



## The quest for an inclusive curriculum and assessment culture: The national council for vocational awards 1991–2001

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**THE QUEST FOR AN INCLUSIVE CURRICULUM AND  
ASSESSMENT CULTURE:  
THE NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR VOCATIONAL AWARDS  
1991-2001**

**Mary-Liz Trant**

**Introduction**

In 1991, the National Council for Vocational Awards (NCVA) was set up on an *ad hoc* basis by the Department of Education and Science. This temporary existence lasted for ten years; in June 2001, with the enactment of the 1999 Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, the NCVA was subsumed into a new, statutory body, the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC). From 1991-2001, the NCVA developed vocational certification for learners outside of the mainstream second and third level education systems. Starting with fewer than 5,000 learners in 1991, by 2000 almost 30,000 candidates received awards, with over 100,000 learners awarded certification prior to the NCVA's dissolution. Participants in NCVA programmes include those who complete post-Leaving Certificate courses, early school leavers and adults with little or no formal educational qualifications who wish to return to learning or re-enter the workforce with new skills. Some of these participants can be described as disadvantaged, either within the education system or due to their life circumstances. However, regardless of the profile of those accessing the system, the NCVA's aim from the outset has been to create an inclusive curriculum and assessment culture within the new system. Consequently its curriculum and assessment structures are designed to maximise access to a wide range of learners and to include those who had hitherto been excluded by the mainstream system, and also to make the practice of curriculum and assessment accessible to a wider community. This aim was stated in early Council documents and publications, and was subsequently expressed in a more public forum by three NCVA staff members:

Equality of opportunity, flexibility of access, room for local and regional input into the curriculum, modes of assessment appropriate to the type of curriculum envisaged and mutual recognition of qualifications across frontiers are key goals in the

NCVA vision. (Boland, Fogarty and MacNamara, 1995, p. 27)

This paper begins by describing the main curriculum and assessment features of the NCVA system. Secondly, it presents findings from an incomplete research project on how NCVA curriculum and assessment has worked in practice. Thirdly, a number of barriers to the NCVA's progress are identified, and finally, suggestions are presented on how a culture of inclusiveness in curriculum and assessment could be further developed for an organisation such as the NCVA and for the wider education community in Ireland.

### **Curriculum and assessment features**

The NCVA's approach to curriculum and assessment has a number of features. First, it aims to integrate educational and training values into a system that does not just prepare people for work but also focuses on personal needs and encourages learners to develop their personal well being. To achieve this, a modular framework was developed that includes general studies as well as vocational modules, and a range of broad core skills in all modules that emphasises the importance of a balanced curriculum in which "vocational and personal needs are given their due weight" (NCVA, 1995, p. 27). The decision to use a modular system was justified in the NCVA's first public document *Preparing for the New Europe: A National Framework for Vocational Qualifications*:

The availability of modular courses has significant benefits.

- Provision can be closely matched to the **needs** of participants, to changing skill needs in the labour market and to local conditions.
- There is **flexibility** in terms of course design and combination of modules.
- Since modules are assessed separately, individuals are enabled to **accumulate** credits towards certification.
- School-based and work-based learning can be closely **integrated**.
- Pathways of **access** can be established between academic and vocational education and training. (NCVA, 1992, p. 5 - emphasis in original)

These benefits have since been reiterated in a document issued by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI):

Many of the actions that could be built into an awards framework to promote access, transfer and progression are greatly simplified in the context of modular approaches to programme design and delivery. There is a slow but definite trend towards modular formats by many providers of further and higher education and training. (NQAI, 2001, p. 38).

The second feature that is part of the NCVA's system relates to curriculum development itself, and to the perennial problem of who should decide what the curriculum comprises and omits. To establish a national certification system, a broad-ranging curriculum was required, and so by 2001 the NCVA had facilitated development of 300 modules in over 30 different fields, covering areas as diverse as theatre performance, outdoor pursuits, motor technology and graphic design. To achieve this, the NCVA developed a curriculum development approach whereby, teams with experience and expertise in education, industry and trade unions, for example, were convened to discuss and develop curriculum content and frameworks in each vocational area. The focus was on teams that would be wide-ranging and inclusive; this sometimes made for a difficult but ultimately fruitful and rounded curriculum in each area and, at its best, ensured recognition and respect from both education and industry.

A third feature of the NCVA's inclusive approach was to provide educational practitioners with the opportunity to develop local modules for their programmes, specifically where an NCVA module was not available. Between 1993-2001, over 200 of these modules were developed and have been used as part of many vocational programmes. Local modules include such curriculum areas as intercultural studies or disability awareness, which are of central importance to a local programme. They are also of growing national importance but have not yet been developed as part of the national system. A locally based initiative such as this gives practitioners an opportunity to participate in the curriculum development process and to make learning programmes more relevant and focused for their learners. It also promotes a wider sense of involvement and ownership of the curriculum.

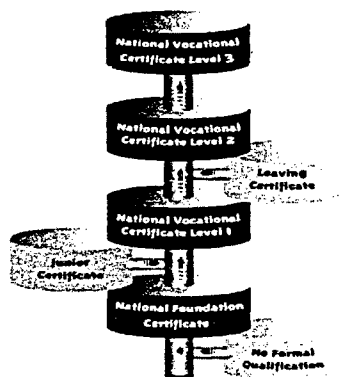
The final feature relates specifically to assessment. Developing an inclusive approach to this aspect of the learning

process has been central to the goal of making certification flexible and accessible to a wide range of learners. NCVA assessment is locally based and emphasises what Gipps (1996, p. 24) terms "the local rather than the global". Rather than being carried out in a way that separates assessment from learning and establishes a false barrier between it and the curriculum, assessment is carried out in a local context that supports the professionalism of the teacher and flexibility of approach. Assessment strategies are selected to assess, as closely as possible, what has been learned, thus placing the learner at the core of the process. For instance, someone preparing to be a healthcare assistant will be assessed in a largely practical way, through skills demonstrations and practical projects. Where theory and understanding is required, he/she has the opportunity to complete a theory-based examination in a variety of ways, be it oral, written or visual. For it is not the ability to write a brilliant essay about caring for others that primarily makes a good healthcare assistant, but rather the practical skill to work with those in need of care, and the hands-on skill of helping and communicating with patients.

#### **Curriculum and assessment in practice**

What has been the experience to date of learners and teachers of NCVA certification and its attempt to build an inclusive curriculum and assessment culture? Findings from an almost complete research project have direct relevance to this question. In this project, a holistic case study methodology was used to examine the NCVA, combining participant observation, as the researcher was a development officer in the NCVA, analysis of relevant literature, documentation, interviews with a broad range of participants in the system and detailed discussions and interviews with staff and learners in four sites using NCVA

certification. While it is not possible to present all of the findings from the project in this paper, data from two of the learning sites, a number of other interviews and documentation are of direct interest. The first site is a centre for young people aged 15-18 who complete national vocational certification mainly at Foundation level. Foundation level is broadly equivalent to the Junior Certificate completed in mainstream second level education and is the first of four levels within the NCVA framework of awards. This framework was developed in the early 1990s to harmonise with a European framework of education and training awards developed by the EU education and training Council, CEDEFOP (NCVA, 1992, p. 4).



