Comparability study of assessment practice

BTEC National qualifications in business, engineering and media

November 2005

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Executive summary

Purpose

This study is part of the regulatory authorities' ongoing programme of quality assurance monitoring of qualifications. The study compared the consistency and quality of assessment practices associated with the BTEC Nationals in centres across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The awarding body offering this suite of qualifications is Edexcel.

The study commenced in December 2004 and concluded in April 2005. A team of six scrutineers and one team leader, each having expertise in BTEC assessment and appropriate occupational expertise, were recruited to examine assessment practices in centres approved by Edexcel to offer BTEC Nationals.

The team inspected student evidence and interviewed students and assessors in 122 centres across England, Wales and Northern Ireland, which had a total of 4,325 students registered for the qualifications. Data collection was based on a data collection instrument provided by QCA. In total, 747 overall judgements were made and over 1,000 individual pieces of evidence inspected from 361 students.

This report summarises the findings across the 122 centres and will be made available to Edexcel and published by the regulatory authorities. Edexcel will be required to amend relevant action plans, to address issues raised for them in this report.

Summary of findings

A judgement was made as to whether the assessment evidence provided met with the criteria of the national standards. The team of scrutineers agreed with 80 per cent of assessment decisions on the student evidence they examined and disagreed with the assessment decisions on 20 per cent. These judgements were made on the evidence in students' portfolios against the criteria of the national standards. The 80 per cent agreement rate is the average across all evidence examined in the three sector pathways included in this study.

Where statistics are used, the report context differentiates between the percentage of centres implicated in the judgement and, when appropriate, the percentage of candidates' assessment evidence that was sampled.

- In media centres, scrutineers agreed with 92 per cent of assessment decisions on the student evidence they examined and disagreed with 8 per cent of the assessment decisions.
- In business centres, scrutineers agreed with 77 per cent of assessment decisions on the student evidence they examined and disagreed with 23 per cent of assessment decisions.
- In engineering centres, scrutineers agreed with 72 per cent of assessment decisions on the student evidence they examined and disagreed with 28 per cent of assessment decisions.

Strengths

The following were identified as strengths in some of the centres in the sample:

- some strong industry relationships
- committed assessors with relevant vocational experience
- good vocational contextualisation of assessment material
- good assessment support and guidance
- some effective development of additional vocational skills.

Weaknesses

The following were identified as weaknesses in some of the centres in the sample:

- insufficient standardisation and sharing of good practice
- inconsistent application of merit and distinction criteria
- inconsistent use of assessment plans across the qualification pathways
- inconsistent quality of internal verification
- inconsistent quality of external verification
- incorrect assessment decisions in engineering
- weak tutor assessment-writing skills in business centres
- unsatisfactory engineering integrated vocational assignments (IVAs)
- out-of-date engineering assessment material
- unsatisfactory media resources in sixth form colleges.

Conclusions

The study concluded that the BTEC National qualifications reviewed meet the needs of students and are following the processes and content set out in the accredited specifications. Although there is both good and poor assessment practice, the overall judgement is that national standards are being maintained.

Assessment decisions were judged to be effective in 80 per cent of students' evidence and a number of key strengths were identified. The study was also able to establish that:

- achievement records are accurate and verifiable
- assessors are familiar with awarding body requirements for the recording of assessment decisions and maintenance of student records
- assessors have access to awarding body guidance and support material, including full assessment specifications, either as hard copy or via the website.

There were weaknesses in a number of areas, which ranged across assessment practice in centres, internal and external verification and awarding body practices. Assessors have access to appropriate training and development, but find that Edexcel is reactive to their needs, rather than proactive. In their current form, the qualifications conform to generic design principles for a single qualification and the level across pathways is commensurate. However, some inconsistencies are apparent between centres and, in order to maintain the integrity of the BTEC National brand across the sector pathways, a system of periodic verification and standardisation across all pathways, focusing on volume, level of demand and type of assessment, needs to be developed. Attention to these shortfalls, as detailed in the report, should increase further the consistency, quality and effectiveness of the assessment process.

Summary of recommendations

The following recommendations are based upon the statutory criteria published in 2004 by the regulatory authorities in *The statutory regulation of external qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*. Full recommendations are provided at the end of this report; a summary is set out below.

Issues for Edexcel

- To maintain the integrity of the qualification brand, Edexcel should consider establishing a periodic review to ensure that key aspects of the qualification are commensurate across all sector pathways and to confirm that the level of demand is balanced across the suite of qualifications.
- Edexcel should make better use of external verification reporting data to inform a continuing development programme for its centres and to review its guidance. Over time, this has the potential to improve the quality and consistency of assessment practice. Edexcel should also review the training opportunities available for centre teaching staff based in Northern Ireland.

- Overall, external verification was providing good support for centres in 77 per cent of the study sample. This could have been better, but weaknesses in verification practice included: unsatisfactory follow-up after failed National Standards Sampling (NSS); conflicting judgements made by external verifiers (EVs) reviewing the same evidence; poor standards of administration/organisation of the external verification process; no allocated external verification for some centres in this academic year.

- Edexcel must provide clearer guidance on grade differentiation to centres, together with a review of units to ensure qualitative rather than quantitative reward of performance. There are differences in assessment practices across all pathways and the awarding body guidance appears contradictory and confusing to centre staff in describing the distinctions between grades of evidence and the rationales behind their definitions.

- Edexcel should consider providing regional events for internal verifiers and EVs, to standardise and maintain national standards and to provide contextualised guidance. Key areas for standardisation should include: sufficiency of evidence, assessment design, grading and differentiation.

- Although not included formally in Edexcel's quality assurance arrangements, inconsistency in practice demonstrates a need for checks on the provision of assessment plans in centres, the number and focus of centre-run assessor standardisation events and the quality of internal verification sampling plans.

- Edexcel should consider providing good quality exemplar assignment material and specific guidance on how centres can develop the assignment writing skills of their teaching staff, particularly new assessors including newly qualified teachers (NQTs). This support needs to focus on how to interpret the curriculum, assessment writing and design activities.

- When reviewing the qualifications for re-accreditation, Edexcel must ensure they reflect current industry practice, particularly those units mentioned in the report.

- Edexcel should review centre approval schemes to ensure that all centres, but particularly sixth form colleges, are appropriately resourced.

- Edexcel must disseminate definitive guidelines on reassessment policy, to avoid current confusion in the sector.

- In order to maintain the integrity of the award, External verifiers should approve contextualised engineering IVA briefs prior to use. This would ensure consistent standards and eliminate the use of inappropriate project choice. It would also bring the pathway more into line with the profession and ensure effective independent assessment.

- The study found that centres and learners had difficulty using Edexcel's website. The awarding body may wish to reconsider its design to enhance user-friendliness. This should be followed up by user satisfaction surveys that include students.

