

REPORT  
FROM THE  
INSPECTORATE

**Good Practice  
Report**

**January 1998**

***Key Skills  
in Further  
Education***

THE  
FURTHER  
EDUCATION  
FUNDING  
COUNCIL

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***THE FURTHER EDUCATION  
FUNDING COUNCIL***

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## SUMMARY

An increasing number of colleges are developing coherent corporate approaches to managing and teaching key skills. In the best cases, colleges have clear policies on key skills which apply to all students on all courses and effective arrangements to ensure that the policies are implemented. However, much good practice has been unco-ordinated and good and poor practice can sometimes be seen in the same college. Internal structures frequently impede the development of a consistent approach to the teaching and learning of key skills across all programmes.

Most colleges assess students' general levels of communication and numeracy skills at the start of their course. Many are now developing more detailed assessments linked to the student's course of study. Initial assessments have shown that large numbers of students are in need of learning support. Few colleges are able to ensure that all students receive the learning support they need.

Of the three key skills which are mandatory on general national vocational qualification (GNVQ) programmes, communication, application of number and information technology, communication has generally been the most successfully taught and application of number the most problematic. Opportunities for full-time and part-time students of all ages to acquire information technology skills have significantly increased. Some colleges have successfully integrated the three mandatory key skills with students' main programmes of study. Key skills are taught either by course teachers or key skills specialists. To be effective, those teaching key skills need to be fully involved in course and assignment planning.

Many colleges are starting to address a wider range of key skills, and developing key skills teaching on courses where it is not a requirement of the qualification. There are some positive approaches to the development of key skills for general certificate of

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education advanced level (GCE A level) and general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) students. Key skills teaching is most successful when students see its relevance to their own learning. Formal recognition of key skills through accreditation has helped to enhance their importance for students.

Effective key skills teaching and assessment require sound organisation rooted in a clear college policy. This report draws on evidence from the first four-year cycle of inspections. It includes examples of good practice as well as some of the difficulties experienced by colleges. A checklist of the characteristics of good practice identified by inspectors is given overleaf.

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**Good Practice in the Teaching, Learning and Management of Key Skills is Characterised by:**

- a college policy on key skills which applies to all programmes and all students
- a strategy for implementing the policy which ensures a co-ordinated corporate approach
- active support from senior managers
- systematic procedures for initial assessment and learning support
- key skills teaching which is closely linked to students' main programmes
- a range of teaching methods and modes of delivery, including a central resource base
- regular monitoring and review of students' progress
- appropriate accreditation linked to procedures to assure standards
- effective arrangements for internal verification and moderation
- effective timetabling and administrative arrangements
- regular reports on key skills development across the college
- opportunities for staff development and sharing good practice.

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## INTRODUCTION

1 In recent years there has been growing public concern about the extent to which the education system enables individuals to acquire the key skills which they need to succeed in life and work. These skills, variously known as ‘core’, ‘common’ or ‘key’ skills, were defined by the former National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) as ‘skills, or cognitive processes, which are common and fundamental to performance in a wide range of activities in employment and life in general’.

2 The Dearing report, *Review of Qualifications for 16–19 Year Olds*, published in March 1996, recommended the use of the term ‘key skills’ in order to reduce confusion and to underline their importance. The term ‘key skills’ is used throughout this report, except where there are historical references to other terms.

### **The National Picture**

3 Many national reports and initiatives have reflected the concern of government, employers, awarding bodies, and education and training providers to identify skills which are transferable across the contexts in which individuals live and work. For example, the revised national targets for education and training, published in May 1995, stressed the importance of developing ‘self-reliance, flexibility and breadth, in particular through fostering competence in core skills’.

4 In 1990, the government asked the National Curriculum Council, the Secondary Examinations and Assessment Council, the NCVQ and the Further Education Unit to work on the definition of core skills. The National Curriculum Council subsequently published *Core Skills 16–19: A response to the secretary of state* which listed core skills in communication, problem-solving, personal skills, numeracy, information technology, and modern foreign languages.

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On the basis of this, the NCVQ began the task of developing specifications for accrediting competence in core skills at five levels. By 1996, there was a complete range of accreditation in:

- communication
- application of number
- information technology
- working with others
- improving one's own learning and performance.

Specifications were also developed for problem-solving but were not accredited. In October 1997, NCVQ and the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority were merged to form the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA). The QCA is currently working on a revised specification for accrediting problem-solving skills. This is to be trialled in 1998. A specification for modern languages was developed separately from the work on key skills, originally as additional or optional units in certain general national vocational qualifications (GNVQs) and national vocational qualifications (NVQs) and, more recently, as a set of free-standing units.

