



Assessment Series No.5

A Briefing on Key Skills in Higher Education

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Generic Centre Guides and Briefings

Welcome to the Learning and Teaching Support Network Generic Centre's series of Assessment Guides and Briefings. They aim to provide a series of overviews of important issues and practices in the field of assessment for the higher education community.

The Assessment Guides are intended for colleagues with particular roles and for students, as their titles suggest. The Briefings are primarily intended for lecturers and other staff involved in supporting learning.

The Assessment Series is a snapshot of a field in which development is likely to be rapid, and will be supplemented by specific case studies produced by the LTSN Subject Centres.

The series was developed by Brenda Smith and Richard Blackwell of the LTSN Generic Centre with the support of Professor Mantz Yorke. Experts in the field were commissioned for each title to ensure that the series would be authoritative. Authors were invited to approach the issue in their own way and no attempt was made to impose a uniform template.

The series editors are grateful to colleagues in LTSN Subject Centres and other senior colleagues who refereed the series, and of course to the authors for enabling its publication.

We hope that you will enjoy the Assessment Series and find it interesting and thought provoking. We welcome your feedback and any suggestions you may have for future work in the area of assessment.

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Summary

These resources have been prepared for use by those working within higher education (HE) with interests in developing and assessing key skills among students. The materials include background information about the development of key skills within other education and training contexts within the UK, and provide links to other resources that can be accessed. They also look at some examples of current schemes for key skills development, assessment and recording within HE, and give some guidelines about good practice, which relate mainly to assessment issues. However assessment issues can never be totally separated from curriculum and pedagogical issues relating to student learning, hence the need to also examine how key skills assessment might relate to different HE courses, other aspects of student experience, and the variety of ways in which key skills developments can be supported and recorded.

Where have Key Skills Come From?

There is a long history of work relating to the acquisition of core, generalisable, or transferable skills. These skills such as the ability to communicate or solve problems are encountered by individuals in a wide variety of contexts, and it is assumed that developing such skills will help individuals to be able to use them both in familiar as well as less familiar contexts.

In the UK such skills have been of considerable interest to employers, and as a result they have received a great deal of attention within vocationally-related schemes of education and training (e.g. National Vocational Qualification (NVQ), General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ), Youth Training Scheme (YTS), and other similar vocational training programmes and qualifications). However they are now also seen as crucial in equipping individuals for lifelong learning and everyday life in this a modern society.

Following the Dearing Report on Post-16 Qualifications (Dearing, 1996) it was proposed that such skills (then re-titled 'key skills') should be included in the programmes of all students remaining in education and training post-16, regardless of whether they were following either an 'academic' programme or a programme that was 'vocationally orientated'. After a great deal of debate about how to implement this recommendation, a Key Skills Qualification was developed and included in a reform of post-16 programmes and is part of the Curriculum 2000 reform, which was introduced in England, Wales and N Ireland from the Autumn of 2000. A parallel set of developments in Scotland has led to Core Skills being introduced as part of the Higher Skill reforms, which have been implemented over a similar timescale.

A subsequent Dearing report on Higher Education (Dearing, 1997) went on to recommend that key skills should have a place in all degree level programmes. The Dearing HE Report stressed four key skills, which it regarded as being "key to the future success of graduates whatever they intend to do in later life" (Dearing Report, 1997, p133).

These four are:

- communication skills
- numeracy
- the use of information technology
- learning how to learn.

The report stressed that its key skills recommendation were based on a belief “that these skills are relevant throughout life, not simply in employment” and they included ‘learning to learn’ alongside the other three commonly cited key skills “because of the importance we place on creating a learning society at a time when much specific knowledge will quickly become obsolete. Those leaving higher education will need to understand how to learn and how to manage their own learning and recognise that the process continues throughout life”. (Dearing Report, 1997, p133-134)

As well as proposing that all universities should place value on “good levels of competence in communication, numeracy and the practical use of information technology” in their admissions procedures (Recommendation 17), the Dearing Report went on to recommend that institutions produce ‘programme specifications’ for all degree level programmes, which identify potential stopping-off points and intended outcomes in relation to:

“the knowledge and understanding that a student will be expected to have upon completion;

key skills: communication, numeracy, the use of information technology and learning how to learn;

cognitive skills, such as understanding of methodologies or ability in critical analysis;
subject specific skills, such as laboratory skills.”

