PILOT OF NEW KEY SKILLS QUALIFICATION 1997-99

A joint report from:

OFFICE FOR STANDARDS IN EDUCATION

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THE FURTHER EDUCATION FUNDING COUNCIL

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TRAINING STANDARDS COUNCIL

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INTRODUCTION

1. This new key skills qualification arose from recommendations in Sir Ron Dearing's review of qualifications for 16–19-year-olds, which was produced in March 1996. It assesses performance in the three key skills of Communication, Information Technology (IT) and Application of Number, and was developed from existing units used in the General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ) and other programmes. For the full qualification, achievement has to be demonstrated in all three skills, although separate certification is also available in the individual key skills units. The qualification was piloted in a range of schools, colleges and training providers, and in General Certificate of Education Advanced level (GCE A-level), GNVQ and National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) programmes from autumn 1997 to summer 1999.

2. An evaluation of the pilot of the new key skills qualification was commissioned by the Secretary of State for Education and Employment in October 1997. The Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) Inspectorate, the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) and the Training Standards Council (TSC) were requested to inspect and jointly report on the impact of the new qualification in colleges, schools and training providers. Inspectors from FEFC and Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI) from OFSTED began visits to centres in autumn 1997; inspectors from TSC began their evaluation in April 1998, when the Council was formally set up. Visits continued until July 1999 and the inspection did not cover any developments after this date.

3. In their visits to centres, inspectors evaluated:

   - the effectiveness of the qualification in developing students' and trainees' key skills capability;

   - its impact on the quality of students' and trainees' work in GCE A-levels, GNVQ and NVQ programmes;

   - its impact on teaching, training, learning and the motivation of students and trainees;

   - the effectiveness of planning and implementation of the key skills in different pathways;

   - the rigour and consistency of internal assessment, and the effectiveness of standards moderation procedures;

   - the suitability of revised forms of external assessment, and their manageability in centres;

   - the overall manageability of the qualification, and the demand it made on staffing and resources;

   - the level and effectiveness of staff development, support, guidance and resources provided by awarding bodies and other agencies.

4. Inspectors visited key skills sessions in centres, scrutinised portfolios and discussed the work with students and trainees. They interviewed teachers, trainers, assessors, co-ordinators, senior managers and employers. Inspectors also attended awarding-body moderation meetings dealing with both external set assignments and portfolio work, and assessment training sessions for teachers.

5. A total of 47 schools, 23 Further Education (FE) sector colleges and 13 training providers were visited in the course of the pilot. Repeat visits were made to most of these, and some were visited on up to six occasions to gain an understanding of the development of work over a period of time. Included in this sample were independent, selective and comprehensive schools, general FE and sixth-form colleges, training organisations and employers in receipt of government funding for training young people and adults. The visits covered the full range of courses and programmes undertaken by post-16 students, and a representative sample of vocational sectors. They included some schools undertaking the key skills qualification as a component of the Part One GNVQ course with students in Key Stage 4.

6. Most centres were piloting the full key skills qualification, but some were using only one or two units. A few centres piloted the qualification with all their students on particular programmes; most selected smaller groups, often those most likely to be able to generate the necessary key skills evidence because of the particular courses they were taking. Most centres that started in the first year of the pilot continued into the second year, but a sizeable minority decided not to do so, largely because of the difficulties they had encountered, and the shortcomings they perceived in the implementation and administration of the pilot. Others had not formally withdrawn from the pilot, but were not sufficiently active to supply useful feedback.

MAIN FINDINGS

General implementation

- The pilot has demonstrated the substantial difficulties of introducing a new key skills qualification across the full range of post-16 courses and programmes, and in differing types of institutions and training providers. Many of the difficulties have stemmed from the lack of a widely shared view across the 16–19 sector, in higher education and amongst employers about the need for the qualification, its purpose, and the benefits to be gained by the young people who undertake it.

- There were serious problems in implementing the key skills qualification in the majority of GCE A-level and NVQ centres. Only a small proportion of students and trainees starting the pilot completed the units in any of the key skills, and very few achieved the full qualification by completing all three units.

- Introduction of the pilot key skills qualification was generally satisfactory in GNVQ programmes. Teachers were already familiar with key skills, and most students achieved the full qualification, or individual units within it, as an integral part of their GNVQ.

- The pilot has achieved a significant improvement in the rigour with which key skills are assessed.

- On all types of programme the emphasis was very largely on the collection and assessment of evidence of what students and trainees could already do, and insufficient attention was given to developing their key skills capability.

Students' and trainees' work

- GCE A-level students who successfully completed key skills units in Communication and Application of Number did so largely on the basis of existing work from their GCE A-level courses. Whether they could do this in Application of Number depended on their particular combination of GCE A-level subjects.

- Other than in the development of oral presentations in some centres, and more comprehensive IT capability in others, there was little evidence that the key skills qualification had had an impact on the performance of students in their GCE A-level studies or of trainees on NVQ programmes. It was largely seen as a means of accrediting existing skills.

- The new specifications and assessment procedures led to some improvements in students' achievements in Application of Number and IT in GNVQ programmes in colleges and, to a lesser extent, in schools.

- The new arrangements for key skills had the effect that much of the key skills evidence for GNVQ courses in schools, and for NVQ programmes in some training providers, was produced separately from vocational work. In colleges, key skills were, generally, actively developed in GNVQ courses, they were integrated into vocational assignments, and had a positive effect on students' work.

- The quality of much of the completed level 3 key skills evidence in portfolios of GCE A-level and Advanced GNVQ students and modern apprentices was good, reflecting the general standard of work in these programmes.

Students' and trainees' response

- The majority of students and trainees were initially fairly positive about their involvement in the pilot, though they were often unclear about the purpose of the key skills. However, many were demotivated by poor results on the external assessment, and by the difficulty of finding all the necessary portfolio evidence. This resulted in high drop out rates from GCE A-level and NVQ programmes.

- Lack of knowledge about, and interest in, key skills by university admissions tutors and local employers had a negative effect on students' perceptions of the qualification. Some employers' lack of co-operation with assessment arrangements was demotivating for NVQ candidates.

Management, teaching and planning

- The most effective coverage of key skills, for the full range of students and trainees, was achieved by deriving as much evidence as possible from the main programmes. This was then supplemented by specific timetabled provision, where any other necessary skills could be taught, and students could tackle additional, specially designed, key skills assignments.

