A HISTORY OF CORE SKILLS POLICY DEVELOPMENT IN SCOTLAND

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ABSTRACT

The primary aim of the paper is to critically review the development of policy and practice in the area of Core Skills within both the compulsory and post-compulsory years of education. The research design is based upon an analysis of policy documents, interviews with key informants and the use of secondary data sources. An historical analysis for the period 1979-2006 is also provided of policy development in the field of Core Skills including the demand for generic foundation skills from employers. The main conclusion of the research is that policy-makers in Scotland are currently at a cross-roads with the very notion of generic Core Skills and that this, in turn, could lead to the abandonment of the policy of 'embedding' skills within the school and college curriculum.

INTRODUCTION

This paper provides an historical account of policy-making in Core Skills in Scotland. In doing so it is acknowledged that, in contrast to Key Skills in England (Hodgson and Spours, 2002), the historical analysis of Core Skills is not particularly well documented in Scotland. This is partly because although Core Skills have formed part of the discourse on curriculum policy, they have never achieved such a central role in post-16 education as they have in England. Also, much of the history of Core Skills in Scotland is accounted for within an oral tradition that relies heavily on a very small but close-knit community of educationalists and policy-makers. What is presented here, therefore, is of necessity a partial and reconstructed explanation of the formulation and implementation of Core Skill policy over the last thirty years. Indeed, this account relies as much on the personal reflections of the actors involved throughout the period, as it does on the official policy discourses that informed the debates at the time. The paper is divided into a number of sections, each of which forms a distinct phase in the development of Core Skill policy. Although these phases are in a sense arbitrary, and do overlap, they are nonetheless useful in distinguishing a particular Scottish dimension to the debate.

It should be acknowledged at the outset that Core Skills as a concept is socially constructed. Over the years, the meaning of generic skills has continually changed, reflecting social, political and economic trends. For instance, in the 1980s language education was central to any discourse 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 own learning. Post-feminists have also argued that the concept of skill is highly gendered and offers a masculine perspective of the world of work. Indeed, in many ways the concept of skill has become bigger, broader and much fuzzier around the edges (Warhurst et al, 2004). Definitions of Core Skills are, therefore, contested and the concept has increasingly become imbued with notions of emotive and aesthetic labour and, in turn, tangled up with attributes and dispositions.

However, for the purpose of this paper, Core Skills will be taken to mean the clusters of foundation generic work-related skills identified by the Scottish Qualifications Authority. These are: communication; working with others; numeracy; problem-solving and information technology. They are offered at five levels and can be certificated as stand-alone units (Workplace Core Skills), although typically they

are embedded or signposted within National Qualifications.

PHASE 1: DEFICIT MODEL (1979-1984)

The historical roots of Core Skills can be found in two parallel developments in UK education and training policy. The first was the core skills project established by the Manpower Services Commission in 1984, which set out to identify a number of transferable skills that were common in a wide range of tasks and which are essential for competence in those tasks. This competence framework provided a foundation of generic skills for the development of the Youth Opportunities Programme (YOPS) and, subsequently, the Youth Training Scheme in the mid-1980s (Raggatt and Williams, 1999). In policy terms, core skills were initially conceived of as clusters of foundation work-related practises that would have an occupational currency and allow the development of a flexible and competent workforce. However, in practice these generic core skills were targeted at the unemployed and thus came to be associated with a deficit model of skill development (Hayward and Fernandez, 2004). A related policy development in core skills began with the Basis for Choice (DES, 1979) in England, which saw the introduction of pre-vocational education courses such as the Certificate of Pre-Vocational Education (Halsall, 1996). These were, indeed, the forerunners of the general vocational education programmes such as GNVQs/GSVQs that would emerge at a later date. It can be argued, therefore, that by the early 1980s a broad policy framework on core skills was already being established within the UK.

In Scotland, the emergence of Core Skills can be traced back to the Youth Training Scheme (YTS). Both the one-year and two-year YTS programmes incorporated the three strands of core skills, occupational skills and transferable skills within their structure. Core skills covered communication, numeracy and IT while transferable skills focused on the softer skills of team working and problem solving. This leaner version of work-related skills, it is argued, heralded the retreat of state intervention in higher-level skills training that would eventually result in the dismantling of UK public institutions and infrastructures responsible for education and training (Fairley and Paterson, 1991). However, it is important not to be overly pessimistic about YTS, as it did offer an 'extension' of learning from the compulsory years of education for those least likely to stay on at school and, by 1988/89, improved sufficiently in quality to allow for a greater breadth of study. Nevertheless, the first phase of development of Core Skills was seen as a UK-wide initiative primarily targeted at unemployed young people participating in government sponsored training programmes.

