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## School and Work: Meeting Employers' Expectations with Core Skills

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the skills with which young people leave Scotland's schools are of critical importance . . . Delivery of these skills presents a formidable challenge for the Scottish education service . . . if Scotland is to be able to compete successfully, and if her economy is to prosper. (*A Teaching Profession for the 21st Century* (The McCrone Report), SEED, 2000, pp. 4, 5).

As this quote from the McCrone Report makes clear, Scotland's politicians expect its education service to meet employers' expectations for an appropriately skilled workforce. This chapter discusses how the Scottish curriculum from primary school to university has attempted to align itself with employers' skill needs by means of the Scottish core-skills policy. Core skills have been included in Scottish school and college curricula (as well as adult education and training programmes) for a long time, and the National Qualifications encourage their development. Core skills are defined by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) as the abilities young people will need as active, enterprising and responsible members of society. They are viewed as generic skills that underpin performance in a wide range of jobs in the modern economy, and the list currently comprises Communication, Numeracy, Information Technology, Problem Solving and Working with Others. The two fundamental assumptions of core-skills policy are, first, that these generic skills can be developed through general education and skill-specific training in schools, further-education colleges and workplaces, and, second, that once acquired, they will enhance young people's employability:

while developing occupational competences, or educational attainments, students are also developing fundamental skills such as communication, problem solving and numeracy. In fact, it might be argued that the primary purpose of education is to develop such skills as they offer the potential for transfer to other pursuits later in life. (G. Jessup, *Outcomes: NVQs and the Emerging Model of Education and Training*, London: Falmer Press, 1991, p. 194)

The Scottish Core Skills Framework extends progressively through the Scottish curriculum over successive levels, starting during the 5–14 age-range, continuing through Standard Grade courses and National Qualifications, and carrying on into degrees, Higher National Certificates and Diplomas and Scottish Vocational Qualifications.

Core skills are included in the curriculum in two ways: 'integrally' (when they are judged to be implicit in subject-based studies) and as 'stand-alone' Workplace Core Skill units. In

the 'integral' mode of provision, National Units and National Courses in all subjects have been audited to see where success in the educational programme demonstrates that a core skill has been achieved. Accreditation of integral core skills by the SQA subdivides into 'embedding' and 'signposting'. When the core skill is judged to be 'embedded' within an educational course, 'the unit assessment overtakes the Core Skill assessment' and the student is 'automatically' accredited with the respective core skill alongside his or her attainment of the relevant unit. Communication, Numeracy and Problem Solving core skills are frequently certificated in this way. Alternatively, when the core skill is judged to be 'signposted', this means that 'opportunities to develop core skills occur during teaching, learning and assessment but lie outwith the formal assessment [of the unit or course]', in which case the core skills are not separately certificated, although the unit or course qualification is endorsed with the relevant 'signpost' (*Writing Higher National Units*, SQA, 2005).

It is readily apparent that many senior pupils in secondary schools are puzzled when they see these core skills listed on their SQA certificates alongside their subject grades. 'What are these?' many ask of their teachers, following results day in August each year. At the very least, there is a communication problem here – but it is tied up with the nature and constitution of core skills. These issues are discussed later in this chapter.

'Stand-alone' Workplace Core Skills Units and related assessments exist at levels up to Higher for each of the five core skills listed above. These discrete units can be attached to educational programmes where a particular core skill is not already an integral part of the the other units and courses of the programme. This results in the certification of the respective core skills on the Core Skills Profile in the same way as 'embedded' core skills.

## ORIGINS OF THE CORE-SKILLS POLICY

The UK core-skills policy originated in successive phases of the Youth Opportunities and Youth Training Schemes, introduced across the UK in the 1980s by the Manpower Services Commission to deal with youth unemployment. Core skills were included in these schemes to equip the trainees to find work in a modern economy. The content of the core skills reflected significant changes in employment which were believed to be taking place at that time, and embodied employers' beliefs about the generic skills the new ways of working would require. Due to a series of recessions and the liberalisation of world trade, the UK was experiencing a decline in mass production and other heavy-goods manufacturing and an expansion of the service sector. The drive to improve competitiveness resulted in increased use of automation and information technology, more flexible kinds of employment, more teamwork and increased recognition of the importance of customer orientation, with a consequent emphasis on 'emotional labour'. Moreover, the expectation of 'jobs for life' and a career spent working for a single employer, which dominated the political and vocational training agendas from 1945 to 1979, disappeared in the recession of the early 1980s. Most young people now faced a lifetime of shifting employment opportunities and flexible working, and would need regular retraining to maintain their employability in the new flexible workforce. It was against this background that core-skills policy was initiated in a speech by Kenneth Baker, Secretary of State for Education in England and Wales, to the Association of Colleges of Further and Higher Education on 15 February 1989:

As I see it, there are a number of skills . . . which young people and adults in future will all need. They could be expressed as a list of core skills . . . say, the following: Communication, written and

oral. How to explain a complicated working procedure, or deal with a tricky customer . . .  
Numeracy. Not simply adding a column of figures, but understanding orders of magnitude . . .

