Qualitative Evaluation of Demand-led Skills Solutions: standards and frameworks

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Qualitative Evaluation of Demand-Led Skills Solutions: standards and frameworks

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Foreword

The UK Commission for Employment and Skills is a social partnership, led by Commissioners from large and small employers, trade unions and the voluntary sector. Our ambition is to transform the UK's approach to investing in the skills of people as an intrinsic part of securing jobs and growth. Our strategic objectives are to:

- Maximise the impact of employment and skills policies and employer behaviour to support jobs and growth and secure an internationally competitive skills base;

- Work with businesses to develop the best market solutions which leverage greater investment in skills;

- Provide outstanding labour market intelligence which helps businesses and people make the best choices for them.

The third objective, relating to intelligence, reflects an increasing outward focus to the UK Commission's research activities, as it seeks to facilitate a better informed labour market, in which decisions about careers and skills are based on sound and accessible evidence. Relatedly, impartial research evidence is used to underpin compelling messages that promote a call to action to increase employers' investment in the skills of their people.

Intelligence is also integral to the two other strategic objectives. In seeking to lever greater investment in skills, the intelligence function serves to identify opportunities where our investments can bring the greatest leverage and economic return. The UK Commission's third strategic objective, to maximise the impact of policy and employer behaviour to achieve an internationally competitive skills base, is supported by the development of an evidence base on best practice: "what works?" in a policy context.

Our research programme provides a robust evidence base for our insights and actions, drawing on good practice and the most innovative thinking. The research programme is underpinned by a number of core principles including the importance of: ensuring 'relevance' to our most pressing strategic priorities; 'salience' and effectively translating and sharing the key insights we find; international benchmarking and drawing insights from good practice abroad; high quality analysis which is leading edge, robust and action orientated; being responsive to immediate needs as well as taking a longer term perspective. We also work closely with key partners to ensure a co-ordinated approach to research.

Evidence shows that the quality of the UK workforce, when compared to other leading economies, is not developing quickly enough. There is a growing need for employers to compete on quality, cost, and innovation; and, not just at home but globally. Skills are very much part of the challenge and, therefore, the solution. The UK Commissions' investment funds are one way to leverage greater investment in skills by employers. Developing Standards and Frameworks is another route which provides key elements of the infrastructure necessary to support greater and smarter investment in skills. To ensure continuous improvement we undertook a qualitative evaluation of investments in standards and frameworks, the Growth and Innovation Fund (GIF) Round 1 and 2, and Employer Investment Fund (EIF) Phase 2.

This report focuses on the learning around standards and frameworks. There is a fellow report which explores the learning from the investment programmes. Across all three programmes, however, the research is unequivocal: increased competition for skills investment funding is having a positive impact in ensuring that proposed skills solutions and products are better-targeted at areas of identifiable demand. It is too early to identify evidence of impact or changes in employer investment-behaviour but the evaluation suggests there are key factors which support progress toward that goal: **active** engagement of at least a core of employers, **planning for sustainability** from the outset, and **early engagement of a range of employers** (to shape the understanding of the problem, the solution and the sustainability model)**.** The UK Commission implements change in light of evaluation findings and draws on it to shape our policy position.

Sharing the findings of our research and engaging with our audience is important to further develop the evidence on which we base our work. Evidence Reports are our chief means of reporting our detailed analytical work. All of our outputs can be accessed on the UK Commission's website at www.ukces.org.uk But, these outputs are only the beginning of the process and we are engaged in other mechanisms to share our findings, debate the issues and extend their reach and impact.

We hope you find this report useful and informative. If you would like to provide any feedback or comments, or have any queries please e-mail info@ukces.org.uk, quoting the report title or series number.

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Executive Summary

Introduction

The UK Commission for Employment and Skills commissioned a qualitative evaluation across a range of investments, including the standards and framework programme, which procures the development of National Occupational Standards (NOS) products, apprenticeship framework products and Vocational Qualification (VQ) products. The evaluation was undertaken from November 2012 to April 2013. It was based primarily around a qualitative case study approach. There were 10 case studies looking at standards and frameworks products (five National Occupational Standard case studies; four Apprenticeship framework case studies; and one Vocational Qualification case study) and 10 case studies on projects funded through the Growth and Innovation Fund Rounds 1 and 2 (GIF) and Employer Investment Fund Phase 2 (EIF).

There are two evidence reports: one presents the findings of the standards and frameworks case studies; and a separate report presents the findings from the research undertaken on the GIF and EIF investment programmes.

Background to standards and frameworks

The standards and frameworks programme was introduced for 2012/13 and, in its first year, 381 standards and framework products were commissioned, which received £4.82m of public investment. As part of the bidding process sector bodies were invited to organise themselves into consortia and 12 partnerships and individuals suppliers were selected as providers over the period from 2012-2015.

Findings from the research

- The standards and frameworks programme commissioned around 300 unique products during 2012/13, a substantial proportion of which (43%) were new products. There was broad geographic coverage of these products and a substantial focus on activity in Scotland.

- The new partnership model for contracting standards and framework was effectively set-up, leading to 12 consortia and individual suppliers being contracted for this work from 2012-15. There is good understanding of the new collaborative approach among suppliers and the process benefited from previous good working relationships between many of the SSCs. The bidding process did not lead to new entrants to the market or increased competition between existing suppliers.

- All of the case study suppliers could point to a plausible rationale for product development or refresh. Sector bodies are increasingly focusing on revisions to standards and frameworks that relate to high-volume, strategically important qualifications. It is more difficult to identify demand for new products (especially NOS) than existing products, where existing data on qualification take-up can be used as a proxy for demand.

- While a mix of evidence is often used to make the case for investment in new products, demand is typically articulated as a general need rather than a more specific business case. A general need might relate to gaps in the existing standards and frameworks landscape (especially regarding specialist or emergent occupational areas) or changes to occupations / working practices that mean existing products cannot simply be refreshed. There are some exceptions to this, and the case for new development is strengthened when linked to regulatory or other similar changes that impact on employers and, in effect, creates new markets for training and qualifications.

- The commissioning process for products in the form of annual funding agreements has been well-designed, even though the timescales in 2012/13 were tight for suppliers (especially given that the process was new). Suppliers are being more closely geared towards considering the anticipated outcomes from product development when they make their case. The pricing model introduced has impacted on how suppliers organise standards and framework development – introducing new project management disciplines, looking for efficiencies and economies in the development process, as well as guiding them towards more streamlined processes.

- While the development process for apprenticeship frameworks and NOS is quite standardised and characteristically similar to qualification-related activities in the past, there are differences between suppliers in terms of the overall time taken for development, the approach to engaging employers, how the process is managed and the roles played by different organisations/individuals.

- The new commissioning model has directly led to sector bodies innovating approaches to research, consultation and testing. Employers are still largely involved in a consultative role, but these discussions and much more targeted and focused – something that is generally felt by all parties to be an improved approach. There is much better use of technology and greater task-orientation to ensure that working groups make the most of effective use of employers' limited time.

Qualitative Evaluation of Demand-led Skills Solutions: standards and frameworks

- There is a greater focus in many cases on working with employers and stakeholders that can bring intelligent industry insight and technical understanding, and less of a focus on light-touch consultation with a large number of employers. Suppliers typically gravitate towards previously-engaged employers when forming working groups. In some cases, the occupational area might be niche in nature or new to the supplier and here, considerable effort is deployed to ensure that specialists or experts are involved. How representative these groups are is a debatable point. However, most participants across the case study sample thought that there was a 'good mix' of employers and other stakeholders.

- The consortia approach is bringing greater consistency in standards and framework development through peer review, sharing of learning and approaches to consultation. The benefits are variable across the partnerships depending on how the lead supplier interprets its role.

- By the end of March 2013, 93% of planned outputs had been delivered. Five out of the 12 suppliers delivered all outputs by the deadline. By and large, suppliers delivered the vast majority of what they had been commissioned to do.

- It is too early to measure take-up and use of the new / revised products in most cases. There is early evidence of some new apprenticeship frameworks delivering increased take-up, and anecdotal evidence of individual employers using NOS to inform their own training and development. Largely, though, this relates to employers and stakeholders involved in the development process. The wider promotion of NOS is piecemeal and the difficult task of capturing intelligence on the wider use of NOS remains work in progress for most suppliers.

- The commissioning model has largely shifted the risk for product development onto suppliers, creating substantial efficiencies for the use of public money. The onus is increasingly on suppliers to ensure that there is sufficient demand in the first place, providing an additional lever to ensure that investment is targeted in the right place.

- There has been no major shift in thinking about, or planning for, the future sustainability of standards and frameworks products or the possibility of more practical employer contributions to sustainability. There is some early evidence that qualifications-related activities are becoming more integrated with the wider work of sector bodies, but it remains quite a discrete activity.

Conclusions

- **Competitive commissioning and investment culture:** Increased competition for skills investment funding is having a positive impact in ensuring that proposed skills solutions and products are better-targeted at areas of identifiable demand. Suppliers are being more selective about the solutions and products they put forward. The shifting of financial risk from the public funder to standards and frameworks suppliers is an extremely powerful lever for ensuring that development is demand-led.

