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ABSTRACT

Education reform in Great Britain during the last 15 years has been piecemeal, and all the pieces are not yet in place for broad and balanced post-16 education. The last 10 years of debate have achieved much common ground among the goals perceived by government, industry, and education. Three major ways of looking at the post-16 curriculum have emerged: the triple track, the all in, and the broad continuum. Some more detailed developments have also been taking place within the 16-19 curriculum: National Vocational Qualifications, General National Vocational Qualifications, education and training targets, core skills, records of achievement, credit accumulation and transfer, modularization, and the place of coursework. Closely related to curriculum development are the delivery of learning and assessment. An increasing use of more flexible approaches to learning is an important element in effective curricular change. Modular developments have, in turn, opened the way for continuous assessment, recognition of partial achievement, and construction of a framework for credit accumulation and transfer. Clear progression must be ensured from school to postcompulsory education and training at 16. Suggestions for a practical program for the 1990s can be grouped into the starting point, institutional practice, and modifications required nationally. A national curriculum must be developed that delivers both breadth and balance through post-16 education and training. (Contains 22 references.) (YLB)

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An unfinished jigsaw: the 16+ curriculum in the 1990s

Noel Kershaw

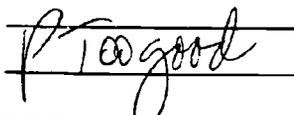
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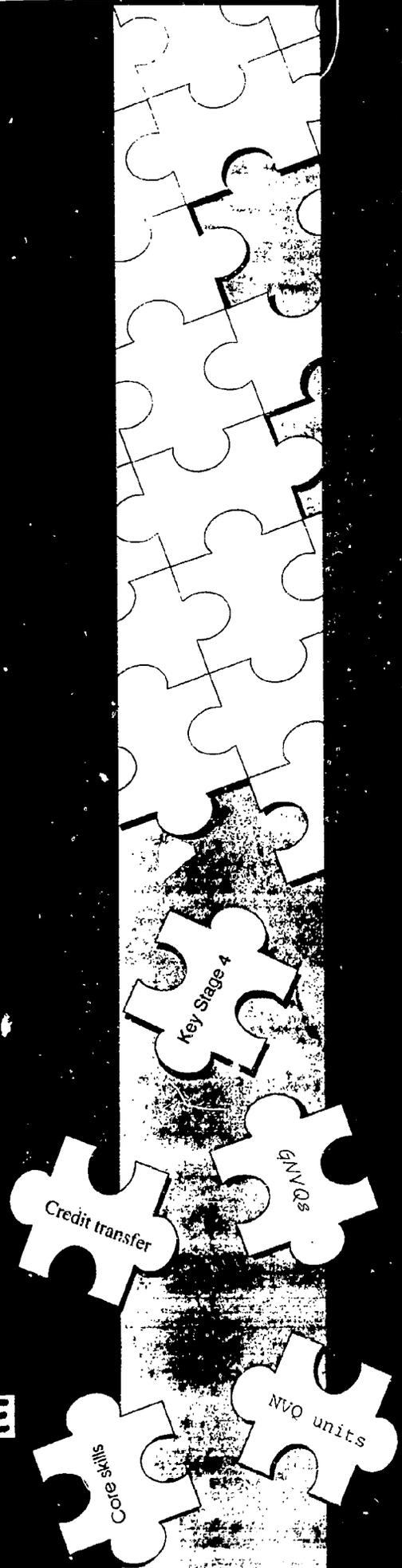
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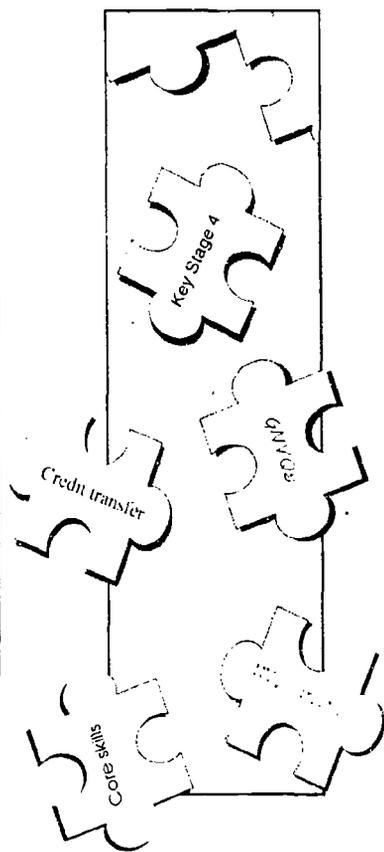
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An unfinished jigsaw: the 16+ curriculum in the 1990s

Noel Kershaw

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A combination devoutly to be wished

Education reform during the last 15 years has been piecemeal and it is difficult to see an overall pattern of the kind which underpinned the 1944 Act. Concern with post-16 matters was at the top of the early agenda with the Macfarlane Report in 1980 but was then overshadowed by the school curriculum until it finally re-emerged with the publication of the White Paper **Education and training for the 21st century** (DES *et al.* 1991) more than a decade later. This publication is very deliberately targeted at the 16-19 curriculum but it must consider developments in Key Stage 4 of the national curriculum as its starting point.

Initial support for the idea of a national curriculum was based on Government's intention to ensure 'that all pupils study a broad and balanced range of subjects throughout their compulsory schooling and do not drop too early studies which may stand them in good stead later, and which will help to develop their capacity to adapt and respond flexibly to a changing world' (DES 1987). The move from principles to practice has been difficult but it is a fight worth winning.

The consultations on Key Stage 4 in 1990, produced clear evidence on percentages of pupils in their final years of compulsory schooling who were being denied access to essential parts of a broad and balanced curriculum by the vagaries of individual school timetabling. This has left no doubt that the principles underpinning the national curriculum should continue through the whole 11 years. Unfortunately, the initial design brief to 10 separate groups of subject experts, each working to a different time frame, got in the way of this ideal by ensuring that in their zeal for their specialism the 10 groups produced

between them a curriculum which took about 120 per cent of the time available and that because of the timing, it was impossible to manage the necessary links between the different subjects.

The 1988 Education Reform Act itself underlined the general and all-embracing purpose of a whole curriculum when in section 1 it required schools to promote 'the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society' and to prepare pupils 'for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of adult life' (Education Reform Act 1988). The National Curriculum Council, in developing this whole curriculum, received ministerial support for a range of cross-curricular elements described as 'ingredients which tie together the broad education of the individual and augment what comes from the basic curriculum' (NCC 1990a). These elements were further defined as dimensions, skills and themes with the intention that as much as possible should be delivered through the national curriculum subjects themselves.

“ Greater flexibility and some choice is desirable but it does help if careful thought has first been given to the framework within which that choice is to be exercised. ”

In relation to Key Stage 4, the vision outlined above began to be distorted with Kenneth Clarke's speech to the North of England Conference at Leeds in January 1991. It had become clear that the national curriculum was too large and unwieldy, allowing no time for flexibility and preventing the continued development of a range of additional subjects such as economics, a second modern language, classics or theatre studies. Unfortunately however, the baby and bath water mentality ruled and although history and geography were made alternatives, art and music were made entirely optional. In its turn this led to the creation of a vacuum in some 25 per cent of the timetable but without accompanying serious thought about how it was to be filled. Much time was then wasted in a fruitless search for an Eldorado constructed out of core subjects with a vocational slant and new subject combinations which were potentially yoked to give more and more unlikely partners. Greater flexibility and some choice is desirable but it does help if careful thought has first been given to the framework within which that choice is to be exercised. Ministerial constraints seldom encourage a genuine review of all options however – there is always a tendency not to investigate lines of action known in advance to be unpopular.

