



Soft Skills Development in the Irish Economy

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Background

As a result of the rapid changes in the structure of employment and in the organisation of work generally, there is a growing recognition that the possession of 'soft' skills (which are variously referred to as 'generic', 'personal', or 'behavioural') are integral to working effectively in new work patterns. These types of skills are reported to be of increasing importance to employers as they relate to a person's ability to operate effectively in the workplace either alone or with others.

This report on soft skills development in the competitive Irish economy was commissioned by FAS on behalf of the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs in order to establish the current position in relation to meeting the soft skills requirements in the work place in Ireland and to identify any areas in which recommendations can be made for improvement.

The terms of reference for the report contained the following 6 specific objectives:

- Identify what the term "soft" skills encompasses and describe why these are assuming increasing importance in working life.
- Gather, document and present information from research and future-oriented studies/papers which deal with the need for soft skills (Irish and International).
- Gather existing information about Irish employers' views on deficiencies in soft skills.
- Establish what activities are currently underway in Ireland's education and training systems that address the needs for soft skills.
- Identify examples of good/innovative practices in the area (Irish and International).
- Draw policy recommendations aimed at ensuring that soft skills are satisfactorily developed among second and third level students, new labour market entrants and the existing workforce.

Methodology

The study was commissioned to Graphite HRM, Ltd and additional research was undertaken by FAS with the support of a working group (representing FAS and the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs) set up to oversee the project. The membership of this group is listed in Appendix 2.

The research methodology involved both desk and field research techniques. During the desk research stage, an internet search and extensive literature review was undertaken in order to:

- Devise a workable definition for the term 'soft skills'
- Identify current trends with regard to soft skill requirements arising from the introduction of new forms of working, both in Ireland and elsewhere.
- Gather information on the provision of existing soft skills development within the Irish education and training system.

The main focus of the field research was to gather the views of relevant organisations (state agencies, representatives of the social partners, second and third level education organizations) regarding 'soft skills' issues and practices in Ireland. The list of people who were interviewed and/or who provided detailed comments on the research are listed in Appendix 2. An extensive survey of employers was not included in the terms of reference for the study. However, the consultants undertook a limited internet survey of employers to assess their views on soft skill requirements and deficiencies in the work-place.

Introduction

Traditionally, the word “skill” has been associated with a range of technical, job-specific abilities which require training and instruction for a worker to become proficient or skilled within a particular job reference. In latter times, there has been growing interest in a range of abilities which are variously referred to as ‘generic’, ‘personal’, ‘behavioral’ or ‘soft’. These skills relate to a person’s ability to operate in the workplace, either alone or with others. The need for these types of skills is not new, but contemporary changes in the organisation of work, the focus on team-working, and the growth in the services sector have increased their importance and they are now emerging as a critical feature for organisational success. Other skills, which at times overlap, yet are distinguishable from soft skills in their use, are basic skills, core skills, and key skills.¹

Defining Soft Skills

The literature review conducted for this study indicates that there is no common definition for the term ‘soft skills’. There is a general recognition of the importance of “soft skills” in improving the productivity of the workforce, but there is still quite a degree of ambiguity in defining their boundaries. In general, throughout the research, soft skills were seen as people-oriented skills and self-management skills.

The following 4-competence type framework (based on the work of Bunk, 1994 and used by the ESF Evaluation Unit within an Irish perspective) was found to be valuable for understanding the range of competences and skills required in the world of work.

Table 1 The Competences Associated with Innovative Employment Systems			
Specialised Competence	Methodological Competence	Social Competence	Participatory Competence
Delivers CONTINUITY	Delivers FLEXIBILITY	Delivers SOCIABILITY	Delivers PARTICIPATION
Knowledge, Skills and Abilities	Procedures	Modes of Behaviour	Structuring Methods
Occupation Specific: o Extended vertical and horizontal knowledge about the occupation Enterprise Specific Experience Specific	Variable Working methods: o Situated Solutions o Problem Solving solutions o Independent thinking and working o Planning, assessing and executing work o Adaptability	Individual Social Skills: o Willingness to achieve flexibility and adaptability o Willingness to work Interpersonal Skills: o Willingness to co-operate o Honesty o Fairness o Willingness to help o Team Spirit	o Co-ordination skills o Organisational skills o Combination skills o Persuasion skills o Decision making skills o The ability to assume responsibility o Leadership skills

Source: ESF Programme Evaluation Unit Report, “Education & Training for New Forms of Work Organisation”, P.33

¹ *Basic skills* includes the fundamental elements of literacy and numeracy. *Core skills* include communication (including literacy and numeracy), planning, teamwork, safety, quality awareness and hygiene (FAS). *Key Skills* covers communication, use of numbers, IT, working with others, self-learning and problem solving (UK definition)

While *Specialised Competence* (Column 1, Table 1) relates mainly to technical skills, the other three competences relate to behavioural or soft skills and are mainly inter- and intra-personal skills. *Methodological Competence* delivers flexibility, e.g. problem solving, adaptability and analytical techniques. *Social* and *Participatory Competences* are seen as the cornerstones for team working, focusing on communication and interpersonal skills alongside leadership and decision-making abilities.

While the above framework is helpful in understanding the range of competences and their related skills, it also includes technical skills, through its specialised competence classification, and therefore a more straightforward definition of soft skills was looked for. Accordingly, as part of the objective to identify what the term soft skills encompasses, the consultants conducted a limited internet survey of Irish employers (32 companies) in order to establish their understanding of the meaning of the term soft skills. The skills identified by these employers are highly compatible with the skills identified in the above framework, and are listed below.

- Communication skills
- Influencing and negotiating skills
- Assertiveness and diplomacy skills
- Leadership skills
- Supervisory skills
- Problem solving skills
- Team-working skills
- Conflict resolution skills
- Flexibility
- Coaching, counseling and mentoring skills
- Creativity

Taking account of the Bunk framework, the Irish employers' definitions and other research², a suggested definition for soft skills is *the inter-personal and intra-personal skills required to be effective in the workplace*. This encompasses the following:

Table 2 Definition of Soft Skills	
<i>Soft skills are “the Inter-personal and Intra-personal skills required to be effective in the workplace:</i>	
<p><i>Inter-personal skills include:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ability to work in a team - Communication and influencing skills - Leadership, coaching skills 	<p><i>Intra-personal skills include:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Self-management - Orientation to learning, creativity, flexibility - Motivation, perseverance - Problem-solving

The need for soft skills

As high performance practices become the organisational norm, current research indicates that the workforce requires the necessary education and training foundations to contribute effectively. With work structures changing, traditional command and control methods are being replaced by flatter, horizontal, structures; teams are being empowered to make

² The OECD classification of the key skills and attributes relevant to human capital is broadly similar to this definition, although it includes literacy, numeracy and IT skills.

decisions; workers require higher skill levels and there is greater partnership between employees and management.

Many commentators describe the transformation in the workplace not only in terms of new organizational structures but also describe the necessary competencies required of employees. For example, Sellin³ states that “*New forms of work organization place a priority on communication skills and on the ability to work in teams*”. When innovative work systems and practices are introduced, such as team working, performance related pay, job rotation or TQM, there are immediate implications for employee skills. The findings suggest that soft skills are becoming increasingly important, both to cope with the level of change, and to work with a more participatory management style.

The need for soft skills for Irish employees was identified by the Irish employers organisation, IBEC, in its report - Actions for a Learning Society which stated, “*The ability to work in a team, to communicate effectively and to cope with conflict and pressure are essential in the modern workplace*”.

The higher educational level of many new entrants to the labour force, and their expectations of opportunity and development, are forcing organisations to demonstrate high levels of soft skills in practice in order to manage and retain such employees. In many cases, this is exposing skill deficiencies of managers, who may have lower educational levels and be less well-informed about participatory management styles.

The growth in employment in the services sector, both in Ireland and internationally, has also resulted in an increasing need for soft skills as, traditionally, soft skills have been core to the success of this sector. The increasing emphasis on customer care has further emphasized this.

The increased diversity in the workplace in Ireland, ranging from more family-friendly arrangements to intercultural diversity, has imposed different ways of working in many organisations. This is underpinned by equality legislation, which provides protection against discrimination and harassment across the workplace. All employees require the skills to interact in a positive manner to be able to create and maintain a safe and dignified working environment.

Irish Practice

The main findings of the research, conducted by the consultants on soft skills practice in Ireland, demonstrate that in relation to the organisations surveyed:

- Employers were broadly satisfied with the current level of soft skills possessed by most employees but recognized that such skills would become even more important in the future.
- Many felt that the level of soft skills possessed by third-level graduates entering the workforce was quite satisfactory.
- Different jobs, occupational grades and levels required varying degrees of soft skill capability.
- Companies invest heavily in soft skills development, mainly using personal development programmes and formal training courses.
- When it comes to managing people, soft skills were the most important differentiator of effectiveness.
- In the good practice examples, a range of HR practices were being used to instill and support a team-working culture, including recruitment, use of competency models,

³ Burkart Sellin, “The implications of the competency-based approach for training design – a paradigmatic shift in work-related training and in organizational knowledge development”. Cedefop, Thessaloniki, January 2002

performance management processes, training and development, reward for skill development, etc.

Some concerns were expressed with regard to new entrants in certain sectors (eg the hotel and hospitality sector, where the quality of soft skills is inextricably linked to the service dimension of the business) and to the skills of older employees. The level of soft skills possessed by managers or supervisors was identified in a number of cases as being unsatisfactory.

For many organisations, particularly those in the traditional indigenous manufacturing sector, the emphasis on increased flexibility and equality of opportunity is presenting a significant challenge to the way they operate, their management style and the skills of their employees.

How do the findings fit in with national and international research?

Findings from international case studies demonstrate the common theme of the empowerment of employees by organizations. Employees are being encouraged to use their own judgment, often within the framework of a team. The studies also demonstrate that the capacity to learn is at the centre of many organizations' strategies - requiring multi-skilling, a high level of technical skill, as well as the need to develop self-management and problem-solving skills. It is clear that learning is becoming focused on equipping people for the development of the next round of products, services, processes and, therefore, jobs. Thompson, Warhurst and Callaghan⁴ conclude that *"it is not thinking or even technical skills which are of increasing importance to most employers in the country, but person to person skills"*. These developments reflect the implementation of teamworking systems, breaking down organizational barriers and introducing innovatory human resource management policies.