- Successful completion of key skills units required committed and enthusiastic leadership. In schools, a single co-ordinator often personally carried out most

of the necessary planning, monitoring and assessment – something that cannot be sustained when all post-16 students are involved. In colleges, a co-ordinator usually managed a small team of key skills teachers.

- Other than in IT, relatively little formal teaching of key skills took place in schools and by training providers. A greater amount of formal teaching took place in colleges, mostly on GNVQ courses.

- Levels of key skills awareness were not high amongst the large majority of GCE A-level staff not directly involved in the initiative in the pilot schools and colleges. Most GCE A-level teachers have still to be convinced of the value of the qualification.

- Levels of awareness of key skills in the work-based sector varied. Training providers offering modern apprenticeships and national traineeships generally coped satisfactorily with the key skills. Other centres delivering training programmes where key skills were not mandatory were less successful. Many staff lacked confidence and some centres did not have sufficient staff with the appropriate expertise.

- Short-term planning was often satisfactory, but many schools and training centres did not systematically map out the complete coverage of the key skills units for GCE A-level students and NVQ trainees. This meant that the most difficult aspects of the key skills specifications were often left until the last moment, which made it difficult for these candidates to complete their portfolios.

Assessment

- The pilot specifications made portfolio requirements more manageable, and assessment more straightforward, than in previous versions of the key skills. However, a lack of clarity about the relative importance of different features of the specifications, and mixed messages from awarding bodies about precisely what evidence would be required, caused unnecessary difficulties for centres.

- The specifications were more clearly written than in previous units, but the educational language in which they were expressed was not well suited to many work-based learners.

- The set assignments clarified the levels of work and standards required for the key skills, and overall made the assessment of key skills more rigorous. However, the assignments varied in quality, the contexts in which they were set were often inappropriate for the work-based sector, and some aspects of the way in which they were marked were unsatisfactory.

- Set assignments took up a disproportionate amount of time, particularly in the first year of the pilot, and the external assessment arrangements generally caused major difficulties for NVQ centres. Some employers were reluctant to allow apprentices time off work, especially where there was little flexibility over dates, and there were often practical problems in getting trainees to assessment venues.

- External assessment was not considered appropriate for many work-based learners by trainers and employers, and there was considerable resistance in the sector to externally set tests. Many young people had specifically chosen work-based training because they wished to avoid the formal assessment of academic programmes.

- Results on the set assignments in the first year of the pilot were generally poor. In some cases the outcomes did not accurately reflect students' and trainees' capabilities in the key skills. Greater familiarity with the demands of the assignments and more realistic mark schemes resulted in significantly improved performance in many centres in the second year.

- The Application of Number tests were tackled successfully by the large majority of students in schools and mathematically-able students in colleges, mainly because the questions were similar in style and demand to those with which both students and staff were familiar for general certificate of secondary education (GCSE). The tests caused more difficulties for those students in colleges who had not been successful in GCSE mathematics. Work-based trainees in vocational areas such as engineering coped well with the tests, but pass rates were lower in those areas where numerical skills were considered less relevant.

- Assessment of portfolio work was usually rigorous, but it was time-consuming and often delayed until late in the year.

- In most centres there was insufficient initial assessment of students' and trainees' prior attainment in key skills, to ensure that teaching and training were matched to individual needs.

- The three unitary awarding bodies jointly instituted useful procedures to aid the standardisation of their marking of set assignments and, more recently, the moderation of student portfolios. Portfolio moderation was frequently unsatisfactory at the end of the first year of the pilot, but better procedures and training of moderators led to a considerable improvement in the second year.

ISSUES FOR ATTENTION:

For Government

- It is clear from this pilot that the new key skills qualification faces many difficulties. There is no common agreement across the 16–19 sector, in higher education and amongst employers, about the need for the qualification. The new qualification can have little positive impact until these uncertainties are resolved.

For the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA)

- Action is needed to raise awareness and understanding of the key skills qualification amongst employers and in higher education.

- Where the key skills qualification serves to accredit existing skills, demonstrated in students' other courses and programmes, simple procedures need to be established to use this evidence to ensure that bureaucracy is kept to a minimum.

- For students and trainees whose key skills need to be developed, or whose main studies or training will not provide the necessary portfolio evidence, centres need specific advice on how the necessary support can be provided most effectively.

- Exemplar materials are needed, from GCE A-level, GNVQ and NVQ programmes, which illustrate both the standard and sufficiency of portfolio evidence required.

- The quality of external assignments or tests and their marking systems needs to be improved, and their purpose more clearly defined.

- The consistency and effectiveness of moderation within and between awarding bodies will need to be carefully monitored in view of the expected increase in the number of candidates for the key skills qualification from September 2000.

- Further discussion is needed with employers and training organisations about the purpose of external assessment of key skills for work-based learners.

For the awarding bodies

- Assessment training of the type successfully introduced by the awarding bodies, where teachers work together on real examples of candidates' work with guidance from senior moderators, should be made available for all staff involved in work on key skills.

- Awarding bodies need to clarify, for centres and moderators, the amount of assessment that is needed, so that teachers are not doing more than necessary.

- Awarding bodies should provide prompt and detailed feedback to centres on the performance of those candidates who fail the set assignments, to enable the candidates and their teachers to take effective remedial action.

- Awarding bodies need to ensure timely despatch of materials to centres, and to improve their response time to queries about key skills.

- The senior moderators who have responsibility for the marking of set assignments, or other forms of external assessment, should also write the assignments and their mark schemes.

- Awarding bodies need to give early attention to the recruitment and training of the large numbers of extra moderators who will be needed for the expected expansion of candidate numbers from September 2000.

For colleges, schools and training providers

- If both teachers and learners are to be convinced of the value of achieving the key skills qualification, those aspects of the specifications which will bring something new to students' and trainees' learning and will help them with their main studies or programmes need to be clearly identified and specifically taught.

- Centres need to make arrangements for the effective assessment of students' and trainees' existing key skills on commencing their programmes.

- Centres need to plan effectively for full coverage of the key skills units before students and trainees embark on the qualification. On GCE A-level programmes this will need to take account of the different combinations of subjects taken by students.

- The precise role of staff involved should be clearly defined, in terms of the planning, teaching and assessment of the key skills. Where staff lack the necessary experience or expertise, they should be provided with suitable training and should have sufficient programmed time to carry out the work effectively.

