

National Awards for Students with Learning Difficulties

NATIONAL
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THE INSPECTORATE

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THE
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Contents

Paragraph

Summary	
Context and Background	1
Awards for Students with Learning Difficulties	10
The range of awards	10
Aims, content and structure of awards	11
The Impact of External Awards on Teachers and Teaching	31
The Impact of External Awards on Students and Learning	35
Conclusions and Issues	40
Annex	
A: Proposed structure of a curriculum framework for students with learning difficulties	
B: Bibliography	

Summary

During the past 20 years a range of qualifications has been developed to meet the demand for external validation of students' achievements. Since the introduction of the *Further and Higher Education Act 1992* there has been a particularly sharp increase in the use of external awards to accredit the achievements of students with learning difficulties. External awards are often mistakenly thought to be necessary to meet the requirements of schedule 2 of the Act, to secure funding from the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC), and to meet the requirements of colleges' own information systems. Most students now study for an award. This inspectorate national exercise was devised to evaluate those national awards which are frequently used at pre-foundation level for students with learning difficulties and to judge the impact these awards have on the curriculum, on teaching and learning, and on students' achievements.

Some awards for students with learning difficulties, particularly pre-vocational awards, can provide a useful framework which good teachers can use to improve courses for students. Some give an appropriate structure for courses, prompting teachers into providing a wider range of learning opportunities and activities. Some students gain confidence and self-esteem as a result of their success in achieving such awards.

However, many of these awards are not ideally suitable for students with learning difficulties. Few of the awards improve the quality of students' learning experiences. Some awards accredit activities which are of little significance and require students to learn skills which are not relevant to their lives as adults with learning difficulties. Those students with poor literacy skills may waste many hours trying to complete written work in pursuit of an award. Some awards result in the development of inappropriate and fragmented individual programmes for students, whilst others provide misleading information about students' abilities, skills and understanding. Some awards are made up of an arbitrary choice of activities and competences and have imprecise performance criteria which do not always match what is being assessed. In addition, some modules which are offered at the same level have different degrees of complexity and breadth of content.

Teachers often use the award framework to replace their own curriculum, lesson plans and schemes of work and, as a result, do not undertake curriculum development to take account of the needs of the students they are teaching. To meet the criteria stipulated for the attainment of an award, teachers often contrive simulations and paper-based activities, but these do not help students to learn useful skills. Teachers then assess students' progress in relation to the awards' performance criteria, not in relation to how much they have learned during their programmes of study. In many instances, use of these awards involves teachers in excessive bureaucracy and complicated procedures.

To address the above issues teachers need to plan each student's programme within a curriculum structure which is designed to enable students to work towards level 1 and foundation level programmes.

National Awards for Students with Learning Difficulties

Context and Background

1 This report evaluates the quality of awards which are frequently used at pre-foundation level for students with learning difficulties. It assesses the impact of these awards on teaching and learning, and on students' achievements. The evaluation is based on evidence from a detailed analysis of the most commonly used awards, inspections of provision for students with learning difficulties between September 1993 and May 1998, and meetings with representatives from external agencies and awarding bodies, as well as discussions with staff from a range of colleges and specialist establishments for students with learning difficulties.

2 The inspectorate's curriculum survey report, *Basic Education*, published in April 1998, identified weaknesses relating to the use of awards, including:

- the lack of an overall national structure showing how the many different pre-foundation and foundation level awards relate to each other
- the use by teachers of these awards as a substitute for curriculum planning
- students studying for awards which are inappropriate for them
- course content is inappropriate or poorly designed, but still meets the requirements of the awarding bodies.

This report seeks to explore these and other related issues in more detail and to provide illustrations of good practice in the use of awards.

3 The aims of the national exercise were to:

- review and analyse the content of the awards
- assess their value and currency
- evaluate their impact on teaching and learning
- comment upon their relevance, effectiveness and fitness for purpose
- report on best practice.