The case studies show that high-quality relationships are needed to make new organizational structures work and that investment in people lies at the heart of the development of high performance working. Many organizations have in place performance management procedures in order to monitor progress, assess the development of skills and identify areas for further development.

The European Social Fund Programme Evaluation Unit conducted an examination of innovative work practices and their use in Ireland. Their report, "Education & Training for New Forms of Work Organisation", June 2000, found that there was widespread experimentation with a variety of new practices and these had direct implications for the totality of necessary skills. To support this analysis, the study examined a number of important surveys which provided evidence detailing the extent to which innovative work practices are being used in Irish work-places.⁵ From these surveys, they concluded that *"the empirical evidence confirms a widespread diffusion of new forms of work organization in Irish establishments"*.

For the purpose of this ESF report, nine company case studies were undertaken in the three different types of organizations identified in the work by McCartney and Teague⁶. These organizations ranged from the highly traditional to the highly innovative. The conclusions drawn indicate that when innovative work systems and practices are introduced, such as Team Working, Performance Related Pay, Job Rotation and TQM, there are immediate

⁴ Paul Thompson, Chris Warhurst and George Callaghan, "Ignorant theory and knowledgeable workers: Interrogating the connections between knowledge, skills and services", *Journal of Management Studies*, 38:7, November 2001

⁵ McCartney and Teague (1997), IBEC (1999), Roche and Geary (1998) and the European Foundation's 'EPOC Survey' (1997).

⁶ McCartney, J. and P. Teague, 'Workplace innovations in the Republic of Ireland', in the *Economic and Social Review*, Vol. 28 (4), 381 – 399.

implications for employee skills. The conclusions drawn from the case studies included the following remarks.

“What these mean is that workers must understand why their performance is important – how it affects their colleagues, how it affects the customer and how it affects final business outcomes. In the past a high division of labour absolved workers from responsibility for all but their own small task. Innovative work systems depend upon workers taking responsibility for any and all jobs within the firm, and contributing accordingly”.

The authors of this study believed that this generic concept was not being instilled into students and trainees and that this flaw in the national education and training system has to be compensated by firm’s use of private training consultants.

The Labour Market Policy Perspective

The Final Report of the European High Level Task Force on Skills and Mobility, December 2001, stated that the EU objective of achieving a dynamic, knowledge-based economy, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion, will depend on a labour force which has the necessary skills as well as the capacity to adapt and acquire new knowledge throughout working life.

The Commission’s Action Plan which followed the Report (February 2002) identified a range of areas for action, which include:

- Providing all citizens with free access to the acquisition of the following skills; literacy and numeracy, maths, science, languages, *learning to learn*, *social/personal skills*.
- Making the education and training systems more responsive to the labour market.
- Continuing training to be made more accessible and it should promote the adaptability, employability and retention of workers in employment.
- Enterprises developing as learning organizations.

The EU objective regarding the development of a dynamic, knowledge-based, economy implies the development of soft skills in the labour force in order to ensure that continuous learning, flexibility and team-working become prevalent practices.

In line with EU policy, Ireland’s National Employment Action Plan (2002) sets out the key objectives of Ireland’s labour market policy, which includes providing:

- Support for and mobilization of labour supply from all available sources.
- The necessary education, training and lifelong learning opportunities to ensure that supply matches demand and that those in and seeking employment have the required skills.

Areas where the National Employment Action Plan will have specific implications for soft skills development include the areas of partnership, adaptability and flexibility:

“Partnership at the level of the firm is particularly important in the context of adaptability. This includes a shared understanding of; organisational goals, the need for and purpose of change, and the necessity for an open, participative approach to addressing the needs of the organisation.”

“In the area of organisational flexibility, issues such as new forms of work organisation, complemented by imaginative reward and recognition systems and the development of a

family-friendly workplace are important to underpinning adaptability and flexibility. Such measures must both enhance the opportunity to reconcile work and family life and contribute to the effective and efficient operation of the enterprise.”

The Government has established the National Centre for Partnership and Performance to work with relevant Government, employer and trade union bodies to develop guidelines for partnership arrangements. It has identified the following topics as likely to be subject of partnership agreements :

- competitiveness, adaptability, flexibility and innovation;
- better systems of work organisation;
- training and personal development linked to lifelong learning; and
- equality of opportunity and family friendly working arrangements.

The skills implications for both managers and employees to work effectively to set up and operate such partnership agreements is quite significant. Possession of the required soft skills will be a prerequisite for success. To succeed, the Partnership initiative in organizations will require enhanced soft skills such as:

- capacity to analyse and evaluate information
- creative thinking
- ability to articulate views to influence others
- ability to work as part of a team
- ability to provide leadership and contribute to decision-making as appropriate
- ability to continuously learn and adapt to new ways of working
- capacity to work in a diverse working environment

While the development of soft skills is a prerequisite to achieving a number of labour market objectives both in Ireland and across the EU, in Ireland, unlike other EU countries, there is no formal statement of policy regarding soft skills which would provide a focus of attention and direction to education/training providers.

Soft Skills Education and Training – Policy and Provision

Policy

The extent to which the education system is designed to provide for the labour force, or to feed into further education, is always a point of debate. The role of education and training is widely recognized as being a critical contributor to achieving and sustaining national competitive advantage. Michael Porter, in *The Competitive Advantage of Nations*, states that:

‘There is little doubt from our research that education and training are decisive in national competitive advantage. The nations that invest most heavily in education had advantages in many industries that could be traced in part to human resources. What is even more telling is that in every nation, those industries that were most competitive were often those where specialised investment in education and training had been unusually great.’

Porter concludes that education and training constitutes perhaps the greatest long-term leverage point available to all levels of government in upgrading industry. He argues that improving the general education system has to be an essential priority of government and a matter of economic and not just social policy.

The EU Commission’s Action Plan for Skills and Mobility recognizes that the adaptability and employability of workers over their working life depends on high quality initial education and training and on a reduction in the drop-out rate from education. They recommend that:

- In addition to the foundation skills of numeracy and literacy, all citizens should have the chance to acquire new key competences
- Innovation in school curricula is necessary to prepare young people for the demands of increasingly dynamic labour markets
- Formal education and training systems must become more open and flexible
- Education institutions and other learning providers should develop closer links and partnerships with business, and the wider labour market.

Proposals from the EU Commission set out other agenda items for the educational sector which impact on the development of soft skills, mainly the demand for increased flexibility and integration of educational and training systems. This will require greater definition of common policy aims and objectives to facilitate flexibility and adaptability, and to strengthen the links between formal and informal learning.

In Ireland, the White Paper on Education, *Charting our Education Future*, 1995, establishes the fundamental aim of education as “...to serve individual, social and economic well-being and to enhance quality of life.” Ten specific educational aims are outlined as guides to policy formulation and practice which includes the aims to:

- nurture a sense of personal identity, self-esteem, awareness of one’s particular abilities, aptitudes and limitations, combined with a respect for the rights and beliefs of others.
- to foster a spirit of self-reliance, innovation, initiative and imagination.

While these aims emphasise the development of individual qualities and capacities, there is no specific policy for soft skills development in the Irish education system. In practice, explicit references to what are commonly called key or core skills (which include soft skills) are relatively few and far between in Ireland’s statements of purposes and aims at all levels.⁷

Soft Skills Provision

Second Level Education

The current, Irish secondary education system comprises two main cycles, the Junior and Senior Cycle. Both cycles are, for the most part, academically focused with examinations at the end of each cycle.

Junior Cycle

The junior cycle of post-primary education caters for young people between the ages of 12 – 15 years. It currently constitutes the final phase of compulsory education in Ireland. In 1989 the Junior Certificate programme was introduced to provide a single unified programme replacing the Intermediate Certificate and Group Certificate.

The White Paper on Education (1995) states that, on completion of the junior cycle, all students, in accordance with their abilities and aptitudes, will have achieved the following outcomes:

- competence in literacy, numeracy and spoken language skills which will allow them to participate as young adults in society
- experience in various domains of activity – artistic, intellectual, scientific, physical and practical
- formative experience in moral, religious and spiritual education

⁷ Developing Senior Cycle Education: Consultative Paper on Issues and Options, NCCA, 2002

- knowledge and supportive guidance in matters of personal health, sexual awareness and relationships
- competence and understanding in practical skills, including computer literacy and information technology
- knowledge and appreciation of their social, cultural and physical heritage and environment
- understanding and appreciation of the central concepts of citizenship

Although the acquisition of soft skills is not a specified outcome, their acquisition is implied in the above statement. The development of soft skills is most directly addressed in the Junior Cycle⁸ through the recently introduced Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) programme, to be covered over all three years. It sets out to build on the SPHE programmes in primary schools, and aims to:

- enable students to develop skills for self-fulfillment and living in communities
- promote self-esteem and self-confidence
- enable students to develop a framework for responsible decision-making
- provide opportunities for reflection and discussion
- promote physical, mental and emotional health and well-being

While the introduction of the SPHE programme is welcome, not all students take it as part of their Junior Cycle education. A survey of school Principals, undertaken as part of the NCCA review of the Junior Certificate programme⁹, asked about the allocation of time given to Junior Cycle subjects taken by first year and third year students in their schools. Table 3 below gives the results for the take-up and allocation of time given to the SPHE programme.

Time	First Year	Third Year
None	19.3	32.9
One period per week	76.7	64.7
Two or more periods per week	4.0	2.4

Source: The Junior Cycle Review. Progress Report: Issues and Options for Development. NCCA 1999

Table 3 indicates that while SPHE receives some ‘time allocation’ (mainly one period per week) in first year in over four-fifths of schools, ‘time allocation’ is reduced as the Junior Certificate examination approaches - it receives some allocation in only two-thirds of schools in third year. Furthermore, the Table also shows that a significant minority of schools don’t allocate any time at all to SPHE – one-fifth of the schools in first year and close to one-third in third year.

To date, there is no formal national assessment framework (either formative or summative) for recognizing student achievement on SPHE. While this is being explored, the lack of recognition tends to undermine the importance given to SPHE as compared to subjects assessed as part of the Junior Certificate examination. This problem is further compounded by the fact that there is no dedicated teaching qualification for the subject.

