

The Myths and the Reality of Assessing Functionality: Assessment issues emerging from the pilot of the new mathematics, English and ICT in England for young people and adults.

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Abstract

The Holy Grail of the assessment of generic skills is an arrangement where learning, understanding and application can be demonstrated by all audiences irrespective of context and programme of learning. Functional Skills have been introduced in an attempt to do just this. Functional English, Mathematics and ICT have been promoted as a response to continuing calls from employers and higher education for school and college leavers with the right underpinning skills to tackle work and further study successfully.

This paper discusses the significant challenges and disconnects between the policy ambitions, assessment arrangements and stakeholder expectations. The paper also looks at the backwash on learning that this approach to assessment has had, highlights the positive impact on learner motivation and then explores the issues around assessment theology such as comparability, reliability, fitness for purpose and value in assessing functionality. The role that technology has and can play in securing credibility, impact and reach is also addressed as are the gaps between learning aspirations and assessment capabilities. **Key words:** assessment; functional; learning; skills; validity

Introduction

In spring 2005 the UK Government published what were intended to be two ground breaking White papers designed to ensure that all current and future citizens of the UK had the knowledge, skills and understanding necessary to place the UK economy in the vanguard of the global knowledge economy. *Skills: getting on in business; getting on at work* (February 2005) was designed to ensure that the stock of the current workforce had access to education, training and qualifications that would enable business to create wealth and help individuals realise their potential. *14-19 Education and Skills* (March 2005) was designed to ensure that the flow of young people entering the workforce was motivated and stretched and as a consequence would be better able and qualified to progress in learning, life and employment.

At the heart of these policies was a determination once and for all to provide all UK citizens with those generic abilities, aptitudes, capabilities and competences to function effectively and efficiently in the C21st. This determination was reflected in clear statements about mastery of the basics irrespective of audience, context, constituency or setting and the development of Functional Skills (FS): Functional English, Functional Mathematics and Functional Information and Communications Technology (ICT) were described as the ability to use basic English, maths and ICT in a range of practical settings.

Some five years later, following extensive development work through two major pilots involving over two hundred thousand learners¹, three thousand four hundred centres² and costing many millions of pounds sterling how close has the UK Government come to securing the Holy Grail of functionality? Has this investment of intellectual capability with resources drawn from the public purse and commitment and dedication from practitioners and learners resulted in a family of programmes and qualifications that provides individuals with the skills they need to secure, retain and progress within employment, and employers with the workforce they desire to compete successfully in the global economy? Equally are policy makers now confident that they have finally delivered Sir Claus Moser's challenge in 1999³ to provide people with 'the ability to read, write and speak in English and to use mathematics at a level necessary to function at work and in society in general'?

Background

Generic functionality has been a focus of the UK's skills policies for over thirty years from when the Manpower Services Commission identified in excess of one hundred generic skills that contributed to employability. The creation of the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) in the 1980s saw the development of a narrower suite of generic

¹ The data is taken from the following series: summer 2008; autumn/winter 08/09; summer 09; autumn/winter 09/10

² QCDA: <http://www.qcda.gov.uk/qualifications/functional-skills/765.asp>

³ 1999, Sir Claus Moser, A Fresh Start: Improving literacy and numeracy,

skills, consolidated as the core skills of: *application of number; communication; information technology; improving own learning and performance; problem solving; and working with others*. These performance standards were designed with the help of employers to ensure that young people had the skills ‘commonly needed for success in a range of activities in education and training, work and life in general’. The key elements here were identifying the basic or fundamental knowledge, skills and understanding and then developing the competence and confidence to transfer and apply these in a diverse range of contexts for a diverse range of purposes. In 1997 NCVQ merged with the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA) to form the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA). The Dearing Review of post-16 education (1995-97) resulted in a major reform of the post-16 curriculum and as part of this reform core skills became Key Skills (KS) and bespoke qualifications were introduced along with strengthened elements of external assessment. This greater externality was introduced in the search for more credibility, reliability and rigour for these generic skills which was justified in the context of their increased status and value.

