



# Taking Forward the Specification for New Qualifications

## Report of an Open Agenda Event at St. George's House, Windsor Castle, 18<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> January 2007

The focus for this event was to explore the progress and future challenges for Strand 1 of the Vocational Reform Programme in achieving its goal to deliver accredited qualification and learning provision. We recognised that although the most visible evidence of success in achieving this goal will be made by the 7 Sector Skills Councils that are leading the way in putting in place Sector Qualification Strategies, other progress in this direction should not be overlooked.

As with all Open Agenda reports, this report aims to reflect the main ideas and views put forward during the event, with the understanding that not everybody involved in the discussions endorsed all of the ideas included. Nor should this report be viewed as a policy statement on behalf of the Sector Skills Development Agency or any other body. Phrases that are italicised are direct quotes from the event, and a list of participants is included at the end of the report.

This report begins with an outline of the key points that it was felt will be important to keep in sight while achieving the goals *"if they are to be of value"* (pages 1 – 2). It continues by highlighting the outward facing and internally focused actions that need to start or continue with more drive to achieve the goals of Strand 1 (pages 3 – 7). The composite action plan put together by participants during the event is included as an Appendix to this Report.

### Strand 1 Goals

Our starting point at this event was to agree the goals we wanted to achieve by the end of 2008, sticking closely to the principle of the Vocational Qualifications Reform Programme that 'as a programme, we deliver what we say we deliver.'

The goal, or milestone as most preferred it expressed, was agreed as follows:

*'To be delivering accredited qualifications and learning [that fit within new Sector Qualification Strategies]. This delivery will include that of the 7 lead or pilot Sector Skills Councils, but not be narrowly confined to these Sector Skills Councils.'*

This goal attracted strong buy-in from participants, with two important provisos:

### Provisos

- Many were uncomfortable with a deadline of implementing 7 Sector Qualification Strategies by 2008, *"if this means cutting corners."* What is **most** important about the reform is that employers value it. This will take time, especially ensuring that smaller companies feel that it meets their needs as much as larger companies.

It was recognised that the process in place *"behind the scenes"* does need to be more efficient. By this we meant that the key roles of Awarding Bodies and Regulatory Authorities across the four nations do need to be responsive and work quickly to deliver the Qualification Strategies that employers want. However, before they pull out the stops and move as quickly as possible they need *"to feel confident that this is what employers want."*

There is a tension about how employers' views are fed into and shape the reform process. Although it is recognised that Sector Skills Councils, with the Sector Skills Development Agency, have the lead responsibility for the 'employer voice', it was pointed out that many of the other organisations with a significant stake in the reform "*also have direct contact with employers.*" And it doesn't help that employers, even those in the same industry or sector, often do not share the same views.

While this lack of confidence in what it is reported that employers say they want exists, headway will be slow.

- ➔ Many were also uncomfortable with deadline alongside the proposition that the first 7 Sector Skills Councils in developing Sector Qualification Strategies are **pilots**. Drawing on the experience of this first tranche, it was pointed out that there will be insufficient time to evaluate whether this is indeed the best approach before the second tranche of Sector Skills Councils begin the process.

Two major concerns were expressed.

Some felt that because of the tight deadlines "*there's no room for trial and error.*" It is felt that it has to be right first time, because there will be little or no room for manoeuvre if any of the stakeholders feel that the pilots have demonstrated design faults, or that different approaches are needed. Some of the organisations have had experience of being badly bruised in developing new approaches to a tight timetable, and are understandably resistant to taking the risk of making the same mistake.

Others felt strongly that "*the case for Sector Qualification Strategies is as yet unproven.*" There is a view that they may prove to be unnecessary and, instead, the Sector Skills Agreements could be strengthened for this purpose.

There was a broad consensus that "*there is more to lose than gain by rushing*" to achieve this goal: not least the credibility of stakeholder organisations, as well as the Strand 1 Board. It was not suggested that timescales for achievement shouldn't be set, rather that they should be realistic to enable stakeholders to uphold the principle: as a programme, we deliver what we say we deliver.

There was also a strong view that the terms 'goal' and 'pilots' are not helpful, and could be misleading. Milestone may be more appropriate than goal.