Issues for centres

Centres should:

- ensure that all students receive appropriate assessment plans at the start of the course
- ensure that assessment is based on activities appropriately contextualised to the chosen sector pathway and that it gives students opportunities to achieve higher grades
- ensure engineering teaching staff are using up-to-date and effective assessment instruments, in preparation for more rigorous NSS sampling
- ensure teaching staff, and in particular part-time teachers and NQTs, receive appropriate training/support in assignment-writing skills, to enhance the effectiveness of assessment practices. Edexcel's support was considered by centre staff to be reactive rather than proactive
- adopt a more rigorous approach to internal verification management. Internal verification must be planned and regularly implemented. It should include effective verification of both assessment briefs and assessment decisions applied to student work
- stop the inappropriate recycling of assessment from other types of qualification. This is bad practice and affects the integrity of the qualification as a whole
- register their candidates in accordance with deadlines set by Edexcel in order to ensure external verification procedures can be implemented as soon as possible.

Introduction

The regulatory authorities are responsible for regulating the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and ensuring that:
- the accredited qualifications are of a high quality
- the accredited qualifications are fit for purpose
- consistent standards are being properly maintained by awarding bodies.

The findings of this study are set out in the report for the benefit of learners, centres, other education organisations and the public.

The structure and specifications for BTEC National qualifications have been reviewed and recently accredited to the NQF. This study focuses on the consistency of assessment practices in three key sector areas (media; business; operations and maintenance engineering) as implemented in centres across England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Background

BTEC Nationals are a well-established suite of qualifications. This particular suite of awards was reviewed and accredited to the National Qualifications Framework in 2002. The new qualifications deliver major changes to assessment and external quality assurance practices by comparison with the previous versions, including amendments to the Edexcel system of National Standards Sampling (NSS), which will now include evidence from integrated vocational assignments (IVAs), scenario-based assignments (SBAs) and final major projects (FMPs).

In April 2004, the regulatory authorities published *The statutory regulation of external qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*. Edexcel responded quickly to the new criteria and in May 2004 advised centres of updated assessment arrangements for implementation from September 2004, subject to new criteria. For example, externally assessed units were now subject to independent assessment through the NSS regime. An effective design principle, to ensure that Edexcel remains the guardian of standards, is the block on certification until positive external verification reporting.

Under the new BTEC arrangements there has been a change to externally assessed units, leading to some amendments in assessment practice. IVAs are written by the awarding body, published on the Edexcel website and used as an exemplar of good assignment design. The previous mark scheme has been withdrawn and IVAs, FMPs and SBAs are now assessed by tutors using published grading criteria in the same way as internally assessed units. External verifiers then assess a sample of student work. Each centre has an allocated Edexcel quality manager to guide them in quality assurance practices and any remedial action recommended by external verifiers. There have also been some amendments and updates to unit content.

This study reports on whether assessment practices for this qualification are appropriate in the light of the students' outcomes. The study focused on the core units for each award (listed in Appendix 1), as assessed in all centres offering these qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Purpose of project

Project aim
To maintain public confidence in the integrity of vocational qualifications in the National Qualifications Framework, as part of the regulatory authorities' ongoing monitoring activities.

Project objectives
Using qualifications in three representative vocational areas (culture and the arts; business and services; and science and technology), to compare and evaluate the national standard of consistency and quality of assessment practices for core units included in the following qualifications (see also Appendix 1) in centres across England, Wales and Northern Ireland:

- BTEC National Level 3 Diploma and Certificate in Media
- BTEC National Level 3 Diploma and Certificate in Business
- BTEC National Level 3 Diploma and Certificate in Maintenance and Operations Engineering.

To determine whether the assessment instruments are appropriately designed to ensure valid, authentic, current and sufficient assessment for student performance.

To explore as part of this process whether:

- assessment planning is adequately addressed
- the level of the assessment is appropriate for the student and the qualification
- the time allocated for assessment is appropriate
- the student understands his/her role
- the qualification is relevant for the student
- the assessment in multiple disciplines is able to conform to the design principles for a single qualification and maintain consistency and level.

Methodology

A team of sector specialists was appointed to evaluate the standard of assessment in BTEC Nationals as outlined in the relevant qualification specification. They compared assessment practice and outcomes across a range of 122 centres (see Appendix 2), including general purpose Further Education institutions, schools, private training providers and specialist centres, to establish whether or not standards are consistent for all students and whether the qualifications are appropriate for their level.

Six scrutineers – two for each qualification pathway (business, engineering, media) – undertook the study, led by a team leader. Each scrutineer planned to complete a maximum of 20 centre visits in a random national sample, making a total of 40 visits for each pathway. Centre visits included Wales and Northern Ireland. Scrutineers completed a data collection instrument and had a project-specific question sheet to aid in interviewing learners and centre staff. Scrutineers examined evidence and assessment records of up to three students in each centre, many of whom were also interviewed. Managers, internal verifiers and assessors were interviewed when available. Where reports from prior external verification visits were available, the scrutineers made a note of this but the report reflects analysis only of their own evaluation of student work. A profile of the centre sample is presented in Appendix 2.

As part of the quality assurance arrangements for the study, the team leader undertook one centre visit for business, engineering and media and observed each scrutineer on a centre visit. In addition, regulatory officers from England (QCA), Wales (ACCAC) and Northern Ireland (CCEA) shadowed each scrutineer on a centre visit, selected at random.

The study focused on the core units for each qualification as outlined in Appendix 1. Other units were examined if insufficient core units were available. Evidence was also gathered from the qualification specifications and interviews with students and assessors.

Details on sample

Students

The team planned to interview a maximum of three students at each of the 122 centres visited, a maximum of 366 students. The actual number of students interviewed was, however, 361; this was due to some students being unavailable on the day of the visit. Table 1 shows the gender and age of the sample. Table 2 shows the employment status of the sample.

Table 1: Student profiles

	Business	Media	Engineering	Total
Students on programme	1,172	1,471	1,682	4,325
Students in sample	121	124	116	361
Male (%)	50	55	96	66
Female (%)	50	45	4	34
Under age 16 (%)	3	1	0	1
16–18 (%)	74	70	54	66
19–24 (%)	21	25	38	29
Over age 25 (%)	2	4	8	4

Table 2: Student employment profiles

	Business	Media	Engineering	Total
Students on programme	1,172	1,471	1,682	4,325
Students in sample	121	124	116	361
In related employment (%)	20	0	70	29
In unrelated employment (%)	6	44	17	23
Not employed (%)	74	56	13	48
Registered as a full-time student (%)	100	100	43	82
Registered as a part-time student (%)	0	0	57	18

Approved centres

Appendix 2 shows the type and number of approved assessment centres participating in the study. The sample was chosen to reflect the population of approved centres offering the BTEC Nationals. A stratified random sample was determined by the

geographical area and centre type to reflect the national pattern, and included centres in Wales and Northern Ireland.

Detailed findings

Centre facilities for assessment

Centre resources for assessment are satisfactory or better in all centres except sixth form colleges delivering media qualifications. Information technology, textbooks and learning resources were of a particularly good standard in business centres. All engineering centres had adequate resources, although there were huge variations from adequate to exceptionally good facilities.