If young people are to achieve successfully post-16, and if as many as possible are to be able to exercise real choice in deciding their learning programme at college, then Key Stage 4 must provide them with the following essentials. First of all it is clearly unhelpful if areas of progression are closed to school leavers because they have dropped necessary subjects too soon. Second, young people require as good a level of achievement as possible in the cross-curricular skills – defined at this level as communication, numeracy study, problem-solving, personal and social skills and information technology – and a sound understanding of the areas covered by the five themes of economic and social understanding, careers education and guidance, health education, environmental education and education for citizenship. Third, they require the best possible progress in the core subjects of English, maths and science. Last of all it is essential that they have undertaken a challenging course in the foundation subject of technology – success in this final area is one of our best guarantees of solving the problems caused by the academic/vocational divide.

If these four aims are to be achieved it is important to review carefully the changes to Key Stage 4 proposed in the Dearing Report (1994). In summary

“ ... the NVQ approach is far too limiting at 14 or 15 and should be firmly avoided at this stage. ”

they consist of the deletion of history and geography from the list of mandatory subjects, completion of the review of technology and the provision of a mandatory short course in this subject and in modern foreign languages, the slimming down of subject areas where appropriate to enable them to be taught and assessed in differentiated forms, support for the introduction of a high quality vocational pathway and the development of links between GCSE and GNVQ (General National Vocational Qualification) accreditation particularly with reference to core skills. The overall aims are an increase in the time flexibly available to schools at Key Stage 4 to about 40 per cent and the development of academic, vocational and occupational pathways. The first of these two objectives will cause no harm provided that schools maintain their current belief in a broad and balanced curriculum and provide study of the humanities and expressive arts for all their pupils as the majority do now. The second objective, however, is more dangerous as Dearing himself recognised at his press conference by saying 'I do not think it would be right for young people to get fixed in a pathway too soon' (MacLeod 1994) in which case we are better sticking to a single broad route up to the end of compulsory schooling although composed of different sized and shaped paving stones. Too much choice at 14+ may restrict choice unnecessarily at 24+, 34+ and 44+. In particular, the NVQ (National Vocational Qualification) approach is far too limiting at 14 or 15 and should be firmly avoided at this stage.

If we are not careful, however, Dearing's pathways will point straight downhill towards the sort of divisions between potential administrators on the one hand and hewers of wood and drawers of water on the other which has greatly helped to get the country into its current economic difficulties. Nor is it useful to say that one should do this because it is the pattern in Germany and France; it is definitely not the pattern in Japan for instance where they have a much more logical view of these matters and, even though one might not be comfortable with their teaching/learning styles, they develop as far as possible broadly educated and flexible young people up to the age of at least 18 in most cases. It has always seemed a pity that we did not learn the right lessons from the seminal work in **Competence and competition** (NEDC/MSD 1984). It is clear from that report that of three major competitor countries studied only Germany went for relatively early differentiation while in the USA and Japan a broad education, which might include some applied vocational work, was the norm until well past the age of 16.

What we need as a nation, and what would furnish the soundest base for the process of 16 to 19 education, is a broad national curriculum which retains as much as possible of the full range of subjects to 16 but makes use of the concept of a reduced statutory requirement plus discretionary elements as recommended by Dearing. This form of modification would allow for the continuation of cross-curricular work, for the development of differentiated approaches to subjects related to the needs of pupils and in particular for the development of the skills which all major interested parties know are essential for a young person to achieve success. It will also leave room for at least one and possibly two optional additional subjects. This kind of framework for Key Stage 4 will allow for the development of an applied approach to some subjects within the choice of discretionary material. It will not condemn students to a stunted choice of routes at 16+ while it will certainly give a better foundation for future study and training than many have had in the past.

It is sad that Dearing neither mentions cross-curricular matters in any explicit way in his report since they provide much of the necessary breadth in pupils' total programmes, nor emphasises the role of some skill training for all. What is needed and what can still be offered post-Dearing is a curriculum at Key Stage 4 with an extended core of English, maths, science, technology, modern foreign languages, physical education, religious education and careers education plus a humanities option (which could include a broader range of subjects than simply history and geography) and an expressive arts option. Much of the cross-curricular work can be delivered through this range of subjects as was always intended. The remaining 20 per cent of curriculum time gives scope for two additional general education subjects, some units of GNVQ work or a mixture of both. Ideally either here or in the restructured technology order there will be some skill development for all pupils.

Goals and barriers

Having arrived at 16+ with a broad and balanced education, delivered in such a way that encouraged the development of individual interests, what are we then hoping to achieve through further education and training? First of all we must note how the last ten years of debate has achieved much common ground between the goals perceived by government, industry and education.

In the introduction to **Education and training for the 21st century** (DES *et al.* 1991) the Prime Minister was quite clear:

Our objective is simple: it is to encourage all our young people to develop to the best of their ability. We want to knock down barriers to opportunity. We want higher standards. We want more choice. In short, our aim is to give every one of Britain's young people the chance to make the most of his or her particular talents and to have the best possible start in life.

Within the more detailed aims of the document itself the first two begin to spell out what these fine words mean in curriculum terms. The Government, it says, will:

- establish a framework of vocational qualifications that are widely recognised and used, and that are relevant to the needs of the economy; and
- promote equal esteem for academic and vocational qualifications and clearer and more accessible paths between them.

Further down the list is the need to ensure:

- that pupils gain a good understanding of the world of work before they leave school;
- that all young people get better information and guidance about the choices available to them at 16;
- that there is provision of opportunities and incentives for young people to reach higher levels of attainment.

This approach is paralleled by the thrust of reports published by the CBI in recent years. In its 1989 Task Force Report **Towards a skills revolution**

(CBI 1989) the aim was to bring about such a revolution principally by improving the foundation skills of young people as a basis for continued development throughout their working life, while in its latest report, **Routes for success** (CBI 1993), the CBI spells out four broad requirements for 16–19 education and training. They are:

- relevant qualifications and development in core skills;
- profiles incorporating action planning as well as a record of a broad range of achievement;
- top quality independent careers education and guidance;
- cash credits to empower and motivate young people and give them real influence and buying power in a new education and training market.

With the possible exception of the idea of credits and vouchers, the CBI aims are closely related to ideas central to thinking in the world of education. In its 1990 paper **Core skills 16–19**, the NCC started from Kenneth Baker's description in his speech to ACFHE (the Association of Colleges for Further and Higher Education) in February 1989 of 'competences built on knowledge and understanding'. The council developed this phrase by stating that 'competence describes effective performance and implies an inter-dependence of knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes' and that 'if young people are to develop competences for adult life they need the breadth of knowledge and understanding and opportunities to apply skills in a range of contexts' (NCC 1990b). While in their concluding recommendations they are looking, amongst other things, for:

- definition of the whole curriculum framework post-16;
- strategies for the development of core skills in individual study programmes;
- development of a single national record of achievement;
- establishment of a system of credit accumulation and transfer.

From the training perspective NCVQ state at the beginning of their report on **Action planning and the national record of achievement** that the 'need to raise skill levels and increase the flexibility of young people and adults is well recognised in the UK' (NCVQ 1992). More specifically, in their April 1993 information note on GNVQs, the approach to increasing skills and flexibility is spelled out as follows:

GNVQs provide a broad-based vocational education. In addition to acquiring the basic skills of a body of knowledge underpinning a vocational area, all students will have to achieve a range of core skills. This combination of vocational attainment plus core skills will provide a foundation from which students can progress either to further and higher education or into employment and further training. (NCVQ 1993)

The sentiments quoted in the preceding paragraph have a broad but clear level of agreement. Key words such as 'skills', 'flexibility' and 'breadth' pin together the ideas of government, industry, education and training. Yet we have still not put together this particular jigsaw even though its combined pieces are close at hand. On the face of it this seems another classic case for quoting Charles Caner's splendid statement so effectively used by Sir Christopher Ball

“ The principal barrier to curriculum progress post-16 in the past five to ten years has undoubtedly been the present Government's refusal to contemplate significant alteration to GCE A level. ”

in his RSA report **Learning pays** which asks the question 'why things widely and long assessed to be sensible and urgent do not happen?' (Ball 1991) Central to any answer to this conundrum are four areas of reluctance:

- reluctance on the part of government to leave the shelter provided by A levels;
- reluctance of the majority of employers to follow the CBI lead;
- reluctance by those in education to make clear the evidence of their own experiences of students' approach to learning beyond 16;
- reluctance of young people in general to follow beyond the age of 16 courses which in large part they find uninteresting.

