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KEY SKILLS WITHIN THE NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS

FRAMEWORK: 14-19

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Editor's Foreword

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**KEY SKILLS WITHIN THE NATIONAL
QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK: 14-19**

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at the policy, context and emergence of Key Skills as national qualifications. It considers some of the continuing tensions relating to clarity of purpose and definition of the model. It will consider perspectives pre and post 16 and from a number of sector stakeholders including employers and Higher Education. We will highlight, from the perspective of ASDAN as a participant in the national scene, a continuing debate with and within DfEE and QCA concerning the place, status and equivalence of Key Skills in the national qualifications framework.

1. INTRODUCTION

We have described elsewhere how the broad pathway division between the academic and the vocational within the English educational system has been a “debilitating and unnecessary divide” (White, Pring, Brockington 1995). We also outlined in that document the dimensions of a unified common core for the 14-19 curriculum and to date, six years on, it would seem to be the case that the only currently proposed element between the qualification pathways post 16, which could be argued to be in any way common across those pathways' is the Key Skills element.

Pre 16, since we are concerned here with the curriculum 14-19, and moreover, for a common core curriculum 14-19, the picture is rather different. The Key Skills have not been widely available pre 16 before September 2000, apart from the Information Technology unit, although Application of Number, Communication and IT had been embedded as units within the then GNVQ (now remoulded as the Vocational Certificate in Education (VCE), including the Advanced Vocational Certificate in Education (AVCE) and also known as the Vocational A level). DfEE Circular 4/98 provided for Key Skills teaching and development pre 16 (although not their separate certification) through the following major routes available at that time: GNVQ, Part One GNVQ, the National Skills Profile and the ASDAN Youth Award Scheme. We will return to the issue of the differential patterns of access to the Key Skills pre and post 16 later in this paper, since our view is that a great deal turns upon such access, not the least the issues of status, equivalence, progression and league table inclusion, as well as the issue of the existence of a common core between qualification pathways.

First it may be helpful to attempt a review of the national picture of the development of Key Skills since 1990, especially post 16, in order to provide a wider recent historical context. We are indebted to the Good Practice report from the FEFC inspectorate entitled “Key Skills in Further Education”, January 1998, for aspects of the following summary.

History 1990 - 2001

The National Curriculum Council (NCC) together with the Secondary Examinations and Assessment Council (SEAC), the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) and the Further Education Unit (FEU) of the Department for Education and Science (DES) were requested by the government in 1990 to undertake work on the development of a

definition of core skills. This was a necessary and helpful undertaking in the context of a plethora of previous definitions, models and curricular contexts, and the National Curriculum Council published subsequently **Core Skills 16-19: a response to the secretary of state (1991)**.

This response itemised Core Skills in Communication, Problem Solving, Personal Skills, Numeracy, Information Technology and modern foreign languages. On the basis of this enumeration the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) commenced the task of developing a range of specifications for accrediting competence in these Core Skills. This resulted in a number of developments:

- i) By 1996 specifications for the accreditation of Communication, Application of Number, Information Technology, Improving own Learning and Performance and Working With Others had been developed with a view to addressing five levels. Specifications for the assessment and accreditation for Problem Solving had also been worked upon but were not approved to a final form at this date by NCVQ although the QCA (which is the national agency which emerged from the 1997 merger of the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA) and the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ)) developed a revised specification for accrediting Problem Solving. The trialling for the Problem Solving specification took place during 1998/1999.
- ii) A specification for modern languages was developed separately from the work on what are now referred to as The Key, not Core, Skills. (See the reference to this change in terminology below in relation to Sir Ron Dearing's Review of Qualifications for 16-19 year olds (March 1996.) These modern foreign language units were made available within GNVQs and NVQs (now Vocational Certificates in Education, VCEs) and as free standing units.
- iii) Those learners who followed GNVQ, and Part One GNVQ programmes pre 16 in the national pilot for these qualifications, were assessed, **but not separately certificated**, on their competence in the 'mandatory' Key Skills of communication, application of number and information technology. In addition, work undertaken as part of

‘Working with Others’ and Improving own Learning and Performance were allowed to be accredited post 16 as additional units for learners on the GNVQ route. Modern foreign language units were available as optional or additional units.

- iv) Pre 16 all five of the 1996 NCVQ Key Skill unit specifications apart from Problem Solving, were available for teaching and development through the ASDAN Youth Award Scheme (up until September 2000 when the new Key Skills Qualification was launched in its own right), but could not be accredited outside of the context of that specified Award (ie the ASDAN Youth Award) as separate Key Skill unit qualifications. This mirrors the position at that time within the GNVQ and Part One GNVQ where Application of Number, Communication and IT were available within those qualifications but not as separately or discretely certificated outside of them. The only exception to this ruling, pre 16, was the Key Skill unit of Information Technology which was available at Key Stage Four to all. That this overall restriction of access had been the case was due to the continuing Government, DfEE and QCA debate on the duplication of the Key Skills with the National Curriculum subjects of Maths and English at Key Stage Four. After the launch of the Key Skills Qualification in September 2000 the main Key Skills units which the Key Skills Qualification embraced (ie Application of Number, Communication and Information Technology), have been made fully available for pre 16 learners following much lobbying by ASDAN and other national organisations. The wider Key Skills have been available pre 16 for certification through the DfES approved route of the ASDAN Award Scheme from September 2000.
- v) Post 16, whereas learners on GNVQ programmes were assessed on their competence in the ‘mandatory’ Key Skills, (Communication, Application of Number, IT), those working towards NVQs were not explicitly assessed on Key Skills, but they were expected to be able to demonstrate appropriate levels of Key Skills as part of their general occupational competence. How this expectation was to be met in any formal assessment measure remained unclear although both Gordon Beaumont’s **Review of 100 NVQs and SVQs** (1996) and so Ron Dearing's Report **Review of Qualifications for 16-19 year olds** (1996) (see below), recommended much more widespread

inclusion of explicit Key Skills in NVQs where these were central to the achievement of occupational competence.