- Some specific timetabled provision will be needed in almost all centres; this will have to be used flexibly to meet the needs of students and trainees following different main courses and programmes, and with differing existing skills.

- Centres should start formal assessment of key skills achievements at an early stage, in order to give the work necessary momentum.

- Most centres should seek ways to involve a wider range of staff in the implementation of the key skills qualification beyond the present relatively small core of committed enthusiasts.

- The full resource implications of introducing the key skills qualification need to be carefully considered, particularly by small specialist training providers.

ATTAINMENT AND PROGRESS

GCE A-level programmes

7. The majority of GCE A-level centres encountered serious problems in implementing the key skills qualification, and there were instances of significant achievement in only a small number. In several, where students initially seemed to be doing well in building their portfolios, progress was not sustained as it proved difficult and time-consuming to collect and record evidence. Many students who had started doing all three key skills had dropped to just one or two in the second year of their courses. Several centres dropped out of the pilot at the end of the first year because of students' lack of success.

8. The large majority of students were appropriately working towards key skills Level 3. In a few cases, centres attempted to prepare students for Level 3 by doing Level 2 first; this was a time-consuming and unnecessary strategy. A small proportion of students aimed for Level 2 in IT because of a lack of prior experience, or in Application of Number because of low attainment in GCSE mathematics.

9. In those centres visited which began the pilot with all their first year GCE A-level students in September 1997, little was achieved by summer 1998, and in only a few cases were these students able to achieve the full award, or individual key skills units by summer 1999. Centres were generally more successful where they involved only selected groups of students; some of these colleges and schools made good progress with their students during the second year of the pilot.

10. However, even in those centres where a sizeable number of students were successful in some aspects of the key skills, the pattern of performance across the different key skills units was not uniform, and achievement was largely dependent on the particular combination of GCE A-level subjects studied. For example, in one of the centres where the pilot had operated most effectively, only half of the students who started the pilot were expected to complete the IT unit at Level 3, and only about a third were expected to complete Level 3 in each of Communication and Application of Number.

11. Those centres in which GCE A-level students were most successful in their key skills shared a number of characteristics:

   - they embarked on the pilot with relatively small numbers of students;

   - the work was led by committed and energetic staff;

   - a collection of portfolio evidence had been carefully planned in advance, and it was usually derived from a manageable number of different sources;

   - clear and straightforward assessment and recording systems were used;

   - senior management gave strong support to the pilot.

Application of Number

12. The amount of evidence for Application of Number in the portfolios of GCE A-level students varied considerably between and often within centres. Generally, fewer students completed the key skills unit in Application of Number than in Communication or IT, though there were exceptions to this.

13. Where students were successful in building their portfolios, the evidence came from a variety of sources: primarily from students' GCE A-level courses or from separately designed assignments but also, in some school sixth forms, from prior GCSE coursework in subjects such as geography and design technology, and from additional sources such as an industrial enterprise project. Coverage was most consistent across the full range of students' ability and subject combinations where evidence came both from GCE A-level courses and specifically designed numeracy assignments.

14. Where evidence came only from GCE A-level subjects, the amount of coverage depended on the particular subjects and syllabuses studied. Students who were required to produce coursework were particularly advantaged. Much of the practical work in science subjects, and case studies and fieldwork in subjects such as business studies and geography, could be used as evidence of appropriate numerical skills

with little or no additional work. Students doing subjects such as modern languages, English literature and history, not surprisingly, could generate little evidence from their courses, and they needed additional Application of Number assignments.

15. Although the number of completed portfolios in Application of Number was relatively small, in almost all cases the quality of numerical work in them was at least satisfactory and much of it was good, reflecting the standards achieved by the students on their GCE A-level courses. A few portfolios were quite outstanding with, for example, highly effective use of advanced statistical techniques to test hypotheses in subjects such as biology and geography. Frequently the work exceeded the requirements for key skills Level 3, and some of it reached Level 4, though none of it had been accredited at this higher level. Work was generally well organised and presented, and made use of appropriate techniques. Calculations were accurate. Students had carried out well-focused surveys with adequate sample sizes, and presented their findings in informative statistical graphs. They handled large quantities of financial data competently. Numerical results were mostly supported by helpful commentary or analysis, though explanation of results was more limited in scope where students were unaware of the key skills requirements for presentation of findings.

16. In some of the portfolios observed during the course of the pilot, numerical work was limited in range and in quality. Most of these students had little interest in numerical work and could not see its relevance for their other courses, or else had previously achieved at only a modest level in GCSE mathematics.

Communication

17. Students generally achieved more in the second year of the pilot than in the first year, but overall numbers of students completing the Communication unit at Level 3 were low.

18. Coverage of the Level 3 specifications was fairly comprehensive in completed portfolios. There was usually substantial evidence of students' skills in writing, covering the range of requirements. Evidence for students' oral skills took the form of witness statements; some of these were full and clearly related to the specifications, but most were brief and lacked detailed analysis.

19. Some students studying modern foreign languages at GCE A-level included written evidence in their portfolios, which was largely, or entirely, in French or German. This work was of high quality and appeared to meet almost all of the evidence requirements. There was some uncertainty amongst awarding body staff about the acceptability of such evidence, and the official line taken by QCA appears to be that written evidence must be in English. If this is so, it will mean that subjects that are fundamentally concerned with communication cannot provide evidence for the communication unit.

20. The standard of written work was mostly good. Some work produced was potentially of Level 4 standard, but no centre was organised to accredit it at this level. In most cases spelling was accurate, grammatical structure was correct, punctuation was used appropriately and paragraphing was used effectively to organise ideas and material. Many students could convey meaning clearly in a variety of forms for different audiences. A minority of students observed during the pilot employed more limited styles of writing and did not always use an appropriate style or register for more formal contexts. Very occasionally the technical standard of writing was unsatisfactory. In some portfolios there was relatively little evidence of the skills of reviewing and redrafting written work, while in others this was a strength.

21. In some centres, students had done specific work to develop their ability to write in pre-set formats such as business letters and memos. However, the bulk of written evidence was imported directly from GCE A-level courses, and its quality largely reflected the ability of the student in the subject from which it was drawn. There was little, if any, evidence that written work was improving as a result of the qualification; progress being made was that which would normally be expected of students on the relevant GCE A-level courses.