The word goal implies "*achievement, job done.*" However, everyone felt that the goal will be just a staging post, albeit an important one, in the reform process. Once this milestone or staging post has been achieved, it is important for stakeholders to feel that there is room for review, and change or fine-tuning.

It was felt that the term 'pilots' is equally misleading, as it "*implies that they are simply experiments, and the whole idea will be shelved or radically changed if they are proven to be unsuccessful.*" Far better to use a term that describes more accurately the role of the first 7 Sector Skills Councils: vanguard? Trail-blazers? Whatever term is used, the scope for change – both during and after this trialling activity – needs to be made absolutely clear to stakeholders, including employers.

## Actions Needed

Although these are actions that it was agreed are needed, it was pointed out that "*they are not new,*" with two exceptions.

It was felt an understanding of the *"progress that has already been achieved to date"* could be shared *"by drawing up a brief narrative of the work that has been done."* The purpose of the narrative would be to increase the confidence of those who are unaware of the progress that has been made. It could also help to highlight areas, such as developing a robust mechanism for employer input that all can trust, which it is felt should not be rushed.

The second 'new action' proposed is the reform of the way in which Strand 1 Board works. This proposal is explored in detail on pages 6 – 7.

The remainder of the actions outlined below are already happening, although in some instances it was acknowledged that the approach to the work could be improved through open discussion and review.

### Outward looking actions

→ ***"Achieving buy into Sector Qualification Strategies, especially by employers, learners, providers and Awarding Bodies."*** Persuading each of these constituents of the value of Sector Qualification Strategies is imperative for their success. However, the aim is higher than merely getting them to accept a new approach: the aim is for employers and learners to champion it. They are only likely to do this if they feel that their voice is being heard. However, we know that we're not talking about a single voice! To avoid the risk of ending up with 'white noise' a *"transparent, on-going and inclusive system of dialogue"* needs to be established with employers, so that they can *"shape the reform through different routes and at different stages."*

As far as Awarding Bodies and providers are concerned, what is being proposed could carry the risk of destabilising established markets of business. To deliver the new Qualification Strategies may involve significant investment by Awarding Bodies and providers to develop and deliver revised qualifications and provision that meet more closely what employers and learners say they want. In addition, the Government's policy drive to increase financial investment in learning from employers and individuals will be an additional concern. *"Employers might say they want these qualifications and provision, but are they willing to pay for them?"*

→ ***"Integrate pilot activity into the mainstream work of Sector Skills Councils: build it into the planning process"*** There is a real danger that the development of Sector Qualification Strategies is viewed by Sector Skills Councils *"as just another thing to do"*, rather than an integral part of their planning processes.

Many (though not all) Sector Skills Councils are already feeling the pressure of not having enough resources to contribute in taking forward different strands skills and employment policies across the four nations. This wasn't a cry for more resources – though no doubt they would be welcome! Rather, it was a request that the Sector Skills Councils involved should feel that *"they are in the driving seat"* in taking forward the pilots *"in ways and at a pace that integrates the Strategies"* with their wider organisational planning processes.

→ ***"Identify and remove inhibitors to aligning funding to provision"*** Employers will judge the success of this strand of reform by the ease that they and their employees are able to access skills development and qualification at a time, place and cost that they feel is of value to their businesses. In short, the reform process will need to be **delivered** to gain credibility and value.

Hence we recognised the importance of identifying and removing what employers' see as "*illogical inhibitors and anomalies*" in State funding of provision. This activity needs to happen in tandem<sup>1</sup> with trialling Sector Qualification Strategies, so that the provision requested by employers is readily available, and State funding principles (what is and isn't funded through the public purse and why) are "*transparent and easily understood*."

## Inward looking actions

→ "*Create a process that brings 'us' together, creates a better understanding and respect for organisations' different roles in the process, and identifies how they link together. . . .including agreement about who's role it is to build flexibility and diversity into the system.*" While the principles of how Board members and organisations are committed to working with one another have been agreed<sup>2</sup>, there is less clarity and agreement about the respective roles of the Board and stakeholder organisations **in the process**. It appears that this has meant that it has been sometimes difficult to uphold and adhere to the principles.