5 Students on GNVQ programmes are assessed on their competence in the 'mandatory' key skills of communication, application of number and information technology. Work undertaken as part of 'working with others' and 'improving one's own learning and performance' can be accredited as additional units. Modern foreign language units are available as optional or additional units. National surveys of GNVQ by the inspectorate in 1994 and 1995 found that colleges were having difficulties teaching and assessing core skills. This was also noted in *GNVQ Assessment Review* (NCVQ, 1995), the final report of the review group chaired by Dr John Capey. In September 1995, revised core skills specifications were

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introduced and broadly welcomed by those working within the sector. Improved practice has been commented on in the chief inspector's annual reports. Further revisions to key skills specifications are currently being piloted in response to the Capey report and the *Review of 100 NVQs and SVQs* by Gordon Beaumont.

6 Students working towards NVQs are not explicitly assessed on key skills, but they are expected to be able to demonstrate appropriate levels of key skills as part of their general occupational competence. However, both the *Review of 100 NVQs and SVQs* by Gordon Beaumont and the Dearing report recommend more widespread inclusion of explicit key skills in NVQs where these are integral to the achievement of occupational competence. Modern apprenticeship programmes are required to develop key skills at specified levels within the QCA framework. On these programmes key skills units are often achieved as additional units to the NVQ.

7 Students on courses leading to the BTEC national diplomas and certificates of the Edexcel Foundation develop 'common skills' similar to those within the QCA framework.

8 There are at present no specified key skills within the syllabuses for GCE AS/A level and GCSE subjects. However, there has been a steady increase in initiatives to develop the key skills of students on these programmes and these skills are often accredited.

### **Recent Developments**

9 The Dearing report recommended that all students should be given the opportunity to develop the key skills of communication, application of number and information technology and to have them assessed and recognised as elements of the proposed national certificates at foundation, intermediate and advanced levels and the national diploma at advanced level. A new GCE AS level in key skills

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was proposed for students following GCE A level programmes. The report emphasised the importance of other key skills such as those needed in order to learn successfully and work effectively in a team. Since the publication of the Dearing report the proposal for a separate GCE AS level in key skills has been replaced by a proposed single key skills qualification, to be taken by students in any educational, vocational or occupational setting. In June 1997, the government announced that there was to be a postponement of the introduction of the new GNVQ and GCE A level arrangements, including the proposals for key skills. Following this, in October 1997 the government published *Qualifying for Success*, a consultation paper on the future of post-16 qualifications. Meanwhile, the new single key skills qualification is to be piloted over two years (until summer 1999) rather than one as originally envisaged.

10 There is little evidence that teachers in further education see the development of key skills as a continuum extending through the national curriculum and into further education. There is a need for a common approach to key skills for all qualifications and for simple methods of assessment. Colleges' initial assessments of students entering further education show that the most urgent need is to improve skills in communication, application of number and information technology. However, this must not be at the expense of other important skills, such as problem-solving and working with others.

## INITIAL ASSESSMENT AND LEARNING SUPPORT

11 In the last four years, there has been a substantial increase in the number of colleges which assess the key skills of full-time

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students at the start of their course and identify any additional support they may need. The systematic assessment of part-time students is much less common. Most colleges have at some time used the screening tests devised by the Basic Skills Agency (BSA) to assess general literacy and numeracy. Few, however, assess information technology skills at entry. One of the consequences of the increased assessment of literacy and numeracy has been that college managers have been alerted to levels of need for additional support, often underestimated in the past. A survey of 10,000 students in 12 colleges, conducted by the BSA in 1992, found that 42 per cent were performing below the BSA's definition of competence in communication skills and 59.5 per cent below its definition of competence in numeracy. The provision of learning support has increased significantly since then, but most colleges still find that between 25 and 35 per cent of full-time students are in need of additional learning support. In some colleges higher figures are quoted. It is important that colleges accurately identify the extent of learning support required and that teachers ensure they take account of students' skill levels.

12 The pattern of initial assessment is changing. An increasing number of colleges are using diagnostic tests to determine whether students have the key skills necessary for the specific demands of a course, rather than simply assessing general levels of literacy and numeracy. Diagnostic assessment schemes developed and marketed by individual colleges are growing in popularity. Some colleges are making effective use of the experience they have gained from using basic screening tests, together with the specialist subject knowledge of teaching staff, to devise their own diagnostic tests, as shown in example 1. This increases the relevance and accuracy of diagnoses and encourages teachers to consider the relevance of key skills to the subjects they teach.

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Example 1. The college has developed initial assessments directly related to individual course requirements for reading, writing and numeracy. All full-time students are assessed and detailed feedback is given to course tutors and personal tutors. This includes information on whether the weaknesses identified apply to individual students or are common to the rest of the group. Responsibility for developing key skills is shared by course tutors and learning support staff.

