

# The North East launch of Project Control support standards and Level 2 NVQs

by Nigel Hibberd\*

The North East launch of the Project Control Level 2 NVQ and associated project support standards took place at Darlington Football Club in October and was enthusiastically attended by around 80 people.

During the stimulating seminar the importance of the Project Control NVQ Levels 2, 3 & 4 qualifications to UK plc became clear when it emerged that the level of expenditure on new plant in the process industry in the North East alone through to 2015 will give rise to 16,000 new jobs, many of which will be in the project control disciplines.

There has been less of an emphasis on science and maths-based subjects in colleges over the last decade, mainly because of the break-up/divestments of the process-industry big players. This state of affairs has been further compromised by a frequently changing, Government funding strategy for further education. The challenge now is to provide people with the skills that are needed by industry.

The general feeling is that the Level 2 & 3 NVQs and similar occupational qualifications are closer to what industry needs, and are a pragmatic way of providing the currently available labour force with the required skills. The big concern now is whether there will be a sufficient upturn in training capacity in time to meet the process industries' urgent needs.

Using the North East position as a yardstick, there will be 60,000 additional jobs required in the UK process industry by 2015, a significant proportion of which will require project control skills.

The launch seminar was chaired by Robin Davidson of Wolviston Management Services Ltd who in his introduction highlighted that:



The speakers (left to right): Robin Davidson, Nigel Spencer, Kit Lofthouse, Andy Brown, Richard Dodd, Shane Forth, Howard Malleison

- all major capital programmes had been controlled using project control methodology for the last 10 to 15 years;
- the methodology had grown up and matured in the oil and gas sectors before branching out into other industries;
- industry now suffers from too many 'grey beards' and it was felt the Level 2 would be a vehicle to attract younger people in order to improve the project control engineer's age profile.

Richard Dodd, ECITB (Standard-setting body) project manager for delivery of the new standards, outlined how feedback from the Level 3 & 4 Launch in 2005 had identified UK industries' requirement to provide a visible career path for the project control profession, with the opportunity to start people straight out of school or convert craft technicians into the profession. This clearly marked career path would encourage people to stay within the profession and develop through to chartered or

certified status. The new Level 2 qualification provides the entry point.

Richard related how, in the first place, he had to obtain funding from SSDA/QCA, assemble a team of cross-sector project control professionals and representation from the ACostE (the professional body for project control), deliver the standards, gain approval of the standards, and then develop the subsequent qualification package. The qualification gained accreditation in August of last year. Richard also highlighted a number of other uses that could be made of all the NVQ standards and qualification structures and stressed that, whilst ECITB are the custodians of the standards, they and the qualification structure are in the public domain.

The finished Level 2 standards and qualification consist of 13 units. The qualification requires 11 (8 mandatory) to be completed using the assessment of evidence, each unit being made up of Performance, Scope and Knowledge criteria, all of which must be demonstrated by the evidence.

Nigel Spencer, Head of ECITB's

Awards organisation, explained how the delivery structure works for NVQs. This involves the awarding body: accrediting each assessment centre and overseeing the assessment centre by means of external verification of its processes and candidates' portfolios. In addition, Nigel explained how each centre recruits and trains assessors and has to employ internal verifiers to ensure that the assessment process within the centre is fair, equitable and safe.

Nigel made it clear that the key component of the accredited strategy for the qualification is that the assessor must have been actively employed in the profession for a period of not less than five years. This is in order that the 'can do' aspect of the qualification can be effectively assessed.

Nigel also highlighted that ECITB had recently introduced the Paperless Portfolio System to streamline the delivery process. This is a Web-enabled, secure environment in which the candidate could compile his evidence and units and store securely, yet still allow the assessor remote access to the evidence and units, to assess and comment. All correspondence between the assessor and the candidate is retained within the system, and the internal and external verifiers also had access to review each candidate's portfolio, and comment as required. This has the advantage of minimising assessor travel, although face-to-face meeting will also be necessary, as required.

Andy Brown, also of ECITB, discussed the work he had been involved in to develop a project control apprenticeship programme that is currently being piloted in the North East.