It was felt that swifter progress could be made if the Board agreed "*which organisation should take the lead for different stages*" in taking forward Strand 1 of the Reform Programme and, importantly, how this organisation will work with stakeholders whilst acting as the lead. This was not suggesting that each stage will not involve collaboration: collaboration remains at the core of the process.

However, it would set out clearly roles, responsibilities and relationships between the different organisations and the 4 nations. There could well be tensions about specific roles, especially those like employer consultation to which a number of organisations feel they could make important and significant contributions. The temptation which we felt needs to be avoided is the tendency to disagree which organisation should carry out this role, and then distrust how it carries it out and the outcomes it produces.

There could be a great deal to gain – in both progress and trust-building – if the Board agreed to sign up to a process, something along the lines described below.

- Set out the organisations and Board Members that will lead at different stages in a stage by stage process.
- Organisations set out the actions they will take as leads (what they will do and how they will do it); areas of activity where they will seek to work with the other organisations across the 4 nations, and how they will link with other key policy areas outside of the process, and handing over the baton to the next lead organisation taking forward the subsequent stage.
- Board members and organisations review lead organisations proposals and identify any areas that they feel uncomfortable with. These need to be worked through, and changes made if necessary, to ensure that there is a genuine shared confidence and trust in both the way in which an organisation proposes to work in leading a specific stage of the process, and how it will work collaboratively with others.

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<sup>1</sup> The Learning & Skills Council's business cycle for '08 begins in July/August '07. Timetables for the business cycles of funding bodies in the other 3 nations should be confirmed urgently.

<sup>2</sup> Trust Building Event, 2-Way Trust, Outcomes Note of Event held on 12<sup>th</sup> May, and Vocational Qualifications Reform Programme, Programme Brief, Page 17 Para 5.8.2

- Once ways of working have been agreed, it is fair to expect organisations to take what may sometimes feel like a real risk in working differently. The risk is in allowing another organisation to do something that, if it doesn't work as well as planned, could reflect badly on other organisations (that have relinquished their control), and possibly dent their credibility. The idea will be to share and take on board concerns, and work in ways that demonstrate an understanding and respect of why organisations may feel vulnerable. In return, confidence and trust need to be shown to lead organisations so that they feel they have the support of all stakeholders in moving forward.

Agreement of this process does not have to be time-consuming or lengthy: the whole thing could be carried out in a day, so long as all key stakeholders were present. And this investment could yield significant dividends in both the quality of collaboration and the pace of change.

→ ***"Identify mechanisms to inform the process of what is already working well and can be built upon."*** Once a clear staged process has been established, mechanisms need to be built in, with the agreement of the lead organisation of each stage, to ensure *"that what's working well is built upon and that we are not re-inventing wheels."* This is especially important with regard to building on the achievements of each of the 4 nations.

→ ***"Agee a process that is 'good enough' to begin with, knowing that it will be subject to continuous improvement."*** One of the difficulties of working collaboratively is that it is sometimes difficult to accept another organisation's definition of *"good enough"*. This is especially so when organisation's relinquish control (but not responsibility) to a lead 'partner'.

Naturally an organisation will use its own standards to measure the quality of what others do. The issue here is that this is a new approach. Not a blank sheet, and building on what's proved to be of quality and working well but, nevertheless, a new and ambitious endeavour.

So long as stakeholders are **guaranteed** that this is the beginning of what will be a continuous cycle of improvement, and the process for this cycle agreed, then *"the search for perfection from the start"* can be called off.

This is not to suggest that 'anything' is good enough: we agreed that would mean we could be moving backwards. Perhaps a helpful way of getting the balance between getting 'it right' and getting 'it on the road' is to look back and recall other radical changes that have undergone refinement and quality improvement since their inception: Scottish and National Vocational Qualifications, Skills for Life provision, Learndirect – to name but a few.

→ ***"Review the composition of Strand 1 Board and its function and ways for working to ensure that it is fit for purpose."*** There was a widely shared view that Strand 1 Board is not working as effectively as it might. *"Rather than working strategically and maintaining an overview of progress"* it was felt that the Board has *"become too involved in operational detail and micro-management."* This highlights a lack of trust not only between Board Members, but also the organisations that they represent.

