

Back to the Future: Rethinking Coach Learning and Development in the UK

Dr Alex Twitchen and Professor Ben Oakley
The Open University

Abstract

A shift from coach 'education' to coach 'learning and development' is currently taking place in the UK. This article will examine some of the reasons for that shift by exploring the principles and attempted introduction of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) into coaching during the 1990s. The introduction of NVQs represented a significant change but did not necessarily deliver the desired outcomes. Rethinking coach learning and development is then described with reference to current developments. The article makes recommendations by outlining a learning and assessment framework that is flexible, learner-led, and captures the current momentum for change.

Key words: education, learning, assessment, qualifications, coach development.

Introduction

Learning is a complex, personal and continuous process. It can be hard work, and often involves making connections between different types of learning and interpreting existing ideas and beliefs from an alternative perspective. Developing an effective coach learning and development system to support this process is equally challenging. This article explores the history of the coach learning and development system in the UK and presents a potential model of learning and assessment that could inform the development of a more flexible and agile system.

The aims of *Coaching in an Active Nation: the Coaching Plan for England* (Sport England, 2016), the introduction of professional standards for coaches, the outcomes of the review of the United Kingdom Coaching Certificate (UKCC), and a new definition of coaching, signify a paradigmatic shift.

There is a move from coach education, which is highly regulated and qualification-led, to coach learning and development, which is more adaptable and learner-centred. This article will review past developments and explore current and future opportunities. It will provide recommendations for those working in the system based on the learning and assessment model proposed.

How did we arrive at the current system?

Since the mid-1990s, the awarding of a coaching qualification has been constructed around a linear, four-level structure aligned to the UK national qualification framework. At levels 1 to 3, this approach is primarily:

- 1) Designed around the assessment of functional competencies drawn from the national occupational standards for coaching (NOS).
- 2) Owned and delivered by training providers – predominantly national governing bodies of sport (NGBs).
- 3) Quality assured by approved awarding bodies.
- 4) Endorsed (from 2002 onwards) through the United Kingdom Coaching Certificate (UKCC).

This approach, and the system through which coaches progress, has attracted much criticism. The system is dominated by regulated coaching qualifications which, research suggests, have limited impact on coach behaviour or practice (Nelson et al, 2013, Piggott, 2012). It also seems to be failing the development of female and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) coaches (Norman, 2008; Norman et al, 2018) and ignores the informal learning that coaches seem to substantially benefit from. To better understand this system it helps to understand how it came about.

In 1986, a White Paper, *Working Together: Education and Training*, laid the foundations for a new system of national vocational qualifications (NVQs) that would fundamentally reform vocational education and training (VET) in the UK. The following principles informed the design and implementation of NVQs (Jessup, 1991):

- 1) Employers and professional bodies would write functional competencies which define the behaviours, expressed as national occupational standards, required to fulfil job roles.
- 2) In assessment – a learner is either *competent* or *not yet competent*.

- 3) Competence is demonstrated and assessed through a broad array of evidence gathering methods including the recognition of prior learning.
- 4) Assessment of competency should be continuous and ongoing and undertaken by line managers, supervisors and assessors in the workplace wherever possible.
- 5) Any learning and teaching should be distinct and separate from assessment.

From the outset these principles were contentiously debated by researchers, employers and policy stakeholders. Table 1 provides a brief summary of the most prominent criticisms.

Table 1: Criticisms of the NVQ system of qualifications in the UK

1. Designed around functional competencies which are based on discredited evidence and are associated with a system of practical training designed to maximise the efficiency of labour (Hyland, 1994).
2. Indicative of the assumption that functional competencies are external to the individual and can be objectively discovered, defined and measured (Hodkinson, 1992).
3. Written in complex, jargon-laden and ambiguous language that prohibits a clear understanding of them (Raggatt and Williams, 1999).
4. Practically constrained by the challenge of implementing individualised learning and the absence of a curriculum that structures the learning process (Smithers, 1993).
5. Subject to concerns regarding the validity and reliability of assessment when this is undertaken in the workplace by line managers and supervisors (Wolf, 1995).

Through continuous debate, a lack of consensus, and the necessity of cost-effective delivery and administration, VET and NVQs have been subject to constant change (Raffe, 2015). In coach education, the introduction of NVQs were viewed as a way to restructure the existing approach to coach education.

