

Assessment of Competence Qualifications for Project Management and Controls

By Richard Plumb. C.Eng., MIStructE., FACostE., MAPM.
ACostE Advisor on National Vocational Qualifications

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Introduction

For the project management and project controls profession, the standards and vocational qualifications developed in the early nineties and implemented since 1997 provide a proven benchmark that an individual practitioner can use to demonstrate his/her professional occupational competence. They form a medium for the training of employees, job candidate selection, professional society membership and continuing professional development. However, the standards and vocational qualifications are of little value if there is no reliable, satisfactory and auditable method of assessment available to the candidate and qualification Awarding Bodies. Thus ensuring the consistency of assessment quality across the country and the maintenance of credibility for the qualifications.

The Standards and Qualifications

As part of the scope of this paper it is necessary to outline the general structure of vocational qualifications. I shall not try in this paper to describe in detail the British project management and project controls standards, as with an audience from many countries you will probably be using standards developed for use in your own country. However, all vocational qualifications have a similar operating structure. There are standards and vocational qualifications for levels of occupational activity from operatives up to the highest levels of management. These higher levels are generally recognised as professional level qualifications.

All occupations are covered by an appropriate set of standards from which vocational qualifications are constructed. The qualifications are broken down into units, each of which covers a discrete but fully complete part of the job scope. These Units are further broken down into Elements and still further into Performance Criteria, which are qualified by Range Statements. The standards also detail the underpinning knowledge requirements that the candidate must be able to satisfy the assessor that he/she has. This may be done by completing specially set questions or by inference through an examination and acceptance of the performance evidence.

The Assessor Requirements

The Awarding Body for these qualifications has the responsibility, vested in them by the government agency, to ensure that approved assessment centres which are regularly audited for their systems and procedures, carry out a proper assessment process. The Awarding Body in an appropriate publication will detail this and forms part of the package, which must be accepted by the Approved Centre upon being licenced to practice.

Every assessor engaged upon the assessment of project management or controls vocational qualifications needs to be able to show that he has been engaged "hands on" in that profession for a long period. Occupational competence in project management and or project controls is a must, since at these professional levels a complete understanding of the requirements is vital and additional to the normal assessment qualifications. In the United Kingdom assessment qualifications are a specialist form of National Vocational Qualification and they demonstrate that the assessor has been through proper training and has been seen to be able to assess candidates.

Assessors, in addition to their technical and assessment capabilities need also to have well developed people skills. The assessor will be the motivator who will drive and encourage the candidates to complete their qualification. He will need to anticipate potential difficulties that may develop as the programme progresses and be able to prepare a way ahead.

The Assessor will provide the following basic candidate requirements: -

- Inducting the candidate onto the correct programme for his/her abilities
- Interpretation of the standards into meaningful requirements relevant to the candidate's occupation.
- Assistance with the identification of suitable evidence
- Planning assessment sessions
- Recognising assessment opportunities and providing focus for completion.
- Providing feedback to both the candidate and the management.

The candidate and assessor will normally meet regularly by previous arrangement for a session, which generally consists of two distinct parts.

1. The review of work done by the candidate – this will include the scrutiny of evidence items and their relationship to the assessment criteria. The candidate's knowledge of the subject will also be questioned such that the assessor will be assured that the candidate really knows his/her subject.
2. The discussion and planning of the next assessment session such that the candidate has a clear idea of the work to be achieved before the next meeting.

Assessors must be flexible and able to understand that the candidate is the one with work pressures, holidays etc. Meetings do get cancelled and need to be rescheduled as work must come first, however, the assessor will also recognise when the candidate is not putting enough effort into the portfolio of evidence and take suitable steps to get improved performance.

Remote Assessment

During the past few years we have had many requests for assessment of candidates who are located some distance from the Approved Centre and the assessor. This has proved something of a challenge for us in that to maintain the economic viability of the qualification both for the candidate and the assessors the assessment process had to be by post, email and telephone. Systems have now been developed which have streamlined this operation and we have managed candidates from many distant countries.

