

NOS Strategy 2010-2020

UK Commission for Employment and Skills

Revised Strategy June 2011

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1 Our vision

The vision driving this strategy is that, by 2020, high-quality National Occupational Standards (NOS) will be widely used both by awarding organisations/bodies for developing qualifications, and also by employers and other stakeholders to underpin their human resource management processes and strategic business developments.

NOS will be recognised by employers as the clear, concise and consistent articulation of requirements for occupational competence and the knowledge and skills individuals need to develop to perform effectively and safely in the workplace.

NOS will be valued by the governments across the UK and wider stakeholders as essential products for ensuring the UK has a competent, flexible and safe workforce which can drive the growth of a productive, globally competitive and sustainable economy.

Objectives

The progress of this strategy will be monitored throughout the next decade and evaluated in 2020 against the following twelve objectives:

1. NOS are developed to underpin the skills identified as being most critical to the economy.
2. The potential benefits of NOS and how to use them are clearly communicated to employers and other stakeholders.
3. NOS and professional standards are cognisant of each others' position in each sector, to simplify the offer for employers and facilitate individual career progression across all 4 nations
4. NOS are easily accessible to employers and other stakeholders in a common format which allows them to be used for a variety of human resources management and development as well as strategic business purposes.
5. Products and services based on NOS may be made available in diverse formats appropriate to the markets for which they are intended.
6. The contribution of NOS to the UK economy and society is measured through robust and credible evaluation methods.
7. Functions which are common to more than one sector or occupation are specified by single common NOS to facilitate transferability of competence.
8. NOS covering new functions are developed in line with the Quality Criteria and approved within six months of their need being identified.
9. NOS that meet agreed quality criteria are available for all significant functions carried out in the workplace in the UK.
10. Wherever appropriate, vocational qualifications in the UK are underpinned by NOS which meet the quality criteria.
11. NOS inform, and are informed by, knowledge, skills and competence developments in the EU, particularly the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), Key Competences (KCs) and the European taxonomy of Skills, Competencies and Occupations (ESCO).

12. NOS support employability by clearly showing the employability skills required for effective performance in each NOS.

Work began in 2010-11 towards the first nine objectives. The processes which were adopted and the progress made are outlined in Appendix 1. Objective 3 has increased in importance so has been moved to that position.

The last two are longer-term objectives and will be addressed later in the decade.

The objectives are underpinned by a series of key principles which are articulated later in the strategy.

2 Where are we now?

National Occupational Standards are statements of the standards of performance individuals must achieve to be competent when carrying out functions in the workplace, together with specifications of the underpinning knowledge and understanding.

Demand-led skills

Over the past 25 years, National Occupational Standards (NOS) have been the mechanism for ensuring that vocational education, training and qualifications equip the workforce with the skills the economy requires. A third of the workforce now holds a qualification based on NOS, nearly two million people have completed or are currently on apprenticeships and many millions more are following learning and development programmes designed to meet the requirements of NOS. They encompass the employability skills of self-management and organisation of work, thinking through and solving problems, working with others, communicating effectively and understanding the business.

NOS are therefore, UK-wide, demand-led, evidence-based benchmarks of competent performance which underpin vocational learning and development, apprenticeships and qualifications across all sectors, occupations and parts of the UK.

Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) and other standards setting organisations (SSOs) work continuously with employers and other key partners to develop and refine NOS in order to express and present current and projected industry requirements in ways which are immediately accessible to workers in their sectors/occupations. There are NOS covering virtually all functions carried out in the workplace today – a truly unique resource with the potential to focus the efforts of employers, workers and educationalists to develop the skills required to increase the UK's productivity and competitiveness and ensure the individuals' employability. In some sectors, demonstration of competence against NOS is required in order to run a business or practice a craft or profession.

Support the development of new skills for new jobs

The EU and governments across the UK have highlighted key economic, social and demographic trends and the implications of these for the skills of the workforce.

The EU Commission's communication of 16 December 2008, *New Skills for New Jobs: Anticipating and matching labour market and skills needs*, identifies that: "Across Europe, the

shift to a low-carbon economy and the growing importance of the knowledge economy, in particular the diffusion of ICTs and nano-technologies offer great potential for the creation of sustainable jobs. Globalisation, ageing populations, urbanisation and the evolution of social structures also accelerate the pace of change in labour market and skills requirements. The development of new skills and competencies to fully exploit the potential for recovery is a priority and a challenge for the EU and national public authorities, for education and training providers, companies, workers and students."

Within the EU, there is widespread recognition of the systematic approach represented by NOS which has strongly influenced the design of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and is well positioned to make a significant contribution to the definition of the Key Competences (KCs) underpinning the EU's *New Skills for New Jobs* programme.