Except for sixth form centres, media students had access to a wide range of production equipment, post-production technology and access to computers and the internet. Students were able to book equipment for use outside the normal teaching timetable. This enabled them to produce appropriate media materials in a variety of locations. It is particularly helpful for developing time management and production management skills relevant to the Final Major Project (FMP). In England, five colleges had Centre of Vocational Excellence (CoVE) status for engineering or media and were able to show excellent facilities. For example, CoVE status has enabled one media centre to purchase studio facilities, and three others had professional production and editing facilities that were used to enrich the students' experience of vocational activities. In one case this resulted in professional work being undertaken for the local football club.

Some centres (15 per cent) have made strong industrial links with local, national and European companies to underpin theoretical knowledge and to contextualise assessment practice. For example, in business there were some creative practices such as links with European Union projects, links with Young Enterprise, and a centre in Wales linking with Enterprise Week. In engineering, 50 per cent of programmes sampled were day release and these programmes benefited from good contacts with industry.

In 21 per cent of the centres visited for engineering and media, tutors had relevant industry experience to support their pedagogic practice – they also showed high levels of commitment to the programme. There were many examples of part-time staff working in centres and working in their own business or for local companies. In engineering centres almost all staff had appropriate industry experience. Many media centres employed part-time teachers who were regularly working in the media industry.

In business centres, programmes were generally staffed by experienced and well-qualified full-time staff. However, quality of provision and assessment were severely weakened by a lack of staff with appropriate teaching skills to manage the programmes.

Tutors doubted their ability to assess and 15 per cent were not able to design effective assignment material.

There were no significant regional variations in resources for assessment. Most college-based media provision was adequately resourced, including some small cohorts who benefit from shared resources with related subjects such as art and design, or music and performing arts. Most centres maintained strong links with the professional industry, greatly enhancing students' understanding and experience, often through work experience. Part-time students in engineering tend to be more classroom-based and do very little practical work, but have work placements in industry.

The study found unsatisfactory media resources in sixth form colleges. These centres have expanded their curriculum into vocational areas with insufficient investment. They were under-resourced in technical equipment, software and specialist staff. Some general-purpose further education centres with small cohorts also suffer in the range of technical equipment and facilities provided (10 per cent). This was a weakness in one such centre for engineering.

Types of evidence and methods of assessment used
Scrutineers recorded the assessment arrangements used in the centres they visited. Their findings and observations are reported below.

Assessment planning
Centres showed inconsistent use of assessment plans in all three qualifications. These should set out deadlines for submission of candidate work and ensure that the assessment load for learners is balanced and consistent across units. Eight per cent of centres exhibited good assessment planning, including a formal plan defining assignment handout and return dates, shared with students at induction.

In media, there was clear evidence of effective planning and it was good in 35 per cent of centres. In nearly all media centres, the course planning and assessment timetable was available to students through either the course handbook or the college intranet. In engineering, 20 per cent of centres planned effectively. However, 58 per cent of engineering centres had no formal, or very limited, plans. In addition, some centres' assessment plans, particularly in media and engineering, overloaded students by providing too many assessment points, either through delivering most units as stand-alone units, or by replicating opportunities to achieve each criterion through multiple assignments.

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Specific data on whether a student had an assessment plan is presented in Table 3. Although external verifiers are not required to check the assessement planning aspect of qualifications delivery, it would benefit the learning and assessment in the qualification if this check were included in quality assurance arrangements.

Table 3: Agreement rates and student assessment planning

Assessment plan in place (%)	Business	Media	Engineering	All students
Yes	93	89	73	85
No	7	11	27	15

Suitability of assessment design
Table 4 records the use of different types of assessment evidence across the pathways.

Table 4: Types of assessment used in centres

Types of assessment (%)	Business	Media	Engineering	Average across pathways
Work records	0	0	0	0
Observation	9	19	0	10
Witness testimony	0	2	0.3	1
Simulation	2	0	1	1
Assignment	70	61	86	70
Product	0	17	0	7
Oral questions	0	0	0	0
Written questions	18	1	12.7	10
Other	1	0	0	0.2

Good vocational contextualisation of assessment material was found in 32 per cent of centres. Many centres set assessment in the context of the students' employment, creating inspiring work-related assignments that were broken down into clear, manageable tasks. A mixture of assessment methods were used (see Table 4), including assignments and open book research, and some were carried out under exam conditions. In one centre, media students investigated a Restricted Service Licence for a live radio link to a local football club and to a Quaker TV programme, which was produced and broadcast at the ground on match day. In another centre, students were

working on a periodic student magazine in which they were allocated production roles on a rotation basis.

Some centres exploited the opportunity to integrate assignments across units, again to reflect industry practices. Very effective assessment designs are used in media, where 35 per cent of centres provide integrated holistic practical projects covering all or parts of related units. Teachers also used a range of methods such as: practical activities, production work, written work, presentations, pitches, peer group assessment and tests allowing students to use their media skills to best effect (55 per cent). In some centres, teachers used the marketing department as a client and produced marketing material. The marketing students appreciated that there was a good mix of theory and practical work (50 per cent).

In business, all centres were assessed through either the issue of one unit-based assessment or three or four smaller assessments. In engineering, good practice was seen in centres with a standardised approach across assignment presentations and cover sheets (5 per cent). In media, the rigour of assessment practice was particularly noted in 16 per cent of centres in the study; these centres had planned effectively and had clear systems in place for implementing the FMP.

Fifteen per cent of engineering students liked the use of time-constrained exercises, including exams and phase tests, because learners complete the activity in college time. A wide variety of assessment methods were used in some business centres, including research, presentations, case studies and, in 10 per cent of centres, role-play.

Some centres relied heavily on written projects and lacked variety or, as in engineering, showed insufficient attempts to contextualise subjects such as maths and science into the vocational area.

In business, experienced full-time tutors generally staffed courses. However, quality of provision and assessment overall were weakened by a lack of staff with sufficient teaching skills to effectively manage the educational programmes. Fifteen per cent of tutors doubted their ability to assess and 23 per cent were not able to design assignment material effectively. Some were incorrectly using the grading grid instead of writing task-based activities appropriately contextualised to their chosen industry. Some assignments were confusing or led students away from the grading criteria. These practices were not corrected by internal verification.

The design and quality of assessments ranged from very good to extremely poor. Fifteen per cent of engineering centres were found to be using old assessment material that needed review and updating. In one centre, the technician completed practical experimentation instead of the students; in another, the mathematics assessment was restricted to weekly class tests and incorporated formative and summative assessment. In two centres, scrutineers found excessive use of examinations.

Re-assessment opportunities
There is great inconsistency within the overall qualification on access to re-assessment. Examples across the whole study ranged from very limited to unlimited opportunities. Two centres showed poor deadline adherence with resubmissions up to 10 months after the final deadline. Centres would benefit from detailed and clearer guidance on this issue.

