Changing the Concept of Skill in Higher Education in the UK: is it progress in the current environment?

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Introduction

If one is tempted to believe the Ancient Greeks, then ‘change is the only constant’ and, as such, can be planned and sequenced as a rational model. Mintzberg (1987), however, argues that a rational model of change may be accepted but an alternative, emergent approach begins with the assumption that change is continuous, open-ended and largely unpredictable because of the changing environmental context of the organisation. This applies as much to an educational establishment as to a business organisation. Fullan (1991, pp. 345-346) contends that over the last 30 years we have been ‘grappling with educational change in self-defeating ways’ and that we are now at a point where ‘the immediate future of educational change is at a particularly strategic juncture’ as ‘the life-chances of large segments of society are increasingly dismal.’ It is in this light that Sir Ron Dearing led the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education in the UK and created a ‘vision for 20 years: the learning society’ (Dearing, 1997).

Building on the Robbins report (1963), the Dearing committee (referred to as the Dearing commission) took as its starting point the aims and objectives of higher education (HE) identified by the Robbins Committee and developed them into four main purposes. It is within the discussion around the first of these that the issue of skill within HE is raised. The Robbins Committee viewed HE as having two distinct elements: imparting employment skills and developing the general powers of the mind. The Dearing commission does not view the two as mutually exclusive, arguing that the development of the mind underpins that of many other skills. Highlighting the case of the professions, Dearing argues that:

the essence of professionalism is a thorough and up-to-date grasp of the fundamental knowledge base of an occupation; sufficient understanding of the underlying theoretical principles to be able to adapt to novel circumstances and to incorporate research findings into practice; and appropriate practical skills and professional values (Dearing, 1997).

The commission then goes on to distinguish between the development of ‘high level intellectual skills and key skills of communication, numeracy and capability in communications and information technology’ and claim that ‘those in work increasingly need to be able to be flexible and adaptable, to work in teams, and to manage their own development and career’ (ibid.).

This article seeks to examine the appropriateness of the concept of key skills (as defined by the Dearing commission) in higher education. I shall set the scene by looking at elements of the changing environment in which higher education operates in the UK and then discuss the changing ways of working which may arise from this environment. Discussion then turns to
the concept of ‘skills’ *per se* and key skills in particular as a specific change in higher education, before concluding as to the appropriateness of this additional change to the system.

**The Changing Environment for Education**

Dalin & Rust (1996) discuss a knowledge explosion and obsolescence, claiming we are moving from manpower to brainpower. They identify 10 revolutions for the 21st century:

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<th>TEN REVOLUTIONS:</th>
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<td>1. the knowledge and information revolution;</td>
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<td>2. the population revolution;</td>
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<td>3. the globalising and localising revolution;</td>
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Adapted from Dalin & Rust (1996, pp. 31-33)

The increasing proportion of cerebral job roles resulting from the knowledge and information revolution potentially poses a huge opportunity for HE, as does the development of Internet and the worldwide web, bringing global boundaries into the realms of local boundaries. The declining populations in the advanced industrialised countries and the growing populations in the less developed countries provide a more interesting opportunity for HE, certainly one which would require new ways of working by exporting the British Education service overseas.

University attendance is one area of social relationships where there has been notable change. In 1960, there were under 200,000 full-time students in the UK, rising to 500,000 in the 1970s and over 800,000 in 1995 (1997). If part-time students are included, the numbers rise to over 1.6 million for 1996-7. Previously, only the upper class divisions were offered a university education, but there is now much greater equality of access across the social strata of the population, women and ethnic minorities (NCIHE, 1997, pp. 21-22). It is unclear whether the expansion of HE has led to wider access or whether wider access has led to the expansion. As Butler (1985, p. 345) claims, ‘social systems are extremely dynamic and complex entities that often defy descriptions and analysis. Therefore, one can easily get lost in attempting to sort out all the cause-and-effect relationships.’ It could be argued that it does not matter which is the cause and which is the effect in determining what has constituted the changes so far. However, I would argue that we will be better able to predict and hence prepare for the changes of the future if we do work out the causal relationships. For example, the economic revolution potentially threatens the funding of the HE sector, as student fees will be introduced in 1998-9. It is debatable what impact this will have on the social and demographic distribution of students.

