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## Developing key skills in a traditional university

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### Summary

A snapshot of how one research-led, traditional university is approaching the development of students' key skills.

### Biography

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### Keywords

Transferable skills, key skills, QAA

### Ancient history

I know I've been in my job too long when I find myself thinking 'Hang on - haven't we been here before?' And indeed we have: in the early '90s when I was employed partly under the aegis of the University's Enterprise in Higher Education scheme, colleagues were talking about core or transferable skills and working for their development.

The Employment Department Group's report *Enterprise in Higher Education: the First Eleven* (one of which was Durham) noted:

*What all the models had in common was an emphasis on development of what some called 'transferable skills'. These were skills which would make graduates more employable, but would also help them through their undergraduate days and in life beyond Higher Education and work.*

Examples of these skills were: communication, problem solving, team work, negotiation, self-assessment, use of initiative, creativity, entrepreneurship, reflection on experience, and leadership.

### Don't let your degree get in the way of your education

Heading up one of Durham's Student Societies' Web pages is this healthy reminder that students arrive at university with a plurality of aims and interests. [The Dearing Report](#) pointed out that key skills were 'relevant throughout life, not simply in employment', and through their own extra-curricular activities students undertake personal development and community service as well as promoting their employability.

We certainly see the employability of our graduates as testimony to the quality of support we offer to students. But as a collegiate university catering largely to traditional school-leavers, Durham has always favoured a holistic view of student development, adding value to the degree programme which is the core purpose of their time here.

So the Enterprise Scheme supported the implementation of established plans: a computer literacy programme (possibly the first of its kind), support for language learning, interventions to develop economic awareness and numeracy, personal and career development planning tools developed in colleges and departments, and a wide range of short courses offered by colleges and the Careers Advisory Service. (I treasure the comment from one graduate, a few months into his new job, who reported that the keyboarding skills course he had taken in college was one of the most useful things he had done at university....)

For Durham University the Enterprise Scheme ended in 1993, and not all of its initiatives survived the more stringent times which followed. The collective experience, however, meant that many staff became accustomed to the idea of transferable skills and continued to support skills development in different ways. There are, of course, varying views of the costs and benefits of this to staff.

## Present university strategy

The University's strategy specifies the provision of key skills training *'to ensure that our graduates are able to gain an advantage in the international job market, and are able to deploy their skills in the wider community to support economic and social development'*. Beneath this heading a number of actions are outlined:

- continuing opportunities for all students to develop their IT, foreign language and career management skills;
- departments to identify key skills as part of the QAA work on degree profiles;
- encouragement of projects which enable students to use their skills to the benefit of the local community.

Implementing the strategy means that, in line with the University's general commitment to teaching, delivery of key skills training will in the first instance be embedded within subject-specific curricula and degree programmes and will be the responsibility of the Boards of Studies for those subjects. However, the strategy implies responsibilities for 'the University' more broadly to provide opportunities and for students to take advantage of these.

As I've noted above, many of these opportunities represent the fulfilment of earlier strategic visions and continue to evolve. For example, as more students arrive at the University with well developed IT skills, an IT Generic Skills Certificate is no longer an appropriate offering, and is being replaced with shorter, more advanced, programmes. The Language Centre offers low-cost classes in an increasing number of languages at different levels and free access to a huge variety of self-study resources, and of course the Careers Advisory Service has continued to beaver away to help students identify the gains from their learning and experience.

## Embedding in the first instance

From 1999 onwards the Academic Office required all departments to send delegates to short courses on devising programme specifications, with a view to internal as well as external reviews (for QAA specifications see <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/progspec/contents.htm>). We sought external providers for these short courses, in order to emphasise the broad national context of these developments. We referred those taking part to subject benchmarks (<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/benchmark/benchmarking.htm>), where these were available, to illuminate the discussions.

For some participants this appeared to be the first time they had considered the integration of key skills into their own subject provision. This included me; I had been involved in preparing the proposal for our new Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education and now realised that we had not taken key skills into account, despite their consideration being included among assessment criteria for the Certificate's predecessor. (Should initial professional development for academic staff include accreditation of relevant key skills? Discuss.)

Programme specifications and other documents now coming forward for internal and external review purposes tend, unsurprisingly, to reflect the levels of engagement with key skills within their subject communities and apparent in their benchmarks. So we can see a wide variety in approaches: some departments still focusing very closely on traditionally defined academic skills, and some taking into account a broader range of professional employment-related skills; some departments perhaps articulating for the first time what may truly be embedded practices, and some instigating innovative programmes explicitly to help students identify and plan to develop skills relevant to their future as well as to current studies.

## So what's new?

Three initiatives will perhaps interest ILT readers, since they illustrate some classic approaches to educational development and innovation. If you want to do something new, is a 'bolt-on' programme necessarily a bad idea? Is it better to start small, with pilot projects? And how do you find out what's already going on, anyway?

