

Assessment within the NSQF: Findings, Interventions & Recommendations

Introduction

This composite report provides an overview of the activities of the India-EU Skills Project's SSTE for Assessment with respect to the current status of assessment of NSQF qualifications in India, the interventions carried out in response to identified needs and a number of recommendations for immediate and on-going action by the authorities charged with overseeing the governance and implementation of both the NSQF and the NQAF.

The report is set out in line with the SSTE's deliverables (*see Annex A*) and makes reference, either in the body of the report or in the attachments, to those key stakeholders with whom she has worked: SSCs, Assessment Bodies, Training Providers, colleague consultants, NSDA & NSDC.

The first section of the report is descriptive, in that it follows the timeline of the work of the SSTE carried out over four Missions: May/June 2015; September/October 2015; February/March 2016; May 2016; with the final, fifth Mission to be completed in November 2016. The key outputs from each Mission are attached as Annexes to the report.

The second and final section of the report comprises the collated findings and recommendations arising from the work of the SSTE.

This report is presented to the India-EU Steering Group for information and to the India partner organisations, in particular, for review and for consideration of future action.

Section One: Activities carried out

Mission One, May/June 2015

This initial Mission was spent fact finding regarding the current status of assessment within QFs/QPs and carrying out a broad-based analysis of training needs with respect to assessment.

A small sample of assessment strategies contained within QF submissions was scrutinised, discussions held with the nominated Assessment Leads within a range of SSCs and, in addition, the views of curriculum-specialist colleague consultants gathered regarding the assessment practice followed by their allocated SSCs. Moving on from this, a structured approach was designed (*see Annex B*) to provide the basis of a training needs analysis. In practice, however, the source of information regarding training needs was drawn from structured interviews with: SSC Assessment Leads, Assessment Body Leads and Training Provider senior personnel. These interviews, together with the findings of colleague curriculum and training expert consultants, provided sufficient evidence of existing practice and informed the necessary interventions.

The sum total of this work resulted in two main outputs: first, an initial report on the status of assessment (*see Annex C*) and, second, a summary of the interviews conducted with a range of assessment-related personnel (*see Annex D*).

The SSTE's review and analysis of the various evidence served to confirm that the claims made by both the QPs under NSDC guidance & approval and the more recently-introduced QFs under NSQC approval that the qualifications were competence-based, was patently not the case. The approach to assessment in both QPs and QFs failed to demonstrate candidate competence against pre-defined standards.

The role of assessment and the part played by those involved in assessment was found to be under-resourced, unrecognized and unfit for purpose.

In response to these findings, the SSTE began work on describing the various roles required to set up, deliver and maintain a robust competence-based assessment system and from these descriptors, a set of competences in line with each of the defined roles. (*See Annex E*) Key to a successful and robust assessment system, however, is the common understanding by all those in the system of the principles of assessment and how these apply to one's own practice. To this end, the SSTE drafted an additional paper, Guidance on Assessment, which comprises these universally-acknowledged principles of assessment (*Annex F*). In drafting the competences for the identified assessment personnel, the core competency, Apply the Principles of Assessment, was seen to be a priority requirement.

(It should be noted that a draft set of National Occupational Standards for Assessors & Trainers were developed under the auspices of the ILO/NSDC in 2014/2015. At present, these have not been presented for formal approval as QFs within the NSQF. While the SSTE had contributed to the review of these OS, she continues to be of the view that the standards for Assessors are too ambitious to be adopted at the present time, given where assessment is at present. Her view is that a staged approach is required and that the competences and role descriptors developed within the India-EU Skills project provide a useful – and initial - starting point)

Mission Two, September/October 2015

Building on the findings and work completed during the first Mission, the SSTE continued to conduct structured interviews with relevant stakeholders – all of which served to confirm her initial analysis of the status of assessment as provided in Annex B.

It was agreed during this Mission that, the project's focus on assessment should shift to working directly with Assessment Bodies & SSC Assessment Leads rather than, solely, with groups of individual Assessors. Colleague, curriculum-specialist consultants supported this shift as they, in turn, were advising SSC Training & Assessment Leads on improved approaches to assessment which, it was acknowledged, would have knock-on effects on both Assessment Bodies and Training Providers. (In the case of the former, on the role of Assessors and, in the case of the latter, on the role of trainers in carrying out formative assessments).

