

Imaginative Curriculum Project: Initial Proposals

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Purpose

This paper sets out the initial ideas of the project team for consideration and development by the Curriculum Network. It contains within it a number of questions that are intended to promote thinking and gain your views. The paper was used as background material for the launch meeting on January 30th 2002.

Introduction

The project aims to enhance curriculum design in UK HE by improving access to knowledge about curriculum design and raising awareness that this information exists. We will seek to do this by making existing and new knowledge about curriculum design available through a dedicated website.

We recognise that information alone will not achieve the enhancement of understanding across HE communities that we are seeking. Ultimately it will require facilitation and cultural change. The knowledge development process should be seen as the first step in this process.

The central feature of the process is the creation of a network of knowledgeable practitioners (a knowledge network). The network is the intellectual and practical resource that enables us to:

- evaluate the information needs of different types of users
- identify existing codified knowledge and develop new knowledge from their own tacit knowledge
- evaluate the utility and use of the information and website
- understand how best to facilitate the use of the information by different users

This paper provides a point of departure for the knowledge development process that we see as fluid and dynamic. Clearly we have to produce results quickly (the project is designed to deliver results within 12 months). We therefore need to establish a framework and strategy within which participants can make effective contributions.

We do not want to get into semantic debates around defining the precise meaning of 'curriculum'. We know that there are different conceptions and ultimately we would like to capture knowledge that reflects the richness of this understanding. We feel that the greatest potential benefit would come from the development of a broad and inclusive conception such as that expressed by Light and Cox (2001):

The curriculum refers to the learning experiences (planned for the most part by the teacher) through which that course is put into practice... Teaching and learning styles are part of the curriculum...Curriculum is a richer concept than that of syllabus or course. (page 81)

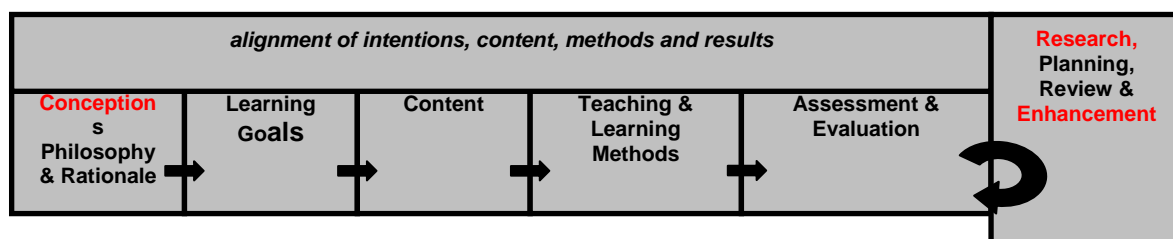
Within this broad inclusive concept we can capture a range of approaches to curriculum design.

A working model of the curriculum

The key objective is to provide structured, accessible and searchable information about the curriculum through a website. For this reason we are proposing that the systematisation of information, in the first instance, be developed around a simple model Figure 1. The model is

a rational and inclusive view of the curriculum and an extension of the model promoted by Biggs (1999) in his discussion of what he identifies as the *constructively aligned curriculum*. In effect the aligned curriculum demonstrates clear and close correspondence between the curriculum objectives, teaching and learning activities and assessment tasks. In fact this reflects the sort of principles that are underpinning and guiding the recent introduction of programme specifications by QAA (2000).

Our initial model of the curriculum, which would provide the primary structure to the website, has six central elements: conceptions, philosophy and rationale; learning goals; content; teaching and learning methods; assessment and evaluation; research, planning, review and enhancement - see figure 1.



We see curriculum design as an informed and mainly rational decision making process around a multitude of variables in each of these elements, in a progressive way. Decisions in each element have a significant effect on decisions in the next and subsequent elements. Whilst we represent this here as a linear process, we acknowledge that in reality the process is complex, more iterative and messier than it is portrayed in the model. The model does not preclude discussion and presentation of other models of curriculum design which can be introduced through the conceptions /philosophy element of the model. Indeed, it will be essential to develop our understanding of different conceptions of the curriculum through the knowledge development process. And we should not shy away from critiques of this rational model. But we believe that it does provide a convenient and logical way of organising and providing information about the curriculum.

We also think that this model can be applied at the levels of the whole curriculum (ie course or programme) or and individual curriculum unit or module.