- **The role of the UK Commission:** The overall feedback on support and management from the UK Commission is largely positive. The view from organisations with extensive experience of working with the UK Commission is that the guidance, support and monitoring it has provided is generally clear, appropriate and proportionate.

- **Employer demand and involvement project design:** There is inherent and long-standing difficulty in trying to capture an upfront measure of demand for a proposed standards and frameworks product. Bids for standards and frameworks investment tend to focus on well-established evidence of 'need', often drawing on LMI, rather than providing more tangible evidence of 'support' from employers. It is more resource-intensive to coalesce active sector support than to present a case for action based on existing LMI, so the approach appears to be a consequence of the relatively small level of investment in individual standards and frameworks product.

- **Progress, delivery and outlook:** There is evidence of effective and efficient approaches to managing the delivery of investment projects. The output-based payment model and price bands for standards and frameworks product development create value for money and improved project management across the supplier network.

- **Planning for sustainability:** The indicators of preparedness for future success include: whether there is a robust plan in place for making the transition beyond the investment period (and investees, especially SSCs, are getting stronger in this area over time) and whether investees can lever sufficient *active* involvement from at least a core of employers so that they are not just customers, but also champions of the solution that they shaped and developed. There are more substantial questions about whether standards and frameworks suppliers are generally gearing towards promoting those products once developed.

- **Strategic fit:** Standards and framework projects remain quite discrete in nature and there is scope for the links between standards and frameworks products and the wider strategic ambitions of many sector bodies to be much more explicit.

1   Introduction

1.1   Putting the evaluation in context

The UK Commission for Employment and Skills commissioned a qualitative evaluation across a range of investments in demand-led skills solutions, including:

- **The standards and frameworks programme:** procurement of the development of National Occupational Standards (NOS) products, apprenticeship framework products and Vocational Qualification (VQ) products.

- **The investment programme:** investment in projects under the Growth and Innovation Fund (GIF) and the Employer Investment Fund (EIF) programmes.

The overall aim of the evaluation was to:

- 'develop a greater understanding and insight of the development and commissioning of the individual funds

- draw insights about delivery and potential improvements

- enable the continuous improvement and capacity building to develop sustainable solutions'[1].

The findings are reported by programme:

- this report focuses on standards and frameworks

- there is a fellow report that focuses on the GIF and EIF investment funds.

In conducting the research in this way we identified common themes which presented both challenge and opportunity for the investee community. There a series of thematic papers which accompany the evaluation reports and draw out the learning from across the programmes.

The remainder of this chapter provides the background and context to the standards and framework programme. It also provides an overview of the evaluation approach and methodology.

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[1] Invitation to tender, September 2012 UKCES

1.2   Policy context for the standards and framework programme

In 2011, the UK Commission published an external review of the effectiveness of sector body activity to develop standards and frameworks, including National Occupational Standards (Serco Consulting, 2011). The review found inconsistent quality and value for money in the development of these products. There were significant variations in approach, cost, quality and the time taken to bring products to market.

The UK Commission's revised ten-year strategy for National Occupational Standards (NOS), also published in 2011, set out a vision for NOS to be widely used not just for developing qualifications, but *'also by employers and other stakeholders to underpin their human resource management processes and strategic business developments'.* The strategy also noted that standards and frameworks must reflect the needs of the modern economy, incorporating new and emerging areas, such as the low carbon industries and new technologies. Duplicates, or near duplicates, of NOS were identified as adding to the complexity of the skills system, making it difficult for employers and others to navigate, understand and use existing standards and frameworks (UKCES, 2011a).

Following the review of previous standards and frameworks activities, the UK Commission introduced a new commissioning model for these products in April 2012. It can be characterised by:

- Driving efficiency through competition and moving away from the traditional approach in which sector bodies 'owned' industry and occupational areas for the purposes of standards and framework development. With the exception of certain SOC codes for which there are separate statutory arrangements[2] and pan-sector SOC codes that are the responsibility of the Council for Administration, the **competitive bidding process for SOC codes was open to all SSCs who could evidence employer support**. Other sector bodies were able to participate, but only in partnership with a lead SSC supplier.

- Moving away from allocating resources via SSC core funding. Instead, a lead supplier makes the case for investment on a product-by-product basis and the available funding is determined by a price band. The unit price range varied by product (NOS, apprenticeship framework, SVQ) and depending on whether the product was new or an existing product to be reviewed. The price range for reviewing an *existing* apprenticeship framework was from £10,000 to £15,000. At the other end of the scale, the price range for developing *new* NOS was from £25,000 to £35,000. Unlike in the past, suppliers are paid on the delivery of outputs.

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[2] Certain occupational areas that are the responsibility of ConstructionSkills, Skills for Care and ECITB

- Simplified contracting arrangements based on **sector bodies bidding as consortia** to have responsibility for standards and frameworks in particular occupational areas (based on SOC codes), for the period 2012 to 2015.

- Selected providers for the three-year period 2012-15 negotiate **annual funding agreements** with the UK Commission, the first of which ran from April 2012 to March 2013. In 2012-13, 381 products were initially commissioned at a cost of £4.8m.

Since the introduction of the new approach to developing standards and frameworks, the Richard review of Apprenticeships (Richard, 2012) also recommended moving away from frameworks shaped by government to increasing employer control and involvement in design. It proposed changes to the way in which apprenticeships frameworks are developed, how they are assessed and who holds the purchasing power. In line with the NOS strategy, the Richard review recommended **moving towards a simplified qualification system**, based on having fewer standards (preferably one per occupation), with the impetus for standards and framework development lying with employers.

1.3 Overview of the study

1.3.1 Evaluation objectives

The focus of the evaluation was to capture lessons about the commissioning and delivery of the various investment programmes (standards and frameworks; GIF; EIF). It also aimed to provide an indication of impact to date from the UK Commission investments.

The evaluation had specific objectives to:

- Explore how standards and frameworks and the investment funds work to: develop a greater employer ownership and engagement in skills solutions; facilitate a more strategic approach to skills; and improve skills utilisation.

- Understand the approach sector skills councils and others are taking to the UK Commission funds, and how this operates in practice.

- Explore if, and how, Sector Skills Councils are adopting a strategic approach to their commissioning of standards and frameworks and investment bidding.

- Explore the coverage of the funds, and any linkages with wider work in the skills and employment arena.

- Explore the indications of how the standards and frameworks solutions and investment approaches might effect change in the sector in the medium-term, and identify evidence of early impact.

1.3.2 Approach and methodology

Key research tasks

The evaluation was undertaken from November 2012 to April 2013. It was based primarily around a qualitative case study approach focusing on a sample of 20 projects and products commissioned through the various programmes. This included:

- 10 case studies looking at standards and frameworks products (*five NOS case studies; four apprenticeship framework case studies; and one VQ case study*), each based around 4-6 in-depth interviews with the lead delivery organisation and partners supporting product development (including employers, as well as training providers, awarding organisations and other industry bodies) to triangulate views on development.

- 10 case studies looking at investment fund projects (*five EIF 2 case studies; and five GIF case studies, composed of three GIF 1 projects and two GIF 2 projects*), each based around 7-9 in-depth interviews. This included face-to-face interviews with strategic and operational staff in the lead delivery organisation and telephone interviews with employers and other project partners (trade unions, learning providers etc.).

- In addition to the case studies, the research also included interviews with organisations that were recipients of the GIF 2 development phase support and/or advice.

Evaluation framework and themes

An evaluation framework was developed to translate the research objectives into a set of themes that could be explored with case study interviewees:

- The **rationale** for the project or product (identification of need; alignment to programme objectives; product use and sector awareness; innovation and added value)

- The **case for investment** (the design and development process; use of evidence)

- The **role played by employers and partners** (employer and wider stakeholder involvement in project design; the employer contribution; maintaining and growing employer involvement in delivery)

- The **UK Commission role and programme design** (the application and commissioning process; support and guidance from the UK Commission; the impact of the investment approach and commissioning model; investee perceptions of monitoring and reporting)

- The **delivery and management of projects** (the implementation/delivery approach; delivery successes; challenges and lessons; early impact; evaluating outcomes and impact; future progress and plans for sustainability)

- The **strategic approach** employed by delivery organisations (coordination and alignment between activities; strategic planning; links to wider public policy goals).

Case study selection

Case studies were selected to ensure a mix of product and project types, while also focusing on investments project that were of particular interest to the UK Commission. For the standards and frameworks case studies, the selection criteria were based on achieving a mix in terms of the following:

- products developed by lead suppliers and products developed by consortia partners

- SSCs and other sector bodies

- product types (NOS, apprenticeships and VQs)

- geographical product coverage (across the UK nations)

- new and revised products

- products were also selected to reflect diversity in broad sector area.

Overview of interviews

The 10 Standards and frameworks case studies were undertaken from December 2012 to April 2013. A total of 58 interviews were undertaken across the ten case studies. This included: 21 interviews with standards and frameworks suppliers (sector bodies); 18 interviews with employers; and 19 interviews with other partners involved in product development.