Before proceeding further it is essential briefly to unpick these rather bald statements if we are to understand the difficulties to be overcome in order to complete the curriculum jigsaw.

The principal barrier to curriculum progress post-16 in the past five to ten years has undoubtedly been the present Government's refusal to contemplate significant alteration to GCE A level. They have seen this examination as the one clearly accepted and understood landmark in the post-compulsory education scene. In that sense alone they are of course quite correct. However, their rather narrow view of A level as still being a largely content-based course which can only be assessed by terminal written examinations has not been altogether true in fact and has certainly hindered curricular development at this level. In post-16 education A level has represented the nurse which the Government has clearly been terrified to leave.

“ ... a large percentage of medium and small firms have at best a sketchy understanding of the pattern of education and training qualifications. ”

From the employer's point of view the CBI proposals have invariably been sensible but like the over-enthusiastic leaders of a rally they have reached the street corner and looked back to discover that their followers have not even reached the preceding corner. Staff in colleges, TECs (training and enterprise councils) or the Careers Service can all produce ample testimony that a large percentage of medium and small firms have at best a sketchy understanding of the pattern of education and training qualifications. What is more damaging in this context is that the CBI style view with its emphasis on breadth, flexibility and core skills, sits uneasily with companies struggling for survival who feel that they can only afford to answer their most immediate problems. Unfortunately, the narrowness of some vocational education seems to have affected industry lead bodies in their approach to the design of particular NVQ programmes.

The strong top-down pressures from central government during the last decade with its emphasis on things private, whether typified by parents or industry, as being good, and things public, particularly the major services such as education, being bad, has had its inevitable effect. Those of us engaged in education have appeared to be discredited and as a natural consequence we have tended to grumble quietly rather than openly proclaim what our experience tells us to be true. This may be understandable but it is also unhelpful in that it removes important evidence from the debate – particularly our shared experience of the value of motivation as it relates to the usefulness of particular approaches to curriculum design for this age group.

We have seen the reluctance of young people post-16 to be forced or cajoled into undertaking programmes which either do not interest them or which they feel are irrelevant to their futures. This attitude was for instance one crucial factor in the failure of CPVE (Certificate in Pre-Vocational Education) to take off when students were offered the choice of more precisely targeted vocational alternatives. This does not mean of course that we should accept this attitude of young people as a total limiting factor in our approach to curriculum planning. On the other hand it does mean that we must develop strategies for dealing with their likely reaction and we ignore it at our peril.

The areas of reluctance sketched in above have to be circumvented if we are to complete the curriculum jigsaw post-16. Other barriers do exist, in particular that provided by HE gatekeepers. To list every possible consideration would be too depressing, however, and since I believe that if we are sure of our goal we will get there in the end, I would prefer to look for positive signs of progress for the remainder of this publication.

The major proposals for routes forward post-16

During the past few years three major ways of looking at the post-16 curriculum have emerged – the triple track, the all in and the broad continuum. The first is the Government's preferred route, the second represents the opposite end of the spectrum and the third is a more central set of proposals which takes something from each of the others.

The triple track

The triple track is based on two aims, stated in **Education and training for the 21st century** (DES *et al.* 1991) as the establishment of a widely recognised and used framework of vocational qualifications and the promotion of equal esteem for academic and vocational qualifications. Once the Secretary of State gets down to detail in the document, however, we discover that he is talking about a proposed Advanced Diploma which subsumes the three tracks of NVQs, the new GNVQs and A and AS levels. It is suggested that the Advanced Diploma 'would clarify and enhance current channels for progression' (DES *et al.* 1991). Given the actual state of play that seems a rather pious hope whether in terms of the generalities which follow here or of the more detailed considerations in the next section.

“ Unless something gives it is going to be a very difficult trick indeed to pull these three tracks together. ”

What is being attempted is to pull together into a single system three kinds of qualification which still to a significant extent retain features which clearly differentiate them. In simple terms A levels are subject specific, GNVQs relate to broad occupational areas while NVQs are very much job specific. Also so far as assessment is concerned, NVQs are measured in levels of competence by work-related accreditation, GNVQs by units of achievement which mix both knowledge and application while A levels are principally measured by externally set examinations. Unless something gives it is going to be a very difficult trick indeed to pull these three tracks together.

Looking a little more closely at the three systems it becomes apparent that there are further differences which have to be overcome. NVQ is not only job specific but has been largely based on a process of functional analysis which can be so detailed as to paralyse progress. If the elements and performance criteria which go to make up a particular unit are too completely tied in with

what a section of industry needs now, then they are unlikely to be flexible enough to stretch the trainee's thoughts to encompass likely future developments. NVQs are also built on a pass/fail basis. Either you are competent or you are not. They have a detailed and fairly precise structure of levels and core skills form separate units rather than being embedded within those that are job-related.

GNVQs share much with their predecessor qualification – in particular they have the same basic structure and they currently cover three of the five levels. However, the change of wording from statements of competence to statements of achievement hides other differences. The new qualifications have three grades of pass; although much of the assessment is through coursework of various kinds there are also some end of unit tests which count towards the final grading. Core skills are built into the mainstream of the qualification rather than being added on and have a clear effect on the outcomes.

The third track, A level, is markedly different from the other two. Whereas their units and combinations of them have a clear relationship to the world of work A levels only touch on it very tangentially. They are organised on an academic basis and are traditionally founded upon hodies of knowledge which are felt to have coherence. What binds a subject together sometimes seems much more important than the possible relationship to other parts of a student's learning. This is of course not surprising when we consider that probably the strongest forces leading to their creation and development have been the requirements of the higher education system which in the past have tended to put much more stress on content than on skill. This in turn has led to other differences including the very limited use of coursework, the undervaluing of the ideas of units and of modular courses, the lack of any great attempt at developing core skills and the difficulty the A level system has in explaining the criteria on which its grade differentials are based. With this current heap of practical problems we will leave the triple track for the moment only pausing to marvel at the optimism of the Department for Education which obviously felt that they could all be overcome without modification of individual qualifications.

“ ... the difficulty the A level system has in explaining the criteria on which its grade differentials are based. ”

The 'all in' route

If the official policy seems to lead towards fragmentation then it is not surprising that it has provoked the putting forward of an opposing view based on an inclusive approach. The 'all in' route is developed from the structures of the Baccalaureate examination in France and the International Baccalaureate which has been offered in this country but so far without conspicuous success in terms of take-up. The major publication explaining this particular 16-19 programme is the Institute for Public Policy Research's publication on the British Baccalaureate, **A British 'baccalaureate': ending the division between education and training** (Finegold *et al.* 1990). The analysis of the problems and the general lines of argument advanced in this document seem quite sound. However, the structure which it proposes has some worrying aspects. It is put forward under the umbrella of an advanced diploma – although this version has more substance to it than the Government's copy a year later. It is also quite different in that the whole of the programme follows a modular structure. The authors are aiming to encourage breadth and coherence of study balanced by opportunities for specialisation.

