



Modular Courses in the structure of UK post school education and training

1. Introduction

This paper intends to show how modular courses (and consequently modular assessment) have been embedded into the UK structure of post school education and training. It attempts to identify some lessons which can be learned.

The United Kingdom consists of 4 nations (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) and a variety of small administrations (e.g. the Isle of Man, the Channel Islands, Gibraltar) which all have distinct variations in their education and training systems (and administration, tax and law!). This paper will concentrate on the system in England (which dominates the UK, see Table 1) as all are essentially similar, with Scotland being the most distinct. However, it should be noted that the system in Scotland often appears to work better and to be more applicable to other countries, perhaps because it has fewer implementing organisations.

Table 1: 2006 UK Population Estimates ('000s)

Age	0-4	5-15	16-19	20-24	25-44	45-59	60-64	65-79	80+	All ages	%
United Kingdom	3,496	8,041	3,196	4,024	17,158	11,449	3,240	6,988	2,699	60,587	100%
England	2,944	6,719	2,667	3,361	14,501	9,777	2,697	5,809	2,277	50,763	83.8%
Wales	160	401	162	196	753	592	177	377	148	2,966	4.9%
Scotland	268	653	263	339	1,417	1,058	280	624	214	5,117	8.4%
Northern Ireland	112	268	104	127	487	316	87	178	61	1,742	2.9%
UK annual cohort	699	731	799	805	858	763	648	466			

The UK is experiencing high rates of net immigration which partly counteracts an ageing population (with an increasing proportion post-retirement and decreasing numbers of young people and children).

Serious deficiencies remain, more than one third of adults do not hold the equivalent of a basic school-leaving qualification. Almost one half of adults (17 million) have difficulty with numbers (21% are classified as not numerate) and 15% (5 million) are not functionally literate. Continuing to improve UK schools will not be enough to solve these problems, as over 70% of the 2020 workforce have already completed their compulsory education.

Table 2: % of Workforce's Highest Qualification, 2006

	Level 7-8	Level 4-6	Level 3	Level 2	Below Level 2	No qualifications
United Kingdom	6.2	22	19.4	22	17.5	12.9
England	6.3	21.8	19.2	21.2	18.2	12.4
Wales	5.1	18.8	20.4	23.4	16.4	15.9
Scotland	5.8	26.5	20.9	20.0	13.7	13.0
Northern Ireland	5.2	19.9	18.8	23.7	11.1	21.3



UK (particularly England) has had too many school leavers without any qualifications, and too little training in employment. As a result Government is encouraging students to stay at school beyond age 16, and increasing emphasis on post-school vocational education and training (see Table 2):

- Increased numbers into higher education (HE, i.e. universities, including 2 year vocational 'Foundation Degrees'), and further education (FE, i.e. all provision outside schools that is below HE level).
- Encouraging employers to support the training of their employees.
- Emphasis on self-motivated and self-financed life-long learning and continuing professional development (CPD) for all ages.
- Development of structured work-based apprenticeships for school leavers.
- Development of open- and distance-learning (e.g. Open University, Open College, University for Industry, and a huge number of courses of all subjects by universities, colleges, professional institutions and the private sector).
- Competence-based National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ).
- Integration of all qualifications (except HE) into a new Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF), which will allow modular qualifications to be assembled from any source. The QCF is compatible with the European Qualifications Framework and ECVET.

The UK economy is changing rapidly. There are no longer jobs for life, individuals expect to change employer (and even profession) many times. New industries are springing up and old ones dying. New occupations, specialisations and professions are constantly arising. Change is the constant theme, and learning is the necessary means with which to take advantage of change: new skills, new behaviours, new knowledge. An increasing proportion of the work-force has been educated and trained elsewhere.

The system is in continuing evolutionary change (in response to these deficiencies and a continuing stream of studies, reports, White Papers and legislation, and also to align with the European Union's Copenhagen and Bologna processes), but work-based competence and modularity have been fundamental since the mid 1980s for all UK's governments, and they are being adopted by the rest of Europe and beyond.