22. There was clear evidence in a good number of centres of the progress made by students in giving oral presentations and in speaking for different purposes. This was the feature of the key skills most often regarded as significant by the students themselves. Teachers often considered it to be the most distinctive part of the communication unit, and some were prepared to give time to developing these oral skills in their courses. Other, less successful, presentations highlighted the importance of actively developing students' communication skills, not just expecting them to acquire them unaided.

23. Although the most able students were able to select and synthesise information from a variety of different

sources very effectively, the lack of such skills remained a fairly common weakness, evident in some portfolios and particularly in early attempts at the set assignments. One of the centres visited had developed this aspect of the work to a high level and had also encouraged students to write sophisticated evaluations of their written assignments, something that was rarely seen or developed beyond the most basic level in most centres. Students following arts-based courses should be developing these skills anyway as an integral part of their studies, but it is likely that students following other subject combinations, where they are less systematically promoted, could profit most from being taught them.

Information Technology

24. There was great variation in the work observed in schools and colleges, both in the quality and quantity of work which students had produced and in the way in which centres approached key skills. Most students were slow to accumulate the necessary evidence for their portfolios. As a result, completion was often left until late in the second year of the course, by which time most students needed to give all their attention to their GCE A-level subjects. Success rates at Level 3 were often low.

25. In most of the colleges visited, and in some schools, the focus was mainly on identifying the IT key skills within GCE A-level subjects and achieving accreditation for students' existing skills. Students had varying degrees of success in identifying appropriate evidence in their GCE A-level subjects, with those students taking subjects with a significant IT content having a significant advantage over those students whose subjects contained little IT. The latter students were often encouraged to use IT to undertake some of their subject work, for example in word processing essays or undertaking research on the Internet.

26. Where evidence came from other courses, there were sometimes some very good examples of appropriate IT use, but it was rare to find the broad coverage necessary for the IT requirements of the qualification. Often there was good use of text processing, using a range of facilities appropriately to enhance the appearance of the document, and sometimes incorporating a picture or diagram, but there was often no evidence of processing numerical data or of editing graphical data.

27. In some centres, because of close attention to the specifications, students were demonstrating competence in the use of a broad range of IT

methods. However, this had not been accompanied by sufficient emphasis on the students' ability to plan their work, to decide for themselves when and how to use IT and to design documents. Since these are essential IT key skills, it was regrettable that the specifications appeared to push teachers away from their development rather than towards it.

28. There was generally a lack of opportunity for students to develop their key skills, for example from Level 2 to Level 3. Very few centres enabled students to achieve their key skills at Level 4, even where they were taking GCE A-level computing.

GNVQ programmes

29. From their introduction in 1992, all GNVQ programmes have incorporated key skills units. Unlike their counterparts teaching GCE A-level courses and most NVQ programmes, GNVQ teachers involved in the pilot were therefore already familiar with the idea of key skills, and needed only to adapt existing methods of teaching and assessment, rather than introduce something that was completely new. The substantial coursework requirements of GNVQ also meant that GNVQ students generally had more opportunities to produce key skills evidence than did students doing GCE A-level courses or trainees on NVQ programmes.

30. The standard of key skills work produced by Advanced GNVQ students for their portfolios was generally satisfactory, and in some cases good. At Intermediate level, work was more variable, but the majority of it was at least satisfactory. The pilot specifications and exemplification of standards provided by the set assignments contributed to key skills work of a more consistently appropriate standard than was previously the case within GNVQ courses.

31. In colleges, much of the key skills work was integrated into the vocational course work. In schools, the new evidence requirements in the specifications tended to increase the amount of key skills work generated from specially designed assignments, though there were still some examples where the key skills were effectively integrated into vocational units.

32. Most Intermediate students were on course to complete their key skills portfolios by the end of their one-year course, though a widespread lack of success on the set assignments meant that most were dependent on the awarding bodies' reconsideration arrangements to achieve the units.

Most Advanced GNVQ students achieved satisfactory coverage of the key skills. In a few centres, students completed particular key skills units in the first year of their two-year courses, but in others completion of portfolios was left to the last minute, when it was as hurried as it had often been in the past on GNVQ courses.

33. Key skills work in the Part One GNVQ courses was dominated by the set assignments and, well into the second year of the course, many students had little other key skills evidence in their portfolios. Some schools improved the quality of key skills work by introducing specially designed assignments.

Application of Number

34. The large majority of numerical work seen in GNVQ portfolios, at both Advanced and Intermediate levels, was at least satisfactory. Performance was mostly fairly uniform at Advanced level, with just a few examples of particularly good use of numerical methods. There was considerably more variation at Intermediate level, with some very poor portfolios, but rather more that were very good. The fact that the new specifications made the requirements clearer contributed in part to the quality of this work, though the expertise of staff in the centres remained the most important factor.

35. Suitable coverage of the evidence requirements for the Application of Number unit was achieved at Intermediate level in almost all of the centres visited. At Advanced level, students in many centres were slow to accumulate necessary evidence, but the quantity of numerical work was mostly satisfactory. In school sixth forms, most of the good work came from specially devised assignments; in colleges more came directly from vocational coursework. In the best work, students demonstrated competence across a wide range of skills and could apply appropriate numerical methods effectively in realistic contexts. They showed the ability to collect and collate appropriate data, and presentation of results and findings was often impressive. In one sixth form, students included evidence from GCE A-level subjects such as psychology in their portfolios, some of it involving quite sophisticated statistical techniques.

36. Where work was less than satisfactory, Advanced-level students were really operating only at Level 2; and at Intermediate level, students showed little real understanding of what they were doing, even though they had technically met some of the requirements.

37. In some colleges and schools, students starting with relatively weak mathematical attainment showed progress in their numerical skills as a consequence of the attention given to key skills. This was particularly true where there were clear and strong links with the vocational units, so that students could understand just why they needed to develop and use their numerical skills.

Communication

38. Overall, key skills Communication work at Level 3 was satisfactory. Advanced GNVQ students usually started with suitable skills, including the ability to listen and speak with confidence in a range of contexts, to write accurately, to organise materials, and to read and research a range of texts, summarising and redrafting where appropriate. There was evidence in portfolios that the requirements of the GNVQ courses had encouraged students to extend their skills, by using varied forms of sentence structures and varying the choice of vocabulary to convey clear meaning.

