The aim of this Guide is to provide useful information you can refer to as you work towards your qualification and to let you know there is plenty of support available if you need it.

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The aim of this Guide is to provide useful information you can refer to as you work towards your qualification and to let you know there is plenty of support available if you need it.
About this guide

You may be new to the field of NVQs or new to the Open University Awarding Body (OUAB). It is our job, as your awarding body, to tell you what our responsibilities are, where your Assessment Centre fits in and what is required of you as a candidate.

The aim of this Guide is to provide useful information you can refer to as you work towards your qualification and to let you know there is plenty of support available if you need it.

The OUAB has a range of policies and procedures to support candidates. These are available on our website www.open.ac.uk/ouab and include our Customer Service Statement, Equal Opportunities, Appeals, Complaints and Data Protection policies. Your Assessment Centre will provide you with details of its own policies and guidelines.

This guide is divided into four sections for ease of reference

1. An introduction to NVQs
   provides answers to some commonly asked questions relating to NVQs

2. The assessment process
   explains how the assessment process works

3. Roles and responsibilities
   provides information on key people involved in the assessment process

4. Putting together a portfolio of evidence
   explains how to put your evidence together
1 An introduction to NVQs

This section is designed to explore some of the more commonly asked questions in relation to NVQs and to explain key terms. (A Glossary is also included at the back of the guide for quick reference.)

What are NVQs?

**NVQs are National Vocational Qualifications.**

Nationally recognised qualifications are based on standards. Standards have been developed across industry and they clearly set out the skills and knowledge expected of individuals working across a range of occupations at different levels.

The standards are agreed by a cross-section of people working within each industry and they relate directly to the skills and knowledge a candidate needs to demonstrate when they are competent in a given area of work.

What are the differences between NVQs and other forms of qualification?

NVQs set out skills, knowledge and attitudes which can be directly applied and assessed within the workplace. The emphasis is on your day-to-day abilities and achievements rather than, as with some other qualifications, the ability to recall large amounts of information in examinations.

How do I get an NVQ?

You achieve an NVQ by demonstrating you can meet the standards that form the qualification you are working towards. This is called ‘demonstrating competence’ and you do this by collecting a variety of evidence and having this evidence assessed.

The evidence will often occur naturally (that is to say, your assessor\(^1\) will assess your performance as you carry out your normal work activity).

There are many other types of evidence, which may include reports and documents, testimonials from colleagues and examples of your previous work, to support or explain your workplace achievements.

Your evidence must show your assessor that you have consistently met the standards laid down within your qualification and that you are currently competent - that is to say you can currently demonstrate the required levels of performance.

How long does an NVQ take to achieve?

This may vary and depends on the extent to which you need further work experience or training, the amount of time you can commit to gathering evidence and the level of support you receive from your assessor, employer and other supporters. However, as a rough guide Levels 2 and 3 can take up to 12 months and Levels 4 and 5 up to 24 months.

**NVQ certification**

You will be certificated by the OUAB, however it is important to highlight that you can decide to work towards the achievement of individual units rather than a full NVQ. If this is the case you will be certificated for the units achieved.

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\(^1\) See page 12 for further information on the role of the assessor.
What does an NVQ look like?

Each NVQ is made up of different units of competence which in turn are broken down into separate elements.

Units of competence are the main blocks which make up an NVQ. The units relate to significant areas of work activity for a given occupation. Each unit is made up of a unit title and elements of competence. Units are the smallest components of NVQs which are available for certification.

The elements within each unit provide more specific information covering what is involved within the unit. They reveal what you, as a candidate, need to be able to do as you seek to achieve the unit.

An example of this is set out above.

What are performance criteria?

The performance criteria provide clear information on how you need to demonstrate your ability.

Performance criteria are statements to which you can refer to ensure you collect appropriate evidence. Your assessor will refer to the performance criteria as he/she judges the evidence you put forward.

What are the range statements?

Some qualifications include range statements. Range statements define the range of situations and circumstances in which you, as a candidate, need to demonstrate competence.

What is underpinning knowledge?

Each element will specify the knowledge and understanding you must demonstrate alongside competent performance. This is the underpinning knowledge.

You are required to demonstrate the underpinning knowledge of your occupational area to show that you understand why certain activities have to be carried out in a particular manner.

The underpinning knowledge (shown with each set of standards) states the specific aspects you need to be aware of. This information will be
Section 1: An Introduction to NVQs

referred to by your assessor as he or she carries out the assessment with you. Frequently, your assessor will ask you questions which relate directly to the underpinning knowledge.