2. Institutional Set-Up

Post school education and training are divided between HE and FE (in particular the post-school colleges). The responsibility for the education service in England lies with the newly created:

- Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) is responsible for all aspects of policy affecting children and young people, and is not directly relevant to this paper,
- Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS).

The inspection of all state-funded learning outside HE in England (including schools, FE colleges and private providers) is the responsibility of a separate, non-ministerial government department, known as Ofsted. In addition, the Quality Improvement Agency for Lifelong Learning (QIA) was created in 2006 to work alongside Ofsted, improving performance across FE. The planning and funding of FE in England is the responsibility of the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), a non-departmental public



body. The LSC is currently working with the Government towards changes in the FE funding system to move towards a more ‘demand-led’ FE sector.

At HE level, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) provides quality assurance services across the UK. It is independent of UK governments and is owned by the organisations that represent the heads of UK higher education institutions.

3. Participation in Training

Education is compulsory up to age 16, and increasing numbers are continuing in full- or part-time education after 16. Full-time students aged under 19 are exempt from tuition fees.

Table 3: % of 16 & 17 year olds continuing their studies¹ as of 2004/5

	Age	% At school	% In FE: Full-time	% In FE: Part-time	% in Government- supported training
United Kingdom	16	37%	36%	5%	..
	17	28%	30%	6%	..
England	16	35%	38%	4%	7%
	17	28%	32%	5%	9%
Wales	16	40%	33%	5%	7%
	17	31%	26%	6%	8%
Scotland	16	48%	16%	7%	...
	17	21%	18%	12%	...
Northern Ireland	16	53%	29%	17%	..
Ireland	17	45%	30%	14%	...

Part-time day courses are mainly for students released by their employers either for one or two days a week (‘day release’), or for periods of ‘block release’. ‘Sandwich courses’ are those where more than 19 weeks of full-time study per academic year are broken by a period(s) of associated industrial training or experience. Sandwich course students are classed as full-time students. Tables 4 and 5 show that numbers are small when compared to the numbers in the age group or workforce (Table 1).

Table 4: Numbers of People in Training in England, 2005/6

Apprenticeships ²	Entry to Employment programmes	Adult & Community Learning	LSC-funded FE	participating in any learning	participating in taught learning
155,000	24,000	786,000	3,630,000	21,850,000	14,870,000

There is also a continuing decline in the numbers recorded in adult learning activities. The number of LSC-funded learners fell by 14% since the previous year in spite of an increase in both the numbers aged under 19 and on governments’ key programmes;

¹ Participation in part-time FE cannot be aggregated with full-time FE or schools activity due to overlap. Students in England and Wales are counted once only, irrespective of the number of courses for which a student has enrolled. In Scotland and Northern Ireland, students enrolled in more than one course in unrelated subjects are mostly counted for each of these courses.



adult learners (age 19+) declined by 17% in the year. Female learners dominate the numbers.

There has been a great emphasis on increased modularisation of all education and training in order to maximise the flexibility and interchangeability of training. This has been accompanied by:

- specifying learning outcomes (rather than prescribing the inputs such as: courses of study or curricula, fixed periods of experience).
- recognition of a wider variety of learning opportunities, including informal learning on-the-job.
- development of quality control for training providers and assessment.

Table 5: % of employees who undertook job-related training in the last 4 weeks, 2006

		On-the-job training only	Off-the-job training only	Both on and off-the-job training	Total
United Kingdom	Males	6.5	4.7	2.5	13.7
	Females	8.4	6.0	3.3	17.7

There is a continuing annual reduction in off-the-job training and an increase in the proportion of on-the-job training.