Integrated vocational assignment (IVA)
The IVA is designed as part of the independent assessment requirement of the qualification. The aim is to synthesise learning from more than one unit, to give students the opportunity to demonstrate their understanding of the seamless relationship between units in an applied vocational context. Edexcel writes the IVA and publishes it on the Edexcel website for completion at any time during the programme of study. It is assessed by centre tutors against grading criteria, as are the internally assessed units. The assessment decisions are then confirmed by external verification sampling. Certification remains blocked until there is positive external verification reporting. In engineering, centres provide specific guidance to students on project choice and 8 per cent of centres were setting good projects. In business, centres managed the IVA effectively and welcomed the opportunity to adopt a more creative approach. Some learners expressed great enthusiasm, while at other centres students had little comprehension of IVA arrangements. In media, the independent assessment requirement is met by an FMP.

Some engineering centre IVAs were unsatisfactory (18 per cent) because they did not meet the Edexcel criteria. This was due mainly to poor project supervision, but there were other reasons. Engineering centres struggled to find appropriate projects and reverted to GCSE-style design and build or other unrealistic assessments. Ten per cent of centres had not issued the published learner instructions to students. Eight per cent of centre tutors thought the curriculum and assessment criteria for the Project unit and the Communication unit were above level 3 standards.

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Final Major Project

Media students complete an FMP. This provides students with a tangible product with which to demonstrate their skills and understanding when potentially at their most developed. Most teachers understood the recent changes to the independent assessment criteria. Edexcel has invested in additional support and guidance for this component, including some support to students on the internet. Most centres undertook work for the FMP units, especially Unit 2 and Unit 3, throughout the course. Many centres were clear about the need for internal standardisation but were unsure how they would achieve this.

Project proposals and projected grades must be provided to the external verifier. The external verifier samples work and releases certification appropriately if national standards have been met. However, there are some challenges in providing external verification on the date specified by a centre. Some tutors are concerned that the FMP is losing its value because it is not re-marked externally. The majority of centres regretted the change from external assessment, as the external marking of student work provided a wider review of individual courses than the 'snapshot' of National Standards Sampling, and the rigour of an external examiner provided a focus for students' efforts (45 per cent). Similarly, with the FMP of the three units (Unit 2 'Research techniques'; Unit 3 'Media skills workshop'; Unit 5 'Production management') only one individual grading criterion out of 14 directly and solely relates to the media production skills used by the student in the actual FMP video produced.

Suitability of qualifications for students

All three qualifications (National Award, National Certificate and National Diploma) are accredited at level 3. The level of all three qualification pathways meets national standards of a level 3 qualification, and in the majority of cases the students were on the right course and at the right level for their individual needs. Students progressing from level 2 found the level 3 BTEC Nationals more challenging and in-depth than their previous experience. Students entering with very good GCSE profiles or A levels also found the qualification challenging. The new 18-unit Diploma was demanding for some students. Consequently, some centres are using the 12-unit National Certificate or six-unit National Award as an alternative qualification. Table 5 confirms judgements that the level is appropriate for this qualification.

Table 5: Students' perceptions that level is appropriate for the qualification

Level of qualification (%)	Business	Media	Engineering	All students
Appropriate	98	99	99	99
Inappropriate	2	1	1	1

Student perceptions

Across all three pathways, students appeared to be satisfied that the courses were meeting their vocational and career ambitions. They had sufficient time to complete their work and many students thought they had developed good time management skills. Table 5 confirms that the timescales for assignment work set by centres are appropriate across the qualification.

Table 6: Agreement rates where assessment timescale is appropriate for the student

Time (%)	Business	Media	Engineering	All students
Appropriate	97	99	100	99
Inappropriate	3	1	0	1

In media centres, most students had a clear understanding of assessment criteria and were confident in asking tutors for further guidance if they need it. Most students had also received realistic guidance on career progression. They understood their role and responsibilities for achieving the qualification. In business, the assessment method of the BTEC Nationals attracted many new students, including some who had changed to the course after completing AS levels. The majority of students understood the assessment/grading criteria, although some experienced difficulties with language relating to the difference between merit/distinction criteria. Business tutors felt that the qualification was more flexible and employer focused than the Advanced Vocational Certificate in Education (AVCE). In 10 per cent of engineering centres, students working on the IVA had not seen the published IVA learner instructions. Table 7 shows the percentage of students that understand their role and the assessment process.

Table 7: Students' understanding of their role and the assessment process

Students' understanding (%)	Business	Media	Engineering	All students
Satisfactory understanding	97	98	98	98
Unsatisfactory understanding	3	2	2	2

Student support

Twenty-nine per cent of centres offered good monitoring of learner assessments, progress and targets, attendance and punctuality, to support and encourage students to achieve. This varied from after-college homework clubs to a system of early comments on draft work prior to final submission dates and assessment dates. The feedback and action planning provided for students enabled them to improve their performance and achieve a higher grade.

In the majority of centres, additional support was available for students, including those with particular/special needs. However, in a few media centres, there was an over-reliance on written reports for assessment, which puts unnecessary barriers before some students. Most centres have appropriate disabled access, though a few had problems with ageing buildings. Some centres also provided assignment support in a learning resource centre, which students could access on a drop-in basis. In media centres, some examples of effective provision for learners with particular needs were observed. They included a wide range of assessment instruments catering for students with dyslexia. Similarly, in media, a learner who had failed in the school system was now achieving – the student coped with the work with support from teachers, despite having a rare form of dyslexia that had not been identified at school, and was now achieving good results for the first time. One student who was returning to education after many years of working and raising a family was receiving a high level of support in order to balance family demands, night shifts and the college timetable. Several business tutors stated that the qualification in its present form has enabled them to meet the needs of a variety of students and to be more creative in their teaching.

In the business and media qualifications there is much evidence of learners developing additional vocationally relevant skills, and often to a professional standard (8 per cent). For example, in one business centre, students were effectively engaged to review a fast-food chain's corporate communications. In addition to the technical criteria of the assessment, students also developed strong creative and analytical skills. Similarly, in one media centre, first-year students undertook work on a music programme under the direction of final-year students. The music was provided by music technology students

working closely with a local football club to produce DVD material for a promotional package. Additionally, communication skills were embedded at the core of the qualification.

Maintenance of national standards of assessment

Statistical analysis of findings

Although there was evidence of both good and poor practice, overall the judgement is that national standards are being maintained. But the study reveals that some assessment practice needs monitoring. Achievement records were verifiable and accurate. For this comparability study, judgements on quality were made in terms of:

- validity – whether the evidence was relevant to what is being assessed
- authenticity – whether the evidence was produced by and attributable to the student
- currency – whether the evidence was up to date (as required by the awarding body)
- sufficiency – whether there was enough evidence to meet national standards.

On the basis of the factors listed above, judgements were made on whether the evidence met the criteria of the national standards. Across all 122 centres the team of scrutineers agreed with overall assessment judgements made on 80 per cent of the student evidence they examined, and disagreed with 20 per cent. In total, judgements were made on 747 occasions. The 80 per cent agreement rate is the average across all centres and units examined. Table 8 shows that the agreement rates varied from 92 per cent in media to 72 per cent in engineering, and 77 per cent in business.