The Confederation of British Industry, representing the interests of the major employers in the UK, gave strong support for core-skills policy, which it saw as the cutting edge of a 'skills revolution' that would ensure that school-leavers were prepared for work in a post-industrial economy. The first set of core skills formulated in the UK following Baker's speech comprised Communication, Numeracy, Personal Relations (e.g. teamworking and leadership), Familiarity with Technology, Familiarity with Systems (e.g. office and workshop procedures, employment hierarchies) and Familiarity with Changing Working and Social Contexts.

Subsequent Scottish policy and practice on core skills diverged from the approach in England and Wales (where core skills were renamed 'key skills') and is now distinctive. Scottish core-skills policy is based much more on the integral mode of provision, where core skills are judged to be embedded or signposted in a broad educational curriculum. Consequently, there is less emphasis on stand-alone Workplace Core Skill units, and less direct assessment of core skills.

The initial development of the distinctive Scottish approach to core skills can be characterised as a period of piecemeal growth. The three main curriculum offerings in post-16 education and training, the 'academic', 'work-related' and 'work-based' tracks, tended to incorporate quite distinct notions of how the skills acquired in formal education could be made relevant to the world of work. In schools and colleges, an attempt was made to introduce work-related skills into the curriculum through the introduction of the 1983 Action Plan. These new modular-based National Certificates had a learning-outcome framework and could be taken alongside traditional academic subjects. Indeed, they were seen as much broader in educational terms than their counterparts elsewhere in the UK:

In contrast to the approach being pioneered by the Manpower Services Commission . . . National Certificate modules were designed to be deliverable in both colleges and the workplace. This, and the emphasis on 'learning outcomes' rather than competence, not only meant that reform of vocational provision in Scotland had a more educational bias, but also that the specification of knowledge components was better articulated. (P. Raggatt and S. Williams, *Government, Markets and Vocational Qualifications*, London: Falmer Press, 1999, p. 37)

In fact, the National Certificate modules were taken up in considerable numbers by pupils in schools, and, it could be argued, represented the rudiments of a core-skills programme:

The unitisation, or modularisation, associated with Action Plan was quite different in style and scope to that associated with the introduction of Scottish Vocational Qualifications. Action Plan was concerned with learning of all kinds and could happily incorporate hard and soft skills, process and products. (J. Hart and C. Howieson, *Unitisation: Benefits and Issues*, Research and Information Services Bulletin, no. 9, Glasgow: SQA, 2004, p. 7)

The Action Plan offered an integral model of core-skill acquisition in the sense that it resisted the narrow vocationalism of the Manpower Services Commission on the basis that there should be no abandonment of broadly based education. It also endorsed an 'immersion' model of core-skill practices through work-experience programmes for school pupils and placements for students from colleges. This contrasted with policies that created stand-alone teaching units of core/key skills or embedded processes that recognised that the skills were

already incorporated in the design of the curriculum. By 1998–9, just over 50 per cent of pupils in schools had taken National Certificate modules, the majority of which were in the subject areas of Work Experience, Communications, Core Mathematics and Word Processing (Canning, 2003). Within colleges, the take-up of National Certificate modules was even more impressive, as they offered an alternative programme of study for young people leaving school at the age of 16. This would also eventually result in a more coherent curriculum as colleges introduced Scottish Group Awards at National Certificate and Higher National Diploma levels in the mid-1980s.

Within the academic track, Standard Grade had broadened the curriculum in S3 and S4 and over time incorporated the idea of generic skills through the use of process skills and personal and social development. These evolutionary changes in the curriculum would eventually form part of a Core Skills Framework within the system of National Qualifications.

Alongside these developments in broadening the academic and work-related curriculum within schools and colleges, a UK curriculum policy on work-based qualifications took central stage. Although National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) had been introduced in England in 1985, they had been resisted within Scotland and were adopted only in 1989. At that time, Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs) were seen as an unnecessary alternative to National Certificates, and their initial growth was limited to Foundation Levels of Standard Grade. In fact, it was not until the introduction of Modern Apprenticeships that we witnessed substantial growth in the take-up of SVQs at intermediate levels. In contrast to National Certificates, the work-based SVQs incorporated 'occupational competences' and, in particular, reflected the views of larger employer groups who had historically shown little appetite for funding training associated with general transferable skills. Although the awards reflected a pragmatic, codified response to the employability agenda, the standards on which SVQs were based tended to be much more occupationally focused, with less explicit coverage being given to generic core skills. Thus, while generic skills were a built-in feature of the National Certificate, they were stripped out of NVQs and SVQs (Hart and Howieson, *op. cit.*).