PHASE 2: DIVERGENCE (1982-1992)

The second phase in the development of Core Skill policy can be characterised as a period of piecemeal development. The three main curriculum offerings in post-16 education and training (academic, work-related and work-based education) tended to incorporate quite distinct notions of generic skills. In schools and colleges an attempt was made to introduce work-related skills into the curriculum through the introduction of the Action Plan (SED, 1983). 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 MSC, however, 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 (Raggatt and Williams, 1999: 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 modularization, associated with Action 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 (Hart and Howieson, 2004: 7)

The *Action Plan* offered an integrated model of Core Skills in the sense that it resisted the narrow vocationalism of the MSC on the basis that there should be no abandonment of broadly based education (Fairley and Paterson, 1991). 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 incorporated the skills within the design of the curriculum. By 1998-99 just over 50% of pupils in schools had taken NC 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 Group Awards at National Certificate and Higher National Diploma levels in the mid-1980s.

Within this period a broader concept of generic skills was also being integrated into Further Education courses through the use of Personal and Social Development modules (PSD) that included elements of mathematics, communication, problem solving and team working. Although these modular based courses formed part of the skills agenda, they were much broader in conception and included aspects of personal and social development which appealed to a much wider student group from young people to adult returnees. Many of these social and education awards can be seen as the antecedents of the current Core Skill framework and, although conceived of in much broader terms, marked an important development in identifying and certificating foundation work-related skills.

Within the academic track the Standard Grade had broadened the curriculum in S3 and S4 (HMSO, 1977) and over time incorporated the idea of generic skills through the use of process skills and personal and social development (SCCC, 1989).

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 only adopted in 1989. At the time Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs) were seen as an unnecessary alternative to National Certificates and their initial growth was limited to foundation levels (Canning, 1998). In fact, it was not until the introduction of Modern Apprenticeships that we witness substantial growth in the take-up of SVQs at intermediate levels (Canning, 2004). In contrast to National Certificates, SVQs incorporated a much broader definition of skills that in terms of Core Skills, rather paradoxically, were more narrowly defined:

> Thus, whilst generic skills were a built-in-feature of the National Certificate, they were stripped out of NVQs and SVQs (Hart & Howieson, 2004:7)

These work-based qualifications emphasised occupational competence and, in particular, reflected the views of larger employer groups who had historically showed little appetite for funding training associated with transferable skills. Although the awards reflected a pragmatic, codified response to the employability agenda the standards themselves tended to be much more occupationally focused with less explicit coverage being given to generic core skills.

By the end of the 1980s progress had been made on the introduction of a much more coherent set of Group Awards that provided a basis of choice for the increasing number of pupils who where staying on at school after the end of the compulsory years. Rather interestingly one such Group Award to emerge was a sister qualification of the General National Vocational Qualifications from south of the border (GNVQ). This was the General Scottish Vocational Qualification (GSVQ) which was piloted following Access and Opportunity (Scottish Office, 1991). Here for the first time we have Core Skills being identified and certificated within the work-related curriculum in schools and colleges (Gunning, 1994). Although the Group Award was never taken up in any considerable numbers it did represent an important landmark in the development of Core Skill policy and strongly influenced subsequent thinking on how to design and integrate Core Skills within the curriculum.

One of the most influential documents to emerge on Core Skills at this time was the publication of Core Skills by Design (SOED, 1991). Presented to the Howie Committee as part of its review of the post-16 curriculum, the paper outlines 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 are 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.

What emerged over this period was a fragmented and decentralised structure of Core Skill development that relied as much on the intrinsic logic of institutions as it did on any coherent national policy. However, a national Core Skill framework begins to emerge during the period that would play an important role in shaping subsequent curriculum policy development in the early 1990s.

PHASE 3: EMBEDDING MODEL (1994- PRESENT)

The third phase of development in Core Skill policy emerged with the introduction of *Higher Still* (Scottish Office, 1994). Following the Howie (SOED, 1992) 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, Howe'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 Qualification programme the Higher Still Development Unit issued a consultative document on Core Skills (HSDU, 1995) that outlined a number of options for incorporating Core Skills 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 40 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 (HSDU, 1996). Initially this would lead to greater institutional diversity in the

provision of Core Skills with schools opting for a more embedded model within a subject-based curriculum, whilst 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*:

> There was substantial opposition within schools to the emphasis on core skills and to the creation of SGAs (Howieson et al, 2002: 74)
>
> and
>
> Aims relating to core skills or the relation of academic and vocational courses are considered less important especially by independent schools (Raffe at al 2004: 7)

In comparison with England and the development of Key Skills, Scotland did opt for a more embedded model of Core Skill delivery:

> The most important difference between English and Scottish policy is their different approaches to delivering core/key skills. Higher Still 'embeds' core skills by incorporating them into the design of units of courses..(Spours et al, 2000: 89)