The principal methods used are

1. Induction of the candidate by videoconference although if it is possible for the candidate to travel for this one day occasion to the assessor, it may be preferable.
2. Transmission of evidence items by email using normal business software e.g. Word, Excel, and Adobe Acrobat etc.
3. Development of two identical portfolios, one with the candidate and the other with the assessor. This will assist when discussing points of concern over the telephone.
4. The assessor must try to be in his office for a regular period each day say 9 – 10 am to receive phone calls from candidates. Answering machines can be a costly luxury if a foreign candidate has to be replied to. This also solves the problem of time zones.
5. The use of a specific website for the posting of evidence by the candidate, which may be accessed by the assessor and the internal or external verifiers.

The Candidate

Prior to commencing on a programme all candidates will be reviewed for suitability to attempt the qualification. The workplace opportunities for portfolio building and the candidates background knowledge will be examined to ensure that every candidate has a realistic chance of succeeding. There is nothing worse than having a candidate with insufficient experience or job opportunity. Everyone gets frustrated and it's a waste of the client's money.

The qualifications are available at all occupational levels from UK Level 2 (clerical support), Level 3 (technician) Level 4 (fully competent practitioner) and Level 5 (strategic manager)

Each candidate will be assigned to an assessor and assessment will be conducted on a one to one basis throughout the programme, Ideally there will be more than one candidate from a given client company, to enable interchange of ideas and portfolio building techniques and to assist each other between assessor meetings. Visits to client companies are clearly more economical when two or more candidates can be seen in succession, although at two hours each, more than three in a day would be a mental and physical stretch.

Explanation of the standards for a given unit will be a key part of an assessment session and is provided to ensure that the candidate understands fully that which is required. Sometimes some tutoring will creep into the assessment process, which is fine for background knowledge, but the candidate is expected to find from work experience sufficient performance evidence to demonstrate competence.

Where a particular subject requirement of the Standards falls outside the range of a candidates work opportunities, it is necessary to request the line manager to provide a live work experience for that item. Sometimes a temporary transfer to another department can be arranged or if all else fails a simulation can be set by the assessor for the candidate. Note that no more than ten percent of the Units and Elements can be dealt with in this way, as the NVQ will then become just another academic exercise.

Progress

Candidates will normally complete their NVQ programme in about twelve months for a seven-unit qualification. Experience over the years has shown that the first unit for a new candidate will probably take up to three months to achieve, the next two months and the remaining five at one month each. This with a month of holiday will enable achievement within one year. But it has been faster, the current record is four months, but that was very exceptional.

Candidates should expect to spend some 150 hours gathering their evidence, building their portfolio and meeting the assessor; therefore if three hours a week is assigned to the task, reasonable progress should be maintained.

See attached Candidate Performance Matrix.

Approved Centre Requirements

Fundamental to an assessor's performance with candidates is the ability and systems of the Approved Centre. Approval to offer the Project Management and Project Controls qualification rests on having a proven and competent assessment/verification team and on the Centre having a proven quality management system (QMS), and an effective documentation control system. Centres will require policies and procedures in place covering issues such as Equal Opportunity Policy, Disclosure of Information Policy and Appeal Procedure. The assessment/verification team consciously complies with this infrastructure as they work with candidates. Records of candidates' registration with the Centre, and progress through their qualification, are kept electronically and reported to clients every two months. The entire record keeping activity needs to comply with the eight principles of the Data Protection act and additionally registration with the Information Commissioner.

Audits

The Awarding Body will conduct audits on a regular basis, normally twice yearly. The audit will look at the work of assessors and verifiers, and the effectiveness of the Centres systems and documentation. The British Awarding Bodies have clearly defined criteria that must be complied with in order to remain Approved, and the audit ensures that compliance is on going. An External Verifier, who writes a report after each visit noting good practice and any actions to be undertaken, conducts the audit

Assessor and Verifier Management

All members of the team are to be kept abreast of changes in Centre procedures or Awarding Body requirements. The Centre Contact, whose role is to administer the centre, does this through conducting regular Assessor/Verifier meetings, and through dissemination of information. The records of these meetings are checked during the External Audit.

A particular requirement is ensuring that all assessors keep up to date with developments within their profession, such that they know all the latest techniques and activities required of a practitioner in business.