Table 6: % of employees who undertook Job-related Training in the previous 4 weeks, 2006

Occupational Group	On-the-job training	Off-the-job training only	Both on and off-the-job training	All methods of training
Professional	7.0	11.7	4.8	23.6
Associate professional and technical	7.8	10.3	4.2	22.3
Managers and administrators	4.3	6.6	2.5	13.9
Personal and protective services	8.8	9.4	5.7	24.0
Sales	4.8	6.5	1.0	12.4
Clerical and secretarial	5	8	2	15
Craft and related	3	5	3	12



Plant and machine operatives	2.9	2.8	0.8	6.6
Other occupations/no answer	2		1	7
All occupations	5.3	7.5	2.9	15.7

Over time, the replacement of off-the-job training by on-the-job training is especially strong for professionals, associate professionals and technicians, managers, and sales staff. Staff in the personal and protective services are the principal ones showing any increase in training.

Tables 5 and 6 demonstrate that there is considerable scope to increase investment in training by UK industry, particularly for the lower occupations. There is also growing concern that men are lagging behind women in their learning, as demonstrated in performance at school and university, and participation in work-based training.

4. Modular Courses

Modular Courses are short units of learning, which are separately assessed and can be assembled over time into larger courses and qualifications. Often one can study for the separate modules at different times and places, and assessment can be by different bodies. They therefore require detailed specifications of outcome, and systems of quality assurance and external verification to accredit the training providers and the assessors. They enable great flexibility: trainees can study at their own pace, in a style and at a place of their choosing, common modules can be shared by several specialisations, new modules can be added to reflect new specialisations. They therefore reflect the realities of life-long learning: trainees with jobs, family responsibilities, changing careers. The UK has universally committed itself to modular courses and qualifications to such an extent that it is taken for granted, and it is forgotten that other countries have yet to do so. There is no single explicit methodology of modularisation, but everyone thinks and acts in a modular way.

5. Qualifications

UK has traditionally had a complex, confused and misleadingly named set of qualifications, with emphasis on academic content rather than vocational competence. There are currently 22,000 qualifications. Over the last 20 years, much work has been done to simplify the situation, by applying an overall framework for all qualifications (academic, vocational and professional). The National Qualifications Framework (NQF) was introduced to provide a consistent framework for comparison of NVQs and other qualifications. This is currently evolving into the Qualification & Credit Framework (QCF) which will align English qualifications (expressed as Units of Assessment) with the European system emerging from the Bologna and Copenhagen processes: the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) and the European Credit (Transfer) System for Vocational Education & Training (ECVET).



Table 7: English National Qualification Framework and Credit & Qualification Framework, compared with the European Qualification Framework

<i>NQF Level</i>	<i>QCF Level</i>	<i>EQF Level</i>	<i>Examples</i>
8	8	8	Doctorates
7	7	7	Masters Degree, Postgraduate Diploma and Certificate
6	6	6	Bachelor (Honours) degree
5	5	5	Foundation Degree, BTEC Higher National Diploma
4	4	4	junior managers, associate professionals
3	3	3	Technical Certificates for craftsmen, technicians, supervisors
2	2	2	equivalent to GCSEs at C-A* grades, for skilled occupations
1	1	1	equivalent to 4 GCSEs at D-E grades, for semi-skilled occupations
Entry Level	Entry Level 3		using skills, knowledge, understanding to carry out structured tasks and activities in familiar contexts, with appropriate guidance where needed
	Entry Level 2		using skills, knowledge, understanding to carry out simple, familiar tasks and activities with guidance
	Entry Level 1		

The traditional academic qualifications have had higher status than vocational qualifications in UK. They concentrated on knowledge and understanding, and often ignored practical experience, the competence required in the work-place, and the functional skills. Table 7 shows the overall qualifications framework at each level, with the spectrum from academic qualifications (knowledge and understanding of a particular subject) to vocationally-related qualifications (a broad introduction to a particular sector of the economy, usually still restricted to knowledge and understanding and studied off-the-job) to occupational qualifications (requiring practical experience and the demonstration of practical competence in the work-place, related to a specific occupation).

