

National Vocational Qualifications were meant to be a godsend to community artists – providing qualifications they could gain by simply doing their work, and which would be recognised within a wide range of professional sectors. Yet they're still receiving a lukewarm response from potential employers as well as from artists. Anita Holford reports



Vocational qualifications

– *worth dancing to their tune?*

Do you know where the gaps in your skills or knowledge lie? Do you know how good you are at your job – more to the point, can you prove it? As far back as the early 90s, Scottish/National Vocational Qualifications (S/NVQs) were being touted as the solution for community artists' development.

They would provide a way for people to be assessed on their ability to do a job, not learn about it. They were going to be recognised by people in other industries because they were part of a wider system of occupational standards for all professional sectors. They would address the lack of opportunities for training outside the college system, and would put an end to the hotchpotch of 'professional' qualifications which were confusing to employers and practitioners, as well as young people wanting to enter the profession.

The *Delivering artform development* S/NVQs have been available since June 1997, yet up to June 2000 Metier (the national training body responsible for the

standards, see LINKS) estimates that only 74 people had been awarded Level 3 (the lower of the two qualifications, roughly equivalent to A-level) and only five have been awarded Level 4 – though 291 have been awarded and so may have worked towards some of the units. Those statistics represent all types of artists involved in passing on artform skills, whether they're musicians, dancers, visual artists or others. So the training and education system for community artists remains in much the same state as it was ten years ago.

At Level 3 you have to pass five mandatory units, which assess your ability to establish rapport, support learners, promote anti-discriminatory practices, plan sessions and ensure you're meeting participant and client needs, maintain health and safety standards and maintain and develop your own professional competence. You then choose two optional units from those covering group and individual learning, working relationships, developing work opportunities, developing your own practice and providing mentoring. At Level 4, there are three mandatory units and seven optional units which together

cover everything from identifying what your learners have the potential to achieve to evaluating the learning process and setting policy, to improving sales and marketing. The optional units are provided in three blocks so that you can choose from three different pathways – teaching, development or policy – depending on what sort of function you currently perform.

One of the main criticisms of the system is the amount of paperwork involved in providing 'evidence' of your abilities, and the over-formal language used in the 'standards' (the documentation which forms the basis of the qualification). Add to that the fact that S/NVQs are tricky to exploit for freelance practitioners who don't have access to funding, assessors, and advice through a larger organisation, and it's maybe not surprising the response has been so poor from community artists. Metier is making changes (to be launched early in 2002) to make the process more accessible, altering the language used in the standards and placing more emphasis on observed, rather than paper, assessment – but it's open to guesses whether these will make a difference to uptake.

Above: work from Q Arts (see opposite) as part of the Japan 2001 events

Perhaps not surprisingly, some trainers don't think that NVQs deserve their bad press. WAC Performing Arts and Media College (formerly Weekend Arts College) provides arts and media training for young people from low income families and also has a training programme for artists wanting to work in educational settings. Based in London, they assess practitioners across the UK, and their website offers practical advice on the S/NVQ process including guidelines for producing a portfolio, and for how to go about working towards an S/NVQ with the college.

Director Celia Greenwood is convinced that the system works for community artists: "It genuinely improves practice and gives a quality stamp to a workshop leader. We found that individuals had difficulty in accessing training – a lot of the musicians we work with, for example, don't have a conservatoire background, so the NVQ route has become a really valuable way for

them to accredit their skills at a level that is nationally recognised in all sorts of contexts, and it gives them the confidence to go out and get work. Freelance artists who are in and out of work, and in and out of our area, have very disrupted working lives, and so accrediting their work and skills is tricky. NVQs are perfect because you can do it at your own pace – you even have a break of a year and then go back to it. I think the standards have a real future for that kind of artist."

