as well as learning and outcomes has helped identify some areas of weakness, particularly in the effective use of learning plans and reviewing the continual professional development (CPD) of practitioners.

3.14 One provider was very clear that the Standard had focussed the college's attention on basic skills provision and had resulted in them? carrying out a review of practice across the college to ensure that learner needs were being identified and learning plans developed and reviewed regularly.

"The positive impact on our organisation has come from the audit of our practice and the streamlining of certain processes and improvement of others to meet the requirements."

3.15 However, no provider reported with any specific detail, how the Standard had improved their learning provision or ultimately performance as a provider with regards the quality of learning or learning outcomes. However, quality assessors interviewed had a different view as to how the Standard had improved practice.

"Best practice is developed as a result of an iterative process between assessor and the provider over the period of the development process to acquire the Standard." (Assessor)

3.16 Assessors gave anecdotal examples of how lessons were observed and feedback given to provider managers of the over use of worksheets. Also there were some concerns expressed regarding some practitioners not differentiating sufficiently within groups of learners. In these situations, assessors worked with managers to develop and improve the quality of teaching.

The standard supports providers in marketing their provision to businesses

3.17 Many providers stated that the benefit of having the Standard is that it helps market their service to businesses and learners. It is a well-recognised 'kite mark' that demonstrates to both employers and learners that the provider delivers to a national framework of quality and that learning will be delivered to a high quality.

Weaknesses with the standard

3.18 Although there is considerable support for having the Standard, a number of issues were consistently raised. These include:

- duplication of evidence required for the Standard, Estyn and SARs;

- problems with the assessment process;

- resource demands on providers.

Compatibility/duplication of evidence

3.19 For most providers, this was the main criticism of the Standard. Many drew attention to the fact that they already have quality standard procedures as part of internal quality management systems, and regularly undertake self-evaluation against the Quality and Effectiveness Framework (QEF). Therefore the Standard represents an unnecessary duplication of evidence.

"Evidence is important but often it is already there (e.g. some required by ESTYN) but has to be reformatted to fit the needs of the Quality Standard."

"Too much requesting of data that has already been supplied and the entire system needs to be looked at."

3.20 One provider was wholly against the Standard because it was considered to be a bureaucratic exercise adding no value to the quality of basic skills provision.

"Estyn now have very rigorous requirements of their own and in meeting them, the need for a QS now seems pointless."

3.21 There was also the view that evidence required across the various systems of quality assurance and inspection were inconsistent.

"Whilst I fully support any external audit/inspection as it is very worthy to us, I believe that all should work in close partnership to ensure goal posts aren't constantly changed and all requirements are agreed otherwise what you need to do for one is different to the other."

"These need to be aligned so that the standards we are measured against are consistent and evidence can be cross-mapped."

"Reporting systems need to be synchronised and co-ordinated as currently there is too much pressure on staff regarding reporting. Standards should be consistent."

3.22 There was a suggestion that classroom observations could be standardised and reports shared with Estyn as a way of minimising time demands on providers.

3.23 The degree to which providers tolerate the perceived duplication of effort varied, some stated it needed to change, but otherwise were more sanguine.

"This falls in line with SARs [Self Assessment Reports] and WP [Widening Participation] targets we set ourselves as part of our Welsh Government/DfES contract anyway so it works well together and ensures we meet the needs of our learners."

Assessment process and levels of support

3.24 Most providers valued the contribution made by assessors to their review of systems and procedures. Many recognised their expertise. However, there was a common view that assessments were not consistent or sufficiently rigorous in some areas of learning, partly because it was being undertaken by a single person, and partly because it was not thorough enough, this was felt particularly among FE providers.

"My personal feeling is that the process was not very robust and standards were not always consistently applied."

"Learning Support got through the assessment process fine, but when they visited ESOL we felt the assessor was nit-picking…there was a lack of consistency of approach across the areas."

"The assessment is made by one person, not always an experienced basic skills practitioner, over a very short period of time."

3.25 A few providers (from Adult and Community Learning, private training providers and FE colleges) were somewhat critical that the assessment had not taken into account the context in which learning was being delivered.

"The assessor we had was from FE and not ACL. I felt she was asking certain questions that were just not practical for us to evidence from across the provision."