NVQs:

- are based on levels (see Table 7).
- distinguish between ‘skills’ (practical know how), ‘knowledge & understanding’ (facts, principles, theories; these are often offered as a separate Technical Certificate qualification as part of an apprenticeship) and incorporate attitudes (values, professional ethics).
- identify the generic ‘functional skills’ shared by all occupations. 6 have been specified in detail at the same levels: communication, application of number, problem solving, improving own learning and performance, information technology, working with others.



- have been specified by industry to give the detailed competences required by every occupation: performance criteria for skills, the range of circumstances over which competence is required, the knowledge and understanding that underpin competence and the type of evidence that would demonstrate competence.

Table 8: % of Workforce’s Highest Qualification, 2006

	Level 7-8	Level 4-6	Level 3	Level 2	Below Level 2	No qualifications
United Kingdom	6.2	22	19.4	22	17.5	12.9
England	6.3	21.8	19.2	21.2	18.2	12.4
Wales	5.1	18.8	20.4	23.4	16.4	15.9
Scotland	5.8	26.5	20.9	20.0	13.7	13.0
Northern Ireland	5.2	19.9	18.8	23.7	11.1	21.3

Table 8 demonstrates that the overall level of qualifications in UK is low.

6. Training Providers and Awarding Bodies

The overall responsibility for school and FE college qualifications lies with QCA (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority) in England, and equivalent bodies in the other 3 nations. There is a wide range of qualifications and Awarding Bodies, see Appendix.

Those organisations which are most involved in developing modular courses are:

- the distance learning providers, e.g. the Open University, the Open College, some universities and FE colleges, private training companies.
- the universities (mostly new) offering modular degrees and membership of a Credit Accumulation & Transfer Scheme (CATS) to recognise each other’s modules.
- the University for Industry (Learndirect) offering a vast range of short courses.

7. Funding systems for training

Government is keen for employers to take on the responsibility for investing in their work-force, but small and medium employers are reluctant to do so. Individual employees are also encouraged to invest in themselves. There are often subsidies available from projects and programmes administered by a variety of official agencies: the Learning and Skills Council and the local Small Business Service, Sector Skills Councils and European funding via the regional Government Offices. As a result, small employers in particular expect training to be free or below cost-price. Government has increasingly tied its funding to the achievement of qualifications in the NQF (such as NVQ units and Technical Certificates), which encourages all training providers to adopt this framework.

8. Implications of a Modular System

The modular system of courses has been taken up most enthusiastically by the newest universities and courses, and thus those with lowest status. However the flexibility they offer has gradually made them more widely popular. Modular courses have led to



a desire to 'pick and mix' modules from different sources in order to suit individual circumstances and requirements. Verification and moderation of assessment has needed substantial investment to ensure uniform standards, whether assessment is by a single organisation at different sites/times, or by different organisations. When assessment is by different organisations, a standard framework and shared definitions are needed (which enable variety and customisation), as in the CATS system. It is hard to arrange between organisations with different status, because the high status organisation will fear its standards will be undermined. The identification of shared elements from which any courses or qualifications can be assembled is the logical outcome of a shared framework (e.g. National Occupational Standards and Functional Skills).

It has taken time for all of the academic community to accept the NVQ system, for a variety of reasons:

- the vocational system was set up in opposition to the academic system and academia was excluded from its formation. There is now a recognition of the fundamental importance of industry's needs when designing courses and qualifications.
- initially the NVQ system took little notice of knowledge and understanding, the primary domain of academics, but this has now been remedied.
- the NVQ system sets minimum standards (competence is either achieved or not yet achieved), which is felt to discourage excellence.
- the reductionist nature of the standards of competence may exclude important components, and limit attention to those aspects which can be specified (factors which are no longer excluded: knowledge and understanding, values).
- assessment of each module on its own is not enough to ensure full competence, there is a need to include exercises that integrate the modules (practice in the work-place usually ensures this) and a holistic assessment at the end.
- the detailed specifications of competence in language applicable to all employers can be hard to understand, and make assessment cumbersome and bureaucratic.

