

## **Making learning visible: Internal and External Vocational Learning Model and individual demand for skills and qualifications**

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### **Abstract**

Individual demand for qualifications depends on the nature of work, organisational culture and a range of socio-economic factors. This paper summarises research in this area and presents a model (Tuckwood 2012) which makes learning more visible by encompassing all forms of vocational learning, including workplace learning, and encourages a more balanced view of vocational education and training (VET).

The paper is an extract of a thesis which investigated the link between vocational qualifications and skills and the extent that QCF qualifications are a catalyst for learning and performance (Tuckwood 2012: 2.5, 5.3 & 2.8).

### **Key words**

QCF, Qualifications and Credit Framework, vocational qualifications, skills, performance, making learning visible, skills development, workplace learning, organisational excellence, communities of practice.

# **Making learning visible: Internal and External Vocational Learning Model and individual demand for skills and qualifications**

## **Introduction**

The relationship between qualifications, skills and performance is complex and often contradictory. Demand for qualifications depends on a range of factors, including the nature of the workplace. This paper summarises research about individual demand for skills and then presents a model (Tuckwood 2012) which makes learning more visible by encompassing all forms of vocational learning, including workplace learning, and encourages a more balanced view of vocational education and training (VET).

## **Individual demand for skills and qualifications**

Research confirms that individual demand for qualifications depends on the nature of work, organisational culture and a range of socio-economic factors.

## **Expansive and restricted working environments**

First, Fuller and Unwin's (2004) case study research into Modern Apprenticeships shows that learning opportunities for apprentices vary according to the working environment. They distinguish expansive and restrictive approaches to workforce development and argue that expansive approaches include access to a range of qualifications, including knowledge-based vocational qualifications. Likewise Purcell et al (2003: xi) argue that performance is a function of individual ability, motivation and opportunity, and Ashton (2004) relates individual motivation to engage in skill development to prior experience; the extent that an organisation facilitates access to knowledge and information; opportunities to practice and develop new skills; and the level of support and rewards for learning.

### **Incentives to study**

Second, Keep (2009) identifies two categories of incentives that influence an individual's decision to invest in qualifications. Type 1 (internal) incentives relate to intrinsic interest in learning that can be enhanced by better access to training and qualifications. Type 2 (external) incentives range from straightforward economic benefits to incentives that are embedded in family and social relationships, the structure of society, labour market and wider economy; examples include wage returns associated with a qualification; career progression through the acquisition of valuable skills; benefits of higher status from qualifications linked to entry into a particular profession or occupation; cultural expectations; labour market regulation; and non-economic benefits such as increased personnel satisfaction and well-being. Keep (2009) argues that Type 2 Incentives are powerful relative to many Type 1 incentives, with the result that there are limits to the extent that public subsidy or the reorganisation of VET can influence uptake of qualifications in the absence of Type 2 incentives.

### **Power and control considerations**

Third, research shows that the link between qualifications and skills is often mediated by considerations of power and control (Coffield 1999), with the reality being that qualifications, knowledge and skill are seen as a source of power and authority. Notions about 'power' in relation to the meaning of skill help clarify the link with qualifications. Being 'skilled' can both confer social status and stem from it (Gallie 1994; Penn, 1984, in Grugulis & Vincent 2004: 1). This is exemplified by the growth of professional bodies. Unwin et al (2004) describe how, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, occupational groups 'categorised themselves and were, or came to be recognised as 'professions'' (2004: 3.6). These organisations specified the content of qualifications, laid down codes of ethical behaviour and sought legitimacy through royal charter. In addition, they established entry requirements that later became

regarded by UK government bodies and others sometimes as 'barriers to access' (see for example MSD/DES, 1986 in Unwin et al 2004: 3.12).

In addition, Grugulis and Vincent (2004: 1) identify contradictions in the meaning of skill. For example, work carried out by those classed as 'high status' is sometimes regarded as 'skilled' regardless of complexity (Philips and Taylor 1986). Similarly, employees who gain status or collective power may be regarded as 'skilled' having harnessed this power at work (Turner 1962).