NVQs often find favour in organisations where people might progress from entry level right through to being arts workers with an accredited qualification, as Tan Draig, programme manager at Q Arts does: "We chose the NVQs because although they don't exactly match our requirements, we've made them work how

we want them to." He adds: "It also makes funding a bit easier if your course is accredited." As to how difficult they are to administer that, he thinks, depends on who you're working with: "We felt we could have a good relationship with the college who we'd be working in partnership with – Willmorton Tertiary College in Derby. The assessor there is a practitioner with experience of participation, so that meant a lot. We're now training to do the assessment ourselves, and will be contracted through the College to do this."

A common perception is that community artists are rejecting qualifications because they're resistant to having their practices reduced to a standardised formula. But Gail Dudson, a freelance arts manager and external verifier for arts S/NVQs believes that the problem many people have with the standards is in fact quite the opposite: "Because it's created for people delivering artform skills in a

NVQs – a case study for your portfolio

Q Arts is a visual arts organisation with a gallery, studios for emerging artists, and a participatory arts programme. It has been running an NVQ accredited programme for community artists since September '99. Tan Draig is the programme manager

Why do you offer NVQs?

Five years ago, when we changed from being called Derby Community Arts, we were trying to improve the standard of work we were delivering. One of the problems was that we had lots of good artists but they weren't necessarily able to do workshops well, and we wanted to train people to a standard that we felt comfortable with. We also wanted people to understand how their little bit of work fitted into the overall programme and ethos of the organisation, and how one workshop can be very important to the work of the organisation as a whole, or the development of a particular group of people – not usually easy when you use contract workers.

Although we're a visual arts organisation, some of the training is based around other art-forms – video, or movement or sound – so trainees see the way other people deliver workshops in an accessible, participatory way, and recognise that some of the approaches are common to all workshops, no matter what artform is used.

What are the pros and cons?

- It gives people a qualification that people outside the arts can understand and it does make funding easier.
- It gives you a chance to assess participants not only on the quality of their work but also on what sort of groups they'd work best with and which collaborations would or wouldn't work.
- It makes you work in a more systematic way – which is really good for the trainees because although we always collect evidence of work that we do as an organisation, we wouldn't necessarily do this for the individual artworker.
- In terms of the quality and context, it's not right, but we add on what we need to add on. It is very much focused on skills exchange, and there's not an awful lot on how you develop creativity, confidence within the groups, collective and individual self-expression, the role of the artist. The problem we had was that our standard of training was much higher than what was required for NVQ, so at the moment we probably ask our trainees to do maybe an extra 50%.
- It is a lot of work and it's not to be taken lightly, but I don't think any qualification could be perfect – a lot depends on where you're working, how you're working. We have quite a unique way of working anyway – the only way of getting a more

suitable qualification would be to create it ourselves, and we don't feel that's necessary.

What do artists have to do?

Participants have to do 120 hours of work – either direct work on a project or attending training workshops, the NVQ doesn't specify what that should be. We stipulate that people have to attend all of the fortnightly training workshops through the year, and the three full-day workshops.

It should take them a year, sometimes it takes two. Often they'll come to the first training workshops and then will volunteer to work alongside an established arts worker. Then they progress to paid work as an assistant arts worker, and when we and they feel they're ready we pay them the lead artists rate and they have someone work with them. Not all the work has to be through us – we go out and assess people on other projects as well.

Shadowing and mentoring is the most important bit of it really, because you can say you understand about professional boundaries and participation, but when you come to it in practice it's a completely different thing. The earlier version of the NVQ didn't have any aspect of shadowing, but we included it because it was one of our own requirements.

variety of settings, it doesn't prescribe the methods you should use, it's generic. So it talks about processes and procedures, how adequately you prepare, whether you're working in appropriate ways, whether you're taking the necessary health and safety considerations. People are used to workshops and training courses that tell you what to do, but the standard doesn't, so it allows for those diverse practices."

Yet there's still little evidence to suggest that potential employers are any less sceptical than artists themselves. Although NVQs have become widely accepted in some industries, word of mouth and recommendation remain the preferred method for assessing whether an artist can do the job amongst within the arts and in other sectors: "A qualification is no guarantee

of effectiveness," argues Paul Mawson, healthy living centres coordinator at Bradford Health. "I think the key issue is, do they engage with people through using creative approaches? I've always found it is best to observe work at first hand rather than reading a publicity leaflet or cv."