One issue appears to be that Board Members feel that their role is to *"protect at all costs the organisation [or body] that they represent."* While this is understandable, this does not help in the progress of reform: indeed, it can often slow it down. What many felt is needed is *"a change of attitude"*: looking at the process through a different 'lens'.

Instead of seeing their role as primarily to protect "*the reputation and standards*" of their respective organisations, view their role as one of sharing the "*expertise and experience*" of their organisations in informing the reform process: "*acting as an advisory body.*"

This is a fairly subtle shift, but an immensely important one. It could mean that while an organisation's concerns are noted (and recorded) they do not necessarily halt progress or change the direction of the Board. Of course, this may be the case, especially if the Board has not identified a pitfall that the reform process could fall into. In other instances though it is about being open to the idea of doing things differently, and Board Members taking on the role of championing these changes to their respective organisations and stakeholders.

For some this could be a significant shift. Instead of informing the Board of the views of their organisation and holding firm to these in all discussions, they would be advocating proposed changes and timelines to their organisations – so long as they feel they have merit within an **overall** strategy, and exploring with their organisations how they might best support them.

Of course, all this can only happen if there is a real drive to build up trust (which ties in closely with many of the outward and inward looking actions outlined on the previous pages). There was a strong view that the "*governance of the Board should be reviewed to dispel the perception that its sponsor is controlling it and calling all the shots.*" It must be stressed that this is a perception and no more, but nevertheless very damaging to building trust and the buy in of Board Members.

Many also felt that the Board needs to re-organise itself so that it can work in a way that fosters trust and helps it to become more effective. There is only so much a Board comprising over 20 members can do when it meets.

One idea is that the Board needs to elect small working groups to champion specific areas of work, and support organisations taking the lead of different stages of work. These groups would provide brief summaries of progress to the Board, and turn to it if they felt they needed its advice and guidance on how to proceed. In return Board Members would have the opportunity to raise any concerns they may have with the progress, but be prepared to trust the expertise and integrity of their fellow Board Members to get on with getting the task done. This would mean that even if one or two Board Members had concerns, **so long as they were noted**, and efforts made to remove these concerns, the direction of travel, pace and specific actions cannot be ground to a halt by the Board.

One can almost hear the groans in response to the proposition of sub groups and more meetings. However, given the size of the Board and its wide ranging remit it does appear that they could really help in making it fit for purpose and, at the same time, help to build trust.

As with the idea of agreeing a clear staged process for moving forward, agreeing a new way of working for the Board does not need to be a lengthy affair. So long as the benefits of change are recognised by the Board and, perhaps, one or two alternative models are put forward by any Board Members uncomfortable with the suggestion above, a whole new way of working could be agreed in, say, half a day.

## Endnote

What was very apparent at Windsor is that on a personal level there is trust between Board Members and stakeholders, but that this trust does not extend fully to the **process** and/or **timescale** for the area of reform that is

the responsibility of the Strand 1 Board. Indeed, they appear to undermine the trust that has been built up. What is more, we recognised that for those outside looking in at the work of the Strand 1 Board the progress that has been made is not visible enough. Hence the need for a brief narrative to outline just how much has been achieved.

During the event it felt that significant headway was made in both identifying the issues that are undermining trust and confidence, and solutions for removing them. More than once at the event, someone said, "*this isn't rocket science, it's difficult to understand what the problem is.*" In one way it is difficult to disagree with them: the tasks to be done are clearly defined. The problem is **how** they are carried out.

The general view was that processes, roles and responsibilities need to be clearly defined **in the context of taking forward the reform**, rather than what the organisations involved do outside of their involvement in Strand 1 of the Reform. At the same time, there needs to be an understanding of the other priorities of organisations, and where Strand 1 Reform sits amongst these priorities.

By the end of the event it felt that we had a come a long way in creating tangible and simple structures and processes that will help create more robust and effective ways of working for both the Board and stakeholders.