- vi) In Modern Apprenticeship programmes, NVQ level 3, learners have been expected, but not required, to develop Key Skills at specified levels within the overall QCA framework. These levels details have been left to the final judgement of the sector specific Industry Training Organisations (ITOs), later replaced by National Training Organisations (NTOs), to determine. It is arguable that a similar situation to that of Key Skills in relation to A levels obtains for Modern Apprenticeships, where the argument runs that if a learner is operating at level 3, as with an A level, they must automatically be achieving Key Skills by virtue of the level of work and performance required by that A level/Modern Apprenticeship.
- vii) Learners on courses leading to the BTEC national diplomas and certificates of the EDEXCEL Foundation develop common skills currently similar to those within the current QCA framework. Edexcel planned to replace Common Skills with Key Skills.
- viii) The recommendations following the Government's 1997 Consultation exercise **Qualifying for Success** (see below), led Awarding Bodies to address a variety of ways for mapping key skills assessment specifications with A levels. A great deal of attention and work has been devoted to the mapping and signposting of the main Key Skills (Application of Number, Communication, Information Technology) to A level within the context of the QCA's national pilot for the Key Skills Qualification, and subsequently as part of the Qualifying For Success reform initiative. The notion of a Key Skill Qualification replaced the recommendation of Sir Ron Dearing (1996) of an A/S level in Key Skills.

2. SIR RON DEARING'S REVIEW OF 16-19 QUALIFICATIONS

- i) We turn now to look at the specific recommendations of Sir Ron Dearing's **Review of Qualifications for 16-19 Year Olds** published in March 1996. Sir Ron Dearing recommended a yet further sub-division of what was then the NCVQ's 1996 Core Skills taxonomy (Communication, Application of Number, Information Technology,

Working with Others, Improving own Learning and Performance - and Problem Solving, not then accredited but being 'worked upon'). The recommended further refinement was as follows:

Key Skills: which Sir Ron advocated were to be pursued by all learners in all three pathways post 16. These Key Skills were Application of Number, Communication and Information Technology (ie the three 'mandatory' erstwhile titled Core Skills which had been embedded into GNVQ) and Core Skills: referred to by Sir Ron as including interpersonal skills in Team Working, Presentation Skills – including oral and personal presentation – and wider personal skills such as Problem Solving and Self Management of Learning. These latter Core Skills were framed by Sir Ron in the context of what employers in particular would wish to see developed as illustrated in the 1995 CBI survey.

It could be argued that the debate concerning what might be a Core Skill, if not, more widely and complicatedly, what might constitute the 'core' of any learning programme in any qualification pathway, was being opened up again, even if not being thrown open widely for re-examination in Sir Ron Dearing's Review. Ironically the need for some sort of common core across all pathways became much more essential to secure given the fundamental failure of Sir Ron's Review to break down the basic tripartite pathway divisions of the qualification structure within the national education and training system.

The three pathways which remained intact are:

- the academic pathway: represented by A/AS levels and GCSE, where the primary purpose is to develop knowledge, understanding, and to a lesser extent, skills associated with a subject or discipline
- the applied education pathway: represented by the GNVQ (more currently described as the Applied or as the Vocational A level, or Vocational Certificate in Education AVCE), where the primary purpose is to develop and apply knowledge, understanding and skills relevant to a broad area of employment

- the vocational training pathway: represented by NVQs, where the primary purpose is to develop and recognise competence and capability in a trade or profession at the relevant level

Although left intact by the Dearing Review (1996), (since the received wisdom subsequently has it that Sir Ron had finally been warned off tampering with the 'Gold standard' of A levels by his political masters), the Report did make some underpinning proposals for bridging the intrinsic divisions within the national education and training provision. It did this as follows:

First, and fundamentally, by promoting the Key Skills (Application of Number, Communication and Information Technology) as those which should be pursued and developed by all learners in all pathways. This in effect would establish a common core, albeit restricted, and some would say impoverished, as a core entitlement, to all learning programmes across all the pathways.

Second, by recommending the development of a new A/S in Key Skills and the harmonisation for the Key Skills requirements in the AS and in GNVQs.

Third, by relegating the particular pathway through which qualifications are achieved (ie be it academic, applied or vocational) to a lesser prominence on a new certification and format in a newly proposed **national qualification framework**, in which the pathway itself may become less significant than the acquisition of the overarching National Award achievable through each of the pathways equally. Our understanding is that variations of this proposal as encapsulated in the 'Overarching Certificate' concept were put on a back burner at the time, in terms of further development, by the Chairman of QCA, Sir William Stubbs. The envisaged framework would allocate all qualifications from whatever pathway to four levels: Advanced, Intermediate, Foundation and Entry. The main certificate heading would be National Award, then the level would be specified eg Intermediate, then the Awarding Body would be named. Only then would the particular qualification be specified (eg GNVQ Intermediate, or GCSE Grades A-C, or NVQs at level 2), and grades and merits would be listed as well as all units achieved within any qualifications. It was Sir John Cassells of the National Commission on Education who, at the first public preview of Sir Ron's Report at the RSA, John Adam St., commented that this proposal was an exquisitely clever way of subsuming the differentiation

of the pathways by creating an overarching cohesion. Others presumably, including Sir William Stubbs, believed it to be a piece of purely presentational legerdemain.

Fourth, Sir Ron proposed a complete overhaul of the Youth Training programme under the new banner of National Traineeships. He envisaged a provision which would offer participants the opportunity of accomplishing the Key Skills to at least level 2, of re-sitting GCSEs where appropriate, and taking GNVQs as well as NVQs as an intrinsic part of this work related route up to the level of NVQ level 3 and the Modern Apprenticeship.

Fifth, Sir Ron recommended the review and relaunch of The National Record of Achievement as an overarching vehicle for all learners for developing the Key/Core skills of planning and managing one's own learning from the stage at 13 ½ when decisions are taken and choices made for the last two years of statutory schooling.

