

## What's the R in OCR? Exploring OCR's RSA heritage – Paul Steer

(Lecture first given by OCR's Head of Policy Paul Steer to mark 25 years of vocational qualifications at Progress House in Coventry)



Cast your mind back to the 1990s. Oasis and the Spice Girls were riding high in the charts and John Major found himself elected as a Conservative Prime Minister, much against what was predicted in the polls. The early 1990s were a time of recession; the Gulf War; ratification of the Maastricht treaty (complete with anti-Europe backbenchers); the forced exit from the European Exchange Rate Mechanism ("Black Wednesday"); the privatisation of British Rail; the National Lottery; Sunday shopping; the "Back to Basics" campaign; the Dangerous Dogs Act; and the Cones Hotline. You should be in the zone now.

So it was that in 1990, the RSA Examinations Board which had offered vocational qualifications since the mid-1850s, relocated from London to brand new, purpose built premises in Coventry, complete with warehouse and print facilities. It also had barely a single meeting room – in one of RSA's less prescient moments on the changing workplace, they predicted that meetings would become a thing of the past. And just a few years later, RSA Examinations Board and UCLES (the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate) merged to form OCR.

### Relocation, relocation, relocation

Relocation out of London was to become something of a fashion, reaching a crescendo with Michael Lyons' *Review of Public Sector Relocations 2004* which led to a large part of the Department for Education and Skills moving to Sheffield, and to the consolidation of Coventry as something as a centre for education-related government including the Further Education Funding Council, soon to become the Learning and Skills Council, the Adult Learning Inspectorate and, eventually, the home of the new exams regulator, Ofqual.

Before 1990, the post-16 vocational education landscape had been consolidating over the previous twenty five years or so since the Industrial Training Boards set up under the 1964 Industrial Training Act. The training boards were responsible for developing programmes, typically certificated by City and Guilds, largely in the craft, construction, engineering and manufacturing industries. The model of study was typically one of day release.

Similar programmes were added to these during the 1970s by the Business Education Council and its parallel Technician Education Council (merged into the Business and

Technical Education Council – BTEC – in 1983). BTEC courses tended to cover broader vocational areas than City and Guilds, and by 1990 they were offering substantial full-time vocational courses ranging from the First, through the advanced level National Diploma, to the Higher National Diploma (HND). Later, when RSA had become part of OCR, OCR would go on to develop OCR Nationals and then Cambridge Nationals and Cambridge Technicals, designed to provide a strong alternative to the BTEC provision.

## Changing workplace



But throughout this period, RSA had a strong presence as the provider of qualifications in secretarial and business sectors, alongside skills-based qualifications linked to employability, literacy and numeracy. Within this provision, there was a great diversity from the Higher Diploma in Administrative and Secretarial Skills - which was the qualification to guarantee the perfect 'Personal Assistant' - to a basic but highly popular 'Spell Test'.

In the early 1990s, RSA was best known for two highly popular qualifications. The first was its typewriting and text processing exams. These were universally regarded as the benchmark for proving your typing skills and were routinely used in job adverts at the time for secretaries and administrators. Successful as our typewriting qualifications were, the workplace was undergoing a transformation with the introduction of the personal computer. A whole swathe of employees would need to master the use of these new-fangled computers and there was also a body of people seeking work or returning to work after childcare who needed to play catch up with this new technology.

The second well known RSA qualification was CLAiT. Launched back in 1987, it quickly became the most popular IT qualification in the UK. By June 2005, some 2.5 million learners had achieved CLAiT certification. CLAiT anticipated changes in the workplace – that typing pools and secretaries would be in decline with managers and workers having to self-serve their administrative needs via the computer. RSA's offer would become increasingly broad to include Business Administration, Retail, Management, Foreign Languages for Business, etc. It was also strong in qualifications for teaching and assessing – the D32 was a license to practice for those wanting to deliver NVQs and the delivery of D32 programmes to FE lecturers became an enormous business.

Still anticipating changes in the workplace, RSA pioneered qualifications in Customer Service – those who remember levels of customer service in the early 90s will know there was room for improvement and this indeed proved to be growth area. We worked with the Institute for Customer Service to introduce the first NVQs in Customer Service which proved to be one of our biggest successes. To this day, you can still take an Apprenticeship in Customer Service.

