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## Higher education and key skills

John Gillespie

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### Summary

The intention of this article is to provide a snapshot of some of the current main issues and developments to do with Higher Education and key skills. It is a personal perspective, informed in part by reflection on involvement with some national Key Skills projects and the evaluation of others. Web-site addresses have been included, as exemplars of the large range of sites from Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and other organisations addressing key skills in Higher Education.

### Biography

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### Keywords

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### Generic, transferable and key skills

The terms 'generic', 'transferable' and 'key skills' have a variety of meanings which have yet to be agreed. There is an understanding that the term 'generic skills' refers to skills such as communication skills, teamwork skills, or the skills of learning how to learn, which underlie effectiveness in a range of activities and employment situations. These skills are being seen as of increasing importance and value in progression from education into employment, within employment and in other aspects of life in Britain today. The development of these skills is to do with fostering the individual's ability to apply such skills to raise the quality of main areas of their work and other activity, rather than to demonstrate the skills in isolation.

The term 'transferable skills' implies an ability to transfer skills from one setting to another. There are debates on the extent to which such transfer can be shown to take place. For this reason, it may be preferable to avoid using this term unless specific issues of transferability are being discussed.

The term 'key skills' can be used as a synonym for 'generic skills', or for a subset of these, as it is in the Dearing Review of Higher Education. However, the term 'key skills' is commonly used to refer to the nationally-agreed sets of skills in the key skill units specified in detail and at four levels by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) in the six areas of communication, application of number, information technology, working with others, improving own learning and performance, and problem solving. Within this article the term 'key skills' will be used to mean these QCA Key Skills. Further details are available from the QCA website (<http://www.qca.org.uk/>).

There are generic skills which are widely quoted but which do not appear explicitly in the key skills units (such as creativity or entrepreneurial skills). Some of these skills may be acknowledged simply by their perceived presence or

absence. At the same time there are technical aspects of some of the skills within the QCA key skills units which some would question as to whether they could be called generic (such as, for instance, some of the detailed knowledge requirements in application of number).

## QCA key skills

Each of the six QCA key skills are specified in detail at four broad levels, from Level 1 (typical of a below average 16 year old) to Level 4 (typically close to degree level or junior to middle management). The specifications include both technical skills and skills of application. Progression from levels 1 to 4 is characterised by increased technical demand, increased complexity of the settings where the skills are being used, the increased autonomy of the individual and an increased emphasis on process skills such as planning, reviewing and evaluating. For instance, an individual operating at level 1 largely follows clear directions carrying out straightforward tasks whilst at level 4 the individual could have personal responsibility for a complex multi-faceted project lasting several months. At level 5 there is a single QCA key skills unit in personal skills development, recognising the dominant role of process skills common to all key skills at this level. Prospective undergraduates are likely to be up to level 3 in their key skills, combining technical requirements similar to those for a good pass at GCSE with competence in selecting and planning how to go about using their technical skills effectively, and in choosing, presenting and interpreting their findings and results clearly.

The development of competence in three of the key skills - application of number, communication and use of information technology - is being particularly emphasised by government. This emphasis follows general concerns over many years over deficiencies in these skill areas. These concerns fed into the Dearing 'Review of Qualifications for 16-19 year olds', some of whose conclusions are to be seen being implemented in 'Curriculum 2000' for 16 - 19 education. Among other proposals, the Review recommended that all 16-19 year olds in education or training should have opportunities to develop the three key skills and have them assessed, and that competence in these skills should contribute to overall examination scores for entrance to higher education. One consequence of this is the awarding of Universities and Colleges Admissions Service for the UK (UCAS) points to individuals for each of three key skills at level 2 (10 points per skill area) or at level 3 (20 points per skill area). Further details are available on the UCAS website ([www.ucas.ac.uk/new/index.html](http://www.ucas.ac.uk/new/index.html)).

## QCA key skills assessment

With the raised national profile of key skills has come demands for increased reliability and rigour of assessment. This has led to several changes in assessment approach, in the search for a system which is valid but also sufficiently consistent, manageable and rigorous to be workable and command credibility. The system now in place for each of the three assessed key skills includes the assessment of a portfolio of work carried out by the individual, showing the skills in application, together with an externally-set test. But in practice such external assessment can itself distort the learning activity that leads to the qualification. In attempting to increase rigour, the emphasis on the testing of technical skills within the QCA assessment procedures can lead to an undervaluing of application skills which the qualification was originally intended to foster.

## QCA key skills and higher education

Some Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), including the Open University (see <http://www2.open.ac.uk/VQC/VQCRROLE.html>) and, the University of Central Lancashire (see <http://www.uclan.ac.uk/facs/class/languages/keyskills/topkey.htm>) among many, are using the QCA key skill unit specifications, particularly at levels 3 and 4. Many other HEIs do not appear to use the QCA key skills as such. Even among those that do, there appears to be little interest on the part of these HEIs in using the QCA assessment schemes for key skills. Instead the focus is on developing students' self-awareness of their own generic skills, with self assessment schemes linked to the underlying groups of skills in the key skills specifications. Here it may be that the QCA specifications may be of more use as a stimulus to the development of generic and study skills initiatives in individual universities than as a detailed prescription of assessment.

Advantages of working to these national standards are, for instance, that there is a broad common understanding both within and outside the institution of what is meant by, for example, having shown evidence for communication skills at level 4 as compared with at level 3, and that the same national standards are used in employment settings. Disadvantages of working to QCA specifications are, for instance, that the specifications may be seen as imperfectly matched to the generic skills for which evidence is shown by the individual. There may also be a reluctance to use specifications that were developed outside the HEI in contrast to those which could develop naturally within an HE department, so reducing the opportunities for generic skill development to be integrated naturally into main learning programmes.

There have been many favourable first reactions to the recently revised Level 4 key skills specifications, with their substantial emphasis on a common core of process and application skills, regarding their relevance to middle management and professional development post-graduation. It may be that they will have a useful role to play in providing some framework for skills development within degree programmes. Indeed this is the subject for research

within a current Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) funded project directed by the Vocational Qualifications Unit at the Open University.

## Developing generic skills

Students are likely to become aware of the value placed on generic skills development as they progress through their degree courses. This awareness is likely to be increased through contact with careers services and through their initial enquiries into employment opportunities after graduation. It is well known that employers are seeking graduates who can add value to their organisations immediately on recruitment. In particular this requires students to be good communicators and to have effective team-working skills in addition to abilities to think critically to reflect and evaluate. Indeed students may be more focussed on the importance of such skill development than some of their academic staff.

Not only do students need to have opportunities to develop these skills at an appropriately high level, but they also need to be realistically aware of their own levels of generic skills and the evidence for them. Some students may not be aware of their lack of particular generic skills; others may well undervalue the skills they have and lack the confidence to develop them further. The development of systems of personal academic recording have much to offer here.

Guidelines for progress files and personal development planning from the Qualifications and Assessment Authority (QAA) are contained in the draft 'Guidelines for HE Progress File' document accessible via the QAA website [www.qaa.org.uk](http://www.qaa.org.uk) or directly at <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/progfileHE/guidelines/guideline.pdf>. The personal development planning associated with particular degree programmes as evidenced in the Guidelines includes groups of generic skills appropriate to subsequent careers associated with those degrees.

A fair self-awareness of generic skills levels on the part of the student and their further development requires some form of realistic and formative self-assessment at the least. Generic skills do not develop in isolation, but rather in the course of other activities - academic, workplace-based and personal. So generic skills development is likely to be successful when it is integrated into and contributes to these main activities. In turn this process can benefit from alterations in the styles of academic and course assessment so as to value evidence of generic skills, as evidenced some years ago for instance by developments in course assessment at the Open University.

## Contrasting examples

There is no single national picture of uniform development or implementation. Indeed, in many HEI's, interest and practice in generic skills development varies widely from department to department. What follows here are five contrasting examples of initiatives which concern skills development and personal recording.

Some universities have developed national reputations for programmes of learning materials for study skills which include materials to support the development of key skills, such as at Sheffield Hallam University with comprehensive commercially-available skills development materials ([www.shu.ac.uk/keytokey/index.htm](http://www.shu.ac.uk/keytokey/index.htm)). The TLTP3 project with Leeds Metropolitan University extends this to include web-based examples.

Others have pressed ahead in developing systems to enable students to build up portable personal academic records, such as the Personal and Academic Development for Students in Higher Education (PADSHE) project and the Personal and Academic Records (PARs) developed by a team led by the University of Nottingham ([www.nottingham.ac.uk/padshe/](http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/padshe/)). This system enables students to record the incidence of personal skills development both within and outside academic learning, including for instance their involvement with community action and student societies through students' unions. The PAR scheme focuses on the need to remake personal tutoring after modularisation. It is exploring appropriate uses of communications and information technology (Internet-PARs), through a partnership of teams from Newcastle and Nottingham Universities.

A second example of record building and skills development is Liverpool University Student Interactive Database (LUSID) (<http://lusid.liv.ac.uk/public/users.html>). This is a web-based student profiling system currently under development at the University of Liverpool with Liverpool Hope University and includes recording, skills analysis, action planning, CV construction and guidance.

Within LUSID, students are encouraged to reflect on learning experiences and achievements in, for example, employment, education or leisure activities and to record them within LUSID. This data is then stored within a personal profile. Students can analyse those activities in terms of skills that may be useful in future employment. Students are invited, during skills analysis, to answer series of questions which should identify skill strengths and/or areas for development. The reflective process LUSID takes users through is intended to make students more aware of the skills they have already gained in different contexts and which could then be used in future employment searches. For those students requiring help in developing skills, guidance is provided for each skill area.

As well as university-wide schemes such as these, there are also generic skills development and recording schemes associated with particular areas of academic study and subsequent employment. One example is the electronic Recording Achievement for Professional and Individual Development (RAPID) Progress File (<http://rapid.lboro.ac.uk/>) developed at Loughborough University in association with the Chartered Institute of Building (CIOB). In this case the skills recorded in the file include key skills, personal and professional skills and construction-related skills - all related to the CIOB Professional Development Programme. Schemes such as this enable individuals to carry records with them as they move from their degree programmes to employment. RAPID also is available at some other universities see also <http://www.lboro.ac.uk/faculty/eng/engtisc/showcase/details/002/002.html>.

The final example is from the University of Central Lancashire where project funding has enabled a comprehensive range of resources and support to be developed (see <http://www.uclan.ac.uk/facs/class/languages/keyskills/topkey.htm>). Here as mentioned above the emphasis is on enabling learners to manage their personal development. Indeed personal academic and career development - learning how to learn - is at the centre of many generic skills development initiatives in HEIs.

## References

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