“ ... aiming to encourage breadth and coherence of study balanced by opportunities for specialisation. ”

The modules are to be grouped into three broad domains of study structured as follows:

Domain A Social and human sciences – this would include theoretical areas such as history and social sciences along with applied areas such as health, caring and business studies.

Domain B Natural sciences and technology – this would include mathematics, all branches of natural science and engineering. There would also be a wide variety of skills-based modules.

Domain C Arts, languages and literature. In addition to the language and literature of all countries studied, this would also include performing and visual arts and media studies.

The modules would be divided into three types. There would be core modules covering the essentials of a subject area, specialist modules which went into greater depth in particular areas and work or community-based modules which demanded the application of knowledge gained. Although one advantage is claimed to be the opportunity to devise new combinations of modules it is also recognised that many students would wish to follow definite groupings and routes which can lead to clear outcomes and progression.

The possible difficulties appear when the rules of the game are laid out. Students would be expected to take core modules with both a theoretical and applied focus in each of the three domains and all students would have to complete at least one work or community-based module. In theory this ensures breadth and balance for all but in practice it is all too likely that it will lead to an army of unwilling conscripts. A structure of this kind, as with the International Baccalaureate, will have very definite appeal to a proportion of the age group. There is no doubt, however, that they will need to be achievers who are both well motivated and probably well supported at home. A system which ignores the increasing focus placed by students on their own developing interests and which does not seem to make sufficient allowance for their differing responses to learning styles seems to be creating unnecessary troubles both for itself and for potential students. The British Baccalaureate has too much of a middle-aged, middle-class, born in Hampstead feel about it to be instantly attractive across the whole of the age group concerned.

The National Commission on Education's recently published report, **Learning to succeed** (NCE 1993), presents a modified version of the 'all in' approach which is undoubtedly an attempt to resolve the problem of parity of esteem. However, even here the advanced level of their proposed general education diploma is still subject-fixated. The various examples of possible student programmes include too many where, in order to get representation of four different areas of study, a subject sometimes appears to be dragged into the programme. How far the business studies student will be motivated by European history, the car repair student by French or the scientist by pure philosophy must be open to some doubt. There are more user-friendly ways of providing breadth than simply asking students to learn more facts about different things. More attention to process in the curriculum and the detail of delivery would have been helpful in the report. As noted below, the development of core skills and the ability to locate knowledge and then use it can have greater value than a simple increase in the amount and variety of content.

“ The British Baccalaureate has too much of a middle-aged, middle-class, born in Hampstead feel about it ... ”

A broad continuum

In between the two tracks already described a third route has been developed based largely on ideas first floated in the National Curriculum Council's discussion document **Core skills 16-19** (NCC 1990b). The ideas have to some extent been developed by the Royal Society and the CBI and are also reflected in work by the Further Education Unit. Although they relate to the existing three pathways it must be said that they assume one major change of heart – namely the final acceptance by government that although A levels should not be abolished they should certainly be significantly developed. The intention of this broad continuum approach is effectively to build from the significant statement in **Education and training for the 21st century** (DES *et al.* 1991) already quoted regarding the creation of 'links' between the three tracks.

“ This approach ... builds on existing qualifications, allows for differing learning styles and can start from individual students' own enthusiasms. ”

The underpinning elements arise out of the development of a whole curriculum framework post-16 based on what we really want students to have achieved whatever programme they are following. The major linking factor within that framework will be the core skills and themes which, as far as possible, will be embedded in the major areas of study. These were outlined in the National Curriculum Council's report **Core skills 16-19** (NCC 1990b), and detailed further in work undertaken by NCVQ, particularly in Gilbert Jessup's useful book **Common learning outcomes** (Jessup 1990). There will be some degree of modularisation in A level and certainly an acceptance of a significant percentage of coursework for assessment purposes. These elements will be validated by their appearance in a national record of achievement and they will also lead to the building up of a workable system not only of credit accumulation but of genuine credit transfer. At the moment the latter is impossible precisely because of the widely differing attitudes to coursework and end-testing between the three kinds of programme previously noted. Although not yet fully explored, the system will also require some development of NVQs, particularly in their relation to core skills and possibly to accreditation. This approach as a whole is not radical or dramatic but it does build on existing qualifications, allows for differing learning styles and can start from individual students' own enthusiasms. It is also possible to be achieved and is described further.

Detailed developments – the last five years

Alongside the building up of the broad approaches described in the preceding section, some seven or eight more detailed and precise developments have been taking place within the 16-19 curriculum. Probably the most important have been NVQs, GNVQs, education and training targets, core skills, records of achievement, credit accumulation and transfer, modularisation and the place of coursework. Two recent developments not on this list are AS levels and CPVE since neither can claim to have been successful. CPVE, although the result of some careful thought, was found to be both too complex and too loose a framework. AS levels, lacking sufficient thought, never managed to present a clear and convincing image. The currency of both was suspect although for different reasons and the only point which they both clearly underlined is that it is dangerous in education to leave too much power to the market-place.

Although the development of NVQs began in earnest with the publication of the De Ville Report (MSC *et al.* 1986) and the setting up of the National

Vocational Qualifications Council in 1986, the coverage of vocational areas has only taken off in the past two or three years. By the end of 1993 it was expected that at least 80 per cent of possible areas would be in scope. In essence NVQs are a thankfully simple concept and a straightforward framework has been developed which consists of 11 areas of competence encompassing every known field of vocational qualifications. Across each of these areas five levels of competence have been devised. These range from the ability to perform routine or predictable tasks at Level I to the much more complex world of Level V where competence includes a great measure of autonomy in an approach to sophisticated tasks within a largely unpredictable context.

Within this framework is a more complicated system of units of competence. These comprise *elements* which describe something which a person in a given occupational area should be able to do; *performance criteria* against which an individual's ability to perform activities specified in the elements should be judged; and *range statements* which make clear the context applicable in a particular case. It must be remembered that first, NVQs are based on national standards provided by industry lead bodies and are intended to be a guarantee of competence to do a job and second, that they are not learning programmes but statements of outcomes.

General NVQs are vital to progress but have been developed extremely quickly since they were first mooted publicly in the White Paper **Education and training for the 21st century** (DES *et al.* 1991) in 1991. The Government's intention was to produce a range of qualifications clearly related to the NVQ framework which encouraged young people to study in vocational areas but did not limit their options too soon. They are being developed at levels I-III and by September 1994 will be available at levels II and III within a dozen or so broad occupational areas. In comparison with NVQs these new vocational A levels, as they have now been dubbed, have a statement of attainment rather than of competence, are assessed in colleges and schools rather than in the workplace, and do not certificate occupational or professional ability. In addition, they assess core skills as an integral part of the programme rather than separately as with NVQs and overall their assessment of performance is undertaken through the application of knowledge and understanding and partly at least by means of a written end test. Finally, unlike NVQs, their relationship to A level has been made clear from the beginning. GNVQs should be capable of acting as a vital bridge across the academic/vocational divide.

“ GNVQs should be capable of acting as a vital bridge across the academic/vocational divide ”

A third publicly accepted development has been that of education and training targets. These were initially proposed by the CBI in their 1989 report **Towards a skills revolution** (CBI 1989) and were aimed principally at training. In the 1991 White Paper the Government simply acknowledged the exercise and looked forward to discussions as to how they could 'be associated most effectively' with the exercise. By the spring of 1993, however, they had been effectively hijacked to become part of Government policy and had been expanded so that they are clearly applied both to education and training. The national education and training targets (NETTs) have two sections, one relating to lifelong achievement and the other, the foundation targets, related to young people which will have a direct influence on the 16-19 curriculum by providing a new and very strong pressure on institutions to ensure that they

develop their curricula in ways which encourage success rather than identify failure. The foundation targets are:

- 1 by 1997 80 per cent of young people to reach NVQ II or equivalent;
- 2 training and education to NVQ III or equivalent available to all young people who can benefit;
- 3 by 2000 50 per cent of young people to reach NVQ III or equivalent;
- 4 education and training provision to develop self-reliance, flexibility and breadth.