The British university sector appears to have evolved by being subject matter - rather than market-led. As such, the development of a new course is a slow process. As the pace of change increases, the need for universities to be able to adapt to keep pace will be paramount to their survival. A customer-focused paradigm should be developed, so that, when a
customer requests a new course, the university mechanism can respond before the need has changed. Otherwise, the university sector will lose out to the faster responding professional associations in the development of postgraduate education (e.g. the Institute of Personnel and Development, the Institute of Management).

The three-step model (Lewin, 1951) argues that successful change involves:

1. unfreezing the present level,
2. moving to the new level,
3. refreezing the new level.

The progress of the ‘new’ universities since they lost their ‘polytechnic’ title was certainly representative of an unfreezing process and moving to a new level, before refreezing in the new status title. Whereas they used to operate competitively in a differentiated market, many may be having a harder time in a single market place. Dearing (1997, ch. 16) recommendations 61 and 62 refer to the need to encourage diversity of institutions’ missions and for clarity to be given to the confusion of institutional status.

In a world where change is so rapid that Kiernan (1997) warns us to ‘get innovative or get dead’, the third step in the Lewin model is perhaps superfluous, as the time necessary to ‘refreeze’ in an organisation is a luxury, ill-afforded with regard to time and inappropriate with regard to need. The average lifetime of a large industrial enterprise is about 40 years, roughly half that of a human being (Mayo & Lank, 1994).

The difficulties that some new universities are experiencing with recruiting students are not the result of a decline in the demand for places holistically. Some may come from their inability to see or respond to the changes in the market place, i.e. to move from a teaching society to a learning society. Harrison (1977, see Harrison, 1995c) proposed a future of self-directed education and detailed how this requires educators to change their skill mix. He identified the needs of most educators for ‘authority, visibility and a sense of personal significance’ which are not well met by the self-directed format (Harrison, 1995c, p. 379).

It is clear that there is a need for change in the higher education sector in the UK, but finding the best way forward is difficult. Hargreaves and Hopkins (1991) take the view that managing change is about changing management. The new spectrum of education qualifications about to come on the market may do just this. There will be qualifications for head teachers in schools and qualifications for lecturers in higher education (Dearing, 1997, ch. 14).

**Changing Ways of Working in Higher Education**

If we revert to Mintzberg (1987), his emergent approach is structured less around a belief in what is, but more in a belief in what is not. That is to say that change cannot be a planned and controlled process because there are different perspectives to be considered and uncertainty in the environment. The emergent approach focuses on the unpredictable nature of change as it unfolds within organisations and on trying to understand the complexities therein, perhaps in an incremental fashion rather than as a strategic approach.

Dearing (1997) proposed management of learning, not teaching, and a ‘Professional’ Institute of Higher Education which is not based on research. This moves the expansion of the ‘knowledge base’ from a wider, societal perspective of generating new knowledge for the good of society to an individual perspective of generating new knowledge for the good of individuals. Environmentally, this shift creates a profound change in HE in the UK, as much of the funding and rating of HE establishments has been allocated on the research activities
criterion. Dearing suggests that institutions must increase effectiveness and move towards a working week which includes week-ends for part-time students and that the supply chain must catch up with demand. Cox (1997) argues that critical supply chain assets are the foundations of business success and that only by leveraging these assets will businesses survive. If lecturers are the critical supply chain asset of HE institutions, then they should only lecture if the institutions are to be successful. Whether or not this will be achieved in the current context is questionable. Arguably, the change is not being managed, just suggested, talked about and, to some extent, assumed to be happening, as specific targets have not been set and measurements/occurrences are not recorded. Some universities are offering week-end and block courses, but many of these are overseas to bring in the profits of out-sourced courses rather than being run in the UK for home-based part-time students. Essentially, British higher education has become a business.