During the early 1990s the National Coaching Foundation (NCF - operating today as UK Coaching) sought to introduce NVQs to professionalise and transform existing coaching 'awards' into recognised qualifications. In 1993 the NCF produced an NVQ Implementation Manual, which aimed to "assist NGBs in preparing their awards in order to implement NVQs" (McQueen, 1993). The question and answer section of the manual helped to explain and demonstrate the vision for coach education based on the NVQ model. For example:

1. "Will I have to attend lots of courses?"
Answer: "Not necessarily. How you get the skills and knowledge is up to you. You may feel that you would rather do home learning from a specially produced pack, or you may wish to attend a course."
2. "I have been coaching for ages. Does this mean that I will have to start all over again?"
Answer: "No. NVQs are an assessment of your ability. All you have to do is prove that you are a competent coach against the national standards for coaching."

These responses were very forward looking but only partial aspects of the NVQ model were adopted. These included: drawing on national occupational standards to define course content and competence-based assessment criteria; quality assurance based on internal and external verification; the binary assessment of competence; and aligning coaching qualifications to the requirements of the national qualification framework.

It is not known why NVQs did not become the principle type of recognised coaching qualification. It could be that NVQs were intended to support people in, or wishing to enter, paid employment and as a result were not appropriate for a coaching workforce that is predominantly part-time and voluntary. For example, continuous assessment in the workplace by assessors and supervisors was too challenging for most sports organisations and instead the assessment of practical competency was often simulated during coaching courses. Furthermore, coaching qualifications remained in the ownership and control of NGBs and there was some reluctance to relinquish this control and enable other organisations, such as Further Education colleges and commercial training providers, to deliver coaching qualifications. In addition, government policy has consistently upheld the status of NGB coaching qualifications as the primary form of recognition for qualified coaches. In this respect

coaching is very different to other vocational and professional sectors in the UK labour market.

It is argued that the introduction of VET and NVQs in the UK in the 1990's, led to the development of a coach education system that was a 'middle track compromise' between a traditional course of education with aspects of the NVQ model shoehorned into it (Raffe, 2015; Young, 2011). The system was overtly qualification-led and represented an often generic approach that failed to appropriately accommodate the individual learning needs of coaches. A vital ingredient given the highly differentiated nature of the coaching workforce.

The current landscape and developments

Sport England's *Coaching in an Active Nation* (2016) seeks to address some of these challenges. Alongside a broader definition of coaching, and a greater focus on supporting a more active population, the plan seeks to:

- 'modernise [coach development] approaches and make it easier for more people from a wider range of backgrounds to join the coaching community';
- 'foster an improvement culture ... where coaches are actively engaged in improving their ability to deliver and develop a lifelong learning habit';
- 'utilise technology to improve ... and build an 'on demand' learning and development capability for coaches'.

This is a vision shared by UK Coaching in *Transforming Learning, Transforming Lives* (UK Coaching, 2018) which seeks to create a system that promotes lifelong learning, empowers coaches to take ownership of their own development, recognises different types of learning, advocates learning through peer relationships, and embraces new forms of technology. Built on a model of connectivity, the aspiration is to develop more reflective, confident coaches who can deliver high quality experiences to the people they coach.

The challenge for NGBs is how to respond to these initiatives and how to represent a more person-centred approach to coach learning and development. Some NGBs are already taking steps to do this, and two examples are provided in the following boxes.

Great Britain and England Hockey

Great Britain and England Hockey's rationale is to provide engaging support and development to the people that deliver hockey, based on their role: "The previous qualification terminology suggested a hierarchical nature to the development of coaches and did not cater for the differing groups or capabilities that a coach delivers to."



This represents moving away from a system that develops qualified coaches, to a system that develops appropriately skilled coaches. "The renaming of qualifications (eg Introduction to Hockey Coaching; Sessional Coach Course) and the introduction of a far wider coach development pathway involving many more specific development opportunities will better equip coaches with what is needed to deliver in certain environments."

Through consultation they also learnt "that courses need to have maximum 'pitch time' and more home study time to allow for coaches to learn in their own time."