The impact of digital technology on the work place and indeed throughout our lives has grown exponentially. The newly-formed OCR developed an OCR National in ICT which

would pick up on this revolution in most unexpected ways. Although it was designed originally to be taken post 16 and by adults in FE Colleges, it became one of the most popular qualifications to be taken in schools, alongside GCSEs, throughout the first decade of this century. This was partly enabled by the disapplication of the national curriculum which became widespread from 2002 to allow pupils to study vocational subjects pre 16.

A huge fillip for the ICT National was the inclusion of vocational qualifications in school performance measures – the league tables. The design of our Nationals were such that versions were available that were equivalent, when it came to league table points, to 1,2,3 or even 4 GCSEs. Although very, very few school age pupils took the larger 4 GCSE equivalent OCR National, there was a tendency amongst some to see vocational qualifications as a mechanism for artificially boosting a schools league table points. There may have been an element of this, but there was something else going on – the realisation that digital skills were life skills and that without them, you were economically, socially and culturally disadvantaged.

Digital skills are still commonly regarded as the third basic skill alongside literacy and numeracy, and it became the responsibility of schools to deliver this within the core curriculum. Although the facility to deliver large ICT qualifications in schools has been restricted in recent times, qualifications such as our Cambridge National in ICT still count towards league table points and are regarded by many as essential. With recent announcements of the demise of A Levels and GCSEs in ICT, the importance of the Cambridge National in ICT comes to the fore.

### **Changing assessment**

When staff moved to Progress House in 1990, they brought with them expertise in the full range of approaches to assessment. These included very traditional exams, use of multiple choice, but there were a range of principles which seemed pretty progressive at the time and which still underpin much of our vocational provision. The features included:

- A strong emphasis on measuring skills '*doing things*'
- and their application in *real or realistic settings*
- *strong links with employers* to inform the content and design
- competence based '*can do statements*'/*criterion referenced*
- *unit based* qualifications allowing for bite-sized learning, optional routes and profiling
- assessment *when ready*
- covering full *age range*
- use of *technology* in assessment

Some of these features were adopted in the government-funded Skills for Life programme, which kicked off at the start of the new millennium. Many will remember the Gremlins advertising campaign which was used to frighten people back into the classroom to improve their literacy and numeracy. OCR worked in a consortium with Edexcel and City and Guilds, funded by the public purse, to develop a massive item bank of questions across levels and skills which could be taken on screen, any time and almost anywhere. Between 2001 and 2008, 2 million adults sat these tests – one of the rare government targets in education to have been met two years early.

## Changing policy



Paul Steer and the changing face of education policy

A great number of initiatives have been imposed on the vocational education sector over the years. RSA and then OCR has responded to each and every one, but also maintained its own parallel provision which has tended to be the source of greater innovation and success. The main examples of government-led initiatives are:

- NVQs which have taken root in only in a handful of sectors,
- GNVQs which some say were withdrawn just at the point where they had stabilized and were beginning to get recognition,
- the Specialised Diplomas which were quietly smothered
- the Qualifications and Credit Framework, which is currently being dismantled brick by brick like an old housing estate,
- and vocational GCSEs and A Levels which never really got traction.

There is barely a single year during the last 25 when there hasn't been an influential and important report on qualifications, especially vocational ones, but the 2011 Wolf Review of Vocational Education tried to draw a line in the sand. It recommended that a small amount of vocational education should be encouraged in schools but that the main focus of study at this age should be an academic core – the so-called Ebacc subjects, and especially English and Maths. At post 16, it set out a menu of three strong and distinct pathways consisting of learning programmes:

1. the HE or academic route,
2. a general vocational route leading to HE, employment or further vocational training,
3. and a technical route, designed to lead directly into an occupation.

Encouragingly, Wolf argued that the qualifications embedded in these programmes should be developed by exam boards with strong brands and experience and she cites, not only City and Guilds and BTEC, but good ol' RSA.

I do have to report that the Skills Minister Nick Boles returned from a trip to Norway with some new ideas on vocational education. As a result, a panel headed up by Lord Sainsbury, but including Alison Wolf, will be designing a framework for up to 20 vocational learning routes. The panel will apparently report in March 2016 at which point a process will be set up for developing the content. This is reminiscent of the way NVQs, GNVQs, the QCF and Specialised Diplomas all started.

I hope we make sure we incorporate the wisdom and heritage of bodies like the RSA – and OCR – and that, for the sake of learners and the economy, something will emerge that proves a bit more enduring than previous revisions to vocational education, to see us through the next 25 years in good stead.

Paul Steer  
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