Sixth, Sir Ron recommended the introduction of an Entry level category of qualifications since Foundation level, which had been level one within the erstwhile national vocational qualification (NVQ) framework, had been pitched too high to give ease of access to many learners with particular or special learning needs. This has led subsequently to a continuing debate on the relationship between the Key Skills standards and the Basic skills framework being developed by the Basic Skills Agency. There will be cross over between the Key Skills and basic skills at levels 1 and 2 as well as at entry level. This issue has more recently been the subject of development in the Moser Report **A Fresh Start: Improving Literacy and Numeracy, February 1999**. The Basic Skills standards for literacy and numeracy were published in the summer of 2000.

In Autumn of 1996 the SCAA/NCVQ Joint Committee, which was charged with taking forward the bulk of post Dearing work, undertook extensive consultations upon all these recommendations. The predominant view was against proceeding with an AS Key Skills qualification because the teaching and assessment of the Key Skills should be common across all the qualifications. Instead the Joint Committee recommended that future work should focus on the design of a single Key Skills qualification to cover Application of Number, Communication and Information Technology and to operate across the three pathways (A levels, GNVQs and NVQs). The Joint Committee submitted detailed proposals for the single

Key Skills qualification to Ministers in early July 1997. A decision by the newly elected Labour Government was taken to consult further on the format and breadth of A levels 16-19, recommended by Sir Ron Dearing. Baroness Blackstone then announced a further consultation ‘**Qualifying For Success**’ (1997) to contribute to the construction and design of Curriculum 2000, and in March 1999, the following initiatives for Curriculum 2000 design finally emerged:

- The reinforcement of a National Qualifications Framework with three qualification categories – general, vocationally-related, and occupational. Qualifications included in the framework are subject to the control of three regulatory authorities for England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, QCA, ACCAC, and CCEA. This reform aimed to provide a framework which would be clear, coherent and widely understood and would achieve high, consistent standards across all qualifications.
- The introduction of new A level, AS and Advanced GNVQ qualifications, based on a structure of 3-unit, 6-unit, and 12-unit awards. The mergers of the former examination boards and vocational awarding bodies into three unitary awarding bodies would significantly reduce the number of different specifications (syllabuses) available. New specifications for all subjects were to be developed.
- An *Advanced Subsidiary* would replace the *Advanced Supplementary* (both AS). This was envisaged as either a stepping stone to a full A level (the first three units), or a stand-alone qualification. It would attract 50% of the A level marks, and be set and assessed at a standard appropriate to the first year of a full A level programme.
- A levels would have a 6-unit structure, and would incorporate AS. Subject criteria (covering both AS and A level) would replace the present A level cores. The second set of units (the A2 component) would include a 20% synoptic assessment element. All A levels were envisaged to be modular, although it was planned for there to be opportunities for either staged (modular) or end of course (linear) assessment.
- Advanced GNVQs, to be renamed Vocational A levels or Certificates of Vocational Education would be available in 6- and 12-unit awards in all subjects, with the possibility of 3-unit awards in a small number of subjects.
- A new combined Key Skills qualification covering Application of Number, Communication and Information Technology (now referred to as the “Main” Key Skills)

would be made available, and alongside this combined qualification the individual Key Skills units in Improving Own Learning and Performance, Problem Solving, and Working with Others (the Wider Key Skills) would be available. Key Skills would not be mandatory, but it was anticipated and hoped by government that a large proportion of schools and colleges would include them in post 16 programmes. Signposting of opportunities to evidence Key Skills would be included in all new A/AS and GNVQ/Vocational A level/Certificate of Vocational Education specifications.

The government considered that post 16 students should undertake a broader programme involving a greater volume of study than that associated with the traditional study of three A level subjects. Thus the above reforms aimed to encourage breadth through the study of more subjects, the opportunity to combine different types of qualification in one programme, and the development of Key Skills, although it would continue to be possible to evidence depth where this was needed for a particular progression opportunity.

After the first year of implementation of these reforms, the Secretary of State for Education and Skills, Estelle Morris, in June 2001, called for a Review of the new reforms constituted in Curriculum 2000. This Review of Curriculum 2000 was in response to widescale misgivings about the assessment overload on students and workload on staff, the crammed nature of AS, the over-academicised assessment associated with the re-vamped GNVQ (now known as the Advanced Vocational Certificate in Education or Vocational Certificate in Education), and the burden of Key Skills Qualification assessment, which now required external assessment as a condition of its entry to the National Qualifications Framework.

Misgivings on all these fronts were featured in the national press and came to a head at the time of the summer examinations in June 2001. News headlines reported crises in schools unable to complete the AS exams and syllabus specifications, examination timetable clashes between different subjects and excessive continuous hours of examinations for students. There were signs also that the new Key Skills Qualification, because of its additional external test assessment burden would be abandoned in the next academic year by many schools and colleges whose students, not convinced at all of its acceptance by either Higher Education or Employers, were failing to sit the tests.

The Review requested of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) by the Secretary of State was to be in two stages. The first stage reported in July 2001 in order to provide short term advice for schools and colleges. The full and final review and report was to be completed by December 2001.

The QCA were asked that the first stage of the Review be focussed on the assessment arrangements for Curriculum 2000 and in this assessment context QCA was asked to look at the assessment arrangements for the Key Skills Qualification.

The first stage of the QCA Review submitted to the Secretary of State by David Hargreaves, Chief Executive of QCA, in July 2001, made four basic recommendations for change in relation to the Key Skills Qualification. These recommendations were based upon a range of opinions in the field which appeared quite divided.

The first recommendation was that the assessment arrangements for the three units of the qualification needed fundamental and urgent review.