The Senior Cycle

The White Paper on Education *Charting our Educational Future* (1995) states that the purpose/aim of senior cycle education is: “... to encourage and facilitate students to continue in full-time education during the post-compulsory period by providing a stimulating range of

⁸ Soft skills are also addressed, although to varying degrees, in other Junior Cycle subjects such as Civic, Social and Political Education and Physical Education

⁹ The Junior Cycle Review. Progress Report: Issues and Options for Development, NCCA, March 1999

programmes suited to their abilities, aptitudes and interests...to develop each student's potential to the full, and to equip them for further work or further education."

Over the last decade, the senior cycle system has been re-structured with a view to catering for the diverse needs and aptitudes of all students. The restructuring of the senior cycle involves four main elements:

- The availability of the Transition Year.
- The revision of the established Leaving Certificate Programme.
- The introduction of a new Leaving Certificate Applied course.
- The development and expansion of the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme.

These four programmes are continuously being reviewed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.

Transition Year Programme

The Transition Year is an additional year which students may follow before proceeding to the two-year Leaving Certificate cycle. The Department of Education and Science guidelines specify the mission of the Transition Year as being *"to promote the personal, social, educational and vocational development of the students and to prepare them for their role as autonomous, participative and responsible members of society"*.

The Transition Year provides students with the opportunity to follow an interdisciplinary programme and develop new skills, which are outside the boundaries of the certificate courses. The year concentrates on promoting self-directed learning. Among the skills promoted during the Transition Year are a range of soft skills including interpersonal communications, problem solving skills, presentation skills, confidence building, managing relationships and community awareness. Students become more involved in the community and gain life experience through exposure to work experience and independent research. Students are also encouraged to engage in self-reflection to assess the skills, which they have developed personally.

According to the Department of Education and Science, in the 2001-2002 academic year, there were 502 schools undertaking the Transition Year, representing 75% of the total number of second level schools in Ireland. Approximately 30% of the participating schools operated the programme as a compulsory module of secondary level education while the remaining schools offered the year as an optional module to all senior cycle students.

The schools who provide the Transition Year programmes have the responsibility for deciding their own curricula, setting appropriate goals and defining the objectives necessary for their achievement within guidelines set down by the Department. As there is no single programme, the quality of programmes varies between schools. Since 2000, the Transition Year programme is certified by the Department of Education and Science.

A longitudinal research study carried out by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment¹⁰ on the performance of Leaving Certificate students in 1997 found that the Transition Year appears to have a positive impact on student progress between Junior and Leaving Certificate, but the degree of impact varies considerably between students and between schools. Most notably, for disadvantaged students, not-participating in Transition Year seems to have a significant negative impact.

¹⁰ From Junior to Leaving Certificate, A Longitudinal Study of 1994 Junior Certificate candidates who took the Leaving Certificate Examination in 1997, Final report, National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 1999.

The Commission on the Points System, Final Report & Recommendations, 1999 completed its report subsequent to publication of the above report and noted that *“There is growing anecdotal evidence that students who have taken the Transition Year programme are more self reliant learners when they enter third level education than their peers.”*

There are strong arguments in favour of further investigating the impact of the transition year on students. There is a need to identify more precisely which aspects of the programme are most beneficial, develop these aspects and consider if they should be incorporated as modules or integrated into the curricula in all Transition Year programmes. There is also a need for finding a mechanism which will allow the learning gained in Transition Year to continue during the subsequent senior cycle years. The ESRI are currently (January 2003) conducting a research study into the Transition Year; this will hopefully redress the gap in research on the Transition Year programme and help inform policy makers regarding future decisions on the role and place of the programme within the senior cycle educational system.

The Leaving Certificate Programmes

There are three, two-year, ring-fenced, Leaving Certificate programmes – the Leaving Certificate (established), the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and the Leaving Certificate Applied available for Irish senior cycle students.

In relation to soft skills development at this level of education, the White Paper¹¹ states that the educational programmes are based on achieving *“an appropriate balance between personal and social development, vocational studies and preparation for work and for further education, the actual balance achieved varying from programme to programme.”*

The Leaving Certificate (Established)

The focus of the established Leaving Certificate is primarily academic and its main emphasis is on providing students with the necessary education required for entry into further education. Notwithstanding the introduction of the alternative Leaving Certificate programmes, the established programme remains the one followed by the majority of Irish students in the senior-cycle. It has a high profile and the public, education institutions and employers have confidence in its standards and status.

However, there has been some criticism by employers and educationalists, interviewed as part of this study, on the Leaving Certificate and its lack of development of soft skills in students. It has been suggested that the emphasis on the points system (from within the school, combined with the pressure from students and parents) conflicts with the personal development of the student. The focus on getting into college, they claim, has at times been to the detriment of developing skills such as team building, communication skills and strategic thinking.

The Commission on the Points System¹² looked at the impact of the Leaving Certificate system on students. During the consultative process of the research, a number of damaging effects were attributed to the points system. Issues raised included *“negative impact on students’ personal development, choice of subjects by students to attain the highest levels of points for entry to third-level education, a narrowing of the curriculum from the tendency to teach to the examination rather than to the aims of the curriculum and an undue focus on the attainment of examination results.”*

¹¹ White Paper on Education, *Charting our Education Future*, 1995, Government Publication

¹² The Commission on the Points System, Final Report and Recommendations

The Commission argued that the Leaving Certificate “*should begin to recognise a wider range of skills, intelligences and achievements than is currently the case. These would include skills that are variously described as involving observation, problem identification, problem solving, reasoning, the application of what is learned in school and taking initiative in and responsibility for learning. It should recognise the ability to work co-operatively, a sense of social solidarity and a variety of other aspects of social and personal development, which the NCCA refers to as “the qualities of the student as a human being”.*

The NCCA recognize that these concerns need to be addressed in reforming the Leaving Certificate (established) as an examination and as an educational programme “*...in the broader contexts of lifelong learning and developments in teaching and learning, relatively little attention has been given to the total experience of students within the programme, addressing areas such as time spent in different learning modes, access to different sites, the role of basic and key skills, the role of homework and study, etc.*”¹³,

The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme

The overall aim of the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme is “*to prepare students for the real world by ensuring that they are educated in the broadest sense, that is, they are able to cope and thrive in an environment of rapid change, are adaptable self starters and are innovative, autonomous lifelong learners who are familiar with a range of technologies.... The Programme aims to balance the virtues of the traditionally academic Leaving Certificate with the development of skills and qualities which will prove relevant to the lives of students on leaving school for further education, the world of work, or the business of making a living.*” (Submission 82, Mr. Michael Garvey, LCVP Coordinator, LCVP Office).

The two-year programme is based on combinations of Leaving Certificate subjects and is a pathway to third level education. The programme is based on similar principles to those of the Transition Year and sets out to provide students with the opportunity to engage in self-directed learning, and promote innovation and enterprise. These objective are achieved in part through the requirement to follow three activity-driven modules known as Link Modules – Enterprise Education, Preparation for Work and Work Experience. These Link Modules help to develop:

- Communication skills, including ICT skills.
- Research and report writing
- Team-working, including interpersonal skills, listening skills, leadership and decision-making skills.
- Autonomous learning

The use of active teaching and learning methodologies is encouraged across the LCVP curriculum. Experiences such as work placement, career investigation, mini-enterprise and business visits are an integral part of the programme. Vocational relevance is enhanced by putting in place opportunities for students to plan, organise and engage in active learning experiences both inside and outside the classroom.

The NCCA, 2002, Consultative Paper referred to above, notes that evaluation and reviews of the LCVP to date indicate that the programme has taken root. Indeed the number of students availing of the LCVP continues to increase year on year. In 2001, of the 54,499 students who completed the Leaving Certificate, 12,354 or 21% completed the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme.

However, it is important to note that given that the LCVP largely comprises Leaving Certificate (established) subjects, the criticisms made of that programme above, can equally be made of the LCVP. Additionally, the Link Modules, which form such an important part of the programme, are not equally recognized across Higher Education for points purposes. The

¹³ Consultative Paper on Issues and Options, *Developing Senior Cycle Education*, NCCA, 2002

Institutes of Technology award more points than Universities. This stance by the universities conveys an important and negative message about the skills at the heart of the LCVP and their value – and, as was pointed at one of the interviews with educationalists which formed part of the research for this report “if universities/colleges were to recognize achievement in soft skills for entry to third level, then these would appear on the curriculum overnight”. The issue of disadvantaging second-level students in opportunities for pursuing higher education, was also noted by the Commission on the Points System. They recommended that *“that the universities consider giving higher points (the same as those that are currently awarded by the Institutes of Technology) to the Link Modules in the LCVP, as recommended by the Department of Education and Science as soon as possible”*.

The Leaving Certificate Applied

The primary objective of the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) is to meet the needs of students who are not catered for by the other Leaving Certificate programmes, and who might otherwise leave full-time education.

The curriculum and approach of the Leaving Certificate Applied focus on preparing students for the transition from school to adult and working life. Key principles underlying the LCA are activity-based learning and teaching, and maximizing the student’s involvement with the local community. The programme differs from the traditional Leaving Certificate by being more practical, community based, work-oriented and task-centred. Continuous assessment is used as the basis of about two-thirds of the final result, and those who successfully complete the programme are eligible for entry into many Post-Leaving Certificate courses, but not directly to third level courses.

A recent National Evaluation of the Leaving Certificate Applied report found that vocational preparation and guidance teachers felt the work experience module, which each student participated in as a core element of the course, gave considerable value in terms of the personal development of the students and their ability to enter the work environment. The report commented that the feedback from employers given to students had positive effects on their self-esteem. Participation in work experience was a factor in retaining students in the Programme and, as a consequence, students had a better chance of obtaining full time employment or of continuing on to a Post-Leaving Certificate course.

In 1998, the NCCA produced a *Review of the Leaving Certificate Applied: Report on Programme Structure*, which highlighted a number of issues that negatively impacted on the Leaving Certificate Applied. These include:

- Many programme participants would like to combine elements of the LCA with subjects from the more academic Leaving Certificate (established) but were prohibited from doing so due to the ring-fencing of the three Leaving Certificate programmes.
- Public ‘perception’ of the programme as one for ‘weaker students’ resulted in lack of parity of esteem with other Leaving Certificate programmes notionally under the same umbrella.
- This lack of parity of esteem can be further exacerbated by lack of recognition of the programme by employers and education and training institutions.