It has taken a long time and a huge effort to specify all the competences, and now it is necessary to keep them up-to-date. The number of candidates for the higher level qualifications has been disappointingly small, and awarding bodies have found it difficult to cover their costs. Success has come when the qualification:

- has filled a gap where no suitable qualification existed before.
- provides exemption from some requirement (e.g. statutory requirements, membership requirements of a professional institution).
- has been a condition for financial support.
- the occupation has adopted the standards for commercial uses as well (e.g. to define competence in contracts, to identify training needs, to manage CPD).

However the investment has not been in vain. We can now see the principles of modular qualifications based on learning outcomes being adopted across Europe (through the Bologna and Copenhagen processes) and world-wide (e.g. Australia, Mexico, New Zealand, Oman, South Africa).



9. Trends and Anticipated Changes.

The principle trends which we can discern are:

- there is a danger that we are moving to a 2 tier society: those who have skills and are employable, and those who are excluded. We need to help the lower levels to manage their own development, providing them with more support since they take least benefit from the present system. At the same time the economy has to maximise the number who will learn faster than our competitors.
- the EQF and ECVET have been developed in response to the great fluidity of occupations, the single European labour market and globalisation. They provide an overarching framework to which national and sectoral systems are being adapted. They give coherence, interchangeability, flexibility, mutual recognition, quality assurance, transparency, etc. No longer can each country and occupational area maintain its own idiosyncratic system in isolation.
- the increasing emphasis on career change and lifelong learning will reduce the distinction between vocational training for young people and continuing professional development. This will lead to the increasingly flexible courses and assessment required by those with work and family responsibilities.
- modular, competence-based systems are increasingly recognised world-wide as the key to such frameworks; their atomistic specifications enable competence to be fully specified. Europe is setting the agenda and the standards world-wide,
- there is a convergence towards shared systems, specifications of competence and even qualifications. With the single market, and particularly free movement of labour, this sharing is between countries as well as between sectors.
- the specifications of competence are proving to be of value well beyond qualifications, providing a common currency between individuals and organisations, that can be used for example in recruitment, training, selection and promotion. For example the construction industry has identified almost 100 different applications (of which only a handful relate to qualifications).

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Appendix – UK Qualifications

A1. Teaching Qualifications

² Participation in part-time FE cannot be aggregated with full-time FE or schools activity due to overlap. Students in England and Wales are counted once only, irrespective of the number of courses for which a student has enrolled. In Scotland and Northern Ireland, students enrolled in more than one course in unrelated subjects are mostly counted for each of these courses.



Awarding bodies (independent organisations recognised by the regulatory authorities) offer a wide range of national qualifications. Common qualifications taken are the General Certificate of Education Advanced level examination (GCE A-levels); the Advanced Subsidiary level examination (GCE AS-level); GCE A-levels in applied subjects (formerly Vocational Certificates of Education (VCEs)); and National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs).

Teachers are not civil servants, they are employed either by the local authority or by the individual institution. Initial training of school teachers generally involves a three- or four-year Bachelor of Education degree course (or equivalent part-time, flexible or employment-based routes), or a bachelors degree followed by a one-year Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE). FE lecturers in a vocational subject are usually a practitioner who has changed career or often part-time in both roles. Initial teacher training courses lead to 'Qualified Teacher Status' (QTS). Since 2001 all new entrants to FE teaching have been required to complete a professional teaching qualification. In England, major reforms of initial teacher training for the further education sector have been announced. These include the introduction of the award of 'Qualified Teacher Learning and Skills (QTLS)' from September 2007. In Northern Ireland, teachers in further education who do not have an initial teacher training qualification on appointment must hold an approved qualification, such as a university degree or a vocational qualification in the subject they wish to teach. They are contractually required to obtain the Postgraduate Certificate (Further and Higher Education) within three years of appointment. There is currently no statutory requirement for teaching staff in HE to receive any initial training, but universities increasingly provide training for their staff. The Higher Education Academy (HEA) has developed national professional standards for HE teaching for individual universities to apply to their professional development programmes and thus demonstrate that professional standards are being met.