Table 8: Agreement rates with overall judgements on student evidence

Overall judgements (%)	Business	Media	Engineering	Total
Agreed	77	92	72	80
Disagreed	23	8	28	20

Table 9 shows the agreement rate covering the whole qualification, broken down into assessment types. Over 1,000 assessments were sampled. This shows that agreement rates varied from 0 per cent to 100 per cent, with the biggest variance being in the sufficiency of evidence to meet national standards. The 0 per cent agreement was from two business assessments sampled and was considered an outlier in the data.

Table 9: Agreement rates for the quality of assessment across the qualification

Quality of Assessment (%)	Validity	Authenticity	Currency	Sufficiency
Work records	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Observation	100	100	100	93
Witness testimony	100	100	100	88
Simulation	100	100	100	100
Assignment	97	99	99	82
Product	100	100	100	100
Oral questions	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Written questions	100	100	100	83
Other	50	30	100	0
Average	**92**	**90**	**100**	**78**

In business centres, where holistic judgements were made of the overall student's performance, scrutineers agreed with centre assessors on 77 per cent of the student evidence they examined and disagreed with the assessment decisions of 23 per cent (Table 8). Table 10 describes the agreement rate in the quality of evidence across the business pathway by the method of assessment. This shows variance from 0 per cent to 100 per cent and that the weakness was often in the sufficiency of evidence seen. This was an issue in 10 per cent of business centres (Table 10).

Table 10: Agreement rates in the quality of assessment across the business pathway

Quality of Assessment (%)	Validity	Authenticity	Currency	Sufficiency
Work records	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Observation	100	100	100	97
Witness testimony	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Simulation	100	100	100	100
Assignment	100	99	100	83
Product	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Oral questions	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Written questions	100	100	100	73
Other	50	33	100	0
Average	**90**	**86**	**100**	**71**

In media centres, scrutineers agreed with overall judgements made on 92 per cent of the student evidence they examined and disagreed with the assessment decisions of 8 per cent (Table 8). Table 11 describes the agreement rate in the quality of evidence across the media pathway by the method of assessment. This shows variance from 92 per cent to 100 per cent and that the weakness is occasionally in the sufficiency of evidence seen. However, in 5 per cent of centres, students were providing almost too much evidence and exceeded the requirements of the assessment criteria.

Table 11: Agreement rates in the quality of assessment across the media pathway

Quality of Assessment (%)	Validity	Authenticity	Currency	Sufficiency
Work records	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Observation	100	100	100	92
Witness testimony	100	100	100	100
Simulation	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Assignment	100	100	100	93
Product	100	100	100	100
Oral questions	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Written questions	100	100	100	100
Other	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Average	**100**	**100**	**100**	**97**

In engineering centres, scrutineers agreed with assessment decisions of 72 per cent of the student evidence they examined and disagreed with the assessment decisions of 28 per cent (Table 8). This represents assessment evidence sampled in 30 per cent of engineering centres. Table 12, over the page, records the agreement rate in the quality of evidence across the engineering pathway by the method of assessment. This shows variance from 0 per cent to 100 per cent and that the weakness is in the sufficiency of evidence seen. Scrutineers commented that validity was not always clear for the criterion being assessed and that assessment decisions were often inaccurate in 30 per cent of centres.

Table 12: Agreement rates in the quality of assessment across the engineering pathway

Quality of Assessment (%)	Validity	Authenticity	Currency	Sufficiency
Work records	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Observation	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Witness testimony	100	100	100	0
Simulation	100	100	100	100
Assignment	92	97	98	72
Product	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Oral questions	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Written questions	100	100	100	98
Other	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Average	**98**	**99**	**99**	**68**

The wide variance in agreement shown in Tables 8–12 underlines the need for Edexcel to place greater emphasis on encouraging and monitoring standardisation events both within and between centres.

Assessment decisions on grading
Assessment decisions were accurate in 80 per cent of sampled judgements and adhere to national standards. Qualification standards are being maintained by withholding certification until Edexcel receives satisfactory external verification reports on the centre. Best practice was found in media centres with long experience of the qualification and where criterion-referenced grading practice is well established. Similarly, most centres new to the qualification were maintaining grading standards. Media students also had a correct understanding of how to achieve higher grades. The use of tutorial time to discuss progress was evident in many centres.

In 30 per cent of engineering centres, assessment decisions were inaccurate. One centre altered assessment criteria to suit its needs; another centre had created its own marking scheme for assessing the IVA; and another had failed to implement the changes to the units (published September 2004) into assignments, and were incorrectly grading projects. This was also the case with three media centres. These issues may be addressed by their forthcoming external verifier visits. In two engineering centres the only work that had been assessed in the last 18 months were the eight pieces of work used for NSS in March 2004. Some engineering students were effectively discouraged from seeking to improve their performance by limitations on their resit opportunities (10 per cent), and one centre had blocked students from achieving

merit or distinction in a unit – against qualification policy. These facts again underline the need for Edexcel to place greater emphasis on standardisation events both within and between centres.

Interpretation of grading standards

There was confusion in how to interpret the standards and how to differentiate between the merit and distinction criteria in 31 per cent of centres. Some centres had made minimal attempts to cover the criteria and had systems that allowed students to achieve the merit and distinction criteria too easily. In engineering there was a lack of appropriate contextualisation (eg engineering maths and science units), together with an over-reliance on tests where assignments would have been better (eg business systems for technicians). Scrutineers for all three pathways found examples of ineffective assessment planning and some low-quality assignments failing to meet requirements of the related assessment criteria. This was particularly evident from media assessors who were newly qualified teachers (NQTs). In two business centres the evidence seen indicated that no member of the current assessment team understood how to assess the learners' work.

The study found that inexperienced centres had recycled inappropriate assessment materials from A level or AVCE programmes, which, combined, led to inaccurate assessment of student work. Some assessed work lacked good quality evaluative feedback on learner performance and some centres had little evidence to demonstrate their mapping of achievement. In these cases, students also had little understanding of where and when they had achieved grades.

The study found that 13 per cent of business centres are struggling to grade against merit and distinction criteria, largely because of differences in interpretation of the criteria terms 'analyse' and 'evaluate'. Others have diverse views on the amount of content that should be included in the learners' work (18 per cent). Thirteen per cent of business centres set assignments with extra tasks for merit and distinction, in contradiction of expectations set out in the qualification guidelines.

Engineering centres had a similar issue, including concerns that the criteria wording is not clear in guiding the assessor to judge student achievement (68 per cent). For example: 'Solve problems using Newton's laws' may be better worded as 'Solve **two** problems for each of Newton's **three** laws'. Similarly, for 'Introduction to business', 8 per cent of centres expressed concern about vague criteria. Many engineering merit and distinction criteria use key verbs such as 'justify' and 'compare', which are not

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interpreted correctly by assessors. This has led to work being assessed as merit or distinction that was not at that level, either in terms of meeting the requirements of the criteria, or in the general level of the student's work.