4 During the last decade, and particularly since 1993, there has been a growing trend in the use of externally validated awards in further education at pre-foundation level for students with learning difficulties. Prior to this, most provision at pre-foundation level comprised courses which were developed either by staff in individual colleges or by groups of staff working together at a local or regional level. Few of these courses were externally validated. In order to acknowledge and celebrate the achievements of students who were not entered for externally validated tests or examinations, many colleges devised their own certificates and presented these to students in recognition of the progress they had made in their studies. In addition, some colleges used records of achievement to describe and validate the progress students had made.

5 The growth in the use of external awards for students with learning difficulties can be attributed to a number of factors. The introduction of the national curriculum provided a framework for the education of all schoolchildren, whatever their level of ability, as many educationalists felt that this was necessary to secure parity of esteem and equality of opportunity. Although the national curriculum does not apply to colleges of further education, teachers in these establishments wanted to ensure that their students also had parity of esteem. One way of securing this was thought to be through providing opportunities for students to study for nationally validated awards, thus granting wider recognition for their achievements.

6 The *Further and Higher Education Act 1992* (the Act) also resulted in an increased interest in the use of external awards to accredit the achievements of students with learning difficulties. Many colleges mistakenly thought that external awards were necessary to meet the requirements of schedule 2 of the Act, to secure funding from the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC), and to meet the requirements of colleges' own information systems. The FEFC

has issued guidance to colleges in several circulars, the most recent being 99/10, *Schedule 2*, confirming that funding for provision for students with learning difficulties is not dependent on them studying for external awards. However, many staff, including senior managers, continue to believe that external awards are necessary to secure FEFC funding.

7 Awarding bodies responded to requests from teachers to provide awards at pre-foundation level. Each awarding body developed one or more awards to form a pre-foundation level, which would then lead on to the awards it had already established at more advanced levels. Few awarding bodies had previous experience of developing awards at pre-foundation level, however. The awards were developed in isolation from each other, within whatever model of accreditation the awarding body chose to adopt. This has led to a plethora of different awards, supposedly at the same level, but in reality requiring very different skills, competences and understanding.

8 Many teachers welcomed the structure provided by the requirements of the awards. However, evidence from inspection raised concerns about the adverse impact that the awards appeared to be having on the quality of provision. The grades awarded in inspections of provision for students with learning difficulties confirmed that there were significant weaknesses in the quality of this provision. The inspectorate's report, *Basic Education*, details many of these weaknesses.

9 This report has been compiled at a time when there is a particular focus on basic skills provision. The report of the learning difficulties and/or disabilities committee, chaired by Professor John Tomlinson, has significantly raised awareness of the needs of students who have difficulties with learning. Inclusive learning, the concept of which was developed in the committee's report, and defined as the achievement of a good match between the learner, what is to be learned and how and

where it is to be learned, is now seen as an entitlement for every student. The current concern to break down social exclusion and widen participation in further education has increased pressure for the development of pre-foundation level and level 1 courses for students who traditionally would not have enrolled for a college course. Most recently, the report of the committee chaired by Sir Claus Moser on the national development of basic skills, *Improving Literacy and Numeracy: A fresh start*, has brought this area of work into national prominence.

Awards for Students with Learning Difficulties

The range of awards

10 This report considers those awards and schemes which are most commonly used in further education for students with learning difficulties. These comprise:

- National Proficiency Tests Council independent living skills and vocational programmes, for example, horticulture
- RSA Examinations Board (RSA) national skills profile
- Team Enterprise
- NEAB unit award scheme, formerly Northern Partnership for Records of Achievement (NPRA)
- CENTRA independent living and work preparation
- The National Open College Network
- Edexcel Foundation entry key skills award
- Edexcel Foundation entry vocational skills qualifications
- Southern Examining Group certificates of achievement
- City and Guilds of London Institute (C&G) skillpower
- London Chamber of Commerce and Industry Examinations Board vocational access certificate

- Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network (ASDAN) workright
- ASDAN towards independence
- English Speaking Board (ESB).