The second was that schools and colleges needed to be given more flexibility and autonomy to shape their policy and practice in relation to the Key Skills qualification to "match the qualification more closely to individual student needs and aspirations". What this actually means is the phasing out of the combined Certificate for the three Key Skills from September 2001. Instead schools and colleges will be encouraged to allow for development of the main three Key Skills through the already established Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) arrangements for curriculum enrichment, tutorial, citizenship and Key Skill provision which had been put into place at the beginning of the academic year 2000/2001 upon the launch of the Key Skills Qualification. What has altered, now under the auspices of the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) which has replaced the FEFC, is that the achievement of the Key Skills Qualification has been de-coupled from the funding requirement. Colleges will still have to evidence provision of the appropriate Key Skills development and delivery as an output, but students will not necessarily be required to demonstrate the achievement of the full, or even part qualification, as represented by achieving certification for the individual Key Skills units.

QCA recommended that the National Learning and Skills Council make these funding changes for sixth form colleges and for colleges of further education which fall within the LSC's remit. The previous funding arrangements did not include funding for the Wider Key Skills. The Wider Key Skills are technically not regarded as full qualifications since they do not meet the QCA stipulated regulations governing the entry of qualifications into the national qualifications framework. These regulations specify that approved external qualifications are required to provide up to a minimum of 40% external assessment in order to be eligible for inclusion in the National Qualifications Framework. This requirement is somewhat ironic given that a fundamental factor leading to the request for the review by the Secretary of State in 2001 was the issue of assessment overload. The QCA would do well to consider the appropriateness of this criteria of up to 40% minimum external assessment for NQF eligibility as an underpinning and fundamental structural issue. QCA will need to deal as a matter of urgency with this underpinning structural issue if it is to look at the broader issues raised by the Review requested by the Secretary of State.

The associated Learning and Skills Council (LSC) funding settlement regarding Key Skills for operation from Autumn 2001, following publication of the Hargreaves QCA Post 16 Review (2001), is that colleges and sixth form colleges post 16 (and schools' sixth forms also, from 2002, will come under the funding remit of the LSC), will be encouraged to offer Key Skills development across the six Key Skills as appropriate to individual learners. Funding will be pegged to the development of any of the six Key Skills but not necessarily to their certification as an outcome. The combined Key Skills qualification launched in September 2000 is now to be phased out from September 2001. Other aspects of the full QCA Curriculum 2000 Review phases one and two (July and December 2001) include looking at the feasibility of implementing a system of on-line external assessment to open up the windows of opportunity for Awarding Bodies to cater for on demand assessment by learners both in Key Skills and Basic Skills. Policy guidance from the Regulatory Authorities has also reflected the Secretary of State's two specific expectations: that candidates who had not achieved A*-C in GCSE English and Maths or ICT should be expected to achieve the relevant Key Skills qualifications at level 2; and that institutions should support candidates commencing advanced level programmes to achieve at least one level 3 Key Skill qualification.

3. KEY SKILLS AND THE FUTURE OF 14-19 QUALIFICATIONS

Post 16

Post 16 the distinct tripartite division of the qualification pathways had been reaffirmed following the 1997 **Qualifying for Success** consultation and instead of the sort of radical reconstruction recommended by a number of sources, including ourselves, (Richardson, Spours, Woolhouse, Young 1995), and (White, Pring, Brockington 1995) the **Qualifying For Success** consultation recommended a number of structured reforms and bridges in and between the pathways.

Key Skills have remained high on the government agenda and were seen as central to its strategy for broadening A levels. However, there was no real clue in **Qualifying For Success** 1997 which led to the Curriculum 2000 reforms, (apart from market forces in the shape of a points allocation to the main Key Skills from the UCAS Tariff for HE entry purposes), as to how Key Skills could be delivered to the majority of the cohort without compulsion. There were and are no plans for the Key Skills to become mandatory.

Now the QCA Review of the **Qualifying For Success** Curriculum 2000 reforms (known as the Hargreave's QCA Curriculum 2000 Review) of July and December 2001 appears still not to be addressing the fundamental issue of a divisive national qualifications framework. The assumption appears to remain that the tripartite division of the national qualifications framework reflects accurately the needs of distinct groups of learners who, it is assumed, are best served by this mixed economy model of provision. If there were genuine parity of esteem between the pathways this might be arguable. But there is no such parity so the mixed economy model actually upholds and reinforces a divisiveness within the system. Furthermore there appears still to be no plan for Key Skills, main or wider, to become comprehensively offered as a basic component of some semblance of a common core across the qualification pathways.

Pre 16

Pre 16 we have argued that the 16-19 reforms needed to be carefully fused into the National Curriculum Review, especially in relation to Key Stage 4, and there were signs that this was

not happening thoroughly. The position on Key Skills Pre 16 as described through the DfEE Key Skills Website in August 1999 was as follows:

The National Curriculum is the main vehicle for the development of Key Skills. QCA provided advice on the nature of the Review of the National Curriculum in Spring 1998. Planned developments on Key Skills were:

- Inclusion of the IT Key Skill unit amongst the qualifications approved for use at Key Stage 4 (From 1996)
- Proposed national extension of the availability of the Part One GNVQ, from 1999
- Demonstration projects at Key Stage 4 to test the feasibility and desirability of separately accrediting the Key Skill units in Working with Others and Improving Own Learning and Performance
- Work to determine the extent to which requirements in GCSE Maths and English meet the reasonable expectations of employers in relation to Communication and Application of Number

There was some cause for concern here in relation to learners' widescale access pre 16 to the Key Skills. The last bullet point, above, is an elliptical reference to the considerable difference of opinion within the QCA, and possibly also the DfEE at the time, as to whether the new Key Skills Qualification, which was to be launched in September 2000, was to be made available at Key Stage Four at all. There is a further difference of opinion (see bullet point three above in relation to demonstration projects) as to the extent to which, the wider Key Skills, of Improving own Learning and Performance and Working with Others, might be made available within the limited context of the disapplication of the National Curriculum for some learners at Key Stage Four. Although subject to internal dispute, the access to the new Key Skills Qualification at Key Stage Four had been described as one of the measures for 14-16 year olds in the White Paper Learning to Succeed focussed on Post 16 provision.

