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**Alternative Programmes at KS4 for
Students with Learning Difficulties**

INTRODUCTION

Prior to the introduction of the national curriculum, many Oxfordshire secondary schools offered alternative programmes to students for whom it was felt that GCSE was inappropriate. Some students lacked motivation and were disaffected by their schooling. Some students with lower ability, despite their endeavours, were not expected to gain significant grades. For some the academic structure of GCSE denied them the opportunity to demonstrate other skills and aptitudes which they possessed.

Such alternative programmes usually included elements of the core skills - communications and numeracy; social, personal and life skills; community work; and careers advice, work preparation and work experience. Some were developed under the aegis of NLI (New Learning Initiative) as Oxfordshire's version of the government's LAPP (Low Achieving Pupils' Project), and "The Thinking Skills Initiative". Some incorporated national accreditation, such as C&GL 365 Foundation, AEB Basic Skills, or the RSA Profile. Others used the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme or the Oxfordshire introductory Fox Award. Most schemes however were internally certificated by individual schools.

The advent of the national curriculum and related legislation effectively curtailed many of these initiatives as schools strove to include all students, without recourse to modifications or disapplication.

Following the Dearing Review

The Final Report of the Dearing Review (1) recommended that at key stage 3, "The slimmer national curriculum should free about 20% of teaching time for schools to use at their discretion" and that at key stage 4, "...schools have the opportunity to offer a more varied curriculum to suit the needs of their own pupils." "... 40% for option choices." The implementation of the revised national curriculum at key stage 4, year 10 is scheduled for August 1st 1996 and year 11 for August 1st 1997. "The intention is to make no major change to the national curriculum for five years from 1995."(4)

More recently, the National Commission on Education (2), "...worried about the large minority of young people who get little out of their education..." recommended amongst other things, that Government departments should "...promote education and training measures specifically aimed at enabling teenagers to improve their prospects of gaining and retaining productive work. Such measures should include, "...specially designed courses for 14-plus pupils alienated from classroom learning..." (3) The Report claims that 20% of school leavers lack the literacy and numeracy skills demanded in the work place.

Similarly, the second White Paper on "Competitiveness" sees the revised national education and training targets (NTETs) as "...more precise and more challenging than their predecessors" (6) with core skills for all students; 75% of whom will be expected to achieve level 2 competence in communications, numeracy and I.T. by age 19, by the year 2000.

Gillian Shephard, the Secretary of State for education, stated in her letter to head teachers, (5) "For all 14-16 year olds we have introduced additional flexibility to allow schools to provide options, in addition to the national curriculum, to cater for the different needs and aptitudes of their pupils; and we are developing new vocational qualifications to enable schools to take full advantage of this flexibility." Reference to "vocational qualifications", whilst including NVQs and GNVQs, also recognises the work which SCAA has commissioned NFER to undertake - the "Small Steps" project; the work of RSA and BTEC in pre-foundation GNVQ - the "National Skills Profile" and the "Skillpower Certificate"; and the work of HMI for the DFE.

THE STUDY

The aim of this study was to discover the impact which the national curriculum had had on alternative programmes; to audit current provision, programmes and accreditation at key stage 4; and to interrogate the existing national and local accreditation offers. The work was carried out in three stages.

Stage 1 A questionnaire was sent to the curriculum deputy headteacher of each secondary and upper school in Oxfordshire - 35 - and the returns analysed [January-April 1995].

Stage 2 Using the returns received, a series of semi-structured interviews were carried out in 10 schools, with five curriculum deputies, four special needs co-ordinators (SENCOs) and one vocational studies tutor. The schools were chosen to represent the five LEA Divisions, larger and smaller, rural and city schools, and those where alternative programmes were already in operation and those where development was still taking place.

In order to address the question of progression at 16-plus, responsible staff in colleges of further education were also contacted and either visited or interviewed by telephone.