It is claimed this has reduced the length of courses and the amount of travel to and from courses. They also "built in flexible assessment methods so the coach will be supported through to completion of the qualification after attending the course." (England Hockey, 2019)

Badminton England

Badminton England has sought to recognise and provide a broader range of learning opportunities beyond the normal coach education courses. Such courses alone "will only provide coaches with a base level of skills and knowledge, so a wider structure is essential to support the wide range of coaches" (Badminton England, 2019).

They are developing a suite of opportunities aimed at all levels and types of coaches, consisting of practical workshops, e-learning modules and informal learning.

Their vision is that coaches can choose to engage with workshops and modules that support and complement the type of coaching that they are involved in. It aims to enable coaches to plot a personalised learning journey shown on a learner's 'tube map'.



As these two examples illustrate, a more flexible and personal approach shifts the focus of learning from content to context. It also provides more autonomy for coaches to be responsible for their own learning and can help to meet the needs of more coaches more often. It is a paradox that this approach is identical to the core principles of the NVQ system:

"Learning is an individual experience and to 'standardise' it by adopting specific modes and time periods is not the most effective means for a group to achieve a set of learning outcomes. Individuals need to manage their own learning experiences in a manner which recognises where they start from, their preferred modes of learning, and the time and opportunities they have for learning" (Jessup, 1995).

Jessup (1991) also argued that learning takes many forms which range from the formal to the informal, and only the learner can make coherent sense of what they have learnt from these different experiences. He also proposed that learners should be assessed by way of accumulating evidence from across all their learning experiences and the various opportunities they have engaged with. Jessup (1990) also suggested that assessment should be “more friendly and facilitate learning rather than acting as a deterrent or just an obstacle to be overcome.” A process that he envisaged would require new, more imaginative and alternative forms of assessment.

The approaches that are now being promoted and adopted are not new. They have been evident within the underlying educational philosophy of vocational education and training since the early 1990s. Where the NVQ system arguably failed, particularly in coaching, was overlaying the philosophical approach with a rigid, linear system that incorporated the assessment of very prescriptive functional competencies, which do not always reflect the complex judgements and decisions coaches make in practice (Collins et al, 2015). The educational principles were sound enough, but they were distorted during implementation and the design of the system around them.

In summary, the current landscape appears to be one in which a transformative shift from coach education towards coach learning and development is being recognised. The challenge is how a system change can be achieved across the 150+ recognised sports without fragmented approaches, different ideas and inconsistent practices emerging. There is arguably a need for system developers to be able to refer to a common coach learning and development framework that is flexible, offers the scope for innovation, and captures the progressive spirit that is now gathering momentum. The model explained below may contribute to a debate about what a future framework might look like.

Rethinking coach learning and development in the UK

A way to provide some insight into a possible framework is to look at the largest scale learning and assessment system in most countries: the driving test.

The UK driving test is a literal illustration of an accessible, flexible and robust approach to learning and assessment (see ‘Becoming a licensed driver’ box). It is the accessibility and personal choice of how individuals construct their learning for the final two assessments (theory and practical) that is of interest here.

Becoming a licensed driver
 A learner driver can be taught by a driving instructor, a friend or self-taught through experience (with a qualified driver accompanying). They then organise a test and demonstrate to a driving examiner, who is independent of their learning, that they can perform to the required standard. It may take 10 or 100s of hours of driving experience and learning and/or being examined multiple times: the learning is implied and assumed by the capability to perform in real conditions and meeting the required standard. There is no prescribed ‘course’ that a learner must attend. Successful drivers draw on all their learning experiences. In most cases their learning includes input from a qualified driving instructor alongside the experience they have gained with those accompanying them. An online theory test is taken separately to the practical driving test.

The approach to becoming a licensed driver is an example of an ‘outcomes’ based approach to learning and assessment because it is the outcome of learning that matters not necessarily the learning itself. Learning and assessment are consequently separated and distinct from each other, with the learning component being specific to the individual and constructed through drawing on different forms of learning. How an individual learns to drive is not the primary focus of the process, what matters is that they learn to drive safely, they are able to demonstrate this in real conditions and satisfy an assessor that they are not a danger to themselves and other road users.