39. In the best Advanced work, students planned their own tasks, worked independently or collaboratively as required, and demonstrated the ability to use Communication skills in a range of challenging projects and assignments. The material was well matched to the students' needs, and the work they produced was presented in a clear and relevant manner, demonstrating an awareness of structure, style and appropriate vocabulary.

40. Where attainment and progress were less than satisfactory, the Communication skills had not emerged from the vocational units, either because of the lack of expertise of the vocational tutor or because no specialist support and advice was available. In a few cases, students had a relatively poor grasp of the more formal aspects of English, and this proved a severe handicap.

41. Even allowing for the difference in level of demand, key skills work in Communication was generally weaker at Intermediate than at Advanced level. Students with low achievement in GCSE English (typically grades D, E or F) needed particular help with grammar, punctuation and spelling. Many found it difficult to undertake research and to produce reports that were clear and coherent. They often did not plan their work and were weak at re-drafting. However, there were examples where students made significant progress in their Communication skills because programmes of work were well-matched to students' individual needs.

Information Technology

42. Completed portfolios generally provided suitable coverage of the key skills specifications, and the standard of IT work ranged from satisfactory to good.

43. In the best work on Advanced courses, students were well on their way to completing their portfolios by the end of their first year. They had produced a good range of evidence, with some examples of a very high standard of achievement. There were essays and reports that were well presented and made good use of a range of IT facilities. Some particularly impressive pieces of work were produced by students based on their work placements, making use of realistic materials and producing documents to the standard required by the companies involved.

44. Students came to GNVQ courses with a wide range of prior attainment in IT, and this was frequently reflected in their work in the early stages of the course. However, most made good progress, largely because the use of IT was so central to their GNVQ course.

45. Intermediate GNVQ students mostly completed their IT key skills portfolios by the end of the course. Work was of a standard appropriate to the Level 2 requirements if these were interpreted in a narrow sense, but these students often failed to demonstrate the ability to plan, to decide and to design. In some portfolios, students made frequent use of IT to benefit their vocational work, but in others it was clear that the students had produced the number of pieces of work which were required to meet the IT requirements, but had made very little use of IT in the course of doing their vocational work. In a few instances there was very little IT evidence in portfolios.

NVQ programmes

46. Many NVQ centres experienced major difficulties in implementing the key skills qualification. A high proportion of centres either withdrew from the pilot, or were not sufficiently active to provide inspectors with useful feedback.

47. The centres that were visited were involved in the pilot because of their particular interest in key skills; they included the most highly motivated staff, who displayed high levels of commitment to the development of the key skills qualification. Despite some difficulties, most centres that remained at the end of the second year of the pilot had candidates who were progressing well. Portfolios contained work of a high standard, which was clearly cross-referenced to NVQ evidence.

48. Where centres were successful, effective programme planning was a key feature of the provision. The key skills were carefully integrated into the NVQ training and assessment processes. Where trainees' work did not cover some parts of the key skills units, work-related activities were developed to fill the gaps. Less successful centres considered the key skills units in isolation from the rest of the programme and tended to address them only when the NVQ was nearing completion.

49. Trainees generally produced good-quality work where the key skills could be seen to be directly relevant to their vocational competence. Examples included written reports and oral presentations, supported well by projector slides and other visual aids. Trainees similarly developed a range of IT skills appropriate to their vocational programme. In engineering, NVQ trainees displayed sound numerical skills; however, in other occupational sector – such as administration and care, and hair and beauty – achievement in Application of Number was constrained by the perception of its irrelevance to NVQ programmes and to work roles.

50. In the successful centres the rate of progress in key skills was equivalent to that in trainees' main NVQ programmes.

51. In some centres the evidence in trainees' portfolios was not linked sufficiently clearly to the performance criteria in the key skills units. This made it difficult to assess whether trainees had covered the skills and knowledge adequately. In one centre, analysis of evidence in one trainee's portfolio suggested that he had not covered the units satisfactorily and should not have claimed the award.

Performance on set assignments and Application of Number tests

52. There was considerable variation in the pattern of results in set assignments, but outcomes in the majority of centres in the first year of the pilot were much poorer than expected, and both staff and students or trainees found the assignments a demoralising experience.

53. In the Level 2 set assignments, candidates generally performed best in IT, with reasonable proportions of students achieving the necessary standard in most centres. Results were more variable between centres in Communication; in some, results were good, but in others few, if any, students were successful. Performance in Application of Number was the least predictable: in most centres this was the least successful of the key skills, but in a few, all students passed at the first attempt.

54. Success rates in the Level 3 set assignments were consistently low across all three key skills in all centres visited in the first year of the pilot. Frequently, very able students failed for relatively trivial reasons, even though the overall standard of their work was high. For the set assignments (or their equivalents) used in the awarding bodies' own assessment models, teachers did not appreciate how the assignments were marked, and they were very critical about the lack of detailed feedback on how their students had performed.

55. Although in some centres students showed little improvement on their second attempt at the set assignment, in most cases results improved markedly in the second year of the pilot. This was primarily because teachers were much clearer about the demands of the assignments, and prepared their students more effectively. More realistic marking systems, which ensured that results were better-matched to students' performance, also contributed to the improvement in results.

56. Results in the Application of Number tests were generally satisfactory in the schools visited. Pass rates at Level 3 were almost invariably high for GCE A-level students, who found the tests similar in style to, and certainly no more demanding than, GCSE mathematics. In colleges, where some students had not been so successful in GCSE, pass rates on the tests were not so high. Some of the most mathematically able students taking the tests found them trivial and were highly critical of them; most, however, were content to do a test which they could pass quite easily. Performance amongst NVQ trainees varied, depending on their occupational area; those in engineering and other mathematically related areas did well, while those in occupations which required few numerical skills were less successful.

STUDENTS' AND TRAINEES' RESPONSES

57. Most of the college and school sixth-form students involved in the pilot were, initially, reasonably positive about the initiative, and took it seriously. Their attitudes were often influenced by the enthusiasm of their teachers who encouraged them to take part. For GNVQ students the key skills formed an integral part of their main qualification, and they accepted it as such. In some centres the GCE A-level students had volunteered to take part, but in a few others some of the students were reluctant recruits, who could not see the point in what they were doing.

58. Almost all GCE A-level students expected that involvement in the pilot would be helpful to them in their university applications. Some consequently discovered that most admissions tutors, as well as local employers, knew nothing about the key skills qualification, and this had a serious impact on their commitment to the work, and on the credibility of the qualification.