Nicola Plant, health partnership programme manager at Sandwell Health Authority, West Bromwich agrees: "I much prefer to rely on viewing artists' work, recommendations from others, and a face-to-face meeting. Whether they have NVQs or not would not be a factor in the selection process. I don't feel that such a qualification demonstrates the ability to put learn-

ing into practise effectively."

"I would be much more impressed if a person could show they'd been working in a setting where there wasn't a captive audience," says Brian Cohen, a former tutor in community and youth work and a freelance trainer, consultant and researcher. "Qualifications are a starting point, but they need to be backed up with solid evidence that they've worked in community settings, and voluntary work is as impressive as paid work."

Gail Dudson doesn't find this surprising. "If it's not taken seriously by practitioners themselves, then no-one else will give it credence. But as long as it isn't used as currency with community arts, then anyone can try and get work in this field, and may be doing it in less informed ways." The day that artists are refused work because they don't have an S/NVQ may still seem a very long way off, but the arguments for a system of bench-marking for community artists appear to be becoming more widely and loudly aired. The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) has been warning for some time that people wanting to work in schools will need to have some kind of formal qualification, and the introduction of the Creative Partnerships scheme (Arts Council of England's scheme to develop partnerships between schools and artists in deprived areas, see *Sounding Board Winter 01*, p4) is bringing these arguments to the fore.

There has yet to be any concrete indication of where these debates will lead, but the ground is shifting, and community artists may be standing at the edge of an interesting new terrain.

But Mark Bick, a community artist, trainer and consultant, believes that the biggest concern for the community arts isn't whether qualifications will help people to get more work, but that training programmes which have less depth will take over. "It's not so much that qualifications will become more necessary if people want to work in, say, education, because I don't really believe that will happen. But unless we do something about accreditation for community artists, we're in danger of not having a choice about which training and qualifications are available. In the future, funding and resources may go to courses that will not offer the rigour that we'd expect them to.

"There are accredited courses that aren't of good quality, but they're fast becoming adopted by young people wanting to work in music because they offer a clearer route to work than anything the community arts has to offer."

LINKS and RESOURCES

Federation of Community Work Training Groups

Responsible for the community work S/NVQ. Available at levels 2, 3 and 4, it also contains material valuable to community artists. Free information pack, including details of your local community work training group, available.

Federation of Community Work Training Groups, 4th Floor, Furnivale House, 48 Furnivale Gate, Sheffield S1 4QP 0114 273 9391 E: info@fcwtg.demon.co.uk

Learning about learning

A series of two-day workshops run jointly by the Musicians' Union and Sound Sense to help musicians to access information about training and development. Next is in London on 27-28 March 2002; followed by three in Scotland starting later in the year. Contact Sound Sense to be added to the mailing list.

MUSE and Maestro

Web-based learning resources for musicians working in education and outreach and for workplace mentors or others offering guidance to professional musicians, but available only to members of the Musicians' Union.

W: www.musiciansunion.org.uk

Metier

The national training organisation for the arts sector responsible for NVQ standards. It was set up to represent industry and work with employers to develop policy relating to qualifica-

tions and standards, and assess the skills needs for the sector. Website at www.netgain.org.uk provides business and careers guidance. There are sections on business, funding, careers and learning, access and also noticeboards.

Metier, Glyde House, Glydegate, Bradford BD5 0BQ T: 01274 738800 F: 01274 391566 E: admin@metier.org.uk W: www.metier.org.uk

Q Arts

See previous page for details.

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WAC Performing Arts and Media College

Provides training and assessment for artists working towards an NVQ wherever they are based in the UK. Useful information in their website includes portfolio presentations, checklists, free downloads. Although they are not currently taking on any additional practitioners, WAC intend to restart their funded training and NVQ assessment programme in early 2002.

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