In a similar way, the literature relating to vocational qualifications shows that considerations of power and control, such as the status of the skill, government intervention and power relations within organisations, mediate the uptake of vocational qualifications.

First, qualifications are obligatory for some highly skilled professional areas, such as law and medicine because they 'give some degree of assurance to the public about the competence of members' (Eraut 1994: 163). Second, uptake of vocational qualifications depends on factors such as their currency in the labour market and links to professional and career pathways (Unwin et al 2004: 9.3). Third, government controls demand through regulatory arrangements. For example, vocational qualifications are expected in the financial services, care and construction sectors (2004: 9.8) and now the enforcement sector (Lord Chancellor 2014). Thus, there is not a simple relationship between qualifications and skills; the value of qualifications is influenced by factors beyond the intrinsic nature of the qualification itself.

Billett (2004) identifies work-based prejudices regarding access to training and the certification of skill, noting that there is evidence of 'deliberate structuring of

learning experiences within social practices to maintain their continuity' (2004: 115). This may involve deliberately constraining an individual's access to a demanding new task that would lead to development. Hence workplace participatory practices are often contested and access to certification of skill depends on power relations surrounding organisations and organisational culture.

Thus from an individual's perspective, the link between qualifications, skills and performance is complex and often contradictory. Lack of qualification does not necessarily mean low skills and performance. A range of social and economic factors influence the value of qualifications for individuals and these vary between organisations even within the same sector as explained next.

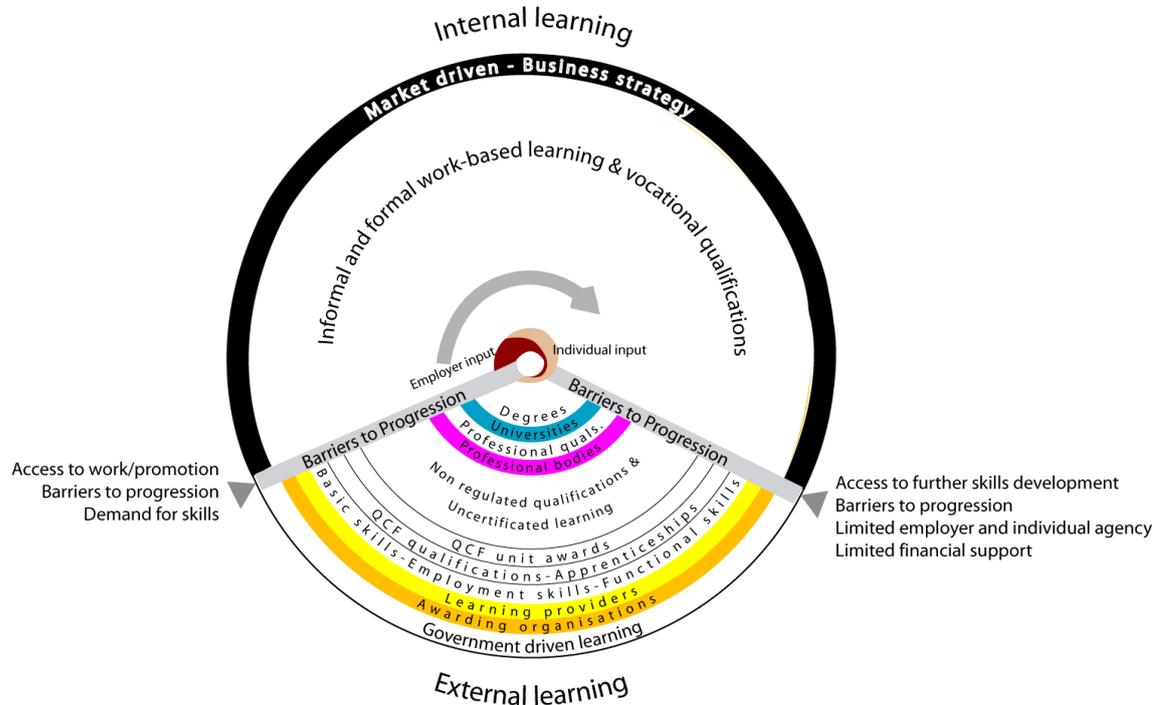
### **Internal and External Vocational Learning Model**