Media centres generally had a good understanding of assessment, but many were critical of the design and clarity of unit grading criteria (13 per cent). This was for two reasons:

- there was too much repetition and overlap of criteria across units, resulting in students being over-assessed and duplicating evidence
- in most practical-based units too many criteria reward the documenting of the process rather than actual media skills in productions completed, for example Unit 26 'Interview and presentation techniques' and Unit 27 'Shooting single camera drama' (see 'Final Major Project' section, above).

There are differences in the assessment practice across all pathways. Some centres thought they had to write additional tasks to achieve merit/distinction, and other centres thought that work of a higher quality must be produced. The Edexcel training and development materials, *NQF BTEC First and Nationals – assessment and grading*, clearly state:

> assignment design could take two logical approaches:
> - Task(s) set for Pass;
>   Development of same task for merit;
>   Further development for distinction.
>
> - Task(s) set for Pass;
>   Separate tasks set for merit/distinction.

In Edexcel documentation there is insufficient clarity regarding the requirement for either additional work to be produced for merit/distinction criteria or simply for a higher level of understanding, skill and independence of learning. *BTEC Nationals guidance and units* specifically states (page 26) that a 'qualitative improvement' and not 'extra tasks' are what is required for merit and distinction. However, the business IVA has separate tasks for some of the merit/distinction criteria and IVAs are now being presented as exemplar material on the Edexcel website. In addition, the way the grading grids have been written means that extra tasks are often required to meet the merit and distinction criteria. Edexcel guidance, therefore, is inconsistent and confusing, and in practice centres are setting extra tasks.

Engineering centres were critical that units required setting more work for merit/distinction rather than better quality work. Merit (M) and distinction criteria introduce new curriculum content, which is not assessed at Pass (P) level. An example of this occurs in Engineering Unit 4 'Mathematics for technicians', in which the P7 criterion states 'differentiate polynomial and other simple expressions' and the M5 criterion states 'differentiate algebraic, exponential and trigonometric functions using the basic rules'. Students tackling M5 have to carry out extra work to demonstrate differentiation of extra types of mathematical functions – exponential and trigonometrical functions – that were not required for P7. This involves a merit- or distinction-level student producing more work, not higher quality work. The unit also contains eight pass, five merit and three distinction criteria. There is evidence that centres are having trouble getting students to attempt merit and distinction criteria and these two issues seem to be linked (see 'Interpretation of grading standards', above).

Thirty-one per cent of centres are experiencing difficulty in interpreting the specification requirements. This may be summarised as follows:

- confusion over merit and distinction criteria and the amount of content required
- lack of clarity on how to write assignments
- inconsistent advice and guidance in Edexcel publications
- inconsistent advice and guidance from different Edexcel qualification leaders.

These facts suggest the need for more exemplar material and a review of the grading criteria policy, and again emphasise the important role that the awarding body has to play in promoting standardisation events.

Assessment feedback and records
There were accurate and verifiable student assessment records. With some exceptions, assessors were familiar with awarding body requirements for the recording of assessment decisions and maintenance of student records. The majority of feedback and record-keeping was satisfactory for the qualification requirements.

Good quality feedback was often seen in business centres with both formative and summative assessment opportunities (55 per cent). In some centres, detailed written comments were made against each criterion. However, some business centres had unsatisfactory documentation for recording written feedback, especially for presentations or formative comments (15 per cent). In media centres, feedback was satisfactory and students had opportunities to review work in progress, in both practical

and theory assignments, prior to deadline submissions. A small number of media centres kept records but did not share them with their students (8 per cent). In engineering, 10 per cent of feedback was good or better, with the best practice seen in private training providers, but it was unsatisfactory or absent in some centres (8 per cent).

Some centres were engaging students in the assessment process very effectively. Student skills and confidence were built up through returning detailed action plans with assessment feedback. These gave students clear targets for achievement of higher grades. However, in 38 per cent of engineering centres many students deliberately aimed for only a pass grade, rather than merit or distinction.

Internal verification
Examples of both good and poor practice in internal verification were identified in 42 per cent of the centres in the study, and there appear to be opportunities for greater standardisation and sharing of good practice, which are yet to be exploited.

The study found very effective internal verification in some centres (25 per cent). In media centres, the internal verification process in most experienced centres was thorough, including team or cross-discipline standardisation (43 per cent). Similarly, some engineering centres applied a systematic sampling plan to internally verify assessment briefs and assessment decisions (18 per cent). In business centres, practice varied. For example, in some centres there was no monitoring of assignment briefs, while in others there was rigorous monitoring (13 per cent).

Some effective internal moderation practice was observed in all three pathways, which itself led to effective assessment (19 per cent). There were examples of formal and informal internal verification taking place. Some centres had adopted awarding body paperwork and some used a college-wide internal verification format.

Evidence of internal verification was found in 83 per cent of centres. In some centres there was no evidence of any internal verification of students' work; in others, there was unsatisfactory and ineffective internal verification or monitoring of assignment briefs. In 21 per cent of business centres, internal verification feedback on assignment briefs was ineffective because it was not happening early enough in the course to impact on assignments issued to students and, therefore, was of no benefit to the learner. Many engineering centres had ineffective internal verification and failed to identify unsatisfactory assignment briefs, or inaccurate assessment decisions (23 per cent). A

few media centres that are new to the qualification did not have effective internal verification processes, which resulted in assessment standards below national standards (8 per cent).

In some cases, the timing of external verification is preventing the identification of poor internal verification practices which otherwise could have been rectified to enable completion by the students. The timing of the external verifier visit is negotiated between the centre and the external verifier and, in the interest of moving the whole qualification forward, centres are urged to use the earliest window of opportunity for external verification scheduled by Edexcel.

External verification
Inconsistency in assessment practice emphasises the need for more rigorous standardisation of external verifiers. Edexcel has a role to play in both sharing good practice and eliminating poor practice but this activity appears to be minimal at present. Edexcel's external verifiers should visit centres once a year, documenting good and poor approaches to assessment. At present, Edexcel does not guarantee to undertake this. Late registration of learners by centres is a significant cause of late external verifier allocation and verification, and inhibits Edexcel's ability to deliver external verification effectively. The role of the quality manager in this respect is not clear.

NSS is the vehicle by which each unit of the qualification is reviewed on a rotating basis by an external verifier. Two units are sampled from each year of the cohort. The external verifier judges whether or not national standards have been maintained through centre-devised, internally set and assessed assignments. At least 50 per cent of the work submitted is required to be internally verified by the centre, but there is no direct penalty system if they have not done so. The external verifier report now states what remedial action is needed if a centre fails to achieve national standards. Units sampled are negotiated with each centre but exclude those sampled in the previous year. An additional sample of either NSS units or IVA work is reviewed by post, if requested by the external verifier.

Each centre has an allocated quality manager to support them with ongoing quality assurance practice. In business, there were some anomalies between NSS and the standards of observed work. Scrutineers found centres where students' work that conformed to the qualification specifications had been failed by external verifiers at NSS, while other centres had passed NSS but their students' work did not meet national

standards. The role of the quality manager in these cases was not clear and the awarding body should review this issue.