A2. Academic Qualifications

GCSEs (General Certificates of Secondary Education) are taken in 5 or more subjects by most children at school at the age of 16 at the end of compulsory education. Increasingly they include assessment of course work which is essentially modular. GCSEs are graded:

F (fail),

E, D (Level 1)

C, B, A, A* (Level 2)

GCE A (Advanced General Certificates of Education) **Levels:** an A-Level in a subject consists of 6 modules, 3 of which are typically taken in the Year 12 or Lower Sixth aged 16 to 17. After taking 3 modules, students aged 17 to 18 (Year 13 or Upper Sixth) can choose either to continue studying the subject to obtain full A-Levels, or to "cash in" the first 3 modules for an **AS-Level**. From 2008 the number of units within the system will be reduced to 2 at each level, comprising 4 in total for the award of an Advanced Level GCE. Students aiming for university entry typically study 3 or 4 subjects to A-Level and an additional (often contrasting) subject to AS-Level. The system has been increasingly modularised, with the introduction of alternative Modular A Levels consisting of 6 modules taken over the course of the 2 years. The



intention is that students should take modules from a broader range of subjects. A Levels are at Level 3.

The **International Baccalaureate** is an alternative to A-levels (also at Level 3) requiring a greater breadth of study, offered by a few institutions.

A3. Vocational Qualifications

Vocational qualifications can be taken at school or FE college. They have traditionally had lower status than academic qualifications. Plans are being implemented for school **Specialised Diplomas** of basic educational achievement in a vocational subject area, to try to motivate the least able school students.

GNVQs (General National Vocational Qualifications) combine general and vocational education as a preparation for employment or further study. They are available at three levels: Foundation, Intermediate and Advanced (also known as vocational A levels), in 14 vocational areas (eg business). GNVQs are modular unit-based qualifications assessed through a combination of continuous portfolio assessment and short test papers. They have been introduced since 1991.

National Certificate, National Diploma (NC, ND) are studied at FE college over 2 years; providing the knowledge and understanding and developing the key skills associated with an apprenticeship. They are modular: the Certificate is part-time, the Diploma is full-time and includes more modules.

Higher National Certificate, Higher National Diploma (HNC, HND) are studied at FE college over 2 years, leading on from NC or ND, and similar in style (modular, vocational). The 2 year **Foundation Degrees** which are being introduced, are likely to replace HNDs.

National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) are occupational qualifications, available at 5 levels, and are based on up-to-date **National Occupational Standards** (NOS) of competence. They are definitions of what a competent practitioner must be able to achieve in the work-place, set by employers and practitioners. They are modular unit-based qualifications assessed in the work-place. Each sector of industry has mapped the occupations in its sector, identified the range of functions performed by those occupations, specified the functions in detail, and then used them as a shopping list to define the competences of each occupation at each level (e.g. in the construction industry 50 occupations have been defined at levels 3 to 5). An NVQ is therefore based on units, most shared with other occupations in the sector, some shared with other sectors (e.g. those relating to communication and management) and all sharing a standard format. Many NVQs offer options to cover different specialisations, usually consisting of some core units and some optional units with rules as to what combinations constitute the full NVQ. The development of the NVQs has taken place over the last 20 years and is largely in place, with the exception of some professions which feel they already have good qualification systems in place.

Modern Apprenticeships provide structured on-the-job training to young people in employment, with some Government funding. Each sector sets out a MA Framework for an occupation, which identifies the NVQ which will be achieved, the knowledge and understanding requirements (often available as a separate **Technical Certificate**



qualification at Level 3, representing the underpinning knowledge requirements of the NVQ), and the levels of each Functional Skill; sometimes there will be additional requirements specific to that occupation or industry.