2   The standards and frameworks programme

Chapter Structure

- The chapter provides an overview of the standards and framework programme, including types of investment made in 2012/13 and the geographic spread of activity.

- It explores the new commissioning process, which led to 12 consortia and individual suppliers being selected to provide standards and frameworks services from 2012-15. It looks at the process of partnership formation and the impact of the contestable funding approach on competition for NOS, apprenticeship frameworks and VQ development.

- The chapter then looks at how suppliers made the case for investment in individual products, especially in relation to evidencing employer demand. It considers some of the differences in how demand was articulated for new as opposed to existing products.

- It also looks at how the process of setting annual funding agreements has impacted on suppliers, particularly with regard to the significant impact on how product development is resourced, costed and managed.

- The key steps to product development are described and differences in approach between suppliers are identified. While the basic mechanics of the process are relatively unchanged, there are changes to the way in which employers are engaged as a consequence of the new commissioning model. On-going monitoring on the part of the UK Commission is also considered in this context, as are the benefits of the consortia model in supporting good practice.

- The chapter finishes by looking at overall programme achievements against expectations, as well as early evidence of take-up and use of the new/revised standards and frameworks. The efficiencies delivered by the new approach are considered, as is the impact of shifting the financial risk from the public funder to suppliers. The relative gap with regard to suppliers considering the sustainability of products is explored and the wider strategic fit of standards and framework activity with the other work of suppliers is discussed.

2.1 Programme overview and commissioned products

2.1.1 Overview of commissioned products in 2012/13

There were 381 commissioned standards and framework products in the 2012/13 financial year receiving £4.82m of public investment. Around a fifth of these (84 products) related to the same product being developed for different UK nations, typically in the context of apprenticeship frameworks. A framework covering England and Wales would be counted as two products. During 2012/13, there were therefore 297 'unique' standards and frameworks products at the point of commissioning[3].

Table 2.1 below shows the breakdown in terms of types of product commissioned and the balance between investment in new products and the revision/updating of existing products. Given that there is a relatively mature landscape in standards and frameworks, especially regarding NOS coverage, it is striking that **43 per cent of commissioned products were new**. This indicates a shift away from investment in routine refresh of existing products and suggests that the public investment in this area is being targeted to add value. Noting that the overall public resource for standards and framework development has reduced, suppliers of these products have increasingly targeted development work around gaps and areas of strategic importance.

Table 2.1   **Number of commissioned standards and frameworks products, 2012-13**

	Apprenticeships	NOS	VQs	Total
Number of unique products (and % of all products)	79 (27%)	143 (48%)	75 (25%)	297 (100%)
- New products (% of product type)	*41 (52%)*	*46 (32%)*	*40 (53%)*	*127 (43%)*
- Revised products (% of product type)	*38 (48%)*	*97 (68%)*	*35 (47%)*	*170 (57%)*
Investment, £ (and % of total investment)	£1.08m (23%)	£2.79m (58%)	£944k (20%)	£4.82m (100%)

Source: UKCES output tracker, October 2012

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[3] In-year contracting changes added some additional products, while others were withdrawn. By the end of the year, a total of 303 unique products were recorded on the UK Commission's standards and framework output tracker.

2.1.2 Geographic coverage of standards and frameworks products

All NOS products are UK-wide in coverage. The apprenticeship frameworks commissioned relate to different combinations of the UK nations. Very few (four) products were UK-wide in scope. There were a substantial number of Scotland-only frameworks (27 out of 79 products) and Wales-only frameworks (12 products). Six frameworks were England-only in scope and none focused specifically on Northern Ireland. The remainder covered various combinations of England, Wales and Northern Ireland (including 26 England and Wales products). According to the case study evidence, this variation was primarily due to the different review cycles of the devolved administrations.

The VQ element relates almost exclusively to the development of SVQs in Scotland (65 products), although it also includes 10 products relating to the development of sector skills priorities in Wales. Overall, **the standards and frameworks programme supports a range of activities in each of the four UK nations**.

2.2   Suppliers and the consortia commissioning process

2.2.1 Overview of standards and frameworks suppliers

Suppliers of standards and frameworks from 2012-2015 are organised into 12 partnerships, which were successful under terms of a competitive bidding process. Each partnership has a lead supplier, nine of which are SSCs and three of which are standard setting organisations (SSO). In one case, the lead supplier is Joint Venture Company comprising three SSCs.

Details of the 12 consortia are set out in Table 2.2 below, including the range of products commissioned in 2012/13. Four out of the 12 lead suppliers are not in a partnership, including the three non-SSC lead suppliers. The partnerships broadly align to areas of shared sector interest.

Table 2.2   **Consortia breakdown and number of commissioned products, 2012-13**

Lead supplier	Partners	Product type	Total
Broad sector	Broad sector	Number of unique products	Number
Asset Skills (Built environment)	Summit Skills (Built environment) Skills for Security (Service)	6 NOS; 11 AF[4]; 8 VQ	25
Construction Skills (Built environment)	ProSkills (Manufacturing)	18 NOS; 5 AF; 13 VQ	36
Creative & Cultural Skills (Creative & Digital)	Skillset (Creative & Digital)	15 NOS; 10 AF; 7 VQ	33
EU Skills (Energy)	Cogent (Energy) Improve (Manufacturing) ProSkills (Manufacturing) SEMTA (Manufacturing) Summit Skills (Built environment)	17 NOS; 17 AF; 16 VQ	50
e-skills UK (Creative & Digital)	None	1 NOS; 2 AF; 3VQ	6
Lantra (Agriculture)	SkillsActive (Service) HABIA (Service) People 1st (Service) Improve (Manufacturing)	17 NOS; 14 AF; 7 VQ	38
Skills for Care and Development (Health/Social Care)	Skills Third Sector (Multi-sector)	2 NOS; 0 AF; 3 VQ	5
Skillsmart Retail (Service)	IMI (Service) Skills for Logistics (Service)	10 NOS; 3 AF; 7 VQ	20
Universal Skills: Skills for Justice (Public Service) Skills for Health (Health/Social Care) Financial Skills (Service)	Skills Third Sector (Multi-sector)	28 NOS; 6 AF; 6 VQ	40
LSIS (Other public service)	None	2 NOS; 2 AF; 1 VQ	5
Council for Administration (Transversal)	None	6 NOS; 8 AF; 4 VQ	18
ECITB (Multi-sector)	None	21 NOS; 0 AF; 0 VQ	21

Source: UKCES output tracker, October 2012

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[4] Apprenticeship frameworks40

2.2.2 The 'selected provider' commissioning process

The commissioning document for standards and frameworks suppliers was published in early September 2011[5]. It formed a two-stage process. Initial submissions by partnerships of sector bodies to become selected providers for the three year period 2012-15 were required by the end of October 2011. This was followed by funding agreement negotiations with successful consortia for the 2012/13 period, which took place from mid-December 2011 to the end of January 2012. During this stage, suppliers had to submit evidence of employer support / demand for proposed products.

The initial commissioning of selected providers was based on a single bid per partnership made by the lead SSC. One requirement of the commissioning process was that bidders had to provide *'the whole range of services'* (i.e. NOS, apprenticeship frameworks and qualification-related activities)[6].

The rationale for the consortia model

The commissioning document clearly set out the rationale for the new commissioning approach – the need to *'find a way to deliver high quality services with less money'*. The shift from grant allocation to payment by outputs was set out in the commissioning document as being central to achieving value for money. The partnership approach was identified as a way of ensuring responsiveness and innovation:

> "We want to encourage collaboration across traditional footprint boundaries in order that you [sector bodies] can respond quickly to emerging strategic priorities by having the right services in the right place at the right time" (Michael Davis, Chief Executive of the UK Commission for Employment and Skills, UKCES 2011b, p. 4)

Forming partnerships

The partnership approach was widely accepted by SSCs. The two-stage approach in which selected providers were identified before products were commissioned **encouraged individual SSCs to work jointly to ensure that they would be able to access funding over the next three years**.

Partnership forming between SSCs seems to have been a relatively straightforward process, given the challenging timescales. Most of the SSCs interviewed during the case studies made a point of the value they placed on collaboration with colleagues in other SSCs in the past.

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[5] UKCES (2011b)
[6] UKCES (2011b)

This **cultural starting point and the experience of previous formal and informal partnership therefore facilitated partnership forming**. The standards setting bodies (SSOs) involved in the process could not usually be partnership lead suppliers, so the terms of engagement were quite straightforward for these organisations.

Determining roles: lead and partner suppliers

Decisions about **whether to be a lead supplier or partner supplier were made through negotiation within the partnerships**. It was a fairly ad hoc process, which is understandable given that the commissioning model was new and at the time there was not a clear view about the benefits or risks associated with the different roles.

Potential lead suppliers had to take a more active role in bid development. One lead supplier put itself forward as a *'political move'* given the increasing importance of competitively commissioned skills services.

Suppliers operating independently

Those SSCs which decided not to form a partnership or to form only a limited partnership did so because:

- they felt that their organisation was already something of a partnership and did not want to impose an additional layer on to existing approaches to standards and frameworks development; or

- they felt that the cross-sector nature of their work meant that there was no natural sector partnership alignment.