At the same time as Curriculum 2000 was launched the Government also sought to address the needs of an increasing number of adults whose English and mathematics skills fell short of even the lowest KS Standards. In order to bridge this gap and to create a continuum of development in 1999 the QCA was commissioned to develop national standards in adult literacy and numeracy followed by ICT in 2003. *Skills for Life, the national strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy skills* was launched in March 2000 and designed to underpin and align with the KS of application of number and communication at Levels 1 and 2 of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). For the first time an external test for each skill at NQF Levels 1 and 2 was introduced and these tests were designed to be the same for both Skills for Life (SfL) and KS qualifications. The main difference between these related qualifications was that whilst the SfL qualifications at Levels 1 and 2 were totally dependent upon the external test the KS qualifications, which were designed to assess both the basics and their application, in addition included an element of continuous assessment through a portfolio of evidence. This portfolio was intended to provide evidence of the application of these basic skills.

Writing in the launch documents David Blunkett, then Secretary of State for Education and Employment, said that the Government’s mission was to ‘give all adults in England the opportunity to acquire the skills for active participation in twenty-first century society’. This alignment between citizenship and employability for the individual and economic performance and social justice for society as a whole has, in our experience, placed unrealistic expectations on the assessment, learning and qualifications associated with generic qualifications.

Initially the DFES took responsibility for developing the new Functional Skills (FS) standards and these were passed in draft form to QCA in January 2006 to undertake extensive consultation together with their remit for translating this innovative Government policy into meaningful, motivational qualifications. Following extensive consultation with awarding organisations (AOs), employers and education practitioners the FS Standards were published in 2007 as draft documents in advance of the main FS pilot which began in September 2007 with a target completion date of July 2010. The main FS pilot was designed to evaluate the impact and appropriateness of FS for learners seeking to improve their English and mathematics skills irrespective of age, or learning context.

The FS Standards and Performance Statements set out key factors in determining the learner’s level of ‘functionality’. There are several level differentiation factors that interplay to confirm the level: the complexity of situations; the technical demand associated with the activities; the learner’s familiarity with the task or activity; the degree of independence with which a learner can complete the activity. As FS were seen as central to all learning, training, attainment and progression these qualifications were designed to underpin achievement in a raft of other qualification pathways. These qualifications are described in the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) document, *Delivering 14–19 Reform: Next Steps* (DCSF, October 2008). When FS are fully implemented throughout the curriculum, it is estimated that there will be over two million discrete registrations or entries from 2010 onwards.

FS qualifications were designed to be embedded or nested within GCSE English, mathematics and ICT qualifications⁴ and the awarding of an A*-C grade in each was to be dependent on obtaining a Level 2 in the corresponding FS first. This use of the main driver for school league tables (GCSEs) and thus the comparative performance of schools meant that FS immediately became high stakes qualifications for learners, teachers and senior managers alike. This alone is an ambitious and bold remit, but the expectations went further. FS were rooted as compulsory components in the new flagship Diploma

⁴ GCSEs are the main compulsory qualifications for 16 year olds in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, with school league tables benchmarked against results over 5 GCSEs which include English and mathematics.

qualifications, as replacement for KS in the new apprenticeship frameworks and would replace SfL, the legacy literacy and numeracy programmes and qualifications that have successfully re-engaged and empowered post 16 and adult learners alike.

The FS standards and FS provision were positioned across the 14-19 and adult learning frameworks as well as becoming compulsory components for all involved in government-funded major learning programmes. The ambition behind such challenging decisions was to ensure that the flow and stock of the working population possessed the knowledge, skills and understanding to the same breadth and depth. The pilot was designed to explore how best to provide such diverse audiences and constituencies across the full range of contexts and settings with teaching, learning and assessment mechanisms that were reliable, rigorous and valid whilst at the same time meaningful and motivational to all learners. Within UK education systems teaching and learning are measured, recognised, reported and validated by qualifications and it is at the point of assessment where FS diversity, integrity and value have come under greatest scrutiny.

In order that the FS assessment instruments better reflect the Government's ambitions for the skills development Ofqual, the qualifications regulator, has devised a set of criteria designed to assess each learner's functionality. Each AO has been tasked to provide assessment instruments that include assessment tasks that: are relevant and set in realistic contexts or use realistic scenarios and problems; require the possession of and deployment of problem solving skills; provide opportunities to apply knowledge, skills and understanding for a purpose; and measure knowledge application and process skills. The Ofqual requirements highlight the challenges that: AOs face in developing appropriate assessment instruments; that the providers face in managing the assessment process; and that the candidates face in accessing assessment. This last is at the heart of the emerging disconnects between the developing FS qualifications, the policy ambitions for FS, the FS assessment arrangements and stakeholder expectations of FS.