Figure 1 represents an outcomes model of learning and assessment applied to coaching and is based on re-visiting some of the underlying philosophical ideas that lay behind the introduction of NVQs. The model is founded on the principles that:

- 1) Coaches learn from a wide variety of opportunities and experiences, many of which are increasingly online and digital.
- 2) Learning is a personal process and each coach has their own circumstances and prior experiences that influence what they want to learn, how they will learn and why they want to learn.
- 3) Coaching is relational and context specific, any system needs to cater for coaches working in different contexts with different people.
- 4) Access to learning should be open, flexible and accessible to all coaches; as should any assessment of competence.

- 5) The outcomes and mode of summative assessment should be transparent, robust and quality assured and consistent across sports.

Figure 1 depicts the progression of a coach from one level or stage to another. In this sense there is still a commitment to a ‘staged system’ with summative assessment ‘gateways’ except that the process through which a coach moves from one stage to another is very different to the current system. These stages are not necessarily numbered, but each stage could represent the different roles and contexts that coaches work within and named accordingly.

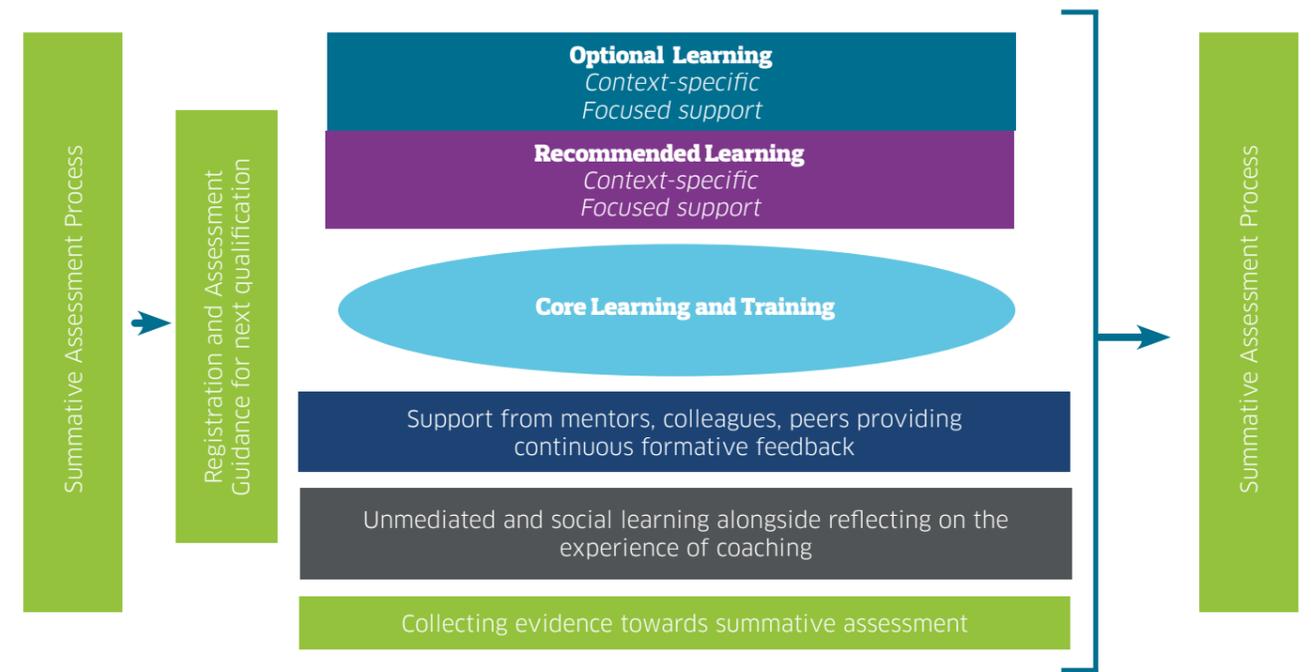


Figure 1: An Outcomes Model of Learning and Assessment

The model in figure 1 has five main elements:

1. Initial compulsory registration and guidance

Coaches at each stage are informed and understand the process that lies ahead and how they progress towards the ‘gateway’ summative assessment. This is the start of the journey within each stage and an initial form of action planning may take place here and, if possible, some one-to-one guidance is provided.