- Q. Are colleagues comfortable with the overall model as a basis for promoting understanding about curriculum design and providing information through a website? Bearing in mind the qualifications that we will seek to include information on other conceptions of the curriculum.**
- Q Are there features of curriculum design that are omitted?**
- Q Is this framework likely to be recognised and understood by different academic communities?**
- Q What are the barriers to acceptance by different academic communities and how might they be overcome?**

Influences on the curriculum

We must acknowledge that the decisions that have to be made by curriculum designers are not made in some sort of idealistic vacuum and that there are many and significant influences that circumscribe and impact upon the curriculum design process and outcomes. In figure 2, we attempt to identify these major (external) influences and to align them with the elements of the curriculum where they have the most impact. We are aware that in generalising these influences, we will be identifying factors that will have no impact on some courses – for example, specific professional body concerns are unlikely to figure in courses that do not have a professional remit. Similarly there may be influences that are particularly subject-specific and so do not register here in our generality of concerns – for example, overseas placements on language courses.

It is also important to acknowledge that some of these influences are time dependent – they may be important now because they are new. Later, as they become part of the wallpaper of HE, they will assume less significance. Some influences also assume greater or lesser significance depending on the culture of the institution/subject. So professional and vocational factors are perhaps less important in academic cultures/ subjects – although many of us might wish still to dispute this! It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore the many subject cultures and orientations in any detail but we acknowledge the powerful influences that arise from the traditions of subjects/disciplines. A key dimension of this project will be to connect high level principles and generic information about curriculum design to subject specific information that will show how principles and ideas translate into practice in specific contexts. Making these connections will be key to the success of the project and five Subject Centres will be helping us explore this dimension.

Q Are colleagues broadly content with the influences identified for each element?

Q Are there omissions that need to be rectified?

Q What sorts of influences might different subjects emphasise/ add?

Curriculum concepts

We feel that it is important to recognise that curriculum design is not only a complex process, but also that it involves the understanding and application of a range of quite complex concepts –often dismissed scathingly as being merely *educational jargon* by some less sympathetic colleagues. There is a view that one of the main benefits of the work of the QAA in recent years is that it has helped to provide a common lexicon to assist with the debate and discussion around the quality and standards of student learning across the HE sector. So there is some indication of the need to define the concepts around curriculum design, as well as looking at good practice in their application. In figure 3 we have attached what we feel to be the main underpinning contemporary concepts within curriculum development and we have aligned them with the most appropriate element.

Once again we would suggest that the solution looks neater than the actuality, and that some concepts are relevant across more than one element of the model. We acknowledge also that the range and depth of concepts here is potentially enormous (infinite) and so we have tried to suggest those we feel to be pre-eminent together with category headings within which there is scope for considerable broadening and extension.

Q Are these concepts widely recognised?

Q Are there significant omissions?

Q How might the generic concepts interface with subject-specific concepts?

Q Are colleagues happy with the overall structure of the complete map as a possible organiser for the structure of the web site?

Figure 2

CONCEPT MAP : INFLUENCES ON THE HE CURRICULUM

NOTE: variables below the dotted lines are particularly relevant at module level(s)