These, although important targets, will certainly not easily be achieved without overcoming the barriers listed previously – preferably following the methods proposed later in this publication (see page 18).

The next three developments, those related to core skills, records of achievement and credit accumulation and transfer, have all had a measure of official approval although its level has certainly fluctuated. Core skills were already being developed in approved programmes such as CPVE and by BTEC's work on common skills when Kenneth Baker made them one key theme of his February 1989 speech to ACFHE. It then took nearly two years before John McGregor asked the National Curriculum Council to investigate their possibilities and in particular to undertake 'work on incorporating core skills into the programme of study of advanced level students as indeed for others' (Letter from Secretary of State to the Chairman of the National Curriculum Council, November 1989). In their report the NCC went for a slimmed down and realistic scheme with three skills for incorporation into all post-16 programmes namely communication, problem-solving and personal skills, and three others, numeracy, information technology and modern language competence, which should be developed wherever possible. During consultation on the proposals there was overwhelming support for this range of skills both from education and from industry. The report also made it clear that the skills should be part of a total post-16 framework which included guidance and cross-curricular themes, that they should be embedded within learning programmes and that they should be assessed as part of the qualification to be achieved.

“ ... there was overwhelming support for this range of skills both from education and from industry. ”

At approximately the same time NCVQ was investigating the possibilities of developing and improving core skills through vocational qualifications. Joint work was then undertaken between a number of government agencies to specify the skills and to allocate them to levels. Although this proved difficult sufficient progress was made for the approval of some individual units within the NVQ framework and in particular for core skills to perform a significant role within the new GNVQs. Here communication, information technology and application of numeracy are mandatory and embedded while two personal skills units have also been accredited and problem-solving is in the pipeline. Also within the GNVQ grading themes are planning, information seeking, information handling and evaluation which themselves cover the major part of problem-solving.

“ ... in February 1991 the Government launched the NRA and within a year it had achieved a 60 per cent take-up in schools. ”

Core skills additionally form an element within the national record of achievement (NRA) although mandatory reference to it is still minimal. Initially records of achievement were encouraged as part of the apparatus surrounding Youth Training. Then in February 1991 the Government launched the NRA and within a year it had achieved a 60 per cent take-up in

schools. The fact that it was too like an old-style school report and was summative rather than formative probably had much to do with colleges' reluctance to use it. However, in September 1992 Ministers decided to incorporate action planning into the record and in **Routes for success** (CBI 1993) the CBI continued to press for a greater level of core skill reporting. The NRA is still a moving target but at least it is one which appears to be going in the right direction.

With regard to credit accumulation and transfer government have not so much given approval as held an increasingly benign watching brief. NCC's **Core Skills 16-19** report called in its conclusion for the establishment of such a system following on from McGregor's request to SEAC (Schools Examination Assessment Council) to 'consider the possibility of mapping overlaps in specific subject areas which are served by both advanced level and vocational qualifications with a view to *developing credit transfer* possibilities, (letter from the Secretary of state to the Chairman of the Schools Examination Assessment Council, November 1989). The emphasis, interestingly enough, is not mine but that of the DES.

“ Credit accumulation now seems a real possibility although there are practical problems to be solved before credit transfer becomes a realistic option. ”

This particular set of ideas has been positively moved forward by the Further Education Unit (FEU) in its discussion and feedback papers of February 1992 and February 1993 both entitled **A basis for credit** (FEU 1992, FEU 1993). In essence these reports seek to make a case for an overarching framework for credit accumulation and transfer across the whole post-16 system. They establish the idea of the credit as a common currency for achievement in post-16 education and offer a common language for expressing achievement across a range of subjects and vocational areas. This language is based on the module as the descriptor for a defined amount of teaching and learning, the unit as an assessed part of a learning programme which may cover more than one module and the credit as a statement of what a unit is worth within the total framework. The framework itself could eventually cover all subjects and vocational areas across both further and higher education and will have a potential alignment with the national curriculum at Key Stage 4. Credit accumulation now seems a real possibility although there are practical problems to be solved before credit transfer becomes a realistic option. However, the project is receiving active encouragement from the CBI and others and at least tacit approval from the Government.

The two final developments mentioned, coursework and modularisation, are probably best considered together since they are really dependent on each other for their success. It is also true that these ideas have kept alive in spite of some official opposition which fortunately has varied in its intensity. The first interesting point to note is that both of these elements are freely available in vocational courses where they are encouraged and even praised. The difficult task has been to extend their use to A levels beyond subjects such as art and design which even the most blinkered opponent cannot fail to notice has an essential practical element.

Two main patterns of modular courses have been developed at A level – the Cambridge model with the subject divided into six equal units and the Wessex model, now sadly defunct at least temporarily, with a 60 per cent core and 40 per cent optional module structure. The intention in both cases has been that some modules should be applicable to more than one subject. It can already be seen that if such a framework is to be practically capable of assessment then

“ The Government's attitude has been ambiguous not to say confused. ”

properly moderated coursework must be part of the process. Additionally of course there are subjects such as the Associated Examining Board's English syllabus Number 660 which have been available with up to 50 per cent use of coursework. The response of both higher education and of students themselves has been very positive to these joint developments citing such things as the ability to use evidence, to research, to argue a case, to work independently as genuine benefits. The Government's attitude has been ambiguous not to say confused. In **Education and training for the 21st century** (DES *et al.* 1991) for instance in volume 1 chapter 2 they write in favour of 'new techniques of learning' whereas in chapter 3 they slap a firm maximum on the use of assessed coursework in A level, one of the techniques most guaranteed to increase flexibility for individual learners. Fortunately however, with one of its dying acts, SEAC did regularise the position of modular A levels and there is an interesting overlap between the six-unit structure of the Cambridge system and that of GNVQs. It is vital to continue this development, not just as implied above so that links may be created between the pathways, but also so that students can have a more manageable pattern for their programmes and in particular so that there can be positive recognition of partial achievement.

The delivery of learning and the process of assessment

“ An increasing use of more flexible approaches to learning, ...enables curricular change to be effective. ”

The three processes of devising the curriculum, the delivery of learning and assessment are closely related and any curriculum document would be incomplete without some consideration of the other two. There are some obvious developments in teaching and learning such as the growth of open and flexible learning, although it has to be said that they have been more the province of adult students. Some note must also be taken of project work, of experiential learning in its varied forms, of resource-based learning, of integrated approaches, of action planning and of the use of key lectures. The list is not exhaustive and no one of these approaches is sufficient by itself. Indeed, a well organised school or college will use them in concert with some more formal, traditional ones. Much of the development of the curriculum framework noted later is concerned with increasing students' levels of skill and their ability to apply knowledge. A number of the changes in teaching method reflect this fact. An increasing use of more flexible approaches to learning, and particularly those which demand continued individual effort from the student, are an important element in enabling curricular change to be effective.

Open learning was first seriously developed in this country in the mid-1970s through the Flexistudy system and the Open College of the North West. It is intended to assist students who cannot regularly attend a centre owing to problems of travel, work pattern or domestic circumstance. For 16-19 full-time students its principal use, however, has been to provide opportunities for the study of minority subjects where take-up has not warranted more normal arrangements or in some cases to assist where there have been unavoidable timetable clashes making it impossible for students to take a subject vital to them. Up to now 16 to 19 year olds have been very much the minority users of this form of flexible learning.