The ethos of the centre for young people places the emphasis firmly on the personal development and well-being of the young people that attend:

*The policy of our centre is to nurture the full potential of each and every trainee in a safe and happy atmosphere, where respect and self-esteem are valued and all members of our centre learn to live and live to learn. (Formal statement on ethos from Youthreach centre – on public display in the centre)*

How does vocational certification serve this ethos? Learners in the centre complete modules in a wide range of areas such as horticulture, childcare, art, craft and design, engineering workshop processes, but these are integrated with modules in personal effectiveness, communications, and curriculum areas such as consumer awareness and transnational experience which encourage learners to develop their confidence and ability to interact successfully with others. One tutor at this centre commented:

Here we focus a huge amount on personal and interpersonal skills; many trainees have not yet developed the ability to interact well even with each other, they can fly off the handle easily, they lack confidence and have low self-esteem. All of these things are a barrier to these young people getting on in life, and so tackling them effectively has a high priority on the curriculum. (Interview with tutor at centre for young people, 14 September 2000)

Prioritising personal development and completing NCVA certification are not competing goals; the NCVA modules provide a structure for the learning that is taking place, not just for learners but for teachers also. Although some staff suggested that more personal development-focused modules are needed within the system, all agreed that there is a good balance between introductory vocational skills and a focus on the person in the Foundation programme:

If what we were doing was too vocational, and too focused on job skills, we wouldn't get anywhere with the young people here. Many just wouldn't have the personal skills and confidence to tackle a full-scale vocational course and successfully finish it. Then they would be looking at failure yet again. So instead we start at a different place, focusing on personal development, whatever aspects of it need developing, and everyone makes progress. (Interview with tutor at centre for young people, 28 September 2001)

In line with the NCVA's overall assessment strategy, continuous assessment and portfolio-building is a key component of assessment in the Foundation certificate, with an emphasis on learner involvement in the assessment process and an avoidance of assessment techniques associated with past failure such as terminal written examinations. This approach attempts to shift assessment from what Gipps (1996, p. 5) described as "a move from an examination-as-hurdle model to an assessment model where we try to give all of the candidates a real opportunity to show what they know, understand and can do." A learner in the Foundation centre commented on her assessment experience:

At least with NCVA modules you can work away yourself, and you don't have to do an exam. You have a portfolio and after a while you can use that to be assessed. I've done four modules and I want to get the full certificate this year. (Interview with learner at centre for young people, 28 September 2001)

The director of the centre identified the success factors of the assessment system as being the way in which learning and assessment

can be integrated, and the fact that the fear has been taken out of the assessment process through portfolio-building and a locally based approach. She pointed out that a similar approach is used in some Junior Certificate subjects such as Art – which for this reason the learners take for assessment purposes also. It was also possible with the NCVA system to achieve a balance between learning and assessment: "Completing the modules and the assessment gives a focus to the learning for both staff and trainees without going overboard on assessment" (Interview with director, centre for young people, 20 October 2000).

The second learning site is a community centre, based in Dublin, which runs a music programme for members of the disabled community. Working with the tutors and course participants at this site was a significant learning experience for this researcher; through her interaction with the course participants and teachers she realised more fully the meaning of the term 'invisible' which has been used at times to describe the experience of disabled people in this country. The only requirement for applicants to the music course was that they be over 18 and registered with the National Disability Authority. The course director described the range of participants that he had met over a period of three years:

Most of the participants under 30 years of age are damaged by their previous educational experiences, but not chronically so, and it is possible to 'unlearn' the fear and lack of confidence that has built up. However, in the case of many of the older participants, their negative experiences are so internalised, and also their experiences as disabled people are even worse than the younger participants, it is very difficult, and sometimes impossible for them to overcome their bad experiences. In general, they have quite entrenched attitudes towards society and their status within society. Participating in group work, involving considerable trust in others and personal confidence, which is the main teaching and learning strategy we use, is extremely difficult for them. (Interview with course director, community centre, 5 January 2001).