Aims, content and structure of awards

11 Originally the remit of the national exercise had included the mapping of these awards, with a view to placing them within coherent levels in an overall framework, and judging their suitability for different groups of students. This proved to be impossible, because each award has been developed individually by an awarding body, in isolation from, and with no reference to, all other pre-foundation level awards. Each awarding body has created its own definition of the skills needed at this level according to its own view of how learning takes place.

12 Awards which enable students to learn through practical activities rather than through theory are the most effective. These are usually pre-vocational awards, such as the vocational access certificate, validated by the London Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the vocational awards validated by the National Proficiency Tests Council which have been designed specifically to prepare students for national vocational qualification (NVQ) courses. These pre-vocational awards focus on assessing students' achievement of skills which are relevant to employment. Students are required to demonstrate competence practically, rather than by merely describing the skills needed.

Achievement within the vocational access certificate is assessed on the candidate's actual performance of the full range of specified competences. The award comprises a number of generic core units of competence and occupational units of competence which are selected to meet the needs of the individual student. Literacy and numeracy modules are optional rather than compulsory.

The Team Enterprise initiative, which is part of Young Enterprise, provides an opportunity for students to gain practical experience of running their own company with support from their teachers and business advisers. The scheme aims to give students a range of opportunities to:

- gain an understanding of what it means to be at work and how a business functions
- discover and acquire a range of work and social skills
- learn to work with adults whom they do not know well
- demonstrate their potential to possible future employers
- grow in self-confidence and self-esteem.

This award works well when it is taken seriously by both staff and students, so that students are genuinely 'in role' and have as real as possible an experience of running a business. The students learn valuable vocational skills and often make significant progress in their personal, social and communication skills.

13 Awards which enable students to develop their oral communication skills have an impact on the quality of provision and improve students' confidence and self-esteem.

In an award accredited by ESB, students are taught to make a presentation to a group, based on an article, experience or interest of their choice. Whilst students are developing and polishing their presentation they are learning and practising a range of communication skills. The final presentation is made to the group, and to the external examiner, who provides an honest but supportive evaluation of each student's performance. Students are justifiably proud of their achievements.

14 Programme area managers or course leaders with little expertise or experience in designing courses for students with learning difficulties sometimes use awards to provide a basic structure for programmes. Inspection evidence indicates that this works well in some colleges but is not always successful as many awards comprise a large number of separate units or modules which lack coherence. No links are suggested between modules, and no indication is given as to how modules can be clustered to meet individual requirements.

The 'towards independence' award validated by ASDAN comprises 32 separate modules. No rationale is given for the inclusion of the particular modules, which include: making pictures; popular cultures; initial keyboard skills; yogacise; physiotherapy; using a computer; work awareness; meal preparation and cooking; getting to know a group.

The achievements of one student, which were validated by the Northern Partnership for Records of Achievement (now NEAB), were listed as:

- 'responding to verbal communication
- body awareness
- entering and leaving a minibus
- wiping a table with a damp cloth
- playing an untuned percussion instrument'

No rationale was given to explain why these particular elements had been selected for the student, however.

15 Teachers comment that awards sometimes give them ideas for student activities which they would not otherwise have considered. Many teachers also believe that working towards an externally accredited award motivates students to learn and enhances their self-esteem. Some teachers also use awards because they see them as being part of an equal opportunities

entitlement for the students (if everyone else can get an award, why should they be excluded?).

16 Some awards comprise units and elements which involve different degrees of difficulty, even though they are listed as being at the same level. Some elements demand little of students, whereas others at the same level require a complex or sophisticated response. It is difficult to understand the rationale for the inclusion of the different elements at the same level within an award.

In the module on work awareness within the 'towards independence' award validated by ASDAN, students are required to:

- share in a group experience of feeling discriminated against
- draw or make a picture to show one or more of these experiences
- take part in a role-play related to discrimination
- discuss ways to deal with the situation.

In another module at the same level, however, the requirements are very basic, and students are required to:

- move around a room while pulled on a blanket
- lie on the floor and transfer their weight from one part of their body to another
- move from side lying to a crawling position and get into a kneeling position.