This point – lack of parity of esteem, has been made by educationalists interviewed during this research. One of the contributory factors to this situation is the lack of awareness of the value of this course of study. The NCCA is involved in a campaign to promote the LCA and this work has led, for example, to the recognition in 2002? of the LCA for entry to the Garda Síochána. However, there needs to be an ongoing and extensive publicity and awareness campaign to promote the validity and relevance of the course for students and employees, and not just as options for those not suited to academic study.

Despite this lack of parity of esteem at ground level, the value of the LCVP and the LCA have been highlighted by the Irish employer representative body IBEC, who recommended in their report, *Actions for a Learning Society*, that “*The LCA and the LCVP should be expanded and made available to all second-level schools. It must be ensured that choosing to take these new options does not disadvantage students in opportunities for pursuing higher education*”.

Soft Skills Provision in Secondary Education – The Future

While soft skills are being developed to some extent in the Irish secondary education cycle, a number of factors are hindering their development. These include:

- The lack of an explicit policy at national level for the development of soft skills in secondary education.
- The lack of formal recognition for a wide range of non-academic skills in the established Leaving Certificate examination.
- While soft skills development forms an integral part of the LCVP and the LCA, the unequal recognition of these skills for points purposes by the universities (LCVP) and the lack of parity of esteem for the LCA, conveys a negative message about the importance of these skills.
- The need to ensure that second-level teachers are adequately trained in order to develop these soft skills in their students.

The Commission on the Points System suggests a way forward for some of these issues. “*The Commission considers that in looking at the development of the senior cycle the NCCA should have particular regard to the beneficial impact of the new programmes that have been developed - the Transition Year, the Leaving Certificate Applied and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme.*¹⁴ *Among the key successes of the new curricular and assessment developments of these programmes has been the development of appropriate techniques to measure the learning process itself. The Commission considers that much of what has been sought in the consultative process by way of a broad senior cycle experience can be made available to students through the incorporation of some of the innovative curricular approaches and modes and techniques of assessment of these programmes*”.

“*The Commission is of the opinion that while a broad senior cycle education should be provided, and students’ attainment in that senior cycle assessed and certificated, in some instances the certification might be of the nature of a record of participation and involvement rather than a grading of achievement. Some elements of the certification might not count for points purposes, but would be a pre-requisite for entry to third-level education*”.¹⁵

The NCCA has taken cognisance of the views of the Commission in its 2002, *Developing Senior Cycle Education: Consultative Paper on Issues and Options*. While the NCCA addresses the totality of the senior cycle education system in this report, the report also includes a major treatment of the place for soft skills in senior cycle education.

The Paper considers the implications of some of the recommendations of the report of the *Commission on the Points System* - mainly regarding the review and reform of the Leaving Certificate (established). The strengths and weaknesses of the current Leaving Certificate options are examined and the danger of a developing dual-track system of senior cycle education is highlighted. The current aims and purposes of senior cycle education are

¹⁴ “Among the beneficial elements of these programmes are growth in interpersonal and intrapersonal knowledge through teamwork, fostering of an entrepreneurial spirit through work-experience, becoming a self-reliant learner through exposure to experiential learning methodologies.” Report on the Commission on the Points System

¹⁵ Report of the Commission on the Points System, section 4.6, the Development of Senior Cycle Curriculum and Assessment

considered in the context of whether these are preparing learners for the challenges that lie ahead of them and a new set of aims and purposes for senior cycle education in the future is presented for discussion.

The main section of the report aims to clarify key issues related to curriculum, assessment and certification at senior cycle. A number of questions are posed:

- Is current provision adequate? Would more extensive reform of the Leaving Certificate (established) represent an appropriate focus for action?
- Should the Leaving Certificate (established) and the LCVP merge?
- Should a new three-year cycle be developed combining the best features of the Transition Year, the Leaving Certificate (established) and the LCVP?
- Should a new three-year cycle programme be developed combining the best features of all existing programmes?

Issues papers on 'Basic and Key Skills'; 'Modularising the Curriculum?'; and 'Curriculum Structures and Programme Requirements at Senior Cycle' are to be published and discussed at invitational seminars. The NCCA then proposes that a National Forum on Senior Cycle Education take place in the Autumn of 2003 to report on the findings of the consultation process and signal the direction that the emerging 'policy paper' on senior cycle education is taking.

Soft Skills Development in Further Education and Training

Definition of Further Education and Training

The term 'Further Education and Training' (FET) covers education and training which occurs after compulsory, second-level schooling but which is not part of the third-level system. FET is mentioned as a sector in its own right in the 1995 White Paper on Education, *Charting our Education Future* (pp 73-74). The term is used to refer to Vocational Education and Training and Adult Education, with specific reference to:

- The Post Leaving Certificate Sector
- Adult Education, including the Vocational Training and Opportunities Scheme (VTOS), and
- Apprenticeships

The scope of Further Education was expanded in the White Paper on Adult Education, *Learning for Life*, 2000 (p85) to include:

- Adult Literacy
- Basic and Community Education Provision
- Self-funded night-class provision in second-level schools and other centers

The White Paper on Adult Education stresses the personal as well as economic elements of adult education policy. "*The policy objectives for adult education should embrace personal, cultural and social goals as well as economic ones, and be seen as promoting collective as well as personal advancement.*"¹⁶

Although not included specifically in the above definitions, additional Further Education programmes are provided through other Government Departments by a range of training agencies such as FAS, CERT, TEAGASC, Bord Iascaigh Mhara and by voluntary and community organisations.

¹⁶ Department for Education and Science, (2000) *Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education* Dublin: Stationery Office

Government commitment to lifelong learning has put increased pressure on the further education sector regarding the development of soft skills¹⁷. The Taskforce on Lifelong Learning has formed the following vision for Lifelong Learning, “*The State and citizens working in partnership should achieve: The skills, motivation, support/tools, resources and time to engage in learning on a lifelong basis and thus enrich lives and develop a more prosperous, more inclusive society*”. The Taskforce states that “*This will require a significant cultural and attitudinal change on the part of providers, learners, employers, the public service and government. A core element of that cultural shift will involve viewing learning not as a cost but as an essential investment which has tangible economic, personal and societal returns*”.¹⁸

The Taskforce recommends that a framework be established to enable a strategic approach be taken to ensure the achievement of lifelong learning. This Framework has the following elements:

- Developing and implementing the National Framework of Qualifications (see below)
- Ensuring Basic Skills for all
- Providing comprehensive and coherent guidance and information
- Addressing delivery, access and funding issues
- Better learning opportunities in the workplace and for workers

In the last decade, the further education and training sector grew rapidly. However, much of this development took place in an *ad hoc* and fragmented manner and until fairly recently, practice in the area of further education was far in advance of policy. The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999 has set out to redress this situation with the establishment in 2001, of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) and the establishment of the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC).

The NQAI has three main tasks:

- The establishment and maintenance of a framework of qualifications for the development, recognition and award of qualifications based on standards of knowledge, skill or competence to be acquired by learners.
- The establishment and promotion of the maintenance and improvement of the standards of awards of the further and higher education and training sector, other than in the existing universities.
- The promotion and facilitation of access, transfer and progression throughout the span of education and training provision.

The Authority is not an awarding body. The two Councils, FETAC and HETAC, make national certification available for all education and training in the State other than that provided in the primary and post-primary sectors, the Dublin Institute of Technology and the universities.

The Councils have three principal functions:

- The establishment of policies and criteria for the making of awards and the validation of programmes.
- The determination of standards of knowledge, skill or competence to be acquired by learners, before an award may be made by a Council or recognised by a Council.

¹⁷ This pressure is not exclusive to the further education sector, it applies likewise to the higher education sector and employments.

¹⁸ Report of the Taskforce on Lifelong Learning, 2002. Government Publications. P.7

- The making and recognition of awards where persons have achieved the required standards as set out.

The Councils are also responsible for ensuring the quality of awards.

The setting up of the NQAI was a recognition that there needed to be a new body to oversee the development of a national framework of qualifications. Meeting the needs of learners was the key driver for the establishment of the Authority as learners are the key group who will benefit from the development of such a national framework of qualifications and from the implementation of procedures for access, transfer and progression. Through the qualifications framework, learners can have confidence in the quality of their learning and in the relevance of that learning, both in terms of their own personal development and in terms of the relevance of learning to the world of work, where this is appropriate.

The NQAI has already commenced work on developing a new national framework of qualifications in both further and higher education (this framework is due to be published shortly). The framework, which places emphasis on an outcomes-based approach to learning, will put learners at the centre of the education and training system and will promote the principle of access, transfer and progression in a way that has never been done before in Irish education or training.

Concomitantly, it needs to be recognised that while the work of the Authority will be of benefit to learners, the functions of the Authority are immediately relevant principally to FETAC and HETAC and to providers of education and training generally.

Regarding Further Education, the integration, by FETAC, of the awarding systems previously in place for further education and training, will assist in a more common, coherent and transparent approach to the certification of outcomes in further education and training.

Soft Skills Provision in Further Education and Training

Department of Education and Science Funded Programmes

Further education and training covers a very wide range of activities and provides for approximately 30% of all school-leavers at present. The Department of Education and Science provides substantial funding for programmes such as:

- Post Leaving Certificate courses (PLC)
- The Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme for the unemployed (VTOS)
- Youthreach for early school-leavers
- Senior Traveller Training Centre programmes for young and adult travellers who have left school early.
- Second Chance - Adult literacy and Back to Education Initiative
- Community Education

These programmes are, for the most part, delivered locally by the Vocational Education Committees and by some second-level schools. National certification of further education is provided by FETAC and programmes can also be offered leading to awards under the Junior or Leaving Certificates.

Post Leaving Certificate Courses (PLCs)

Post Leaving Certificate courses are provided mainly in VEC schools and colleges for young people and adults who have completed upper second level education but who need vocational training to enhance their employment prospects. The programme offers over 1,000

courses in 229 centres. The PLC programmes integrates training for vocational skills in particular disciplines and the development of soft skills such as interpersonal skills, adaptability and initiative. It also provides for work experience to give relevance to the skills learned and an appreciation of working life. Approximately 18% of all school leavers enter PLC courses. Over 40% of PLC students are aged 21 or over.

Certification is provided through FETAC - mainly NCVA Level 2 awards but also some Level 3 qualifications. Eight modules are needed for a full Level 2 award, including 3 mandatory modules in communication, work experience and another general studies module. A progression scheme operates which enables holders of FETAC (NCVA Level 2) awards to progress to designated certificate and diploma courses in all Institutes of Technology, the DIT, and more recently University College Cork. Since the 2001/2002 academic year, the National University of Ireland will allow holders of the NCVA Level 2 Certificate, with Distinctions in five modules, admission to degree courses in cognate areas¹⁹ and UCC have been the first university to implement this decision.

The Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS)

VTOS provides second-chance education and training for unemployed adults aged 21 who have been receiving an unemployment payment or signing for credits for at least six months. The programme is of 1 – 2 years duration and participants may choose from a range of options including the Junior or Leaving Certificate programmes or modules or awards certified by FETAC (NCVA Foundation Level, Level 1, Level 2 or 3). Regarding soft skills development and assessment; at Foundation Level eight modules are required for a full award including three mandatory modules in communications, maths and personal effectiveness/personal and interpersonal skills. For a full award at Level 1, eight modules are required including four mandatory modules in communications, maths, IT and personal effectiveness/personal and interpersonal skills. The requirements for a full award at Level 2 are described under the Post Leaving Certificate Courses above.

Youthreach

Youthreach is an inter-Departmental initiative for early school-leavers. Participants are generally aged between 15 – 20 and have left school with less than 5 Ds in the Junior Certificate, or without having attempted the Leaving Certificate. The programme operates through a number of different strands – Youthreach centres funded by the Department of Education and Science and managed by the VECs (77), Community Training Workshops funded by FAS (35 – 45). A similar programme in a culturally supportive environment is operated for travellers in a network of Senior Traveller Training Centres (30). There is no upper age limit in the Senior Traveller Workshops.

Programmes feature integrated personal development, literacy numeracy, ICT, communications and a range of vocational training options and work experience. Certification is provided through the FETAC (NCVA Foundation and Level 1) qualifications, the Leaving Certificate Applied and through subjects in the Junior and Leaving Certificate programmes.

Adult Literacy

The National Adult Literacy Programme was the first pillar of the Government's strategy for Second Chance and Further Education outlined in the White Paper on Adult Education, *Learning for Life*. Within adult literacy part-time programmes, the definition of literacy goes beyond the technical skills of reading, writing and listening. It includes the integration of reading and writing, listening, speaking, and mathematics or numeracy for everyday life. Personal development, improving self-esteem and confidence and communications are an

¹⁹ NUI Minimum Academic Entry and Registraron (Matriculation) Requirements, 2001/2002, 2002/2003

integral part of the process. Certification options in Junior Certificate and FETAC (formerly NCVA) Foundation Level and Level 1 are widely used.

Back to Education Initiative (BTEI)

The Back to Education Initiative is the second pillar of the Government's strategy for Second Chance and Further Education. The BTEI provides for an expansion of flexible part-time options across further education so that adults can combine a return to learning with work and family responsibilities. The BTEI.

The top priorities of the BTEI part-time programme are to address:

- The low literacy levels of the Irish adult population
- The large number of Irish adults (1.1m aged 15-64) who have not completed upper second-level education, of whom 5229,600 have not completed lower second-level
- The inflexibility of the Irish education system, with its predominant emphasis on full-time provision, time-specific entry and exit opportunities
- The difficulties in combining family, personal and work responsibilities with learning opportunities

Provision will include FETAC (formerly NCVA) qualifications at Foundation Level, Level 1 and Level 2/3, and subjects in the Junior and Leaving certificates. However, only 30% of provision may be targeted at those who have already achieved at least 5 Ds in the Leaving Certificate, and such provision must be targeted towards addressing critical skill needs such as ICT skills, languages, social care.

Community Education

The community-based sector is amongst the most dynamic, creative and relevant components of adult education provision in Ireland. Community education evolved in Ireland in the early 1980s *"as an ideologically driven, highly innovative and large-scale Adult Education provision consisting mainly of self-directed women's groups"²⁰*. These groups developed mainly in urban working-class areas which were badly affected by high rates of unemployment and which had to cope with high levels of youth dependency. Alongside these groups, community education movement developed in a range of other disadvantaged contexts. The community development programme of the Department of Social and Family Affairs now works in approximately one hundred disadvantaged communities, both urban and rural, throughout the country. Similarly, through the work of the Area-Based Partnerships, Community Education has focused on issues of inclusion as they affect marginalized groups such as Travellers, people with disabilities, rural small-holders and the elderly.

Key characteristics of the community education sector are:

- Its non-statutory nature
- Its problem-solving flexible focus based on trust
- Its process- rather than syllabus-focus – participants are engaged from the start as equal partners in identifying needs, designing and implementing programmes and adapting them on an ongoing basis
- Its promotion of personalised learning and flexibility within the environment of a learning group
- Its commitment to match curriculum and pedagogy with the needs and interests of the students

²⁰ Department of Education and Science, 2000, *Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education*, p.111

Training of Trainers

A research project was undertaken by the School of Education Studies at Dublin City University to analyse the training needs of trainers in the Further Education sector in Ireland. The survey (census) which was undertaken covered Youthreach centres, VTOS and Senior Traveller Training Centres in the Republic of Ireland. A 50.2% response rate was achieved.

The survey results indicate that around one-third of full-time educators/trainers and more than one-half of part time staff do not have an appropriate teaching/training qualification. Likewise, over one-third of centre co-ordinators do not possess a teaching/training qualification.

The report recommends that there should be a required minimum level of teaching/training qualification for trainers in the sector. The programmes for training trainers should include the following topics: vocational guidance, communications skills, identification of training needs, motivation, learning differences and difficulties, assessment of learning, learning methodologies and principles of adult education.

Other Providers

FAS

FAS, the National Training and Employment Authority, is the major body involved in providing training to the unemployed and to job-seekers. FAS provides a regionally integrated and locally-based service through a network of training centres, external training and employment services offices located throughout the country. The following are some examples of the work that FAS is currently doing in relation to the development of soft skills.

Apprenticeship Training

FAS has the statutory obligation to administer the Irish apprenticeship system. Apprenticeship training is delivered jointly by employers, FAS and the Department of Education and Science. It's objective is to ensure that the quality and quantity of skilled crafts-persons matches current and future employer needs.

Current apprenticeship training is standards-based and leads to a National Craft Certificate issued by FETAC. It has seven phases; three off-the-job phases and four on-the-job. Phase two is conducted in FAS Training Centres and Phases four and six are conducted by the Department of Education and Science and take place in the Institutes of Technology. Apprenticeship training aims to develop the following soft skills though there is currently no explicit method of assessing the attainment of them within the system.

- Communications
- Customer Relations
- Adaptability
- Ability to work as a team member
- Ability to work independently
- Initiative
- Problem solving
- Planning
- Information-gathering
- Quality
- Language
- Report writing

Over 4,000 National Craft Certificates were awarded between June 2001 and June 2002.

Specific Skills Training Courses

Specific Skills training courses cover a very wide range of skills designed to meet the needs of unemployed jobseekers and employers. The content and duration of such courses vary depending on the nature of the course. Specific Skills courses set out to develop trainees' technical skills but also cover, in some cases explicitly, the interpersonal and self-management skills required to be effective at work. Examples of Specific Skills courses which have a high 'soft skills' content are Hairdressing, Community Care Practice, Communications, Supervisory Skills, Sales/Marketing, Caring Skills, Child Care, Sports and Recreation Leadership. Approximately 14,600 Certificates were issued by FETAC for Specific Skills Training Courses between June 2001 – June 2002.

Traineeships

FAS Traineeships include elements of personal skills development. The following modules are common to all Traineeship programmes:

- Induction
- Communications or Customer Relations (depending on traineeship occupation)
- Health & Safety
- Information Technology
- Career Planning and Job Seeking Skills

The personal skills modules/elements are tailor-made to match the occupational profile as agreed with the particular sector. While there are specific modules focusing on certain soft/personal skills, soft skill development is also integrated into the total curriculum of the traineeships. The certificates awarded are issued by FETAC.

Integrated Assessment System (IAS)

The Integrated Assessment system is an inter-agency, (FAS, CERT and Teagasc) joint-initiative which targets the disadvantaged. The IAS concentrates exclusively on the development of soft skills using practical skills as a vehicle by which to develop and assess them. There are currently 160 training and assessment modules. The modules are not a curriculum, rather they identify training outcomes against laid-down standards. The core skills assessed in each module include:

- Communications
- Planning
- Teamwork
- Safety
- Quality Awareness
- Hygiene

The identification of the above skills were derived from the needs of employment and the need to transfer into Further Education. A mutual agreement with the NCVA, at foundation level, was established in respect of a certain number of modules. The award is now recognised by FETAC.

The IAS is currently accessed by a wide range of groups – Community Training Workshops, Job Clubs, CYTP, Community Response are examples. CERT and Teagasc also still run them in these centres.

Core Skills

A Certificate in Core Skills has been developed for participants on the Community Employment Programme based on the core skills identified in the Integrated Assessment System. Currently a new award in core skills has been piloted and will be available as a national award under FETAC for a wide range of activities. This new Certificate in Core Skills consists of:

- Core Skills Modules, which are followed and assessed in the context of
- Core Themes

The Core Skills Modules describe in detail some of the knowledge and skills which are needed to manage effectively in work, daily and civic life. The skills are:

- Communications: Reading
- Communications: Writing
- Communications: Dialogue and discussion
- Communications: Using signs, symbols and images
- Using Numbers
- Working in Teams and Groups
- Information Technology
- Quality Awareness
- Planning and Problem Solving

The Core Themes are general topics which are relevant to people as individuals and also as members of society. Examples of Core Themes are; Work Placement, Quality at Work, Lifelong Learning, Career Planning, Working Maths, Health & Safety.

Trainees choose the Core Skills Module(s) which they want to work on, plus the Theme(s) which are of interest to them. Activities are planned which enable them to explore their chosen topic and at the same time, practice and improve specific skills..

The Certificate has been developed at two levels – Introduction/Foundation and Continuation Level. The pilot of the Foundation Level has been approved by FETAC.

To access the IAS and Core Skills, trainers must attend a one-day assessor briefing session.

FAS Net College

FAS Net College provides a range of e-learning courses aimed at employers, employees and the unemployed. The courses are available on the internet. Through e-Learning, learners can gain access to training at all times over a six month period from their commencement date. The Soft Skills/Personal Development e-learning course comprises a series of different courses which includes the following:

- Appraisals series
- Basic business writing and effective e-mail series
- Leading Teams series
- Team working series
- e-Working series
- e-Working with e-tutor support

Currently, no certification is offered on the Soft Skills/Personal Development courses.