Andy stressed that an apprenticeship is a partnership between the employer, the apprentice and the Government who needed to fund/subsidise the process. UK plc has been losing out since the big companies had stopped funding this form of staff development, and the programme was part of a government initiative to re-engage the employers in the recruitment and training of apprentices.

The apprenticeship programme is based on two levels, 'advanced' which maps to Level 3; and 'modern', which maps to Level 2. The pilot programme is an advanced apprenticeship. As it is

## 4 Years

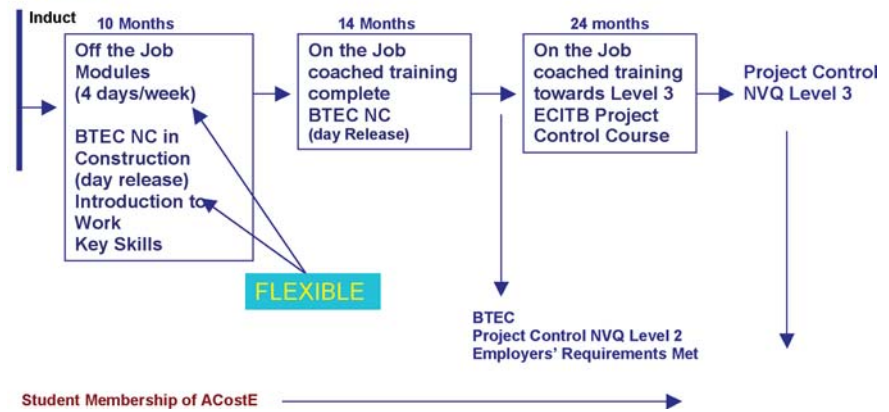


Figure 1: young persons' route

generally not possible to mix a Level 2 and Level 3 apprenticeship in the same programme, the NE pilot programme uses the Level 2 as a training vehicle to bring people up to a standard that helps them move on to the Level 3. The overall timescale for someone fresh out of school with is expected to be four years, at which point the candidate will emerge with a Level 3 qualification. The overall NVQ process also allows more mature transfers in from craft/technicians and graduates. See Figure 1.

In putting the programme together Andy had worked closely with local employers from the engineering construction industry, and the following local training providers.

NETA (North East Training Association) are providing the apprentices with training for four days a week in the early phase on: practical technical awareness, craft awareness, project control theory based on the national occupational standards for project control support.

Darlington College are providing the academic training in support of the BTEC qualification for one day a week.

KT Associates will undertake the NVQ assessment throughout the programme, and have developed an on-the-job training programme mapping back to the standards for each apprentice.

At the end of Andy's presentation, Shane Forth, AMEC Project Controls Manager and ACostE North East Chairman presented the apprentices, who had joined the programme in September '07, with their certificates for Student Membership, awarded on the strength of them undertaking the

Project Control NVQ as part of their apprenticeship.

Shane commented on the excellent quality of all candidates interviewed for the apprenticeship, and said he looked forward to the apprentices achieving full membership of the ACost E in a few years' time.

Following the presentation of the membership certificates, the accredited assessment centres for Project Control NVQs then introduced themselves to the seminar.

KT Associates, represented by Kit Lofthouse, have been in business for around 20 years and are currently working with three awarding bodies EDEXCEL, Open University, and OCR, providing assessment in a number of industries, and typically developing and delivering bespoke graduate and research & development training programmes. KT Associates deliver a broad range of training to a wide variety of clients. They have a network of assessors working throughout the North of England, although the core assessors are based in the North East where the administrative base is.

TASC (The Assessment Service Centre), represented by Howard Malleon, is a not for profit subsidiary of the ACostE, and specialises solely in supplying NVQ assessment services to the project control profession. Their service covers benchmarking of practising project control staff to identify gaps for development, and also providing free knowledge training courses to candidates and employers in areas where gaps exist against the standards, eg, risk. TASC stressed that all their assessors are corporate