However, for the most part, SSCs and SSOs were able to form partnerships to take forward standards and frameworks activity. The **guidance and support for bidding to become selected providers was well-regarded** and the process was positively received by most successful participants.

2.2.3 Impact of the supplier commissioning process on competition

Although the commissioning document explicitly encouraged bidders to look beyond traditional SSC footprint boundaries, **the process of selecting providers for 2012-15 has not led to increased competition** for the provision of standards and frameworks services. Sector bodies have largely consolidated around SOC codes that have traditionally been their responsibility and for which they felt better-placed to bid to become suppliers.

There have been **no new entrants to the standards and frameworks market**, which is unsurprising given the technical capacity required to undertake this work, and the fact that non-SSCs (e.g. SSOs) could only bid in partnership with lead SSCs. Skills for Security, HABIA and Skills Third Sector are all partners within the nine SSC-led consortia. The Council for Administration and ECITB are lead suppliers in their own right, reflecting existing pan-sector and statutory arrangements respectively. One SSC questioned whether it was appropriate to limit eligibility to SSCs (*'if they [other organisations] are engaging with employers, why not encourage them? If they are doing the job right, the application system should be open'*).

According to case study interviewees, there appears to be **little appetite to compete beyond traditional SOC footprint responsibilities**. This is not surprising given the emphasis placed on collaboration in the initial supplier commissioning round. **Few suppliers have plans to extend their reach in future**. In part, this might reflect the timing of the commissioning process. With current responsibilities notionally set until 2015, it may be too early for the sector bodies to consider their medium-term strategy in relation to standards and frameworks.

There are, though, **substantial barriers to increased competition if the current model is continued**. According to case study interviewees, these relate primarily to the (unfunded) set-up costs for working in new sector and occupational areas. Even where sector bodies have the requisite technical skills (e.g. to develop NOS), the development of the supporting infrastructure (employer support and links) is too costly in the short-term and the gains are thought to be too marginal for it to be a realistic proposition. It was also noted that, in most occupational areas, there are better-placed incumbents (other SSCs) with established employer relationships. Gaps in current coverage were felt to be niche, raising questions for interviewees about the likely level of return.

2.3 Evidencing the demand for standards and framework products

After the consortia were selected by the UK Commission in late 2011, each successful supplier had a small window in which to agree an annual funding agreement for products to be developed from April 2012 to March 2013. This included agreeing the price and volume of outputs and the provision of evidence of demand, based on LMI and other skills intelligence.

The **case for developing/refreshing apprenticeship frameworks and VQs tends to have been more clearly linked to direct employer demand than NOS development**. In some cases, the demand for apprenticeship framework products is mediated by awarding organisations, which play a crucial role in providing the business case for development by underpinning the market for qualifications.

Qualitative Evaluation of Demand-led Skills Solutions: standards and frameworks

The rationale for NOS development depended on whether the primary purpose in each case is:

- qualification development (in which case the drivers and evidence for development is similar to apprenticeship framework products); or

- wider uses of NOS (typically to support consistent occupational/professional standards and often in a regulated context).

All of the case study suppliers were able to point to a plausible rationale for the product in question. Suppliers drew on national labour market sources and employer surveys to evidence gaps and shortages that could be met by the proposed product. In this sense, **demand is often articulated as a general need rather than a more specific business case for the specific product**. The level of demand is often not quantified. Such evidence is difficult to produce, but it perhaps indicates a wider gap in relation to having clear objectives about how the products will be used and how they may impact on the sector.

2.3.1 Making the case for revising existing products

The rationale for revising existing products is largely based on one of the following:

- changes to the occupation, working practices or work context (typically technological changes)

- an additional need based on using the product in new ways or with new audiences (for example, revising existing NOS in part to support closer engagement with key employers to support professionalisation)

- a routine need for updating related to the demands of external stakeholders (regulators, funders etc) or to reflect other qualification-related changes (e.g. updating an apprenticeship framework to reflect revised NOS and VQ).

There is evidence that **sector bodies are focusing on revisions to standards and frameworks that relate to high-volume, strategically important qualifications**. This indicates that the commissioning model is working to support prioritisation. The notion of review cycles for standards and frameworks was described by some interviewees as influencing their thinking (e.g. a period of time has passed and the product is due to 'expire' or due for review), but this acts increasingly as a spur for considering review rather than a rationale for review *per se.*

Qualitative Evaluation of Demand-led Skills Solutions: standards and frameworks

The business case for review of apprenticeship frameworks and some NOS[7] often draws on existing data on qualification take-up as a proxy for demand. A number of case study suppliers referred to this evidence as being an important part of the case for action.

It was much **easier for suppliers to evidence demand/need for revising products than it was for new products**. Nevertheless, there were challenges faced by suppliers. In some cases this related to lack of understanding of how best to make the case. For example, one supplier had its initial bid rejected because it did not provide evidence of the increasing take-up of qualifications; something it was able to address based on UK Commission feedback.

2.3.2 Making the case for developing new products

The rationale for developing new standards and frameworks products is typically based on the following:

- gaps in the existing standards and frameworks landscape, especially regarding specialist or emergent occupational areas / skill needs

- changes to the occupation, working practices or work context (typically technological changes) to the extent that existing standards or frameworks cannot simply be refreshed because of the way in which these changes are transforming job roles and occupations

- the deployment of existing standards and frameworks products, and particularly apprenticeships, to new occupational areas, especially in order to develop non-traditional entry and progression routes

- new regulations or occupational requirements (often driven by government policy) that create new markets for the application of standards and frameworks.

In the context of the development of new products, the **evidence put forward by suppliers included a mix of evidence related to active employer demand and latent demand**. Active demand is evident when a group of employers are explicitly pushing for product development. Latent demand is where the evidence of need is mediated by a third party (typically the sector body itself) and posed in more conceptual terms (*i.e. what the sector needs, rather than what the sector is currently actively supporting*). It does not presume that employers are immediately in a position to make use of the product. Investing in standards and frameworks products based on latent demand is generally much riskier, although may be more innovative if it is connected to capacity building activities within the sector to raise the level of demand for skills and development.

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[7] where the rationale for NOS was closely linked to qualifications rather than wider uses

Examples of active and latent demand are provided below.

- Active demand: In one case, a group of major employers approached the SSC with a view to developing a new more-specialised apprenticeship framework, because the existing framework was felt to be too general to meet their needs. The underpinning rationale was that if the framework was not developed, each employer would develop its own training – potentially limiting transferability of skills.

- Latent demand: The rationale in another case was to create new entry and progression routes in an occupational area that did not traditionally use apprenticeships. The case for action could therefore be based in terms of the benefits for non-professional staff which might use this route for career development (supporting retention etc.). The level of demand in this case was relatively untested, because the whole approach is new to the occupation in question. There were limits to how far the supplier could go in scoping demand owing to the short timescales for bidding and because, in this case, the product involved the supplier working with a new group of employers.

The **case for action to develop new products is often more tangible and persuasive when it is also related to new regulations or requirements on employers**. For example, part of the rationale for developing new NOS in corporate governance risk was as a response to the financial crisis and new responsibilities on leaders in financial service organisations.

However, even where there is a clear *a* well-established rationale for having occupational standards, it does not necessarily follow that employer beneficiaries are aware that NOS could be a potential solution. There is challenge in evidencing demand for new NOS where employer awareness is low. Partly as a consequence, there is relatively little exploration or early scoping in the bids of the *nature* of actual employer demand (i.e. tangible and specific support from employers). This sits alongside the absence of clear upfront plans in many cases for how products, once developed, will be marketed to ensure wide usage – which is especially important given that demand is often either articulated in general terms or as being latent in nature.

However, there was an example in which new NOS were proposed to act as a 'code of practice' to underpin in-house training on manufacturer products. Crucially, the need for the NOS had been discussed and negotiated through various industry forums over a substantial period of time (*'the need for these NOS units had been identified through existing research and consultation around 18 months prior to the project commencing'*). This provides an insight into how wider uses of NOS can be scoped and developed with employers once the commissioning process is established and when the wider benefits are aligned to what employers need (in this case, *'setting quality standards employers can use for their own training'*).

2.4 The product commissioning process and resources for development

2.4.1 Reflections on the commissioning process

The **overall commissioning process for standards and frameworks products appears to have been well-designed**. There was positive feedback from interviewees about the UK Commission's role, the support provided in negotiating annual agreements and dealing with the need for in-year flexibility (although there may be need for further clarity and awareness raising among suppliers about these flexibilities). There is a sense that where plans for product development were rejected for funding, this was done on a transparent basis.

As discussed below, supplier perspectives on the new commissioning model are informed by a realistic view of the level of available resources – i.e. there is lower public investment overall and a need for efficiencies. There are examples of challenges faced by individual suppliers further down the line relating to payment for work commissioned – which leads to questions being raised about the balance of risk between the UK Commission and suppliers. This is explored below in the section 2.6.2 on programme *Outcomes*.

