

Increased government funding for professional qualifications is great news for the UK's awarding bodies. But if they are to meet growing requirements for accountability and qualification integrity, deliver the next generation of e-assessment and attain de facto status within their sector they need to significantly overhaul existing processes.

development and membership support, undermining the quality of service delivered to members and, with it, the potential to attain market dominance.

- **Professional qualifications**

If the UK is to remain a competitive economy, the country needs to drastically improve the level of skills and long-term education across the board. Today, from door supervisors to personal trainers, individuals must achieve a recognised qualification before achieving employment.

This growing emphasis on professional qualifications

and associated continuing professional development (CPD).

- **De facto qualification**

If these awarding bodies are to achieve the de facto qualification, they need to significantly overhaul their processes. These organisations face major administrative challenge and cost in order to meet the expectations of the LSC – and its quality enforcement arm, the Qualification and Curriculum Authority (QCA) – in terms of transparency of process and demonstrable adherence to higher standards.

The QCA has recently announced a radical change to the way qualifications and achievements are recognised in the future to create a system more responsive to employer and learner needs. A key component of this overhaul is a requirement for awarding bodies to implement excellent

Making the grade



Growing competition within the qualifications and awarding bodies sector highlights the need for these organisations to improve their information management.

by Richard Couchman

As the UK economy struggles to keep pace with its rapidly emerging competition, there is a growing demand from employers for improved skills across every industry. The government has responded by significantly increasing the level of funding available to organisations providing such qualifications. However for the 120 awarding bodies across the UK, pressure is mounting to demonstrate the integrity, validity and commercial relevance of such qualifications.

With an increasing number of organisations recognising the government's commitment to long-term education and qualifications, the competition in the market is growing, with several awarding bodies now competing to become the dominant qualification in their sector.

Without investing in technology that streamlines the awards process, these organisations will struggle to meet the demands of the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and will find resources being diverted from key areas of

across UK business is great news for the 120 awarding bodies. Under the aegis of the LSC, funding is on the increase. However, so too is the emphasis on integrity, quality and relevance of qualifications – as well as accessibility of skills, with a growing emphasis on the use of technology to enable e-learning and e-assessment.

Formal education qualifications, GCSEs and A Levels, are losing respect as high marks make candidate differentiation difficult for employers and places of further education. For the LSC and awarding bodies there is a real need to ensure these vocational qualifications, such as the NVQs, attain and retain real value to both student and potential employer.

For the awarding body, creating a qualification that becomes the de facto standard within the sector is the primary objective. Those that attain this position will not only guarantee membership levels but will also generate additional revenue both from the standard qualifications

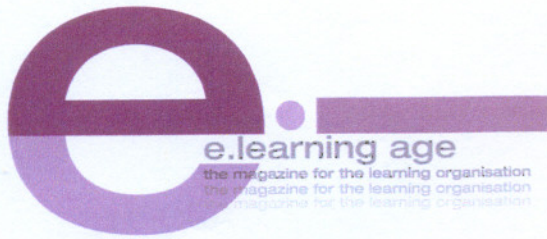
IT facilities both to meet customer requirements and post achievements on a database, and also to offer e-learning and e-assessment.

The LSC requires thorough on-going evaluation and certification of the qualification process. And with the Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) focusing heavily on the standards of qualifications across the country, the demand for information on courses, students, facilities and performance is growing.

Yet over half of awarding bodies are still trying to handle this process manually. From candidate registration, entrance to exams, recording results and issuing certificates, the process is time consuming, expensive and open to the errors that plague any organisation reliant on information rekeying.

- **Process integrity**

Traditional paper based processes or basic membership



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databases have not provided the infrastructure to automate the tracking of individuals through this process. Nor can they offer easy access to the information demanded by LSC, QCA or SSCs. As a result, many awarding bodies are overwhelmed by manual processes and are using resources to track members through the qualification process and provide information.

These organisations have got to improve their information management and automate the creation of standard reports for statutory bodies if they are to continue to develop and enhance the qualifications offered to the membership.

By opting for a records management solution that is totally integrated with existing membership databases, organisations can attain complete control over the awards process. By improving the quality and timeliness of the evaluation and award process, awarding bodies will see a substantial reduction in costs. One awarding body was able to cut the time taken to record student results and report on them from six weeks to 24 hours by using

an automated integrity solution.

- **Commercial value**

This information accuracy and speed of response is critical in order to respond to employers' information demands – especially in industries such as the licensed trade where individuals cannot be employed without appropriate certification.

Bodies can also improve access by offering a web based online registration option to candidates; a move that reduces administrative costs while improving the organisation's perception across the membership – and potential membership.

The information provides a platform for improved marketing and targeting. Students can be automatically emailed or mailed to remind them when the next set of exams is due or an associated lecture/course available for those on a CPD programme – a key issue for those individuals requiring regular review and retest to retain a license, for example.

- **Key developments**

With this platform in place, awarding bodies can then embark upon the next key development in the delivery of professional qualifications: the use of e-learning and e-assessment. While today the majority of examinations are conducted in person, if government targets for an increase in qualifications and CPD are to be met, online solutions will become paramount.

The spotlight is now on the awarding bodies. As the funding increases so too does the demand for integrity, quality and, increasingly, innovation to ensure a broad range of qualifications to support a diverse membership. Without an excellent, highly configurable solution for managing the awards process an awarding body will drown under a sea of administration and paper and miss out on an unprecedented opportunity to become the de facto industry award and deliver an ever widening set of revenue generating services to the membership.

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