13 The effectiveness of colleges' procedures for initial assessment and their success in meeting learning support needs vary significantly. There is often a delay between initial assessment of students and arranging suitable learning support. Few colleges manage to ensure that all students who need support receive it and the number of students who take advantage of the support offered is often low. Some teaching staff are reluctant to spend time marking screening tests because they are not convinced of their relevance. Senior managers' monitoring of the extent to which colleges are meeting learning support needs is generally weak. Monitoring is sometimes more difficult in those colleges which have moved from centrally managed screening to vocationally linked diagnostic assessment, because the assessments are often managed by staff in individual subject areas.

14 An increasing number of colleges are establishing procedures whereby initial assessments are followed by referral for support, development of learning support programmes for individual students, progress reviews and regular reports to personal tutors (example 2). Where this has been done there is clear evidence that more students successfully complete their programmes of study. Good learning support provision is often based on a central resource centre or workshop (example 3).

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Example 2. All full-time and some part-time students are assessed in communications. They are also assessed in application of number if they have not already gained a GCSE pass at grade C or above in mathematics. The tests are administered by personal tutors and students who may need additional support are referred to the manager of the college learning centre. Students discuss their additional learning needs with a learning support tutor and agree a learning plan. Learning support tutors are available in the learning centres at specified times in the week. Progress reports are sent to the personal tutor at least once a term. If a large number of students is identified as needing support in a particular course, the support is provided in lessons alongside specialised teaching.

Example 3. A suite of rooms has been converted into key skills workshops, with one room devoted to information technology. There are banks of high-quality learning resources for students' use. Any stigma which students might have felt by being 'referred' for support has been overcome by the fact that all students, whether referred in this way or attending as part of their GNVQ key skills sessions, are timetabled in the same suite of rooms. Students from a wide range of courses and levels of study now use the workshops.

15 Inspectors have identified the following features of good practice in initial assessment:

- there are established procedures for assessing all students at the start of their programme of study, using methods appropriate to the level of study
- opportunities exist for teachers to refer students for additional support and for students themselves to request such support

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- analysis of the results of initial assessments is followed by discussion between learning support staff, the student and the student's personal tutor about the nature and level of support required
  - where need is identified, an additional, more focused assessment is carried out by learning support staff
  - an individual learning programme is devised for each student, which includes clear targets for achievement
  - appropriate methods of teaching and learning are available to students and there are suitable resources including access to learning support on all main college sites
  - there are regular reviews of students' progress and personal tutors are kept well informed
  - regular monitoring reports are prepared for college managers on the results of initial assessments, on the numbers of students taking advantage of the support offered and on the progress students make.

## TEACHING AND ASSESSMENT

16 While the teaching and assessment of key skills is a requirement on GNVQ courses and government-funded training schemes, it is no less important for students on other courses. The development of key skills is most effective when teachers take some responsibility for systematically developing them as part of their teaching and when students see the relevance of these skills to the course they are studying.

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17 In the best practice, the teaching of key skills and support for key skills are provided for all students and in a variety of settings. Provision may include support in lessons, a central resource centre which students can visit when they wish and where they can study as individuals or in groups and additional key skills units which are linked to students' main programmes.

### **The Three Mandatory Key Skills for GNVQs**

18 Colleges have spent much time and energy on the development of the three key skills which are mandatory for GNVQ programmes: communication, application of number, and information technology. However, approaches vary even within colleges. A large further education college in the Midlands, which recently conducted an audit of its GNVQ provision, found wide disparity between curriculum areas in the effectiveness with which key skills were being developed. As a result, it was recommended that some teaching teams should look more closely at the successful work being carried out by other teams. There are some colleges, however, which have developed procedures common to all their GNVQ programmes (example 4).

Example 4. Every GNVQ course includes three hours a week allotted for key skills. Students use the three hours to attend a key skills workshop. They work at their own pace on assignments with a built-in key skills component. Key skills teachers based in the workshop help students and assess their work. The college is monitoring these developments. An initial finding has been that GNVQ intermediate students have made greater improvements in their English and mathematics than students following GCSE or other vocational programmes.

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## Communication

19 Communication in its various forms is central to all effective learning and is often the skill which is best taught. The QCA specification for communication includes speaking and writing skills. As well as being a specific requirement of many programmes, communication is also an important element of other key skills, such as ‘working with others’, where communication skills are developed in group work and in making presentations. Students in further education often develop good communication skills when activities are well prepared and supported by teachers (examples 5a and 5b)

Example 5a. Students’ work on communication and literacy was well integrated with GNVQ art and design assignments. The work was marked by a key skills support teacher who had helped to develop the assignments. He talked to each student explaining his comments on their work and discussing basic techniques of writing. Students received effective help in relating their written work to their art and design topics.