One of the most influential documents to emerge on core skills in Scotland at this time was the publication of *Core Skills by Design: A Report to the Howie Committee on Core Skills in the 16+ Curriculum in Scotland* (Edinburgh: SOED, 1991). The paper outlined a range of proposals on the themes of the introduction of a core-skills framework, the embedding and certificating of core skills and the use of Records of Achievement for every school pupil. The framework operated at three levels (corresponding to levels 1–3 SVQs) and included the core skills of Communication, Problem Solving, Personal and Interpersonal Skills, Numeracy and Information Technology. Although a range of options were included in the paper on how to implement a core-skills framework within schools, it is clear that the favoured one was embedding them within the subject curriculum. In other words, existing subject areas would become 'carriers' of core skills through an embedding and auditing framework.

## HIGHER STILL

The next phase of development in core-skill policy emerged with the introduction of 'Higher Still'. Following the 1992 Howie Report into upper secondary education, a baccalaureate-style qualification was proposed for Scotland that incorporated core-skills provision across all levels of the curriculum. Interestingly, the core-skills framework envisaged was broader in its conception and included both modern languages and personal and

interpersonal skills. However, Howie's recommendations were rejected and a less ambitious reform programme implemented through Higher Still and the adoption of new National Qualifications.

During the development phase of the National Qualifications programme, the Higher Still Development Unit issued a consultative document on core skills in 1995 that outlined a number of options for incorporating them within the 14–18 curriculum. The framework included five core skills made up of nine components and offered at five levels: Access 2, Access 3, Intermediate 1, Intermediate 2 and Higher. Each core-skill component would require forty hours of learning to complete. However, no consensus emerged from the consultations, and it became apparent that there was little appetite for implementing a core-skills framework within schools. Initially, this would lead to greater institutional diversity in the provision of core skills, with schools opting for integral provision within a subject-based curriculum while colleges developed both stand-alone core-skill units and embedded skill profiles within National Certificate modules. However, this period of development could be seen as a pragmatic response to the then current political realities as schools resisted the implementation of the core-skill component of Higher Still. In comparison with England and the development of key skills, Scotland did opt for a more integral model of core-skill delivery. This in fact reflected the dominant position of schools in shaping the new National Qualifications and subsequently in retaining strong academic focuses in the 14–18 curriculum. However, it should be noted that there was more enthusiasm for core skills within colleges and special schools – although, like mainstream schools, these sectors failed to adopt Scottish Group Awards, which included core-skill elements.

Since the introduction of National Qualifications, there has been a consolidation of the integral model of core-skill practice (Raffe et al. 2005). For instance, in the year 2000, the newly created SQA introduced a Core Skill Profile for each candidate, which incorporated an embedded and automatic certification framework of core skills within schools (SQA 2005). Also, since spring 2003, the SQA has revised the design rules for Higher National Certificates and Diplomas to signpost and embed core skills within the curriculum. This was followed in 2006 by a National Certificate portfolio review that uses a signposting model of core skills. Although there exists a diverse range of practices in assessing core skills, the dominant model emerging is that of an integral approach, with either automatic certification or signposting core skills within the curriculum. Whether the further-education sector will be able to continue to offer stand-alone certificated units in core skills is open to question, and this may eventually depend on funding frameworks and external pressures to surface some generic notion of transferable skills from Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education (*Core Skills in Scottish Further Education Colleges*, Edinburgh: HMIE, 2001).

### *A CURRICULUM FOR EXCELLENCE*

An interesting recent development in generic skills provision within the compulsory school years emerged from the National Debate on Education during 2002. The ministerial response to the debate was *A Curriculum for Excellence*, which, among other things, proposed the piloting of Skills for Work courses for young people in S3 and S4 at secondary schools in partnership with local colleges. The courses are being offered at five levels and consist of three or four forty-hour units. The pilots are within vocational subjects such as early education, childcare and construction. Although core skills feature within the courses, a much broader curriculum is proposed that includes employability and subject-related knowledge

and skills. However, it could also be argued that the courses are less ambitious in nature and reflect a rather unassuming conception of working life, for instance: 'Opportunities to develop both generic and specific vocational skills are provided, including understanding workplace demands such as timekeeping, appearance and customer care, adaptability and a positive attitude to change' (SFEU, *Broadcast 70*, Spring 2006, p. 30).