We have argued repeatedly for the need for widescale availability of the Key Skills at Key Stage Four; both those that had been embedded within the then proposed Key Skills Qualification (ie the 'main' Key Skills of Application of Number, Communication and IT)

and the 'wider' Key Skills of Improving Own Learning and Performance, Working With Others and Problem Solving. The reasons for this are as follows:

- i) It would make no sense for any of the Key Skills, seen within the context of their providing a common core across qualification pathways 14-16, only to be available for accreditation post 16.
- ii) If the Key Skills are to be available and promoted post 16 it is crucial that learners pre 16 be familiar with the assessment methodology and that prior learning and experience pre 16 can be accredited for progression purposes post 16 for all six Key Skills.
- iii) If the Key Skills within the GNVQ/Vocational A level/Certificate of Vocational Education were to be disaggregated from those qualifications for certification through the Key Skills Qualification separately, then those Key Skills qualification units must be available pre and post 16 in order to perform this separate certification function.
- iv) If there is to be any serious attempt to make the national curriculum at Key Stage Four more vocationally relevant and vocationally oriented (as is envisaged in the White Paper - **Schools Achieving Success, September 2001**) it is crucial that the Key Skills, as backed so consistently by employers, are all available to accredit achievement within that more vocationally oriented context.
- v) If aspects of Citizenship and PSHE are to be accredited through Key Skills as has been referred to in the government's PSHE Advisory Group Report **Preparing Young People for Adult Life (DfEE May 1999)** then all the Key Skills must be available pre 16 to facilitate this (and to provide a more applied and experiential assessment methodology than may be the case through the unitary authority Examination Boards' more traditional GCSEs/GCSE short courses in Citizenship Studies which have been encouraged for Key Stage 4.)

4. KEY SKILLS AND THE SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES PERFORMANCE TABLES

It is clear from the recent research and development activity of ASDAN that there is support from a number of influential sources for the reform of the indices to reflect wider learner and school achievement within the league tables. The House of Commons Education and Employment Select Committee in its Report (April 1998) observed:

“Like the Government we believe that school performance tables should be revised to reflect more accurately what schools and their pupils achieve... The performance tables include information about some vocational qualifications, but at present these tend to be given much less prominence than the A*-C indicators. We believe that attention should also be given to crediting other nationally recognised achievement as well – through, for instance, the number of pupils who had completed ASDAN Awards....”

In June 1999 the DfEE undertook a consultation on the School and College Performance Tables which posed a number of questions to the field including whether other qualifications achievement data should be included within the merged GCSE/GNVQ data. The response to the DfEE consultation included a considerable number of specific recommendations that ASDAN Awards should be included in the merged GCSE/GNVQ data, since pre 16 it was one of the few routes through which Key Skills could be certificated (alongside GNVQ and Part One GNVQ, see above). At present, though, this Key Skill achievement data from the ASDAN Awards is not captured for league table purposes. From Sept 2000 when the Key Skills qualification units were made available pre 16, they had still not been included in the all important "merged GCSE/GNVQ data" categorisation for recording achievement in the Schools and Colleges Performance Tables.

Keith Mitchell, the Chief Education Officer of County Durham, for example, enunciated succinctly the need for the inclusion of wider means of recording and recognising achievement in his response to the 1999 DfEE consultation. This was that headteachers feel let down because on the one hand they are judged and publicly paraded in the league tables which focus on the GCSE side, but at the same time are being encouraged to develop other non-GCSE approaches within Key Stage Four that will re-motivate pupils and tackle the social and inclusion agenda. However if they are to do the latter they suffer because of the

former, when their very success in the latter leads to their public humiliation in the league tables as presently constructed.

The Society of Education Officers in their response to the DfEE consultation (which together with Keith Mitchell's response also made specific reference to the inclusion of ASDAN Awards) stated:

“The Department should take a strong lead in encouraging schools to put much more emphasis on work related learning. This means giving a high priority to extending the range of qualifications published in performance tables”.

The current DfES position remains that they see no reason in-principle why Key Skills achievement data should not be included and merged with the GCSE/GNVQ data. However it has been made clear by DfES that no action can be taken by them on this matter without the advice of the QCA on the underpinning issue of equivalence of Key Skills to GCSEs. It is therefore for QCA now to make a determination on this matter which could enormously influence the reflection of erstwhile non included achievement of learners within the league tables.

As late as March 1999 there seemed to be no consensus at QCA, or DfEE also, on whether the Key Skills Qualification for launch in September 2000 would be available at Key Stage Four (see above). This lack of consensus was underpinned by the wider and politically fraught issue of equivalences for league table purposes. This latter debate raises all the questions of overlap, duplication and 'dumbing down' which have variously been used in the past to keep the Key Skills within a restricted remit and for a restricted audience. Now, following the Review of the Qualifying For Success Reforms requested by Estelle Morris in June 2001 one year after their implementation, the Key Skills Qualification launched in September 2000 as a combined qualification, is to be phased out from September 2001 and learners encouraged, rather to register for the individual Key Skills units. Because of the value placed upon the Wider Key Skills by employers and higher education institutions, schools and colleges certainly post 16, are being encouraged to develop all six Key Skills 'Choosing those most useful to individual students for their 16-19 work and their future plans.' (September 2001 Key Skills Update. QCA). Our view is that if Key Skills, however

restricted it may be as a model, is still the only common core element across qualification pathways currently envisaged, then their status as a central cohering feature of an otherwise disparate qualification system needs to be affirmed. We believe this to be as true for the Wider Key Skills of Improving Own Learning, Working With Others, and Problem Solving, as for the main Key Skills of Communication, Information Technology and Application of Number.

5. KEY SKILLS REMEDIAL OR BROADENING?

It can be seen from the account of the place of Key Skills pre and post 16 given so far, that there is a distinct tension between their use and conception as a broadening or enriching mechanism for the post 16 A levels (and the Vocational Certificate in Education, VCEs), and the possibilities for their use and conception pre 16 as, on the one hand, a remedial device for accrediting achievement within the context of disapplication of the National Curriculum, and also, on the other hand, as a potential route for the accreditation of PSHE and citizenship for a much wider whole school context. Until this confusion of purpose is resolved it seems unlikely that much progress can be made with the sort of view we are putting. This is that, by default, the Key Skills could potentially be set in the centre of stage in the context of a common core element (although needing to be broadened and built upon further), across all qualification pathways 14-19.