2. Learning is separated from summative assessment

The summative assessment process (the gateway) is still owned by NGBs and a future UKCC endorsement process or similar might endorse this process to ensure consistency and quality assurance across and within sports. An assessment should enable coaches to demonstrate what they have learnt and how this has impacted their practice and the experience of the people they coach rather than repeating or remembering what they have been taught on a course. A focus on safe practice would be maintained and the CIMSPA professional standards would underpin the skills, knowledge and behaviours being assessed.

3. A clearly identified compulsory 'core' learning

This would focus on the essential aspects of coaching. Again, the NGB could decide what core learning is and how it is delivered. The example of hockey reducing content and time is perhaps an instructive example that careful thought needs to be given to what, and how much time, this core learning takes.

4. Coaches curate their own additional learning

An individual would decide, just like the learner driver scenario, what best supports their progress towards summative assessment and is specific to their needs. For example, support from a mentor, attending workshops, online learning, short courses or learning provided by their employer or another organisation (eg club, school, college or university). Appropriate guidance and advice would be provided as to what is 'recommended learning' (i.e. opportunities that a coach is strongly advised to follow) and 'optional learning' (i.e. useful for specific coaching contexts). It is the learner's responsibility to keep track and collect evidence of completion of their additional learning, not the NGB. This might be done through digital badges, a reflective journal or e-portfolio submission as part of the summative assessment.

5. A coach decides when they are ready to be assessed

The summative assessment process only takes place when a coach feels ready. Some coaches may be ready almost as they register, for others the process may take a lot longer.

This model of learning and assessment enables a coach to move through the system and between stages by pursuing an individualised and personal learning experience. The model in this respect creates a framework that is 'learner-centred' not 'provider-led'. The model also lends itself to building a more agile and flexible system that does not force coaches along a single 'one size fits all' pathway of attending a coaching qualification with integrated assessment. Instead, by combining and connecting different experiences and opportunities learning is tailored to the needs of a coach and their coaching context. The model also enables NGBs and other organisations to deliver bespoke learning experiences for specific groups of coaches that instead of being 'outside' the system become part of the system. The following box provides an example of this.

Football Association Women's High Performance Centres

The FA Women's High Performance Centres were established in partnership with eight Universities in 2017. Part of the purpose of the Centres is to support the learning and development of female coaches and coaches working within the female game. To do this the Centres have developed and delivered different types of activities ranging from workshops to mentoring and creating support groups for coaches at similar stages of development. These activities at present lie outside the FA's qualification framework and therefore represent additional forms of support operating in an almost detached way from the main coaching pathway. In the model of learning and assessment proposed such activities become part of the framework, they become integral by representing 'recommended' learning for specific coaches.

The model of learning and assessment described still incorporates the underlying aspects of vocational education and training in the UK, no new concepts or theories are being introduced. However, there are some implementation challenges:

- Supporting coaches to learn and become qualified is an income stream for many organisations so changing the approach could be more challenging.
- Some organisations have limited resources to restructure their provision and may need to be incentivised to collaborate and share common coaching related modules or online resources.
- Deciding what is core and how much time is devoted to this.
- Reallocating resources from content delivery to coach developer and mentor support.
- Deciding if coaching qualifications should remain on the national qualification framework (currently the Recognised Qualifications Framework - RQF) and accepting the constraints on design and delivery this entails.
- Delivery at scale across the UK given the challenges associated with devolved administrations in Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Change, particularly substantial change is never easy or straightforward. Nevertheless, there is a sense that change is now needed, but with this change comes risk. As this article has described, the proposed introduction of NVQs during the 1990s represented another significant moment of change in the coaching landscape that did not deliver the intended strategic outcomes. In this article we have sought to present a future framework that is designed on an outcomes model of learning and assessment. Coach education in the UK has been criticised due to variability, lack of coherence, and inconsistencies in practice *Coaching Matters* (1991) and the *Coaching Task Force Report* (2002). Such criticisms also seem evident in the more recent review of the UKCC endorsement process, where it was perceived as being either too prescriptive or lacked standardisation, and featured too much variation across and within sports (Sport and Recreation Alliance, 2018). Some type of common framework would therefore seem beneficial to underpin the development of a new coach learning and development system.