FAS – Training of Trainers Programmes.

During the 1980s and 1990s, FAS in partnership with the NUI Maynooth and NUI Galway, developed a series of distance learning, Training of Trainer, programmes. The programmes are designed at foundation, certificate, diploma and degree level. The programmes were initially designed with the needs of FAS instructors in mind but have since been expanded and are currently aimed at vocational teachers, trainers, educational consultants, human resource specialists and those practicing or planning a career as trainers in the educational, industrial, commercial, voluntary and community sectors.

The programmes were developed in order to:

- Enable trainers to acquire and develop their competences in trainer skills
- Provide opportunities for trainers to update and extend their knowledge and skills in training technology, methodology and delivery systems.
- Provide formal qualifications for those involved in training and continuing education

The delivery of the programmes combines open learning, self-instructional modules, attendance at workshops and written and practical assignments.

Regarding the teaching/trainer qualifications of FAS instructors (including contract instructors), all are required to have the Foundation Certificate (or equivalent²¹) as a minimum qualification. However the majority of FAS instructors have also completed the Certificate level course.

CERT²²

CERT is the national body responsible for training and development in the Irish tourism and hospitality industry. CERT provides training services for students in second-level schools, adults and for the industry generally. As highly-developed soft skills are a requirement for many jobs/occupations in this sector, most courses include them in the curriculum either in an integrated system or as a separate module.

CERT courses in second-level schools

CERT offers two stand-alone programmes for students undertaking the transition year in second-level schools; Tourism Awareness and Hotel Industry Opportunities in Tourism. They also offer a course – Hotel, Catering and Tourism – as a vocational specialisation within the two-year full-time Leaving Certificate Applied programme. This course is task oriented and is examined by continuous assessment and a final written examination.

PLC Courses

Two CERT-designed PLC courses – Hotel and Catering, and Tourism - are available on a one-year full-time, or part-time basis over a number of years. These courses take place in a number of second-level schools, community training workshops and VTOS centres around the country. They are open to anyone aged over 16 or who have completed either the FETAC (NCVA Level 1) or Leaving Certificate programmes. On successful completion of the course, participants are awarded a FETAC (NCVA Level 2) certificate. These courses are similar to

²¹ The H.Dip in Education or the IITD Certificate are considered equivalent qualifications

²² Since May 2003, CERT has become absorbed into a new organization – Failte Ireland

the PLC courses described above and for a full award, require that the student has taken three mandatory modules in communications, work experience and another general studies module.

CERT Training Programmes for Adults

CERT provides a number of Skills Training (Elementary Certificate) courses for unemployed adults. The programmes are full-time and are 3 – 4 months long. There are common core modules that form part of each course – four of which focus on developing personal/soft skills. The skills include communications, team-work, developing a CV and health and safety. Successful participants are awarded a FETAC recognised certificate. Over 1,000 certificates were awarded by FETAC during the period June 2001 – June 2002. CERT also provide Return to Work courses for unemployed (mainly women) people returning to the labour force – 10 hours a week over 10 weeks. There is a high emphasis on soft skills development in the course (confidence building, personal development etc) and participants can progress to the Skills Training course described above.

Cert National Craft Certificate (apprenticeship level) courses are held in Institutes of Technology throughout the country, the DIT and the Tourism College in Killybegs. The majority of participants entering the programmes hold a Leaving Certificate qualification. The level of personal/soft skills development within these courses varies depending on the nature of the course. However, all students taking part on these courses are required to undertake the Complementary Studies/Living Programme modules, which includes awareness-building and skills development in the following areas:

- Customer care
- Communications
- Disability awareness
- World of work and leisure
- European studies

Accreditation on these courses comprises continuous assessment and final examination leading to a FETAC recognised qualification. Over 800 certificates were awarded by FETAC between June 2001 – June 2002.

The Advanced National Certificate is designed for people who have successfully completed the National Craft Certificate and who have completed a satisfactory period of time working in the sector. The courses vary from 8 – 20 weeks and take place in third-level institutions throughout the country. There is a high customer-care emphasis in these programmes and the soft skills element tends to be integrated into the curriculum. The courses lead to a FETAC recognised award – over 330 certificates were awarded between June 2001 – June 2002.

Professional training for the hotel and hospitality sector is provided in third-level colleges throughout the country in Institutes of Technology, the DIT and Shannon College of Hotel Management. Qualifications are awarded at Certificate, Diploma and Degree Levels. Course duration varies between 1 – 4 years and are provided on a full-time or block release basis. These courses are accredited by HETAC.

CERT also provides a wide range of on- and off-site training and development to the sector for both operational and business issues. Programmes which have a significant soft skills content include People Management programmes, Leadership and Management, Operations Management, and Professional and Business Development programmes.

Soft Skills Provision in Further Education and Training – The Future

The extent of soft skills development in Further Education varies between programmes and between providers. In some programmes the skills are recognised explicitly in the curriculum and their achievement forms part of the assessment system. In other programmes, the importance attached to them is less specific. In view of the growing significance of such skills, there is a need to ensure that soft skills are explicitly incorporated onto all programmes.

There is one common theme in all further education and training courses – the participants (be they young school-leavers or mature adults) are all at post-compulsory level and therefore require a learner-directed, person-centred approach to training/education. Appropriate training of trainers is extremely important to ensure that trainers have the required skills to deliver their programmes effectively using these approaches. There is therefore a need to ensure that FET trainers are appropriately trained.

Third Level Education

Structure of Higher Education in Ireland

Higher Education in Ireland is provided mainly by universities, institutes of technology and colleges of education. A number of other institutions provide specialised training²³. Most higher education is State-funded - currently, universities and institutes of technology receive more than 90% of their income from the State.

The Higher Education Authority (HEA) is the planning and development body for higher education. It has wide advisory powers throughout the whole of the third-level education sector and is the funding authority for the universities and a number of designated institutions. Its functions include:

Altogether, there are eight universities in Ireland. The universities are responsible for:

- Determining their own basic matriculation requirements
- Reviewing the content and teaching of courses
- Appointing external examiners
- Awarding degrees and other qualifications

In addition to the universities, higher education is available in thirteen institutes of technology (ITs) located throughout the country. These institutes provide a comprehensive range of courses ranging from craft apprenticeship programmes through to two year National Certificate and three-year National Diploma and four-year degree programmes in the applied fields of engineering, science (including computer science), business studies and humanities and post-graduate studies. The institutes also provide for recurrent education by way of part-time day and evening courses. HETAC is the validating body for most of the courses run by the ITs and the qualifications awarded therefore will have to adhere to the level indicators, which set out the broad range of knowledge, skill or competence associated with groups of awards or award types, as set down by the NQAI.

The Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) offers courses covering apprenticeship, certificate, diploma, degree and professional awards and it is the validating body for its own awards.

HETAC/DIT diploma or certificate holders may, in certain circumstances, be able to transfer to the universities to complete courses for a higher qualification.

²³ For example; art, design, medicine, theology, music and law.

Government Policy

Irish Government policy is working towards maximising the number of students undertaking third-level education, “*In line with the aims set in the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness, investment will aim to put Ireland in the top quarter of OECD countries in terms of the participation of the population in post second-level education*”²⁴ Participation in third-level education is viewed as a key indicator in contributing to future economic success.

However, access to higher education in Ireland has been primarily through a narrow, sequential pathway following the second-level education system. There have been limited opportunities for alternative entry points for adults in the system and as a result, Ireland has one of the lowest mature student participation rates in the industrialised world. Current Government policy in relation to lifelong learning; the establishment of HETAC and the NQAI and the development of a national framework of qualifications will put increased pressure on third-level institutions to improve and extend access to third-level education.

At both national and European level, the need to increase the links between educational institutions and industry has been clearly identified²⁵. This is to ensure that the educational sector becomes more responsive and adaptive to labour market needs. The following goals are outlined in the Department of Education and Science Strategy Statement:

- Support partnerships between business and institutions of higher education.
- Establish and monitor national targets for meeting specific occupational and skill requirements, drawing on the work of the *Expert Group on Future Skill Needs*.

To deliver on these goals, the higher education sector will need flexible strategies to meet the expanding and changing needs brought about by demographic trends, economic developments and industry demands.

Provision of Soft Skills at Third-level

In preparing people for life and work, third level institutions have a role to play, not only in developing technical and professional skills, but also in developing the personal, interpersonal and enterprise skills that are now required for working in highly-skilled and knowledge-based employments. Until recently, little formal recognition of this responsibility has been acknowledged either by the third-level education sector or by the Government.

The Universities

Universities have their own discretion to decide what emphasis should be placed in the area of soft skills. Each institution places its own emphasis on soft skills development, and this varies across colleges and across courses.

The need for soft skills development at university level has been recognised for some time. In 1998, the Irish Universities Training Network (IUTN) held a seminar on University Teaching and Learning: Policy and Practice. One of the key areas where recommendations were made related to what key skills (cognitive, social and personal effectiveness skills) should be identified as part of all degree programmes. In responding to the report, the HEA noted that this role would not be appropriate for either the Department or the HEA, rather it would be appropriate for universities themselves, whether through the Conference of Heads of Irish Universities (CHIUI) or independently to ensure the education of well rounded individuals at all levels.

²⁴ Department of Education and Science, Strategy Statement 2001 - 2004

²⁵ High Level Task Force on Skills and Mobility, Action Plan 2002

The recent report on Irish Universities by Professor Malcolm Skilbeck ²⁶ points to the need for the Irish university sector to become more in tune with modern Irish society and the world of work and the economy. Although the report does not deal specifically with the area of soft skills in the Irish university system, it does highlight a number of areas which affect their development. The areas looked at below are; access to higher education; the links with industry, and the teaching and learning roles within the universities.

