

7. INTERVIEWS WITH HUMAN RESOURCES PERSONNEL

7.1. Participants and procedure

Persons in charge of human resources departments of five enterprises were invited to comment on (a) their satisfaction with and expectation of their employees (who were school leavers) and (b) the suitability of the current school mathematics curriculum. Two of the companies were from the production and services sector, two were from high-tech industries and one was a mass media firm. The semi-structured format was adopted. The interviews were audio-taped, transcribed and content-analysed.

7.2. Results

Findings of the interviews revealed that the type of mathematical knowledge and skills required in the work situation varied with the nature of the job. The human resources personnel interviewed expected people working in accounting and financial sections to be sensitive to numbers and to have strong computation skills. For other jobs, including those of sales, service and technical nature, it seemed that no specific mathematical skills were required. Instead, interviewees thought that language skills and computer skills were more important because good language skills were important for effective communication.

An interesting point is that the interviewees expected people in the professions to have good analytical ability, problem-solving skills, reasoning and logical thinking. These qualities were seen, to some extent, to be related to mathematics education.

The interviewees did not express any complaints about the mathematical knowledge and skills of their current employees. This suggests that they were generally satisfied with their workers' mathematical standards. None of the interviewees gave any opinions on how they thought the present mathematics curriculum should be changed in view of their expectations of the mathematical standards of their staff. However, they did mention that they would like their employees in the professional and managerial staff to have stronger analytical and problem-solving skills.

Most of the interviewees expressed confidence in the public examination systems. They believed the results achieved in public examinations did reflect people's, particularly job applicants' abilities. Only one of them said that they had to test applicants' sensitivity to numbers when they were recruiting accounting staff.

7.3 Discussions

The interviewees were generally positive about the “output” of the present mathematics curriculum. When compared with the commercial sector’s strong criticisms of language teaching in schools, this is, indeed, a cause for relief and some degree of pride.

It was the view of the human resources officers that industries, even those in high technology looked for very basic computational skills in their staff. The general “analytical and problem-solving skills” at the core of the “broad aims of mathematics education” were highly valued by different enterprises. This indicated the importance of “deep understanding” and skill development in mathematics education. In this light, we should investigate just how adequate the current classroom teaching is in developing children’s understanding and skills in mathematics and how adequate our public examination systems is in assessing learning in these two areas.

For most human resources personnel who were not in the technical field, the contents of the present S.4-5 and A Level curricula, particularly the latter, were not directly relevant to the nature of their work. In view of these comments, we should consider shifting the present content basis of our mathematics curriculum to one which emphasises the development of concepts.