In the skillpower award which is validated by C&G, one element of language and culture requires students to show that they have written simple words accurately and copied a simple sentence correctly, while in another element of the same award students are required to provide written or oral evidence to meet the following performance criteria:

- describe the basic health needs of individuals
- give examples of basic health needs
- identify the main risks to health and well-being of one client group
- give examples of how best to reduce the risks to health and well-being of this client group
- describe the effects of a major change of circumstances on health and well-being
- describe ways of coping with this major change in circumstances.

17 In some awards the performance criteria are not always consistent with the level of the award. Often, the requirements are at a more sophisticated level than a pre-foundation level course should demand.

For example, students who are taking the skillpower award, which is at a level below NVQ level 1 and general national vocational qualification (GNVQ) foundation, are required to 'be aware of the role of the trading standards officer and the importance of correct advice or information; carry out a health and safety audit in your workplace; and identify any significant links and overlaps between job roles'.

18 Few awards provide a clear rationale for the inclusion of particular skills and competences. Although the awards are designed specifically for students with learning difficulties, the topics are often inappropriate,

and the skills and competences they address are unlikely to be priorities for their learning. It is difficult to envisage how teachers can devise programmes which are relevant to students' needs within the framework of the awards.

In the 'independent living' award, validated by CENTRA, the illustrative course content for a module concerning the home is listed as:

- a place in which to live
- services relayed to the home
- maintenance of the fabric and contents of the house
- choice, purchase and care of soft furnishing and other household textiles
- conservation of energy and use of appropriate fuels
- planning and design of the home
- the rights and responsibilities of the householder.

Although some of these topics might be of interest to students with learning difficulties, it is unlikely that they reflect the true range of activities or decisions that most students will engage in during their lives.

19 Some competences within awards are inadequately defined. The lack of information about the level of complexity required for each element results in teachers having to make subjective judgements about the level of performance required, which then leads to students possessing different levels of skill and competency achieving the same award.

The competences listed under numeracy in an award validated by CENTRA are:

- counting/ordering/sorting
- measuring length/liquid/weight; reading dials
- simple calculating
- rule-of-thumb estimating
- managing money
- problem-solving.

The award does not provide any further explanation of what should be covered in each of these elements. For example, no parameters are set for 'simple calculating', and no guidance is given regarding the amount of money students are expected to be able to manage or the type of problem they are expected to be able to solve.

20 The performance criteria listed for some awards do not always match what is actually being assessed. As a consequence, students can achieve an award but might not be able to demonstrate practical competence in the areas covered by that award.

Within the 'workright' award which is validated by ASDAN, the performance criteria for punctuality in the workplace are listed as 'being able to say why it is important to be on time; describe how you travel to your workplace and state what route you take'. None of these criteria actually assess students' ability to be punctual in the workplace, however.

Within a 'learning to swim' module accredited by the Open College Network, students were assessed against criteria such as choosing appropriate clothes for swimming and working out the route to the swimming baths. None of the criteria involved the students learning to swim in the water.

21 In many awards, evidence of being able to identify and describe a skill is often accepted as evidence of being able to perform the related activity. Again this often results in students achieving awards but being unable to demonstrate practical competence in the skills covered by the award.

For example, students who are required to supply evidence of their ability 'to provide an acceptable service to customers' as part of the leisure and tourism element of the skillpower award which is validated by C&G, have to produce a piece of written work or an oral presentation which:

- lists the benefits of providing good customer service
- gives examples of the main types of service required by customers of a leisure and tourist facility
- gives examples of factors that affect customer service in such a facility
- gives examples of leisure and tourism information services commonly required by customers.

A student's ability to meet these criteria does not provide evidence of their ability to provide an acceptable service to customers.

22 Many awards have performance criteria which allow staff to give students total support, or as much support as they need in carrying out activities. This means that a student who can only carry out the designated activities with, for example, continuous verbal prompts and/or physical assistance can attain the award. Under these circumstances it is difficult to know what level of skill and competency is signified by achievement of the award.