Senior (1997) suggests that managing change in situations of soft complexity involves managing a mess rather than a difficulty and that the art of mess management is: resolving, solving or dissolving problems (Ackoff, 1993). Solving a problem intimates an outcome that satisfices (satisfies and suffices). It involves research and is likened to a positivist approach. Dissolving a problem involves changing the nature of environment in which the problem operates so as to remove it (ibid.). The Dearing proposals (1997) have elements of each: training the head teachers and academics as a resolution; finding some form of quality measure for education so that institutions can be compared like for like as a solution; and blurring the edges between Further and Higher Education as a dissolution.

There are two streams of thought regarding change from the individual perspective: (a) the Gestalt-Field perspective suggests that change occurs as individuals within an organisation change their understanding of themselves and their situation, which, in turn, leads to a change in behaviour; (b) the Behaviourists modify external stimuli on the individual in order to bring about change. Some organisations use a combination of both, particularly those which preach an excellence culture, where they use strong individual incentives (external stimuli) and discussion-involvement and debate (internal reflection) to bring about organisational change (Burns, 1996). The internal reflection element has been addressed as the Dearing committee sought opinion from a wide range of sources and included elements from many and varied stakeholder groups in higher education. The external stimuli, however, are the constant scourge in education, or rather ‘the lack of’ incentives and reward. Robbins and Finley (1997) argue that this internal and external focus would involve both sides of the brain. The left side is where we would weigh the pros and cons of the change and make a commitment or not on the balance of whether or not we would gain. The right side is the centre for intuition, creativity and integrative aspects of our thinking and proactive talents. Here, we would want to enter the debate about how to go about the change and what change should take place. Visualising the future is the work of the right side of the brain. Constructing the roads towards that vision is the work of the left side. One hemisphere is not sufficient. If only one hemisphere is engaged, a person will resist the suggested change. If neither is engaged, the change will not happen.

The group dynamics school of thought stems from the idea that organisational change is brought about through team work and work groups (Bernstein, 1968). Examining and challenging norms, roles and values held in the group are the key to bringing about change. Pettigrew & Whipp (1993) defend the need to create a climate that is receptive to change. They focus on the cultural aspects. Legge (1995) argues that culture cannot be managed, only changed as individuals change and realign their values and beliefs.

It is clear that we are operating in a changing environment in higher education and this will result in changing ways of working. How this change will evolve, develop and be managed is questionable, to the extent that it is questionable whether it can be managed. The
learning society proposed by the NCIHE (1997) may be an ideal vision, but unless it becomes a shared vision, i.e. owned by those who will make it happen, it is unlikely to be achieved. I would like to focus now on the argument around skills in higher education, to ascertain whether or not there is a need for a change in this area, and whether the change proposed by the Dearing committee is appropriate.

**Skills Development in Higher Education**

It may be argued that for too long institutions of higher education have become just that, ‘institutions’, demonstrating an unwillingness to change as the pace of change in the world around them grows. In 1979, the Enterprise Initiative identified a serious imbalance in the UK between education and training. Stephenson & Weil (1992) highlighted this imbalance as being harmful to individuals, industry and society and proposed the inclusion of creative skills, the competence to undertake and complete tasks and co-operate with others. They claimed that educators should spend more time preparing people for life outside the education system. The argument made here brings ‘skills’ into the realms of higher education. The skills ‘issue’ has been highlighted by the Dearing committee (1997), specifically in recommendation 21, which calls for the development of key skills, cognitive skills and subject specific skills in every programme an institution offers.

Concerning skills and capabilities in higher education, Barnett (1994, p. 58) offers 10 ‘theses’ to ‘muddy the waters’. Using these, the appropriateness of the three types of skill that Dearing proposes for inclusion in higher education can be examined:

1. All Skills contain some blend of action and reflection. But, for a skill to be developed in HE, it should contain a high degree of cognitive content.