(Dearing Report on HE, Recommendation 21)

These recommendations which have been followed up by the recent changes to the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) tariff system, and the work of the QAA which now requires ‘programme specifications’ within its reformed subject review procedures, undoubtedly present many universities with some new challenges. The need for universities to meet these challenges has been increased greatly by the prominent position that key skills occupy in the ‘benchmark standards’ produced in conjunction with QAA for a range of different HE disciplines. Despite this need it is still the case that the level of familiarity and emphasis on key skills varies considerably among the broad spectrum of universities in the UK.

What Count as Key Skills?

There have been many controversies that have accompanied attempts to embed key skills within higher education and post-16 education and training programmes. Although people are generally happy to subscribe to the idea that such skills are relevant and important, they rarely agree so readily in relation to how the skills should be defined and assessed, or how likely it is that they are genuinely transferable from one situation to another.

Much of the early UK work on key skills was undertaken by the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ). That organisation, which was later merged with the Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA), to become the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), invested a great deal of time and energy into the development of specifications for a set of six key skills. NCVQ and more recently QCA have funded a great deal of development of these specifications, as well as a variety of different approaches to both embedding them within post-16 programmes, and assessing students against specifications for them, which were over time developed at each of five levels.

As a result of all of this activity we now have a widely recognised set of six QCA key skills specifications for the following skills:

- Communication
- Application of Number
- Information Technology
- Working With Others
- Problem Solving
- Improving Own Learning and Performance

Each of these skills is defined through widely used QCA specifications, and these specifications have been developed, so as to allow the acquisition of each skill to be related to a series of levels from 1 to 4, with a single over-arching specification for Personal Skills Development at level 5. These level descriptions have been designed to relate to an existing set of levels used by QCA to distinguish between other existing qualification frameworks. Levels 4 and 5 correspond to performance at and beyond degree level and into graduate employment. For some purposes the first three skills on this list have been treated differently from the others, which have become known as the 'wider key skills'.

Further details about these QCA key skills specifications can be found at: www.qca.org.uk , and corresponding materials relating to their development within post16 programmes of education and training can be found at www.keyskillssupport.net

It is interesting to note that the key skills proposed by the Dearing Report for Higher Education are not identical to the ones developed as a result of the Dearing Post-16 Review. If 'learning how to learn' is taken as equivalent to 'improving our learning and performance' then the higher education list is equivalent to four out of six of the QCA skills – with 'working with others' and 'problem solving' being the two that only appear on the QCA list. As will be seen from some case studies that are referred to in the next section, several universities have added and subtracted their own brand of key skills from the QCA and Dearing HE Report lists.

The Relevance of Key Skills for Higher Education

There are a variety of ways in which the key skills developments described in the previous two sections are relevant for those working in higher education. Firstly, as has already been noted, students will increasingly enter higher education with experience of key skills programmes, assessments and qualifications. For a number of years now students entering higher education with Advanced GNVQ qualifications were required to have demonstrated that they had reached at least Level 3 in the key skills of Communication, Application of Number, and Information Technology. From 2002 other students, who have following AS and A-Level programmes, will also enter HE with key skills qualifications, and under the new UCAS tariff system will have acquired UCAS points from key skills assessments. Some students may have a full key skills qualification, documenting their levels of achievement in relation to the key skills of communication, application of number and information technology. Others may have obtained certification in relation to one or more of these skills and/or the wider key skills. (Recent changes to the National Qualification Framework have recommended that students entering HE should have achieved Level 2 in all of the three skills, mentioned above, and have achieved Level 3 in at least one of the six key skills. This reduced requirement was introduced following concerns of an unnecessary assessment burden on the post-16 students).

The earlier references to the Dearing recommendations for higher education highlighted the dual need to address key skills issues in both admissions to higher education and programme specifications. As a result of this all staff teaching in HE should now be aware of ways in which opportunities can be provided for students to develop key skills, and all programmes should include opportunities for such skills to be assessed and recorded.