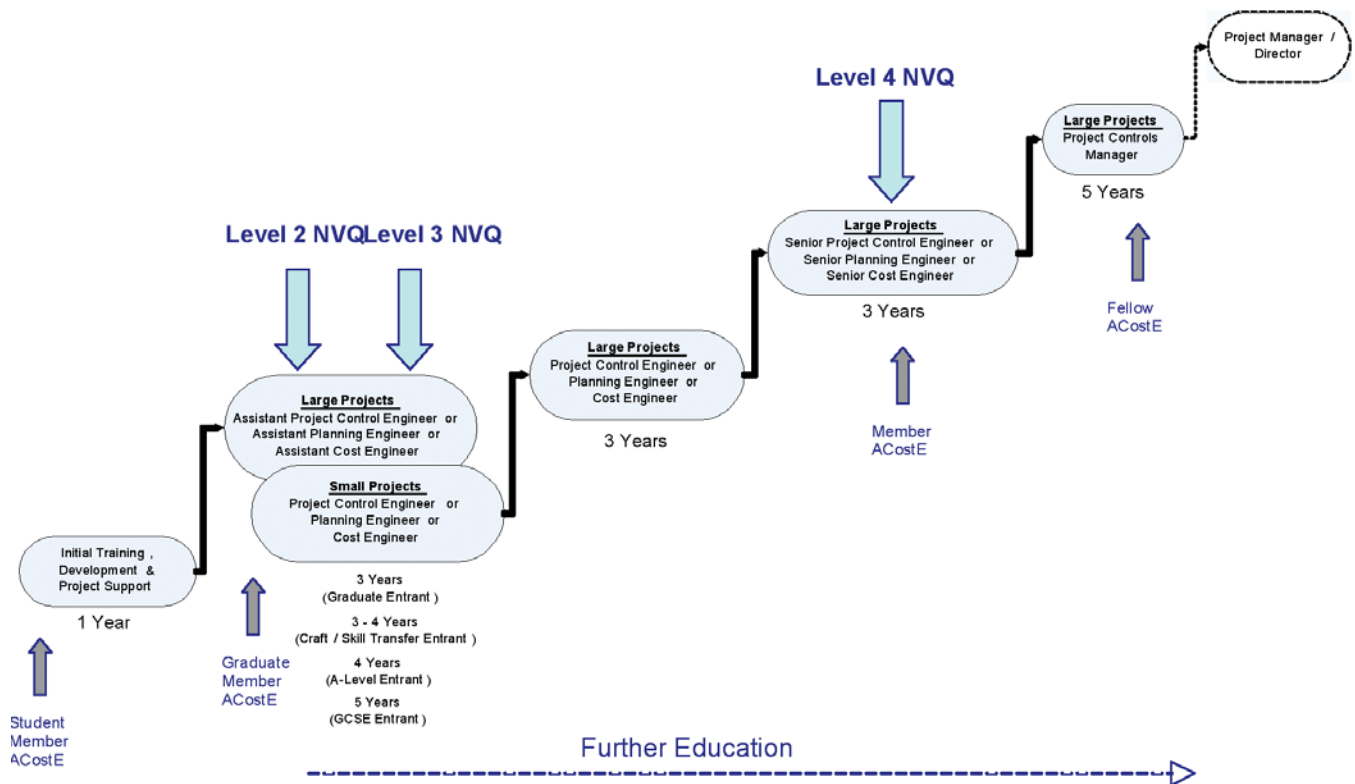


Figure 2: the project controls career path

members of ACostE and TASC can cover the whole of UK with this network from its office in Sandbach.

Howard reminded us that 'there is no world-class project delivery without world-class project control'.

Shane Forth, Project Control Manager for Amec Industrial, changed the focus of meeting to the industries'/employers' input into developments, why industry needed the Level 2 NVQ framework and how he had used the standards to good effect in developing the skills framework for project control within Amec Industrial. This underpinned a point made by Richard Dodd earlier.

Shane discussed how, as an Amec rep on BCECA (British Chemical Engineers Contractors Association), he and other industry colleagues had been involved since 2002 in influencing ECITB as to needs for the NVQs in Project Control. BCECA and organisations like ProVoc (the national user group for the qualification) had all been actively involved in working with Richard Dodd to develop the new qualification and standards.

Shane was also actively involved in developing the Apprentice Programme, which had been key to enabling an early start to delivery of

the Level 2 NVQ in the North East. Amec has a number of apprentices on the Programme.