- Skilbeck highlights the fact that the universities have continued to exert an undue influence on the second level system by maintaining the traditional Leaving Certificate as the almost exclusive route to university education. The long-standing social imbalance in terms of who goes to university has not been tackled in any significant way, and at least part of the responsibility for that situation is laid at the universities' door. He suggests that *"For the universities the challenge is now to show a readiness to work collectively as a system, in tandem with the institute of technology sector, and the secondary schools. Targets should include the introduction of procedures for more systematic recognition of prior learning; credit transfer; joint (cross-sectoral) study programmes; part-time study including work and home-based study by distance education; and further diversifying curricula, teaching and assessment procedures; and developing on-line learning on a national, co-operative basis...."*
- The Report also deals with the need for the universities to strengthen partnerships with industry and community organisations *"... there is a need for universities to demonstrate a greater responsiveness to the rapidly changing economic environment through outreach schemes in all subjects and fields of study – and not only those with business/employment links. These could include work and community experience as a normal component of all degree programmes, closer integration of university career guidance and community liaison programmes into academic work, business-university fora..."*
- Regarding the area of university lecturers and their teaching/learning role, Skilbeck states *"There are very serious challenges to appoint new staff with aptitude for a broad range of entrepreneurial as well as academic roles and to provide professional development opportunities for the present staffs of the institutions.... Growth of student numbers, greater diversity including equity groups and mature age students with whose educational needs many teachers may have little experience, and the spread of technology-based learning pose considerable challenges that will have to be met in positive ways. Good teaching needs encouragement and appreciation including fuller recognition in recruitment and promotion procedures. The examination-bound conventions of the 'right answer' and the fostering of rote learning have long been signalled as potential weaknesses. They become all the greater in a modern society where emphasis is given to problem-solving, team work, oral communication, the search for information from multiple sources and self and group-directed initiative. University teaching does not always respond to these requirements whose focus is 'learning how to learn, to know and to do'. There is often in educational practice a weak linkage among declared goals, assessment practices and the content and process of teaching. Staff development should focus more on improving each of these and their inter-relationships and not only on teaching methods and the uses of technology."*

He suggests that as there is not an established policy framework at university level in Ireland to address the above needs (and indeed there might be some resistance to formal training), a first step might be to initiate collectively, at national level some studies of good practice which would lead to a policy debate. Ireland should set a

²⁶ Skilbeck, M. (2001) *The University Challenged: A review of International Trends and Issues with Particular Reference to Ireland*. Dublin: Higher Education Authority

range of targets to deal with these issues and treat staff development as the key strategy to achieve them.

Both the IBEC²⁷ and the ESF Evaluation Unit Reports²⁸, referred to in previous sections, highlighted the need for and the ways in which universities could incorporate the development of soft skills in the context of third-level course delivery. Firstly, the third-level institutions could explicitly incorporate material on innovative work practices and associated skills into course syllabi (although this is common practice in some educational institutions, it is not universal). Secondly, third-level institutions could review the role of teaching and assessment methods in reinforcing personal learning outcomes. This approach is more far reaching as it would involve re-designing the delivery of courses to more closely replicate the modern working environment by incorporating problem-solving techniques, team-working and bottom-up communication in courses. This second approach would involve the re-training of lecturers and teachers in devising appropriate course materials and delivery methods.

Currently, the explicit development of the soft skills of students at university is insufficient. However there are some initiatives that are taking place that reflect good practice. A number of these are highlighted below:

The Careers Services in Trinity College Dublin, Waterford Institute of Technology and Dublin City University, have received project funding from the HEA to identify the transferable skills (*“also known as ‘generic’, ‘soft’, ‘key’ or non-technical”*) that Irish employers look for in Irish graduates. The project is being piloted in a modern language department in each institution. The project aims to develop different methods of integrating transferable skills into the academic curricula with a view to eventually disseminating the experience to other departments and third-level institutions.

In July 2003, they published a study identifying the transferable skills that Irish employers look for in graduates. The survey found that a range of transferable skills were very important during recruitment. Oral communication, teamwork, customer service, time management, written communication, and the ability to cope with multiple tasks were particularly valued transferable skills. These skills were rated more highly than academic record or relevant work experience when recruiting graduates.

The next stage in the project is to survey students and they also plan to meet with academic staff and alumni. The collated feedback from the research will directly inform the content of the project in each institution.

Other HEA funded programmes under the Targeted Initiative Programme in 2002 included projects to:

- enhance the soft skills amongst staff members in a third-level institution with a view to helping them support students from disadvantaged backgrounds to participate in higher education.
- develop on-line career skills modules with a view to aiding students develop key skills during work placements and ensuring students can integrate work-related learning with their academic programme – the University of Limerick.

The Careers Office in TCD has a Personal Development Programme available for students in a number of selected Departments. The programme encourages students to reflect on the transferable skills they are developing while at college and gives them the opportunity to

²⁷ Actions for a Learning Society

²⁸ European Social Fund, Programme Evaluation Unit, Education and Training for New Forms of Work Organisation, 2000

record and articulate those skills by completing a workbook called the Personal and Career Development Record. The programme aims to enhance the employability of graduates and prepare them for lifelong learning

The Centre for Teaching and Learning in UCD has developed a website designed to introduce the concepts and principles of 'Good Practice in Teaching & Learning' in third-level education. The website is a resource and research centre for the study and support of teachers. Regarding soft skills, there are web pages on generic and transferable skills, lifelong learning and self-directed learning – what they are and how to integrate them into curricula. The section is complemented by a section on Good Practice in Student Assessment.

Although some soft skills development is taking place at university level, there is at present insufficient development of these skills across the sector as a whole due to the lack of an explicit policy at national level for the development of soft skills. There is a need for the sector to develop an overall policy which will ensure that soft skills are addressed on all university programmes.

The Higher Education sector is influential in determining the extent and level of soft skills development in young people due to the control they exert over entry requirements for higher education. However, as has been pointed out in previous sections, the current situation whereby the Link Modules in the LCVP are not recognised equally across higher education for points purposes conveys a negative message from the higher education sector regarding the value and importance of soft skills development in education and training. The progression scheme which enables holders of FETAC (NCVA Level 2) awards to progress to designated certificate and diploma courses in all Institutes of Technology and the DIT is welcomed. Since the 2001/2002 academic year, the National University of Ireland will allow holders of the NCVA Level 2 Certificate, with Distinctions in five modules, admission to degree courses in cognate areas²⁹ (UCC have been the first university to implement this decision). Such arrangements should be extended to other universities.

Recommendations

While the continued emphasis on developing core technical and hard skills is essential for the Irish economy, the need for soft skills is increasing and requires attention now to prevent a critical gap arising in the future. The shortage of technical skills and professional skills, e.g. nurses and engineers, is often more visible, but the lack of soft skills will impact on the effectiveness of organisations, and ultimately the economy, over the long term.

The risk to the economy of underdevelopment in this area is high, given the expressed needs for ongoing innovation and creativity, new and more flexible working practices, increased team working and partnership, all of which have soft skills as their foundation for success. While there are many examples of good practice within both the workplace and educational system, there is no clear national policy or framework to provide a cohesive structure or direction. The Expert Group on Future Skills Needs makes the following recommendations to enhance the development of soft skills in Ireland.

1. The acquisition and development, on an on-going basis, of soft skills proficiency and use will be an increasingly critical success factor in maintaining and improving both the competitiveness of the Irish economy and individuals' employability. The Expert Group, therefore, recommends that the development of soft skills should form an explicit and integral part of the national policy agenda, both in respect of enterprise development and of education/training.

²⁹ NUI Minimum Academic Entry and Registraron (Matriculation) Requirements, 2001/2002, 2002/2003

2. The national framework of qualifications can help establish the importance of soft skills by ensuring that their acquisition forms a key part of education and training programmes. Specifically, FETAC and HETAC should ensure that qualifications approved by them explicitly incorporate recognition of the acquisition of soft skills in terms of outcomes.
3. As recommended by the Commission on the Points System, the acquisition of soft skills should be more explicitly incorporated into all Leaving Certificate programmes. Currently, the development of such skills is included in the Leaving Certificate Vocational and Applied programmes. However, there is a need to ensure that all Leaving Certificate students develop these key skills. The Expert Group welcomes the current review by the NCCA of the curricula and assessment systems for the Leaving Certificate, particularly in relation to the development of soft skills.
4. In order to endorse the value of the link modules in the LCVP, the Expert Group supports the Commission of the Points System who recommended that *“the universities consider giving higher points to the link modules, (the same as those that are currently awarded by the Institutes of Technology), as recommended by the Department of Education and Science as soon as possible”*.
5. Currently, the Transition Year aims to give a high priority to the development of soft skills. However, not all students undergo the Transition Year, and the quality and effectiveness of the Transition Year is quite variable. The Expert Group believes that it is desirable that second-level students undertake a well-structured Transition Year as a means, inter alia, of improving their soft skills.
6. Consideration should be given to developing the module on the world of work, to increase the learning from the work experience element of the Transition Year. This module should deal with the modern workplace and work practices and be developed and implemented in consultation with the social partners and local industry. Curricula material for teachers in respect of soft skills elements in the Transition Year might also be usefully developed, or, where it already exists, better communicated to Transition Year teachers/leaders. Similar modules on the world of work might also be usefully developed for other groups of students/trainees e.g. third-level students on co-operative work experience.
7. Failure in the education system is often due to problems encountered by individuals at early or pre-school stage. A culture of life-long learning recognises the need for a successful early start to learning. In relation to soft skills, also, early foundations are important. The Group notes that the learner-centred pedagogy in primary schools seems to be more conducive to soft skills development. It is recommended that the responsible authorities should seek to have more of the positive elements of this learner-centred approach incorporated into second-level schools and further education/training.
8. Educationalists differ on the relative effectiveness of stand-alone modules in respect of soft skills, compared to integration of soft skills within ‘normal’ programmes. There are also different views on the effectiveness of the transfer of soft skills between different situations and in different contexts. The Expert Group favours the integration of soft skills development into all curricula and learning processes of ‘normal’ programmes. However, this does not rule out the value of having stand-alone modules for specific purposes. It is recommended that all the relevant authorities (the Department of Education and Science, the NCCA, FAS, etc...) consider the need for the development of nationally-certified stand-alone modules at different levels for various elements of soft skills.

9. At all levels of the education/training system, many teachers are teaching particular subjects, the overt topic, as well as the 'hidden curriculum' - soft skills such as problem solving and team working. Teachers should be assisted to identify how best to move the development of these soft skills into the conscious learning of students. This will require reviewing the learning that has taken place, the processes used and the analysis/thinking/interpersonal skills being developed as a side-product of the main subject.

10. The importance of soft skills as a means to ensure that individuals can operate effectively in the work place also needs to be addressed in higher education. In particular, higher education institutions should, in the development and review of curricula have regard to the need to address soft skill development for students. The work undertaken by TCD, DCU and WIT and highlighted in this report may assist all institutions in this regard.