This in fact reflected the dominant position of schools in shaping the new National Qualifications and, subsequently, in retaining a 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 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 embedded model of Core Skill practice (Raffe at al, 2005). For instance, in the year 2000 the newly created Scottish Qualification Authority (SQA) introduced a Core Skill profile for each candidate, which incorporated an embedded and automatic certification framework of Core Skills within schools (SQA, 2005a) 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 (SQA, 2005b). Embedded in this context means that the Core Skills are embedded where the unit assessment overtakes the Core Skill assessment, while signposted means that where opportunities to develop Core Skills occur during teaching, learning and assessment but lie outwith formal assessment, then the Core Skills will not be automatically certificated. This is being followed in 2007 by a National Certificate portfolio review that will use 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 embeddedness, either through automatic certification or by 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 the Inspectorate of Education (HMIE, 2001). However, it should be recognised that colleges use Core Skills as a diagnostic tool both for establishing initial skill levels and for planning student progression.

An interesting recent development in generic skills provision within the compulsory school years has emerged from the National Debate in Education during 2002. The ministerial response to the debate was *A Curriculum for Excellence* (ACfE) and *Determined to Succeed*, the latter which proposed the piloting of

Skills for Work (SfW) courses for young people in S3 and S4 secondary schools in partnership with local colleges. The courses are being offered at four levels and consist of three or four 40 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 docile 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, 2006: 30)

In fact these enculturation attributes of meeting employers' behavioural expectations are nothing new. In a report published on Learning Gains from Education at Work (Scottish Executive, 2002) the Core Skills of numeracy, problem solving and ICT were deemed less important for schools leavers than being able to turn up at work and follow instructions. Indeed, employers, school leavers and teachers believed 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 SfW, the Core Skills elements may have a more symbolic value allowing much more precise behavioural and cultural attributes of organisational practices to be assimilated. It is also probable that despite the aspirational claims of policy makers SfW is likely to be concentrated at Access and Intermediate levels of achievement for 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.

EMPLOYERS

The discourse on Core Skills places employers in a central role in shaping the skills for work curriculum. Employer groups have consistently supported the Core Skills agenda in national policy debates (CBI Scotland, 2000). However, this apparent enthusiasm for transferable skills appears to dissipate somewhat when individual employer practices are considered at a local level. Recent research in Scotland (SQA, 2002) suggests that the majority of employers have little awareness, or, indeed, understanding of the Scottish Qualification Authority's Core Skill profile and had paid scant attention to it when recruiting employees. Although the softer Core Skills were valued, these were linked more to the disposition and attitudes of the candidates rather than to any acquired set of Core Skills. Interestingly, in the *Future Skills in Scotland* (Scottish Enterprise, 2004) surveys, taken over the period 2002 and 2003, employers said that they were happy with just under half of school leavers' soft core skills, 74% of college leavers' core skills and 82% of higher education students' core skills. It was acknowledged in the reports that:

> It may be that the soft core skills which FE and HE graduates have accrued as the result of their being older and more mature rather than having been acquired as part of their continuing education (Scottish Enterprise, 2004:36)

This is supported by evidence from Higher Education Institutions who would also appear to be somewhat ambivalent towards Core Skills (SQA, 2003). It is also highly questionable whether employers do actually need transferable skills. Data from the Scottish Household Survey would suggest that specific occupational skills are more in demand in comparison with 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 (Paterson at al, 2004:52)

An interesting question here is who exactly is responsible for developing Core Skills? The answer to the question is both a conceptual and an empirical one. If Core Skills are conceptualised as generic soft skills (non-cognitive) then it would be reasonable to assume that an early intervention programme with pre-school children would help solve the problem (Heckman and Masterov, 2004). However, it could be argued that this is a rather over-deterministic approach and that schools and colleges could play an important role in developing generic Core Skills. If, however, Core Skills are conceptualised as context-bound and collectively formed, then employers would play a central role in developing them within a workplace environment. Indeed, one of the few empirical studies into the acquisition of Key/Core skills (Green at al, 2001) suggests that soft skills are better learned on-the-job, while schools, colleges and universities would do better concentrating on academic and technical skills.

DISCUSSION

The paper has provided an historical account of how Core Skills policy has been developed over the past 30 years within Scotland. However, a theoretical and socio-political explanation is also required to understand why Core Skills followed a particular trajectory in policy development terms. In particular, how can the different phases of policy development be explained and why has such a narrow and, arguably, more 'rationalist' model of skills been so readily adopted in Scotland in comparison with other countries from around the world? Finally, when reflecting back on policy debates, why is it that Core Skills policies have persisted over a period of more than three decades when there has been only limited evidence of their impact on learning?