3.26 There were a small number of comments regarding concern over a lack of information about what the process would involve, no agenda for the day, which prevented providers from preparing sufficiently.

"[There was a] lack of information, training and support about the objective and the processes involved (this will hopefully not be the case when/if the new format is agreed)."

"The assessment needs improving…particularly clarification, advice and guidance in working towards gaining the Quality Standard and an identified contact or team to contact to expedite the process."

3.27 Having an identified contact within the Welsh Government who can offer advice and support has been expressed by a few providers.

3.28 There were also concerns over the length of wait before providers could be assessed.

"[The] lack of Quality Standard staff to carry out the process resulting in delays and general frustration."

"There must be sufficient qualified Quality Standard staff to carry out the process if it is to be effective."

Demand on staff time required to achieve accreditation

3.29 A small number of providers commented on the resources required to achieve the award.

"The main weakness is the length of the process and volume of evidence required… It could be improved by reducing the evidence requirements, an electronic version perhaps and more clarity about requirements being provided."

3.30 This was felt particularly sorely among those providers who were preparing for the assessment at the point at which assessment was suspended.

"We put lots of time into working towards the Quality Standard and now we feel like all that time was wasted."

A Closer Look at the Standard's Elements

3.31 All but one provider were in support of the aims of each element on the Standard and felt that they are the set of elements to ensure that quality is maintained and improved. However, there were a number of comments regarding the resources required to evidence each element and the added value of some of the elements to the quality of their provision.

Element 1: assessing basic skills needs

3.32 This element requires providers to demonstrate knowledge of local need and how this is influencing learning provision. Providers agreed that understanding the needs of learners locally is very valuable in terms of making decisions about provision. However, many stated that up to date data was difficult to access, and that there were inconsistencies in how the data was used. A few providers have expressed that they gained little strategic value from the process. Some said that quite considerable time and resources were expended on this exercise, and in some cases, staff did not have the experience or knowledge in accessing local data.

"…as all organisations use different assessment tools the current situation doesn't contribute to an understanding of the wider scale of need."

"It was hard to see what the benefit was to our delivery."

"Difficult to assess need of whole borough accurately without survey of very local need (last survey with this was in 2004). We do not assess all learners in ACL so have to rely on data from other organisations and this is patchy."

"Additional workload in terms of gathering data and completion of documentation. (Couldn't much of the data, which is centrally gathered, be shared amongst QS, Estyn and Welsh Government?)"

3.33 A suggestion was made regarding the new Individual Assessment and whether, as a result of this, data could be fed electronically to the Welsh Government as a way of building up data on learner needs.

3.34 A few providers and assessors mentioned the assessment process of learners not being thorough or sufficiently standardised at present which leads to inconsistencies in the intelligence regarding need.

Element 2: development of a strategy and development plan with targets for the whole organisation

3.35 This element requires evidence that the identification of learner's basic skills needs is being addressed across the whole organisation, including wider partners if relevant. This was recognised by nearly all providers as being an essential element of the Standard. Providers stated that it helps to ensure that literacy and numeracy is promoted as a priority throughout the organisation. This was particularly important for the large FE colleges.

"This element ensures that the organisation raises awareness of the issues across all staff and develops strategies to aid this."

3.36 Providers stated that this activity complements what providers already do in terms of their development plans that ensure they achieve Welsh Government targets and continually improve engagement with basic skills needs throughout their provision.

Element 3: ensuring the use of qualified staff, teaching programmes, strategies and resources to improve basic skills

3.37 This element requires evidence that there is sufficient continual professional development of practitioners to ensure they develop their expertise and knowledge. There was unanimous support for raising the bar in terms of stating that staff should be suitably qualified. Providers value the reference to minimum qualifications for teaching detailed in the Standard and do not want to lose this.

"The Quality Standard can require agreed qualifications for literacy, numeracy and Essential Skills delivery staff, which lies outside Estyn's remit."

"This has helped us to focus on staff that needed development, also giving them new fresh skills to support learners."

3.38 This is an area where many providers stated that the quality of provision can be assured.

"Make strict compulsory rules about the qualifications required to deliver, assess for Essential Skills. This would ensure minimum standards were being met and would ensure a better quality of provision without the need for that part of the Standard."