The Report entitled "Skills Development in Higher Education" (CVCP, 1998) emphasized the importance of key skills in HE. Thus in several ways the higher education institutions are now committed to responding to the Dearing recommendations.

In essence then higher education institutions need to pay attention to key skills within their admissions procedures, and should have developed ways to signpost their presence within all programmes, and be able to report on their development within records that are kept of student progress. Thus in an ideal world key skills can be developed and reported before, during and after higher education as part of an ongoing process of lifelong learning. It is important to make the distinction here between basic skills (such as literacy and numeracy), key skills (the generic skills of application) and study skills(skills particularly associated with induction into higher education) even though there are some overlaps between these three groups.

There is little doubt that students in higher education often face more complex and demanding learning challenges than they met in schools, calling for greater autonomy and technical skill, so their key skills will need to develop to meet such demands. In reality, many parts of higher education are still struggling to come to terms with this new requirement to be more explicit about key skills learning opportunities, assessments and records, and it will take quite a few more years before this intended reform is implemented across all HE programmes. At this stage there is plenty of early experience, especially from universities that have participated in new government initiatives such as Foundation Degrees and graduate apprenticeships. Experience in this briefing document as well as the various case studies that accompany it, will be drawn upon.

One strategy that has been popular among some HE institutions is to publish a list of general transferable skills that they expect graduates from their institution to have acquired. However, without any supporting evidence to demonstrate how such a promise can be achieved in each individual case, such claims are liable to be dismissed by many users as rather speculative. A major alternative to that approach is to follow the maxim 'that it is the most important elements of learning that should be emphasised within any assessment of that learning'. Hence the search in many HE institutions to find new ways to assess, record and document the skills of students, both at entry and at exit and developmentally during the time spent in higher education. At this stage many such assessment systems are at an early stage of development or implementation, and there is no question over the fact that assessing such skills in a way that is authentic, manageable, and meaningful is not a simple exercise.

The diversity of practice in relation to key skills schemes within HE is illustrated through some of the case studies that have been produced to support this paper. The De Montfort example, (Case Study 1) is principally about supporting students in self-assessing themselves in relation to the three key skills of communication, numeracy and information technology at the point of entry to the University. In contrast to this, the Luton University example (Case Study 2) is about one institution-wide attempt to map exposure to thirteen skills for all students across all programmes, as a step towards producing a graded skills profile of each graduating student by 2005. Case Study 3, produced by a team at Loughborough is concerned with a web-based tool to help students to develop their skills and to document evidence of competence in them when engaged in work-based learning as part of Construction courses. Case Study 4 relates to a very different context, where teacher training students on a one-year PGCE course at the University of Nottingham are given opportunities to develop and review their own key skills in communication, numeracy and information and communication technology (ICT) and to reflect on the role of these key skills in their own teaching in secondary schools. These students undertake a series of key skills audits during the first two weeks of their course as well as taking the mandatory Teacher Training Agency (TTA) tests in literacy, numeracy and ICT, which have to be passed by all those entering teaching in the UK from 2001.

Together, these case studies show the wide diversity of ways in which key skills issues are being tackled in very different HE contexts. In addition it is clear that in each case the developments are mostly in their infancy and based upon detailed evaluations, and further development will be refined and improved over the next couple of years. This neatly illustrates the fact that there are no quick and easy solutions to including key skills in a relevant way in all HE courses and contexts. The sensitive development of such solutions requires careful planning, pedagogical reflection, and a degree of experimentation in order to see what is feasible and desirable in actual practice.

In each of the case studies, assessment issues tend to represent the toughest part of implementing key skills schemes. Indeed none of these four schemes has totally resolved that part of their development in a way that is likely to satisfy the users of the assessment results.

This does illustrate the view that the biggest challenge facing higher education in relation to implementing the declared aspirations in relation to skills development lies in coming up with suitable assessment models, which can reinforce and complement the rationalisation or development of new learning opportunities. This same challenge has been faced and been the focus for sustained research and development in other phases of education, and in the final section of this paper I will outline what I see as the main lessons which higher education can learn from that previous work as it seeks to develop new approaches to meeting this challenge.