Example 5b. A group of GNVQ advanced health and social care students participated in a group debate on euthanasia. The activity was well prepared by the teacher. Students showed that they could discuss complex and challenging issues in a formal setting.

20 There are also many examples of effective development of communication skills in subjects where they are not a mandatory element of the course. In one general further education college in the North West region, a GCE A level religious studies lesson focused on questions related to the topic ‘work’. Students worked together in groups, then shared answers to questions about the purpose of work

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and Christian views on work. They generated a large number of responses, which they analysed, then summarised. The lesson provided excellent opportunities to develop key skills, including communication skills.

21 Regular correction of spelling, punctuation and grammar helps students to communicate more accurately and more clearly. However, many vocational course teachers and some teachers of academic subjects fail to correct mistakes and offer guidance. This undermines the efforts of those teachers who are striving to improve students' communication skills.

#### Application of number

22 Of the three mandatory key skills, application of number is the skill which is taught least successfully. Few colleges have a strategy for the development of numeracy skills across all programmes of study. Mathematics teaching is often planned differently in different parts of a college and there is little sharing of good practice. Staff teaching application of number on vocational courses are often based in vocational departments and they have little opportunity for regular contact with other mathematics teachers.

23 Students' numeracy skills vary significantly. Some students lack the basic skills required to carry out simple mathematical and scientific investigations. For example, students in a second-year national diploma class on fishery management lacked the numerical skills to be able to work out the costs of fish rearing and the pace of the course had to be slowed considerably to enable them to catch up. In another college, most students in a GNVQ advanced level class in engineering were unsuccessful in external tests, displaying inadequate mathematical skills. Their numeracy skills had been assessed at the start of the course but the assessment had not focused on the algebraic skills needed for the course. Most of these students had achieved GCSE mathematics at grade C.

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24 Students on GNVQ programmes are required to apply numerical skills in vocational contexts. Mathematics teachers frequently express concern that a certain level of numeracy, including for some courses algebraic skills, is essential before it is possible to apply these skills in vocational settings. Teachers find it is difficult to relate the teaching of number to some subjects. For example, the opportunities to relate number work to engineering are extensive but they are less obvious in art and design. Nevertheless, where teaching is imaginative, there are examples of effective application of number in all vocational areas, as illustrated by examples 6a, 6b and 6c.

Example 6a. In a separate mathematics class for art and design students on a GNVQ programme, the teacher used common symbols such as letters of the alphabet to discuss symmetry. Drawing on this information, students identified shapes they could use to create textile designs. The students were enthusiastic about their ability to relate mathematical concepts to their creative work in art and design.

Example 6b. In many assignments on business courses, students were required to manipulate figures when analysing and presenting their ideas. For example, a GNVQ intermediate group visited the largest shopping precinct in Europe and calculated the amount of space given to different products within different window displays.

Example 6c. During a GNVQ intermediate leisure and tourism lesson, held in the key skills centre, a team of vocational teachers and specialist key skills teachers helped students to work on assignments designed to develop their understanding of mathematical averages. The students worked individually and in groups on material related to the vocational context of their course. They enjoyed the work, recognised its relevance and made good progress.

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## Information technology

25 Information technology is often the most extensively taught key skill and there is much good practice in parts of colleges. Many students make good use of information technology, especially in wordprocessing and presenting their assignments. However, it is still not extensively taught outside courses on which key skills are mandatory. Many teachers lack the confidence to use information technology with students. Practice is most successful in those colleges which ensure that the development of information technology skills is both vocationally relevant and broadly based (example 7).

Example 7. All full-time students in hospitality, leisure and tourism have formal study time in a well-resourced learning centre. They use industrial-standard software in addition to general software for wordprocessing, databases and spreadsheets. They can also use the centre on an open access basis. Most second-year GNVQ students are confident in using the resources which include a hotel reservations system and travel office software.

26 There are examples of good practice in the teaching of information technology skills across a range of programme areas (examples 8a, 8b and 8c).

Example 8a. On an NVQ level 3 catering course, the development of information technology skills is a routine part of the programme. Students applied their previously acquired skills to a range of tasks related to their coursework. Two students were using a wordprocessing package with French and German fonts to prepare publicity materials and menus for international restaurant evenings they were organising. Other students in the group were confidently working on a costings exercise using a spreadsheet.

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Example 8b. In the final year of a national diploma in agriculture course, students were using real data taken from the farm database to analyse a range of crop and milk yields as a part of an exercise on farm costings and management. They were effectively using skills covered earlier in the course and the information they were generating provided useful evidence for the assignment.

Example 8c. On a childcare course, students were introduced to a graphics package to enable them to produce pictures as a stimulus for play activities. Another aspect of their programme was to review games software and to assess its use as a learning activity for young children. These skills were being accredited through the Open College Network.