The importance of Assessment Bodies in meeting the ambitions of the NSQF was formally confirmed by the NSDA at the first India-EU Skills Workshop for Assessment Bodies held during this Mission, to which a selected number of SSC Assessment Leads were also invited to attend. This workshop set the tone for the remainder of the SSTE's work for the project, in that it was designed to be highly interactive, it sought to galvanize the growing expertise, experience and determination of those present to drive forward the required reforms and, finally, to champion the professionalism and the pivotal importance of assessment in establishing the credibility of both qualifications and the NSQF.

The workshop generated invaluable feedback on the Assessment Role descriptors, the competences for the proposed roles and on an early draft of quality standards for the accreditation of Assessment Bodies within the NQAF. (Here the SSTE was supporting a colleague consultant whose mandate was to provide drafts of the various Manuals required for NQAF implementation). (Information about this first Assessment Body workshop is at *Annex G*)

A final intervention taken by the SSTE during this Mission was the holding of a pilot outcomes-based training session for a small number of willing attendees: these were drawn from Assessment Bodies, NIOS & SSCs. This provided a useful learning activity in readiness for the roll-out of training programmes for each of the identified job roles, beginning in Mission Three. (Information about this training session is at *Annex H*).

Mission Three, February/March 2016

Building on the momentum generated during the second Mission, in this Mission the SSTE developed and delivered materials and training programmes for the first two cohorts of targeted assessment personnel, namely Lead Assessors & Assessment Coordinators (combined group) and Assessors – for whom two separate sets of training were delivered. For each group, participants were provided with Work Books (*see Annexes J & K*), which served to illustrate good practice associated with outcomes/competence/standards-based training (& assessment), in that the standards upon which the content of training is based are made transparent to those being trained & approaches to assessment are fit for purpose, ie they purport to support the demonstration of the required skills, application of knowledge & understanding. Such Work Books then comprise a useful source of on-going referral, guidance and support for trainees when back (or for the first time) in their work place. Feedback from these training programmes was universally positive. (*See Annex L*)

A second NSDA-supported Work Shop for Assessment Bodies was also held during this Mission, the prime purpose of which was to consult attendees on the recently-posted NQAF Manual for the Accreditation of Assessment Bodies. (*See Annex M*) This proved a lively and positive work shop. It was evident from the proceedings that Assessment Bodies are eager to be given greater autonomy, responsibility and accountability for assessment in the NSQF – see the recommendations. In support of this interest, Assessment Bodies attending the work shop were asked to consider establishing an association of some kind to give them a voice in policy formulation & implementation. While those present seemed keen to take this forward and the

support of NSDA was given, it has to be noted that its realization requires the initial steps to be taken by the Assessment Bodies themselves, not by the Project.

The feedback from this second Assessment Body workshop was built into the final draft of the NQAF Manual for the Accreditation of Assessment Bodies by the SSTE. *(The Manual has now been replaced by a composite Manual comprising Guidance on Assessment in addition to the Accreditation Criteria for Assessment Bodies. This is a necessary development given the need for explicit documentation of assessment practice as it should be carried out within NSQF qualifications).*

Mission Four, May 2016

This Mission took the form of a Study Visit to the UK, comprising institutional visits in both Scotland and England. *(The Executive Summary report of the Study Visit is at Annex N)*

The mixed group of participants – from Assessment Bodies, Training Providers & SSCs – was exposed to many examples of standards-based assessment practice and its quality assurance & regulation, from the perspective of training providers, awarding bodies and country regulators. This exposure confirmed for the participants the scale and nature of the challenge facing the Indian system in its quest to achieve parity in terms of mutual recognition of its qualifications. *(This became particularly apt given the simultaneous UKIERI project on Transnational Standards involving two of the participating SSCS. See recommendations).*

The group met the C/Ex and members of the UK's Federation of Awarding Bodies, FAB, and through this interaction found out about how the Federation worked, what it did and what value its members placed on its existence & its services. While recognizing the role of Awarding Bodies in the UK is somewhat different to that of Assessment Bodies in India, it was agreed that there was more in common than not. It was hoped that bilateral working of some kind might be established, should an Assessment Body association of some kind be established in India.

Mission Five, November 2016 – in the offing

This comprises the last Mission for the SSTE as the Project nears its completion. The activity to be lead by the SSTE is well-planned, namely, the holding of the final two training sessions: for Assessment Designers & Developers and for Heads of Assessment. These training programmes will follow the format of those run in March 2016, resulting in extensive materials, including role-specific Work Books for those in the role of Assessment Designer/Developer and Head of Assessment.