3.39 However, a few had concerns over the lack of a national qualifications framework. This viewpoint was supported by assessors who stated that, although experience is essential in teaching basic skills to adults, there needs to be a minimum standard of qualification. Assessors are keen that the standard is raised to above Level 3.

"I have seen many practitioners delivering lessons who were not sufficiently qualified or experienced to deliver lessons. Level 3 is not sufficient to ensuring quality of provision." (Assessor)

3.40 Providers perceived a lack of clarity from Welsh Government around what minimum standard the Standard was stipulating. Providers interviewed stated that the minimum qualification needed to teach basic skills was Level 3, but there is reference to teaching staff having a Level 4 qualification in the guidance. Providers were concerned that not all practitioners want to obtain a higher level of qualification and Level 4 qualifications were no longer available.

Element 4: developing effective procedures for planning, monitoring and reviewing learner progress

3.41 Providers stated that they have good procedures for planning, monitoring and reviewing learner progress through the use of individual learning plans. However, assessors had views that the standard and relevancy of learning plans varied hugely among providers and was one of the weaknesses in providers' practice. Assessors stated that this is evidenced by the lack of real progress among some learners.

"Too often we see learners achieving a level 1 qualification and then being re-assessed as Level 1 learners and not progressing." (Assessor)

"We have to ensure that learning is appropriate for the learner and that we don't simply give learners qualifications." (Assessor)

Element 5: working within procedures for monitoring and evaluating the impact of the organisation's strategy on basic skills

3.42 This element requires provides to use learner data (achievement/attainment) and learner feedback to demonstrate impact. Although this had general support, a number of providers expressed a lack of confidence in generating evidence to demonstrate the impact of their provision on basic skills needs. A small number referred to the difficulties in using data to demonstrate impact and the issues with getting reliable local data. This possibly indicates some providers are a misinterpreting this element and are considering the impact too broadly (e.g. at the local level rather than provider level). Knowledge and methods of how to review impact and what is required seems to be inconsistent and could be improved among providers.

"We have reservations about how to measure and evaluate impact effectively as re-testing alone is not sufficient and other methods can be highly subjective."

Summary

3.43 The key theme coming from the consultations was the overwhelming support for having the Standard. However, a range of positive and negative comments were made that demonstrate differing views of the strengths and weaknesses of the process. Particular strengths were considered to be the raising of the profile of basic skills teaching and learning and the emphasis on a whole organisation approach. Key concerns were in the duplication of evidence and assessment processes.

3.44 The next section goes on to look at the implications of withdrawing the Standard on provider performance as well as provider confidence in maintaining quality in basic skills provision.

4 Implications of Changing the Quality Assurance System

4.1 This chapter discusses some of the challenges and implications in moving to a different system of quality assurance and withdrawing the Standard. This draws together opinions of providers as well as recommendations from Europe and other Nation States' quality assurance systems.

Reduced Demand on Providers' Resources

4.2 A significant positive element of the withdrawal of the Standard and integration with Estyn inspection would be the reduction in resources required to produce evidence (that has already been produced for Estyn and for the SAR). One provider stated that the amount of time staff spent on gathering evidence for the Standard could be used on developing teaching practice.

4.3 The quality and rigour of Estyn inspections are held in high esteem. Integrating basic skills provision within an Estyn inspection framework would give basic skills providers the necessary reassurances and could be used as a promotional tool for businesses. However, the basic skills element of inspection would need to have sufficient focus in order to provide the same level of assurance as the Standard.

Effective Challenge and Support

4.4 One of the key benefits of having the Standard is the challenge and support that is involved in the process of accreditation.

"The role of the sponsoring body is to provide support and challenge and, where necessary, to intervene so that poor performance is addressed quickly and robustly."[13]

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[13] DCSF, BIS (2010) Quality Assurance System for Post-16 education and training provision: Overarching Framework

4.5 Providers themselves recognise the value of having an external assessment of systems and learning provision. In fact some providers commissioned an internal audit, undertaken by an independent auditor to review practice. The Welsh Government is promoting the use of local partnerships and peer reviews to encourage the sharing of best practice.[14] Although this idea receives support and networking in Wales is very strong in terms of sharing of practice and discussing policy, there appears to be little recognition of the value of a peer review system with regards reviewing and evaluating provider performance.