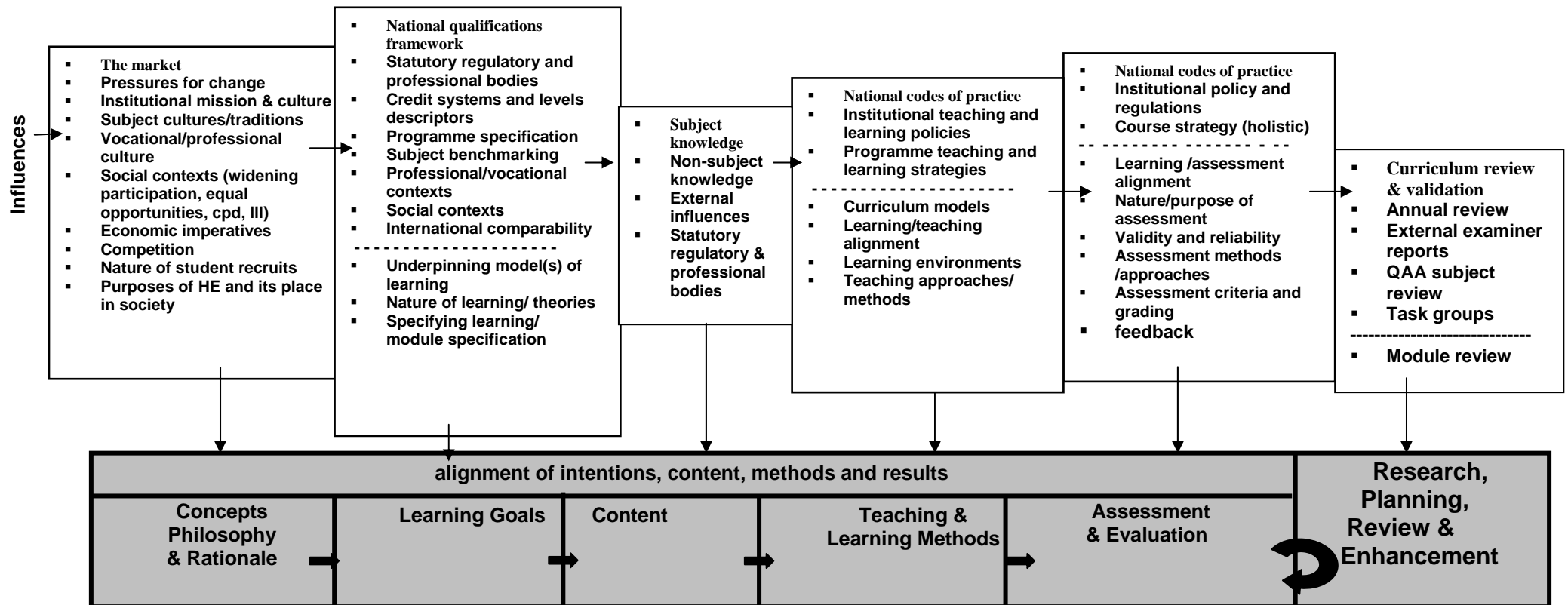
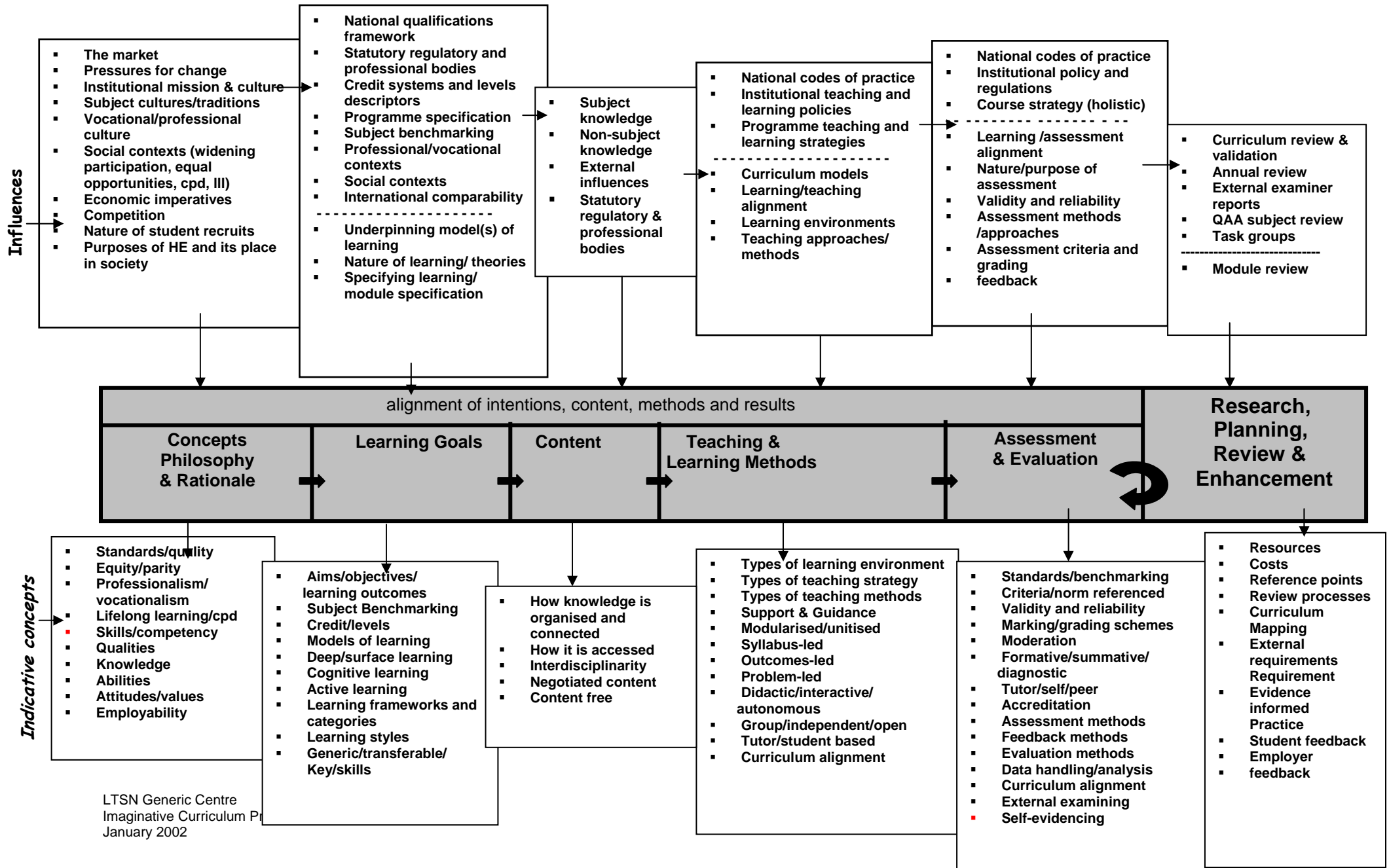