A key innovation in the NOS Strategy 2010-2020 is to prioritise and fast-track the development of NOS to develop the knowledge, skills and occupational competence of workers:

- in low carbon industries
- in new technologies, particularly life sciences and information and communication technologies
- to improve resource efficiency in traditional industries
- to adapt to new ways of working as a result of technological advances
- to address the needs of an ageing population.

Recent shocks to the economy and waves of redundancies have emphasised the importance of workforce flexibility and the transferability of knowledge, skills and competence from one context to another. A second key innovation of the NOS Strategy will therefore be to identify those functions which are common to more than one sector or occupation and ensure that NOS further strengthen the performance required in all the contexts where the function is carried out.

Support the development of employability skills

Policy initiatives for the EU and the UK nations identify the key challenge of ensuring individuals develop and maintain their basic employability skills. The UK Commission's report *The Employability Challenge* outlines a framework for employability skills that encompasses literacy, numeracy, ICT, self-management, thinking through and solving problems, working with others, communicating effectively and understanding the business – all underpinned by a positive attitude.

Since NOS describe the outcomes of competent performance in a function, individuals need to demonstrate employability skills as well as technical and context-related knowledge and skills required to perform to the standard. These employability skills will vary between occupations and the specifics of how these skills are developed and assessed will be included in individual qualification specifications.

The UK Commission will work with UK and EU partners over the period covered by the NOS Strategy to ensure the development of a common taxonomy of the knowledge and skills required in employment so that these can be mapped to NOS. A common taxonomy will

enable employers to use a common language to specify the fundamental knowledge and skills required to perform a function to a competent standard.

Recent bouts of redundancies and higher levels of unemployment have put a premium on fundamental Employability Skills and the ability to transfer skills from one sector or occupation to another.

Simplify the skills system

This NOS Strategy supports the Simplification agenda which includes working towards “a simplified, rationalised, unitised, system of qualifications that meets employers needs” and addressing some of the issues raised by employers, such as excessive bureaucracy and complexity of programmes and initiatives and difficulties of access to the skills system.

Adherence to the *NOS Quality Criteria* will ensure that "the content of learning and qualifications is shaped by the relevant sector, and up-to-date with emerging industry needs" (*Hiding the Wiring*, UK Commission, 2009) and fast-tracking of NOS of critical importance to the economy will "improve the relevance, currency and responsiveness of industry and occupational qualifications" (*Towards Ambition 2020: skills, jobs, growth*, UK Commission, 2009).

To support the simplification agenda, an early priority for the NOS Strategy is to agree a common template for NOS and to replace the NOS Directory with a NOS Database using as its basis the common template. A consistent presentation of standards will simplify use of and access to the standards by a variety of stakeholders including employers, awarding organisations and the four governments. As part of this obsolete, duplicates or near duplicates of NOS will be removed on an ongoing basis during the lifetime of the NOS Strategy.

Government commitment

Unparalleled government investment of £20 million in the UK Vocational Qualification Reform Programme (UKVQRP) over the past two years has required that all relevant vocational qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland on the Qualifications and Curriculum Framework (QCF) and SVQs on the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) are based on NOS and that all publicly funded training meets the needs of employers.

In Wales, through the Lifelong Learning pillar of the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW), employers have been encouraged to work with SSCs to use NOS to inform awards.

The *Skills for Scotland: A Lifelong Skills Strategy* (2007) requires that employers have a say in the design of all qualifications and this has been embraced through the VQ Reform Programme with SQA ensuring that:

- SSCs and employers are involved in the design of the qualifications which it awards
- SSCs and employers are involved in the design of the qualifications which are accredited by SQA's Accreditation Unit.

Through this strategy the government is demonstrating its commitment to ensuring that new and flexible vocational qualifications on the QCF and relevant vocational qualifications in Scotland continue to be informed by the voice of employers, articulated through NOS.

Building on success

Building on success to date, it is intended that this strategy will ensure that NOS make their full contribution to the development of our economy, society and environment and underpin the UK Commission's strategic goal of a world-class UK workforce, where "world-class" is defined by being in the top 8 OECD countries for productivity, employment and skills. It will achieve this through:

- ensuring consistent, quality, relevant and up-to-date NOS continue to be available and accessible to those who need them
- promoting and supporting the use of NOS as the basis for vocational qualifications to ensure that these meet the needs of employers
- promoting and supporting the use of NOS and products/services based on NOS in order both to meet skills development needs and to deliver business outcomes
- evaluating the impact of NOS on the achievement of the 2020 targets and other economic, social and environmental benefits.