"We've never been involved in peer review and I can't see how it would really work…we're in competition with each other." (Private Training Provider)

"Providers tend to be too nice to each other" (Assessor)

4.6 The Welsh Government also needs to be able to understand the reasons for any shortfall in performance, to hold providers to account in their performance and ultimately in the quality of their delivery. Although an inspection model per se will hold providers to account, it will not necessarily encourage improvements in the quality of provision[15]. A few providers and assessors were of the opinion that inspections undertaken by Estyn do not provide sufficient feedback to aid the on-going quality improvement required in basics skills delivery.

"If you have someone to come in to improve it rather than test you, it's a whole different thing." (Provider)

"Ultimately it is about what you want to achieve. If you want to develop and improve an organisation's delivery of basic skills, then you need something like the Quality Standard. If you just want to benchmark providers against set criteria then an inspection only system is fine." (Assessor)

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[14] Welsh Assembly Government (2009) *Quality and Effectiveness Framework for post-16 Learning in Wales.*
[15] European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (2009) Accreditation and quality assurance in vocational education and training: Selected European Approaches.

4.7 Much of the literature in Chapter 2 confirms that effective quality assurance procedures need a combination of self-assessment and external evaluation, but that external evaluation should include mechanisms for review and feedback. This delivers the cyclical model of quality assurance recommended in the European Quality Assurance Framework (EQAF)[16].

Withdrawal of the quality standard contributing to a state of flux

4.8 There is some disquiet in general around the flux in Government policy with regards to ensuring quality of provision in basic skills teaching and learning. For example, many individuals talked about the withdrawal of Basic Skills Cymru and the subsequent loss of expertise both within government and as an advisory agency overseeing and advising on the Basic Skills agenda.

"The announcement that the Quality Standard was to be suspended seemed to follow extensive reorganisation of Welsh Government departments, the departure of many staff from Welsh Government with knowledge of the Basic Skills agenda, the introduction of Essential Skills Wales qualifications and a lack of Quality Standard staff to carry out inspections. At the same time there has been a lack of information, clarity and direction regarding the Basic Skills agenda. This seems to be in contrast with the Ministers prioritisation of improving literacy standards in Wales."

4.9 The withdrawal of the Standard, after a redesign only four years ago, has added to the concern regarding the future direction of policy with regards ensuring quality in Basic Skills provision.

4.10 Some providers expressed frustration at having engaged with the process of accreditation and then the Standard being suspended. There is frustration among those few who feel they have wasted significant amounts of time.

4.11 There are very real concerns among most providers that without some form of standard, "*basic skills could get lost.*"

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[16] GHK (2010) *Action Plan on Adult Learning, Basic Skills Provision for Adults: Policy and Practice Guidelines.*

Complexity of basic skills provision

4.12 Providers delivering basic skills to learners in the workplace vary hugely, by size, length of time in operation and how they deliver learning (i.e. one to one or group learning). Therefore, there is a greater need to have a minimum standard against which providers should be assessed. This is particularly important in times when providers will seek to increase efficiency, reduce cost and where there is an increased focus on the outputs (qualification attainment). Ensuring that learners are provided with appropriate learning pathways that deliver progression is the key to improving the skills levels of the adult population[17]. Any change in quality control mechanisms should ensure a continued focus on providers' systems and processes for reviewing learning.

"Our concern is that without it, there are too few controls in place to ensure the consistency and quality of provision." (Provider)

Impact on the quality of provision

4.13 There are some organisations that had the Quality Mark and are still operating under this system of approval for their basic skills provision. This means that there are providers delivering who have not had reviews of their provision for up to four years.

4.14 In the context of below target performance of some providers in the Essential Skills in the Workplace programme, there is a risk that providers become too focussed on outputs and qualifications at the detriment to focusing on learners' needs and learner progression. A robust quality assurance model needs to operate to ensure provision ultimately meets the needs of learners and is not target driven[18].

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[17].Drummond, J and Gawn J (2006) *What works for Entry Level Skills for Life learners?* Niace
[18] Armstrong, P. (2000) Never Mind the Quality, Measure the Length: Issues for Lifelong Learning.

4.15 Although a key function of quality assurance is to maintain the effective and efficient use of government resources, most providers are concerned that this has become the key tenet against which decisions on the quality assurance process are being made. Providers and assessors expressed concerns that quality would ultimately suffer if an Estyn inspection only model is introduced without sufficient support and challenge from experts in Basic Skills teaching and delivery?