   In HE, this can be demonstrated as the concept of academic argument as discussed by Andrews (1997). Andrews (1992), Andrews et al. (1993) and Mitchell (1994) conceptualise argument as the drawing of conclusions from propositions premised, discussion and a process of reasoning. This is summarised in the working definition of argument as a ‘connected series of statements intended to establish a position and implying response to another (or more than one position(s))’ (Andrews, 1997, p. 259). The action of forming the argument and the reflection on the counter-response fulfil the criteria of thesis 1. The cognitive skills element is therefore catered for here, and possibly the subject specific skill, but the idea of key skills would be contrary to this thesis and hence to the essence of higher education.

2. We slip too easily into linguistic formulations such as ‘the application of skills’ or ‘the need for skills’ which overlook the fact that the skills in use define and change the situation; they are not independent of it (Schon, 1983).

Runkel et al. (1969, see Harrison, 1995a) examine classroom innovation in the university and how the students’ learning skills progress as they are set goals to maximise freedom, encounter and learn how to learn:

At each level students respond to different kinds of influence processes. Dependent students respond to influence by compliance: the giving and withholding of relatively tangible rewards. As students free themselves from dependency, they become responsive to influence through identification with the behaviour and values of the teacher or other students. As the identity, values and standards of students become more stable, they become less easily influenced by external rewards, and students have less need for identification models. Influence through internalisation processes then becomes effective; the teacher becomes more a consultant to the students learning activities and less a director or inspirer of learning (Harrison, 1995a, p. 346).
Thus, by engaging in the learning skills, the student is changing and becomes part of the learning process as party to it. Thesis 2 relates back to the discussion on change and the planned or emergent approaches. While the intention may be for a planned change in skill level, the emergent outcome may be quite different. Care therefore needs to be taken in the introduction of ‘skill’ per se in the university classroom, as the outcome may be the de-skilling of students through increased dependence on the teacher.

3. Talk of skills often takes the form that ‘we can use our judgement in applying our skills’. This separates the skill from the judgement, the action from the reflection.

Singleton (1978) refers to the work of Sir Frederick Bartlett et al. in the Psychology field in the 1950s and the concept of skill as the ‘fundamental unit of behaviour’. However, since then, he suggests that skills have got lost within behaviouristic performance studies and stimulus-response origins, moving away from the gestalt approach to skill psychology. Svensson (1997) mentions reading, listening, writing and problem solving as representing skills, claiming these as conditions for and parts of learning, such that ‘the quality of learning is dependent upon the quality of the skills deployed’ (ibid., p. 59). This implies that the psychological approach does not separate the skill from the judgement, or the action from the reflection, while the stimulus-response movement of skills performance does. The stimulus-response movement would therefore advocate the introduction of key skills into the higher education syllabus, while the psychologists would argue that it will develop naturally throughout the learning process and therefore would not be an appropriate addition.

4. Judgement is integral to the performance but it is also prior to the demonstration of skills.

If, as Svensson (1997) claims, learning is dependent on the quality of the skill employed, then a judgmental decision as to which learning skills to employ is made prior to any learning taking place and should be continually reviewed throughout the learning process to ensure that sufficient learning occurs. In this sense, the judgement takes place both prior to and during the learning process/application of the skill. For example, in preparing for seminar work, a student may decide that reading and note-taking is sufficient; when preparing for an exam, the same student may decide that, discussion, past question practice (problem-solving) and tutorial support may also be necessary to further the learning for the outcome required. As such, the judgement vis-à-vis learning skills is made prior to commencing the learning and throughout the process by reflection of whether enough has been covered for the desired outcome. Hence, the criteria of thesis 4 are fulfilled. If the proposals outlined in Dearing recommendation 20 are enacted (progress files are kept by students as learning logs), then there is greater focus on reflection during and after the demonstration of skills and a lack of focus on judgement prior to the demonstration of skills. As such, this again could result in the de-skilling of the student, as proceduralising the learning process can result in missed opportunities for learning.

