



BRIDGING THE GAP  
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Briefing Paper - no: 2

## Key Skills in Higher Education



### Introduction

The incorporation of key skills into the curriculum is an important strategy for HEI's in addressing the issue of student employability. It is a requirement of the forthcoming QAA Academic Reviews ([www.QAA.ac.uk](http://www.QAA.ac.uk)). The reaction of students to the inclusion of key skills in the curriculum has been mixed. The quality and type of key skills strategy employed can affect student retention.

The DfEE Innovations Fund (1998-2000) funded ten projects under the theme of "Key Skills". These projects addressed the development, implementation, assessment, and continued monitoring of key skills programmes within higher education institutions.

### The following themes emerge from the projects:

1. Cross Institutional Support  
Key skills projects are more likely to be successful if they have support from across the institution at all levels: senior management, academics, other university staff (eg - staff developers), and students. Communication, co-operation and networking within and outside the university are important.
2. Departmental Support  
Key skills programmes must be tailored to the needs and aspirations of individual departments to attract the support of those in the departments. Ways to gain support from academics vary, but include:
  - stressing the relevance of key skills to the subject curriculum
  - the role of key skills in promoting lifelong learning
  - the enhancement that key skills offer to employability
 External sources of motivation can include pressures such as forthcoming subject reviews. Departments may start from very different levels of key skill awareness and activity.

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### 3. Assessment

Students are likely to take key skills more seriously if they are part of the (assessed) mainstream curriculum, rather than bolt-on courses, and if they can see the value of what they are learning. This is more likely to happen if their teachers support key skills projects.

### 4. Structures & Resources

Continuing support in the shape of formal structures and resources is likely to make key skills projects more sustainable.

- Prospects for graduates seeking work: demand for graduates has fluctuated over the past 25 years, with considerable variation between HEIs and degree subject areas
- Graduate under-employment: many graduates are entering employment not traditionally associated with this level of qualification
- Larger recruiters have had difficulty in recruiting graduates with specific skills
- The largest proportion of self-employed students come from creative arts programmes
- The effect of student debt on choice of career route

## THE PROJECTS

The projects are diverse and include institution wide schemes, subject specific schemes, schemes for undergraduates and schemes for postgraduates. Much of the work contained in the projects is transferable to both other disciplines and other institutions.

### Subject Specific Schemes

#### **Geography**

A consortium of 9 HEI's - led by Cheltenham & Gloucester College - developed eight guides based on extensive research. Seven of the guides are for staff development, looking at different areas of key skills teaching. The eighth guide is for new students. The guides are well produced in the form of A5 booklets of varying length between 60 & 150 pages providing many practical examples. The guides would lend themselves to use in other subjects with a minimum of adaptation.

#### **Science & Engineering**

Queen Mary College, University of London undertook a skills audit on a significant number of students in Science & Engineering. One particularly important finding was that there was a very different perception of key skills ability between graduates and employers (particularly Small & Medium Enterprise's - SME's). A student's self perception of his/her skills is much higher than that of their employer. Addressing this skills gap is an important factor in improving the employability of graduates. The Final Report of the project contains a detailed analysis of findings.

#### **Chemistry**

Although focussing on recording achievement, the work undertaken by the Royal Society of Chemistry also covered elements of key skills. The project has developed a process of skills audit and recording procedure for postgraduate chemistry students. Three phased student guides and a supervisor's guide have been produced. Together these guides indicate a framework and content for the delivery of key skills to postgraduate students in scientific disciplines.

### Institution Wide Initiatives

#### **De Montfort University**

This project developed a common system to be used across the different university departments. After extensive trialling the university has developed a range of loose-leaf workbooks which are particularly strong on references for further reading and self-development. Since the mid-1990's the university has been running a Certificate in Personal and Professional Skills. This is assessed by portfolio evidence.

However the take-up of this programme has been rather disappointing, as students regard the evidence gathering as onerous.

### ***National Union of Students***

This interesting project is student driven. During the course of the project over 14,000 students received key skills development. Because students delivered the development the participants seem to have had a very positive attitude to it. The NUS project also appears to have been very cost effective. The NUS saw the separation of key skills development from academic development as being desirable, suggesting that this leads to a more student centred, less formal and more enjoyable programme. The NUS developed development packages for trainers and development portfolio for the students.

### ***University of Bradford***

The University of Bradford has investigated staff attitudes to key skills via a number of development workshops. The University has adopted a two pronged approach: firstly it has embedded key skills into the curriculum; and secondly it has actively encouraged student development through extra-curricular activities. The work has increased the awareness of the Personal Development File, and also demonstrated its importance.

### ***University of Central Lancashire***

University of Central Lancashire adopted a hybrid approach, in that the initiative was institution wide, but each discipline could develop or adapt a model to meet specific needs. The project reached the following conclusions:

- Each discipline needs to develop key skills that are appropriate to their students
- Key skills need to be part of mainstream curriculum, not a bolt on extra
- Many key skills already form part of the curriculum, recognition of these is a useful way forward
- Collaboration both within and between HEI's is important

### ***Universities of Leeds, Sheffield & York***

In a joint project these three universities looked at key skills for research students. The project highlighted the negative attitudes many such students had towards key skills. The main reasons for this were:

- Lack of time
- Research work having priority
- Previous negative experience of profiling
- Lack of suitable documentation

The following measures were developed to address these issues:

- Action planning workshops
- Work shadowing
- Interpersonal skills school
- Personal profile documentation

The final project report is very detailed and addresses many relevant issues.

### ***University of Nottingham***

This project adopted a hybrid approach, and replicated some of the findings above:

- Key skills should be relevant to the discipline
- Implementation of key skills should start from those that are already embedded in the curriculum
- Students need tutorial support
- Personal achievement records are vital in encouraging students in the acquisition of key skills

The project also reflects on how key skills are specified.

### **University of Salford**

Salford has developed a number of useful and transferable key skills products:

- A model for curriculum change and development
- An implementation strategy for key skills development, delivery and assessment
- Staff development and training programmes
- Staff development materials
- A set of key skills curriculum mapping tools
- A computer based key skills diagnostic tool
- An employer survey
- Key skills self-assessment questionnaires
- A student key skills tracking model, which can be linked to a university's Management Information System (MIS)
- Discipline based project materials
- Key skills recording materials

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### **Project Titles in this Theme**

- Key Skills in Geography in Higher Education (Cheltenham & Gloucester College of HE)
- Diagnosis, Guidance & Support, & Recording Achievement of Key Skills in HE (De Montfort University)
- National Students Learning Programme (National Union of Students)
- Skills Development in Science & Engineering (Queen Mary & Westfield College)
- Student Self-Development & Key Skills Acquisition (University of Bradford)
- Key Skills in Higher Education (University of Central Lancashire)
- Training Research Students for Employability (University of Leeds)
- Implementing a Dissemination Strategy for Key Skills in HE Development Work (University of Nottingham)
- Embedding the Development of Key Skills within a Traditional University (University of Nottingham)
- A Strategic Approach to Undergraduate Key Skills Development (University of Salford)

### **Complementary Theme Titles - Recording Achievement**

- The Professional Development of Construction Management Students & Graduates (Loughborough University)
- Skills Profile for Chemistry Postgraduates (Royal Society of Chemistry)
- A Strategic Model for Developing Materials for Recording Achievement in Traditional Universities (University of Leeds)
- Implementation of a World Wide Web Based Profiling System (University of Liverpool)
- From the Periphery to the Mainstream (University of Manchester)
- An Internet Based Communications & Information Technology System for the Development of Personal & Academic records for HE (University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne)