

The Development of Quality Standards for Career Guidance in the United Kingdom

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This article outlines the process of developing the National Quality Standards for Learning and Work (NQSLW) by the Guidance Council from 1997 and identifies some of the lessons learned in the process. The NQSLW were later redesigned as the matrix quality standards for information advice and guidance (See <http://www.matrixstandard.com> for further information).

Introduction and Background

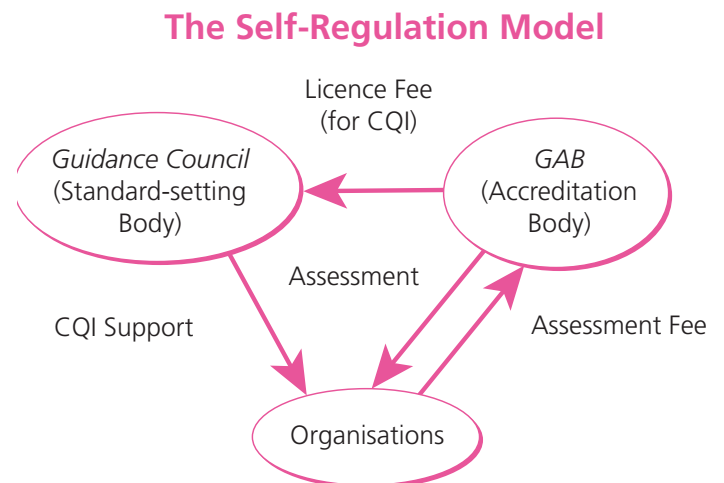
The NQSLW were initially developed as a Guidance Council project, following the publication of the Council's study of quality assurance arrangements for career guidance in the UK. At the outset in 1994, the Guidance Council was a project of the Royal Society of Arts, Commerce and Manufactures (RSA), later (in 1999) becoming an independent charity and company limited by guarantee. The Council was always a representative body for organisations with an interest in career guidance in all its forms – with a particular focus on ensuring that the interests of users are recognised and protected. The Guidance Council was wound up in November 2006.

The then Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) and the local Training Enterprise Councils supported the development of the NQSLW. The DfEE funded the bulk of the development work.

The Quality Assurance Model

The NQSLW were intended to be part of a self-regulation model for career guidance services throughout the UK. The project grew out of the recommendations of the Guidance Council's 'First Steps' report which identified a possible framework for "quality standards framework for guidance across all sectors" (Hawthorn, 1995). Once established, assessment and accreditation against the Standards were carried out by an independent Guidance Accreditation Board (GAB), with 14 per cent of assessment fees being paid to the Guidance Council to promote continuous quality improvement (CQI).

Figure 1 illustrates the model:



Assessment was conducted primarily through desk audit. Applicant organisations would submit a portfolio of evidence to GAB, whose assessors would request additional information where necessary. Random site visits would be undertaken to verify that the portfolio reflected the true position on the ground.

The model was designed to be self-funding over a period of about four years. This goal was not achieved for at least two reasons:

1. There was resistance from some organisations to the CQI fee element for the Guidance Council, as it raised the cost of accreditation which was £550 per day plus expenses (typically two days were needed). The CQI element amounted to £77 per day.
2. The Department for Education and Skills (DfES), which replaced the DfEE and which owned the copyright, decided to make accreditation against the NQSLW a contract compliance requirement for adult guidance contracts in England. This changed the nature of the model and removed the founding principles of self-regulation and voluntarism. The introduction of compulsion meant that organisations who were not convinced of at least parts of the model were not going to be influenced by peer pressure or later evidence that the innovative elements, such as client feedback and mystery shopping, were of benefit. Compulsion secured greater income earlier, but the self-regulation business model was designed for break-even over a four-year period.

The National Quality Standards for Learning and Work

The project was funded by the Department for Education and Employment. The Standards themselves were based on good practice identified by practitioners from a wide range of settings including schools, FE and HE institutions, careers services, libraries, voluntary and community organisations, internet and computer based services. These were then analysed and expressed as criteria under 28 different standards. Any particular organisation would work to the standards specified for their organisation type. One of the development groups consisted of employers. They developed a set of good practice guidelines rather than standards, feeling that these would be more appropriate.

The Standards were founded on the Guidance Council Code of Principles (NACCEG, 1996). The Principles were developed by the Guidance Council's members and were referenced in the original version of the *matrix* Standard until replaced by the DfES Principles for Coherent IAG Delivery (DfES, 2003).

