

Towards valid general education

The vast majority of full-time vocational courses in FE contain an element of 'general education' - that is, some systematic process through which students are supposed to gain access to information, concepts and techniques beyond those required for a particular occupation or vocational qualification. At present this normally takes the form of Functional Skills units in English, Maths and IT. (The preceding form was Key Skills, then before that Core Skills, Common Skills and so on back to the General Studies and Liberal Studies that existed from the 1950s to the 1980s.)

There are strong grounds for thinking that Functional Skills are even more dysfunctional than Key Skills and Core Skills. That is, they don't serve the interests of students, universities or potential employers, but rather those of a self-serving bureaucracy that has entrenched itself in the general education field over the last 25 years or so. There is every reason to think that the successor to Functional Skills currently being developed will be even worse.

People involved in producing *Post-16 Educator* believe that none of this is necessary, and that it would have been - and still remains - possible for a valid model of general education to be developed both for FE and for vocational HE, if general education lecturers and vocational lecturers from colleges, teaching staff from universities, relevant staff who can speak for employers, and former students are allowed to work together to devise one.

Based on our own experience as lecturers, we list in the box requirements that we believe would need to be met for a valid form of general education to be brought into existence. These, then, are points we would seek to raise within the development process described above. We think that the implementation of these points would open a space in which practitioners committed to general education could work effectively. Clearly this presupposes that a group of such practitioners could be recruited, prepared and supported.

The list is included here for readers' comments. Point 1 in particular almost certainly needs further development, which might include reference to the three related AS-levels (Critical Thinking, Citizenship and Public Knowledge of Science), the proposal put forward by the CBI in the early 1990s for a curricular element called 'Understanding Work and the World', and an approach to Communication which integrates it with a form of Media Education.

1. The 'additional' Core/Key Skills of Working with Others, Problem Solving and Improving Own Learning and Performance are mandatory within this general education element, along with Communication.

2. General education is integrated with main course content, rather than merely being either mapped or bolted onto it, in the sense that each is clearly seen to be a necessary condition of the other.

3. To achieve the overall qualification, students must pass the general education element.

4. General education has its own timetable slot.

5. The general education timetable slot is present through the whole course.

6. The assessment of the general education element is based at least partly on one or more extended projects organised collaboratively by a general education lecturer and a vocational lecturer.

7. Subject to the requirement of integration, the specifications for extended projects allow each student to choose for them whatever content (ie as distinct from manner of execution) he/she wishes.

8. General education is assessed, for example graded, using methods clearly equivalent to those used for vocational course elements.

9. The whole specification of what is to be taught and learnt in general education is criterion-referenced, and based on the acquisition of well-defined competences (ie combinations of knowledge, skill and understanding).

10. The basis for progression within general education itself is clear, and consistent with progression across the whole qualification.