Stage 3 All known available nationally and locally accredited schemes were assembled and analysed, in order to come to some conclusions and recommendations about suitability in individual circumstances.

FINDINGS

Stage 1 The Questionnaire

- * All schools finally returned their questionnaires duly completed. **100%**

Prior to the National Curriculum

- * 24 schools had had some form of alternative curriculum in years 10 & 11 **69%**

- * 14 of the 24 schools had used some form of external accreditation as part of an options programme **79%**

[8 schools had used C&GL 365	"Foundation"
5 schools had used ASDAN's	"Youth Award Scheme"
2 had used OCEA/NLI	"Thinking Skills"
1 each responded - SEG	"Services to People"
- WJE	"Certificate of Education"
- AEB	"Basic Literacy & Numeracy"
- RSA	"Profile"]

- * Six of the 24 schools had used internal school certification **25%**
[These specifically designed programmes included elements of human development /relationships, aspects of life and work in the community, tended to be more practically biased, with speakers, visits, work experience and links with colleges.]

- * The time devoted to alternative programmes varied :
14 schools < 6 hours 6 schools 6 to 9 hours 3 schools > 10 hours

With the Introduction of the National Curriculum

- * Eight of the 24 schools dropped their alternative programmes **25%**
- * But in order to support some students, schools variously undertook alternative subject accreditation, including maths. SMP "G" scheme, AEB basic certificates in geography and "The World of Work", SEG maths and English and WJEB Certificate of Education.

With the "...easing of national curriculum requirements."

- * 26 of the 35 schools now offer some form of alternative curriculum **74%**
- * Six other schools were expecting to develop an alternative offer.
Together this would give a total of 32 school out of the possible 35 **91%**
- * It was every schools' intention that the provision would be externally accredited.
- * The current schemes included:

ASDAN	Youth Award Scheme	20 schools)	Some
WJEB	Certificate of Education	7 schools)	combinations
RSA	Initial Award / Practical Skills	3 schools)	were offered

Others:	ABE	Basic Literacy, numeracy, science, geography	3
	GNVQ	Foundation / Level 1	3
	C&GL	Certificate of Education	1
	NEAB	Northern Partnership for Records of Achievement	1

- * The time devoted to alternative programmes remained about the same:
21 schools < 6 hours 5 schools 6 to 9 hours 3 schools > 10 Hours
- * Five schools responded that they were networking with other schools
Six schools had curriculum links with colleges of F.E.
Seven schools liaised with both other schools and colleges of F.E.
- * The responses to the question about progression opportunities for alternative programmes at 16-plus, were inconclusive. Progression was taken to mean opportunities to accredit prior learning through recognised accreditation. Examples of enhanced personal or study skills are not included in the data.

Of the 22 schools which responded positively:

- 11 cited GNVQs/ NVQs as transferable within school or to college of F.E.
- 1 school was offering the Youth Award Scheme in the 6th form
- 3 colleges of F.E. offered the Youth Award Scheme or were intending to from September 1995
- 3 schools were "talking" to their local college about the Youth Award Scheme
- 1 school said "hopefully" their scheme demonstrated progression!

- * Target cohorts for alternative programmes varied:
14 schools targeted students with learning difficulties
12 schools offered their programme as an option to all students
1 school ran two courses; one was by open recruitment, the other targeted
- * All students applying for open options were given guidance. Where it was felt by the school that the alternative option was inappropriate, other options were offered. Where the programme was specifically for students with learning difficulties, then they were guided towards the option and their parents involved.
- * Only eight schools offered statistical information on destinations for students on alternative programmes.