Shane discussed the typical career path for a project control professional, along with the typical profile for Level 2, 3 & 4 candidates. See Figure 2.

The typical profile for the candidates is as follows.

#### Qualifications: at GCSE level or above

##### Type 1: Trainees/apprentices in major organisations

- Where Level 3 and Level 4 qualification is being applied.
- Have recently commenced work in a project control functional group or project team.
- Level 2 is a stepping stone as part of career progression in project control.

##### Type 2: Staff in small to medium enterprises (SMEs)

- These staff will be supporting a 'hands-on' role in controlling project execution from tendering through to delivery.
- Level 2 likely to be a stepping stone to Level 3 in Project Control, or to Level 3 in Supervision.

#### Qualifications: ONC or above

##### Type 1: Staff in major organisations where the Level 4 qualification is being applied who have had two years' experience in a project control environment

- Working under the supervision of more experienced practitioners.
- Level 3 is a stepping stone in career progression to more senior roles.

##### Type 2: Staff in small to medium enterprises (SMEs)

- These staff will already have a 'hands-on' or lead role in controlling projects execution from tendering through to delivery.
- Level 3 qualification likely to be an end in itself, rather than a stepping stone to the Level 4 which the SME will probably not require.
- The more natural progression for such a candidate could well be the Level 4 Management or Project Management qualifications.

#### Qualifications: HNC or above

- Several years as a practitioner in a major organisation.
- One or two years in a position of recognisable authority and

responsibility after achieving Level 3 or equivalent experience.

- Key member of multi-discipline project teams or specialist providing control services into project teams.

To underline the value of the NVQ programme to the candidates, the employer, and UK Plc, Shane highlighted the experience of two past Project Control Level 3 & 4 candidates:

1. a non-graduate who had undertaken Level 3 and 4 qualifications a number of years ago and is now working above a PCM role: 'I felt the qualification had been a practical way of filling knowledge gaps and had given me an added sense of confidence and belief in myself'.
2. a graduate currently working as the Cost Engineering lead/assistant PCM: 'The NVQ made me step out of the comfort zone as I had to actively seek more in-depth exposure to areas such as risk management and procurement. I definitely believe this helped me improve my overall project control knowledge'.

Howard Malleon, this time representing the ACostE, discussed how the ACostE wished to recognise the various levels of NVQ as access to the each level of Association membership. He also conveyed how he was trying to establish a link to CEng status using the NVQ portfolio as part of the supporting accredited documentation. He believed that the ACostE will be able to deliver this solution but did not see it as a short-term objective. In the meantime, since ACostE is a founding member of ICEC (The International Cost Engineering Council), the Certified Cost Engineer qualification is currently available to appropriately experienced Level 4 candidates, and lies somewhere between Incorporated and Chartered status. This is an internationally recognised professional status, because of the ICEC links.

[Currently Members of the ACostE with suitable prior learning and experience can gain Chartered



*The Project Control apprentices after receiving their ACostE Student Membership Certificates at the North East launch*

Engineer status, via the ACostE. What ACostE is trying to do is to build the link between the NVQ programme and Chartered status: this was the focus of Howard's presentation.]

Dr Stan Higgins of NEPIC (North East Process Industries Cluster) gave a very upbeat picture of the North East process industries' current status, saying that a forecast of growth five years ago had been hopelessly low, with record turnover occurring this year. Project control people will be needed directly within the industry and in its supply chain. He believes that the NVQ is key to giving the industry the quality of recruits and staff it needs but is fearful that, because of the way the education has been delivered over the last decade, it will be too little too late, and could compromise the rate of required growth.

It heartened Stan to see the apprentices sitting in front row of the seminar, and he saw them as having excellent career opportunities in the North East in their chosen profession. Overall he was convinced the NVQ programme and standards framework is one of the key ways of addressing the skills shortage in the North East and the country as whole.

The Chairman, Robin Davidson, ended the seminar by conducting a question-and-answers session which is summarised at the beginning of the article. One of the key points Robin made was that anyone who could demonstrate competence across the standards associated with estimating, planning and cost control, would be

sure of employment in areas where work permits were hard to get. In this instance, a multi-skilled resource will always be preferred, and if the skills are underpinned using the NVQ framework, it gives real strength and validity to that individual's capability and credibility.