The main concern about the process of negotiating the annual funding agreement, which was widely voiced by suppliers, was the **short timescale** (less than two months) for submitting proposals for product development. The specific challenge here was in generating the evidence of employer demand. One SSC emphasised that the timescale were difficult for collecting employer evidence, *'especially when dealing with four nations and over the December-January period, which is one of the busiest periods for employers in our sector – largely SMEs'*.

A common critique related to **not having guidance early enough** to support applications for investment. This meant, according to a supplier, that *'we were bidding blind'*. However, the **guidance itself and the bid document were felt to be *'very straightforward'*** according to one lead supplier. Other lead suppliers made similar comments. There was a **learning curve for some suppliers**. Some of the 'jargon' (such as 'demonstrating market failure') was unfamiliar even to SSCs with considerable experience of engaging with the UK Commission.

There was **widespread support for the 'logic model approach' to bidding, which required suppliers to set out the anticipated outcomes from product development**. According to one lead supplier, *'it focuses the minds of bidders on evidence production and forces them to think – "if this is the reason for need, how will the NOS fulfil this?"'* Another partner supplier said that requiring bidders to think through the process of 'how' they will achieve the desired outcomes was the most beneficial part of the process.

Interviewees generally reported a **clear sense of the need to shift from routine product updating every few years to being more discriminating in selecting standards and frameworks for review**. This approach, which also appears to be shaped by the UK Commission's input to agreeing the annual funding agreements, shows that the new commissioning model supports a more efficient use of resources.

To some extent, the constrained timetable is a function of the introduction of a new process. It would be expected that in the second year of commissioning, the greater familiarity with the UK Commission's expectations around the annual funding agreement would enable suppliers to plan and gather appropriate evidence of demand more routinely. A number of interviewees expressly commented that **the process for 2013/14 appeared to be easier**. In the first year, even though the bidding guidance was not received early enough for most suppliers, lead suppliers were able to have informal conversations with the UK Commission, which were felt to be important in helping suppliers to plan activity.

A number of suppliers felt limited by the annual cycle of funding agreements. They wanted to be able to respond to emerging demand within the year. However, there is evidence that a number of in-year changes were made as part of the commissioning process – removing some products and introducing others. There were positive comments about the UK Commission's flexibility in this regard. What is perhaps required is greater clarity for suppliers about the scope for updating the funding agreement during the year.

2.4.2 Costing and resourcing product development

Standards and frameworks products are commissioned according to set price bands per product, taking account of whether the product is being newly developed or an existing product is being revised (see Table 2.3 below). **The new pricing model has impacted on how sector bodies organise and undertake standards and framework development**. Case study interviewees generally report a more streamlined and pared-down process, and the need to develop robust products on limited resources was an on-going concern among sector bodies.

The price bands themselves were felt to be reasonable by suppliers. They generally understood the shifting context and the need for efficiencies and value for money from a more limited public funding 'pot'. The fact that the UK Commission consulted with suppliers when developing the output unit prices was felt to be an important element of ensuring that the costs per output were reasonable.

Table 2.3   Unit pricing for standards and frameworks products (2012-13)

Product	Price range per product	
	Minimum	Maximum
NOS Review	£15,000	£30,000
NOS New	£25,000	£35,000
Apprenticeship Review	£10,000	£15,000
Apprenticeship New	£22,000	£25,000
SVQ Review	£11,000	£19,000
SVQ New	£17,000	£28,000

Source: UKCES Standards and Frameworks overview presentation, November 2012

Output pricing has prompted a substantial number of suppliers to incorporating project management disciplines to underpin product development (see below). Most suppliers used day rates and estimates of the time required in order to develop costs. Where this has not been the case, it is because suppliers are generally comfortable in being able to deliver under the new resourcing model. As one supplier which has not changed its approach said: *'this income we get, as long as it covers our staffing costs, then we are fine'.* Where suppliers are developing a substantial number of products, there are economies of scale that minimise the impact of tighter product unit pricing.

Suppliers have also been able to generate additional efficiencies to the resources required to develop products, such as:

- Developing multiple apprenticeship frameworks at different levels or NOS in similar areas at the same time. This can streamline consultation with employers, creating economies of scale (and reducing the burden on employers).

- Shortcutting the development of new NOS by re-using existing units.

This is important because there are also challenges and uncertainties faced in certain cases:

- Credit and levelling activity in the context of apprenticeship frameworks, which is reportedly only funded in Scotland.

- Costing VQ development when the number of units is unknown in advance and the development costs for each unit vary.

The overall economic viability of product development in the medium-term was an area of some debate among sector bodies. It was generally agreed, however, that this was less an issue for resourcing the process of product development itself, rather than the 'un-funded' elements underpinning product development (gathering LMI on need and, to a lesser extent, maintaining employer networks). The lack of certainty here may be inhibiting future planning.

The issues relating to resourcing evidence of demand (based on LMI) vary depending on the nature of the product. Some case studies looked at fairly niche products for which it would not be realistic to expect national data sources and surveys to be able to provide sufficient granularity. This is primarily an issue for being able to propose new products, given that there are other sources of evidence available to highlight demand for existing products (e.g. qualification take-up).

In reality, the business case for *new* products proposed in 2012/13 drew heavily on qualitative information to underpin the rationale for development. The more substantial question for resourcing (discussed below) is how products, once developed are promoted to potential users – especially in the context of NOS.

2.5 The process of product development

2.5.1 Key steps to product development

The development/re-development process for standards and frameworks products is quite standardised and similar in structure to how products were developed when they were a core-funded responsibility. This indicates that **sector bodies have been able to maintain something approaching a rigorous model, even in light of having reduced overall funding**.

Developing apprenticeship frameworks

The process in relation to apprenticeship frameworks usually starts with some form of initial consultation with employers and/or stakeholders to identify 'what they want' from the framework (through meetings, workshops, telephone calls). This is followed by discussions with awarding organisations offering the qualification / or who may potentially develop the qualification. In some cases, these discussions are on-going if part of the work is to identify an awarding organisation to support development. An internal or external unit writer then drafts new units or selects units from the unit database for the framework.

The process then enters a consultation phase with employers to review the units that have been developed or selected. The final draft of the framework is then sometimes presented for wider consultation (typically over a period of 1-2 months). Finally, work is undertaken with awarding organisations to develop the qualifications based on the revised framework.

NOS development

The NOS development process typically involves the formation of a working group of employers in parallel with initial development / revision work to produce a draft specification. The drafting of this specification varies depending on the type of existing material that NOS writers can draw on (existing NOS, related NOS etc). This is an area, however, in which suppliers generally report a shift: from early consultation on a 'blank piece of paper' to producing an initial draft through a NOS writer or small technical team which can then be consulted on more widely. It shortcuts the development process somewhat, both in terms of time taken and resources required. Consultation then takes the form of meetings or exchanges with the employer working group. This is usually followed by wider consultation on a revised specification before the group meets again to sign-off the final specification.

Differences in approach between suppliers

The overall process for standards and framework development is therefore relatively consistent and recognisable compared to previous approaches. There are differences in approach between suppliers, which relate to:

- **The overall time taken for development.** This is typically shorter than in the past, especially with regard to NOS development, which can be undertaken over a period of months. In some cases, the retention of sector-wide consultation, especially at the four-nation level, at different points in the process means that development (especially for apprenticeship frameworks) can take up to a year. One benefit of having a shorter development timescale is that it is more cost-effective. More importantly, it also helps to build and maintain employer and stakeholder involvement. Employers and stakeholders widely reported the premium they placed on having efficient and focused interactions with the supplier. They do not generally agree to be involved expecting it to be a long, drawn out process. This creates a requirement for suppliers to be well-organised and to effectively manage the process, because there is less scope for slippage; but the case study evidence suggests that suppliers are generally able to do this. Where the development process takes longer, this is, in part, a function of external constraints – notably customary or regulatory requirements for consultation to follow a certain method and, crucially, for it to take place at sub-UK level. There may, though, be scope in future for suppliers in this situation to move slowly towards a more time-efficient approach, because there do not appear to be obvious benefits from longer development processes in terms of the quality of employer input.

- **The approach to engaging employers and stakeholders.** There is variation in the number of times employer groups meet / are asked for comments within the development process. Increasingly, suppliers are moving towards more iterative bilateral discussions with employers, which means that employers may be consulted on anything from three to eight times during the process. Where this works well, it further supports active and effective employer engagement, because it goes hand-in-hand with employers making more targeted and relevant inputs. A number of suppliers reported that what has been removed from previous processes is the general discussions in upfront meetings. These used to serve the purpose of making people feel involved, but were not necessarily the best way to reach an initial draft or specification to be discussed because it involved doing quite detailed technical work by committee. There is a risk here that suppliers might not get sufficient employer input into initial scoping and that the overall legitimacy of the process might be question. This does not, from the case studies, appear to be the experience so far.