The NQSLW listed four categories of measures:

Measure	Definition
1 Audit	A factual "YES" or "No" test by self assessment that the required activity or evidence is in place
2 Client Feedback	Evidence from clients (service users) that the required threshold has been met
3 Staff Feedback	Evidence that staff know and understand policy and procedures
4 Mystery Shopping	This process was adapted from widely used anonymous survey work used in other service industries. It became commonly referred to as 'hidden' or 'briefed' customer, using real users briefed prior to receiving the service.

Each standard would use one or more of the measures. The table below shows how part of the standard for guidance interviews was expressed.

Criteria	Measures
1 Any preparation a client needs to do before the guidance interview has been carefully explained to them ahead of time	Mystery Shopping Q1: Did you need to do any preparation for your appointment? Q2: if YES, were you given enough details of what to do? Q3: Did you know what was expected of you?
2 Clients are given clear reasons if the appointment they have for a guidance interview is delayed or cancelled	Audit Policy statement Mystery Shopping Q1: Was your appointment delayed or cancelled? Q2: If YES, were you given a clear reason why and alternative arrangements agreed?
3 The structure of the appointment is negotiated and an agreement, including confidentiality, is made between the adviser and the client	Client feedback 90% of respondents say GOOD or VERY GOOD to each part of: Q: How would you rate the session on the following: a) Agreeing what you wanted to discuss at the start of the session? b) Discussing your needs and interests? c) Providing you with information? d) Discussing the alternatives open to you? e) Helping you decide what to do next?
4 The process focuses on the needs and interests of the client	
5 The process enables the client to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • explore a range of possible options • identify and consider information relevant to their own needs and circumstances • make decisions about their learning, work or careers options 	

The Standards pack included extensive guidelines and case studies to illustrate best practice. Continuous quality improvement was encouraged by Guidance Council publications disseminating good practice as it came to light, together with workshops for delivery organisations. Discussions were held with other standard-setting bodies with a view to helping organisations that might have to work with more than one set of standards. This work was not completed until after the introduction of the matrix Standard, when a series of booklets outlining how best to work between different standards including Investors in People (IiP - www.investorsinpeople.co.uk), the Practical Quality Assurance System for Small Organisations (PQASSO - www.ces-vol.org.uk) and the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM - www.efqm.org) was published.

Issues and Observations

1. Given the Standards' foundation on good practice, they were primarily about inputs and outputs rather than outcomes. Some felt that this gave rise to a 'checklist' mentality, where organisations simply had to 'tick boxes' to gain accreditation. However, the NQSLW project was based on the notion of self-regulation and included checks and balances, the most important of which perhaps was the 'mystery shopping' process.

Whilst the process was not fit for purpose as a contract compliance tool, many organisations did feed back that the NQSLW 'checklist' served as a good and helpful tool where there had been no prior experience of implementing quality standards and accreditation processes.

2. The menu of Standards was confusing for some organisations. Within workshops and consultancy visits, the Guidance Council's quality consultants were frequently asked to interpret specific items within the Standards in relation to the enquirer's work situation. This question was commonly countered by encouraging the enquirer to imagine themselves as 'client' and to form an answer based on that perspective. The work surrounding the Standards therefore encouraged a shift to a user focus, reflecting the Guidance Council's particular emphasis on "ensuring that the interests of users are recognised and protected".
3. Client feedback was based on questions and thresholds specified in the standards and was designed to collect an immediate reaction to the service. Feedback was gained through questionnaires, telephone follow-up and focus groups. Obtaining feedback in a structured way was new to most organisations; most found it to be a valuable process and workshops facilitated the exchange of good and interesting practice, although some expressed the opinion that client feedback was expensive to collect in terms of time and other resources.

4. Staff feedback was included to ensure that staff understood the organisation and its policies and practices.
5. Mystery shopping provided an informed response to the user's experience of the service received. It was, however, controversial. Many practitioners viewed it as an intrusion into the private relationship between them and the client, and were especially concerned that it was based on a constructed scenario and therefore not a true client need. Some local networks outsourced mystery shopping, and there were examples of colleges using students to undertake the surveys as a research project. Others used real service users, briefing them on the questions that needed to be answered.

Some continued to use adapted forms of mystery shopping after the introduction of the matrix Standard, even though it was no longer required, and the practice may still exist.