A variant of this approach to study which is increasingly important to full-time students is resource-based learning. The similarity lies in the provision of materials to assist the learner while the difference is that this is not then so much seen as an individual process in the learner's own home or workplace but

rather support is given within learning resource centres whether multi-disciplinary or devoted to particular subject areas such as numeracy or communication. In most colleges this approach is used to deliver significant parts of programmes while in a few institutions such methods have become the norm. Much needs to be discovered about the amount and kind of support required by 16 to 19 year olds before large numbers of institutions would find it wise to place too great a reliance on this method. As a supporting mechanism however it does seem to be giving positive results.

At a basic level project work has been part of learning programmes for several years. Fairly recently however it has been developed in a number of significant ways. BTEC's use of the cross-modular project as an integrative focus across a number of areas of learning has been a valuable development – although as with some other aspects of BTEC's work it has also had an insularising effect which has made it difficult to see ways of linking BTEC programmes with other parts of the 16–19 curriculum. Within the Wessex A level scheme many of the optional projects were industry- or environment-based and essential basic skills were developed across both core and options. Also, in a number of more regular A level syllabuses, project work has gained a firm foothold particularly within social sciences where, as with Wessex, they are proving helpful in ensuring that A levels can begin to deliver core skills.

“ The contribution of experiential learning in stretching the resources available to the college has also been invaluable. ”

Experiential learning has played an increasing role in the post-16 curriculum since the late 1970s. At its broadest it means making use of learning and experience gained outside the educational institution as part of the student's total learning programme. The Wessex modules already mentioned, with their insistence on gathering evidence from industry, form one example but the major development has clearly been in vocational education and training. Full-time programmes have begun to treat periods of work experience in an increasingly sophisticated fashion so that they often provide the basic raw material for assessed parts of the course. Youth Training on the other hand has at its best turned the concept inside out with the periods of in-college study helping to make sense of the trainee's time at work. The contribution of experiential learning in stretching the resources available to the college has also been invaluable. This makes it all the more ironic that in order to satisfy NVQ requirements colleges are increasingly having to make good the lack of opportunity for workplace assessment by developing their own realistic work environments.

Changes in the delivery of learning have tended to play havoc with the internal architecture of colleges in addition to extending the possibilities of what can be taught. Particularly in vocational areas the trend for some years now has been to develop integrated learning which has demanded practical facilities and space for writing up within the same area. In more general subjects the move towards greater use of key lectures and supporting seminars also presents accommodation requirements. Additionally the management of the learning processes by lecturers has had to undergo significant change to cope with both developments.

Action planning under a variety of names has become a significant tool for both the guidance and the control of learning. A typical example would begin with an audit of the student's capabilities at the commencement of a course, made by them and verified by a member of staff. As colleges have thought more about this task they have realised that it cannot all be left to the personal

“ To be effective action planning requires the full involvement of subject lecturers and tutors and proper co-ordination between them. ”

tutor. To be effective action planning requires the full involvement of subject lecturers and tutors and proper co-ordination between them. Significant national initiatives such as GNVQs and records of achievement can only work properly with a well thought out action planning process underpinning them. It also contains elements reminiscent of appraisal which increases its attraction for industry. As with most of the items in this section it will have been noticed that they are strongly student-related and if we are to continue to foster an interest and enthusiasm for learning it would seem right for this to be so. Such methods also assist skill development through a process-based approach.

Changes in curriculum design and in methods of teaching and learning have quite naturally had an effect on the processes used in assessment. Modular developments for instance open the way for continuous assessment, for recognition of partial achievement and for the construction of a framework for credit accumulation and transfer. This kind of approach positively encourages the student and underpins learning with a clear sense of progression. The development of NVQs, for example, has been entirely based on the concept of statements of competence. These can be achieved through the production of evidence of various kinds which can be verified by a competent person as demonstrating that a significant element of a particular job can be properly performed. An important extension of this principle and one seemingly welcomed by all sides in the curriculum debate is that of accreditation of prior learning (APL) where evidence of previous achievement can be similarly verified. This movement has been largely paralleled in general education by the growth of an element of assessed coursework in final certification. In assessment terms this type of development is making the point that a snapshot judgement, such as that made by terminal examinations, is not necessarily the right way to ensure achievement in all cases.

It is also worthwhile reflecting that assessment spread throughout a course demands a higher level of continuous effort by a student which is surely not a bad preparation for work and for life in general. Of course such methods have to be properly controlled by a clearly understood system of moderation but then the process of examining also requires careful control.

Much of what has been said above depends on the well organised use of projects which are sometimes known in A level courses as assignments or integrative work. They give an opportunity for students to gain credit for those skills which are not fully recognised in traditional assessment regimes. Both the geography 16-19 project and the Wessex A level programmes furnish good examples.

Projects require communication skills since they can be reported in various forms – oral presentations, simulated conferences or word processed for instance. This is much richer in opportunity than the limited written responses of formal examinations. The problem-solving skills of planning, implementation and evaluation are all key factors in successful project work but cannot be assessed in a meaningful way in conventional examinations. The personal skills of organisation, time management, increasing responsibility for the student's own learning and ability to work as a group member are all called upon and are able to be assessed if the project is designed in an appropriate way.

“ ... it should certainly be possible to apply grading themes and core skills similar to those used in GNVQ both to A levels and to NVQs. ”

Core skills have to be assessed and gain credit if they are to be given proper importance in students' eyes. The design of projects or assignments is therefore vital. They must start from what is needed to be known about a student's ability. Relevant tasks will then be designed and in the SEAC phrase 'assessment fit for the purpose' will be applied. Using a process of this kind, it should certainly be possible to apply grading themes and core skills similar to those used in GNVQ both to A levels and to NVQs. Indeed these grading themes and core skills are a major peg upon which parity of esteem can be hung.

The importance of progression

There is always a danger in dealing with any portion of the educational process as it relates to a particular age range that we treat it as though it existed in a hermetically sealed compartment. This often seems to be particularly true of post-16 education, perhaps because of the key importance which this stage is felt to possess since it marks the transition from a compulsory education to increasing independence for young people whether as students, workers or as members of society. Even though the calls for a 14-18 curriculum can have some unhelpful aspects they are useful in reminding us that we must ensure clear progression from school to post-compulsory education and training at 16. It is, of course, equally important that we also give proper consideration to progression at 18 or 19, whether to employment or to higher education.

So far as progression from Key Stage 4 is concerned there are things we ought to avoid and those we should encourage. To be avoided certainly is any feeling that education is end-stopped at 16. In an ideal world we would probably do away with the big bang terminal assessment which we now have through GCSE. However, since we work in the realm of practical politics, in which broad measures of the performance of the system as a whole are seen to be important, we should take such measurements in the least harmful way possible to individual learners. This would certainly involve careful development of the practice of assessing coursework and the use of projects which have proved so successful in motivating young people. It would also include much more thorough development of the cross-curricular themes and skills and their integration with work on core skills post-16. This will undoubtedly provide a helpful binding agent between school and college programmes.

Following on from the above emphases would be a return to phased and sensible modularisation. Apart from anything else, this would enable young people to gain credit for those parts of a subject in which they have shown achievement. A gradual extension of the idea of a credit framework to Key Stage 4 would achieve the positive aims of 14-18 protagonists without the possibly harmful side effects.

In this matter of progression the National Commission on Education in **Learning to succeed** (NCE 1993) appears to call for a totally integrated 14-18 approach to the curriculum but draws back when it gets into any detail. Although stating that 'it is important that educational provision for young people aged 14-18 should be planned as a single whole' (NCE 1993) when in its visionary mode, the minute the Commission returns to pragmatic mode it

“ A gradual extension of the idea of a credit framework to Key Stage 4 would achieve the positive aims of 14-18 protagonists without the possibly harmful side effects. ”

expects its general educational diploma will, initially at least, require an 'ordinary level normally reached at age 16; an advanced level normally reached at age 18' (NCE 1993).