Customising Key Skills Within Higher Education

Higher education institutions tend to place great value on their independence, and as such have traditionally resisted attempts to standardize their courses, especially in relation to the way in which such courses are taught and assessed. With the advent of benchmarking for individual subjects, national teaching quality assessments conducted by Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), and Institute for Learning and Teaching (ILT) accreditation for new and existing academic staff, there has been some movement towards a greater degree of uniformity. Nevertheless it is highly unlikely that all universities would accept a framework such as the QCA key skills specifications without wishing to adapt and re-prioritise it in relation to the schemes and distinctive character of individual institutions and discipline areas. The evidence for this is already very apparent from the wide variety of approaches that have been taken by HE institutions to draw up their own lists of general transferable skills. However the many universities (over 40) which are now running both Foundation Degrees and Graduate Apprenticeship schemes, are obliged to adopt and use the QCA Key Skills Specifications for students enrolling for either of them, and that is in itself a major lever to encourage HE institutions to use the national QCA Key Skills Specification.

A further challenge for those who wish to develop a stronger emphasis on key skills within HE, is the existing system of assessment, which in most universities leads simply to a final degree classification on a 5 point scale. Unless universities offer supplementary information about the achievements of individual students, either through transcripts or records of personal progress and achievement, then it is very hard to gain any insight into the key skills aspects of students development whilst studying in higher education.

At the moment some universities (eg Luton – see Case Study 2) simply highlight the type of general transferable skills which their students are likely to acquire without giving any individual assessment in relation to each of their graduates.

An entirely different approach to assessing key skills in HE is to pass the responsibility for such assessment to the students themselves. This is exemplified in Case Study 5, which relates to materials produced by the Open University Vocational Qualification Centre. These materials are designed to be used by a range of students, based upon the particular courses that they are following. The accompanying assessment units focus upon the four key skills of improving own learning and performance, communication, information technology, and information literacy (which is not one of the QCA six key skills). Case study 5 illustrates the involvement of students in improving and assessing their key skills development.

This rather different strategy, which is currently being trialled in several UK universities, allows for a more sensitive collection of evidence from a wide variety of sources but faces the same challenge of establishing credibility that face all similar schemes of portfolio assessment and self assessment. A real strength is however the way in which it encourages students to draw on a very wide range of potential sources of evidence to demonstrate their current levels of key skills acquisition. There is another particularly good exemplification of this use of a wide range of relevant evidence on the www.keyskillssupport.net website, showing how a student on another scheme was able to assemble evidence in relation to the six key skills specifications, entirely from her involvement in the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme.

Guidelines for the Assessment of Key Skills in Higher Education

There are several aspects of key skills which make them very challenging to assess. For example:

- a) They are defined as being transferable, they should be assessed in a variety of contexts in order to demonstrate that the individual can transfer whichever skill is being assessed.
- b) The real test of their acquisition is their use in naturally occurring novel situations, and thus that is where the most valid assessment will occur.
- c) The same skills may be developed in a wide variety of courses, modules, and extracurricular settings, though their assessment normally transcends course-based assessment arrangements and needs to be more holistic.
- d) The reporting of the results of such skill assessments needs to be in a form that is understandable by someone, who may not be familiar with the particular skills definitions used by different HE institutions.
- e) It is unlikely that students will welcome time spent on skills development which does not have a direct positive bearing on their main work or subsequent career prospects.
- f) There seem to be encouraging opportunities offered through the current concerns for 'deep' learning and support for the 'reflective practitioner' mode. These could be seen to be supporting the same goals as the movement for raising the level of key skills, though using a different vocabulary of terms. It is here that we can see a close link between moves to equip students as 'well developed lifelong learners' and the particular requirements of schemes trying to promote key skills developments.

Having said that there are emerging ideas about the relative strengths and weaknesses of key skills assessment schemes.

Strengths

Good schemes for key skills assessment tend to:

- i) allow the collection of assessment evidence from a wide variety of real life settings where skill acquisition can be demonstrated.
- ii) link summary assessments of key skills to specific sources of evidence upon which those assessments are based (this frequently involves the collection of such evidence within a portfolio).
- iii) show development of the skill over time rather than a single snapshot assessment at one point in time.
- iv) inform in a formative way the actions of the learner (and in some instances their tutors), rather than simply be seen as a mechanism for reporting such things to a much wider audience (for example potential employers).