Current attempts to understand vocational learning have tended to focus on specific areas, such as the nature of workplace learning and the return on investment in training, and therefore are limited in their ability to represent the full range of vocational learning including qualifications. Also, descriptions tend not to identify partners involved in the delivery of VET. In order to address this gap, Tuckwood (2012) proposes a model (Figure 1) that reflects the views of Hager (2002) and Keep (2006) and aims to put into perspective each form of vocational learning and highlights the importance of Type 2 (external) incentives.

In keeping with the original vision of the QCF, the model aims first to encompass internal and external vocational learning. Second, the model is flexible, and can represent, according to the elements included, the vocational learning of individuals or organisations, either at one point or over a period of time. In particular, it highlights that workplace learning is central to skills development; the lifelong nature of vocational learning.

FIGURE 1

**Internal and External Vocational Learning Model**



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Third, the model identifies the complexity of the link between qualifications and skills. It identifies various actors in the VET system, for example professional bodies, learning providers, awarding bodies, employers and the government, and highlights barriers to progression. The key features are as follows:

**Workplace learning is central to skills development**

First, the model identifies that the level of internal learning is dependent on business strategy and therefore is market driven. Whereas a large proportion of qualifications are government driven in England due to links to funding. Informal workplace learning is given prominence and occupies a larger segment because it is the source for skills development for all people. For many, learning from a more

experienced colleague, 'sitting next to Nellie', is the main form of training; other vocational learning is 'on-the-job' and skills build over time with experience.

The size of the circle and segments, and composition of external learning would vary between learners and workplaces. For some, the circle would be small (Figure 2) due to periods of unemployment or employment in restricted learning environments (Fuller and Unwin 2004). A small segment of external learning may cover, for example basic skills training and a government-funded Level 2 course, for example in customer service, or it may not exist at all. For others, a larger model would represent a wealth of learning gained over a rich and varied career. Expansive work environments (Figure 4) provide many opportunities for continuous professional development, including access to a range external training, such as professional qualifications and further degrees. In this case, decision-making may be influenced by communities of practice, such as professional bodies.

From an organisational perspective, the size of the circle and proportion of informal learning reflects its competitive strategy and the relationship between technical relations and social relations. Some organisations offer extensive on and off-the-job training in order to develop skilled employees for differentiated production or to maximise employee contribution through collective values (Ashton & Sung 2006). Thus there are variations to the extent that organisations fund investment in training and qualifications. The inner segments (Figure 1) demonstrate the extent that training and qualifications are funded by the employer and individual. Generally employers fund initial development, although levels of support for ongoing development vary. However, companies that associate skills and performance closely with qualifications may fund all skills development.