If stress on continuity is to be encouraged it is important that this is not confused with a narrow view that the precise amount of content required pre-16 is to be set in concrete. While there should be no bar to the academically minded being able to stretch themselves it is vital that the perceived requirements of particular A levels do not have an overloading effect on the pre-16 curriculum. Those who work in post-16 education must accept that, just as they welcome the increased ability of post-GCSE students to investigate and develop arguments, they must be prepared to frame their programmes to ensure that the content is properly topped up where required. Whilst not wishing to labour the point again it is important that the Key Stage 4 curriculum is not so narrowed in its range of subjects that the lack of whole areas of study reduces flexibility of progression post-16.

The other vital progression takes place at 18 or 19 and deserves at least as much care and attention as that from Key Stage 4. A particular difficulty at this point is in reconciling the requirements of two different sets of gatekeepers – on the one hand we have higher education and on the other employment. Significantly each of these customers of 16–19 education speaks with a divided voice. To listen to higher education as represented by the Standing Conference on University Entrance (SCUE) or industry by the CBI or TUC one gets the feeling of an underlying commonality of approach. This can be broadly interpreted as saying that what is really required by both parties is the full development of the qualities encapsulated within the core skills proposals and now partly followed within 16–19 education. This kind of approach has also recently been echoed by representative managerial bodies such as the IM (Institute of Management) and the IPM (Institute of Personnel Management).

“... while desirable personal qualities and transferable general skills are required by the bridge, the engine room demands much more precise skills...”

When individual applicants come face to face with either the admissions tutor on the one hand or line managers on the other they find, however, that the forward-looking views expressed nationally all too often have less currency than they should do at a more localised level. In most cases, while desirable personal qualities and transferable general skills are required by the bridge, the engine room demands much more precise skills whether they are academically- or vocationally-based. Rather than wait for an impossible millennium where all these voices would speak as one it might just be better to ensure the embedding of core skills called for by the former within the subject areas demanded by the latter, of which more in the following section.

A practical programme for the 1990s

The intention of this section is to emphasise suggestions which have been made earlier. There will be some repetition – or consolidation to harp back to former classroom days – but this is necessary to give a clear picture of what is proposed. What is definitely not intended, however, is any suggestion of a total system, since the odds are that in constructing it important matters, particularly of access and individual development, will be at best trimmed and at worst negated altogether. The suggestions will be grouped under three sub-headings: The starting point; Institutional practice; and Modifications required nationally.

“... Key Stage 4 should at the very least have a spread of eight subjects including a humanities and a creative arts component but with the Dearing concept of a reduced statutory core.”

The starting point

At 16 young people should have the widest possible range of choice for their future. Their compulsory education should have equipped them with a common core of knowledge and skills rigorous enough to form the foundation for learning throughout their life and yet giving them the flexibility to study areas new to them. Engineers at whatever level without some sense of design or designers without a proper understanding of materials for instance, are not fully useful to themselves or to society. In order to achieve this Key Stage 4 should at the very least have a spread of eight subjects including a humanities and a creative arts component but with the Dearing concept of a reduced statutory core.

If this basic proposal is followed then sufficient time within years 10 and 11 could be created to pursue the other two requirements which providers of post-compulsory education would wish to see. These are properly developed understanding of core skills and themes present in the whole national curriculum framework from Key Stage 1 onwards, and the clear beginning of an enthusiasm which will carry students through the 16–19 transition phase. More than sufficient work has already been undertaken by the former National Curriculum Council on the whole curriculum to take forward the implementation of the former without need for any reinvention of wheels.

The second point can be tackled in two ways, either by the development of differential approaches to the proposed discretionary elements within subjects or by the creation of some flexi-time in place of part of the discretionary time to offer additional subjects appealing to pupils' interests. These should be real subjects such as a second foreign language or economics rather than cobbled up hybrids and they should be offered in a balanced way across the academic/vocational spectrum although they should not include any watered down pretences of precise vocational study. A combination of the three proposals made here would give us 16 year olds who are not unduly restricted in their possibilities of progress, who have begun to sharpen the tools required for independent thinking and who have had an opportunity to develop an area of study they actually enjoy. This would indeed seem to be a combination devoutly to be wished.

Institutional practice

“... there are a number of practical things which an institution can do to begin to change what they offer their students...”

There is always a tendency to say that curriculum development can't take place until certain moves have been made at a national level. In some ways this is only ducking the issue since there are a number of practical things which an institution can do to begin to change what they offer their students and at the same time to ensure that they can respond if and when the national developments do take place. For instance, it is useless to make any serious move towards modularisation and credit transfer if a college's timetable does not allow the necessary flexibility in the use both of staff and accommodation. A common framework made up of building blocks of an agreed length which can be amalgamated into different sized groupings, where the start and finish points always coincide with the pattern of that framework, is an absolute prerequisite for successful curriculum change.

As implied above, a move towards modularisation is also possible and necessary. Modular A levels and BTEC have shown the way but it is likely to

“ ... the development of GNVQs ... will kick-start the curriculum towards a more flexible model. ”

be the development of GNVQs which will kick-start the curriculum towards a more flexible model. Colleges can begin to use the approximately one-third of programme time remaining over and above that required for the mandatory 12 units to offer programmes which interlink GNVQs with both A and perhaps AS levels and NVQs. In doing so, overlaps are bound to be perceived and some modules can be offered with more than one possible outcome. The common first year in science recently available at a few colleges in a diagnostic fashion was based on the practice outlined here. Total modularisation is probably not possible and almost certainly not necessary but without some being encouraged we will not be able to offer students the flexibility they require and there is no need to wait for the exam boards before at least making a start.

The ideas behind action planning and records of achievement have considerable national acceptance already and it is therefore possible for colleges to base their approach to students' learning experiences around them. Indeed, new requirements from the Department for Education and the Further Education Funding Council will make these processes essential so they might as well be used constructively. To work properly there must not only be negotiation of the programme and desired outcomes between students and staff but colleges must also ensure that the staff role is shared between subject lecturers and group tutors and not simply left to the latter. Unless subject staff are totally involved the process is in danger of being marginalised. A formalised action planning process should be introduced across all full-time courses as soon as possible and care must be taken to ensure that similar requirements are introduced for students on all types of course.

“ They must not be seen as bolt-on elements since they may too easily become unbolted. ”

One such requirement which must be universally applied is achievement in core skills. Basing a significant part of action planning on students' performance in these areas makes it clear that the skills must be taken seriously and will also go a long way to ensuring that, even in A level subjects where they may not be explicitly required, they are integrated as far as possible within the mainstream of learning and teaching. Core skills are vital to development and progression whatever programme students are following and therefore can form a key link within the total curriculum offering. This will work best if they are embedded in courses or in some cases buttressing them where the programme clearly demands further development of the skill. They must not be seen as bolt-on elements since they may too easily become unbolted.

Modularisation, development of core skills and a flexible approach to learning must go hand in hand with the use and encouragement of project-based coursework. Some of this may include learning based on experience gained outside the institution but much of it will require the ability to make use of learning resource centres. Such centres, effectively staffed and equipped, will be vital if students are to be able to complete their project work properly. Their development will have an effect on the college's staffing policy and more particularly on its accommodation policy. It will also clearly demonstrate to staff and students that money is being spent to enable the college's stated educational policies to work. What can be progressed internally therefore is a strategy which includes the provision of learning resource centres, the design of an enabling timetable, the use of overlapping modules where possible, the encouragement of project-based coursework, the imposition of a common action planning and record of achievement process and the embedding of core skill achievement across all programmes. All this can be done now.