6. KEY SKILLS AND THE EMPLOYERS PERSPECTIVE

We have not thus far given explicit coverage of the nature and history of the Core/Key Skills contribution from the perspective of employers who are a significant stakeholder in the debate. We are indebted to the recent observations made by Michael Young, Annette Hayton and Tom Leney in their research evaluation report on the work of ASDAN as it contributed to the employers agenda. (Young, Hayton and Leney 1997)

In 1989 the CBI report '**Towards a Skills Revolution**' was published, and ever since employer organisations have championed the Core/Key Skills in the general context of employability. Indeed, had it not been for the insistence of the CBI in discussions with government in 1989 at the time of the publication of their Report, Core Skills are unlikely to

have received such credibility or been developed so rigorously since. But as Young, Hayton and Leney (1997) point out we have to be cautious about the extent of employer enthusiasm.

“When labour market conditions improve, as they have done in the last couple of years, employers tend to forget Core Skills and either recruit those with limited skills for low skill jobs or continue to use traditional qualifications such as A levels to screen out candidates for interview. The attitude of employers to the kind of A level reforms that would be necessary if they were to guarantee core skills has been with notable exceptions.....ambivalent at least” (**Report on the ASDAN Youth Award Scheme** Young, Hayton and Leney 1997).

The writers concluded that by far the best example of “a coherent employer approach to Core/Key Skills” is to be found in the publication from BT entitled Matching Skills (BT 1994). In this document BT came up with no simplistic solution in contrast to employer organisations. Instead rather than producing a yet further prescriptive list of Key/Core Skills, it suggested that a fundamental review of the whole 16-19 curriculum was needed.

In 1992 the ATC at the University of the West of England on behalf of ASDAN undertook a study of the personal skills and qualities employers look for when recruiting 16 and 17 year old school leavers. Employers, training providers and young people in employment and training were asked to identify the most important employability features in their experience. For the employers employability concerned the recruitment and retention of staff. The research identified the fifteen most important personal factors taken into account when considering young people for employment. Significantly, academic qualifications received a low rating as aspects of employability. Of course in some areas of employment academic qualifications have an important influence on recruitment. There is most often an expectation from employers that recruits should have basic skills in literacy and numeracy. Our overall conclusion from the research was that employers actually wanted both academic qualifications and the range of personal qualities which they identified. (See **The Employment Factor Survey**, ATC July 1992). An update on this research has been conducted by ATC between 1997-1999 on what employers value in an effective employee and our findings will be reported to SKOPE in our further work.

In overall terms though, employers worldwide are in a difficult position in relation to the shift from economies based on capital plant and machinery to those based on knowledge. “This shift poses new challenges both to the nature of organisations and the kind of human resource strategy they develop. These challenges arise from the fact that investing in knowledge means investing in people. Knowledge can be invested in but it cannot be owned – not, at least, in the sense that it is possible to own capital goods. In future the emphasis is likely to be on intellectual property as well educated workers seek, or are forced, to become mobile knowledge workers”. (Richardson, Spours, Woolhouse, Young 1995)

7. KEY SKILLS AND HIGHER EDUCATION

There are two contexts in which we need to look at Key Skills in relation to Higher Education. The first is in relation to the content and process of Higher Education courses and their curriculum. The second is in relation to admissions to Higher Education.

In relation to the first, Sir Ron Dearing’s review regarding the theme of Higher Education recommended that Key Skills development and assessment should be integrated into all undergraduate programmes. If Sir Ron was speaking here of the QCA Key Skills unit specifications it would be fairly safe to say that the scenario envisaged is a long way off. Key Skills specifications were still in the process of development for levels four and five, in relation to the Year 2000 standards. A significant issue was and still remains that of staff development. A considerable, if not quantum, change in familiarity with, and understanding, of the assessment methodology for Key Skills would be required in order to achieve their integration for development and assessment within the majority of undergraduate programmes as recommended by Sir Ron. However, considerable development work within HE has taken place in relation to Key Skills if we define Key Skills a little more widely. Initiatives which involved the development of skills acquisition and associated assessment formats in the context of employability began some years ago, for example, through the sponsorship of the Enterprise in Higher Education programme from the Moorfoot based Higher Education Directorate of the then Training Agency. More recently, the CVCP report on Skills Development in Higher Education (1998) has provided an important focus for the further legitimisation of skills acquisition as a function of HE.

A further reason for the need for Higher Education to explore Key Skills in more detail is the work undertaken by the former Higher Education Quality Council, now the Quality Assurance Agency to define what comprises 'graduateness'. After considerable debate on this topic, the overall conclusion appeared to be that there is a set of skills running through HE programmes which, although not aligned perfectly with the national QCA Key Skills standards definition, nevertheless have very close connection.

As part of the DfEE Development Prospectus in 1999, 118 project outline bids on 'Key Skills in HE' were received by the Department from a wide range of institutions of higher education. Twenty eight were invited to submit full bids and nine were finally selected for approval.

Tony Higgins, Chief Executive of UCAS, in a speech to a CRAC conference on Key Skills, January 1999, gave a number of examples of Key Skills developments within the HE sector. These included:

1. **The University of Exeter** which had developed an IT-based student portfolio with the national Key Skills standards built in. An Induction Pack was also made available for both tutors and students. Assessment and accreditation of Key Skills was to be made available to all students who wish to take advantage of them. Students were to be encouraged to seek naturally occurring evidence from all sources their programme of study and involvement in extra curricular activities.
2. **King Alfred's College, Winchester**, had built in the national Key Skills standards into their Continuing Education provision.
3. **The University of Nottingham** has been involved in a DfEE funded project to embed Key Skills into the HE curriculum. Good progress is being made with a relatively small number of programmes, but it is envisaged that it will be some time before all provision can be covered. A Staff Development Pack '*Supporting Key Skills in Higher Education*' has been produced by the Education Department. In addition, the University's Personal and Academic Development Programme (PADSHE) piloted in the Department of English Studies, and developed in conjunction with the

Universities of Birmingham, Liverpool John Moores, Northumbria, and Newcastle, creates a framework for reflective practice, helps to maximise academic achievements and employment opportunities, and includes the recording of achievement in skills area.