What are the different levels of NVQs?
There are five\(^2\) different levels of NVQs which can be defined as follows:

**Level 1**
Competence in the performance of a range of varied activities, most of which may be routine and predictable.

**Level 2**
Competence in a significant range of varied work activities performed in a variety of contexts. Some of the activities are complex and non-routine and there is some individual responsibility or autonomy. Collaboration with others may also be a requirement.

**Level 3**
Competence in a broad range of varied work activities performed in a wide variety of contexts and most of which are complex and non-routine. There is considerable responsibility and autonomy; control or guidance of others is often required.

**Level 4**
Competence in a broad range of complex technical and professional work activities performed in a wide variety of contexts and with a substantial degree of personal responsibility and autonomy. Responsibility for the work of others and allocation of resources is often present.

**Level 5**
Competence which involves the application of a significant range of fundamental principles and complex techniques across a wide and often unpredictable variety of contexts. There is very substantial personal autonomy and often significant responsibility for the work of others and for the allocation of substantial resources.

Also, personal accountability for analysis and diagnosis, design, planning, execution and evaluation.

What does assessment mean?
To achieve an NVQ, you must demonstrate to your assessor that you can satisfy the standards. To do this you must put forward evidence which clearly demonstrates your competence to your assessor and meets the standards.

The assessment process is the joint responsibility of you and your assessor and begins when you draw up an assessment plan together at the start of the process. This will establish your current level of competence and define the relevant skills and knowledge you already possess.

Assessment plans can incorporate evidence, where relevant, from outside work, taking account of previous employment, voluntary work, leisure activities, etc.

The assessment plan will also involve exploring and defining your development needs and identifying training required. It will set the scene for the future assessment of your evidence as agreed between you and your assessor.

Usually, your assessor will observe you in the course of your work (although assessment will also involve your assessor reviewing your portfolio of other evidence – please see Section 4: Putting together a portfolio of evidence).

NVQ assessment is designed to take account of each candidate’s needs and experiences and to give credit for previous achievements, as long as these are still current (normally work carried out within the past two years) and you remain competent.

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\(^2\) In future there will be changes to the levelling of NVQs to take account of developments to the National Qualifications Framework.
2 The assessment process

This section explains how the assessment process works.

The route to assessment

Assessment is the key to achieving an NVQ. However, unlike other forms of assessment with which you may be familiar, NVQ assessment relies on a joint agreement between the assessor and candidate concerning how and when assessment will take place and includes a number of stages.

The stages in the assessment process explained...

1 You, the candidate, decide, in conjunction with your assessor, which qualification or unit(s) you will pursue...

It is vital that you, in conjunction with your assessor, select both the appropriate level of qualification and, if required, relevant optional unit(s). If not you will find it very difficult to gather the required evidence.

2 You meet with your assessor...

You and your assessor meet to identify your specific needs in relation to your qualification and the assessment process.

The initial meeting with your assessor is crucial since this forms the basis for the information you receive and is a chance for you to explore any areas of concern or issues you do not understand.

3 You draw up an assessment plan with your assessor...

This will usually happen at the first meeting and certainly by the second meeting with your assessor. The purpose of the assessment plan is to outline the kinds of evidence you already have, to agree the actions and activities you need to undertake in advance of your first assessment, and to determine a provisional timescale. An assessment plan may cover one or more units.

When drafting an assessment plan, you and your assessor will probably identify the kinds of support, training and development opportunities you will need to have access to in order to be ready for assessment. It will also enable you and your assessor to work out where and how you are going to go about the process of collecting your evidence.

In terms of timescales, it is also useful to see if you and your assessor can incorporate the assessment plan into your current organisational development plans, appraisal requirements and continuing professional development activities.

Once this has been done you will be registered for your chosen qualification and your details will be held by us at the OUAB. This means that your Assessment Centre co-ordinator will be able to process information on your behalf to ensure our records are kept up-to-date at all times.

Your records will be securely stored, both at your Assessment Centre and by us at the OUAB. All Assessment Centres have to provide us with details of their information systems so that we can approve their means of ensuring confidentiality on behalf of all candidates.

4 You start the process of collecting evidence...

Evidence is anything that you can use to demonstrate your competence against the qualification you are seeking to achieve (see examples provided in section 4 of this guide).

You will probably wish to collect at least some of your evidence within a ‘portfolio’. This allows ease of reference by yourself and your assessor.
Section 2: The assessment process

5 You present your evidence for assessment...
This involves meeting your assessor, who will explain the process to you. The assessor will make sure that the assessment arrangements are in line with your needs, workplace requirements and the qualification you are working towards.