Weaknesses

Poor schemes for key skills assessment tend to:

- i) use restricted assessment tools such as timed paper and pencil multiple choice and short answer tests, which do not relate to the way in which such skills are defined and/or need to be demonstrated.
- ii) result in 'tick box' assessments which carry no information about the evidence upon which assessments are based.
- iii) simply report on the experiences that students have had without making any attempt to estimate the extent to which these have influenced their acquisition of the skills.
- iv) report on skills acquisition in relation to particular skills areas, which are specific to a course or institution, and which are not well understood by others.
- v) result from poorly standardised and idiosyncratic assessments carried out by individual assessors, where judgments may not relate to those of other assessors.

If a separate assessment of key skills is required, initial work carried out at the Open University (see Case Study 5) and elsewhere suggests that the use of a personal log of skills development allied to a professional dialogue between tutor and student could be a valid, workable and sufficiently reliable basis for an assessment.

It still remains to be seen what value will be placed on an assessment of key skills – as distinct from an understanding (from subsequent experience of individuals in employment, say) that a particular HE course produces individuals with adequate key skills in required areas.

There is as yet no significant evidence that employers will select future graduate employees on the basis of their separately assessed key skills. It seems more likely that as at present, employers will know (or think they know) that graduates from a particular course or set of courses are likely to possess certain key skills. It may then be in future graduates' interests, that university course planners ensure that, where possible, adequate opportunities are given within courses for the critically important generic skills of planning, problem solving, time management, working with others, IT 'at-homeness' and communication to be developed, in addition to the expected particular technical outcomes of the course along with such degree-essential skills as critical thinking. Some employers will themselves continue to place a heavy emphasis on their own assessment of key skills within graduate selections procedures, and universities will need to make substantial advances in this area before such employers can be convinced to accept HE-based key skills assessments.

Case Studies

Five case studies have been referred to in this report. They have been chosen to illustrate different approaches to key skills assessment in higher education. Together they illustrate a wide variety of practice, and a considerable range of purposes for conducting such assessments.

Case Study 1

Relates to work undertaken at De Montfort University involving self assessment of three key skills at the point of entry to the University.

Case Study 2

Relates to work at the University of Luton in relation to four broad skill categories and thirteen specific skills. At the moment this simply leads to an indication of where students have been exposed to these skills during their programmes. By 2005, this University is hoping to provide a graded skills profile for all of its graduates.

Case Study 3

Relates to work at Loughborough University on a 'RAPID progress file', which allows students to record skills acquisition in relation to statements of competence for individual skills. This is designed to assist students in planning and monitoring skill development during periods of work-based learning.

Case Study 4

Relates to work on key skills support and auditing within a postgraduate initial teacher training (PGCE) course at the University of Nottingham. This covers ICT, Numeracy and Literacy.

Case Study 5

Describes an alternative approach to assessing key skills through project work, which has been developed and trialled by a team within the Vocational Qualifications Centre at the Open University.

Case Study 1: De Montfort University's Self-assessment of undergraduates' level of key skill confidence, measured against the national specifications, at the point of entry to higher education

Aims

- To ensure that students have an understanding of the importance of key skills in a higher education context.
- To provide the University with an overview of the level of key skills of new undergraduates.
- To identify areas where students feel that they may require additional support and guidance

Approach taken & why

De Montfort University has adopted a key skills policy, to be implemented across the full range of the University's awards. This has been reflected as one of six key objectives which form the basis of the University's learning and teaching strategy for 2000-2005:

'To ensure that the student learning experience includes a range of personal and key skills appropriate for employment in the information age.'

In order to progress the policy, it was decided that an assessment of the key skills of students at the point of entry to the University was necessary. It was agreed to adopt a form of self-assessment, which could be administered in an equitable manner with large numbers of new undergraduates across a wide range of subjects. The assessment instrument took the form of a workbook, *Improving Your Learning*¹ addressing the three skills of communication, numeracy and information technology. Activities were designed to challenge students and to raise their awareness of the importance of key skills in a higher education context. The assessment was delivered in workshops, with tutors taking on the role of facilitator and guide. Tutors used a standard introductory presentation to ensure consistent delivery of the message that key skills are crucial to academic achievement at all stages of undergraduate study. The exercise was repeated in 2000, using a second edition of the workbook, *Improving Your Learning*², which had been revised in the light of student and staff evaluation.