Perhaps the most significant contribution of mystery shopping to quality assurance is the opportunity to have clients' experience IAG services with a framework for judging the quality of the delivery. Given the lack of understanding of what represents a 'good' service, it would seem that more development of the practice would be worth considering.

6. Within CQI workshops and consultancy visits, the Guidance Council quality consultants were frequently asked to interpret specific items within the Standard in relation to the enquirer's work situation. This question was commonly countered by encouraging the enquirer to imagine themselves as 'client' and to form an answer based on that perspective. The work surrounding the Standards therefore encouraged a shift to a user focus, reflecting the Guidance Council's, "particular focus on ensuring that the interests of users are recognised and protected".
7. A major challenge throughout the development process was to capture the best practice across a wide range of sectors. This led to an extensive menu of standards and a complex process of selecting the standards appropriate to any one organisation – ranging from schools and colleges (career education), through voluntary/community organisations and training organisations, to specialist career guidance services. Stronger buy-in from the career guidance community to the concept of self-regulation might have found ways to simplify the model. In the event, the DfES decided to replace the NQSLW before the full range of standards could be successfully deployed in all sectors. In practice, the standards were primarily, but not exclusively, used in adult guidance settings in England.

8. Devolution militated against the NQSLW being accepted as a UK-wide system. The matrix Standard is currently used in England only, primarily with career guidance for adults. However, Careers Wales is considering adopting the matrix Standard as an element of its quality-assurance framework, and there has been a pilot in Northern Ireland.
9. The NQSLW 'reach' included employers. The employers' development group decided, as a first step, to draw up 'Good Practice Guidelines for Individual Development in Organisations'. These were not developed further before the introduction of the matrix Standard. However there was a DfES project that explored the use of matrix by employers (unpublished research), and some 30 employers worked with the Standard – most to accreditation.
10. The NQSLW included standards for 'third parties', i.e. those providers that have a vested interest in the outcome of service delivery. Examples included colleges delivering a service in the context of a financial interest in recruiting or retaining students, and outplacement services to employers.
11. The NQSLW included standards for staff competence, development and supervision. These required that staff were recruited and selected according to the prevailing legislation and good practice. They referred to the national occupational standards in respect of staff competence, according to the service in question.
12. The matrix Standard was based on the work that led to the NQSLW, but expressed in a very different way – based more on outcomes than the older standards. The simpler model also removed the need for complex choices with regard to the relevant standards to be followed. However, the opportunity to establish a baseline for all career guidance activity, in the context of lifelong learning, that could then be used to clarify the similarities and differences between work in different contexts, was lost as was the opportunity to develop a self-regulation model for the career guidance sector.

Summary and Conclusion

How should the NQSLW initiative be judged in retrospect?

As a minimum, the NQSLW provided valuable learning which was carried forward into the development of the matrix Standard, and therefore still has impact today.

The NQSLW Standards were overly focused on inputs and the accreditation process was probably insufficiently robust, being based largely on desk audit. However, the model was designed to be part of a self-regulation process and had checks and balances built-in. A major element of the checks and balances was to obtain client feedback and mystery shopping data: engaging clients in quality assurance has since become a major element in the Connexions Service for young people in England.

While no specific parallel process, other than the matrix Standard, is formally in place for adult guidance services, the experience of using NQSLW has probably contributed to a shift in mindset amongst providers towards a greater awareness of the experience of clients using services.

Another check was the programme of random visits by GAB (calculated to be at the rate of once every four years). Feedback from practitioners indicated that the mere possibility of a 'mystery shopper' intervention or a GAB random visit was sufficient to keep compliance with the Standards as a high priority.

It may be that had more focus been placed on gaining active support for the underpinning model rather than simply the Standards themselves, the outcome might have been different. A lifelong, UK-wide process could have been achieved. In any event, it is likely that the NQSLW would have been simplified and become more outcome-based over time; the process of self-regulation model would have led to questioning of purpose and intended outcomes. As it turned out, the matrix Standard was developed as a contract-compliance tool and, as such, is well regarded in England and further afield.

The matrix Standard is more in tune with current thinking on quality-standard models. It addresses the issue of quality in a different context from the NQSLW self-regulation model, but the detailed development of the matrix standard was undoubtedly influenced by experience with NQSLW.

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Note

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not purport to reflect the views of any other organisation.

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