**The next step is to make it happen.**

## Participants

Geoff Fieldsend	Director of Workforce Development, Sector Skills Development Agency
Judith Compton	Head of Standards & Qualifications, Sector Skills Development Agency
Sue Densley	Head of Sector Qualifications Delivery, Sector Skills Development Agency
John Rogers	Chief Executive, Skills for Health
Keith Marshall	Chief Executive, SummitSkills
Richard Beamish	Chief Executive, Asset Skills
Linda Sharpe	Chief Executive, Skills for Security
Bill Twigg	Technical Director, SEMTA
Louisa West	Standards & Qualifications Project Manager, CITB-Construction Skills
Martin Boyle	Policy Manager, Scottish Executive
Mali Davies	VOLL Adviser, Department for Education, Lifelong Learning, and Skills, Welsh Assembly Government
Ruth Court	Sector Development Manager, Dept. for Employment & Learning, Northern Ireland
Cathy Heathwood	Principal Officer, Vocational Qualifications, Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), Northern Ireland
George Brown	Scottish Qualifications Authority
Teresa Bergin	Head of Sector Qualifications Reform Team & Diplomas, Qualification & Curriculum Authority, England
Nick Juba	Strategic Manager: Qualifications & Skills, Qualification & Curriculum Authority, England
Mark Novels	Strategic Manager, Vocational Qualification Development & Implementation, Qualification & Curriculum Authority, England
Joan Gormley	Regional Manager, Qualification & Curriculum Authority, Northern Ireland
Janet Ryland	Qualifications & Framework Developments Director, Learning & Skills Council, England
Paul Ellis	Chief Executive, Federation of Awarding Bodies
Judith Norrington	Head of National Policy Development, City & Guilds
Carol Sherriff	Director, Wilson Sherriff & Open Agenda Associate
Krysia Hudek	Director, Open Agenda & Fellow of St. George's House

## Appendix

### Composite Action Plan

On pages 10 – 11 is a composite Action Plan for the next 24 months drawn up by participants during the event. This should be treated very much as the **starting point** in an ongoing process, that it is regularly reviewed.

The roles and actions of individual organisations and national bodies in taking forward Strand 1 Reform are **their** perceptions of what they can and should be contributing. There are overlaps. In this instance, it is clear that the organisations involved need to work together closely and have a 'high trust' relationship with whichever organisation it is felt to be is best placed to take the lead in any stage of the process.

The methodology used in recording this composite action plan involved placing hand written post-it notes on a board. While we tried our very hardest to ensure that the information has been accurately transcribed – there may be errors. We apologise for these and, on the advice of those involved in this exercise, will amend any mistakes!

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Report of an Open Agenda Event at St. George's House, Windsor Castle, 18<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> January 2007