In aggregate, they were:

STAYED SCHOOL	F.E.	JOB	TRAINING CREDITS	UNEMPLOYED	UNKNOWN	100%
32	41	10	10	4	3	

- * Eight schools offered alternative subject accreditation, either in place of, or in addition to, alternative programmes:

5 schools	WJEC	English, maths, science, rural science, French
2 schools	AEB	English, literacy, maths, numeracy
2 schools	RSA	Media studies, environmental studies, food technology, caring, construction, typing, geography
1 school	SEG	Basic skills - geography

Stage 2 Semi-Structured Interviews

Dearing: Non of those interviewed believed that the Dearing Review and the revised national curriculum really freed up time if the curriculum offer to all students was to be broad, balanced, relevant and differentiated. "Freeing up time is a con" and the notion of half GCSEs, short and single award courses, "...look like concentrated pieces of the original - for bright students who don't want to take the subject at GCSE." For one school at least "minds are being opened...we realise that the curriculum at present is restricted."

The debate for some schools, in addressing what form of accreditation would be best suited to their students' needs, centred around whether entitlement meant the same curricula opportunities for all, or an entitlement to success. If the former, then what might be needed was an alternative form of accreditation which could be studied *"alongside"* other students. The Northern Partnership for Records of Achievement (NPRA), AEB Achievement and Basic Tests and the Welsh Joint Education Board would satisfy the need. This model had the advantage of non-disenfranchisement and the involvement of all staff.

If the latter an alternative programme might be needed, to be taught to discrete cohorts of students by different staff. For most schools, this was the preferred option. For some it represented a *"bolt-on"*. This model, as in the Youth Award Scheme, was regarded as having the benefit of a staged approach, capable of addressing the whole ability range, and of accrediting both course work in subject areas and out of school activities.

Several schools which were not yet committed to a specific scheme, were asking for exemplars of the implementation of alternative programmes. One school wanted to look at all available options before deciding on any particular scheme or programme.

The Youth Award Scheme - YAS: Since 20 out of the 35 schools (57%) had opted to use the YAS, it seemed pertinent to enquire the reason why it had been chosen. The most frequently given answers were; that it was being used in other schools and had been recommended by other SENCOs; it had been recommended by the head teacher; there had been an input at the County's Curriculum and Assessment network meetings; or as one deputy said, "There was no alternative, it was Hobson's choice." Another interviewee said, " I looked at the Welsh board, but I couldn't sell it to Heads of Departments. Now they're regretting it."

Of AEB, one SENCO replied that they had "...used it for a long time, I didn't know about the Youth Award Scheme or the NPRA". NPRA had been "...used in another LEA"

Many schools were implementing the Youth Award Scheme and were making it work for them. There were both perceived advantages as well as disadvantages, as quoted. However it should be borne in mind that what one school perceived as a strength of the Scheme, another saw as a weakness. Much depended upon the cohort, the method of implementation and the communication skills of the staff concerned.

The Strengths of the Scheme:

It is "... open to all abilities" "It is taught in modules"
It addresses "Individual Action Plans" as per the special needs Code of Practice
It "...accredits outside interests" It "...accredits course work in other subjects"
"It has a high profile and status in the school."
Students "...can do Silver at college" I "...refute the lack of rigour."
It is "...compensated for by staff effort and moderation."
"It's used in different schools by different cohorts of students."

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The Weaknesses of the Scheme:

It is "...not rigorous enough" "It needs to be an alternative with status."
"Staff need to build the structure, if it is not to be seen as too recreational."
"It is not recognised as a stepping stone to other vocational routes."
"It is too schooly for colleges"
"There's a lack of (student) motivation unless it is carefully set up by staff."
Because of the requirement to study the core skills, "...Silver effectively cuts out the least able." "It's a bolt-on"
"There is a difficulty of communicating the benefits of YAS to subject staff."
There is a "...stumbling block when it is recognised that YAS is for less-able students. It depends a lot on staff attitudes and relationships."

Progression: was not fully understood or addressed. Where it was there were positive outcomes and comments :

Several schools were planning to introduce the Youth Award Scheme into their 6th form for different cohorts of students : those of lower ability already on the Scheme as well as "A" level students or alongside GNVQs.