FIGURE 2 **MODEL A Restricted work environment**

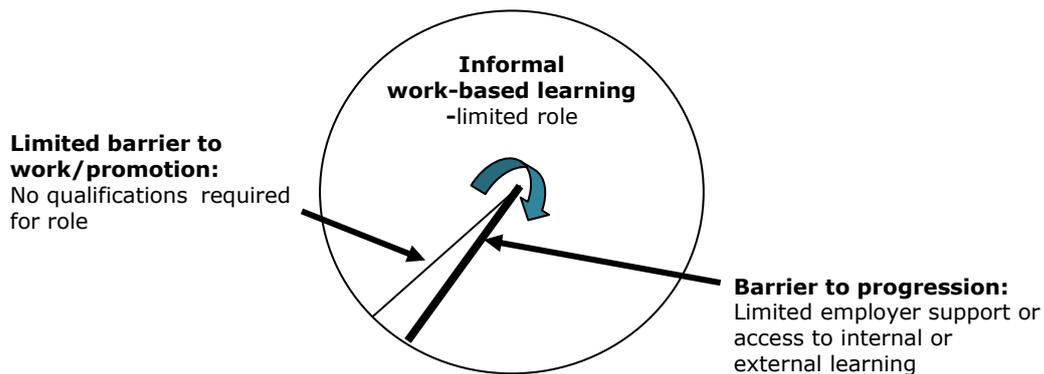


FIGURE 3 **MODEL B Expansive work environment (dependent)**

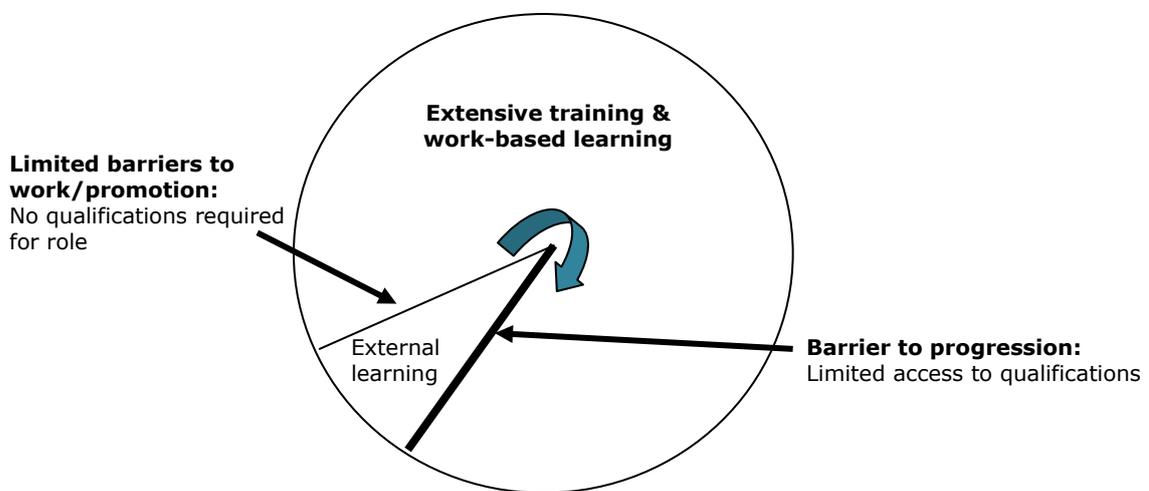
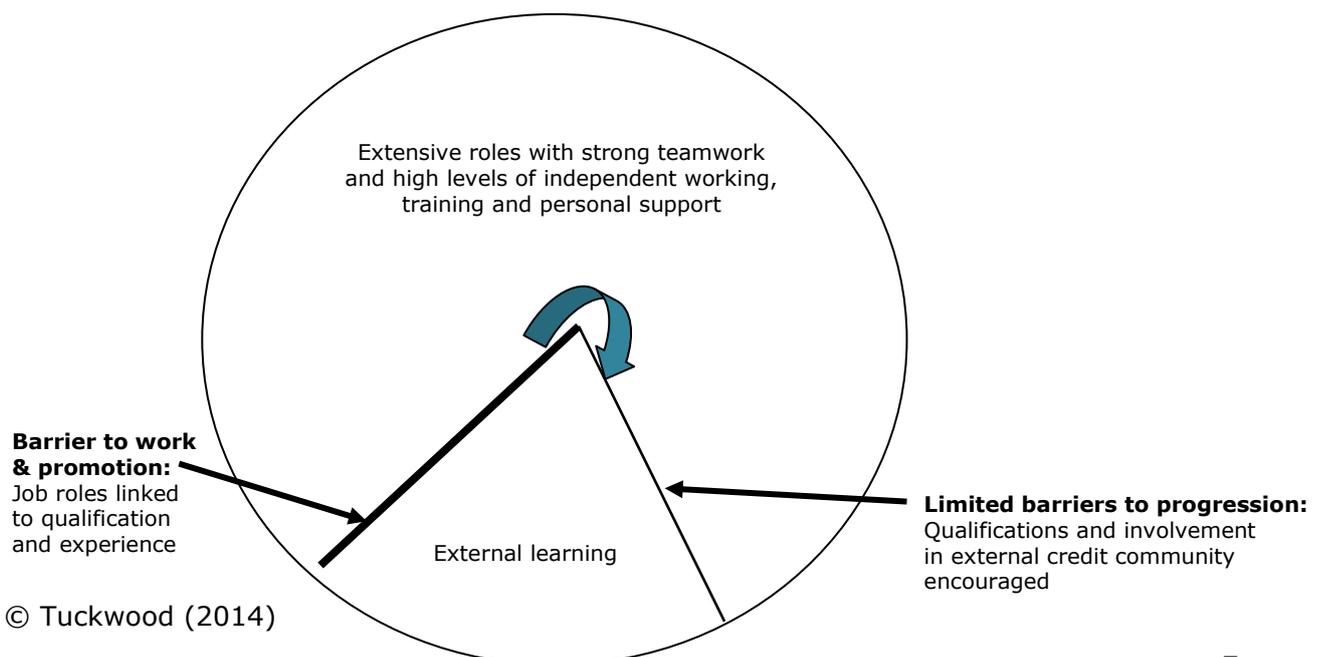


