14-19 Curriculum and Qualifications Reform

Final Report of the Working Group on 14-19 Reform
Summary for Higher Education Institutions

October 2004
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Why do we need reform?

The choices young people make between the ages of 14 and 19 affect their whole lives. The curriculum they study, the examinations they sit and the qualifications they earn are all crucially important. The present system has enabled increasing numbers to progress into higher education, and has increased the numbers gaining five good GCSE grades. But it also has significant weaknesses:

• **Too few young people continue learning beyond compulsory schooling.** The UK has the fifth highest drop out rate among 28 developed nations. This reduces the pool of potential applicants for higher education.

• **It has become increasingly difficult to differentiate between high achievers.** As more students gain As at A level, universities and colleges have found it harder to distinguish between the most able applicants.

• **Too few young people have the right skills.** The curriculum doesn’t offer enough time or weight to communication, number, ICT or research skills, partly because the burden of external assessment is too great.

• **Too few vocational qualifications meet the needs of learners, higher education and employers.** Too many vocational qualifications are of uncertain currency and do not allow young people to progress to level 3. Employers say courses don’t always provide the right skills.

• **The system is confusing and unclear.** There are too many qualifications and specifications, too few of them valued or understood by university and college admissions officers or employers.

If we are to meet the challenges and aspirations of a new generation, we must:

• Provide learning and courses which stretch and engage all, including the most able.

• Enable universities and colleges to see exactly how well each student has performed.

• Equip all young people with the basic skills and attributes they need to succeed in life and encourage them to use their knowledge and skills creatively.
• Encourage young people to progress to level 3 through academic or vocational routes.
• Raise the standard and status of vocational education and training.
• Reduce the amount of assessment and simplify the system, so that young people can progress from one level to the next, with their achievements properly valued and recognised.

A new 14-19 diploma framework

A new diploma framework would replace the existing qualifications taken by 14-19 year olds – including A levels, AS levels, AVCEs and GCSEs. These qualifications would evolve into diploma ‘components’, retaining much of their content, but with less externally assessed coursework. Diplomas would be awarded at four progressively more demanding levels: entry, foundation, intermediate and advanced.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Diploma level</th>
<th>National Qualifications Framework level</th>
<th>Existing national qualifications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advanced</td>
<td>Level 3</td>
<td>Advanced Extension Award; GCE AS and A level; level 3 NVQ; equivalent qualifications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>Level 2</td>
<td>GCSE at grades A*-C; intermediate GNVQ; level 2 NVQ; equivalent qualifications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foundation</td>
<td>Level 1</td>
<td>GCSE at grades D-G; foundation GNVQ; level 1 NVQ; equivalent qualifications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entry</td>
<td>Entry</td>
<td>Entry Level Certificates; other work below level 1</td>
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</tbody>
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There would be up to 20 different subject mixes. Young people could choose an ‘open’ diploma with a mix of subjects similar to GCSEs and many A level combinations. Alternatively they could choose a diploma specialising in an employment sector or academic area. Students might opt for an engineering diploma, a languages and literature diploma or a science and mathematics diploma, for example.
What would young people study?

Most of a young person’s time would be spent on their specialist subjects or programmes. This would be their **main learning**.

Young people would have to reach a minimum standard in functional mathematics, English and ICT to receive a diploma – their **core learning**. Every young person would also have to complete an extended project, which would replace coursework and could resemble a university extended essay or assignment. The curriculum would develop research, problem solving and teamwork skills. Young people would be encouraged to think for themselves.

Young people would be entitled to participate in sports, arts, work experience and community service. Participation would be recorded, but would not be compulsory. Personal review, planning and guidance would help young people to evaluate themselves and their learning and choose the best career path.

**Vocational education and training**

Vocational programmes provide an opportunity to enrich the experience of learners, as well as preparing young people for particular types of job. Vocational courses should be available both within open diplomas, where they can be mixed with other vocational and/or academic courses, and as distinctive vocational pathways. But the quality of much vocational education and training needs to improve.

Vocational pathways would become part of a single diploma framework, allowing learners to move between courses while accumulating credit for what they have
already achieved. There would also be improved work experience and greater involvement of employers and universities.

Apprenticeships should be fully integrated with the diploma framework, but should retain their distinctive identity and ability to respond to the needs of particular employment sectors and the aspirations of young people.

The ability to progress

The diploma framework would allow pupils to progress more easily from one level to the next. But they would not have to start at the lowest level nor claim a diploma at each level before moving to the next.

It should also be possible to change direction more easily. So, a young person specialising in science could move to engineering mid-course, transferring relevant credits already earned. All advanced diplomas would provide pathways into higher education.

More stretch and challenge

As increasing numbers of students gain As at A level, it has become harder to reflect the range of performance within an A grade. The advanced diploma would offer students significant new opportunities to pursue subjects in greater depth:

- Advanced components would incorporate the demands of the current Advanced Extension Award and an extended grade scale of up to eight grades.
- Learners would be able to draw down level 4 components and have achievement recognised on their ‘transcript’.
- The extended project would ensure that young people acquire and demonstrate skills of investigation, planning, research and analysis, which are valued highly by universities and colleges.

In addition, we propose two structural changes to GCE A level:

- First, AS and A2 would become separate components, with AS renamed A1. To gain an advanced diploma students would have to achieve at least four passes at A1 standard (equivalent to the first year of an A level) and at least two passes at A2 (equivalent to the more demanding second year).
- Second, the current six assessment unit structure would be reduced to four with assessment objectives focused on key aspects of the subject rather than coverage of the whole syllabus.

A greater role for teacher assessment

Students currently sit too many external exams, while teachers’ expertise is insufficiently used. Teachers’ professional judgements on the standard of their students’ work would be reflected in the diploma, subject to a quality control framework to guarantee consistency and reliability.

This new system would allow students to receive full credit for their work during the year. It would make it easier for teachers to give students feedback to encourage
them to make further progress. And it would assess evidence collected throughout
a whole course.

None of this means abandoning examinations. Schools and colleges would continue
to test their pupils through more formal exams. Externally assessed formal exams
would also remain an essential part of the advanced diploma and of assessment of
core mathematics, English and computing at all levels.

These new arrangements would have implications for the content of teacher
training courses provided by universities and colleges, and for continuing
professional development.

**Reporting achievement**

Each diploma would record a student’s overall achievement as a pass, merit or
distinction. At advanced level, merit and distinction would reflect greater breadth
of study as well as higher level achievement.

Detailed transcripts of a young person’s performance would be available to
employers, universities and colleges. Such transcripts would detail grades, skills
developed and wider activities. Transcripts could also carry contextual information
relevant to admissions processes, such as data about the student’s institution.

**Post Qualification Applications and additional tests**

The new system would make it easier to judge individual ability and potential under
the proposed new Post Qualification Applications system recommended by the
Schwartz Committee. We would welcome research into the possible benefits of a
national test to assess student potential.

**Mature students**

Universities and colleges would continue to set their own requirements for mature
students, which could include diploma achievement as well as other qualifications
and experience.

**Timetable for change**

These changes would be introduced gradually with time allowed to develop and test
components before moving to the full diploma. Some changes, such as a reduction in
the assessment burden, reforms to A level, improvements in vocational programmes,
and availability of more detailed information about young people’s achievements
could be achieved within five years. There should also be early progress towards
improving basic skills. But we believe that the first diploma programmes should not
be fully introduced for at least 10 years to allow the changes to be piloted and
carefully implemented.

**Further information**

To read our report in full, please visit www.14-19reform.gov.uk. Copies of the full report
can also be obtained by calling 0845 602 2260, quoting reference DfE-0976-2004.