Pivotal to the efficiency of our Quality Assurance as a centre is the role of the Internal Verifier. The Internal Verifier oversees the performance and decisions of the assessment team, through attending assessment sessions, and by reviewing evidence. The role and training requirements of the Internal Verifier is comprehensively defined in the Approved Centre documentation

Internal Verification

At the completion of a candidate's portfolio the assessor will complete a request form for an internal verification and copy this document to the Centre contact for inclusion in their auditable records.

The IV will cover the following subjects and is intended to ensure that the candidate has

- had good and regular guidance from the assessor
- had every equal opportunity
- provided all relevant background information
- completed the assessment records for each unit and element
- provided all evidence dated and owned by the candidate
- demonstrated adequate knowledge evidence
- all evidence items viewed and initialled by the assessor
- signed and dated witness testimony provided for all items

The internal verifier must satisfy him/herself that the assessment process has been correctly carried out and the above check list of requirements can best be achieved by a spot check on perhaps two elements from the portfolio.

The candidate's background information file should contain a curriculum vitae, a job description, a working relationship chart, a witness testimony signed by the line or project manager, a list of evidence items and where used in the portfolio. Also the assessment plans and other feedback and communications, emails etc provided by the assessor during the course of the assessment process.

At the close of the internal verification the IV will complete a form detailing his review and any comments or notes to the assessor. If the portfolio adequately demonstrates the candidate's proficiency against the standards and the assessor has judged the evidence correctly, the centre contact will be requested to apply for an NVQ certificate from the Awarding Body.

The Awarding Body then has the right to request their own external verifier to review the portfolio and the assessment/verification process to ensure that all the procedures have been correctly carried out.

Continuing Professional Development

The NVQ process will demonstrate a candidate's competence at the time of assessment as discussed above. The National Governmental Policy for Vocational Qualifications through the Awarding Bodies will require the re-accreditation of the qualifications every five years or so. The re-accreditation process will include for a review of the content of the standards to ensure that all the latest professional requirements are included at this time, thus providing an opportunity for previously successful NVQ candidates to add the new items to their portfolio

and demonstrating that they are up to date. The cost of this will be reasonably cheap, as only the revised portions of the portfolio will be assessed.

Conclusion

It is these exhaustive quality assurance procedures that ensure that the vocational qualifications, when awarded, are the ultimate qualification and genuinely demonstrate the value of the practitioner to his management, clients and peers. Since their implementation NVQs have been widely accepted by industry and particularly by those who need to show to the public the competence of their workforce e.g. nuclear, petrochemical construction and maintenance.

Thank you.

Notes for Candidate Performance Matrix (See Appendix 1)

Candidates should record the Units and Elements completed on the relevant areas of the matrix and compare their progress with the model performance - shown below. Assessors meetings are programmed as shown and should be indicated on the candidate's own record.

Awarding Body certificate is awarded on final completion.

The model shown is for the Project Management level 4 NVQ. A similar matrix may be created from the standards and used for other qualifications.

Appendix 1

CANDIDATE PERFORMANCE MATRIX

Name _____

Qualification _____

Project Management IV

Date started _____

Date completed _____

MONTHS NUMBERED

UNIT	ELEMENT	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
4.1 Specify Requirements	1.1 Develop means												
	1.2 Produce specifications												
4.2 Resources	2.1 Work breakdown structure												
	2.2 Estimate resources												
	2.3 Recommend means												
	2.4 Develop programme												
4.3 Secure Resources	3.1 Personnel availability												
	3.2 Secure materials												
	3.3 Acquire information												
4.4 Manage Contracts	4.1 Contractual arrangements												
	4.2 Select tenders												
	4.3 Improve tenders												
	4.4 Verify contracts												
4.5 Risks	5.1 Identify hazards												
	5.2 Select options for risks												
	5.3 Monitor risks												
4.6 Guide Teams	6.1 Agree work plans												
	6.2 Agree work methods												
	6.3 Allocate work												
	6.4 Monitor work												
	6.5 Provide feedback												
4.7 Manage Implementation	7.1 Monitor and control project												
	7.2 Comply with regs												
	7.3 Monitor income and expend												
	7.4 Ensure quality												
	7.5 Control handover												

Model Performance

1st Unit													
2nd Unit													
3rd Unit													
4th Unit													
5th Unit													
6th Unit													
7th Unit													
Assessor/candidate meetings	Ind	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10			