Within the ASDAN awards framework, modules can be attained with the following levels of support:

- 'no help given
- helped by someone speaking to you and making suggestions
- gestural help – helped by someone using hand signals
- physical help – helped by someone holding you and/or helping you move
- experience recorded – that is, you have had experience of the activity without actively taking part'.

Within the Edexcel Foundation entry vocational skills qualifications framework, the following forms of support are listed:

- 'physical, mechanical or technical aids
- physical, verbal or gestural prompts
- specially devised and adapted methods of recording assessment
- additional time'.

23 Complex bureaucracy is a common characteristic of many awards. Teachers and managers are concerned about the significant amount of time that has to be diverted from teaching to fulfil the administrative requirements of the awarding bodies.

24 The arrangements which awarding bodies make to monitor the quality of awards are often inadequate. Responsibility for the content of programmes is often left to teachers, and little attention is given to monitoring content when the submissions are considered for approval.

For awards validated by the Open College Network, students often take a large number of separate modules. Submissions are approved as long as they meet the set criteria; however, these rarely specify requirements relating to the content of the modules.

25 Arrangements for the external verification of the standards which students achieve within national awards are often insufficient for any valid assurance to be given as to the quality of the work. Many of the awarding bodies do not send verifiers into colleges to monitor the quality of the work undertaken for these awards. Moreover, the very nature of many of the activities for which awards are given prevents their verification by reference to national standards. The achievement of personal competences such as washing one's hair, cutting one's nails or catching a bus, or domestic skills such as washing up, cleaning the bath or making a bed can be recognised, but it is not possible to assess these against criteria which can be applied nationally. Progress in these competences should be recorded for individual students, but it is inappropriate for them to be accredited through an external award.

26 Many awards accredit achievements which, although they may be significant for students, do not constitute a qualification and have little currency in the world beyond the course. Whilst it might be appropriate to record these achievements as part of an on-going record of progress, it is not appropriate to have them validated by an external body.

For example, as part of a certificate of achievement validated by the Southern Examining Group, students have to demonstrate their ability to:

- understand the names of at least seven places which are commonly found in a town, such as a post office
- use spoken French to say where their home is, and to name four places in their home town
- understand simple descriptions of the town in written French, including at least seven places
- write in French at least three sentences describing their own home town.

The ability to perform these tasks might signify progress for the student, but the tasks themselves do not constitute an award requiring validation by an external body.

27 Many awards do not necessarily give an accurate description of a student's ability. Some awards can give the impression that students are less capable than is actually the case.

For example, one student's achievements, validated by the NPRA scheme, were listed as follows:

- 'describing own daily routines
- playing an untuned instrument
- using scissors
- writing a postcard
- purchasing a drink
- using the telephone: receiving a call
- preparing a toasted snack meal
- preparing a simple breakfast
- using an electric cooker
- changing and making up a bed with clean linen
- ironing, folding and storing linen
- domestic skills
- introduction to laundry skills'.

However, the student was found to be working successfully towards the completion of an NVQ level 1 in catering.

28 Some awards can give the impression that students are more capable than is actually the case.

For example, a student who was accredited within the NPRA scheme for:

- 'responding to verbal instruction
- listening to music
- playing an untuned musical instrument
- body awareness
- using and applying colour
- entering and leaving a minibus
- undressing
- washing hands'

could only perform these activities with a very significant level of support from staff.

29 Parts of some awards are based on the questionable assumption that it is easier to perform the same task in one setting than in

another, or to perform the same task twice rather than once. Different levels of achievement may be awarded for tasks that are not essentially different.

In the national skills profile, validated by the RSA, the module theme 'the uses of technology' states that at level 1 students should 'find out where information or control technology is used in their own home', at level 2 they should 'find out where information or control technology is used in everyday life', and at level 3 they should 'find out where technology is used in the workplace'.