5. Judgement is also consequent upon action, attesting that the action has been skilful.

Entwistle & Entwistle (1997) examine understanding is revised and tested in HE. Higher education currently tests the learning skills through examinations to test students at each stage before they can progress. It is questionable as to whether this tests academic understanding or memory. If it is the latter, then this is more a judgement on a retention skill than a testing of whether the action of learning has been skilful. The whole question of how to measure skill in higher education would need to be addressed. It is far easier to measure results in key skills and subject skills than in cognitive skills.

6. Not far from the idea of skill is the idea of reproducibility. This implies that skills have to contain elements of routine.
Morgan & Beaty (1997) carried out research on Open University students and found that their skill in learning stemmed from repetition of the learning process and growing confidence. They link this skill to developing confidence, competence, and autonomy in learning. Arguably, the fact that students progress through the various levels of their studies suggests that the routine of the studying process develops their skills in studying \textit{per se}, and hence thesis 6 is fulfilled on the cognitive skills front. As regards the subject specific skills and key skills, the argument for including them in higher education is that they will be reproducible and appropriate in the workplace once the educational experience is complete.

7. If we pick up a theme from Foucault, we can say that ‘skills’ is a power-laden term.

Harrison (1972, see Harrison 1995b) addresses the issue of a coercion-free learning setting with regard to experiential learning and self-directed learning around developing autonomy, initiative and risk-taking skills. He claims ‘the entire thrust is for participants to listen to their own needs, wants and desires and even gentle persuasion may shift the focus from the self to the person of the education.’ (Harrison, 1995b, p. 359). His work suggests that any non-experiential, self-directed learning setting is somewhat coercive in terms of skills development.

Alternatively, ‘skills’ could be considered to be a power-laden term simply on the basis that its antitheses is ‘unskilled’, which is generally held in society to hold lower status. This is exemplified in the market research classifications, HMSO bandings, and the idea of ‘blue’ and ‘white’ collar workers.

By introducing skills \textit{per se} into higher education will we be marginalising the ‘traditional’ skills into a less skilled position in society? The words ‘key skills’ fill me with dread, as subject specific skills and cognitive skills hold their own places in society, but ‘key’ implies important to all members of society. This begs the question of what happens to those who do not hold the ‘key’ skills at the requisite level? Also, who decides what the key skills are and when they need changing? Arguably, numeracy is no longer a key skill, as we now have computers.

8. The application of skills is not value-neutral.

Middleton & Midgley (1997) studied academic efficacy and goal theory. They found that, in addition to the goals of demonstrating ability (performance approach) and developing ability (task), there is a goal of students to avoid the demonstration of lack of ability (performance-avoid). Their results showed that performance-avoid goals negatively predicted academic efficacy and positively predicted avoiding seeking help and test anxiety. This links with the work of Elliot & Harackiewicz (1996, p. 461) who suggest that work avoidance goals are aimed at effort reduction, while avoiding the demonstration of lack of ability is conceptualised as ‘striving to avoid incompetence’.

Students’ personal values have a role to play here. The ability to perform a skill well will reflect on their self efficacy and self value. This will apply to all three skills levels proposed by Dearing: key skills, cognitive skills and subject specific skills. By having three skills ranges in which to avoid demonstrating a lack of ability, student’ self efficacy and self value may decrease more than in the present \textit{modus operandi}. Duplicating the anxiety duplicates the negative effect.

9. Skills can range from those that are relatively undemanding to those that are highly demanding; higher education should be characterised by a determination to foster the latter.

Svensson (1997) examines the nature of understanding and learning, building from the learning of facts to developing understanding, and then on to a holistic approach of complex phenomena involving interrelationships and interrelatedness.
While the cognitive skills development and some subject skills development may be highly demanding, key skills development may not be demanding to most students at this level. It is questionable then whether key skills are relevant at this level or whether they should be catered for at the lower levels.