This paper reflects on the previous development journeys for generic skills where policy makers have consistently sought credibility for qualifications through the increase of externality and how this desire remains an unresolved challenge in the current work around FS. Indeed there is increasing evidence that rather than securing the desired credibility, the rigour introduced by external assessment is creating, rather than removing, barriers to assimilation, application and skills transfer. Further, the evidence we present suggests that the ambitious and exaggerated expectations of and for these generic skills qualifications by a diverse range of audiences and constituencies only serve to undermine sustainable progress in respect of the development of meaningful functional capability in teaching and learning as well as workplace performance.

Methods

The main evidence drawn for this analysis has been taken from QCA's evaluation of the Functional Skills Pilots⁵ supplemented by data and information from the various consultations and support programmes sponsored by the Government as part of the 14-19 reform agenda. The QCA evaluation focuses on four key themes and two sub-themes and these have framed the research questions and the analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data. The themes are:

- Establishment and maintenance of FS standards – comparability, reliability and validity
- Delivery of FS to different audiences and constituencies across the full range of settings
- Impact of FS on institutions, practitioners and learners
- Accessibility of FS to all learners especially those with special requirements.

The sub-themes are:

- FS awareness, expectations, needs and intentions
- Value of the FS qualifications as perceived by stakeholders and users.

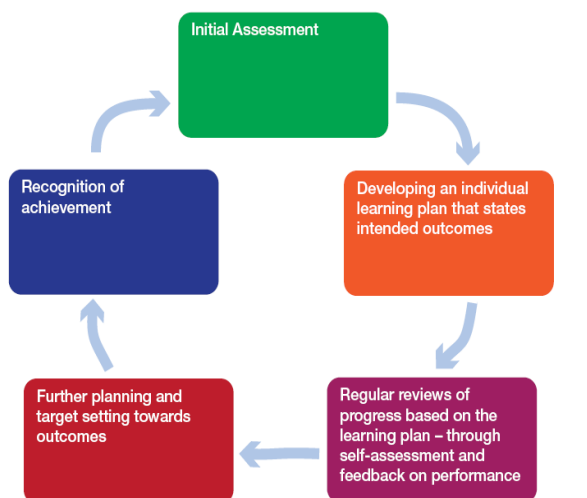
The main pilot evaluation was initiated in September 2008 and following the recognition that the needs of the post-19 community were not necessarily being addressed in sufficient detail a further targeted pilot and associated evaluation were commissioned in September 2009. Named the Adult Suitability Pilot, the evaluation focused on the additional and specific needs of adult learners and the evaluators have been tasked to report on the potential impact of replacing the SfL legacy qualifications with FS qualifications.

⁵ QCDA's Evaluation of the Functional Skills Pilots 2008-11; unpublished Reports 1-6

The data and information that informed the evaluation of the main pilot were drawn from diverse sources including: all previous FS independent evaluation reports; centre case study reports; semi-structured telephone interviews with pilot and non-pilot centres; stakeholder interviews; pass/fail and item data from the various autumn/winter and spring/summer assessment series that comprise the annual assessment cycles, as well as online provider surveys. Additionally from the Adult Suitability Pilot information was drawn from: Individual Learner Record (ILR) data; AO pass/fail data for the target cohort; on-line practitioner surveys; employer interviews; and AO interviews.

The challenges of the evaluation process are a direct consequence of the complexity of the pilots themselves. The basic learning and assessment journey for FS is very similar to that of any qualification and is captured in Diagram 1 below. However, the FS complexity is derived from the diverse audiences, constituencies, contexts and settings engaged in the pilot, the number of AOs active in the pilot, the number of different assessment approaches and instruments deployed in the pilot, the number of different skills and Qualification and Credit Framework (QCF) levels involved, and finally the number of different roles FS qualifications were expected to play as hurdles to achievement of other qualifications and awards. Unlike previous manifestations of generic skills where many of the key elements were tightly defined and centrally controlled or developed, FS qualifications are unique in the extent to which AOs have been given freedom to develop their own assessment instruments in response to the Ofqual FS Qualifications Criteria and practitioners develop and deliver without access to a defined teaching, learning and quality framework or exemplar performance standards.