- **The roles played by different organisations/individuals.** The key distinctions here relate to the use of external, specialist NOS writers as opposed to internal staff. There is a marginal increase in the use of external technical expertise, but a number of suppliers are simply arranging this as they always have done. In relation to apprenticeship frameworks, the role of awarding organisations is often crucial and their level of active involvement varies (e.g. undertaking technical development or acting as more of an interested stakeholder). In some cases, intermediaries such as training providers offering the apprenticeship act as a broker for engaging and consulting with employers (especially in specialist areas). Where technical working groups are deployed, these often include external stakeholders (not necessarily just employers). There is not necessarily a 'right' way to balance roles. Apart from the use of external NOS writers, the differences outlined above are generally a function of the context for each product, i.e. who the key stakeholders are. Whether a supplier choses external NOS writers depends on internal capacity and capability. This is partly a strategic decision for the organisation related to how many NOS the organisation is responsible for and how important NOS are perceived to be within the sector. The debate at the moment is much more about whether to retain previous capability than whether to grow new capability. There are clear potential advantages in having this expertise in-house: the development process is easier to manage; it is more efficient; and organisational knowledge and learning increases as part of the process. However, it is important not to overplay the impact of these advantages. There is no major apparent difference in the quality of the process or product in the case studies that can be ascribed to the use of internal or external NOS writers.

- **Managing the process:** From a supplier perspective, there are different approaches apparent in relation to some organisations having a single staff member managing the entire process, to having a small internal team responsible for different elements. The main advantage of having a single staff member managing the process is that it tends to ensure a seamless interaction for employers and stakeholders. It can make it easier to have a coherent, efficient process. Of course, the risk is that these benefits only appear if the staff member is suitably skilled; so, there is an associated organisational risk in depending on one person to manage the whole process. Having a team-based approach minimises this risk somewhat, but it brings with it additional needs for internal co-ordination and planning. Depending on who within the organisation is involved in the process, a team-based approach may make it easier to connect standards and frameworks development with wider organisational activities. It is less likely to be characterised by one person operating in a silo. However, the case studies suggest that it is early days for ensuring that standards and frameworks activity is better-integrated in wider organisational strategy.

Changes in approach under the new commissioning model

While retaining the same, basic core steps to developing/re-developing standards and frameworks, **the new commissioning model has required sector bodies to innovate their approaches to research, consultation and testing** – notably in relation to NOS. The unit pricing for products demands a streamlined, efficient process. It has, in some instances, **reduced the extent of consultation that takes place**, although not necessarily to the detriment of the final product.

In many cases, there are fewer internal resources managing the process. This has led to processes being streamlined. One sector body described this in terms of being more *'hard-headed'* about development – ensuring that project management disciplines are deployed, that there is a strict timetable and no slippage in development. A couple of case study suppliers had previously undertaken development internally but now used external consultants.

The most substantial change is in *how* partners are engaged as part of the process. Some basic disciplines and efficiencies have been used fairly widely in order to facilitate more focused input from employers and others. This includes using online technology to support working groups, as well as providing more information in advance of meetings. Working group meetings have been refined in many cases. As one supplier noted, *'in the past the process was even more discursive…we'd sit at a table and discuss each [occupational standard]…but this is too expensive'*. **Having more focused and targeted discussions with employers was widely felt to be an improvement by both suppliers and employers involved in the process**.

Where broader sector workshops and events were planned as part of the process, this was not necessarily felt to be successful. As one supplier noted, *'the sector is consulted out'*. In this case, even though there was evidence of the importance of NOS to the sector in this case, when events were run the attendance was poor. The general shift to working with a smaller group of employers in a targeted way is not therefore simply a consequence of the resources available. It reflects that employers are busy and unlikely to prioritise one-off consultation workshops that they have to travel to.

Project monitoring

The commissioning approach clearly directed suppliers to incorporate sound project management techniques in managing development. The **'hands off' approach followed by the UK Commission with regard to monitoring was deemed to be appropriate and proportionate** to the work being undertaken.

One supplier felt that there was *'less micro-managing'* than in the past – characterised by fewer visits and light-touch monitoring requirements (*'we are awarded funding, set targets and left to get on with it'*). Another supplier described it as being an *'open, honest relationship'*, with a view that the UK Commission was ultimately *'on our side'*. Given that on-going discussions might typically centre on difficult areas, such as non-delivery (and therefore non-payment), it is an achievement to maintain positive working relationships.

Inevitably, there was dissatisfaction from some suppliers about how particular cases of non-delivery had been handled. This emphasises the importance of having on-going dialogue and the early identification of problems in order to reduce the likelihood of non-payment. It does not indicate that the monitoring approach should change, because many of the problems can be ascribed to it being year one of a new contracting model.

2.5.2 Involvement of employers and other stakeholders

Nature of employer involvement

Employers are largely involved in standards and framework development in a consultative role. There are two strands to this:

- Employers participating in working groups, which tend to make a fairly substantial commitment to the process, although this is typically advisory in nature.

- Employers responding to consultation exercises / surveys on draft specifications or to identify product requirements. The level and breadth of involvement here is quite variable.

Standards and frameworks development processes are typically based around these two complementary strands to ensure both a depth and breadth of employer engagement. Working groups provide the opportunity for employers to be a sounding board in shaping the product. Employers responding to consultations can act as check to ensure the representativeness and generalisability of the employer voice in the working groups.

The engagement of employers has not generally moved beyond standard and framework design/review to utilising the products. In this sense, **while the process of employer involvement appears to be more agile and efficient than in past, it is relatively unchanged in nature**.

Range and volume of employers involved

Suppliers typically **gravitate towards previously-engaged employers** when forming working groups. In some cases, the occupational area might be niche in nature or new to the supplier and here, considerable effort is deployed to ensure that specialists or experts are involved. How representative these groups are is a debatable point. However, **most participants across the case study sample thought that there was a 'good mix' of employers and other stakeholders**. A common challenge reported by suppliers was ensuring four-nation coverage through consultation, because in some cases this led to undertaking four separate exercises. This clearly had a resource impact on suppliers.

There was also a wider point about what constitutes a sufficient number of employers to engage through the process. This is directly connected to perceptions about the appropriate balance between employers engaged through working groups (typically around 6-12 employers) and those responding to a survey/consultation (a much larger number of employers).

It was generally thought to be **more important to have contributors who could bring intelligent industry insight and technical understanding than undertaking standards and frameworks development as a 'numbers game' based on light-touch consultation with a large number of employers**. Widespread sector consultation was sometimes difficult to execute anyway given resource constraints and the variable level of awareness of the products (especially in the context of NOS).

This raised questions for some stakeholders. One stakeholder respondent wondered whether the process could be improved by ensuring greater transparency of consultation responses and clarity of how representativeness and bias are addressed as part of the analysis of responses.

It appears inevitable that **employer engagement is geared towards a narrow group of employer advocates. This also reflects a need for sector bodies to be quite pragmatic in their approaches.** There are also some long-standing difficulties in making the somewhat archaic world of standards and frameworks meaningful to employers (its technical nature and inaccessible language). This creates a dependency on existing employer relationships and, in relation to NOS specifically, a focus on working with NOS advocates. This point was fairly widely acknowledged by sector bodies themselves, although it has not translated into new approaches to marketing or promoting the products to employers (i.e. to emphasise the wider applicability and practical use of NOS, for example, to inform HR practices at employer level by incorporating them in job role specifications, competency frameworks or training and development strategies).

'Selling' the process to employers

In the context of NOS, the **perceived value in having commonly-agreed national standards** is one of the most important factors reported by employers for engaging in the process. One of the difficulties here is that the value depends on factors such as awareness of the NOS. A number of relatively engaged employers/stakeholders reported confusion and difficulty in understanding the NOS landscape. Lack of clarity about the inter-relationship between seemingly similar NOS developed by different organisations was a frequently-reported problem. The general lack of navigability of the huge NOS library compounded this challenge. The lack of effective marketing about the practical uses of NOS compounds the challenge for employers at large; because it means that there is no logical way in which they would be expected to become aware of these products.

In the context of apprenticeship frameworks, engagement of employers via training providers and/or awarding organisations is an important route into industry in some cases. Especially where suppliers are looking to access small employers in relatively niche areas, existing customers for similar provision provide important intelligence.

Work to revise existing apprenticeships frameworks can **create a virtuous circle in which more appropriate provision (especially for SMEs) leads to increased engagement, understanding and demand**. One training provider reported that employer understanding of previous frameworks was low because the frameworks were not fit for purpose. An employer in the same area thought that because training was *'too college-based'* and did not offer opportunities for progression, take-up was low and this led to lack of understanding of the basic mechanics of the frameworks (e.g. the differences between an NVQ and an apprenticeship; what the additional benefits of an apprenticeship were in this context).

One of the **challenges for suppliers is to ensure that the benefits of all standards and frameworks products are promoted not just as a one-off exercise but over time** – in order to grow awareness and to create the virtuous circle noted above. There are limitations to what any single organisation can do. However, in the context of NOS specifically, employers and stakeholders actively involved in a number of cases reported that while communication and information sharing was good during the process, it tailed off at the end when the products are being approved by the relevant authorities. It was not always clear to those who had been involved whether the new NOS had 'gone live' and what the current status was. The picture here is mixed. Some suppliers whose rationale for development was based on latent demand knew that they had to promote the products once approved to ensure that they were successful.