4.16 The next chapter draws out the conclusions from this research and is followed with a number of options for discussion presented in Chapter 6.

5   Conclusions

Key Points from the Literature Review

5.1   Systems of quality assurance should include four steps: (1) government planning and quality framework development; (2) implementation of indicators; (3) assessment and evaluation and (4) transparent systems of feedback for change. The redesigning of the Standard or other forms of quality assurance necessarily involves a review of all four processes.

5.2   A system of accrediting providers should include a system of feedback with recommendations for improvement which are reassessed by an external assessor. This is the best method for ensuring on-going improvements in the quality of provision.

5.3   Quality assurance systems need to balance the use of self-assessment and external evaluation. The degree to which external assessment can be relied upon to measure quality depends on whether self-evaluation is embedded effectively within providers. There is a move towards greater levels of responsibility and autonomy of providers in quality assuring their own provision across Europe.

5.4   Ensuring the quality of professionals in teaching vocational training is well recognised among European nation states as a way of ensuring the quality of provision. This is central to the position adopted in Austria for example.

5.5   In many countries, providers are supported in developing self-assessment reports and are given assistance in preparing for the process of accreditation. In one country (Switzerland, but there may be more) this system of support is purchased by providers. In addition, a charge is levied on the organisation for accreditation.

5.6   It is not a given that forms of accreditation against quality criteria is guaranteed to improve quality. Indeed, representatives from members states at a quality workshop stated that evidence of improvements in quality were limited.

5.7 In addition, over reliance on accreditation can become bureaucratic and operate primarily in order for providers to be allowed to participate in tendering processes for public funds.

Key Findings from the Research

5.8 All but one interviewee valued having the Standard as a discrete form of quality assuring essential skills provision. Providers believe it gives them kudos, raises their profile, particularly within colleges where basic skills teams reported basic skills learning was considered to be of a lower priority.

Strengths of the standard

5.9 Providers stated that the Standard raises the profile of basic skills teaching and learning and underpins a whole organisation approach, particularly among FE providers. It encourages reflection of practice and ensures that providers continually review their performance.

5.10 Providers feel a sense of security from having a nationally defined set of standards to which they are held accountable. This can be used as a way of demonstrating quality and competence to businesses as well as learners.

5.11 There are some other benefits credited to the impact of the Standard such as increases in basic skills team capacity, increases in the use of internal audit/external assessments, improvements in monitoring systems. All but one provider credited some improvement as a result of the Standard.

5.12 Assessors were more likely than providers to report on how the learning provision had been improved, for example through feedback sessions with provider managers on classroom observations, or the quality of individual learning plans. Providers were more likely to report on improvements made to their systems or monitoring and recording progress, rather than the learning provision per se.

5.13 The main concern regarding the Standard appears to be in the evidence gathering process conducted by providers. There is concern among providers that they are required to generate similar but not compatible evidence for the Standard as they are for other forms of assessment such as for Estyn inspections and Self-Assessment Reports. This was the key area in which providers said the Standard could be improved.

5.14 Other concerns related to the assessment process itself. There were concerns of a lack of consistency in assessment, observed particularly in colleges as assessments were carried out across different departments. There were also concerns regarding the relevance of some questioning and feedback from assessors who had a different teaching background to the provision being inspected.

5.15 There were a few concerns regarding the lack of information regarding what the assessment would involve as well as delays in waiting to be assessed. Some providers stated that more assessors were required.

Implications for Withdrawing the Standard

5.16 Effective quality assurance requires a robust system of review and feedback, giving providers time to address any shortcomings in their provision before being assessed or re-assessed. By removing the role of assessors, the element of support and challenge is lost to a large degree. Providers are concerned that by moving to an Estyn inspection model, on-going quality improvement would be sacrificed.

5.17 Clearly many of the benefits of the Standard are the legacy of the Quality Mark, and the on-going impact of the Standard on quality improvement has not yet been demonstrated. However, much of the literature suggests that improving quality of provision is an iterative process and only by constant monitoring and evaluating provision, can quality be improved.

5.18 However, there are mechanisms that can be put in place to increase the role of self-assessment and afford providers greater autonomy and responsibility in the assessment process. Providers, if they wish can purchase independent expertise on a needs basis.