3,000 students completed the exercise in 1999 and a further 2,400 students in 2000. A resume of the results obtained is contained in the *De Montfort University Key Skills Project Final Report (1998-2000)*³. The exercise is again being revised in preparation for the incoming intake of undergraduates in 2001.

¹ De Montfort University (1999) *Improving your learning, Leicester*, De Montfort University

² De Montfort University (2000) *Improving your learning, Leicester*, De Montfort University

³ De Montfort University (2000) *Key Skills Project Final Report 1998-2000*, Leicester, De Montfort University

Student response

The following is a typical quotation taken from student feedback on the 2000/2001 self-assessment exercise:

'The activities helped me to think about what I was going to come across in my study and realise that there were areas that I am going to have to work on.'

Evaluation

Materials and activities have been evaluated as part of the ongoing development process, including feedback questionnaires and focus group discussions with students and staff.

Areas requiring further development

The exercises in 1999 and 2000 have been conducted in large group settings. It is hoped to increase the number of faculty staff involved in the exercise for 2001, in order for the workshops to be delivered to smaller groups of students.

Hot tips or things to look for

It is important to emphasise to students that while a range of learning support is provided by the University, they themselves have responsibility for their own development within a higher education context.

Case Study 2: University of Luton Key Skills Template for all Graduates

Aims

- making the demands of the HE curriculum explicit to students,
- preparing students for further study;
- preparing students for employment;
- ensuring that students were aware of the skills they possessed, and
- enabling students to take more responsibility for their own skills' development.

Approach taken & why

The University has been working with its own skills template for the past ten years. This identifies four broad categories for skills; information retrieval and handling, communication and presentation, planning and problem solving, and social development and interaction. Each broad area is subdivided into a number of sub-skills. Skills developed are identified at the module level as part of the learning outcomes and recorded centrally. At the end of their studies, the University currently provides students with a transcript recording the number of times their course of study has exposed them to each of the thirteen skills in the template (derived from their modules studied). The prime purpose of this transcript is to remind students of the skills they have developed through their programme. Some course teams provide feedback on each assignment against the skills using the University's grading system; however, this practise is not universal.

Student response and evaluation

Student response has been positive although there is a danger that, unless the message on skills is reinforced at regular intervals and at all levels, then students become disengaged from the process. Consistent feedback and a coherent strategy are important especially within a modular scheme which allows for some elements of choice across subject areas. The University uses its normal mechanisms for gathering student feedback to ascertain the extent to which students are aware of the skills developed in each of the modules. There is broad agreement between staff expectations and the student experience in this regard. Focus groups and more local evaluation have also taken place and have been utilised to support the development and revision of the University's approach on skills' development which is currently underway (see below).

Areas requiring further development

The University of Luton is committed to providing a 'graded' skills' profile for all graduates by 2005. Various means of achieving this aim are currently being evaluated and proposals are due to go to the University's Academic Board in the Summer of 2001.

The purpose of the next stage in the development will be to integrate the skills development more centrally into the student experience at all levels. The intention will be to enable students to take more responsibility for their own development, including that of skills, to provide them with details of their expected outcomes in each skill area by the end of their study, and to enable them to monitor their progress against these targets.

The future development of skills within the University is being informed by internal evaluation and changes to its modular scheme. These include a requirement for students to undertake a personal and professional academic development module at level 1 and a career development or work-based learning module at level 2. External influences include expectations in respect of Progress Files, Subject Benchmarking, Curriculum 2000 and Foundation Degrees.

Case Study 3: Loughborough University's RAPID Progress File: a Web-based tool to enhance the skill development of students in Construction

Aims

- To introduce students to the professional requirements of their discipline
- To introduce students to competence-based assessment
- To enable students to self-assess their strengths and weaknesses across a range of generic and discipline specific skills
- To encourage habits of planning, reflection and evidence gathering
- To facilitate record keeping for future academic and professional needs.