10. Since the central business of higher education is knowledge and understanding, there is a particular responsibility on higher education to foster skills that are knowledge-based and promote understanding. Barnett concludes that:

A higher education designed around skills is not higher education. It is the substitution of technique for insight; of strategic reason for communication reason; and of behaviour for wisdom (1994, p. 61).

Perhaps the focus on skill should not be one of achieving levels of competence in key skills, but one of application of cognitive and subject-specific skills.

The framework for ‘skills based’ qualifications that has developed in the UK is the National Vocational Qualification (NVQ), with its school-based counterpart, the GNVQ (General NVQ). It may be useful at this point to reflect on the distinction between vocational and academic qualifications which Dearing (1977, ch. 10) proposes pulling into the same qualification framework to include vocational and scholastic elements. He identifies a need for content-specific and outcome-specific courses rather than-time based courses, which his ideas on modularisation, credit transfer and key skills would help attain. Arguably, this is not the model of change that many would want to see for higher education. Indeed, many HE establishments do not offer the vocational qualifications that are aligned to degree and postgraduate qualifications (NVQ levels 4 & 5) and currently the market has been left in the main to the colleges of Further Education.

Katz *et al.* (1963) define change as ‘acceptance over time of some specific item, idea or practice by individuals, groups or other adopting units, linked by specific channels of communication to a social structure and to a given system of values or culture’. Given the non-acceptance of the NVQ framework in HE this lack of adoption evidences that a change has not occurred!

By looking at Barnett’s ten theses and the supporting arguments to these, there is a risk that introducing key skills into higher education will dilute the cognitive quality of the present education system, as they would need to replace some cognitive or subject-specific skills on the syllabus. Clearly, people must be skilled when they reach the workplace, but since it is still a minority that obtain a higher education qualification, would it not be more appropriate for these key skills to be brought into the school curriculum? Higher education is about the development of cognitive skills and subject-specific skills. That is its raison d’être. The introduction of ‘key skills’ is inappropriate. The marriage of vocational skill and higher education will never be a happy one while the front end deliverers are not content with the change. Given the rejection of the NVQ framework by the university sector, it is safe to say that it has not bought into the change so far. Enforcing the change on the sector may see an exodus of staff and a national brain-drain, as remaining academics seek to move overseas.

Arguably, the further integration of skills into higher education does not meet the anticipated needs of the 21st century. Referring to Dalin & Rust (1996) and their ten revolutions for the 21st century, skills on the curriculum do not add to the need to meet an increasing number of cerebral jobs (as cognitive skills currently developed in HE fulfil this element already); it does not add to our ability to cope with the economic or political revolutions; perhaps, at best, it will increase our ability to meet the needs of the technological revolution, but arguably the level attained across the curriculum will be...
insignificant compared to the specific skills attained by specialists in this field. Kiernan (1997) warned us to 'get innovative or get dead!' I fail to see how the introduction of key skills in higher education is an innovative response to the changing needs of society.

Dalin et al (1993) argue that change has a joint diagnosis from three foci: the problem focus, the task focus and the institutional focus. They argue that managing the change process involves managing real needs, ownership, planning and development skills, norms and climate, management attitudes and behaviour. While it would be difficult to argue with the concepts of real needs and ownership, it is questionable as to whose real needs and ownership should be addressed. The whole issue of change in education is itself a catch 22. The word ‘learning’ undoubtedly denotes change of some kind (Bateson, 1973) and the factor most likely to influence our capacity to change is our capacity to learn (Plant, 1987). If we accept that learning involves a cyclical approach (Kolb et al., 1974), then a model of change should also be cyclical, or a progressive helix.

Undoubtedly, the current direction of change needs very careful management. As Fullan (1991, p. 345) states:

The shame of educational change is the squandering of good intentions and the waste of resources in light of personal and societal needs of great human consequence. The capacity to bring about change and the capacity to bring about improvement are two different matters. Change is everywhere, progress is not.

Changing the concept of skills in higher education is just that: change, not progress.

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