All this will need to be achieved at a time when budgets are tight and everyone is asked to do more with less, increase efficiency, avoid duplication of activity and prioritise those activities which deliver the best value for money.

This strategy is designed both to tackle the barriers to take-up of NOS in the past and ensure that NOS make their full contribution to the UK's future economic growth and social wellbeing.

Why do we need to change?

Despite significant investment in NOS and their extensive use in certain sectors of the economy, the majority of UK employers are not using NOS, and, then often only for vocational qualifications and apprenticeships. Key reasons given by employers include:

- lack of awareness of NOS
- poor access to NOS
- confusion resulting from inconsistency in the content and presentation of NOS
- perceived lack of relevance of NOS to their business
- lack of understanding of NOS and how they can be used
- lack of simple, accessible tools to apply NOS for fundamental human resource management and development process.

To address these issues and ensure future vocational qualifications are based on clear and consistent specifications of employers' requirements, the UK Vocational Qualification Reform Programme (UKVQRP) Board charged the UK Commission with drawing up the NOS Strategy in line with the following key principles:

1. NOS must be articulated by a representative sample of relevant employers across the UK

2. NOS must be able to be used for a variety of purposes across the UK or in any one of the nations of the UK
3. NOS, and NOS-based products, must be readily accessible for employers/key stakeholders via appropriate media
4. The format of NOS must be consistent and use common definitions
5. NOS must be written in clear, plain language with a minimum of jargon but using language recognisable to business sectors
6. Robust, streamlined development and quality assurance processes must be in place.

Additionally, the UKVQRP Board asked the UK Commission to:

7. work with partners to develop draft models to agree the future format of standards, including taking on board the importance of getting the format right so that the UK standards could be used to shape European standards
8. explore how Employability Skills should be captured within NOS
9. confirm the change of name to "UK Occupational Standards"

This strategy meets the six key principles listed above and takes on board principles 7 and 8 (which the UKVQRP have agreed are lower priorities and should be addressed in later years). It did not, however, confirm the change of name to "UK Occupational Standards". The strategy recognises two significant factors in favour of retaining the NOS brand:

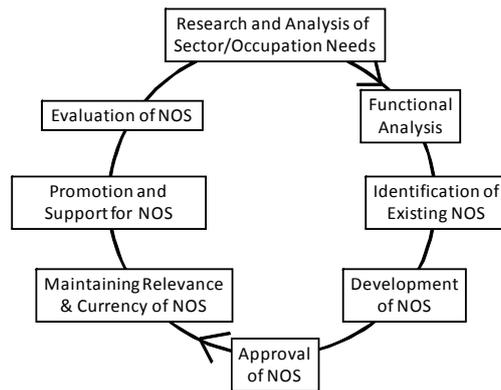
- in sectors where the NOS brand has become well-established it would be more beneficial to build on this success rather than undoing effective work and alienating stakeholders
- in certain sectors NOS are embedded in legislation, regulation, registration, pay and grading and collective bargaining agreements – a considerable cost and level of effort would be required to renegotiate and amend these if the brand were changed

3 What will we do to achieve our vision?

In order to achieve our vision during a period where public funding will be severely limited, we will need to be more consistent in what we do well, simplify our approach and eliminate duplication, prioritise our limited resources on critical areas and develop innovative approaches to removing barriers to realising the potential of NOS across the whole economy.

Adopt a whole-system approach to NOS

The *NOS Quality Criteria* make it clear that SSCs and other standards setting organisations are responsible for taking a whole-system approach to NOS, including the development of NOS and their use in vocational education, training and qualifications, as shown in the figure below.



A Whole-System Approach to NOS

To address the key economic priorities and their workforce implications, SSCs and other standards setting organisations will need to:

- work together to analyse and prioritise cross-sector/occupation workforce requirements;
- analyse and prioritise current and future needs of each sector/occupation and how NOS can be used to address these needs;
- define the key purpose of each sector, occupation or area of work and accurately identify and analyse all the functions that individuals need to carry out in order to achieve this key purpose;
- identify existing NOS which may cover these functions in order to avoid duplication of NOS and maximise the potential for transferability of competence;
- systematically develop and revise NOS in line with agreed quality criteria, including importing and/or signposting existing NOS where appropriate;
- continuously review NOS to ensure they remain relevant and up-to-date, deleting NOS which are no longer required or have been superseded;
- promote and support NOS for training, development, qualifications and the range of human resource management and strategic business purposes which are required by the sector/occupation;
- evaluate the use of NOS and how effective they are at addressing the identified needs of the sector/occupation; this should occur naturally if NOS are truly employer-led

As well as providing a cycle of continuous improvement, the whole-system approach will ensure that investment in NOS is levered most effectively to respond to the current and future needs of each sector/occupation and the UK as a whole.