5.19 The potential withdrawal of the Quality Standard has caused concern among providers who perceive this as an indication of a lack of clear strategy in the Welsh Government. Decisions on the future quality assurance process need to be made swiftly if momentum in terms of quality improvement is not to be lost further.

6 Developing a New System of Quality Assurance

Options for Quality Assuring Providers

6.1 This section looks at the recent developments within Wales with regards quality assurance and offers some options for consideration and discussion by the Welsh Government and stakeholders.

Integrating basic skills quality assurance into an Estyn inspection model

6.2 There is considerable support for having greater alignment of assessment with Estyn 2010 common inspection frameworks and other forms of quality assurance (QEF and SARs). One of the options, therefore, would be to integrate the basic skills quality assurance system within Estyn inspections. This would streamline the process and afford maximum efficiency of resources on behalf of providers and the Welsh Government.

6.3 However, there is reluctance from all but one provider to lose the Standard as a discrete form of quality assurance for basic skills, as has been described in Chapter 3. Providers are concerned of the potential lack of control over the quality of provision; that there could be a return to the days when *'anyone decides they can teach basic skills'.* Any change in the system therefore, has to provide a comparable level of control and transparency in quality assurance as the current Standard.

6.4 Therefore, this system would need supplementing with other methods for improving quality such as reviews of self-assessment against the QEF, evidence of sharing of best practice between providers. The submission of quality development plans to the Welsh Government (DfES) for providers who receive below the 'good' threshold could be used a form of additional monitoring of provider improvement. A move to a model based on monitoring the risk of provision (e.g. using an indication of below acceptable performance triggering an intervention) would require additional mechanisms to ensure that the quality of provision is constantly improving; still focussing on developing best practice, rather than accepting minimum standards.

Improve the standard's assessment process

6.5   There is clearly a need to review and to improve the Standard, to bring it up
      to date with changes in the Essential Skills Wales Qualifications programme,
      as well as improve the assessment process. Improvements requested
      included:

- increasing compatibility with Estyn and other forms of assessment;

- increasing the number of assessors;

- ensuring there are assessors with the appropriate background in
  learning provision (FE, ACL, Private Training Providers).

6.6   This is a significant undertaking and additional investment would be required
      to improve the capacity of assessors. However, this would have the benefit of
      maintaining provider confidence, as well as maintaining systems of support
      and challenge to improve provision.

6.7   **Table 6.1** details a summary of some of the options.

Table 6.1: Options for Quality Assuring Systems

Model	Perceived Benefits	Perceived Concerns
Fully integrated in Estyn inspection and lose the QS	- Providers produce assessment once; - Reduction on staff time; - Credibility of Estyn Inspection; - Cost efficient; - Greater provider autonomy/responsibility for developing best practice.	- Lack of iterative challenge and support possibly affecting quality in the longer term; - Estyn inspections too broad in scope to focus sufficiently on basic skills; - Providers loss of profile and influence in a competitive market; - Loss of momentum to continually drive up quality; - Lack of control over the quality of basic skills provision due to loss of QS.
Maintain and Improve the QS	- Keeps basic skills as a priority focus among providers; - Reassures providers of the quality of provision across their sector; - Helps providers 'sell' basic skills	- Increased cost to the Government of assessment; - The longer term viability of the system due to resource demand and cost.

Discussion Points

6.8 These options are based on this research only and therefore, considerably more research and discussions would contribute to more robust options. Some key questions to discuss at the workshop could include:

- Is it viable to move basic skills quality assurance to Esytn inspections in the longer term if not immediately?

  – Is there a view that Estyn can fulfil the function that the Standard currently delivers within their inspection remit that would satisfy basic skills providers?

  – Could the use of regional advisers who can offer challenge and support fulfil the role of assessors and help to raise standards locally and prepare for inspections and visits?

  – Can the QEF and SARs adequately support this model of quality assurance?

  – Would providers pay for additional support and challenge?

- Can the Standard be maintained as a 'badge' that is linked directly with the outcomes of assessment undertaken by Estyn?

  – What form of accreditation would still need to operate this system?

  – Could/should this be an 'opt in' if providers wanted to be able to access government funding?

  – What are the risk of running a dual form of assessment and accreditation?