Your assessor will review your evidence, whether by observing you at work, looking at your portfolio, questioning you, or a mixture of these, and let you know whether they are approving your evidence. There will often be the need for more than one assessment to assess different parts of the qualification or unit(s) you are working towards.

An assessment record will be completed at each assessment meeting and you can refer to this as an up-to-date record of your achievements.

6 Your assessor approves your evidence...
Once your assessor is able to confirm your competence then he or she will sign your assessment record against the standards for the areas you are working towards and a ‘Completion Record’ form will be completed. Upon receipt of this form the OUAB will produce your certificate.

NOTE
If your assessor is unable to sign the completion record, then he or she will provide you with feedback and will help you to plan to obtain the outstanding evidence.

7 Verification...
Internal verifiers
The internal verifier\(^3\) ensures that consistency and fairness of assessment across all candidates. They review examples of assessment decisions. Internal verifiers need to sign any paperwork being sent to the OUAB and will sign the request for your certificate.

8 Certification...
Once the OUAB has received the Completion Record from your Assessment Centre, we will process it immediately. If you do not receive your certificate within four weeks, check with your Assessment Centre co-ordinator.

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\(^3\) See page 13 for further information on the role of the internal verifier.
SECTION 1

Section 1: An Introduction to NVQs
3 Roles and responsibilities

You, as the candidate, together with your assessor (and advisor), the internal and external verifier, all have particular responsibilities in relation to your assessment.

Roles and responsibilities

**As the candidate, it is your responsibility to:**
- **advise your assessor**...
  through your meetings and ongoing communication, when you feel that you are ready to be assessed
- **collect your own evidence**...
  in relation to the standards with support and guidance from your Assessment Centre
- **present this evidence**...
  in a way that is easily accessible and understandable to your assessor
- **advise your assessor**...
  if you are experiencing any problems in finding evidence or if it is difficult for you to be assessed during the normal course of your work

**It is your assessor’s responsibility to:**
- **help you**...
  to develop an assessment plan that meets your needs
- **help you**...
  to identify opportunities for the collection of evidence
- **explain**...
  any areas of the assessment process which you do not understand
- **provide you**...
  with clear and objective feedback following every assessment
- **complete**...
  all the appropriate documents in connection with your assessment(s)

You may also be allocated an advisor or mentor in addition to your assessor. It is your advisor’s responsibility to:
- **help you**...
  to identify opportunities for collecting evidence
- **ensure**...
  that the evidence you have produced is authentic and valid
- **involve you**...
  in your assessment process
It is the internal verifier’s responsibility to:

provide... guidance and support to the assessors at your Assessment Centre

provide... clear and objective feedback to assessors in connection with their decisions

ensure... that the standards are being used as the only basis for assessments

monitor... systems and ensure they are effective

uphold... quality assurance through the monitoring of assessment decisions within the Assessment Centre

support ... candidates with complaints or appeals

It is the external verifier’s responsibility to:

provide... support and advice to your Assessment Centre and especially to internal verifiers and the centre co-ordinator

provide... clear and objective feedback to internal verifiers and the OUAB

monitor... the use of centre documents, procedures and systems to ensure they meet the requirements of the OUAB

ensure... that your Assessment Centre is operating to agreed criteria

ensure... that your Assessment Centre is operating policies to provide equal opportunities, reasonable adjustments and special consideration for candidates.
4 Putting together a portfolio of evidence

Earlier in this guide, we mentioned the idea of a portfolio as a way to collect evidence. This is one way of ensuring that, with support from your assessor, evidence is collected systematically. This section will outline what is meant by a portfolio and explain the different types of evidence.

Compiling your portfolio

As a candidate for an NVQ you will need to demonstrate, through the presentation of evidence, that you can meet the requirements of the standards for the NVQ that you are undertaking. To do this you need to organise your evidence into what is known as a portfolio.

The OUAB does not provide a set way of developing a portfolio however this section is intended to provide useful guidance and support to you when you come to gather your evidence.

Your Assessment Centre and assessor will also advise you on putting your portfolio together.

When you have been registered by your Assessment Centre with the OUAB you will be given a folder, a welcome letter, a set of the standards for your NVQ and this guide. The folder that you have been given can provide the basis for your portfolio.

What is a portfolio?

A portfolio is a folder, file or collection of information which presents:

1. Who you are e.g. a personal profile
2. Information regarding the context in which competence is sought, e.g. a description of your job and your organisation and/or department. This will help your assessor to put your evidence into context
3. Assessment centre and the OUAB documentation
4. Evidence of competence and development.