Level 1: **BTEC Introductory Diploma** and **Foundation GNVQ** – these are roughly equivalent to 4 GCSEs at D-E grades.

Level 2: **BTEC First Diploma** and **Intermediate General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ)** - these are roughly equivalent to GCSEs at C-A* grades.
Foundation Modern Apprenticeships

Level 3: **BTEC National Certificate (NC)**, **National Diploma (ND)** and **Vocational A-Levels** - these are equivalent to A levels. **Advanced Modern Apprenticeships**

Level 4: **BTEC Higher National Certificate (HNC)** - equivalent to 1st year university.

Level 5: **BTEC Higher National Diploma (HND)** - equivalent to 2nd year university

A4. University Qualifications

Foundation degrees are 2 years and often studied part-time at university or a ‘franchised’ FE college. They are vocational, fully modular and closely linked to industry.

Bachelor degrees (BA, BSc) are 3 years and usually studied full-time at university or through the Open University. The newer universities tend to offer modular degrees allowing 2 or 3 subjects to be combined, with as much as half of the final assessment being on work and exams in the first 2 years. Several groups of universities have combined to recognise each other’s modules so that a degree can be assembled from modules studied and assessed at more than one. The more vocational degrees often have a ‘sandwich year’ in industry as well.

Masters degrees (MA, MSc, MBA, MPhil) are 1 or 2 years full- or part-time study at university, and are frequently used to study for specialisation or career change at age late 20s or early 30s. They tend not to be particularly modular, although various schemes exist to aggregate continuing professional development modules and award a Master’s level qualification.

A5. Professional Qualifications

The professional institutions in UK are very strong and well-respected: they award professional title, not universities. They are generally self-regulating, setting and policing standards of professional competence and conduct, and quality of university courses. **Professional Membership** is usually at 3 levels: technician, associate professional (e.g. incorporated engineer) or chartered professional. There is often a post-graduate qualification required to ensure the full underpinning knowledge and understanding (e.g. solicitors must pass a Legal Practice Course and the Professional Skills Course to become a solicitor). Most professions require a period of one or more years practice under supervision before being fully qualified. Professional institution membership is increasingly based on standards of competence (which are sometimes those defined for the NVQ and key skills) demonstrated in the work-place, and defined knowledge and understanding supplied through appropriate NC/ND,



HNC/HND, Bachelor or Masters degrees. Most professional institutions require members to undertake certain amounts of continuing professional development in order to maintain and extend their competence and to stay up-to-date.

A5. Current reforms and priorities in England

Looking ahead to 2009 and beyond, the Government has set out 5 priority areas

- Closing the gap in educational attainment between those from low income and disadvantaged backgrounds and their peers.
- At the same time, continuing to raise standards for all across the education system.
- Increasing the proportion of young people staying on in education or training beyond the age of 16. A Green Paper (March 2007) set out proposals that all young people will stay in some form of education or training until the age of 18 by 2015.
- Reducing the number of young people on a path to failure in adult life.
- Closing the skills gap at all levels to keep pace with the challenge of globalization.

The Government's strategy to improve educational provision for 14- to 19-year-olds aims to help young people and adults obtain the skills they need to be employable and achieve success:

- Vocational opportunities from the age of 14, which provide clear routes to higher education and/or employment.
- A renewed focus on mathematics and English for all students in secondary education.
- New opportunities for the most able students to be stretched.
- Tackling the disengagement that leads to some pupils leaving education at an early stage.

Legislation has been passed enabling all 14- to 19-year-olds to have access to new specialised diplomas, offering additional opportunities for practical learning. In addition, a revised curriculum is proposed for the compulsory secondary phase (ages 11 to 16) to allow schools greater flexibility to ensure pupils master basic skills and to provide more opportunities to stretch particularly able students.