Not surprisingly, it was difficult to reach the end of a ten-month programme with all the participants and a lot of work and effort went into supporting the participants and encouraging them to persist with



the course. An NCVA certificate at Level 2 in Performing Arts - Music was used to structure the programme and provide certification. Level 2 is generally described as equivalent to post-Leaving Certificate level within the NCVA framework. Participants completed modules in music studies, event production, communications and work experience, and the programme staff also developed two local modules that they felt gave the programme more relevance for the participants - one in music industry studies and the other in disability equality awareness. The tutors commended this opportunity to make the curriculum more relevant:

This music programme is about the personal development of the participants through the medium of learning about the music industry. The curriculum reflects this emphasis, and in all learning activities, the aim is to give the participants a voice and the confidence and communication skills to let people know their mind about things. We complete NCVA modules in interpersonal skills and personal effectiveness, and build these elements into the programme, but we have particular opportunity to relate the curriculum to participants' needs with the disability equality awareness module. (Interview with tutors at community centre, 18 January 2001)

The locally based, flexible approach to assessment was also a welcome element of the system. In the interviews that were carried out as part of the case study, the learners participating in the programme reported that periods of ill-health did not prevent them from completing the course; they could catch up on continuous assessment work such as projects and assignments. They contrasted this with the difficulties that can be caused by missing a single opportunity written examination. The programme co-ordinator described how the assessment techniques could be easily adapted to facilitate participants with particular disabilities that made writing difficult, without drawing attention to specific needs of individuals or making "a big deal" out of the assessment process (Interview with programme co-ordinator January 2001).

### **Barriers to progress**

The findings presented from these two learning sites refer specifically to whether the NCVA has succeeded in its aim to create an inclusive

curriculum and assessment culture. From these findings, it can be argued that during its lifespan the NCVA made considerable progress in developing an inclusive curriculum and assessment culture for those completing national vocational certification. However, the research project also highlighted a number of barriers to progress which slowed, and in some cases undermined the organisation's goal.

The first barrier relates to the absence of a well-resourced infrastructure for vocational education and training outside of mainstream education. Recently, there has been progress in this area, with plans to establish a new, structured further education sector outlined in *Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education*, the government White Paper published in 2000. Yet the findings from the NCVA case study indicate that, in its lifespan, many centres accessing vocational certification had inadequate resources for their courses. In a range of over 350 workplace learning centres, community centres, adult education centres, centres for early school leavers, there is often a struggle to get qualified teachers for adequate amounts of time and even to obtain basic resources such as space and equipment. In centres offering Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses, teachers have continued to operate with their second-level contracts where the day begins at nine and ends at four. In such circumstances, there is limited scope to offer programmes in the evenings or on part-time basis, something that the system is designed to facilitate. Many teachers also continue to operate with their standard teaching timetable and this does not give them adequate time to develop curriculum or plan and administer assessment. Clearly, such restrictions and inflexibility in the educational environment undermine the flexible, access-focused features of the NCVA system.<sup>i</sup>

The second barrier to progress which was identified relates to the lack of sufficient progression routes for learners who successfully complete NCVA certification, whether to further studies or to the workplace. A links scheme between institutes of technology and the NCVA enables candidates to apply for courses in these colleges, and discussions are underway with some universities to expand the scheme.<sup>ii</sup> However up to 2001, when the NCVA ceased to exist, holders of NCVA certification were not eligible to apply for places on a university course. Similarly there are few links, and in many instances none at all, to professional courses such as nursing or accountancy (NCVA, 2001). This contrasts with the progression opportunities available in the UK, and in fact a number of UK-based professional bodies recruit candidates with NCVA certification to fill their courses. In the workplace, NCVA certification has not been

sufficiently widely recognised, and certain employers who still expect applicants with a Leaving Certificate are unsure as to the level of achievement a national vocational certificate at Level 2 represents. This lack of recognition undermines the worth of NCVA certification in providing work or additional educational opportunities to learners. It also hinders the fight against exclusiveness in the education system and our wider society.

The lack of pathways that facilitate transfer between different parts of the education system is also part of this progression barrier. In other countries in the European Union there are well-structured opportunities for learners to transfer between vocational and academic streams during their educational careers. In Ireland however, NCVA certification is segregated from mainstream second level provision. Is there a sound reason why second level students cannot opt for some vocational modules as part of their curriculum? Would this not broaden their horizons and give them more opportunity to identify their strengths and what they would like to pursue in their lives? Yet there has been no interaction between the vocational curriculum as developed by the NCVA and mainstream second level education, despite this being part of the plan in the early 1990s. In the last analysis, such institutionalised segregation only serves to underline the divisions between the vocational and the academic.