How can the different phases in the development of Core Skills policy be explained in political, social and economic terms? The deficit model phase was clearly linked to the wider economic global trends of the late 1970s and early 1980s. A period of economic decline, rapid de-industrialisation and the emergence of youth unemployment on a scale never witnessed since the inter-war years. The foundation skills developed through YTS clearly were designed to be delivered within a training environment and could, therefore, cater for larger numbers of young people. Also the YTS cohorts tended to be the least academically able students and those more likely to benefit from a Core Skills programme. From 1982 onwards this narrower focus on foundation skills was reinforced through the 'new vocationalism' curriculum established by the competence frameworks used within N/SVQs. This drive towards outcome based standards, coupled with de-professionalisation and post-incorporation of Further Education colleges in Scotland, led to a greater fragmentation of the sector and to the piecemeal development of Core Skills policy. It was only after 1994 that we witness the emergence of a national Core Skills agenda. This again, however, was a politically driven initiative that relied heavily on the direction given by policy makers within the Scottish Executive and the Scottish Qualifications Authority. In fact, it is reasonable to argue here that education policy has always operated through a policy of consensus and that what often emerges is a reflection of the institutional logic of the players involved. In this case schools found a way of circumventing Core Skills policy through embedding the work-related competencies within a subject-based curriculum. The college sector subsequently followed suit through sign-posting Core Skills within HNC/HNDs and eventually NCs. It is difficult within this context to claim that the skills agenda was indeed demand-led and employer driven at the time. Employers often remained on the periphery of

events and young people have rarely had a voice. In fact many of the young people holding such Core Skills are unlikely to be aware that they have done so as part of their studies (Welsh and Canning, 2003).

Taking a more international perspective on the issue of skill acquisition, it is interesting to note that the concept of Core Skills and Competencies has been more widely adopted within the English speaking countries from around the world, all of which have introduced some notion of employability skills within the curriculum. However, the concept of competencies is usually much more broadly defined in terms of citizenship and social responsibilities in these countries in comparison with the more narrowly defined skills focus within the UK (McSkeane, 2007). The communitarian aspects of participating in a social democracy are rarely addressed within this narrower discourse of skills. In fact, the neo-liberal economic rhetoric of the knowledge economy, lifelong learning and skills dominates the debate. It is not surprising therefore that skills have come in the UK to be worshiped as the solution to all economic ills. In fact, capital investment is recognised as being the major drag on performance in terms of international competitiveness. Also, more recent research has demonstrated that the concept of skills is largely culturally determined and differs significantly between nation states (Clarke and Winch, 2007). For instance, the German concept of skill is much broader than that of the UK and includes notions of identity, standards of education and training and working conditions. In comparative international terms, therefore, the UK definition of skills is a much narrower, individualistic and shifting concept than its counterparts elsewhere in the world.

In theoretical terms how can Core Skills be conceptualised when the underlying concept is so unstable? This question is taken up in a related paper (Canning, 2007) which suggests that generic skills are often conceptualised in semiotic terms as universal and de-contextualised objects. They often, therefore, come to resemble 'discourses' rather than actual tangible practices and thus are more likely to become sub-merged within the curriculum. If this is the case then why have such Core Skill practices persisted within curriculum policy developments over the years? Perhaps this is more of a sociological question and as Young (2000: 524) points out, 'fundamentally flawed ideas persist because they have a powerful social function in society'. In this case they reflect a discourse and a technical rationality approach to curriculum development.

CONCLUSIONS

There is little doubt that Core Skill policy development is at a crossroads in Scotland. The signposting model has gained considerable ground since *Higher Still* and has become more sophisticated in its application. However, there remains considerable doubt within schools and Universities of its value and this is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. Employers would also seem to be shifting their ground on the issue and pressing for the development of work-readiness skills. 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, 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 the right direction. The trend, therefore, 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 may 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 (Howieson et al, 2006).

Finally, it would also be fair to say that Scotland is now at somewhat of a crossroads with the very concept of Core Skills itself. Two possible options would appear to be on the table. Option 1 would be to make marginal changes to the existing Core Skill framework, for instance, revising particular Core Skills, 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 get a Core Skill Profile without undertaking actual skill development; not allowing evidence to be collected from a wider range of community and social practices. This option would also allow for the further contextualisation and integration of Core Skills within an embedded curriculum model.

Option 2 would be far more radical, if somewhat more regressive. Within this option the notion of Core Skills would be completely 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 *Curriculum for Excellence* and *Determined to Succeed*. Within any new 3-18 curriculum framework, Core Skills may simply be seen as part of the de-cluttering process. The emphasis may then switch again to basic skills reflecting a fairly longstanding employer agenda. Interesting, 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 for young people.

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