27 An increasing number of colleges are developing an information technology policy. For some it is only a plan for the co-ordination of equipment and computer networks. For others, however, it is a comprehensive strategy for developing all students' information technology skills. Some colleges have decided that all students should achieve a certain level of competence and there are programmes which relate to students' existing level of skill. Increasingly, GCE A level students are given the opportunity to take information technology as a separate course. These courses are often accredited. In some colleges teaching staff are required to review GCE A level programmes and to introduce information technology applications where appropriate. Examples of such applications include the use of information technology in presenting poetry to provide a visual impact which enhances the sentiments expressed by the words, and the use of computer spreadsheets in geography and science.

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28 Although few colleges assess students' information technology skills at entry, there has been a considerable increase in the number of computers which are available for students to use and a tutor is often on hand to provide support. Information technology courses for adults, many of whom left full-time education before computers were widely available in schools and colleges, have grown significantly. These students are taught mainly in part-time classes, often in the evenings or study on their own using resources provided in open access centres. Many resource centres have good modern equipment and software and a tutor is often available to help students.

29 Sometimes, insufficient thought is given to the appropriateness of programmes for particular students. In one college which offered an accredited information technology course to all full-time students, some of the students found that the course was duplicating work already undertaken as part of their GNVQ programme. This was not an isolated case. Matching students' existing skills to the specific requirements of their vocational courses can prove difficult and it is not always done well. Few colleges make provision to accredit information technology at a level higher than the student's main course of study. This is a lost opportunity for those students who already have a good level of information technology skills when they start their course.

### **Other Key Skills and their Accreditation**

30 Some colleges have addressed with vigour, and some success, the task of improving the key skills of all students. Others still lack a coherent approach, even to teaching the skills which are mandatory on GNVQ courses.

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31 Students' motivation to improve key skills is greater when these skills are formally recognised and are seen to contribute towards their vocational qualifications. Where they are not a formal requirement colleges have sought other forms of accreditation. Some have introduced QCA key skills units for students following other programmes such as GCE A level or GCSE (example 9).

Example 9. QCA key skills units in communication, application of number and information technology are used on the GCSE programme and taught through three integrated assignments, one for each term. The assignments provide the evidence necessary to satisfy QCA performance criteria; they also cover aspects of GCSE coursework. The first assignment provides tasks appropriate to the GCSE English course, including listening and note-making, discussion, creation of a news bulletin, design of a radio programme schedule, and design of an advertising flyer. Students taking GCSE computer studies can wordprocess the flyer as part of their course work. There were some very good final products in the form of wordprocessed leaflets where full advantage had been taken of fonts and graphics. Students had also tried hard to use appropriate language and style.

32 Other colleges have developed key skills provision as part of their additional studies or enrichment programmes (example 10). Accreditation is obtained through awarding bodies such as the Open College Network or the Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network (ASDAN).

Example 10. Key skills programmes have been introduced for 170 GCSE and GCE A level students during 1995-96, using the ASDAN scheme at levels 2 and 3. The work largely takes place during an additional one hour a week tutorial time. The level 2 scheme is based on three themes chosen by the college:

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developing communication skills, health and survival, and international relations. The level 3 scheme, followed by GCE A level students, has a focus on community action. One of the attractions of these schemes is that work experience, the student's record of achievement and university applications all provide credit towards achievement of the award. The schemes have been most successful in the case of GCSE students.

33 Colleges have made organisational changes in developing courses to include key skills. For example, one college reorganised its timetable so that all first-year GCE A level students could follow the QCA key skills units: 'working with others' and 'improving one's own learning and performance'. Another college decided that all students on GNVQ programmes will, in addition to the three mandatory units, take a wider range of additional units, including working with others, improving one's own learning and performance, problem-solving, modern foreign language and 'enterprise' (examples 11a and 11b).

Example 11a. 'Enterprise' is a compulsory element of all GNVQ advanced programmes, some BTEC national diplomas and NVQ schemes. Each student group functions as a business or charity. This can involve such activities as manufacturing, financing, marketing or selling a real product or service. The aim is to improve students' teamwork and problem-solving skills and to give them responsibility for improving their own learning and performance. Each group has a teacher who is assisted by a volunteer adviser from local industry whose job it is to offer expert advice, guidance and support. Students who successfully complete the enterprise programme gain accreditation which counts towards the three additional key skills units which form part of their GNVQ programme.

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Example 11b. A specialist general further education college has a policy of ensuring that all students working in the leisure, tourism or hospitality industries have some capability in at least one foreign language. Languages are a compulsory element on certain other courses, and are also offered as an option to a wide range of students. The students are highly motivated and achieve useful levels of competence in a foreign language.