In fact, this enculturation approach to meeting employers' expectations about employee behaviour is nothing new. In a report entitled *Learning Gains from Education at Work* (Scottish Executive, 2002), the core skills of Numeracy, Problem Solving and Information and Communication Technology were deemed less important for school-leavers than being able to turn up at work and follow instructions. Indeed, employers, school-leavers and teachers believed that 'fitting into an organisation' was one of the most important aspects of work-related skills within any work-experience course. It is likely that, within Skills for Work, the core-skill elements may make a purely nominal contribution while learning is restricted to acquiring much more mundane habits such as arriving at work on time. It is also probable that, despite the aspirational claims of policy-makers, Skills for Work is likely to be concentrated at Access and Intermediate levels of attainment for those young people who are considered not suitable for academic study. This would indeed mirror the current provision of Workplace Core Skills units, which are concentrated at the lower levels of ability.

## CRITIQUE OF CORE SKILLS

As a measure for ensuring that what is learned in formal institutions of education will prepare students for effective performance at work, core skills have not been without their critics. Scepticism focuses on four areas: the educational value of stand-alone core-skill units, whether core skills do in fact make young people more employable, whether core skills can be transferred from school and college to the workplace, and indeed, whether such skills actually exist.

### The educational value of stand-alone core-skill units

The limited amount of empirical evaluation of stand-alone core-skills units that has taken place has yielded mixed results. On the one hand, they have enhanced some further-education courses by encouraging group work and introducing students to the practice of portfolio compilation. On the other hand, surveys have found them irrelevant to particular career pathways, and they are sometimes resented by students for that reason. Moreover, provision in university settings has encountered difficulties, in that university lecturers are usually subject specialists with little interest in generic workplace skills and little or no training in teaching them.

### Do core skills improve employability?

As we have seen, core-skills policy originated in employer-led debates about the generic skills that are needed to improve young people's employability in a modern economy. Employer groups have continued to support the core-skills agenda in national policy debates. However, this enthusiasm appears to dissipate somewhat when the practices of individual employers are considered. Recent research by the SQA suggests that the majority of employers have little awareness, or indeed understanding, of the Scottish Core Skills Profile, and have paid

scant attention to it when recruiting employees. Although the 'softer' core skills are valued, these are interpreted as the recruits' pre-existing dispositions and attitudes, rather than skills acquired through formal education. Interestingly, in the Future Skills in Scotland surveys taken in 2002 and 2003, employers said that they were happy with just under half of school-leavers' soft core skills, 74 per cent of college-leavers' core skills and 82 per cent of higher-education students' core skills. This led to the conclusion: 'It may be that the soft core skills which FE and HE graduates have accrued are the result of their being older and more mature rather than having been acquired as part of their continuing education' (Scottish Enterprise 2004).

It is also questionable whether students who leave school or college with certificated core skills are thereby enabled to work in the more flexible ways that these skills were originally intended to facilitate. In a study of young employees' performance in the workplace one of the few studies to address this question with empirical research concluded that the core-skills approach 'is inadequate in promoting occupational flexibility' (C. Myers (1992), 'Core skills and transfer in youth training schemes: a field study of trainee motor mechanics', *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 13: 625–32). This pessimistic conclusion is supported by data from the Scottish Household Survey which suggest that specific occupational skills are more in demand among employers than generic skills: 'Many sectors, public and private, have developed occupational skills specific to their needs . . . occupational skills are tied to the particular needs of an industrial sector rather than a generic labour force which moves between sectors' (L. Paterson, F. Bechhofer and D. McCrone, *Living in Scotland: Social and Economic Change since 1980*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004).

#### Are core skills transferable?

Core-skills policy is based on the fundamental assumption that these skills are 'transferable across education and work contexts and that the acquisition of such skills will enhance learner flexibility, adaptability and autonomy' (*Development of Transferable Skills in Learners*, Sheffield: Employment Department Methods Strategy Unit, 1993, p. 9). However, the assumption that skills can be learned in one context and transferred to others has been questioned by extensive research. More than a century of research in the psychology of learning has failed to find convincing evidence that skills can be transported across contexts except at the most rudimentary of levels and between very similar situations. One of the few empirical studies into how soft core skills are acquired suggests that they are learned on the job, not transferred from schools, colleges and universities (F. Green, D. Ashton and A. Felstead (2001), 'Estimating the determinants of supply of computing, problem-solving, communication, social and team working skills', *Oxford Economic Papers*, pp. 406–33). Indeed, the suggestion that a core skill such as Communication is somehow acquired by an individual while at school or college and transferred into new contexts remains highly implausible. It is more accurate to regard communication as part of the culture of the workplace in which the newcomer participates. While the new recruit might arrive with attitudes that predispose to effective communication, the pattern of situated interactions called 'communication' is co-constructed between the members of the workforce and is highly dependent on the organisation's culture.