## **The 'bolt-on'**

First year students returning to the Department of Economics and Business Finance in the New Year enjoyed a key skills week before reverting to normal study routines. The week was designed to improve both student and staff awareness of key skills, and to begin a process of audit to help students identify key skills and see how these could be acquired through their degree programmes. Activities focused on teamwork through employer-run business games, practical research skills for library searches and the use of Internet resources, and presentation skills through practice. Presentations from the Careers Advisory Service and the Durham Award team (of which more below) showed how students might fill gaps identified through this process.

Reactions have been positive and the department will do it again. Evaluation found links between students' desire for more hands-on practice in presentation, for example, and employers' requests for the additional skill of explaining economic concepts to non-economists. The University works to a tight teaching timetable, so finding the time to run this week as well as the human resource to make it work was a demanding task. This in itself may have emphasised its significance to both staff and students.

## **The pilot project**

Staff in the Physics Department have initiated a pilot project to develop and accredit key skills for postgraduates. The project is working with a small group of PhD students in the Very High Energy Gamma-Ray Astronomy Group, part of a trans-European consortium of about 15 institutions building a new facility in Namibia. The students are thus engaged in real world activity which offers unparalleled opportunities to focus on skills at QCA Levels 4 and 5. At the time of writing the students are presenting the outcomes of their research at an international conference and have engaged enthusiastically with the skills agenda.

The Graduate School Committee has recently approved the extension of the project, with the intention of eventually making it available to all graduate students as part of its wider package of training. At an early stage the project was associated with the Open University led project 'Key Skills - Making Connections', whose aims are to make the connections between learning in HE and how they are applied in employment contexts through awareness, development and use of higher level key skills (<http://www.open.ac.uk/keyskills>).

## **An emergent strategy**

At the same time, Physics staff were undertaking an analysis of key skills provision in the undergraduate curriculum. This shows that, although key skills may not have been explicitly built in, *'in retrospect, a considerable amount has been included in the good practice developed over the years'*. Undergraduates' opportunities to work on a range of skills are well integrated into the curriculum, both implicitly through the nature of the subject, and explicitly through skills sessions and projects solving problems for real-world clients. The analysis sees scope for improvement, however, in the development of a reflective approach by students, building in more explicit processes of planning and review to address the skill of 'Improving own Learning and Performance'. It is worth noting that Physics was one of the departments most actively involved in the Enterprise Scheme, so it's no surprise that good practice is embedded here.

## **The Durham Award**

During the late '90s the DfEE continued to fund work on key skills and personal development for students, disseminating the results via regional workshops and conferences. A useful overview of these projects is the website run by the Centre for Developing and Evaluation of Lifelong Learning (CDELL) at the University of Nottingham: <http://www.keyskillsnet.org.uk/>.

Dr Viv Shelley, Director of the Centre for Lifelong Learning at Durham's Stockton campus, attended a regional workshop and was particularly struck by the established and successful York Award (<http://www.york.ac.uk/admin/ya/>). Dr Shelley instigated a pilot scheme for the Durham Award, originally offered to students at Stockton only, but now also available in three departments on the Durham campus as well.

The philosophy of the programme emphasises process: developing skills through undertaking activities rather than the content of the outcomes of these activities. This involves participants in strategic planning, monitoring progress in developing and using key skills, reflective evaluation and presenting the outcomes of these activities. Students will gain the award by demonstrating ability in six 'core'(QCA) key skills - communications, information technology, application of number, working with others, problem solving, managing own learning and performance - and in six additional skills chosen from a range of options - the guidelines suggest action planning, adaptability, decision-making, negotiation, networking, opportunity awareness, research skills, self-confidence and self-awareness; others may be negotiated. Candidates' course work is expected to supply no more than 50%, at most, of evidence of skills development.

In addition to the internal resources already indicated, those taking part have access to the Key Skills Online package developed by Sheffield Hallam University (see <http://www.shu.ac.uk/services/lc/cmeweb/cmehome/content/projects/keyskills.htm> for details).

At the time of writing 177 first and second-year students had signed up to take part in the programme. Two very different participants told me about their experience; both linked the Award with employment. A young overseas student appreciated the help she had gained from the Award staff and valued the chances to develop practical skills:

*The reason I joined the programme was because in this day and age where the competition is so high and fierce, any edge that you can get over others is a welcome opportunity. The Award is a way of showing my abilities to others and a way for me to improve...*

A part-time mature student saw the Award's potential both to recognise her experience and to enhance her contributions in both paid and voluntary work.

*I chose to take part ... as I could see the benefit of such an award when trying to secure future employment. ...I have to provide key skills for some of the work I deliver so for me to work on my skills at a higher level can only be of benefit to all.*

The future of the Durham Award is a little uncertain at present, since it relies heavily on Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund finance and no other sources of funding have yet been identified.

The Durham Award's website is currently under reconstruction so I give no reference to it here. Readers may like to take a look at the similar award developed at Essex: see <http://www.essex.ac.uk/keyskills/EssexSkillsAward/>.

## References

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