2.5.3 Impact of the consortium model

There is evidence that **the consortia approach is already bringing greater consistency in activities to review standards and frameworks (peer review/quality assurance of bids; and working towards similar scale of consultation across the partnership)**. Partnership working provides an opportunity to share good practice and learning. This was seen as a major impact by some suppliers and is a positive by-product of the commissioning model. Examples of effective practice in this area include loaning specialist staff (e.g. data analysts) to other consortia members as required; although these kinds of activity do not appear to be widespread.

Lead suppliers did not tend to report benefits from undertaking their role. Some clearly felt it to be something of a burden (one lead supplier indicating in the order of five days additional work to administer the partnership). It depended how the lead supplier undertook the role. Some partners saw added value, while others thought that the lead supplier was, in the words of one partner, simply *'a post box'*.

Where lead suppliers were quality assuring all outputs, this required significant time that was not generally costed in the bids. Management fees are charged to partners in order to defray these costs and are taken from the agreed development costs for each product. It has been noted that these **lead supplier management fees (typically 5-7%) increase the pressure on partner bodies undertaking the work**. This has not damaged the standards and framework development process; however it can cause resentment because partners view the fees as reducing 'their' already-limited resources for development. There was widespread acknowledgement that the lead supplier role attracted additional costs, but some suppliers thought that this should be costed separately.

2.6 Achievements, outcomes and early impact

2.6.1 Programme achievements against expectations

By the end of March 2013, according to the UK Commission's programme-level output tracker, 336 outputs had been delivered out of 361 intended products. This is slightly fewer than the 381 products initially commissioned, reflecting in-year changes. Some new products were commissioned during the year, while others were withdrawn. For example, one of the case study suppliers reported that, in one case, it emerged some way down the line that separate, related NOS were unnecessary. Results from early development work could therefore be incorporated into the initial plan. In total, 32 outputs were withdrawn and 25 outputs were not delivered. The most important factor for ensuring the viability of the product and delivery of the product was being able to contact and engage a sufficient volume of employers.

Excluding in-year withdrawals, a total 93% of outputs were completed:

- Five of the 12 consortia/individual suppliers delivered all outputs.

- A further six suppliers/consortia delivered from 88-98% of anticipated outputs.

One outlier completed only two thirds (68%) of intended outputs. This was because they experienced specific difficulties in developing products in Scotland. In this case the sector body's products were not approved by the Scotland regulator and they were asked to consult with a broader range of organisations, particularly Small to Medium Size Enterprises (SMEs). In this case, the learning for the supplier is to ensure that in future they establish upfront whether the range of employers they plan to consult with meets the expectations of the regulator.

A further issue that arose was that the regulator had questioned the needs for some products. This was problematic for the supplier, which had already made the case for demand and been contracted by the UK Commission. There was no clear resolution to this debate, according to the supplier. It is an area that should be a priority for the UK Commission to address in future given that, if the situation is repeated, it could reduce supplier confidence in the whole commissioning process.

2.6.2 Outcomes

Early evidence of product take-up/use and prospects for future impact

Most of the case study products were delivered/approved towards the end of the 2012/13 year (i.e. in early 2013), reflecting that delivery across the programme was somewhat end-loaded. It is therefore **too early to assess take-up and use in most cases**. In the case of NOS, it was further noted that there can be a **time lag** resulting from awarding organisation planning cycles, which means that developing and levelling new units for revised qualifications may occur well after the new NOS are approved.

There is a challenge in being able to monitor the wider use of NOS. This is less of an issue for VQs and apprenticeship frameworks, where use can be measured in relation to metrics such as take-up and satisfaction. One provider delivering a revised apprenticeship framework in a niche area reported that there had been 34 new starts in the first month since it was launched, compared to around 150 starts in the preceding two years (*'so it looks promising'*). Indirectly, it is possible to measure the impact of NOS in underpinning qualifications in a similar way. Arguably, though, this provides a narrow measure of impact for something as wide-ranging as occupational standards.

There is a lot of **anecdotal evidence of individual employers using NOS** as part of the design of Human Resource (HR) systems (such as the design of competency frameworks and person specifications). There is also anecdotal evidence from the interviews of NOS being used to underpin important profession-led training programmes. Individual employers who were involved in one of the NOS case study products reported that their involvement had led them to tailor their training. According to one employer, *'the NOS process made me rethink the importance of underpinning knowledge…that should be enhanced alongside the bespoke elements of our training'*.

The difficulty is that much of this activity is 'under the radar'. A training programme or staff development framework may be 'NOS-compliant', but it is adapted and tailored for specific use. Organisations involved in or benefiting from this NOS-based development might not even know that NOS has contributed in this way if the development is undertaken via a third party. As NOS are publicly-accessible, it is even more difficult for sector bodies to monitor who is using them.

Even accounting for these difficulties, the early evidence suggests that **sector bodies are not always even trying to capture intelligence on use and take-up of NOS**. More importantly, a number of wider stakeholders in different sectors have highlighted the point that the **promotion of NOS once developed is piecemeal and insubstantial**. The products appear not to be actively marketed, reinforcing their invisibility beyond a hard-core of technical users.

This arguably increases the risk of them being seen as irrelevant or not meeting employer needs (because awareness is low). In this context it is important that sector bodies understand that promoting the use and impact of NOS can also provide evidence of market demand to underpin later bids for public investment. In spite of the challenges, this is an area in which suppliers should be much more proactive, at least by considering the following questions:

- Have the NOS been packaged and marketed in a way that makes them generally accessible to a wide cross-section of potential users? A useful benchmark for this might be considering whether the NOS would be meaningful and understood by the average HR director or manager working in the sector.

- Which are the key organisations that might be in the vanguard of using new NOS (e.g. professional bodies; major employers; employer networks; HR consultancies; training organisations operating in the sector; awarding organisations) and what is their level of awareness of the NOS?

- What new tools, approaches and products have been developed at industry, network or employer level that *could* have drawn on the NOS? Is there active dialogue with the organisations / networks behind this related work to understand whether the NOS provided a helpful starting point, was aligned to it or might be used in future?

The case studies show that on occasion the use of NOS to support employers is the primary factor informing developments. In these cases the use of NOS for underpinning qualifications is seen as a secondary driver. Where development is framed explicitly in these terms, the evidence suggests that employers involved in NOS development are more likely to use and adapt them for their own purposes. This is shown to work where there is an upfront desire or need from employers for common standards. As one supplier noted:

> "There is research that outlines over 100 uses for NOS. We are missing a trick here – qualifications can often be a barrier to industry. NOS, once developed, are a free resource that employers…can start to use immediately to align existing training" (Standards and qualifications developer)

The question is raised, though, by suppliers about whose role it is to market these benefits more widely.

Programme efficiency and effectiveness

The commissioning model has largely shifted risk from the public funder (the UK Commission) to suppliers. While the vast majority of products have been successfully produced within the required timeframe, the UK Commission has further been able to minimise its risk by reclaiming initial 10% upfront payments in cases of non-delivery from the final payments of products that were delivered – via contract variation.

This creates pressures for suppliers, but it has largely geared them towards ensuring that cost control and effective project management disciplines underpin development. Some suppliers have argued that the balance of risk is unfair, especially when they face delivery issues.

One supplier reported developing a framework that it would not be paid for, because employers decided late in the process that they would not require it – even though they had supported earlier development work. This is a tough situation for the supplier and an extreme case, but it highlights that **the onus is on suppliers to ensure sufficient employer demand in the first place (in order to reduce their risk)**. This provides a further lever to ensure that investments are targeted in the right place. There is no evidence that current suppliers are considering withdrawing from the market because of the level of risk incurred.

Generally, there are fewer people within supplier organisations working on standards and frameworks. Some suppliers have increased capacity in recent years because they have broadened their areas of responsibility. This is relatively exceptional to date and reflects a consolidation of sector organisations involved in the standards and frameworks development (especially with regard to the previously substantial number of SSOs).

For the most part, suppliers have driven efficiencies by working smarter and streamlining the development process. Wider innovations in approach driven by the funding model include:

- increased use of technology for consultation (online surveys)

- having working group meetings via Skype

- being more structured and task-orientated in relation to the refinement and comments of draft standards

- using small, expert sub-groups to undertake much of the legwork for employer-led development (moving away from standards and framework development by committee) and having wider reference groups that are themselves more streamlined than in the past.

Where this process works, it is not only efficient; but, according to stakeholders, it can make for a **more positive experience overall and a higher-quality output**. Much depends on the skill of the sector body in terms of being able to engage the right cross-section of employers/stakeholders to participate to the process and in managing the varying roles and inputs to ensure that the work can be undertaken quickly but collaboratively.

Employers are time-limited in any case and, according to those interviewed as part of the case studies, are likely to disengage from process they perceive to be bureaucratic. The efficiencies flowing out from the new commissioning model are therefore something of a lever for focusing employer input.

2.6.3 Sustainability

Models for sustaining standards and frameworks products

There is no single model for the sustainability of standards and framework products. A distinction needs to be drawn between standards and framework products:

- that can be commercialised and sustained quite easily (although are not necessarily being so yet)

- that are strategically important and, while not necessarily commercially sustainable, can provide evidence of employer support in use that can be used to make a case for a return on the public investment

- that are niche or difficult to market (corresponding to a market failure), which do not appear sustainable under the current model but are needed to stimulate qualification take-up.