External verification support
Good external verification support was found in 15 per cent of centres. This was most notable in media, where external verification was seen as useful in maintaining standards (48 per cent), but this judgement was shared by just one engineering centre, perhaps reflecting the challenges that this pathway is facing to interpret national standards correctly and dealing with the demands of merit/distinction criteria.

Overall, poor external verification support was found in 8 per cent of centres. In business centres this included unsatisfactory follow-up after failed NSS. Delays and a lack of communication created uncertainty for the course team and the students. In addition, there were concerns in engineering over conflicting judgements made by external verifiers reviewing the same evidence. Two media centres believed they had experienced very poor standards of administration/organisation of the external verification process, though not of the actual standardisation applied. Two centres had no allocated external verifier for this year.

Support from Edexcel
Assessors have access to appropriate training and development from Edexcel. Several engineering, business and media centres were very satisfied with the support from Edexcel and some had also attended awarding body training events, which they found useful (13 per cent). In Northern Ireland, there is no Edexcel office and hence training is difficult to access. Centres in Wales did not find access to training a problem. Some centres had received in-house training. However, in one centre conflicting guidance was given by visiting awarding body subject leaders, to that received at the training events. Some centres complained that the awarding body training was too generalised or became marginalised by personal interest groups and did not meet their reasonable needs.

Many staff from media centres who attended awarding body training had a good understanding of assessment issues, but complained that support was reactive rather than proactive and they had to seek out further information/training to ascertain awarding body standards and guidelines (38 per cent). Some had overcome this by deliberately training as external verifiers to gain the extra level of detailed information they needed.

All centres had unit specifications either as hard copy or via the Edexcel website. Most assessors also had access to awarding body guidance and support material. In business, 50 per cent of centres used the website as a major source of information, and in engineering 35 per cent of centres found the website was a good resource.

Centres are finding the website cumbersome and difficult to navigate. One business centre had not found the IVA, and some centres do not use the internet. Some centres were concerned that the website was not always kept up to date. For example, in engineering, amended specifications were published in September 2004, but not updated on the website, which still contained the old specifications as downloadable files (as of 1 February 2005) – even though the paper versions sent to centres clearly stated that the electronic versions on the website had been updated. Media centres found the Edexcel website difficult to navigate and communication to centres very poor (38 per cent). Business centres, in particular, cited the need for more exemplar materials on the website.

Insufficient standardisation and sharing of good practice
Although varied and effective assessment material was often used across the qualification, for all pathways there was little evidence of sharing good practice within or between centres.

Issues associated with the design of the qualifications
With some units there were significant issues that require attention, as they are adversely impacting on assessment practice.

BTEC National in business
The business qualification delivers an interesting programme, with a wide variety of subject matter largely meeting student expectations. Students had a good understanding of this qualification.

The 'Presenting business information' unit helped to develop effective skills for IT and business communications. There was also satisfactory emphasis on e-business, but some units were viewed as below level 3 standard, for example 'Health and safety'. The 'Business on-line' unit has confusing grading criteria and some centres observed some duplication in certain core/option units (Marketing/e-business). Similarly, Unit 1 'Introduction to business' was considered too big and vague and it has barriers to achievement, such as access to commercially produced business plans.

BTEC National in media

In media, the qualification develops very good professional vocational skills, equipping students for industry and progression to higher education. However, some centres (23 per cent) were concerned that the artificial pathway split (audio, moving image, publishing, e-media) limited student experience in the light of increasingly converging industry practice. They also found some technical units out of date and difficult to teach and assess. For example, centres felt that Unit 10 'Understanding video technology' needed updating on technology rather than a complete rewrite.

BTEC National in engineering

In engineering, no additional problem unit issues were identified other than those already reported in 'Interpretation of grading standards', above.

Conclusions

The study concluded that the BTEC National qualifications reviewed meet the needs of students and are following the processes and content set out in the accredited specifications. Although there is evidence of both good and poor assessment practice, overall, the judgement is that national standards are being maintained, and a number of key strengths were identified.

The team of scrutineers agreed with 80 per cent of assessment decisions on the student evidence they examined and disagreed with the assessment decisions on 20 per cent. These judgements were made on the evidence in students' portfolios against the criteria of the national specifications. The 80 per cent agreement rate is the average across all evidence examined in the three pathways included in this study.

In media centres, scrutineers agreed with the assessment decisions of 92 per cent of the student evidence they examined and disagreed with the assessment decisions of 8 per cent.

In business centres, scrutineers agreed with the assessment decisions of 77 per cent of the student evidence they examined and disagreed with the assessment decisions of 23 per cent.

In engineering centres, scrutineers agreed with the assessment decisions of 72 per cent of the student evidence they examined and disagreed with the assessment decisions of 28 per cent.

There were weaknesses in a number of areas, including:

- assessment practice in centres
- internal and external verification
- awarding body practices.

Table 13 summarises the range in agreement rates across each pathway. The biggest challenge is in the sufficiency of evidence. This confirms the evaluative evidence described in this report. In addition, this reconfirms the need for effective standardisation and clearer guidance, especially in differentiating grading criteria.

Table 13: Range in agreement rates in the quality of assessment across qualification

Quality of assessment (average %)	Validity	Authenticity	Currency	Sufficiency
Business centres	90	86	100	71
Media centres	100	100	100	97
Engineering centres	98	99	100	68

The study has established that achievement records are accurate and verifiable. Assessors are mostly familiar with awarding body requirements for the recording of assessment decisions and maintenance of student records. They have access to awarding body guidance and support material, including full assessment specifications, either as hard copy or via the website. Assessors have access to appropriate training and development, but find that Edexcel is reactive rather than proactive about encouraging centres to increase uptake in this area and facilitating this activity with well-designed support materials.

The qualifications for each pathway must adhere to the overarching design principles for the BTEC National brand. However, valid assessment that is fit for purpose requires different types of assessment to meet vocational needs. The study found that, in general, the assessment demand on students across each of the pathways was commensurate with a level 3 qualification. However, Table 14 shows inconsistencies in qualification design and assessment practice across the pathways identified in the study.

Table 14: Degree of consistency across qualification pathways

Criteria	Business (%)	Engineering (%)	Media (%)	Consistency
Effective assessment planning	93	73	89	No
Appropriate level of demand	98	99	99	Yes
Appropriate time allocation	97	100	99	Yes
Student understanding of qualification	97	98	98	Yes
Qualification relevant to student	98	100	98	Yes
Ineffective internal verification	21	23	8	No
Merit/distinction grading difficulties	31	68	13	No
Agreement rates on validity	90	98	100	Yes
Agreement rates on authenticity	86	99	100	Yes
Agreement rates on currency	100	99	100	Yes
Agreement rates on sufficiency	71	68	97	No

In summary, the study indicates that the changes to externally assessed units, and the resulting amendments in assessment practice resulting from the changes to statutory criteria, have demonstrated that assessment for this qualification is appropriate, but that there are weaknesses that need to be addressed (see 'Recommendations', below and in the executive summary. Attention to these should further increase the consistency, quality and effectiveness of the assessment process.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are based upon the statutory criteria published in *The statutory regulation of external qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (QCA, 2004).