The final barrier is not just an issue for the NCVA but is a problem for the entire system to solve. It relates to the low status of vocational education, and its place as the poor relation of the academic sector. Undoubtedly there are other reasons why the NCVA has not gained status in the system, but the research findings indicate that the low standing of vocational education in general has had a significant negative impact on the system. For some educationalists, the vocational sector is still represented by the image of woodwork and metalwork classes for young people anxious to enter the workforce as soon as possible. Yet this is not an accurate image. The fact that the NCVA remained an *ad hoc* agency for ten years, at the fringes of mainstream educational activity, is an indication of this low status. Another indication is the failure of the NCVA to enter the wider educational establishment, instead remaining on the margins, and not featuring in any significant way as part of this community. Ironically, this lack of interest on the part of policy makers and other educationalists has enabled the NCVA to be innovative and to experiment with progressive approaches to curriculum development and assessment in ways that more mainstream endeavours have not

been permitted to do. However there is a serious disadvantage to this lack of status. It has resulted in an uncertain existence for the agency responsible for developing the national vocational certification system, a lack of adequate resources over a ten-year period, a reluctance on the part of policy makers and educationalists to give the certification a proper place within the education system, and a failure to develop adequately the status and prestige of the certification for the benefit of everyone.

### **Building a culture of inclusiveness in Irish education**

Based on the NCVA's story, both in terms of its progress and the barriers it encountered in its development, three things, if altered, would make a valuable contribution to Irish education policy and practice. Those contributing to change would include the Further Education and Training Council, which subsumed the NCVA, as well as the wider education community. Firstly, the experience of the NCVA in developing a curriculum and assessment culture that aims to include a broad range of learners with different strengths and backgrounds should be shared with policy makers and the wider community of educationalists. Education systems that seek to be inclusive should value every learner rather than just the high achievers, and should provide opportunities for everyone to experience success and achievement in their education. Over the ten years of its existence, the NCVA has developed valuable experience in its curriculum and assessment practices that could usefully be applied in other environments and contexts.

Secondly, to emphasise successfully the local rather than the global in curriculum and assessment practice, there is a need for long-term strategic planning to provide professional development for teaching staff and support for learning institutions so that they can develop a sense of ownership and involvement in curriculum and assessment. Jerome Bruner (1978, p.xvi) emphasised the need for teachers to be engaged with the curriculum: "if [curriculum] cannot change, move, perturb, inform teachers, it will have no effect on those whom they teach ... If it has any effect on learners, it will have it by virtue of having had an effect on teachers". Similarly, on the subject of teacher involvement in assessment, Gipps (1994, p.160) comments that teachers must be "assessment literate" in order to assess learners successfully. All teaching staff must be given an opportunity to develop their expertise in these fundamental aspects of the educational process.

Finally, there is a need for all members of the education community to engage in a review of the traditional divisions between the academic and the vocational. Vocational goals in education are becoming more obvious, as economic agendas influence more and more what and how learning takes place. However, rather than representing a threat, this provides a unique opportunity for new dialogue between the academic and the vocational to elicit the best features of both traditions. Dialogue and interaction on the core areas of curriculum and assessment would provide an excellent starting point, accompanied by a determination to discard old divisions and concerns about status and prestige, to make way for a new liberal vocationalism for the future.

#### Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> These findings were gathered through a series of formal and informal interviews with staff in two PLC colleges, other senior VEC personnel and colleagues in the NCVA.

<sup>ii</sup> In July 2001 the National University of Ireland amended its 2001-2002 *NUI Minimum Academic Entry and Registration Requirements* as follows: "Holders of the NCVA Level 2 certificate, with distinctions in five modules, will be granted matriculation for admission to degree courses in cognate areas."

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