In the 'independent living skills' award validated by the National Proficiency Tests Council, students' achievements are recorded at two levels. At level A, a candidate has to prepare one hot drink, for him/herself or for someone else. At level B, a candidate has to prepare two different hot drinks, one of which is for another person. It is difficult to understand why these tasks are considered to be of different levels of complexity.

30 A common theme of many awards is that being able to carry out an activity competently is rated below carrying out the same activity and being able to recall and articulate information about it. This puts at a disadvantage those students with learning difficulties who find verbal recall and articulation particularly difficult but are able to carry out the practical tasks to a high standard.

For example, within the horticulture award validated by the National Proficiency Tests Council, the performance criteria for potting plants by hand is the same at levels A and B. At level B, however, students must also give two reasons for rejecting plants for potting and two reasons for potting-on plants.

The Impact of External Awards on Teachers and Teaching

31 Few strengths in teaching can be attributed directly to the use of external awards. However, some awards, such as the vocational access certificate which is validated by the London Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and the vocational awards validated by the National Proficiency Tests Council and Team Enterprise, do provide some teachers with useful guidance. The framework for these awards helps teachers, particularly those from vocational areas, many of whom have little experience of teaching students with learning difficulties, to devise a structure and develop teaching methods which are effective in helping students to learn. Awards which focus specifically on the development of oral skills, such as those validated by ESB, also have a positive effect by helping teachers to develop courses which improve students' communication skills and lead to increased levels of confidence and self-esteem.

32 In some colleges, staff have devised ways of assessing students' learning needs, developing a programme to meet them, and teaching effectively within that programme. Students' progress is then assessed, and their achievements cross-referenced to the criteria for one or more award. Where this practice is followed, the award has no impact on what is taught or the teaching methods used, and it is often immaterial to the students whether their achievements are validated in this way or not. The process involves teachers in a considerable amount of additional work, but they are prepared to undertake this because they feel that their students have the right to have their achievements validated by a national awarding body.

33 Many weaknesses in teaching can be attributed to the use of external awards. Although some awards state that their purpose is to accredit what students can already do,

rather than to provide a framework for what they need to learn, teachers often use the awards criteria as a curriculum framework. This practice replaces the all important tasks of identifying students' needs, developing an appropriate curriculum framework and planning coherent individual programmes to teach students relevant and useful skills.

34 Teaching is often constrained by the need to provide opportunities for students to demonstrate that they can meet the criteria specified for a particular award. Teachers sometimes choose to teach the modules which are easiest for the students or accredit activities that the students can already perform so that the awards can be achieved as quickly as possible. Little consideration is given to planning valuable learning experiences which will help students to make real progress in learning skills which will be useful to them.

The module theme 'working with others' which is part of the 'practical work skills' skill area of the national skills profile validated by the RSA, states that students at level 1 should 'meet a new group of people'. The performance criteria are specified as:

- smile and/or say 'hello'
- say your name
- listen to the names of others
- behave sensibly
- decide on something you could do together
- carry out the activity together.

The ways in which the criteria are to be demonstrated are then specified as:

- 'on three occasions meet with a new group of three or more people
- meet one of the groups in a less familiar place or situation
- tell someone about who you met and what you did'.

To enable students to meet the criteria, teachers plan a group meeting involving students who do not know one another. They then train the students to perform to the criteria specified (for example, 'smile and say hello'). However, this activity is of little value in helping students to 'work with others'. The use of such specific performance criteria takes away from teachers any opportunities to think creatively about different ways in which they can help students to learn to work together effectively.

The Impact of External Awards on Students and Learning

35 Only a minority of awards enhance students' learning and extend their opportunities for achievement. Many awards result in students undertaking inappropriate activities, learning little and being accredited for the completion of a random selection of separate modules which lack overall coherence.

36 The most successful awards are those which enable students to learn skills such as portfolio building which they will need in order to succeed on vocational programmes. Many students with learning difficulties have poor organisational skills, and the best pre-vocational awards enable them to develop a disciplined approach to gathering and recording evidence to describe what they have learned. Awards which enable students to develop their oral skills also have a positive impact on their learning experience. Many students with learning difficulties have poor communication skills and lack confidence in social situations. Those awards which require students to give oral presentations as evidence of their competence facilitate the development of skills, confidence and self-esteem.