### **Integration of Key Skills**

34 Wherever possible, key skills should be integrated with other aspects of the course. The degree to which this happens varies between colleges, study programmes and the different key skills. Most foundation and intermediate GNVQ programmes include separate sessions on the mandatory key skills of communication, application of number and information technology as well as support for those identified through assessment on entry as needing additional help to develop specific skills. On GNVQ advanced programmes information technology is usually taught separately. On programmes where key skills are not mandatory this may be taught effectively as ‘stand-alone’ units.

35 Key skills do not necessarily have to be taught by vocational course teachers themselves in order to ensure that they are integrated effectively with other aspects of the work. Some of the best key skills teaching is carried out by specialists from other parts of the college or by members of a central key skills team who have been involved in planning the course. Specialist key skills teachers often work alongside vocational teachers, helping to plan assignments which will develop key skills in a vocational context. Where key skills are integral to the course and seen to be relevant, students generally make successful progress in acquiring them (example 12).

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Example 12. GNVQ advanced business students understood the value of information technology. They said that key skills teaching had improved their confidence and ability to use computers. They also valued the opportunity to use numeracy and communication skills in vocational contexts. Communication skills had been particularly useful during their industrial placements, for example in the design of questionnaires and the handling of customer complaints. Students' work demonstrated their growing achievements in key skills.

36 The limited number of teaching staff who have specialist experience both in key skills and knowledge of different curriculum areas has made it difficult for colleges to be consistently effective in making key skills an integral part of students' programmes of study. Some subjects lend themselves more easily to the design of assignments which incorporate key skills. Recent evidence shows that colleges are working through these difficulties and that practice is improving.

### **Teaching Methods and Organisation**

37 The organisation of key skills provision and methods of teaching vary between colleges, depending on the size and organisational structure of the college, the number of GNVQ programmes, and the skills and experience of staff. Some colleges have developed specific procedures to ensure that key skills are central to students' personal development. For example, there are: checklists against which students are assessed; key skills profiles for individual students which are used as points of reference in regular reviews of progress; action plans linked to assignments so that key skills needs are continually assessed throughout a student's course; and the inclusion of comments on students' progress in acquiring key skills in their records of achievement (examples 13a and 13b). Where such procedures are established, students are more likely to develop effective skills.

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Example 13a. Each assignment generates a key skills action plan designed to identify the communication, number and information technology skills required to complete the assignment successfully. Study centre tutors who are linked with a vocational team, sign off the students in due course as 'ready for assessment'. A key skills record of achievement identifies the evidence to show that students have practised a skill, met the criteria for assessment, and demonstrated that they are 'ready for assessment'.

Example 13b. The college developed a comprehensive chart to be used by students and staff in identifying possible gaps in a student's acquisition of appropriate key skills. The chart lists all college courses, giving a key skills rating to indicate the extent to which particular key skills are covered. The college organises evening courses and additional day courses on key skills which students can attend as they find the need.

38 Liaison between key skills specialists and vocational teachers is not always as effective as it might be. Sometimes there is tension when vocational teachers maintain they can cover all the relevant key skills and key skills specialists have doubts about their expertise and the teaching methods being used. Sharing of good practice between programme areas is often informal, depending more on personal contacts than clear procedures. In one college there were examples of imaginative teaching in all three of the GNVQ mandatory skills, but poor liaison between specialist key skills teachers and teachers of vocational units meant that the good practice was not shared.

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## Assessment and Verification

39 The need to satisfy the performance criteria on GNVQ programmes sometimes leads to a preoccupation with recording the material covered at the expense of effective learning. The difficulties have been eased somewhat with the revised specifications for QCA key skills units introduced in September 1995 and the accompanying guidance. There will be substantial change when external assessment is introduced and some teachers are concerned that this may lead to a separation of the teaching of key skills and the teaching of main course content.

40 Colleges have devised varied mechanisms for recording that students have fulfilled the requisite performance criteria. Some use log books written by course tutors, others use a standard format developed by the college for all programmes.

41 Procedures in colleges for checking that the assessment of key skills is consistent across differing subjects are generally underdeveloped. The internal verification of key skills assessment is inevitably linked to the effectiveness of colleges' general policy and practice on internal verification. A number of teachers commented that external moderation by awarding bodies does not provide a sufficiently rigorous model for verifying the standards achieved in key skills. Some colleges have invested considerable time and resources in ensuring common standards, as part of their quality assurance arrangements (examples 14a, 14b and 14c). In many colleges, however, there are no such arrangements.

Example 14a. Key skills tutors are linked to GNVQ course teams. They help to design assignments and oversee their assessment. In addition, college quality assurance co-ordinators, who are responsible for common standards across vocational areas, support key skills tutors and help with internal verification. They also monitor and evaluate the key skills provision.