Progression was being developed by three colleges, who were planning to introduce the Youth Award Scheme, variously, for those who had still to complete an award: as a course curriculum for those of lower ability; as an additional programme for those of higher ability to study during, tutorial time, recreational time and in their own time.

One college which regarded the YAS as "...too schooly" was actively involved in other ASDAN award schemes which demonstrated progression to YAS where appropriate.

Planning the Curriculum for 1996: was still effectively curriculum-led, but already effected by the present round of financial cuts and the prospect of further restrictions in 1996. Examples included:

- * The loss of a minibus for community and out-of-school visits
- * The loss of staff time, both teaching and support
- * Larger group sizes and the probable end of individual attention which many of the students need - the very reason why they chose, or were directed towards, the option in the first place.
- * In one school, two post-16 GNVQ courses had had to be dropped
- * In another school, the special tutor group in year 8 had been abandoned in order to increase the special option in years 10 and 11.
- * In yet another, some GCSE courses had had to be dropped in the 6th form
- * Additional tutorial time in the 6th form had been axed.
- * Schools had greatly reduced their staff development (INSET) budgets.

Stage 3 The Alternative Accredited Schemes

Introduction July 1995

Some of the schemes investigated are coming forward in Pilot stage and more are expected by August 1996. Therefore this section is by no means conclusive. In addition, New GCSE Syllabuses are undergoing approval by SCAA due for publication 1995-6 in Maths, English and Science 'providing a consistent basis for National Curriculum Assessment'.

Alternative Accreditation at Key Stage 4

1. Core Skills

QUALIFICATION	TARGET GROUP	COMMENT
AEB Basic Tests in literacy, numeracy, science	Pupils in short term courses, below GCSE	Dull. Text book based. Exam only assessment in May.
CGLI Wordpower/Numberpower	Foundation level. Approved for use in KS4 from 1995.	Dull? Seem to have been workplace oriented but undergoing revision to overlap with NCVQ Core Skills
CGLI Skillpower Certificate Areas: Foreign Language Enterprise Technology	Pilot post 16 from 1995. Underpins GNVQ vocational and core skills at Foundation Level	Can be used at KS4 and accredited after leaving school. Continuity with GNVQ Foundation.
RSA National Skills Profile Areas: Communication skills Numeracy skills Inf. technology skills Personal skills Practical work skills	Intended for those with severe learning difficulties, moderate learning difficulties to those failing to reach GCSE grade G.	Open pilot from 1995.
SMP Graduated Assessment schemes in maths: ULEAC 4 levels colour coded No exam, visible progress work at own pace.	For those experiencing learning difficulties, poor attenders and up to GCSE level.	Widely used in schools, compatible with GCSE but teacher led and <i>not</i> in line with investigative maths.
WJEC Certificates of Education in Maths, Communication skills and scientific achievement.	For those likely to achieve levels 1-3 N.C.	Being revised in line with new N.C. orders and GNVQ for 1996. English and maths currently popular because of wide overlap with GCSE.