37 Students with learning difficulties often learn best through 'real' activities. A number of pre-vocational awards provide opportunities for students to learn practical vocational skills such as catering or horticulture, whereas other awards and schemes, such as Team Enterprise, provide positive learning experiences by enabling students to participate in the running of small businesses. Students gain considerable benefits from this type of award or scheme.

38 Although teachers report that some students are motivated to learn by working towards external awards, many students cannot name the award for which they are studying and have little understanding of what it means. Students enjoy the award ceremonies and gain self-esteem from participating in them, but an

external award appears to have no more value for them than a certificate awarded by the college itself.

39 Many awards require students to spend the majority of their time undertaking tasks such as reading and writing, which they find difficult or impossible. Non-literate students often spend a considerable amount of time copying out material which they cannot read, just to fulfil the requirements of the award. This often leads to students' behaviour deteriorating and to them becoming disaffected with college.

A group of young students with learning difficulties were using spreadsheets to compile address books. Some students were unable to read at all, others were unable to read sufficiently well to undertake the task. One student became distressed. All the students were working from copies of the same worksheet and carrying out the same task, regardless of ability. Some had considerably more experience of information technology (IT) than others. The more able and more experienced students were making satisfactory progress.

A group of students who had listened to a presentation from the Citizens' Advice Bureau were observed completing worksheets about the bureau and trying to build up a directory of local agencies which provide help. Few of the students could complete the tasks, or understand the information they had been given. Students were copying out, often inaccurately, information which they could not read. The two most able students completed the task easily and well ahead of the others, but the behaviour of the students deteriorated during the session. The two most able students were uninterested and bored, and the others were discouraged and poorly motivated because of their inability to understand what they were doing.

Conclusions and Issues


40 Awards are most effective when they:

- are designed specifically to prepare students for progression to vocational courses by helping them to learn the vocabulary and study skills they will require for these programmes
- are designed to help students develop practical pre-vocational skills
- focus on the development of oral communication skills
- enable students to develop vocational skills through establishing and running successful businesses
- provide an appropriate structure for courses
- prompt teachers into providing a wider range of learning opportunities and activities for students
- enable students to gain confidence and self-esteem by giving recognition for their achievements.

41 Awards are least successful when:

- they result in the development of inappropriate and fragmented individual programmes for students
- they are granted when there is no accurate and reliable evidence that students can actually perform tasks for which they have been accredited
- they provide misleading information about students' abilities, skills and understanding
- they are based on the questionable assumption that it is easier to perform the same task in one setting rather than another or to perform the same task twice rather than once
- they require students to learn skills which are not relevant to their lives as adults with learning difficulties
- they accredit activities which are of little significance

- they result in students spending time on pointless activities which have little educational value
- they entail those students with poor literacy skills spending many hours trying to complete evidence sheets
- they have imprecise performance criteria which do not always match what is being assessed
- they include a seemingly arbitrary choice of activities and competences
- they incorporate modules which are offered at the same level but have different degrees of complexity and breadth of content
- they are offered at the same level but have very different requirements in relation to standards of achievement
- they give too much emphasis to preparing and practising activities rather than actually carrying them out
- they accept evidence of students being able to describe an activity or skill as evidence of them being able to perform it
- teachers use the award framework to replace the curriculum, lesson plans and schemes of work
- initial assessments and the planning of students' individual programmes are undertaken within the context of an award rather than through a careful analysis of the skills that will be most useful to them on leaving college
- teachers contrive simulations and paper-based activities to enable students to meet the criteria stipulated for the achievement of the award, even though these activities do not help the students to learn useful skills
- teachers plan their lessons to enable students to achieve an award as quickly as possible, but pay insufficient attention to the content of these lessons and the teaching methods they use

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- they involve complex bureaucracy, resulting in teachers spending too much time meeting the administrative demands of the awarding bodies rather than helping students to learn
 - teachers assess students to see how much they have achieved in relation to the performance criteria of the awards, not in relation to how much they have actually learned whilst at college.