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Example 14b. The key skills monitoring group includes senior managers and forms an integral part of the college's overall structures for monitoring and evaluating provision. It reports to the college's academic standards committee. To ensure the quality and standardisation of key skills assessment and verification across the college, small-scale trials in each key skill area have been organised and co-ordinated by key skills specialists trained to D34 (internal verifier) standards. Cross-college documentation has been produced to support this process, which is additional to the internal verification requirements of the QCA and the awarding bodies.

Example 14c. The school of health and social care has a number of staff trained as internal verifiers and a calendar of dates when internal verification takes place. Verifiers check for evidence of key skills in GNVQ assignments and the appropriateness of the assignment in terms of the level and grade allocated. Samples of work, involving each student and each teacher, are checked to ensure consistency and a detailed written report, signed and dated, is returned to the staff assessor.

42 Features of good practice in teaching and assessment include:

- opportunities for students to develop a wide range of key skills
- key skills teaching which is closely linked to the teaching of students' main study programmes
- appropriate accreditation of key skills achievements which is linked to procedures to assure standards
- regular monitoring and review of students' progress

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- involvement of all teachers in the development and assessment of key skills
  - involvement of key skills specialists in the design of courses and assignments
  - regular evaluation of teaching methods by course teachers and key skills specialists
  - effective arrangements for the moderation of key skills assessments
  - a variety of strategies to promote key skills, including additional key skills courses, key skills workshops and resource centres.

## THE MANAGEMENT OF KEY SKILLS

43 Although some colleges have clear policies and appropriate staffing arrangements, in many colleges the management of key skills provision is piecemeal. Often, for example there are several, sometimes unconnected, initiatives taking place within the institution. GNVQ programmes, of necessity, have arrangements in place to teach key skills but these may vary between different curriculum areas. There may be limited contact between staff teaching key skills on different GNVQ programmes. Equally, the same staff may be working in more than one curriculum area; for example, an adult basic education tutor may also be delivering learning support and GNVQ communication key skills, sometimes on different part-time contracts and with different line managers.

44 Since 1994, colleges have placed more emphasis on developing a corporate approach to the management of key skills teaching (example 15). Colleges which have developed whole-college key skills policies and plans for their implementation are benefiting from

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the lessons they have learned. They are also getting better at measuring the development of key skills in individual students and the effectiveness of different teaching methods.

Example 15. A policy on key skills has been adopted for the whole college. This includes the following features:

- key skills form part of a student's primary learning goal
- communications, application of number and information technology are integral to the programmes of all full-time students
- other key skills, for example personal skills and modern foreign languages, are actively developed and almost all of these can be accredited
- wherever possible, key skills are integrated with the student's vocational or academic programme
- at least 15 per cent of a programme's taught hours should be devoted to key skills
- teachers are required to produce evidence of students' key skills development.

45 Colleges have been exploring the most effective ways of providing additional key skills opportunities and appropriate certification (example 16). Where this is part of general curriculum development within the institution and is accompanied by staff development it has encouraged teachers and managers to think through the purpose of key skills development and to relate it to their existing teaching.

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Example 16. An urban sixth form college committed itself to an 'entitlement curriculum' for all 16 to 19 year-old students. Starting with the question 'what is it that we want all of our students to take with them when they leave us?', the college drew up a list of key skills and experiences. These were grouped into 10 areas including communication, personal effectiveness, science and technology and modern language skills. The areas, which do not form part of a student's main programme, are taught through short courses. The project was supported by the local training and enterprise council (TEC) and the local authority and developed in partnership with a local university.

46 In recent years, the pattern of development of key skills provision has been one of experimentation, pilot initiatives and changing practice. This process of testing, evaluation and improvement has been rigorous in some colleges. Nevertheless, there has often been considerable confusion about how best to achieve effective key skills teaching across all programme areas. Some initiatives have depended on the vision of one or two individuals. Where such individuals do not receive a positive response from senior managers, the work inevitably suffers. In one college, imaginative initial assessment for students developed by staff in one curriculum area was being piloted across the college in areas where it was felt there would be a sympathetic response. Two years later this initiative faltered because the college had not built upon the experience and developed a coherent policy to guide assessment procedures across all curriculum areas.

47 There is no consistent pattern on timetabling key skills teaching. In some colleges, the broad principles about links between key skills and students' main programmes are agreed, but the responsibility for deciding how this is to be done is left to staff working in each curriculum area. In others, there is clear corporate planning (example 17).