Figure 3

CONCEPT MAP : INFLUENCES ON THE HE CURRICULUM

NOTE: variables below the dotted lines are particularly relevant at module level(s)



The Web site

A key objective for the project is to design and promote a web site based on the elements, influences and concepts contained within our evolved version of the curriculum map at Fig 3. We will need to conduct our own research to understand how different users would try to find information on the webs-site. We will need to understand the language they will use in key word searches, the questions they are likely to pose and the assumptions they might make. The network has an important role in helping us to evaluate information resources from the perspective of different users. Subject Centres will have an important role to play in translating the language of education into words that are used by academics in their communities.

Our starting point will be to provide information through indexes of topics based on the map or possibly their own questions that connect to topics. There will be the opportunity for quick engagement by means of direct access to theoretical and/or practical and/or exemplar treatments of each topic – it is intended that this will depend upon (and allow for) the particular nature of the interrogator’s needs. It is also intended that links will be included that direct the user to other sources (books, journals, papers, websites, etc) that provide either more detailed/ extended discussions of the topics and the issues surrounding them or that provide subject specific treatments.

Templates for gathering, organising and providing information

As a way of exploring how we might create, organise and provide information, Appendix A provides examples of information on the topic of Key Skills produced by the CDELL project at the University of Nottingham.

Issues 1 and 2 (page 1) would correspond to our *theoretical* treatment, issues 4 and 5 would equate closely to our *practical* treatment and sections A and B (page 2) would contain (or provide links to) our *exemplar*, *extension* or *subject specific* concerns and interests.

To manage the information flow into the website and to help authors structure their contributions we propose to use pro-forma templates (see fig.4 for a possible model). This will also allow subsequent rapid review, updating, modification and supplementation - although some form of editorial control by the project team perhaps assisted by peer review through the network will be necessary.

Figure 4: Template for on-line structure of topics

TOPIC: XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX		
Treatments	On-line site materials/content	Off-line and other-site links/ materials
Theoretical treatment	What – descriptions, definitions, interpretations and associated concepts	Book, journal, paper references Links to other on-line sites
	Why – importance, focus, functions, contexts, issues, relationships, arguments +ve & -ve	Book, journal, paper references Links to other on-line sites
Practical treatment	How - to write, construct, develop, select, judge, assess aspects of topic	Book, journal, paper references Links to other on-line sites
	How - to apply, organise, embed, link to curriculum & critical decisions and implications	Book, journal, paper references Links to other on-line sites
Exemplary treatment	Examples for comparison, evaluation, reflection, modification, improvement	Book, journal, paper references Links to other on-line sites

- Q Do you feel that these are the sorts of tools and strategies we need to grow and provide knowledge about curriculum design?**
- Q Do you feel that you would be able to contribute by identifying sources of information via the template?**
- Q Do you think you could contribute by authoring one or more topic areas?**
- Q What types of processes might we use to validate the knowledge contained within the templates?**

References

Biggs, J. (1999) *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*, SRHE and Open University Press, Buckingham.

CDELL (2001) "Resources for Key Skills", Centre for Developing and Evaluating Lifelong Learning, University of Nottingham online at <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/education/cdell/keyskills.htm>

Light, G & Cox, R. (2001) *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education*, Paul Chapman Publishing, London.

Quality Assurance Agency (2000) *Guidelines for preparing Programme specifications*, Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education online at www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/progspec/progspec.htm

APPENDIX A

Supporting Key Skills in Higher Education

This is a set of source materials that is based on the pack Supporting Key Skills in Higher Education, produced in 1997 by the CDELL team at the University of Nottingham. The principal issues have been extracted and re-presented in a shorter and more accessible form, and the cross-references updated to include current activities in universities across the UK.

The intention is to provide you with a quick route into a discussion of key skills. This is done through a set of Issues for departments reference sheets, linked together and to a range of Sources for key skills. A shortcut to the issues can be gained through the use of Departmental agenda items that can be used as a way of discussing a departmental approach to implementing key skills. Each of the agendas is linked to relevant Issues for department's reference sheets.

Whilst it would be clearly overload these materials if they included comprehensive cross-referencing to key skills implementations in all subject areas, an attempt has been made to supplement this pack with links to as much subject-specific material as we are able to identify.

The Issues for departments are divided into 12 sections, as follows.

1. A rationale for key skills
2. Which key skills?
3. Programme audit
4. How to specify key skills
5. Managing key skills
6. Motivating and supporting staff
7. Teaching and learning key skills
8. Motivating students
9. Support for students
10. Graduateness
11. Assessment and accreditation
12. Graduate employability

These are followed by.

- A. Departmental agenda items
- B. Sources for key skills