11. Although soft skills have always been a major requirement in some sectors (e.g. tourism) and jobs (e.g. sales), their increased importance reflects the development of 'high performance working organisations' more widely across manufacturing, services and the public sector. Such organisations have been shown to be more successful, whether measured in terms of productivity, profits or public service. However, many organisations in Ireland have not adopted these approaches. The Group notes that the National Centre for Partnership and Performance is currently examining how best to promote such modern work practices. The Group recommends that the enterprise development agencies, along with the National Centre, continue to promote and provide assistance to organisations in furthering this approach to working. Soft skills development and application is a key component of moving to 'high performance work organisations'.

APPENDIX 1

Key Skills, Qualifications and Competences - Developments in Europe

The development of key skills/competences/qualifications has emerged across the EU as a common policy response to the challenges posed by new technology and changes in the organisation of work. These key skills, competences and qualifications (which include soft skills), became compelling for policy makers as they were seen to hold the potential for including common components in all education and training programmes. These components would be capable of being transferred from one setting to another, allowing competence to be redeployed and thereby allowing individuals to respond effectively to the seemingly inevitable changes in the content and context of work¹.

However, at European level, the development of such skills, competences and qualifications have evolved separately in different countries reflecting concepts based on individual national cultures and institutional contexts. The most influential developments can be grouped into the following three strands:

- Key (core) skills (mainly in the UK)
- Key/core competences (Denmark, France)
- Key qualifications (Germany, the Netherlands)

Key Skills

Key skills (originally known as core skills) were first introduced on a national basis in the UK on vocational training programmes for the unemployed in the 1980s with their use later being extended to national vocational qualifications (NVQs) and general national vocational qualifications (GNVQs) in the 1990s. In more recent years, the Key Skills Qualification has formed an important component of the *Curriculum 2000* reforms.

The conceptual starting point was the identification of a set of key skills that were assumed to have a generic and facilitating nature. Key skills were seen as independent of context and were designed to broaden the potential for individual flexibility and for skill accumulation and transfer. The list of skills identified were restricted to those aspects of performance which policy-makers felt would be amenable to competence-based, criterion-referenced assessment. Six key skills were identified – communication, application of numbers, application of ICT, decision-making, teamwork and improving own learning. However, given the difficulties of definition and assessment, the first three were prioritised and now form part of the Key Skills Qualification. The latter skills, known as Wider Key Skills - decision-making, teamwork and improving own working, while not forming part of this qualification, can be accredited separately through individual wider key skill units.

The units of the Key Skills Qualification can be achieved at different levels. Each unit is assessed by providing portfolio-based evidence and taking external tests. Much of this evidence is intended to be gathered from the learners' main programme of study but in reality they are often taught as stand alone modules.

¹ Oates,T; Bresciani,P.G ; and Clematide,B. Transformation of Learning in education and training, Key qualifications re-visited, chapter 5, CEDEFOP, 2002

It is intended that the Key Skills Qualifications should be offered to all 16 – 19 year olds, although it is not mandatory for learners to take it or for schools and colleges to offer it. However, the UK Government has put substantial resources into a Key Skills Support Programme to be delivered and offered to all schools and colleges free of charge. It has also provided dedicated funding for general further education and sixth form colleges to offer the Key Skills Qualification for 16-19 year olds.

The introduction of the Key Skills Qualification in the UK is an attempt to associate key skills with all types of programmes for 16 – 19 year olds rather than exclusively with vocational qualifications. It is also an attempt to indicate that curriculum breadth at advanced level can be provided through the acquisition of skills as well as through the more traditional means of taking additional academic subjects. While these two approaches might be seen as progressive and innovative, a controversial debate has emerged. It has been argued ² that:

- The Key Skills Qualification has focused on a narrow range of skills (communication, application of numbers and application of ICT) associated with remediation and skills deficits rather than on the Wider Key Skills which are more associated with enhancements to teaching and learning in advanced level study, progression to higher education and higher level skills in the workplace.
- The search for a national qualification underpinned by ‘rigorous and consistent assessment irrespective of its setting’ has created a considerable assessment burden within the Key Skills Qualification and has effectively frustrated the professional aspiration of embedding key skills in subjects, workplace settings and enrichment activity.
- The narrow skill focus and assessment burden has meant that the Key Skills Qualification has not been embraced by the majority of advanced level students and has almost been universally rejected by selective schools. These factors have undermined its recognition by universities.

Key Competences

The key competences approach is not associated with any one particular country or system. Rather it underpins a cluster of approaches in different countries and contexts. The common denominator is that they draw on learning and competence development in organisational contexts, bringing together training and development partnerships between training providers and workplace organisations. The main focus is on integrated organisational learning rather than individual learners or education frameworks.

Key competences promote the renewal of vocational competence within organisational contexts and through continuing vocational training. Curriculum development initiatives involve the development of client-centred customised learning programmes. This approach is not necessarily generalised throughout the education and training systems. Neither has the approach formulated teaching/pedagogic principles for education and training as a whole. Instead the main emphasis is on support for flexible learning for, and through, organisational contexts

Key competences develop an integrative approach to link different individual competences within organisational learning environments. For example, in Denmark far less attention has been paid to producing a nationally-agreed listing of key skills, with policy makers being less concerned about consensus at the level of definition of skill areas and more concerned about high quality learning aimed at promoting the development of adaptable competences. In

² Hodgson, A; Spours, K; and Savory, C. “Improving the ‘Use’ and ‘Exchange Value of Key Skills. Debating the Role of the Key Skills Qualification within *Curriculum 2000*”. Lifelong Learning Group, IOE/Nuffield Series No 4, Institute of Education, University of London. July 2001

Danish vocational educational programmes for industrial operators, personal skills such as 'self-dependence', co-operation with others' and 'flexibility' are explicit goals. They are seen as broad aims to inform curriculum development and delivery rather than specific assessment objectives where the learners and trainers need to assess performance against specific, laid down criteria.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the concept of 'soft qualifications' in continuing vocational education, gained currency within the Danish national AMU system. The intention of researchers and developers was to turn away from technical qualifications with tightly defined criteria. Supported by social partners and authorities in continuing vocational education, some common understandings of the role of key skills and these 'soft qualifications' became established³:

- Qualifying in personal skills is highly dependent on context.
- Qualifying in personal skills is an intrinsic, but under-recognised part of qualifying in technical skills.
- Assessing to fixed standards is highly problematic.
- Historical circumstances affect which of the personal skills are considered important at a given point in time.

The objective of curriculum development within the AMU system is now to analyse and meet the training needs of learners through continuous negotiation and dialogue with the learners. The Danish approach highlights the importance of encouraging learners and trainers to link learning to the specific contexts in which learners are currently operating and the new context in which they have to apply the key skills. Emphasis is placed on being sensitive to the way in which each person understands the context in which they are operating, the skills required, the skills they have and the skills they need to develop in order to perform effectively while at the same time trainers and enterprises remain fully engaged with the development and implementation of learning.

Key Qualifications

The term key qualifications (Schlüsselqualifikationen) was first used by Mertens in 1974. Mertens was studying the increasing need for flexibility in skilled work in Germany. He proposed that vocational education and training should focus upon the development of key qualifications, as this would improve students' labour market prospects and equip them to be better able to react to future developments that are not wholly predictable.

In more recent developments, the Dutch and German discussions on key qualifications emphasise the importance of broadening occupational requirements, in order to take greater cognisance of the need to promote the ability to solve problems. This requires a multi-dimensional analysis of the skills needed in the workplace. These analyses are not restricted to the identification of technical/job specific skills but would include information skills, organisational skills and social-communicative skills.

Developments in the Netherlands drew ideas from the debates on core (key) skills and key qualifications. Core skills were considered as entry-level skills for employment and include both elementary skills like arithmetic, reading and writing skills; general cognitive skills (problem-solving) and interpersonal skills. These skills are supposed to be fundamental to many tasks and a whole range of occupations.

Key qualifications were conceptualised as a number of broad qualification dimensions that were needed by workers in the modern labour market in addition to those required for a much more limited and closely defined occupation.

³ Oates, T; Bresciani, p.g; and Clematide, B; *ibid*

Brown⁴ stresses that “in the debate on key qualifications in Germany and the Netherlands, a completely different concept has been formulated from that underpinning core skills in the UK. ‘Key qualifications’ were associated with the need to broaden and deepen vocational education and training, in relation to development of an underpinning knowledge base and an increased emphasis upon logical, analytical and critical thinking. As such, ‘key qualifications’ raised intellectual demands within vocational education and training rather than being viewed in any sense as remedial. Insofar as these related to skills for employment, they could be seen as proposals for the type of education and training required to maintain an economy at a ‘high skills’ equilibrium (Finegold and Soskice, 1988). Key qualifications does not imply any primacy being accorded to a narrow skills-based approach. Indeed, Van Zolingen (1995), in her comprehensive review, identified ‘key qualifications’ in terms of knowledge, insight, skills and attitudes.”

In the Netherlands, the Advisory Committee for the Dutch Qualification structure (ACOA), in its White Paper on Qualifications (1999) combined both traditions. The ACOA proposed to build the Dutch qualification system structure on the concept of core competences, whereby “core competences are those capabilities (knowledge, skills and attitudes) of an individual which are needed to deal with the core problems of an occupation in an adequate process and product oriented way. Core competences are multidimensional, structured and coherent”. The ACOA emphasises the importance of core competences as learning objectives for vocational education, they distinguished the following four fields of competence:

- Vocational and methodological competences refer to the vocational content and specific problems and assignments and to the development of an adequate approach to these problems.
- Organisational and strategic competences refer to the ability to work in specific work and organisational environments (ie the ability to work effectively in different organisational contexts).
- Social, communicative, normative and cultural competences refer to problems connected to working in groups and participation at the level of a team, a company or a profession.
- Learning and shaping competences refer to the individuals own learning and development, and to the development and innovation of an organisation and profession.

The ACOA White Paper was accepted by the Dutch Government, vocational colleges and national bodies of vocational training and is used as a reference point for further innovation.

⁴ Onstenk, J; Brown, A; Transformation of learning in education and training. Cedefop, Ibid. chapter 6

APPENDIX 2

FAS would like to acknowledge the support and help given by the Soft Skills Working Group to the project and to acknowledge those people who agreed to be interviewed as part of the research and who gave detailed feedback to drafts of the report.

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