While it would have been ideal to have had a third and final work shop for Assessment Bodies to set the scene for 2017 and beyond, timings mean that this is not possible. However, in informal contact with the Assessment Body representatives on the Study Visit, the SSTE is hopeful that an informal gathering will take place.

SSTE in Assessment: Key Findings

Much of what follows has been shared with key stakeholders: NSDA, NSDC, Project Steering Group, SSCs & Assessment Bodies, both formally and informally:

1. Assessment as an area of expertise in its own right is largely invisible in the Indian Skills & Education system
2. When Assessment is mentioned – if at all – it is largely in the context of the needs and deployment of Assessors
3. The stages of Assessment – as widely understood, acknowledged and quality assured in most other jurisdictions – is rarely referenced
4. Other than Assessors & Lead Assessors, few other job roles include ‘assessment’ in their title and job descriptions. The jobs are defined by other terms.
5. There is a widespread, formulaic approach to assessment design, with regard to most SSCs, namely, the adoption of question banks for multiple choice items to assess knowledge (and some understanding); vivas (with similar banks of questions to be randomly allocated to Assessors at the time of their visit) with no immediate relevance to the practical activity being undertaken by candidates, thereby denying the value of vivas which is to probe understanding and application of knowledge to the task/s at hand; practical assessment - limited to a manageable activity which can be carried out by an entire batch at the time of an Assessor’s visit
6. The use of marks is counter to prevailing wisdom with regard to standards-based assessment where professional, holistic judgments of candidate competence are required
7. No standardization activity takes place, therefore Assessors are acting in isolation and without support in determining what constitutes competence when making assessment decisions
8. The current approach to assessment results in invalid certificates being issued to candidates. Candidates are NOT being assessed in line with the defined standards of competence; they are being assessed against a manageable sample of competences that can readily fit into a single, one-off, end of training course assessment session.
9. The role of the trainer and training provider in supporting learners’ successful demonstration of competence with regard to skills, applied knowledge & understanding is absent. To be effective trainers, trainers must be assessors and must know and practice frequent formative assessments to check that learning and skills development is happening and competence being developed
10. Assessment Bodies are not given the recognition they deserve in terms of agents of change & improvement. At present they are merely extensions to SSCs and have minimal, if no, say in bringing about improvements to the system.
11. Assessment personnel – as well as Assessment Bodies – are keen to bring about much needed change to the system. They have the interest, the motivation and the capability of being given responsibility and authority to take the lead.

Recommendations

These recommendations build on those presented thus far in documents and reports compiled by the SSTE and shared with NSDA in the first instance.

Those in positions of influence, mandate and authority should:

1. Adopt and mandate fit for purpose competences & associated training/qualifications for Assessment personnel (These might be adapted versions of the materials developed to date by the SSTE)
2. Adopt and mandate fit for purpose competences & associated training/qualifications for trainers, including their role as assessors
3. Roll out the NQAF Quality Criteria for the Accreditation of Assessment Bodies & Training Providers (this is now in hand?)
4. Delegate the whole of the assessment lifecycle activity to Assessment Bodies with the associated accountability/responsibility measures in place
5. Incentivise Assessment Bodies' continuing professional development in assessment by enabling their logos to be shown on NSQF certificates
6. Acknowledge and build on the interest and determination of both Assessment Professionals and Assessment Bodies to take more responsibility for assessment
7. Support the establishment of an Assessment Body association by inviting A/Bodies to nominate a representative to join the NSQC
8. Seek to work collaboratively with similar bodies in other countries, confirming the centrality of quality assured assessment in establishing credible, highly-regarded qualifications and qualification frameworks.

Changes at national level

When the SSTE began her work, the key bodies at national level with which she interacted were the NSDA and the NSDC. In the period between her third and final Missions, there have been some significant shifts within the governance of the NSQF, not least by the establishment of a National Board for Assessment & Certification. The details of how this Board and the NSDA will work together and how the latter's remit for governance of the NSQF – through the NSQC – will be impacted by the NBAC is not known to the SSTE. What remains an issue, however, is the nature and extent of assessment reform required in the system.

Unless and until, assessment and those involved in its design, development, delivery and evaluation are appropriately recognized & rewarded, the risk remains that end users of NSQF qualification will not have confidence that those holding NSQF certificates have the required skills, applied knowledge & understanding defined by the standards upon which the qualification is based. The very credibility of the NSQF is at stake.

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