It is recognised that organisations have their own quality review processes, such as ISO 9001, and that the whole system approach will be, in some instances, aligned to these organisational processes.

Assure the quality of NOS

Standards which specify employers' current requirements, anticipate future demands, are clearly expressed and easily-understood, provide the firm foundations on which this NOS

Strategy is based. However, in many sectors employers also work with professional standards and have their own competency frameworks, which may or not be founded on NOS. As the NOS Strategy is rolled out, ensuring that NOS are relevant to professional standards and recognise the role of competency frameworks will need to assume greater importance. Professional standards may, for example, define technical knowledge and understanding which underpin NOS; where competency frameworks already exist they may play a vital role in helping standards setting organisations to articulate competency requirements in a given sector.

Trainers have to be sure that NOS provide accurate specifications for designing, delivering and evaluating their courses. Awarding organisations/bodies need NOS which describe performance and knowledge clearly, accurately and in ways which provide a consistent basis for assessment. Employers need NOS to confirm their employees are occupationally competent and therefore able to work safely and deliver consistent and effective results.

The UK Commission has put emphasis, therefore, on the early stages of the NOS Strategy focusing on working closely with key partners to review and refresh NOS quality assurance processes, including minimising the lapsed time between identification of need and availability of relevant qualifications. It is an expressed goal of this NOS Strategy to move towards a quality assurance system that puts the responsibility firmly with SSCs and other standards setting organisations; a prime objective of 2010/11 implementation plan. In future years the emphasis will be on SSCs and other standards setting organisations effectively self-assuring their quality processes and streamlining them in line with their other quality systems to minimise the time to develop quality assured NOS.

Promote the use of NOS

This strategy is designed to ensure that NOS are used effectively by all who can benefit from them. It focuses on both increasing the percentage of organisations which are using NOS (depth of penetration) and expanding the range of purposes to which NOS are being put (breadth of penetration).

There are significant variations from sector to sector in the depth and breadth of penetration as a result of the different conditions in each sector –research consistently indicates that NOS are currently only used by a minority of employers and for a limited range of purposes. The challenge for each sector/occupation is to encourage a greater number of employers to use NOS and to use them effectively for a wider range of purposes.

Increasing the penetration – and therefore the impact – of NOS will be achieved through an overarching UK-wide promotional strategy and sector/occupation promotional strategies. The UK Commission will be responsible for the overarching strategy, whereas bodies responsible for the development of NOS will need to work together to promote strategies to meet the needs of each sector/occupation for which they have responsibility. There is no single prescription for sector/occupation promotional strategies; some may conclude that NOS are already achieving optimum impact in their sectors; others may identify that sector/occupation needs can best be met by getting existing users to use NOS for a wider range of purposes rather than expending limited resources on attracting new users. In some sectors, employers may be able to use NOS as they are, while in others it will be necessary to provide application tools in order to optimise the impact of NOS.

Deliver value for money

The UK Commission's report *Towards Ambition 2020: Skills, Jobs, Growth* identifies two further challenges to be addressed by the skills system over the coming decade:

- **Limited public funding.** We must find innovative approaches to achieving more with less and eliminating processes, structures and costs that do not add real value.
- **Co-investment.** We must leverage significantly more co-investment from individuals and employers if we are to achieve our world class ambitions.

NOS will, therefore, need to demonstrate that they deliver good value for money and a healthy return on investment, especially as public funding will be severely limited and, where available, may be directed specifically to those sectors and occupations which will drive economic growth and prosperity. Employers and stakeholders wishing to invest in solutions based on NOS will need to assess the cost-benefit of doing so and find resources other than from public funding.

4 When are we going to do all this?

The NOS Strategy has been agreed for 2010-2020.

2010-11 was a prototyping year with many of the elements of this strategy being tested out in parts of the system rather than by all players.

2011-12 is an embedding year, when the Strategy is rolled out but kept under review in the light of changing economic and social priorities.

All NOS will meet the requirements of the NOS Strategy by the end of March 2013.

5 Conclusion

The implementation of the new NOS Quality Criteria from April 2010 is ensuring that high quality NOS, informed by a representative sample of employers, written in clear language and complying with common definitions are available for all significant functions in the workplace. Compliance with the *NOS Quality Criteria* is being assured through standards, and training programmes for those involved in developing and promoting NOS, as well as the revised Quality Assurance arrangements that were introduced in September 2010.