- 4 **The University of Salford** has been involved in discussions with QCA about the possibility of using Key Skills as a profiling mechanism.
- 5 **The University of Liverpool** has been using the set assignments developed for the national Key Skills units as a means of diagnostic assessment on entry.
- 6 **Liverpool Hope College** has put together a core module entitled Studentship, based upon the Key Skills units and aiming to equip students with the skills necessary to successfully progress through their HE programmes, and to assist in applications for employment following completion.
- 7 **The University of Wales, College of Bangor** has been involved in Training Needs for Small and Medium Enterprises, which considers the link between skills developed within an HE context, and those needed for progression into employment.
- 8 **University College London's** HE Research and Development Unit has been involved in the embedding of Key Skills into their Continuing Education provision. UCL have what they call The Gold Book, but officially entitled *Guidelines to Good Practice*, which focuses on teaching and learning and refers to the development of Key Skills within an HE environment.
- 9 **A Student Mentoring Project** based at University of Newcastle has been looking at the national Key Skills units of Working with Others, Improving Own Learning and Performance, and Communication, at Level 4, in the context of students involved in teaching and providing information on Higher Education to children at primary schools in deprived areas of Newcastle.

Overall, there seems to have been a growing recognition by institutions of higher education in recent years, that students need Key Skills to succeed on degree programmes and to progress into employment, although there is less agreement on the precise denotation and connotation of such skills. **Leeds Metropolitan University** has indicated, for example, that it emphasises the development of Key Skills within its own curriculum and therefore welcomes their certification and development prior to admission. Similarly, **Brunel University** report that since Key Skills are included as part of their undergraduate courses, they therefore welcome the higher profile given to the three main QCA Key Skills as part of an individuals' prior personal development.

At the **University of Portsmouth** there is also commitment to using the national Key Skills standards following the introduction of Key Skills within Curriculum 2000 and work to map Key Skills development opportunities has been planned for all undergraduate programmes.

In the November 2001 edition of Key Skills Support Programme News published by the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA), Jill Johnson, Head of the Outreach Department at UCAS, reported that well over half of the applicants to higher education for entry in 2002 are likely to have Key Skills achievement alongside their A level or vocational A level awards. Analysis of the 2002 entry requirements collected by UCAS indicates that 64.6% of courses offered by UCAS member institutions welcome Key Skills as part of an overall programme of study. In many cases, Key Skills achievement can contribute to an overall UCAS tariff score.

This brings us to the second context in which Key Skills are significant to HE, that is to say in relation to admissions. UCAS, through its Tariff and Profile project is attempting to put together a single points tariff for all school and college leaving qualifications including A and AS levels, Higher and Advanced Highers, GNVQs/VCEs and International Baccalaureate. This development of such a tariff is in itself a way in which the academic/vocational divide in entry qualifications to HE may be bridged to some extent. There are points available in the UCAS Tariff for the main Key Skills. There are no points awarded yet to the Wider Key Skills although the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) report in Key Skills Support Programme News (November 2001), "this is likely to be reconsidered in due course".

Although qualifications will be awarded a number of points within the total menu of the UCAS tariff it will still be for individual HEIs, and indeed individual departments/courses within HEIs, to determine which qualifications they will use, in what pattern, with which points allocated to make up the total they require for admission.

However, there is, as noted above, growing interest from the HE sector in Key Skills both main and wider, and they will undoubtedly be used by some selectors as a means of differentiation (although the lack of interest in the Key Skills by some higher education admissions tutors is noted as a problem by David Hargreaves in the QCA Review of Curriculum 2000 - Report on Phase Two, December 2001). And, although the Key Skills may not be used as part of a formal offer in the future by some institutions, those applicants who are able to demonstrate Key Skill achievement may increasingly be viewed more favourably than those without such evidence. This has been demonstrated in the development of the UCAS Entry Profiles completed for a growing number of Universities and Colleges. Many Universities now, for example, recognise the ASDAN Universities Award as a valid entry qualification, and indeed an increasing number including Aberystwyth, Glamorgan, Lincoln and Humberside, Luton and Derby offer it up to 40 UCAS tariff points.

8. KEY SKILLS AND ASSESSMENT RIGOUR

The price that had to be paid for the inclusion of the Key Skill Qualification (now replaced by the individual main Key Skills units), in the agenda for broadening post 16 A level provision announced by Baroness Blackstone as part of the conclusion of the **Qualifying For Success** (1997) consultation, was that its assessment regime had to adhere to the prevailing view of what constitutes rigour. Hence, alongside the national pilot of the Key Skills standards the then DfEE and the QCA contracted with the Awarding Bodies involved in the national pilot, including ASDAN, to produce a range of assessment instruments, tasks, assignments and tests for the new Key Skills Qualification which was to be launched in September 2000. Awarding Bodies undertook and produced these instruments and trialled them within the timescale. The NFER, along with the University of Nottingham group, were asked to evaluate the instruments and, rather unsurprisingly, since the contexts of delivery have ranged

from those alongside A levels to those within work based training programmes, concluded that it was difficult to achieve standardisation with the use of different instruments and across a range of contexts. Because of the wider government concern at being seen to maintain standards, the QCA imposed standardisation of tests (not tasks or assignments) within the requirement of external assessment. This meant that what emerged as the final format of the Key Skill Qualification in September 2000 was very different from the assessment model which had operated previously, which, although constantly developing, had been the subject of the descriptions within this paper.