Diagram 1: FS Teaching, Learning and Assessment Cycle



Developed from Delivering Skills for Life: The National Strategy for Improving Adult Literacy and Numeracy Skills

This complexity has meant that securing any reliable and valid comparability across the performance of AOs in terms of their assessment instruments, their assessment processes and procedures; their candidature and therefore their results has been challenging and some three years in to the pilot credible evidence on comparability remains inaccessible or unavailable. In that context the focus of both independent evaluations has been on ensuring that FS were fit-for-purpose, manageable as well as valuable and valued in the contexts in which they are being piloted.

Results

This section focuses specifically on the impact on the key FS actors; practitioners; candidates; and employers. As might be expected by the diversity of approaches set out above the performances and responses of key constituencies are dramatically uneven. The potential for divergence was embedded within the FS qualifications from the outset when the decision was taken to replace the innovative KS and SfL approaches of a single centrally

developed assessment regime and associated assessment instruments with the more traditional approach where AOs develop and devise their own approaches in response to common qualification and assessment criteria. AOs were encouraged by the regulator to develop their own assessment solutions for each skill at each of the target levels. The intention was that a wide variety of assessment instruments and regimes would emerge that would be fit-for-purpose for the different audiences and constituencies across the diverse contexts and settings that the FS were designed to engage and assess. Evidence suggests that with some constituencies the reverse is happening in that audiences successfully engaged by SfL appear to find the FS focus on process skills less accessible or motivational and a potential barrier to progression.

Some three years on the emerging evidence suggests that there appears to be little or no consistency of outcomes or results across the elements of FS qualifications. This inconsistency is to be found across assessment series, between AOs, as well as the performance of candidates. AOs are beginning to voice their concerns at the inconsistencies within FS generally, not just between specific skill and levels but also over the performance of the candidature and the impact this will have in their market share post-pilot. Perhaps of even greater concern is that across all ten⁶ participating AOs there is no consistent trend of improvement in candidate performance and achievement either within the levels of specific skills or across the same levels for different skills. Further, the disappointing lack of consistent, continuous and meaningful

⁶ 11 AOs entered the pilot initially but one has subsequently dropped out.

improvement across the various assessment series becomes a cause for concern when the data of specific AOs are analysed. Consistently throughout the pilot four AOs have accounted for some 96% of the candidature with only 26% of centres reporting using more than one AO. This lack of movement by centres between AOs and their apparent unwillingness to explore the different modes of assessment offered by participating AOs confirms that one of the basic principles behind the decision to accord greater flexibility for the assessment of FS has as yet to be fully explored or exploited. As a consequence candidates within the pilots are being given little or no choice in how to have their FS assessed and given the concerns over comparability and reliability highlighted above, the issue of equity within the pilots is beginning to be raised.

Candidates, irrespective of age or stage, continue to find themselves accessing generic assessments of functionality designed to address the lowest common denominator of contextualisation. This dilution of functionality must be a further factor in the reported unevenness and variation of candidate performance. The validity of assessment instruments for a candidature ranging from 11 or 12 year olds at Key Stage 3 to a post-24 year old studying for an adult apprenticeship has to be a cause for concern for AOs and centres alike. Each constituency has very different reasons for their disquiet: AOs are concerned at the impact on their market share if their assessments are seen to provide too high a hurdle or are not fit for purpose; and centres are concerned that by selecting AOs with more challenging or less engaging assessments they may be disadvantaging their learners by reducing their chances to achieve and thereby stalling their progression opportunities. Indeed many practitioners are reporting that many learners who are able to demonstrate functional application in the practical settings particularly associated with Diplomas and Apprenticeships are unable to demonstrate those same skills when required to do so in external assessments and under examination conditions.