FIGURE 4 **MODEL C Expansive work environment (high involvement)**



## **Lifelong nature of vocational learning**

In contrast to standard qualifications frameworks, including the QCF, that only offer a static representation of achievement of full, regulated qualifications at different levels, the Internal and External Vocational Learning Model shows that vocational learning is ongoing, lifelong and flexible. One diagram could represent the vocational learning of an individual or organisation over time or a series of diagrams.

During a lifetime, individuals build skills informally in the workplace and dip in-and-out of formal internal and external vocational learning. Only some courses would lead to regulated qualifications, although potentially more training and qualifications could lead to credit in the QCF. Individuals do not necessarily progress to higher levels of learning; they are more likely over a lifetime to take a range of courses at different levels that reflect their wider interests. For example, they may combine a series of short Level 2 qualifications in health and safety and first aid, while studying for a degree in their own time.

Likewise, from an organisational perspective, in a changing external environment, new products and systems mean that employees need to update knowledge and skills. Versions of this model could identify this learning and link it to other learning. Individuals learn through a wide range of mediums; and therefore qualifications capture only a small sum of this knowledge and skills.

## **Barriers to progression**

The model highlights barriers to progression. During a lifetime, an individual is likely to experience various barriers to skills development. Some might limit access to employment such as a lack of qualifications, limited personal skills or high competition for work (Figure 4). Within employment, access to skills development is likely to depend on factors such as business strategy, technical specialism, and

availability of funding for skills development, regulatory requirements and competition from other employees. Individual motivation may depend on employer's expectations, especially in organisations with increasingly flatter structures and fewer opportunities for promotion (Figure 3).

For organisations with people-focused interpersonal relations, barriers to entry might be based on soft skills and 'personality fit', for example call centres seek people with good team-working and communication skills.

However, 'barriers' not only limit progression; additionally they provide powerful incentives that motivate individuals and organisations to invest in qualifications. Keep (2006) refers to these as Type 2 incentives, without which there is little motivation to invest in skills development and vocational qualifications. Type 2 incentives depend on cultural expectations regarding the value of qualifications and skills development. Governments, professional bodies and organisations can influence these through setting requirements for certain levels of experience and qualifications in order to access particular roles, for example through licenses to practise or organisational policies that link job roles to specific qualification requirements to encourage investment in qualifications. However, Tuckwood (2012) contends that flatter structures provide less incentive to employees to overcome these barriers and invest time, money and effort in personal development.