Approach taken & why

A variety of approaches have been taken depending on local needs and requirements (RAPID has been piloted in a number of HEIs). It appears that RAPID is most effective when it is used to prepare students for, or support students engaged in, work-based learning. In this context, RAPID has been used as both an electronic and paper-based medium. Students have found the RAPID Progress File to be a most useful tool in assisting them to plan, record and report upon their activities. In addition, the use of RAPID provides a continuum between periods of academic study and work-based learning. Students use RAPID to develop their skills and to document evidence of competence using a format/template common to each skill. Each skill within RAPID (there are 48 in the original 'Construction Management' version of RAPID) presents four statements of competence ranging from a fairly low level (equivalent to NVQ Level 2) to a fairly high level (equivalent to threshold NVQ level 4/5). Students are initially encouraged to audit a broad and comprehensive range of these skills. They are then advised to use RAPID as a means of strategically developing these skills. The skills chosen for each version of RAPID (five are currently under development) reflect the professional development needs of the students' specific discipline.

Student response

Students have found RAPID to be of real benefit. They, in particular, comment upon the way in which it enables them to recognise their strengths and weaknesses, and to then seek to develop their skills in a strategic fashion. Furthermore, they welcome the ability to relate their current skills to the competence requirements laid down by the Professional Institutions in their specific subjects. This ability to relate their current activity to their future professional development is highly valued.

Evaluation

Extensive evaluation (both internal and external) has been conducted throughout the development and implementation phases of the RAPID Progress File. (Evaluation Reports available on request from the Project Manager).

Areas requiring further development

The RAPID Progress File is undergoing extensive further development. Currently, 5 further versions (Architectural Technology, Building Engineering, Civil Engineering, Quantity/Building Surveying, Town Planning) are under development. New features are being introduced on the basis received from previous feedback and evaluation.

Hot tips or things to look out for

Students value electronic medium, and a discipline focused approach.

Case Study 4: School of Education, University of Nottingham PGCE Course Key Skills Auditing for Teacher Training Students

Aims

Students undertaking a one year initial teacher training PGCE course are given opportunities at the start of the year to audit their own key skills of ICT, Communication and Application of Number.

Approach taken & why

The approach is essentially one which encourages self-assessment through a range of audit activities. These are designed to help individual students to reflect upon their own key skills. They are then able to access support to develop these skills, if that is appropriate.

The PGCE course team wanted to include a stronger emphasis upon key skills within this course for a variety of reasons, including the fact that all students on this course are training to become secondary school teachers, where they will encounter key skills initiatives. With some DfEE (now DfES) support and as part of a university-wide project involving seven other subject departments, a range of auditing processes was trialled. These were designed to be highly relevant to the course and have been built around other course activities, rather than being presented as bolt-on skills tests, which might have been rejected (or resented) by mature post-graduate students.

The auditing of communication skills is linked to a reflective writing task carried out while the students undertake a one week placement in a Primary School just prior to the beginning of their course. Each student completes this task and is provided with feedback on their expression, analysis, reflection, ability to summarise, overall presentation and organisation. The fact that this exercise also covers some basic skills such as spelling, grammar, punctuation and handwriting is also a useful preparation for the TTA literacy test, which is targeted more at these basic skills rather than the wider key skills.

The auditing of application of number skills is based around the interpretation and use of some official education statistics covering examination results, parental surveys, pupil/teacher ratios, Key Stage 3 assessment results, school intake data and league tables. Students undertake an audit of their skills in relation to this defined task and can compare their performance with that of other students in their group.

The auditing of ICT skills is a little more straightforward, as this is done using an audit instrument, which has been developed by the Association for Information Technology in Teacher Education (which can be accessed through the PGCE web-site). Although that form has been developed particularly for use with teacher training students, it could easily be adapted for use in other contexts where a fairly simple audit of student's ICT skills is required.

Student response and evaluation

The auditing has been taken on board with fewer problems than was envisaged. However, the introduction of compulsory Teacher Training Agency (TTA) tests in literacy, numeracy and ICT has created a very different climate from the one that existed when their work began 5 years ago.

Areas requiring further development

The provision of appropriate individual support for students wanting to develop their key skills, during the PGCE year, is being adapted and improved each year.