The evaluation has sought to identify both behavioural and technical causes for this uneven performance. The past performance of candidates using national data, the capabilities and commitment of the teaching workforce and the contexts and programmes for learning have all been analysed and the evaluators remain unable to identify any single consistently contributing cause for such anomalies. What is clear is that the evaluation is not aided by a lack of access to the AOs' assessment instruments. Having looked in detail at the past performance of the candidature and the wider AO processes and procedures an emerging conclusion is that there is an issue around the content, form and nature of the assessment instruments together with the assessment processes that determine achievement.

Table 1: FS programmes as a replacement for Skills for Life

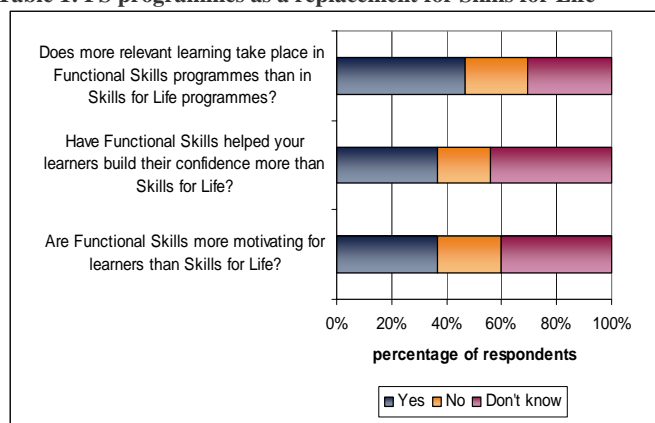
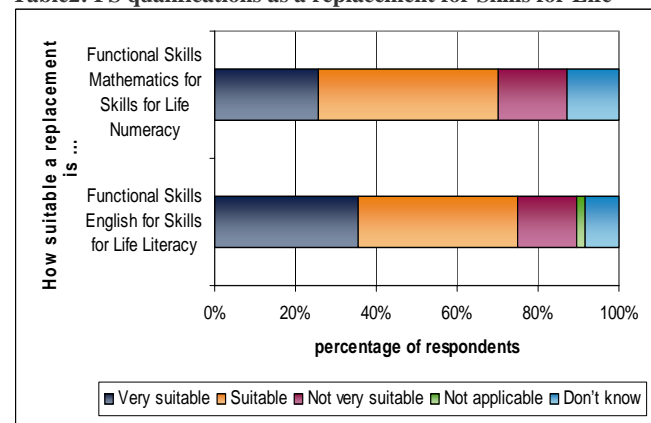


Table2: FS qualifications as a replacement for Skills for Life



Discussions with AOs only serve to reinforce the scale of the challenges they face in designing assessment instruments within a single assessment regime for an increasingly diverse audience and candidature. The expectation has been that during the life of the pilots assessment performance, if not the style of assessment instruments, would converge. The aspiration by policy makers has been to reach a point where there is sufficient alignment between the results generated by different AOs to enable centres to make decisions based on the approaches to assessment, the forms of assessment and the availability of assessment opportunities that are fit for the routines and rhythms of the audiences and constituencies for which they are responsible and the contexts and settings in which teaching and learning occur. Although the candidature performance for each AO cohort is gradually narrowing, the gaps in achievement rates between the assessment of the same skill, at the same level, in the same series for a similar cohort remain a cause for concern. Such disparities would be unacceptable in other national qualifications. In this context the notion of assessment reliability seems to have been set aside in order to address other policy imperatives. The emerging evidence from support programmes and other qualitative areas of engagement suggests that for FS the assessment of functionality and the ability to demonstrate this capability

successfully in the context of external assessment appears to rest more with the centre's AO than within the inherent and/or developed capabilities and skills of the candidates. At present within the pilots there is limited awareness of these dramatic differences in candidate performance and, as referenced above, little willingness for centres and practitioners to swap between AOs to explore the potential benefits to their candidates and their achievement records. Given the scale of the challenges set out above it is surprising to note that one aspect that remains consistent from the time FS were first framed is the continued support of practitioners for these qualifications as a replacement for the legacy qualifications of KS and SfL. As Tables 1 and 2 above suggest teachers when offered the opportunity to retain the legacy learning programmes and associated qualifications or replace them with FS the responses are overwhelming. Despite the challenges FS continue to be seen as providing a more meaningful and relevant learning and assessment experience for individuals.