More launch seminars are planned in 2008 in the North West, London and the South and possibly one in Scotland. These will be timed to enable feedback from the Apprenticeship Programme in the North East.

### **Seminar sponsors (in sequence of engagement)**

**ACostE:** the project control learned body. Tel: 01270 764 798. Lea House, 5 Middlewich Road, Sandbach Cheshire, CW11 1 XL.

[www.acoste.org.uk](http://www.acoste.org.uk)

**Provoc:** the project control NVQ and standards user group, an ACostE SIG, and organiser of the seminar. Tel: 07803 248 427. Contact via the ACostE or

[www.provoc.org.uk](http://www.provoc.org.uk)

**ECITB Standards and Awards:** the sector skills council for the engineering and construction industry. Tel: 01923 260 000. Blue Court, Kings Langley, Herts.

[www.ecitb.org.uk](http://www.ecitb.org.uk)

**Amec Industrial:** a major supplier of

high-value consultancy, engineering, and project management services with candidates on the Project Control NVQ programme. Tel: 01325 744 400. Yarm Road, Darlington, Co. Durham, DL1 4JN.  
www.amec.com

**BCECA** (British Chemical Engineers Contractors Association), who have been key in initiating the Level 2 qualification. Tel: 020 7839 6514. 1 Regent Street, London SW1Y 4NR.  
www.bceca.org.uk

**TASC**, a project control accredited assessment centre. Tel: 01270 764 798. Lea House, 5 Middlewich Road, Sandbach, Cheshire, CW11 1 XL.  
www.acoste.org.uk

**KT Associates**, a project control accredited assessment centre. Tel: 01642 602 721. Waterloo House, Thornaby Place, Teesdale, South Thornaby, Stockton on Tees, Cleveland, TS17 6SA.  
www.kt-associates.com

**The NETA Training Group**, who are providing the apprentices' practical technical and craft awareness training, for four days a week in the early phase, and are expected to apply for assessment centre status for Project Control NVQs. Tel: 01642 616 936. Pennine Avenue, North Tees Industrial Estate, Stockton on Tees, TS18 2RJ.  
www.neta.co.uk

**Darlington College**, who are providing the academic training in support of the BTECH qualification for one day a week. Tel: 01325 503050. Darlington College, Central Park, Haughton Road, Darlington, DL1 1DR.  
www.darlington.ac.uk

**Wolviston Management Services Ltd**, specialists in recruiting project control resources for international posts. Tel: 01642 607375. Wolviston House, 108-114 Yarm Lane, Stockton on Tees, TS18 1JX.  
www.wolviston.com

**NEPIC** (North East Process Industries Cluster), key to understanding the size and importance of the NVQ programme required for project control to the process industry. Tel: 01642 442 560. NEPIC, Room H224, The Wilton Centre, Wilton, Redcar, Cleveland, TS10 4RF.  
www.nepic.co.uk

**Forgetrack**, provider of Primavera and Pertmaster project management tools. Tel: 01920 500 900. Thistle House, St Andrews Street, Hertford, SG14 1JA.  
www.forgetrack.co.uk

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## WOULD YOU LIKE TO BE AN NVQ ASSESSOR?

Due to the increasing demand for TASC's competence assessment services, we need to recruit extra assessors to assist in the delivery of our programmes.



Our nationwide team needs supplementing



You will need to:

- ★ be fully or partially retired from business
- ★ have a lifetime of experience in project management or controls disciplines and have worked at senior levels in business and on projects
- ★ be fit and able to travel, with own car
- ★ willing and able to assist younger people to develop and progress in the profession
- ★ be prepared to carry out part-time assessment on an 'as required' basis, but arranged at times to suit your own schedule
- ★ be prepared to take a qualification, following guidance, on assessment practice.

In addition, it would be an advantage if you have experience of leading teams, recruiting personnel and mentoring and training team members. You will also need to be able to make presentations to clients and to groups of candidates.

Reimbursement of agreed expenses, plus time incurred.

If you can match the above requirements please forward your CV to:  
Helen Jackson, TASC Administrator, at the Sandbach office.