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Example 17. In a tertiary college, there had been discussion for some years about the most appropriate way of ensuring that all students received opportunities to develop their key skills. This was largely led by the senior manager responsible for curriculum development. With the development of the QCA key skill units and the introduction of GNVQs the college has taken the opportunity to widen the range of key skills learning. From 1995-96, the timetable has been adjusted to enable first-year GCE A level and all GNVQ students to work towards QCA key skills units 'working with others' and 'improving one's own learning performance'.

48 Arrangements for the deployment of staff to teach key skills are affected by the size and structure of colleges (examples 18a and 18b). Some colleges have a key skills co-ordinating group, a cross-college key skills co-ordinator, and individual co-ordinators for the three main key skills. In large colleges, there may be co-ordinators for each curriculum area or department. Whatever the chosen structure, it is essential that roles and responsibilities are clear to all staff and students. One college has devised a system of key skills consultants who provide advice and support to staff working in all programme areas. In another college there is a curriculum development unit which acts as a central resource for the development of teaching and assessment of key skills.

Example 18a. The college has a strategy for implementing its key skills policy which includes:

- joint work by teachers and co-ordinators of vocational subjects and key skills specialists
- a key skills monitoring group which meets termly to monitor, and report on, the implementation and effectiveness of the policy

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- an audit undertaken by the key skills monitoring group to identify successes and weaknesses in implementing policy
  - action plans arising from the audit.

Example 18b. All aspects of communication and number skills are brought together in one department. The department's work includes:

- pre-entry assessment and guidance
- cross-college basic skills screening and support
- key skills support workshops
- key skills delivery for GNVQ courses
- diagnostic assessment for specific learning difficulties
- support for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities
- support for staff.

There are a number of benefits arising from this inclusive approach to learning support. It has encouraged the development of a centre of expertise and has enabled all staff to become more knowledgeable about these aspects of work and to share good practice.

49 The rapid expansion of key skills work has made great demands on a small number of specialists and created pressure on everyone to become an expert. Not all colleges are large enough to be able to appoint staff who specialise in key skills teaching. Many colleges allocate additional responsibilities for key skills to teachers of English and communications, mathematics and computer studies. This has been effective where timetabling implications have been carefully addressed. However, in some colleges, co-ordinators or key skills

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specialists are rarely able to attend course team meetings at which course design, assignments and assessment are discussed. This can undermine what the college is trying to achieve. A programme of staff development is an essential part of the effective management of key skills provision. Some colleges have established a mentoring system to support teachers taking on key skills teaching for the first time.

50 Many college managers are concerned about the costs of providing the staff and resources to establish effective key skills development. There is evidence that limitations on funding along with other pressures are leading some colleges to cut back on their resourcing of key skills work, for example by reducing the number of teaching hours available. Nevertheless, some colleges have obtained additional funding from TEC and Further Education Development Agency (FEDA) projects and many colleges are finding that much can be achieved through better co-ordination, and more effective management of staff time and existing resources.

51 Inspectors have identified the following features of good practice in the management of key skills provision:

- there is a college policy on key skills which applies to all programmes and all students; there are also guidelines to support the policy and a statement on students' entitlements
- there is a strategy for implementation describing how the college policy is to be implemented and how a co-ordinated corporate approach is to be achieved
- there is senior management support for the development of key skills
- staffing arrangements are effective and responsibilities for co-ordination, specialist teaching, learning support, internal verification, monitoring and reporting are clearly allocated

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- timetabling arrangements are designed to accommodate and support college policy on key skills; for example, key skills specialists are able to attend course team meetings and take a full part in the planning of courses and assignments
  - there is a programme of staff development which helps to increase the number of staff who can teach key skills
  - resources are managed effectively; where there are limitations on funding there are also plans to make more effective use of existing resources, improve organisation and co-ordination, and make better use of staff skills.

## **COLLEGE INSPECTION REPORTS USED IN THIS REPORT**

Barnsley College

Basford Hall College

Basingstoke College of Technology

Birmingham College of Food, Tourism and Creative Studies

Cambridge Regional College

City of Bristol College

Lincolnshire College of Agriculture and Horticulture  
(now part of De Montfort University)

Newbury College

Northumberland College

Oldham College

Rotherham College of Arts and Technology

Sheffield College (The)

ShIPLEY College

Stratford upon Avon College

Tynemouth College

Wakefield College

Waltham Forest College

West Nottinghamshire College

Yeovil College

Yorkshire Coast College of Further and Higher Education

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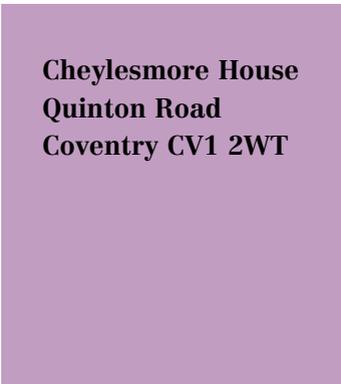
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