Hot tips or things to look out for

- On-line ICT audit is very effective.
- Electronic support for students.
- Involvement of all PGCE tutors in audit process has helped to embed this process within the course very quickly and has increased referrals.

Case Study 5: Open University Key Skills Assessment Units

Aims

To develop and assess higher level key skills of improving own learning and performance, communication, information technology and information literacy as part of the higher education curriculum.

Approach taken & why

The key skills assessment units are part of an ongoing commitment by the Open University to provide a curriculum that supports effective performance both in higher education and the workplace. The assessment units are designed to offer a flexible assessment system that can be used by students across courses, make connections between courses and between their studies and the workplace. The assessment strategy is designed to promote and diagnose learning with the emphasis on using and applying skills to address enduring and emerging learning in different contexts.

The assessment units are designed to focus on key skill areas developed through courses, student support initiatives, such as learning skills workshops, and the workplace. There is no specific course material; rather students get involved in their own learning, improvement and assessment of key skills through the development of a 'showcase' portfolio.

For 2001, assessment is offered in four key skill areas: improving own learning and performance, communication, information technology and information literacy. The first three are referenced against the national standards. Achievement is reported on a skills profile that, in the future, will link to student personal development planning. Later this year work will continue on developing assessment activities for the other key skills as well as for different levels of achievement thus offering progression routes through programmes.

The development of programmes (such as named degrees) within the Open University has brought into focus issues of skills development and assessment. Courses that contribute to programmes aim to develop specific skills but the picture across a programme may be incomplete, may lack coherence and clear progression strands and may offer little opportunity for the student to engage in critical reflection of their performance.

The higher level key skills approach sees the key skills capabilities as multi-dimensional combinations of skills, self-perception, techniques and motives used across performances within higher education and the workplace. Assessment of such skills is complex and involves using measures of competence to study effective performance. While some assessment of these skills is likely to be part of the course assessment strategy there is less opportunity to offer an assessment strategy that is focused on the learner and which aims to support the development of 'meta'-cognitive skills.

Student response and evaluation

The key skills assessment units are part of a twoyear development project. Year 1 was concerned with designing assessment activities and developmentally testing three of the assessment units. Around fifty students worked with us to test the units and provided feedback comments. For Year 2 of the pilot programme the emphasis will be on developing robust systems and will include staff development work. Student evaluation of the Year 1 pilot was carried out using a questionnaire survey. Feedback was very positive and mainly concerned the process of planning, monitoring and evaluating as an enduring aspect of assessment that could be incorporated into future learning.

Areas requiring further development

For Year 2, the pilot has been extended to eight Open University Regions. It has also been integrated into the Open University systems for registration and assessment. In addition, a HEFCE funded project Key Skills: Making Connections between Higher Education and Employment will be piloting the Units with employees from companies and students from other universities.

References

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Further Reading

Bloggs, J. (1998), *Skills development in higher education: short report*
London: Universities UK.

Murphy, RJL et al, (1997) *The Key Skills of Students Entering Higher Education*
(Report for the DfEE). University of Nottingham: CDELL

There is a rapidly expanding further set of materials and relevant web-sites which can be accessed through www.keyskillsnet.org.uk

The Learning and Teaching Support Network Generic Centre

The Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN) is a network of 24 Subject Centres, based in higher education institutions throughout the UK, and a Generic Centre, based in York, offering generic information and expertise on learning and teaching issues that cross subject boundaries. It aims to promote high quality learning and teaching through the development and transfer of good practice in all subject disciplines, and to provide a 'one-stop shop' of learning and teaching resources for the HE community.

The Generic Centre, in partnership with other organisations, will broker information and knowledge to facilitate a more co-ordinated approach to enhancing learning and teaching. It will:

- Work with the Subject Centres to maximize the potential of the network;
- Work in partnership to identify and respond to key priorities within the HE community;
- Facilitate access to the development of information, expertise and resources to develop new understandings about learning and teaching.

The LTSN Generic Centre Assessment Series Guides for:

Senior Managers
Heads of Department
Lecturers
Students

Briefings:

Assessment issues arising from key skills
Assessment of portfolios
Key concepts: formative and summative, criterion and norm-referenced assessment
Assessing disabled students
Self, peer and group assessment
Plagiarism
Work-based learning
Assessment of large groups

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