Another questionable assumption is that core skills are owned by individuals. Analysis of performance at work suggests that accomplishments such as Working with Others are

collective, placing them beyond the reach of the National Qualifications framework, which accredits performance by individuals (Boreham, 2004).

### Do core skills exist?

A 'skill' may be defined as an item of individual behaviour which is orientated towards a goal, is successful in attaining that goal on most occasions it is enacted and which has been acquired by training and practice. The skills of plastering ceilings and dancing the tango fit this definition. However, the more diffuse accomplishments called 'core skills' do not seem to fit. This has led some academic critics to conclude that they are 'non-existent' and that 'belief in these entities is based on wishful thinking . . . a chimera hunt, an expensive and disastrous exercise in futility' (T. Hyland and S. Johnson (1998), 'Of cabbages and key skills', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 22: 163–72, p. 170). In support of this radical view, it can be argued that the language of skills does not derive all its meaning from the process of referring to items of behaviour that can be acquired by training and practice and then reliably assessed. Pronouncements on core skills by the Confederation of British Industry and government ministers responsible for national manpower development might be rhetorical flourishes for urging educators to pay more attention to the employability of their students. This view is supported by the way in which the definition of core skills has shifted over the years, reflecting the social and political purposes for which speeches about young people's employability are made. For instance, in the 1980s, language education was central to the discourses on core skills, while in the 1990s enterprise education became much more prominent. Both have subsequently been eclipsed by the softer skills of teamwork and improving one's own learning. In general, scholars agree that talk about skill is 'fuzzy around the edges' (Warhurst et al. 2004), and post-feminists have argued that it is used by males to assert dominance in the world of work. It is probable that current definitions of core skills do include skills that can be acquired by training and practice and then assessed, such as operating a word-processing package; but it seems that much of their content is far too vague.

### CONCLUSIONS

There is little doubt that core-skills policy development is at a crossroads in Scotland. The integral model of core-skills delivery has gained considerable ground since the advent of Higher Still and has become much more sophisticated in its articulation with National Qualifications. However, there remains considerable doubt within schools and universities of the value of core skills, and this is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. Employers also seem to be shifting their ground on the issue and pressing for the development of 'work-readiness' skills instead. Both these developments endorse the critiques of core-skills policy put forward by academics. On the other hand, in comparison with key skills in England, the Scottish framework on core skills is more responsive to local educational needs, and indeed it attempts to meet a more ambitious hierarchy of ability levels than its southern counterpart. The move away from automatic certification to signposting is a further step in a direction which acknowledges some of the academic critiques of the notion of a core skill. The trend would appear to be towards further *contextualisation* and *integration* of core skills within the curriculum. This has distinct advantages when considering work-based and work-related programmes, particularly within 'near-work' environments in further-education colleges. However, within schools, an alternative approach may have to be



considered. Here, following the example of universities, an 'immersion' policy of structured engagement with actual workplaces and specific employers might be a more suitable strategy. Indeed, this is not something that is new, as both sectors have had a long history of using work-experience programmes as learning opportunities for pupils and students.

Finally, there is an urgent need within Scotland to address the very concept of core skills itself. One option would be to make marginal changes to the existing core-skills framework to acknowledge the diffuseness of the concept. For instance, this might involve revising particular core-skill definitions, reviewing the components that make up each core skill or extending the Framework above level 6 (Higher). This option would continue within a 'mixed-economy' model of core skills but redress the obvious weaknesses within the system: Core Skill Profiles being determined by subject choices; learners being accredited with a Core Skill Profile without consciously attending to them; not allowing evidence to be collected from a wider range of community and social practices. This option would also allow for the further contextualisation of core skills within an integral curriculum model.

Another option would be more radical, if more regressive. Within this option, the notion of core skills would be dropped and replaced with a 'functional skills' approach similar to that developed in England following the government's response to the Tomlinson report. Indeed, this would be in line with current thinking around *A Curriculum for Excellence* and 'Determined to Succeed'. Within any new 3–18 curriculum framework, core skills might simply be seen as part of the 'decluttering' process. The emphasis could then switch again to ensuring the acquisition of basic skills, reflecting a long-standing employer agenda. Interestingly, this option would bring the whole debate around core skills full circle, with a return to both a UK skills agenda and a 'deficit model' approach to skill-acquisition by young people.

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