59. It was rare for work-based trainees to feel motivated by the key skills. Many trainees saw them as irrelevant or only indirectly relevant to the rest of their training programme. Even where trainees admitted they saw some benefit in key skills, they were not motivated by the process of doing them. In some cases, candidates resented the fact that key skills had been introduced late into their programmes. Some trainees complained about having to attend specialist key skills courses; in their view it would have been better to spend off-the-job-training sessions covering NVQ topics. Trainees felt that the key skills award meant a great deal of extra work for relatively little return. The set assignments and tests encountered substantial resistance, and had a demotivating effect on many trainees, who had chosen to undertake NVQs partly to avoid examinations and tests. Trainees felt that significant amounts of time were taken away from their normal work to prepare for and complete external assessments.

60. The large majority of students and trainees had copies of the key skills specifications. However, in a few post-16 centres, candidates had not seen these specifications and had no idea of the requirements of the qualification. Furthermore, they had no responsibility for the identification or collection of evidence – this was entirely in the hands of their teachers or trainers. Key Stage 4 students doing key skills as a component of the Part One GNVQ were generally not required to take any responsibility for gathering or organising necessary evidence. This was all done by the teacher, with the result that the students had little appreciation of the significance of the key skills.

61. Most candidates had a reasonable grasp of the overall structure of the qualification, and understood what was required of them for the evidence of achievement. Some were baffled by the language of the specifications, and this was a particular problem for work-based trainees. Most students had a general appreciation of the standards required. In the second year of the pilot, well-focused teaching of particular key skills observed in a few centres gave students a much clearer understanding of what the specifications meant for their own work.

62. Many students and trainees were well organised in their collection and collation of key skills evidence, but others had done very little, even when they had theoretically been working on the qualification for a substantial period of time. Some generated considerable amounts of relevant work, but there were also instances where they missed possible sources of evidence. Recording of evidence was more variable. In some cases students' records were accurate and up to date, while in other centres students had recorded nothing, even when they were well into the second year of their courses.

63. NVQ trainees often lacked clear guidance on collecting evidence for the key skills units, particularly in the first year of the pilot when staff were familiarising themselves with the unit requirements.

64. In the early stages, many GCE A-level students did not find the key skills particularly time-consuming. However, pressures built up as the demands of their main studies became more evident and, because

they had often put off the key skills work until late in their programmes, many students found that they could not cope with both the key skills and their Advanced-level courses. By the second year of the pilot, large numbers of students had abandoned work on the key skills.

65. One group of adult trainees undertook the key skills award in isolation, and used the experience to familiarise themselves with competence-based learning. This proved to be a valuable introduction to the new accreditation model.

PROGRAMME MANAGEMENT

GNVQ programmes

66. In many centres, key skills arrangements for GNVQ courses were left largely unchanged on the introduction of the pilot qualification. In a few colleges increased specialist teaching of IT, and greater co-ordination of Application of Number by mathematics specialists, led to a more consistent approach to these key skills across different vocational areas.

GCE A-level programmes

67. Most GCE A-level centres embarked on the key skills pilot with no clear sense of where they were going. They generally started with quite sound, short-term plans for how some aspects of the key skills would be achieved, but lacked the necessary long-term strategy to guarantee complete coverage of the full key skills units.

68. Arrangements for dealing with key skills varied considerably between pilot centres. To a large extent these differences reflected the variety of perceptions and uncertainties about the purpose of the key skills qualification. In most centres, the qualification was regarded just as a means of accrediting what the students could already do; in a small number, it was used as a means of developing students' skills.

69. Some, but not all, GCE A-level centres learned from their experiences in the first year of the pilot, and were operating more successfully in the second year. Two school sixth forms completely transformed the quality of their key skills work in Application of Number and Communication in the second year of the pilot by the appointment of very capable, committed staff, and by generous time allocations. Three of the colleges visited appointed a key skills co-ordinator and established a team of specialist staff to improve their work in this area.

70. In a substantial minority of GCE A-level centres, the assumption was made that all evidence would occur naturally within GCE A-level courses, or perhaps from other aspects of the students' lives in or out of school or college, such as Young Enterprise or work experience. In these centres, no additional provision was made for the key skills. Staff increasingly recognised that some additional provision would be needed at a later stage, though they were uncertain about what form this would take. In only a small minority of the schools had the key skills been mapped in detail against GCE A-level subjects, though this was generally given more attention in the colleges.

71. In about a quarter of school sixth forms, existing timetabled provision (for example general studies) had either been re-allocated to key skills, or there had been a shift in emphasis within additional studies, such as the Oxford, Cambridge & RSA Examinations (OCR) Diploma of Achievement, to accommodate the key skills. In most of these schools, students initially made quite good progress in building their key skills portfolios. However, where the students were doing the key skills in addition to another such qualification, they found the pressure to produce work too great, and by the second year these centres had dropped out of the pilot to concentrate on the existing provision.

72. In the remaining schools and colleges, some additional time had been found for key skills, often in the form of specialist workshops or sessions where students could obtain advice on their tracking and recording of key skills. In some centres, this time was provided for only one or two of the key skills, most commonly IT. Students generally found this support helpful, although in a few cases, because staff were insufficiently well prepared, the time was not used to particularly good effect.

73. Some of the colleges visited used the Computer Literacy and Information Technology (CLAIT) qualification as a means of supporting students undertaking IT key skills at Level 3. While the skills that students developed through this qualification were useful, they were below the standard required at Level 3 and, without further teacher support, were insufficient for students to achieve IT key skills at that level. The decision to develop IT skills in this way was partly a consequence of funding opportunities available through the CLAIT qualification. It resulted in double accreditation and unnecessary expense on double entries.

74. In one school sixth form, no attempt was made to obtain evidence from GCE A-level students' main courses, and the intention was that all the necessary evidence should be generated in timetabled key skills lessons. This was an inefficient approach, and the undifferentiated provision in key skills classes meant that students were often insufficiently challenged.

75. There were a few instances of the use of prior GCSE coursework by GCE A-level students in school sixth forms as key skills evidence in portfolios. The nature, quantity and quality of this coursework had enabled several able students to complete their Level 3 portfolios, in particular key skills units, entirely on the basis of this evidence. For other students, however, only some parts of their GCSE projects were appropriate for Level 3, with other work relevant to key skills being more typical of Level 2. It was more difficult for college students, who had done their GCSEs in a different institution, to gain access to this kind of evidence.

76. The most effective coverage of key skills, for both GNVQ and GCE A-level students, came from a combination of evidence from main course subjects and from specially designed key skills assignments. However, relatively few centres managed to strike a good balance between these two, both by putting suitable specialist teaching in place to enable students to develop and demonstrate necessary skills, and also by seeking to ensure that as much of the key skills evidence as possible was set firmly and naturally in the context of the students' main courses or other activities.

77. Most schools and colleges appointed a key skills co-ordinator for the pilot, or already had someone with that responsibility. In most cases, this meant that responsibility for planning, coverage and assessment of the key skills was clearly defined. The quality of co-ordination was an important factor in determining how successfully the pilot was implemented; the work carried out by some of the co-ordinators, often in difficult circumstances, was impressive. In the most successful centres, the co-ordinator was usually supported by a small team of key skills specialists. There was generally less clarity about the role and responsibility of GCE A-level teachers whose subjects might contribute to portfolio evidence.

78. In several centres, sometimes as a consequence of lessons learned earlier in the pilot, representatives from each of the main GCE A-level subject departments took responsibility for identifying and sometimes, where appropriate, assessing key skills evidence. To do this effectively they were given time for induction training and for identifying specific assignments within their own subjects which could realistically be expected to contribute to key skills. At the time they were observed these initiatives were still at an early stage, but they had the potential to make an important contribution to key skills portfolios, provided that they focused on specific pieces of work rather than becoming general mapping exercises.

NVQ programmes

79. Amongst those centres which dropped out of the pilot, many cited programme management difficulties as a prime reason. A variety of difficulties were experienced, including a lack of necessary resources. Two centres withdrew from the pilot because key skills staff left the organisations. Without such specialist staff, these organisations could not resource the necessary development work to sustain the pilot activities. In addition, training providers found that the organisational demands of the key skills were not well suited to the roll-on, roll-off nature of work-based programmes.

80. There was little support from employers for work on the key skills qualification. Employers complained at having to release apprentices from work to sit external tests and assignments. Trainees found the reluctance of their employers to release them stressful, and some had the additional pressure of having to catch up on work they had missed upon their return. The lack of flexibility over assessment dates and times caused employers particular difficulties. One national training provider reported that employers in retail were withdrawing their involvement in modern apprenticeship and national traineeship programmes because of the substantial time and effort required for the key skills units.

81. A lack of sufficient modern computer equipment hampered the effective development of key skills IT capability in some training providers, colleges and schools. This is a resource issue which will become more acute when the key skills qualification moves out of its pilot phase and the numbers of students and trainees involved become much greater.

TEACHING, TRAINING AND LEARNING SUPPORT

GCE A-level and GNVQ programmes

82. Other than in IT, relatively little formal teaching of key skills took place in the pilot schools and colleges. Where staff were timetabled, this was usually to help students identify evidence, to assess the key skills and to fill in records or log sheets.

83. However, there were some examples where staff produced assignments of good quality to enable students to demonstrate key skills capability and sometimes to develop the necessary skills. In a few instances, staff also successfully helped students to understand and develop those features of their GCE A-level and GNVQ work needed to meet the key skills specifications. Some of the most effective teaching was observed in a centre where staff had clearly and systematically identified those skills in Communication and Application of Number which would enhance students' GCE A-level studies, and which would not specifically be addressed on most of the GCE A-level courses.

84. In colleges, the introduction of the new key skills in IT resulted in some changes in styles of teaching. Teachers worked in teams to prepare teaching and assessment materials, to maximise preparation time and to staff IT workshops. They also made effective use of IT equipment in their teaching methods, for example, in using interactive video screens and video projects. In most IT lessons in school sixth forms, students were taught by experienced staff, who had often previously taught other IT courses as part of a programme of additional or general studies.

85. Where large numbers of students were undertaking the key skills qualifications, sixth-form pastoral tutors sometimes had responsibility for monitoring students' work. The quality of this supervision varied depending on the level of understanding and commitment of the tutors to the process.

Supervision was more effective when it was undertaken by a specialist team of key skills tutors, with the ability to assess the work as well as to monitor the collection of evidence.

86. Most of the staff with specific responsibility for key skills had a sound understanding of the unit requirements. A few, who were coming to key skills for the first time, expressed some uncertainty about the standards required, and the difference in some areas between what was required at Level 2 and at Level 3. There was little indication of a wider awareness of the key skills requirements amongst most GCE A-level teachers from whose courses students might be expected to produce key skills evidence.

87. Where key skills work was undertaken by experienced vocational teachers in GNVQ courses, it was usually satisfactory. However, in some cases key skills opportunities were not always fully exploited, and some less experienced GNVQ teachers lacked the specialist knowledge and understanding to deal effectively with the full range of the key skills specifications.

NVQ programmes

88. In work-based training, staffing arrangements for the key skills varied, according to the size of the centre, its vocational diversity and individual staff expertise. Some centres allocated an existing member of staff to take on key skills responsibilities, while others drafted in outside specialists on a part-time basis. One pilot centre sub-contracted its key skills provision to a local college. Some centres provided formal learning sessions for trainees, usually to cover topics not normally done as part of the NVQ programme.

89. In some centres, staff invested considerable time and resources in developing their competence and

confidence in training and assessing key skills. In others, at times, staff attempted to deliver the units without adequate knowledge and skills themselves, particularly in the first year of the pilot.

90. Where the key skills were an integral part of the NVQ standards, NVQ tutors were both competent and confident to deliver and assess them. For example, the Communication unit presented no difficulties for staff whose candidates were taking NVQs in administration, but it was a much greater challenge for tutors in the engineering sector, who had not previously been required to deal with communication skills.

ASSESSMENT AND RECORDING

Centre-based assessment

91. In most centres there was insufficient initial assessment of students' and trainees' attainment in key skills on commencing programmes of work, to ensure that teaching and tutorial support was matched to individual needs. A few instances of such initial assessment were observed in the best NVQ practice, but in most centres groups of trainees were all subjected to a common training and assessment programme in the key skills, irrespective of individual circumstances.