42 The issues raised by this national exercise highlight the need for a coherent curriculum structure for pre-foundation level programmes. This should comprise a logical series of skills and competences which will enable students to work successfully towards level 1 and foundation level programmes. A proposed curriculum structure is described in annex A.

Proposed Structure of a Curriculum Framework for Students with Learning Difficulties

Before teachers can begin the process of curriculum planning it is essential that they recognise that students with learning difficulties are not a homogeneous group. As with any other group of students, individuals have very different needs, aptitudes and interests. They will come from diverse backgrounds, have different lifestyles and be aiming for very different long-term goals. It is therefore impossible to have one level of provision which will meet the needs of all students with learning difficulties.

The following 'ladder' illustrates the different levels within the pre-foundation level curriculum and describes progression from pre-introductory level to foundation level:

Pre-introductory level

- This gives students the skills they need to enter introductory level courses

and leads to

Introductory level

- which gives students the skills they need to enter pre-vocational courses

and leads to

Pre-vocational level

- which gives students the skills they need to enter vocational courses

and leads to

Vocational level level 1/NVQ level 1/GNVQ
foundation

- which gives students the basic skills for employability or to progress to higher-level vocational courses.

Having established the basic structure of the curriculum framework, the next task is to

analyse the skills and competences which need to be taught at each of the levels. The starting point for this must be a careful analysis of the skills and competences students need to learn if they are to succeed on level 1 or foundation level programmes. Once these have been identified, teachers need to 'work back' through the different levels and ensure that they are teaching students the skills and competences which will enable them to progress successfully through the different levels to level 1 or foundation programmes.

The following section identifies the skills that students need to succeed on level 1 and foundation level programmes, and then works back through the different levels of the curriculum ladder, describing the skills and competences to be taught at each level.

Vocational level

To succeed on an NVQ level 1 or GNVQ foundation level course, or in employment, students need to be able to:

- behave within accepted norms in college and in the workplace
- follow instructions or take orders, and respond to them within an acceptable timescale
- relate appropriately to a range of people in different roles and environments
- communicate effectively
- wear appropriate clothing and protective gear in the workplace
- present themselves as potential employees and acceptable adults
- respond to the requirements and demands of work and of adult life
- learn to carry out routine tasks without continuous supervision
- accept that they have a lot to learn, and be willing to learn.

Annex A

This means that at :

Pre-vocational level

the main aims of the programmes will be to teach students:

- to behave within accepted norms in college and in the workplace
- to follow instructions or take orders, and respond to them
- to relate appropriately to a range of people in different roles and environments
- the skills of speaking and listening
- to wear appropriate clothing and/or protective gear in the workplace
- personal presentation
- to respond to the requirements and demands of work and of adult life
- to carry out routine tasks without continuous supervision.

To succeed on a pre-vocational level course, a student needs to be able to:

- follow verbal instructions
- relate appropriately to different kinds of people
- behave appropriately in different environments/a simulated workplace
- present themselves as acceptable adults
- travel independently
- respond to some of the requirements and demands of work.

This means that at:

Introductory level

the main aims of the programmes will include:

- successful responses to verbal instructions
- relating appropriately to different kinds of people
- behaving appropriately in different environments
- wearing appropriate clothing and/or protective gear
- effective personal hygiene

- understanding some of the requirements and demands of work.

To succeed on an introductory level course, a student needs to be able to:

- understand some spoken or signed communication
- communicate with others in some way
- relate to others, and to respond to the environment.

This means that at:

Pre-introductory level

the main aims of the programmes will include:

- the development of a basic vocabulary of words, sounds or signs
- the development of the use of this vocabulary to communicate with others
- the development of some basic responses to others and to the environment.

All students at pre-introductory level are capable of learning, but they will have profound intellectual impairments and will require very specialised teaching.

Annex B

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