**January 07**

**March 07**

### STRAND 1 BOARD

	<p>Identify a small number of clear and specific objectives. Review/improve governance structure - Small action groups for ongoing activity. Board to adopt advisory role. Communicate to stakeholders regularly and in simple terms. Oversee embedding of literacy/numeracy skill.</p>
<p><b>SSDA + SSCs/SBs</b> Sort out cross sector bodies/Non SSC plus establishing working relations Embedding critical skills. Ongoing NOS refreshment/updates plus quality improvement. Ensure regular consultation with employers. ↓ Sustainable resources for programming-particularly for SSCs. Higher level skills plus their delivery. Pilot SSC's, submit SQSs for independent appraisal. Remedial work to meet the QS identified. Phase 1 submit R+D bids.</p>	<p>Evaluation commences. SQS's approval against quality standard. Pilot action plans submitted.</p> <p>Phase 1 start developing SQS's. Pilot qualifications development commences.</p> <p>Phase 2 commences. Pilot Action plan approval- remedial activity identified</p>
<p><b>SSDA</b></p>	<p>AB/SSC's →clarify and resolve relationship management ↓ Keep things moving along plus build on the positives. ↓</p>
<p><b>JQC</b> Liaising with all AB's and SSC's on preliminary rationalisation of qualifications. ↓ ↑ Helping shape vision for future qualifications strategies. ↑ Piloting the extended project. ↓ Piloting functional skills. ↓ Creation of diplomas including discussion with SSCs. ↓ Piloting testing and building for the new framework. ↓ Discussions with SSC's in the pilot. ↑ Establishing approval processes for new centres delivering diplomas. ↓ Continuation of intelligence on agencies and qualifications relevant to SQS development. ↑</p>	<p>Informing wider awarding body community about development. ↑ Continue creation of grids including reform of A levels, GCSE's. Functional skills. ↓ Reviewing centre approval process. ↓ Feeding pilot information into future qualification planning. ↑ Improving the flexibility of assessment plus other arrangements for goals. ↑ Working with individual employers in the accreditation of their programmes. ↑ ↔ ↓</p>
<p><b>SQA</b></p>	
<p>Build on strength of existing arrangements and qualifications Enhance relationships with SSC's/SSB's</p>	
<p><b>QCA</b> Actively and publicly support SQS, accepting joint responsibility for their success. ↑ Ensure SQS tied into a unit-based approach to qualification. ↓</p>	<p>Delivery of working draft SQC for pilot sectors. ↑ Stakeholder engagement plans in place. ↓ Implement qualification- planning accreditation process that is informed by SQS and action plan. ↑ Deliver evaluation of SQC pilot. ↑</p>
<p><b>QCA (NI)</b> Seek clarification on objectives behind SQS pilot. Should be evident in evaluation criteria ↑</p>	<p>Develop regulatory criteria that reflects sector specific needs ↑ Keep appropriate partners +NI informed of developments in regulatory process ↓</p>
<p><b>CCEA</b></p>	
<p>Develop with partners SQC as appropriate with sectors. ↑</p>	<p>Review and revise accreditation process as a result of pilot activity with partners. ↑ Develop mechanisms for realistic engagement with key partners. ↓</p>
<p><b>LSC</b></p>	
<p>Just tell us what we can do to help. ↑</p>	<p>Implement demand-led system 'Leitching Forward'. ↓</p>
<p><b>Scottish Exec</b></p>	
<p></p>	<p>Respond to Leitch ↓</p>
<p><b>DfES</b></p>	
<p>Review reality of meeting proposed timescales. ↑</p>	<p>Decisions on how to implement Leitch and role of stakeholders in England - implications for the direction and timetable for reform. Avoid over-close management of process - implications for <b>four home nations</b> work.</p>
<p><b>DELLS (WAG)</b></p>	
<p>Respond to Leitch. ↓ Policy decision Re: functional skills. ↓ Convergence (key + basic skills). ↓</p>	<p>Advice/policy decision on MOD APP as qualification. ↓</p>
<p><b>DELNI</b></p>	
<p>NI administration to respond to Leitch Review ↓</p>	

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June 07	September 07	December 07	January 08	March 08	June 08	September 08
<p>Identify and use existing materials already there - not just pilots.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Phase 3 commences.</p> <p>Phase 1 commence action planning.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Phase 1 SQSs submitted.</p>	<p>SSC role aligning of LSC, ABS, regulator, SQS's vision and SWOT for each agency. ↓</p> <p>Build on SWOT to develop stakeholder action plan.</p> <p>Phase 1 deliver action plans for approval. Sort out what NOS needs to look like.</p>		<p>Phase 1 Qualification Development commences</p> <p>Pilot organisations qualifications developed/accredited/ revised/rationalised.</p>	<p>Evaluation of pilots report.</p>		
<p>Piloting and assesment. ↓</p>	<p>Developing systems for support centres. ↓</p>					
			<p>Continue accreditation of qualifications including reform of A levels, GCSE's, Maths, Functional skills. ■</p>			
				<p>Deliver new/qualifications through improved accreditation process. ↑</p>		
				<p>Deliver an accreditation process that meets expectations expressed in SQS. ↑</p>		
					<p>Fund priority qualifications (SSC) in QCF transition. ↑</p>	
				<p>Try, through Ministers, to influence funding. ↓</p> <p>Ensure funding is more accessible to employers who cover more than one region - Train to Gain eligibility is too complicated! ↓</p>		
	<p>Delivery of working draft SQC. ↑</p> <p>Evaluation of SQC and decision on feasibility. ↑</p> <p>Stock take of where we are/what we have done/where we are going. ■</p>	<p>Develop revised accreditation process. ↓</p>				
	<p>SIB → governance plus how it works, behaviours + ownership of work.</p>		<p>Improved accreditation process. ↑</p>			

**Arrow Key**

↑ Actions that directly contribute to the progress of Strand 1 objectives

↓ Actions that are other top priorities for organisations alongside in addition to contributions to strand 1