Issues for Edexcel

- In order to maintain the integrity of the BTEC National brand, Edexcel should consider establishing a periodic review to confirm that assessment practice, design and delivery are commensurate across all pathways offered in this suite of awards, including those pathways not covered by the comparability study. The review should use feedback reports from external verifiers and should include: analysis of the volume of work and assessment undertaken by students; the level of demand for each unit within a qualification; the range of assessment methods; the weighting of grading criteria and the opportunities to achieve them across all pathways; balance in the mandatory/optional unit 'rules of combination' and the level of supportive guidance available. This would have the benefit of ensuring balance across the sector pathways and maintain the status of the qualification as a whole. (*Statutory criteria: 50 and 53g*)

- To enhance the effectiveness of assessment practices, Edexcel should provide more proactive support and encouragement for assessor training and development by centres. Edexcel should make better use of external verification reporting data, to inform a continuing development programme for its centres and review its guidance on this aspect of provision. Edexcel should also review the training opportunities available for centre teaching staff in Northern Ireland. (*Statutory criteria: 11b, 11d and 6*0)

- Edexcel should review merit/distinction criteria, providing clearer guidance on grade differentiation to centres, together with a review of units to ensure qualitative rather than quantitative reward of performance. There are differences in the assessment practice across all pathways, and the awarding body guidance on grading appears contradictory and confusing. This requires a review of all units across the qualification, paying due regard to the merit/distinction criteria wording. For consistency, grading differentials should be based on commensurate levels of demand across every BTEC National qualification pathway. (*Statutory criteria: 67*)

- Internal verification practice was found to be inconsistent and included ineffective internal verification of both assessment briefs and assessment decisions. Edexcel should consider providing regional events for internal and external verifiers and to standardise and maintain national standards and provide contextualised guidance. Key areas for standardisation should include: sufficiency of evidence, assessment design, grading and differentiation. (*Statutory criteria: 58 and 61*)

- Inconsistency in practice demonstrates the need for external verification to include checks on the use of assessment plans in centres, the number and focus of centre-run assessor standardisation events and the quality of internal verification sampling plans. (*Statutory criteria: 61*)

- More rigorous monitoring of the external verification programme is needed for the suite of qualifications. Inadequacies identified included: unsatisfactory follow-up after failed National Standards Sampling (NSS); conflicting judgements made by external verifiers reviewing the same evidence; poor standards of administration/organisation of the external verification process; no allocated external verification for some centres in this academic year. The awarding body needs to monitor external verification activity closely to use it as a source of feedback information. (*Statutory criteria: 58 and 61*)

- Edexcel should consider facilitating national standardisation events such as 'sharing good practice' workshops for centres. This would help centres share good practice and materials within and between centres for each of the qualification pathways included in the study. This could be followed up by external verification monitoring of participation. (*Statutory criteria: 58b, 58c, 59*)

- Edexcel should consider providing good quality exemplar assignment material and specific guidance on how centres can develop the assignment-writing skills of their teaching staff, for continuing professional development. This support needs to focus on how to interpret the curriculum, assessment writing and design activities. (*Statutory criteria: 58b, 58c, 59, 60*)

- There are issues associated with particular units in this report that need updating to reflect current industry practice and, in addition, the guidance available to assessors to apply it. This must be done prior to a submission for re-accreditation. (*Statutory criteria: 50f*)

- In order to maintain the integrity of the award, Integrated Vocational Assignment briefs for engineering should be approved by external verifiers prior to use. This would ensure consistent standards and eliminate the use of inappropriate project choice. It would also bring the pathway more into line with the profession and ensure effective independent assessment. (*Statutory criteria: 58a–58f and 59*)

- Edexcel should review its centre approval process to ensure that all centres, but particularly schools and sixth form colleges, are appropriately resourced. (*Statutory criteria: 11b, 11d*)

- Detailed and clear guidelines on reassessment policy must be provided, to avoid current confusion across the further education sector. (*Statutory criteria: 60c–60e and 61g*)

- The study found that centres and learners had difficulty using Edexcel's website. The awarding body may wish to reconsider its design to enhance user-friendliness. This should be followed up by user satisfaction surveys including students. (*Statutory criteria: 33 and 34*)

Issues for centres
Centres delivering BTEC National qualifications should:

- ensure that all students receive effective assessment plans at the start of the course, to be checked by external verification monitoring (*statutory criteria: 53, 60a and 60b*)

- ensure that assessment is based on activities appropriately contextualised to the chosen sector pathway and that it gives students opportunities to achieve higher grades (*statutory criteria: 53a and 53b*)

- ensure that engineering teaching staff are using up-to-date and effective assessment instruments, in preparation for more rigorous NSS sampling (*statutory criteria: 50, 57 and 60a*)

- ensure teaching staff, and in particular part-time and newly qualified teachers, receive appropriate training/support in assignment-writing skills, to enhance the effectiveness of assessment practices. This study identified that teaching staff

require more support to focus on how to interpret the curriculum, assessment writing and design activities (*statutory criteria: 11d and 60a–60e*)

- adopt a more rigorous approach to internal verification management. Internal verification must be planned and regularly implemented. It should include effective verification of both assessment briefs and assessment decisions applied to student work (*statutory criteria: 60*)

- stop the inappropriate recycling of assessment from other types of qualification. This is bad practice and affects the integrity of the qualification as a whole (*statutory criteria: 55*).

Appendix 1: BTEC National comparability study – core units

Forms requesting information on the use of BTEC National units were sent out to assessment centres that were identified from Edexcel's lists as delivering the following units:

Certificate and Diploma in Business

- Business and Management
- Business Enterprise
- Creative Product Promotion
- Introduction to Business
- Presenting Business Information
- Business Online

Certificate and Diploma in Media

- Media Skills Workshop
- Production Management
- Professional Brief
- Research Techniques
- Understanding the Media
- Professional Practice in the Media Industry

Certificate and Diploma in Operations and Maintenance Engineering

- Business Systems for Technicians
- Communications for Technicians
- Mathematics for Technicians
- Operations and Maintenance Procedures and Techniques
- Project – Operations and Maintenance
- Science for Technicians.

Appendix 2: BTEC National comparability study – centre sample

Initial sample base

Total number of approved centres	252
Total number of centre forms returned	205
Total number of centres visited	122
Centres not visited (due to conflict of interest)	4
Total number of students interviewed	361

Breakdown of the 205* centre forms by subject

	BTEC Business	BTEC Media	BTEC Engineering	Total
Total forms received per subject	90	87	50	227*
Total number of centres visited	40	41	41	122
Total number of students interviewed	121	124	116	361

*22 centres offer more than one subject

Breakdown of the 122 centres visited by type of centre

Type	Number
School	4
Sixth form college	7
FE college	93
Training provider	2
Did not say	3
Total	109[§]

[§]Of the 122 centres in the study, 13 that were visited offered more than one subject.