To date there has been almost universal support from KS/FS practitioners in the pilot centres for FS given their greater focus on problem solving. FS are consistently reported as being more meaningful and valid qualifications than KS and SfL. Vocational tutors in those programmes where FS are compulsory have been less supportive especially when they have been expected to embed FS in their own professional practice. Following the publication earlier this year of the final FS Qualification Criteria there have been growing concerns regarding FS assessment regimes from many practitioners. It is here around assessment mechanisms that, with almost total unanimity, practitioners are seeking changes. Surprisingly though their focus is on how the assessment operates rather than on what the assessments are designed to assess. For example, the conditions for assessment seen as essential by practitioners are: on-demand availability; quick turnaround of results; and rich feedback in reporting candidate performance and results. Currently not one of these assessment mechanisms or operational features is available in the pilot and many if not all AOs remain unconvinced that these are possible under Ofqual's current assessment criteria and where there is interest in responding to market forces there is a general concern at the associated development costs. The irony is that the conditions set out above are exactly those conditions that KS and SfL have so successfully developed and deployed irrespective of context, level or skill. The dilemma facing current policy makers and AO technicians is that the trade off in 2000 that saw the external assessment of KS and SfL balance and risk elements of coverage and validity to embrace consistency, manageability reliability, rigour, and scalability are once again emerging but this time without a major policy drive or the public purse to underpin them.

Table 3: Reasons for Entering Learners in the Pilots

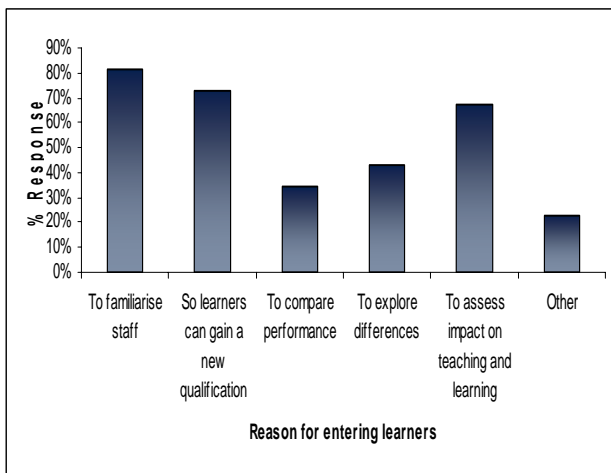
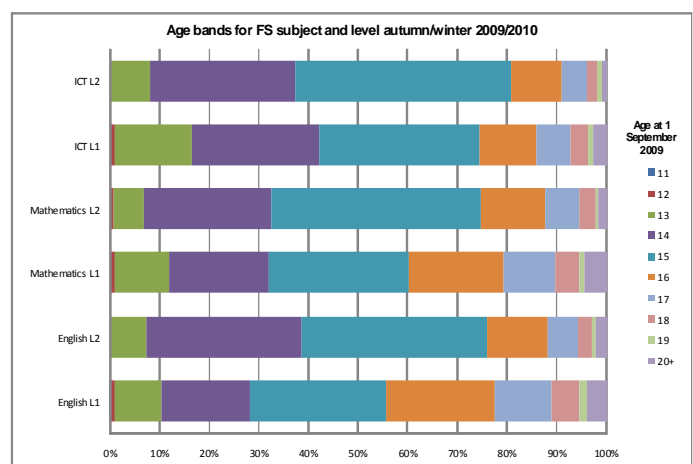


Table 4: Age bands for FS subject and level autumn/winter 2009/2010



As the pilots draw to a conclusion and preparations are put in place for general roll out in September 2010 little thought seems to be being given to those on the pilot who have yet to achieve their FS qualifications. This is of particular concern for those where FS remains a requirement for wider the achievement of Apprenticeships or Diplomas. As Table 3 above suggests the current cohort are seen by some as important in facilitating the FS experiment and advanced planning for the future. There is currently no transition plan in place for those moving from the live pilot to new FS qualifications.