“ ... what is needed is ...encouragement for developments such as credit accumulation and transfer, action planning, records of achievement, modularisation ... moderated coursework ... and of core skills ... ”

Modifications required nationally

In the main what is needed is simply positive encouragement for developments such as credit accumulation and transfer, action planning, records of achievement, modularisation of courses (up to a point) and acceptance of a more substantial place for moderated coursework in assessment and of core skills as a basic element in all programmes. Such encouragement would allow for modifications to be made to both A level and to a lesser extent NVQs. The current outline pattern of courses could be maintained but the emphases listed above could make the whole curriculum more flexible and build workable links between the different strands.

This approach will also need to be underpinned within further education by a funding mechanism which encourages students to follow programmes using parts of GNVQs or NVQs where necessary to build on A levels, GCSEs or full GNVQs. The definition of primary learning aim by the FEFC must enable the negotiation of such programmes and not frustrate it. As can be seen nothing needs to be destroyed at a national level – the currently available courses simply have to be treated in a more enlightened and flexible fashion although still within a properly rigorous framework of assessment.

The combination of positive institutional practice and national development of existing programmes and approaches outlined above will between them create a system open enough to encourage ability to flourish while ensuring that it is securely rooted in the basic skills essential for continued personal growth. It will also significantly increase our chances as a nation of hitting the education and training targets which we have set ourselves.

Possibilities for the next millennium

“ the pieces of the jigsaw are all available – what is needed is their careful interlocking. ”

It may be felt that although these ideas are quite practical and possible they are not very exciting. Surely, however, in education we have recently had quite enough disturbing change of various kinds and what is now required is a period of consolidation and rationalisation. The proposals in the preceding section provide the next small but firm step which needs to be taken. As the title of the publication suggests, the pieces of the jigsaw are all available – what is needed is their careful interlocking.

In curriculum development there is no such thing as a successful quick fix – the history of the national curriculum should teach us that. Unfortunately for politicians, good ideas cannot be rushed and these proposals are only the current stage in 15 years or more of thinking and working with programmes of study for 16 to 19 year olds. It would be wrong however to suggest that they should be regarded as the finished article and it might perhaps be helpful to conclude with a brief look at the elements of the kind of model which will need to evolve by the end of the decade.

First, whatever the future may bring the basic requirements for 16-19 education are still likely to hold good. Put briefly they are:

- a basis of knowledge, skills and application in a particular area;
- the development of common vital skills;

- an understanding of the broad context of adult life;
- the growth of an independent personality.

These aims will need to be set in the context of a world where regular career change may be the norm, where knowledge will expand at a sometimes alarming rate and where the technological requirements for performing an increasing number of jobs are also likely to continue to grow.

“ The development of mandatory subject cores within the national curriculum will evolve into a system of key facts and concepts ... developed alongside essential skills ... ”

All of this must mean that, since the death of Francis Bacon at the very latest no-one has been able to pretend to know everything, the myth of the all-importance of content in education will be shattered. The development of mandatory subject cores within the national curriculum will evolve into a system of key facts and concepts which will be developed alongside essential skills based around communication in all its forms, problem-solving and personal effectiveness. The skills will also develop the necessary tools for enquiry which will enable learners to investigate areas not within the subject cores. These basic processes will increasingly be developed throughout an individual's educational experience from the age of five onwards.

This broad and balanced programme must be maintained until at least the current statutory school leaving age otherwise, as has been seen, individuals' life choices will be stunted and economically we will not be competitive. It would perhaps be desirable to press this approach beyond 16 but probably it is unrealistic even at the beginning of the 21st century to hope that all 17 and 18 year olds will suddenly be keen to become polymaths. Provided that the school curriculum is genuinely broad in Key Stage 4 and that increased stress is laid on all students having a thorough grounding in science, modern languages and technology, sufficient to meet the demands of the modern world then the need to press the broader curriculum through the 16-19 stage will be less urgent.

If we are to achieve parity of esteem during what is still going to be a transition phase between total breadth at school and a clear narrowing of focus at work or in higher education then we must devise a framework which covers all kinds of programmes. In organisational terms this could well be a development of the credit accumulation and transfer or CAT approach but to be successful this will have to be reinforced by other clear signals. People will only believe in parity if, in addition to encouraging a spread of common learning and assessment approaches across the whole curriculum, there is seen to be a strong interlinking in the way in which success is recognised. A helpful way forward may be to accept that on the one hand competence can apply equally to sufficient understanding of a core of subject knowledge as to the perceived ability to undertake tasks. This could then open the way for achievement to be recognised as the ability to apply that knowledge or that job understanding to more complex learning situations – including in work-related areas the flexibility to grapple with up-to-date developments.

If we combine the above approach with:

- equally rigorous quality assurance methods across all programmes;
- continued stress on developing core skills within the subjects themselves;
- proper guidance to ensure coherence of individual programmes;
- a genuine element of enrichment including where possible contrasting kinds of learning experience; and

- a clearly encouraged practice of offering common modules where relevant to all learners whatever their programme might be;

then we will have modulated into the kind of all-embracing flexible structure for 16 to 19 year olds which so many people feel is the right road to follow. We should also have provided a programme which will enable adults easily to key into the parts they need, given that it will be possible to accredit their previous experience. Finally, judgements will be able to be made on the balance necessary in the programmes of the 20 to 25 per cent of young people who will continue to be better served by having the larger proportion of their time at work buttressed by complementary units taken from the overall national framework.

“ If we
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By the year 2000 we must have a national curriculum for all up to the age of 16, followed by a national education and training framework for all. Such a structure could lead to the award of a genuine advanced diploma whatever the components of the programme, could marry learners' enthusiasms with the growth of the necessary skills for further development and, perhaps above all, is achievable by building on what we have now without having to indulge in wasteful processes of destruction. If we refuse to develop we are lost and if we move too far too fast we will confuse. The only wise course is to consolidate now with development of A levels, GNVQs and NVQs and then to move logically forward to a fairer, more fulfilling and at the same time more economically useful 16-19 structure of the kind proposed here.

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Noel Kershaw was both Deputy Principal and Acting Principal at Nelson and Colne College from 1972 – 1980, Principal of the former Percival Whitley College, Halifax from 1980 – 1984 and has been Principal of Yeovil College for the past ten years. He has had a part-time secondment to the FEU, been an Associate of The Staff College since 1986 and was the only further education member of the National Curriculum Council for three years. While on the Council he was centrally involved in the publication of its report **Core skills 16–19**. He has also published **Active learning**, a report for the FEU on experimental learning, jointly edited **Going tertiary** for the Tertiary Colleges' Association, and with Fred Janes produced the two volumes of **Managing flexible college structures** for The Staff College. During the past 15 years he has undertaken consultancy work for the Dutch and Italian governments and for several local education authorities, regularly lectured on curriculum and college management and has written several articles for the educational press. Currently he is a member of the City and Guilds 14–19 Steering Committee and of the Quality Assessment Committee of the Further Education Funding Council.



An unfinished jigsaw: the 16+ curriculum in the 1990s

This publication looks at the most important developments in education and training over the last ten to fifteen years. The author draws the conclusion that, while all the pieces of the jigsaw are available, they are not yet fully in place. What is needed is the development of a post-16 education and training framework, built upon the solid foundations of a national curriculum that delivers both breadth and balance.

The author explains how pragmatic consolidation rather than yet more radical change is the way forward. Developing A levels, NVQs and GNVQs would deliver a fairer and more fulfilling education and the much-vaunted parity of esteem.

This consolidation is needed now. We have all the pieces, we now need to finish the jigsaw.

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