2. Vocational Schemes (including core skills within the package)

<p>ASDAN Youth Award Scheme Levels: Bronze, Silver, Gold Underpins NCVQ, GNVQ and CGLI Diploma Vocational Education.</p>	<p>KS4 and 5 low attainers.</p>	<p>A valued scheme growing in currency. Rewards work done in PSHE. Tutorial outside school in addition to N.C. subjects. Not subject to Section 5 approval.</p>
<p>CGLI Skillpower (see above) Diploma of Vocational Education.</p>	<p>Foundation only at KS4.</p>	<p>A whole package compatible with N.C. and vocational work. Another scheme where students record achievements</p>
<p>NPRA Northern Partnership for Records of Achievement and CENTRA Independent Living Work Preparation Skills</p>	<p>Flexible. For students with special needs as a bridge to work or F.E.</p>	<p>Growing in use resembling NRA but a given framework for accreditation - rewarding what is achieved. Not subject to Section 5 approval.</p>
<p>GNVQ Part 1 Foundation and Intermediate Pilot from 1995 in Business, Health and Social Care, Manufacturing; pilot from 1996 in Art and Design, IT, Leisure and Tourism.</p>	<p>An alternative overlapping GCSE standards. e.g. Student could do, say, Business Unit, no core skills attached.</p>	<p>GNVQ specifications are being re-worked to make for accessibility. Also look out for student-led materials published by Longman for Core Skills. Some take up in Oxfordshire for 1995. Big advantage is progression route post 16. Likely to be adopted if schools are already offering courses post 16 in GNVQ.</p>
<p>RSA INITIAL AWARDS</p>	<p>Foundation learning for GNVQs.</p>	<p>Progress to GNVQ sharing similar vocational areas and Media studies, Agricultural studies.</p>
<p>WJEC Vocational Syllabuses</p>	<p>For those unlikely to achieve grade G GCSE.</p>	<p>Approved in 28 subject areas. The popular vocational courses are: Rural Science and Life Skills. P.E., Graphical and Material Studies are becoming popular. These courses have the advantage of being slotted in piece by piece to form a complementary curriculum.</p>

3. Teacher devised schemes/LEA devised schemes

It is worth noting that the Open College Network which has been traditionally used for accrediting staff INSET and post 16 qualifications can be used to approve teacher devised schemes at KS4. One such is the **Countryside Stewardship** award. Such a scheme may then be provided with progression opportunity as Training Credits.

4. Modern Foreign Languages

Deserves its own section. SCAA is at present talking to the Language Lead Body Units, the framework part of GNVQ, about extending the range of accreditations to provide a foundation level. An urgent process is taking place to provide alternative schemes for September 1996 when Modern Foreign Languages courses will begin to be compulsorily taught to KS4, in accordance with revised National Curriculum.

At present the alternatives are:

QUALIFICATION	TARGET GROUP	COMMENT
CGLI City & Guild, Skillpower	Intended eventually to underpin GCSE MFL.	As in 1 above, limited pilot from 1995. Not yet approved.
NPRA Languages	Those unlikely to achieve at GCSE.	Too much work for teachers to set up.
RSA	Mapping to GNVQ foundation.	A range of awards with build-in progression.
WJEC	Those likely to achieve N.C. levels 1-3.	Undergoing revision for 1998, accounting for changes to KS4.
Teacher devised and validated schemes.	Students with special needs.	Already happening in Special Schools.

In Oxfordshire the LEA is considering its own alternative accreditation scheme but is in consultation with SCAA about this and with other LEAs nationally.

5. Other Awards Schemes

Duke of Edinburgh's Award	Schemes encourage participants with learning difficulties but are generally recreational and take place out of school.
Oxfordshire Introductory Fox Award	As above: extra curricular
Young Enterprise and Team Enterprise Awards	As above: extra curricular

CONCLUSIONS

This *OxSpec*: research has attracted a great deal of interest amongst schools, who are keen to develop the right curriculum offer for their students. It has also shown that there is a variation in philosophy and a wide variety of practice.

The NFER is reporting to SCAA on the follow-up to its Interim report 'Small Steps of Progress in the National Curriculum'. SCAA may release its findings in Autumn 1995.

Those looking for alternative programmes for KS4 students need to update themselves over the next year to August 1996. Schools following schemes like Youth Award have directed GEST funding to its continuation. Schools need to look at the whole package of alternative accreditation they offer students and to bear in mind what schemes can do for truancy levels, staying on post 16 and motivating students to achieve. The issue of Modern Foreign Languages is a lively one given compulsory study of a language to 16 in 1998. The rewriting of GNVQ specifications will also be of interest to schools who have begun to offer this post 16. Foundation GNVQ is *not* equivalent to levels 1-3 National Curriculum. A need is there which must be met by some of the courses mentioned above. We are looking forward to a time of change from 1995-98.

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The authors would be happy to talk to individuals or groups about their findings.