Conclusions

Rethinking a coach learning and development system that embraces a more diverse workforce, ensures that nobody is excluded from developing their potential, and helps coaches to develop their practice so they can enhance the experience of the people they coach, will not be easy. It requires imaginative thinking, a willingness to change, recognising and embracing different ways of learning, and collaboration. It also requires learning from the past and re-evaluating the lessons learnt.

In this article we have sought to contribute to this process. Building a system requires frameworks and models that can act as a point of reference, a thinking tool or a conversation prompts. Any framework must also be realistic and aligned to the strategic outcomes of a policy. The model of learning and assessment proposed in this article is intended to stimulate debate about how a coach learning and development system might evolve. Its aim is to continue the conversation already started, to generate reflection and encourage even more creative ways of thinking.

References

- Badminton England. (2019) *Medal CPD Programme* [online]. Available from: <https://www.badmintonengland.co.uk/coach/find-a-course/medal-cpd-programme/> [Accessed 24 June, 2019].
- Collins, D, Burke, V, Martindale, A, & Cruickshank, A. (2015) The illusion of competency versus the desirability of expertise: Seeking a common standard for support professionals in sport. *Sports Medicine*. 45 (1): 1-7.
- England Hockey. (2019) *My Coaching Pathway: FAQs* [online]. Available from: <http://www.englandhockey.co.uk/page.asp?section=1994§ionTitle=FAQs> [Accessed 24 June, 2019].
- Hodkinson, P. (1992) Alternative models of competence in vocational education and training. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*. 16 (2): 30-39.
- Hyland, T. (1994) *Competence, Education and NVQs: Dissenting Perspectives*. London: Cassell Education.
- Jessup, G. (1990) National vocational qualifications: Implications for Further Education. In: M. Bees and M. Swords, (eds). *National Vocational Qualifications and Further Education*. London: Kogan Page.
- Jessup, G. (1991) *Outcomes: NVQs and the Emerging Model of Education and Training*. London: The Falmer Press.
- Jessup, G. (1995) Outcomes based qualifications and the implications for learning. In: J. Burke, (ed). *Outcomes, Learning and the Curriculum: Implications for NVQs, GNVQS and Other Qualifications*. London: Routledge, pp. 33-54.
- McQueen, S. (1993) *Scottish and National Vocational Qualifications: Implementation Manual*. Leeds: National Coaching Foundation.
- Nelson, L, Cushion, C., and Potrac, P. (2013) Enhancing the provision of coach education: The recommendations of UK coaching practitioners. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*. 18: 2014-2018.
- Norman, L. (2008) The UK Coaching System is failing women coaches. *International Journal of Sports Science and Coaching*. 3 (4): 447-476.

Norman, L, Rankin-Wright, A., and Allison, W. (2018) "It's a concrete ceiling; it's not even glass": Understanding tenets of organizational culture that supports the progression of women as coaches and coach developers. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*. 42 (5): 393-414.

Piggott, D. (2012) Coaches' experience of formal coach education. A critical sociological investigation. *Sport Education and Society*. 17 (4): 535-554.

Raffe, D. (2015) First count to five: Some principles for the reform of vocational qualifications in England. *Journal of Education and Work*. 28 (2): 147-164.

Raggatt, P., and Williams, S. (1999) *Government, Markets and Vocational Qualifications: An Anatomy of Policy*. London: The Falmer Press.

Smithers, A. (1993) *All Of Our Futures: Britain's Education Revolution. A Dispatches Report on Education*. London: University of Manchester/ Channel 4.

Sport England (2016) *Coaching In An Active Nation: The Coaching Plan For England 2017-21*. London: Sport England.

Sport and Recreation Alliance, (2018) *Report to Sport England: Future of the United Kingdom Coaching Certificate (UKCC)*, January 2018. London: Sport and Recreations Alliance.

UK Coaching, (2018) *Transforming Learning, Transforming Lives*. [online] Leeds: UK Coaching. Available from: <https://www.ukcoaching.org/getattachment/887950fc-3300-4fbd-9580-82c75a2dfd20/attachment.aspx> [Accessed 15 July, 2019].

Wolf, A. (1995) *Competence Based Assessment*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Young, M. (2011) National Vocational Qualifications in the United Kingdom: Their origins and legacy. *Journal of Education and Work*. 24 (3-4): 259-282.

Contact

Alex Twitchen – alex.twitchen@open.ac.uk