92. With a few exceptions, relatively little formal portfolio assessment of key skills was carried out for GCE A-level students in the first year of the pilot, and in some centres no key skills work had been assessed by half way through the second year of the pilot. Where work was assessed, it was mostly done carefully and rigorously by staff with appropriate expertise in the relevant key skill. However, there were a few instances in both IT and Application of Number where some work had been signed off by non-specialist staff when it was not up to the standard required, or was incorrectly assessed to have met the requirements of the specifications. In assessing Communication key skills, some vocational teachers failed to take account of errors in spelling, punctuation and expression.

93. There was considerable variation in approaches to recording assessments, partly as a result of a lack of clear, early advice from the awarding bodies. In some centres there was an uncertainty over whether moderators would require records of assessments against the performance criteria as well as against the evidence indicators, and as a result some teachers were assessing and recording in considerably more detail than should be necessary.

94. Most colleges and schools had internal moderation or verification systems in place, but they varied considerably in their capacity to ensure consistency of assessment between different courses and classes. NVQ centres also had qualified internal verifiers in place, although some were not confident in their knowledge of the

standards required. Teachers in schools which had no experience of GNVQ assessment were understandably puzzled by their awarding body's requirement that key skills assessments should be internally verified, if this meant that a teacher who was not a specialist was checking the assessments of a teacher who was.

95. Most staff found the formal assessment and recording of key skills to be very time-consuming. Where numbers of students involved were small this was not a major problem, but with large groups of students it made heavy demands on staff.

Moderation

96. The main awarding bodies all had moderation systems in place, for the purpose of ensuring accuracy and consistency of assessment across centres. Some serious problems arose in the first round of the moderation procedures in 1998. Requirements for submission of samples of work, and mixed messages from some of the moderators, led to uncertainty about the relationship of the performance criteria to evidence indicators. Some awarding body moderators were apparently expecting completed portfolios to be available for their scrutiny in May; this was unrealistic both for Advanced-level students on two-year courses and for Intermediate level GNVQ students, who would be working to complete their portfolios right up to the end of the summer term. There was a general confusion in centres over whether moderators were checking on the standard of work or on completion of portfolios.

97. The system of moderation improved considerably in the second year of the pilot. Before the main period of moderation, senior moderators from each of the awarding bodies met to agree on standards and sufficiency of evidence requirements for portfolios, and to produce common guidance for moderators. Helpful training sessions were then organised by each awarding body for their teams of moderators in each key skill, to ensure that they were familiar with these agreed expectations, and were taking a common approach to moderation.

The requirements on centres were clearer than in the first year. Early indications suggested that moderation procedures were operating in a satisfactory way in summer 1999, and some centres were appreciative of the feedback that they had received.

98. During the pilot, since numbers of candidates were relatively small, awarding bodies needed only small teams of moderators, drawn largely from existing groups of experienced verifiers and teachers. However, this pool of expertise is limited, and it is difficult to see from where sufficient suitable personnel can be recruited to carry out moderation when the qualification is launched nationally for all post-16 students later in 2000.

External assessment

99. There were problems with particular aspects of some of the key skills set assignments in Application of Number and IT; and in Communication there was some variation in quality and difficulty between the assignments produced by different awarding bodies. However, the assignments were mostly suitable for their purpose. They made an important contribution to clarifying the standards required in the key skills units and increased the rigour of their assessment. The design of the assignments was broadly satisfactory, but the marking systems were less than adequate. The initial marking systems were too stringent. There were improvements in the second year of the pilot, but some weaknesses remained. The fact that the senior moderators responsible for supervision of the marking of the QCA assignments had no part in writing them was a major shortcoming of the process.

100. Teachers and trainers using the QCA model of assessment in the first year of the pilot expressed major concerns about the time taken up by the set assignment and its impact on vocational programmes of work. These concerns were reduced, but not completely eliminated, by changes in administration and marking in the second year. Problems were fewer in the Edexcel Foundation and OCR assessment models, whose external components required no preparatory work and were externally assessed. Despite reservations about some practical aspects of implementation, most GCE A-level teachers felt that an external component of assessment was important for the credibility of the key skills qualification, and this view was generally shared by GNVQ teachers.

101. While the move to external marking of the QCA set assignments in the second year of the pilot reduced the pressure on teachers, it resulted in their having less information on weaknesses in candidates' performance. Lack of feedback to centres on individual students' work on the set assignments reduced the effectiveness of any subsequent action taken to prepare candidates for a further attempt at the assignment. Many centres felt that candidates' results arrived too late for them to make proper decisions about entry for the next round of assessments.

102. Employers and training providers had considerable reservations about the place of external elements in the assessment of key skills. The timing of external assessments, geared to the academic year, was often inappropriate for the more flexible nature of NVQ programmes. Staff generally felt that an academic style of testing was unsuitable for trainees who had selected a competence-based assessment route.

103. The awarding bodies initiated effective procedures to ensure consistency of assessment of the set assignments, both across bodies for the QCA assessment model, and internally within their own assessment models. No formal procedures were in place to ensure consistency across the different models, where in some cases marking systems were quite different.

SUPPORT AND GUIDANCE FOR CENTRES

104. Support for teachers and trainers in the planning, teaching and assessment of the new key skills units was variable in the first year of the pilot. Some staff found sessions organised by the awarding bodies to be useful, and they received helpful on-going advice. However, a greater number were critical of the lack of external support for the initiative, and of the delays in receiving relevant materials.

105. Support in the second year of the pilot was generally better focused. The training for assessors, organised by the awarding bodies in autumn 1998, was useful and was much appreciated by those who participated. It provided staff with first-hand, shared assessment experience and direct advice from senior moderators. At the same time, the materials used provided helpful exemplification of standards. The effectiveness of these sessions highlighted the need for this kind of training in the national support programme for the launch of key skills in September 2000.

106. There were some instances of effective in-house staff development. In one GCE A-level centre, volunteers from 12 subject departments attended a range of preparatory meetings, which included sessions where they jointly worked through a piece of geography coursework to identify and assess key skills opportunities. In another school representatives from each of the faculties underwent formal assessor training, focused specifically on key skills, and funded by the local Training and Enterprise Council. In both of these cases the teachers involved were given sufficient time to carry out the necessary work in a thorough way. In some colleges staff undertook the key skills practitioners award, which prepared them well for teaching key skills. In some NVQ centres staff were working towards their own key skills units as part of their on-going development. These initiatives to increase staff involvement, by focusing on a limited number of staff likely to be sympathetic to key skills, were more successful than attempts at general awareness raising across the staff as a whole.