The areas covered by the evidence will include:

- Prior learning, experience and achievement
- Current activities
- Future needs and plans.

Organisation of your portfolio

Your portfolio should contain the following:

- A cover page with your name, address and contact details
- A table of contents that lists the titles of the various sections within your portfolio
- An organisation structure and a short outline of the work of your organisation and/or department
- Your job description
- A career or personal profile (or CV). This is particularly helpful if it can also include achievements to date, current objectives and future plans for development
- Assessment centre and OUAB documentation. This should include assessment planning sheets, assessor feedback sheets and other documentation concerning your assessment, however it should not include policy statements and certificates unrelated to your NVQ
- Cross referencing forms which link evidence with requirements within each of the elements
- An index listing of the evidence
- The evidence itself, each item being numbered and with a brief explanation of where and how it is being used
- A witness list of others who have contributed to your evidence
A declaration stating that the evidence is original, authentic and has been put together by you.

**What sort of evidence is acceptable?**

Suitable evidence can be divided into two main categories – direct and indirect.

**Direct evidence** can include a variety of the following:

- Your performance being observed by your assessor
- Projects or work based assignments
- Personal reports
- Minutes of meetings, action plans, progress reports
- Internal and external correspondence
- Prior qualifications which relate directly to the units and elements
- Product evidence e.g. examples, samples, photographs
- Your responses to oral or written questions
- Video or authenticated audio tapes.

Direct evidence will be used mainly to support your demonstration of competence. The list above is not exhaustive and you may find other appropriate forms of evidence depending on which NVQ you are undertaking.

**Indirect evidence** can include:

- Witness testimonies from people within or outside the organisation
- Achievement in related areas
- Attendance on courses/training activities relevant to the knowledge requirements of the NVQ
- Membership of related committees or outside organisations.

Such indirect evidence will be used mainly to support or confirm direct evidence.

Each NVQ comes with evidence requirements which are designed to help you plan what types of evidence are required. Your assessor will also help you to decide the most suitable evidence to include in your portfolio.

You must highlight your role when you are submitting evidence that has been carried out through group work activities, for example projects and assignments.

**Cross-referencing**

It is vital that you cross-reference your evidence to the units and elements within the NVQ that you are undertaking. Your portfolio will be frequently reviewed both within your assessment centre and by the OUAB to ensure that your evidence matches the requirements of the qualification, therefore a clear referencing system is important.

There should be an index listing your evidence, each piece of evidence should be numbered and should then be referenced to the units and elements. Your Assessment Centre will provide matrix sheets that you should use to cross-reference evidence.

**PLEASE NOTE:**

Not all evidence needs to be stored within your portfolio, however where this is the case, then you need to clearly highlight where the evidence is e.g. on your personal computer (the drive and file name), in a filing cabinet (the folder name).

**Electronic portfolios**

Some Assessment Centres are encouraging the majority of evidence to be stored electronically, for example on CD-ROM. The OUAB is happy to support this, however do seek further advice from your Assessment Centre to ensure that you and they are clear on the amount of evidence to be stored electronically and that there are clear cross-referencing systems.

**Uses for the portfolio**

The portfolio is an important document which many candidates find useful to retain and maintain for further use, once they have achieved their NVQ, particularly as part of their ongoing continuous professional development activities, appraisal systems and even when applying for future jobs.
**Suitability of evidence**

Your assessor will need to be satisfied that your evidence as a whole is:

- **sufficient**
- **authentic**
- **relevant**
- **current**

You need to ensure any evidence included in your portfolio meets these criteria.

**What is sufficient?**

Your evidence must cover all aspects of the performance criteria and range statements (where range statements are applicable) for each element you are seeking to achieve. Some qualifications require specific evidence and you should check your standards to see what is needed. Sufficient does not mean a mass of evidence. It simply means collecting enough evidence to demonstrate competence.

**What is authentic?**

You must be able to explain and substantiate the evidence you put forward. It is important, therefore, to ensure you only submit evidence relating to your own performance. Remember to include a declaration stating that the evidence is authentic, your Assessment Centre will provide you with this.

**What is relevant?**

Any evidence must relate clearly to the qualification you are seeking to achieve. Assessors are only interested in evidence directly related to the requirements set out in the standards. That is, evidence which clearly links a candidate’s performance with specific areas of their chosen qualification. You should avoid the inclusion of reference documents, training materials and other evidence that does not demonstrate competence.

**What is current?**

‘Current’ means evidence relating to skills, attitudes and knowledge you can currently demonstrate. Your assessor will be assessing your current level of competence so you must ensure that your evidence clearly relates to activities and areas of work you could still perform if required to do so.