Prioritisation of the skills needed for new industries and changing demographics, combined with streamlined development and quality assurance processes, will deliver NOS to support sustainable economic growth and secure social wellbeing within the shortest timeframe practicable. A rationalisation programme will eliminate duplication and redundancy of NOS which are used by more than one sector thus facilitating the transferability of competence across sector boundaries. A harmonisation programme will promote the alignment of NOS and professional standards and increase the interoperability of NOS with EU developments such as the EQF and the Key Competences project, which aims to develop a common taxonomy for Employability Skills across the EU.

Through the NOS Database, NOS will be made available in a common format for Awarding Organisations/Bodies, employers and other stakeholders to use for qualifications and other

purposes across the UK. Where required, these NOS will also be available in the Welsh language. SSCs and standards setting organisations will continue to take the lead in promoting and supporting the use of NOS, and, where funding is available, will develop and promote NOS-based products and services to meet their sectors' priority needs.

The NOS Strategy will be reviewed in 2011/12 with the four governments and key stakeholders as part of the new way of commissioning NOS through Universal Services.

Appendix 1

Implementation 2010/11

The NOS Strategy 2010 embedded within it the 2010/11 implementation plan. This has been extracted in order to ensure that the NOS Strategy for 2011 onwards is focused on strategy rather than annual implementation plans.

During 2010/11, £5.5 million of Grant-in-Aid funding was budgeted for vocational qualifications and NOS development. This was in addition to UK Commission internal staff resources. It was used to address the following priorities:

- assuring the quality of NOS;
- making NOS available in a consistent format for qualifications and other purposes;
- speeding up the qualifications development process;
- improving the effectiveness of the workforce through the development of occupational competence
- developing the skills required for new industries;
- increasing the flexibility of the workforce through transferable skills;
- improving the employability of the workforce;
- simplifying the skills system through clearer alignment of NOS with other systems, such as professional qualifications and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF);
- providing evidence of the impact of NOS on the UK's economic and social progress.

Governments across the UK encouraged the use of NOS by employers and other stakeholders for a wide range of purposes other than qualifications. However, the primary focus for the Grant-in-Aid funding for the UKVQRP programme was to develop NOS to underpin qualifications. It was made clear that any support for using NOS outside of qualifications will need to be funded from other sources.

The roll out will be based on an agreed implementation plan based on the natural cycle of review and development of NOS.

Implementation in 2010/11

From April 2010, an enhanced quality assurance system was established to apply to all new and revised NOS, including:

- **NOS Quality Criteria** – specifying the criteria which all SSCs and other standards setting organisations, and the NOS for which they are responsible, must meet;
- **NOS Guidance** – detailed guidance covering processes, methods and effective practices for developing and implementing NOS;
- **Standards for Developing and Promoting National Occupational Standards** – agreed benchmarks for those involved in developing and promoting NOS, allowing practitioners to develop and demonstrate their competence in the functions relevant to them and ensuring consistency of approach;

- **Capacity and capability building** – an extensive programme for both experienced NOS practitioners and personnel who are new to NOS, involving training, supervision, assessment of competence and Continuing Professional Development;
- **Clear accountabilities** – accountability for both the content and quality of NOS lies clearly with SSCs and other standards setting organisations; external quality assurance will be carried out by UK Commission and the NOS Panel based on risk management principles;
- **Regular review** – the quality assurance system will be kept under regular review

To achieve the objectives specified for the Grant-in-Aid funding, the UK Commission worked with key partners to:

- Agree a common template for NOS
- Initiate work to provide a replacement for the NOS Directory. Using the common template, the NOS Database will enable a consistent presentation of standards to simplify use of and access to the standards by a variety of stakeholders including employers, awarding organisations and the four governments
- Remove from the new NOS Database, NOS which were obsolete and duplicates of other NOS
- Ensure all new NOS meet the new Quality Criteria and are accessible through the NOS Database
- Test whether the National Occupational Standards brand, including its acronym "NOS", is meaningful, understandable and acceptable to employers or whether the name itself is a significant barrier to adoption of the standards. The evidence suggested that there are still a significant number of employers who have not heard of, or do not understand what NOS are; however regardless of their knowledge of NOS, it is the products of NOS rather than the NOS themselves that are of more interest to all employers
- Evaluate progress in March 2011 to make any necessary refinements before the full policy went live with the roll-out of the strategy from April 2011

Implementation 2011/12

During 2011/12 the UK Commission will work with key partners to:

- Review the NOS Strategy with key partners to ensure it remains fit for purpose in the light of changing economic priorities
- Embed the NOS Database
- Continue to quality assure NOS against the revised Quality Assurance arrangements
- Continue to remove from the new NOS Database, NOS which are obsolete and duplicates of other NOS