Discussion

It is axiomatic to state that the principal role of education is to instill and nurture each individual's capabilities, competences and knowledge then underpin these with the confidence and understanding required to fulfill their ambitions and realise their potential. One further assumption for education and qualification policy making and implementation sits

at the heart of this FS initiative: assessment and qualifications are mechanisms and monitors of an education system's effectiveness and as such they are secondary to identifying the learning goals, facilitating the high quality teaching and learning that motivates and empowers learners and then enables them to realise their potential and make a meaningful contribution to their families, the communities in which they live and the places in which they work. As the recent history of generic skills illustrates, and the current FS developments highlight, a policy, principle or theory that is launched with over ambitious expectations, without due consideration of past experiences or the robust practical considerations for future implementation will not be without casualties. In the case of the FS pilots the most immediate and obvious casualties are some of the young people and adult learners⁷ who have accessed assessment across the three assessment windows and participated in what increasingly appears to be a flawed process. To date only a tiny percentage of the entire candidature has achieved all three FS. Given that all three FS are required for achievement of Diplomas, the Foundation Learning Tier and Apprenticeship Frameworks this must be cause for concern as preparations are made for the general roll out from September 2010. The danger is that once the full extent of the contrasts in current performance and the diversity and unevenness of opportunity are more generally understood the greatest casualty could be FS themselves. FS policy has already been changed. In summer 2009 the Government, following advice from Ofqual, removed the requirement for FS to be a discrete assessment element of their comparable GCSE subjects citing that as the FS standards were now embedded in the revised GCSE criteria the need for discrete assessment was unnecessary. This decision raised concerns in some quarters as the genesis of FS in part comes from those employers and HEIs who have consistently complained that entrants with GCSEs lacked the basics or the ability to function effectively in the workplace.

The evaluation of FS to date has challenged the expectations and performance of the qualification to deliver its commitment to develop and assess 'the ability to use basic English, maths and ICT in a range of practical settings' as much as it has the ability of centres and practitioners to provide programmes of learning that can nurture FS and AOs to develop appropriate assessment mechanisms for FS. As the **results** section has outlined, despite the unevenness and uncertainties around different assessment instruments and regimes FS continue to be genuinely recognised as an important step forward in linking the demands and expectations of the worlds of work and higher learning with the content, focus and outcomes of the teaching and learning available in the UK's schools and colleges. One matter that has also consistently been reported by practitioners and learners is that FS are more demanding than both KS and SfL. When this is looked at more closely two aspects are cited: firstly, the external tests at Levels 1 and 2 where KS and SfL comprise fixed response items to facilitate flexibility, manageability, reach and scale whereas FS are, in the main, open response and/or task-based; secondly, the problem solving demands of FS. Whilst the first has been well rehearsed in recent years and the limitations and opportunities of fixed response assessment have been explored elsewhere, we believe the latter to be key here. Problem solving requires a degree of confidence and sophistication not previously expected at any previous Level 2 generic skills qualification. When the definitions of KS Level 2 and 3 are examined the challenge is clear: *Level 3 marks a shift from straightforward tasks to being capable of responding to the demands of more complex activities. Candidates need to demonstrate more explicit reasoning ability and personal responsibility in making decisions about how tasks are organised.*⁸

Set against that clear ramping up of expectations between FS and KS levels the challenge for all AOs, irrespective of target audiences and constituencies, of assessing problem solving skills by externally set tasks and tests should not be underestimated. When this was explored for Curriculum 2000 the tasks developed proved unmanageable and unworkable. Perhaps of even greater importance given the high stakes nature of FS for work-related settings, is the fact that there are clear and tangible risks for those in occupational or vocational settings. We are concerned at the potential for demotivation of this increased demand and unfamiliar requirements set within summative assessment instruments, processes and procedures. Equally in order to address diverse audiences and constituencies the emerging assessment instruments have little or no resemblance to the routines and rhythms of their principal focus and do not recognise or reward the adaptive or critical thinking skills (problem solving) central to and required for effective and efficient performance in the workplace.

As Table 4 above suggests, the softening of the FS 'hurdle' within associated GCSEs and the limited uptake of Diplomas within schools at Key Stages 3 and 4 mean that the decisions on the form, nature and structure of FS as captured in the revised Ofqual FS Qualification Criteria and used to shape post-pilot FS qualifications have been taken from data and evidence, in the main, distilled from learners, practitioner and centres where the majority of candidates are no longer

⁷ 194 753 candidates were entered for FS across three series: autumn/winter 2008-09, summer 2009 & autumn/winter 2009-10.