Your assessor can help you to determine what is sufficient, authentic, relevant and current.

**Summary of portfolio use**

Whilst your portfolio will take effort and time to complete, it is also a means of focusing and demonstrating your particular strengths and achievements to others. It should develop along with your achievements and take on a dynamic role as:

- a full record of achievements to date
- proof of your competence
- a full resource bank of your abilities
- a reference tool for staff appraisal
- a basis for career development
- a record of your continuing professional development.

In relation to NVQs your portfolio provides:

- a clear demonstration of your competence against particular elements and units
- a focus for your assessment
- a means to bring together evidence for more than one element/unit
- a focus for the identification of training/learning needs.

**Remember...**

Putting your portfolio together now will not only help you as you work towards your current qualification but will also provide you with a useful reference tool for your future career.
Short glossary of NVQ terms

ACCAC – Awdurddod Cymwysterau Cwricwlwm ac Asescu Cymru, the Qualifications, Curriculum and Assessment Authority for Wales – the Welsh regulatory body for qualifications. Regulates all external qualifications in Wales except the formal accreditation of NVQs.

Accreditation – the process by which the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) approve national standards and also an appropriate awarding body to offer, administer and maintain the quality of the NVQ.

Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) – the assessment of an individual’s previous experience and achievements against national standards.

Assessment centre – an organisation approved by an awarding body for the assessment of candidates for specified NVQs.

Assessment – the process of making judgements against national standards of competence on the basis of evidence collected by a candidate.

Assessor – the person undertaking the assessment of the candidate for an NVQ.

Awards – a general term for that which is given to an individual for the attainment of a full NVQ.

Awarding body – a body registered by the QCA for the assessment, quality assurance and certification of NVQs.

Candidate – the person to be assessed for competence against national standards for an NVQ.

CCEA – Council for the Curriculum, Examination and Assessment – the regulatory body for qualifications in Northern Ireland.

Certificate – a document issued to an individual by an Awarding Body, formally attesting to the attainment of an NVQ or unit(s).

Certificate of Unit Credit – see Unit.

Competence – the ability to perform a range of work activities to national standards and demonstrate them flexibly at work.

Credit accumulation – the attainment of unit credits over a period of time so that a candidate may claim a full NVQ award.

Direct claims status – a term used to refer to the delegation to an Assessment Centre for responsibility of signing off candidates for specified awards (under the regular monitoring of an external verifier acting on behalf of an awarding body).

DFES – Department for Education and Skills

Element – a sub-division of a Unit.

External verifier – employed by an awarding body to approve, support and monitor the work of centres where candidates are to be assessed. See verification.

Level – a sub-division of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) used to define progressive degrees of competence.

Monitoring – a regular audit of the operation of an Approved Centre by an external verifier.

National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) – a qualification approved by the QCA and based on the national standards specified by the appropriate standard setting bodies.

NVQ criteria – the principles to which qualifications and their awarding bodies must conform for their accreditation by the QCA.

NVQ framework – the national system for ordering NVQs according to occupational areas and levels of competence.

Performance criteria – a set of these criteria details the standards within an element.

Portfolio – a single carefully selected and presented body of the candidate’s evidence of competence, including documentary or work products.
Glossary

QCA – See Qualifications and Curriculum Authority.

Qualifications and Curriculum Authority – is a regulatory body recognising awarding bodies to award NVQs.

Quality assurance – the process by which a desired outcome is guaranteed by means of monitoring and verification.

Regulatory body – the QCA, SQA, ACCAC and CCEA are the designated bodies to regulate all post-16 examinations and awards that are funded or kitemarked by the DfES, with the exception of those made by degree awarding bodies, such as universities.

Sector Skills Council – responsible for overseeing the development, review and approval of national occupational standards.

SQA – the Scottish Qualifications Authority – the Scottish regulatory body recognising awarding bodies to award Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs).

Standard setting body – responsible for overseeing the development, review and approval of national occupational standards.

Standards (of performance) – the measure of performance required for the achievement of an Element as indicated by the related performance criteria.

Underpinning knowledge – evidence of the knowledge and understanding of to be demonstrated by a candidate for an NVQ or unit.

Unit – NVQs are made up of a number of units. Each unit covers a discrete area of competence and can be certified separately as a Certificate of Unit Credit.

Verification – the process of monitoring Assessment Centres to offer quality assurance for NVQs.

Verifier (internal or external) – the person who monitors the assessment of candidates on behalf of an Assessment Centre or on behalf of an awarding body.