This transformation of the Key Skills Qualification in order to guarantee its inclusion as a rigorously assessed qualification within the National Qualifications Framework constitutes another example of a failure to convince decision makers of the rectitude and appropriateness of other models of assessment than that epitomised in public and government perception by the 'gold standard' of A level examinations. Such written, examination-like tests, which are time limited, have known disadvantages to candidates. The QCA Curriculum 2000 first phase Review of the Qualifying For Success Reforms in July 2001, less than one year after their implementation in September 2000, requested that the assessment arrangements for the Key Skills units be reviewed urgently. Some formulae which allows for external assessment under current regulations, but keeps this assessment burden to a minimum has to be considered. More radically, the appropriateness of the current regulations need to be scrutinised carefully. An addendum to existing guidance on assessment from the Regulatory Authorities now seeks to clarify requirements and to "discourage" excessive and unnecessary collection of evidence for portfolio assessment. (See Review of Curriculum 2000 Report on phase two, December 2001 QCA). ASDAN has proposed to QCA a way of establishing rigour which does not have to rely on the traditional approach to external assessment. In a briefing paper to ministers in October 1999 we outlined the basis of a way forward which did not rely on inappropriate forms of external testing in relation to the Wider Key Skills.

As many previous commentators have observed, including Sir Oscar DeVille whose report in 1986 led to the establishment of the NVQ framework, the division between the so called academic and so called vocational qualifications should be bridged. The English system of education and training has for too long symbolised a division within the very use of the two words. It is a system which has been designed it seems, largely, to de-select people rather

than encourage them to achieve. And despite the setting of national targets we will achieve very little if the fundamental organising principle of our system for learning is to deter rather than to encourage participation because of inappropriate assessment. In relation to the establishment of the National Qualifications framework, originally proposed by Sir Ron Dearing (1996), what seems to have emerged from the deliberations of the QCA and its advice from ministers on assessment requirements is a rather conservative if not atavistic approach to what should constitute an appropriate national assessment quality assurance regime for the framework of National Qualifications. This current approach is that for any qualification to be admitted to the National Qualifications Framework it must fulfil the stipulation that external assessment be administered. Accordingly the word 'external' has been imported since Autumn 2000 into the title of the relevant DfES Circular on "Approved External Qualifications". Previously the DfES reference on equivalent Circulars had been merely to "Approved Qualifications".

Our view remains that this is both a constricted and limited notion of what constitutes assessment rigour. It is ironic that the criticisms of assessment overload, that have led the Secretary of State in June 2001 to announce a Review of Curriculum 2000 only a year after their implementation, are the same range of assessment factors that feature in the QCA's current national criteria for admission of Qualifications into the National Qualifications Framework. The issue is not just a matter of quality and volume of assessment but is also, fundamentally, about the nature and type of assessment that is appropriate.

Let us hope, for example, that the proposed assessment models for the new vocational GCSEs pre 16 do not simply transfer and impose an inappropriately academicised style of assessment upon vocational and applied learning contexts as has happened post 16 with AVCEs. If current thinking does not alter we are likely to see a repeat of the recent post 16 crisis for schools and learners in the pre 16 sector.

9. SUMMARY

This paper tries to give an account of the development and place of Key Skills within the framework of national qualifications 14-19 and has argued and indicated the following:

- Despite the **Dearing Review**, the **Qualifying For Success initiative** and the **Curriculum 2000 Reforms Review** ordered by the Secretary of State, Estelle Morris in June 2001, the basic division between the academic and vocational qualification pathways remains intact.
- The only curriculum element which might be adduced as even approaching a common core 14-19 is Key Skills.
- The QCA Key Skills model is limited within the context of its performing the function of a common core.
- There is an absence of clarity concerning the purpose of Key Skills: enriching v remedial.
- There is a confusing disaggregation between ‘main’ and ‘wider’ or ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ Key Skills.
- There is disagreement within DfEE and QCA about the status of Key Skills in relation to their equivalence to GCSEs.
- There is little consensus as to the extent to which the main Key Skills should be made widely available at National Curriculum Key Stage 4 as qualification units which could be merged with the GCSE/GNVQ/VCE data
- There is continuing ambiguity from Employers about what Key Skills they require.
- There is growing interest from HE in Key Skills, but defined much more widely than the current QCA model, and within a context of enterprise and employability.
- QCA have produced an assessment regime for the main Key Skills units based on standard externally assessed tests which have considerably increased the assessment burden on learners and teachers.
- The same external standards which have been applied to the ‘main’ Key Skills will mean that more work will have to be done on producing rigorous assessment approaches for the wider Key Skills to meet the QCA eligibility criteria for entry of qualifications to the National Qualifications Framework.

- UCAS will only give points for the hard/main Key Skills in the UCAS tariff (since they will be the ones which will be perceived to have rigorous assessment).
- The wider Key Skills which are of interest to HE and employers will be left out of the points allocation of the UCAS tariff until they meet the same external assessment requirements that have led to assessment overload in relation to the main Key Skills
- A continued dispute on the equivalence of the main Key Skills to GCSE Maths and English may deny league table inclusion for them.
- Non availability of the wider Key Skills as fully recognised units of qualification, pre 16 and post 16 will have an effect for the possibilities of assessment for aspects of PSHE and Citizenship in the National Curriculum and in Post 16 Education and Training.
- The agenda to try to widen the indices by which schools' and colleges' and learners' achievements are judged in the league tables will be set back by continued lack of consensus over the Key Skills equivalence to GCSE for league table purposes.
- The QCA's own stipulations of criteria for admission of qualifications to the National Qualification Framework which includes administration of external assessment will need fundamental review to avoid assessment overload in future.
- If assessment overload in relation to the main Key Skills (which has partly precipitated the June 2001 review of the 'Qualifying For Success Post 16 Curriculum 2000 Reforms') is to be successfully addressed then some system will need to be developed which, under current regulations, allows for external assessment but minimises that overload in terms of quantity and also allows for a type of assessment which is not based on terminal testing to be administered.

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