⁸ Guidance on the Key Skills Units, QCA/99/481, 2000.

required to follow FS programmes of study or seek FS assessment and associated qualifications⁹. Such developments during the life of the pilots must challenge the appropriateness and credibility of the new FS qualifications. FS have been trialled and tested on a candidature in contexts and settings where the FS hurdle has been removed and is no longer a barrier to achievement; therefore the stakes are no longer high. Yet FS will be rolled out for a candidature working in occupational and vocational contexts and settings and embedded within the requirements of awards and qualifications where the stakes remain terrifyingly high. As employers, training providers and other occupational and vocational stakeholders come to recognise this situation there is a real risk that the current support for the principles of FS is dissipated and this latest opportunity to provide step changes in teaching and learning of generic skills and the assessment of functionality compromised and diluted. Those employers who are familiar with the increased demands of FS are already lobbying Government for change and resisting the need for more off the job teaching to address FS requirements¹⁰.

In seeking reliability and rigour FS qualifications are subject to the Ofqual statutory regulation of external qualifications, the associated codes of practice and in addition have very clear requirements in terms of the form and nature of assessments including sampling of the FS coverage and range. Even though the criteria state that AOs must 'provide assessment opportunities that are sufficiently frequent to meet the needs of their candidates, such measures currently make it difficult for AOs to deploy technology in order to secure the flexibility, impact and reach so welcomed in their predecessor qualifications. So whilst Ofqual has not placed an embargo on the use of technology the regulator's almost agnostic approach to the implications for the FS qualifications beyond regulation have created a disconnect and dissonance between theory and practice and, as Government's agents, between policy and reality.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that for the knowledge economy and for an equitable, fair and stable society a nation needs capable and confident citizens who are dynamic, flexible problem solvers. FS were designed to enable the education system to develop these key components through the vehicle of FS and prepare the UK's citizens to compete in the C21st knowledge economy. Somewhere on the development journey between policy, theory, pilots and emerging practice the FS have lost too much that was valid and valuable and gained too much that is bureaucratic and unwieldy.

It is clear that the predecessor qualifications of KS and SfL are now outmoded and whilst in 2000 compromise on range and coverage was acceptable to secure engagement and progression, the time is appropriate to raise the pitch and demand of a new generation of generic qualifications. It is essential that these challenging new qualifications build on the legacy and learn from it. Functional English must address speaking and listening and writing skills, Functional Mathematics must ensure that the correct calculations and methods are applied to acceptable levels of accuracy and Functional ICT must cover the effective and safe use of technology to find and select information as an effective means of communication. A qualification like a tool is only as good as the craftsperson that is using it. In the context of the FS some five years after the policy was launched the economic and political landscape has suffered a seismic shift and education and skills perspectives are subject to challenge and change. Part of this challenge must involve scrutiny of FS as 'tools' and this must include the regulators who are monitoring them, the AO technicians who have designed them, the practitioners who are delivering them and the candidates, employers and HEIs who should benefit from them.

Currently there is little evidence that the Holy Grail has been found. Indeed, such has been the scale of the challenges within the pilots that there is a real danger that the FS learning aspirations are being undermined by the current limitations of the available assessment capabilities. In addition whatever the weaknesses of KS and SfL their ability to engage the full range of diverse audiences and stimulate progression has to date been unrivalled and there is little emerging evidence from the QCDA pilots that the first FS generation will do anything other than stall this process. Without further interventions from Government and/or Ofqual on the form, nature and protocols surrounding FS assessment there is a danger that functionality will once again remain elusive. The pilots have shown that for learners, practitioners, and stakeholders functionality is meaningful and motivational when it is learned and demonstrated in real and relevant contexts and settings but artificial, mannered and a barrier to progression when externally set and examined.

⁹ As at QCDA Report 6, July 2010: 66% of institutions were schools and 87% of the candidature were 16 and under.

¹⁰ Following the UK General Election in May 2010 the Labour Government has been replaced by a Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition. At the time that this report is being prepared the schedule for launch remains unaltered but there is growing uncertainty as to the extent of the new Government's confidence in FS in general, their commitment to these new qualifications in particular and to the schedule for general roll out in occupational and vocational settings.