### **Rich and varied nature of vocational learning**

The model highlights the rich and varied nature of vocational learning. The VET system includes a range of partners: employers, professional bodies, learning providers, awarding bodies and the government that contribute to the provision of vocational learning. Some such as universities and professional bodies focus on higher level qualifications. Others such as some learning providers and the

government focus on developing basic skills. The complexity of a model would depend on the range of provision that was relevant to an individual or an organisation.

The Internal and External Vocational Learning Model is valuable for two reasons. First, it places into perspective each form of vocational learning, to encourage a more balanced VET policy and shift away from further qualification regulation to partnership working with learning providers, professional bodies and employers. Therefore it represents Hager's more inclusive concept of vocational learning. In particular, it gives prominence to the important role of informal workplace learning to encourage a shift in skills policy from the reorganisation of VET to 'open the black box' of the company and look for ways to build expansive working environments (Keep 2002). Also, significantly, the model supports the creation of the QCF as originally conceived in the 'Framework for Achievement'; a simpler, more responsive, inclusive, less bureaucratic and more diverse framework (QCA: 2004). This vision gives recognition to a wide range of achievement and encourages flexible pathways and inclusion of a range of specialist providers.

Second, variations of the model show the dynamic nature of workplace learning and the unique nature of vocational learning paths. It demonstrates that the link between skills and qualifications is not regular or linear. The model is useful for individuals and organisations for a range of purposes; it can capture a moment in time; a life of learning; or through a series of diagrams show how opportunities for learning change over time.

## **Conclusion**

Understanding about the meaning of skills and demand for qualifications varies between individuals and employers because it is influenced by a range of internal and external incentives. Therefore the 'role and value of qualifications is context

dependent' (Unwin et al 2004: 6.62) in the cultural and organisational sense (Keep 2009), and influenced by wider social, economic, political and institutional factors, such as sectoral and occupational traditions, selection and progression mechanisms, and educational and age profiles.

Thus ultimately, interest in certification depends on the extent that employers are concerned about skill development, and the value they place on qualifications as a means to measure skill and motivate employees. For example, Coffield (2004) argues that the problem at the moment is not the supply of relevant qualifications or the 'low motivation of employees' (2004:286), but the poor quality of jobs and limited job specifications. Likewise, Fuller and Unwin (2004) warn that an 'overemphasis on the individual can divert attention from the influence of the organisational and wider institutional context in which learning at work occurs' (2004: 133).

The Internal and External Vocational Learning Model is important because it encompasses all forms of vocational learning, including workplace learning, and encourages a more balanced view of VET. It shares responsibility for skills development more evenly between the employer, individual and external learning providers. Also it is a helpful, descriptive tool to identify the nature of individual and organisational vocational learning.

The model gives prominence to informal workplace learning and the larger model (Figure 4) represents the wealth of learning gained over a rich and varied career in an expansive working environment that gives access to a wide range of training, including qualifications – a lifetime of learning. Alternatively, it could portray the nature of vocational learning in an organisation or department.

The model identifies barriers to progression such as into employment or further skills development or promotion. However results from research (Tuckwood 2012) suggest that a lack of individual agency poses the greatest barrier to progression in organisations with increasingly flat structures and few opportunities for promotion. Thus credible progression routes linked to external communities of practice such as professional bodies are important.

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## **About the author**

Debbie Tuckwood is Director of Learning and Development at the Institute of Credit Management. Debbie has considerable experience in vocational learning and qualifications having completed a doctoral research project into the use of Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) qualifications in credit management departments as a catalyst for performance, and worked with many organisations in the private and public sector to link training to qualification pathways. Debbie led the development of QCF qualifications in credit management, debt collection, money and debt advice and High Court enforcement.

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