Addendum

Following the submission of this paper, a consultation was held at a Colegau Cymru Essential Skills Network Meeting where York Consulting gave a brief presentation on the findings of the research to delegates.

This was followed by a presentation from the Welsh Government on a third option of an Essential Skills Standard that is being proposed as a best practice standard.

A Proposal from Welsh Government on a Best Practice Quality Standard

A key difference for the new standard is a much greater focus on learner outcomes rather than on providers' systems. The Quality and Effectiveness Framework already encourages greater levels of self-assessment and responsibility for quality in systems and procedures, therefore, the Welsh Government proposed there was no need for a quality standard to focus on this aspect of provider activity.

The new standard proposed encourages a focus on best practice in the following five areas:

- Identifying learner needs;

- Delivering learner need;

- Practitioner development;

- Improving Organisational performance;

- Essential Skills learner performance.[19]

These areas are compatible with the new Estyn framework for inspection, so should complement a focus on quality and performance already undertaken by providers. There would be no requirement of providers to be accredited against the standard in order to receive Welsh Government funding. Providers would

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[19] Details on the areas of best practice is included in Annex C.

receive support from the Essential Skills Wales team and provider performance on learner outcomes would be reviewed once a year. The Welsh Government highlighted the need to view quality assurance as an interaction of different elements (Learner Assessment, ES Qualifications, ES Practitioner Development, ES Workplace Developments, ColegauCymru ES Network, ES Quality Standard). The Standard should not be viewed in isolation as all elements contribute to improve learner performance.

If providers wished to maintain the Post-16 Quality Standard this could be continued on a voluntary basis. Providers could purchase advice and support from post-16 quality assessors and could be accredited with the Standard.

Responses from Delegates

All providers at the meeting were supportive of the proposal to move to a greater level of self-assessment based on the five areas outlined in the best practice standard. They were also support for maintaining the Post-16 Quality Standard on a voluntary basis. There were no objections by delegates in this meeting to a charge being levied by the Welsh Government on accreditation to the Standard.

However, delegates were not speaking on behalf of their providers, but were expressing a personal viewpoint on the proposed changes. Only 17 providers were present at the meeting and further consultation is required if an endorsement of the new standard by welsh providers is sought by the Welsh Government.

Questions arose around the continuation of the post-16 Quality Standard including:

- Could we still receive support for accreditation rather than just be assessed?

- Can the Welsh Government ensure that future assessors are 'ahead of the game' in order to make paying for accreditation worthwhile for providers?

- There were concerns expressed regarding the voluntary nature of accreditation and the potential impact this could have on CPD of practitioners. Currently, the Quality Standard requires practitioners to be qualified to a minimum of Level 3 and tutors to a minimum Level 4.

Annex A: Review of The Post-16 Quality Standard

1.   Have you achieved the Quality Standard?

      a.   Yes.

      b.   No.

      c.   We were (are) working towards it.

2.   (If 'No') Why have you not achieved the Quality Standard?

3.   (If 'working towards') what is your target date for achieving the award?

4.   If Yes, When did you achieve this? (Month/Year)

5.   What was your experience of becoming accredited?

6.   Looking at the five elements, what are your views on the value of each element in terms of improving the quality and effectiveness of learning provided?

      1)   Conducting an assessment of basic skills needs to understand the scale of learner need;

      2)   Development of a strategy and development plan with targets for the whole organisation;

      3)   Ensuring the use of qualified staff, teaching programmes, strategies and resources to improve basic skills;

      4)   Developing effective procedures for planning, monitoring and reviewing learner progress;

      5)   Working within procedures for monitoring and evaluating the impact of the organisations' strategy on basic skills

7.   In your opinion, what are the strengths and weaknesses of the Quality Standard?

8.   What are your views regarding Estyn Inspections, the Quality Effectiveness Framework and the Quality Standard?

9. The Quality Standard has been suspended pending the results of this review.

   a. What are your views on its suspension?

   b. What is the impact on your organisation?

   c. How could the Quality Standard as a whole process be improved?

10. What support needs do you perceive your organisation has in terms of achieving assessment (re-assessment)

   a. Little support needed.

   b. Some support needed.

   c. Considerable support required.

11. Do you have any recommendations for the Welsh Government regarding the Quality Standard?