The evidence suggests that there has been **no major shift in thinking about the sustainability of products, or the possibility of more practical employer contributions to sustainability**. It is acknowledged by interviewees as a challenge on the horizon, but this has not generally translated into concrete action.

There is a clear tension between moves to commercialise certain products (especially NOS) and the parameters for development – which mean that they are publicly-funded and publicly-available. There is emerging anecdotal evidence of third parties using/selling tools and support based on the NOS, but most of the sector bodies are not yet in this terrain.

Qualitative Evaluation of Demand-led Skills Solutions: standards and frameworks

There remains a focus on NOS as the underpinning architecture for qualifications, which means that the primary audience is often awarding organisations rather than employers. With one or two exceptions, there is a little exploration among suppliers of the potential use of some NOS to support a wide range of activities at employer level, such as for the design of job roles, to underpin professional development or company training.

Some stakeholders report that the publicly-funded/publicly-available status of national standards is crucial to their support and engagement. There is an understandable reticence on the part of some sector bodies to shift from being the independent, publicly-funded keepers of standards and frameworks, to being more commercially-minded organisations. This may reflect a time lag in how some suppliers are thinking about standards and frameworks compared to other sector solutions. It is clear that commercialising standards and framework to support sustainability requires a different skill set to the technical development of these products. It highlights the importance of sector bodies effectively integrating this activity within their wider work.

The strategic fit of standards and frameworks activities

There is some early evidence that **standards and framework development is becoming more closely integrated with the wider work of sector bodies**. In practice, it still remains quite discrete in nature, although some obvious practical links have been ensured. For example, one supplier reported that work to develop apprenticeship frameworks mutually supports wider activity to develop a career information tool. Information about career progression routes can be incorporated into framework development, and information from the framework can be used to populate the career information tool.

The more streamlined approach to standards and framework development in many organisations has meant that qualifications specialists are working more closely with colleagues in areas such as research and programme management. In some cases, SSC organisations have been restructured to create integrated project teams.

Qualitative Evaluation of Demand-led Skills Solutions: standards and frameworks

To the extent that sector bodies have had to integrate standards and frameworks activity more closely with other work, it could be argued that this leads to a more effective approach overall, although there is little practical evidence of this leading to a more strategic approach to date. This may reflect that in the first year of the new commissioning model there was a more explicit focus among suppliers on getting used to a new process – i.e. to ensure that each product would be developed in a timely and cost-effective manner. Some suppliers were contracted to deliver around 30 products (and many more were managing the development of 10-20 products), so there was a need to ensure that internal project management processes could cope with this volume of work.

The risk is that this work continues in something of a silo, evidenced, as noted above, by the lack of clear plans about how products are marketed after being developed. The positive aspect of this is that there is recognition among suppliers that there is a need for proactive promotion of standards and framework products, so a more strategic approach may emerge in future.

The key test in the second year of commissioning is likely to be whether the connection between standards and frameworks activity and the wider work of suppliers is apparent in the evidence submitted to underpin bids for standards and frameworks investment. This was a gap in the 2012/2013 bids. While it is possible to set out a case for investment based on a more general picture of labour market need, it is likely that being explicit upfront about the links between proposed standards and frameworks products and the wider work of suppliers will support future sustainability by providing a sense of the levers, tools and on-going employer engagement (especially through the investment funds) that each supplier can use to actively promote its future use by employers.

3   Conclusions

The experience to date across the standards and frameworks programme suggests the following conclusions:

Competitive commissioning and investment culture:

- Increasing competition for skills investment funding is having a positive impact in ensuring that proposed standards and framework products are better-targeted at areas of identifiable demand. Suppliers are being more selective about the products they put forward.

- There is an apparent mind-set shift in relation to the standards and frameworks commissioning process – in which existing products only need to be reviewed when something changes, rather than as a matter of routine. The shifting of financial risk from the public funder to standards and frameworks suppliers is an extremely powerful lever for ensuring that development is demand-led.

The role of the UK Commission:

- The overall feedback on support and management from the UK Commission across the programme is largely positive, although it is clear that the support needs of suppliers varies. It is clear that the non-SSC standards and frameworks suppliers require additional, on-going support (e.g. deciphering the language of skills policy, capturing and recording employer engagement, evidencing outcomes and impact, and, in some cases, deploying effective project management techniques).

- The view from organisations with extensive experience of working with the UK Commission is that the guidance, support and monitoring it has provided is generally clear, appropriate and proportionate. Although the bidding / contracting timescales in the first commissioning year were challenging for suppliers, this was mitigated somewhat by the UK Commission consulting in advance with suppliers on key elements of the process (e.g. price bands etc.), which smoothed the transition to a new way of contracting standards and frameworks products. Where plans for product development were rejected for funding, this was done on a transparent basis.

Employer demand and involvement project design:

- The notion of employer demand is at the heart of the UK Commission investments. The standards and frameworks programme highlights the inherent and long-standing difficulty in trying to capture an upfront measure of demand for a proposed product. Bids for standards and frameworks investment tend to focus on well-established evidence of 'need', often drawing on LMI, rather than providing more tangible evidence of 'support' from employers. It is more resource-intensive to coalesce active sector support than to present a case for action based on existing LMI, so the approach appears to be a consequence of the relatively small level of investment in individual standards and frameworks product.

- Of course, these are not 'either/or' approaches; but, they do reflect characteristically different approaches to skills solution design that appear to have consequences for employer engagement in delivery and beyond. For existing standards and frameworks products this is arguably less problematic because hard evidence of qualification take-up (a proxy for demand) can be incorporated to strengthen the case for review (alongside evidence of strategic importance etc.). For new products, especially with regard to new NOS where expectations for use go beyond qualifications, the absence of employer 'support' is more problematic.

Employer involvement in the product development process:

- Product commissioning for standards and frameworks has already led to more cost-effective models for the development and review of these products. The output-based payment model and price bands for product development create value for money and improved project management approaches across the supplier network.

- As a consequence, there is evidence of effective and efficient approaches to managing the delivery of investment projects. The widespread use of project management techniques and has, in some cases, benefitted from reorganisation within lead organisations to have a more 'joined up' team-based approach.

- Product development is generally a more streamlined and pared-down process. Employers are still largely involved in a consultative role, but these discussions and much more targeted and focused. There is much better use of technology and greater task-orientation to ensure that working groups make the most of effective use of employers' limited time. The shift in many cases away from light-touch consultation with a large number of employers to an increased focus on working intensively with employers and stakeholders who can bring industry insight and technical understanding arguably leads to a higher-quality employer input into the process.

- It raises questions about how representative the employer input is, but suppliers are sensibly and pragmatically focusing as much as is reasonably possible on involving a mix of employers.

Achievements and progress towards outcomes:

- Most of the case study products were delivered / approved towards the end of the 2012/13 year and it is therefore **too early to assess take-up and use in most cases.**

- In monitoring the take-up and usage of standards and frameworks products there are challenges that are specific to NOS. For VQs and apprenticeship frameworks, where use can be measured in relation to metrics such as take-up and satisfaction, monitoring is relatively straightforward. Indirectly, it is possible to measure the impact of NOS in underpinning qualifications in a similar way. Arguably, though, this provides a narrow measure of impact for something as wide-ranging as occupational standards.

- There is a lot of **anecdotal evidence of individual employers using NOS** much of the activity is 'under the radar'. Organisations involved in or benefiting from this NOS-based development might not even know that NOS has contributed in this way if the development is undertaken via a third party. As NOS are publicly-accessible, it is even more difficult for sector bodies to monitor who is using them.

- Even accounting for these difficulties, the early evidence suggests that **sector bodies are not always even trying to capture intelligence on use and take-up of NOS**. The products appear not to be actively marketed, reinforcing their invisibility beyond a hard-core of technical users.

Planning for sustainability:

- There appears to be an implicit assumption that all standards and frameworks suppliers will have an interest in and scope for maintaining the product beyond the period of funding. Yet there is a fundamental question for standards and frameworks activity: *what is the UK Commission paying for and what is the incentive and scope for suppliers to do the necessary work to achieve the widest possible use of these products?*

- There are examples of sector bodies developing new products as the first stage of a longer-term strategy that they take responsibility for creating new provision, new career progression routes and improving skills supply for industry. There are also numerous examples, especially with regard to NOS, of standards being developed and remaining relatively invisible to the employers that may benefit from them.

- Some suppliers are not set up to provide the additional input to effectively promote and market standards and framework products. Equally important, there is evidence that the value of these products is underplayed because it is difficult to capture how they are used, for example by intermediaries, to influence the design of well-respected and well-known industry training (and industry training standards).

Strategic fit:

- Standards and framework projects have remained quite discrete in nature in comparison with the wider strategic plans of suppliers. Even though they are becoming more closely integrated and suppliers were in 2012/13 getting used to a quite different commissioning and delivery model, there is scope for the links between standards and frameworks products and the wider strategic ambitions of many sector bodies to be much more explicit.

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