14-19 Curriculum and Qualifications Reform

Final Report of the Working Group on 14-19 Reform
Summary for Teachers, Lecturers and Trainers

October 2004
Why do we need reform?

The present curriculum, qualifications and examinations system for 14-19 year olds has enabled more young people to gain the five good GCSEs employers consider essential for most jobs today, and allowed increasing numbers to go to university. But teachers, lecturers and trainers know it also has significant weaknesses.

There is too much assessment. Many teachers, lecturers and trainers feel that the current mix of coursework and formal assessment means that students have too many external exams, crowding out other activities.

The system is confusing and unclear. There are too many qualifications and specifications.

Bad behaviour makes teaching difficult. Truancy and bad behaviour, particularly among 14-16 year olds, can reflect restricted or inappropriate course options for some students.

Too few young people continue learning beyond compulsory schooling. The UK has the fifth highest drop out rate at 16 among 28 of the world’s most developed nations.

Too few young people are properly equipped for work. Too few school-leavers can communicate, use number or use ICT effectively. Too few vocational qualifications meet the needs of learners and employers.

We propose reforms which would:

- Reduce external assessment.
- Provide lessons and courses which stretch and engage all, helping to improve standards and behaviour.
- Make it easier for young people to progress and encourage them to aim higher.
- Equip all young people with basic and personal skills, and work with employers to improve vocational education and training.
- Ensure all young people can use their skills and knowledge creatively and think for themselves.
- Be properly piloted, carefully phased and fully resourced.
A new 14-19 diploma framework

We propose a new diploma framework to replace existing 14-19 qualifications, including A levels, AS levels, AVCEs, BTECs 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.¹

We propose up to 20 subject mixes. Young people could choose an ‘open’ diploma with a subject mix similar to GCSEs and A level combinations. Alternatively they could choose a diploma specialising in an employment sector or academic discipline. Students might opt for an engineering diploma, a languages and literature diploma or a science and mathematics diploma, for example.

14-16 year olds would continue to study National Curriculum subjects, though their diploma would not depend on achieving a specific grade. Pre-16 diplomas would all be ‘open’, to ensure that young people could not narrow their options.

What would young people study?

Most of a young person’s time would be spent on their specialist subjects or programmes – their main learning. All would also have core learning to reach a minimum standard in functional literacy and communication, mathematics and ICT for each diploma.

¹ Foundation standard is equivalent to gaining D-G grades at GCSE; intermediate standard normally means at least five A*-C grades at GCSE; advanced is at least two A level passes. Entry level is below GCSE standard.
Every young person would also complete an extended project, which would replace most externally assessed coursework.

The curriculum would develop personal skills including problem solving, teamwork and study skills. It would teach rights and responsibilities, active citizenship, ethics and diversity. Students would be encouraged to use their skills and knowledge creatively and think for themselves.

Young people would be entitled to participate in sports, arts, work experience and community service. Their participation would be recorded on their diploma, 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 learning provides an opportunity to enrich the experience of learners, as well as preparing young people for particular types of job. The Secretary of State asked us to pay particular attention to it in formulating our proposals.

The quality of vocational education and training varies enormously. We want to build on what is good to raise overall quality. Vocational courses would be available both within open diplomas, where they can be mixed with other vocational and/or academic courses, and as distinctive vocational pathways.

All vocational courses and pathways would become part of the single diploma framework, allowing learners to move between courses while accumulating credit for what they had already achieved. This would support progress to more demanding courses, including higher education. Employers would be much more involved in every stage of the process.

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 aspirations of individuals.

**The ability to progress**

The diplomas would allow pupils to progress from one level to the next. They would not have to start at the lowest level. Many would enter at intermediate level, and go on to advanced level. Others may gain a foundation diploma first and work towards an intermediate diploma.

There would be no expectation that diplomas would be awarded at particular ages. But there would also be more opportunities for young people to proceed more quickly or slowly in their best subjects, if they wish. It should also be possible for students to change direction easily. So, a young person specialising in science could move to engineering mid-course, transferring credits already earned.

**Supporting those at entry level**

The diploma should enable every young person to achieve their full potential. But some young people, including some with special educational needs, may be unable initially to reach the standard expected in the foundation level diploma.
For these learners, entry diplomas would provide the chance to achieve and progress to higher diplomas. Their course would be based on challenging but realistic personal targets and would help to prepare them for work, to live independent or supported lives and develop their capacity for further learning.

**Tackling disengagement and poor behaviour**

The diploma would be particularly valuable for young people who might otherwise be disengaged from education, whose boredom and lack of success turns to bad behaviour.

By providing academic and vocational options at different levels, schools and colleges, working with training providers, could tailor programmes to each young person’s needs and abilities.

The new system would ensure that the foundation diploma is both a respected qualification in its own right and a stepping stone towards an intermediate diploma.

**More depth and breadth at advanced level**

Increasing numbers of students obtain As at A level, making it harder to reflect the range of performance within an A grade. The advanced diploma would offer students opportunities to pursue subjects in greater depth, whether they choose academic or vocational courses.

- Advanced components would incorporate the demands of the current Advanced Extension Award and an extended grade scale of up to eight grades.
- Advanced level study would be broadened to require achievement in the core.
- The extended project would ensure that young people show skills of investigation, planning and analysis, and begin to acquire the research skills valued by businesses, universities and colleges.

**Less formal assessment, greater trust in teachers’ professionalism**

Students sit too many external exams while teachers’ and lecturers’ expertise is insufficiently recognised. In future, teachers’ professional judgements about their students’ work would be reflected in the diploma, and there would be fewer external tests.

There would be national standards and guidance for teachers and lecturers, and new Chartered Assessors would be responsible for quality control within individual schools and colleges. Sampling of students’ work would ensure consistency of standards between institutions and over time.

Schools and colleges would continue to test their pupils through more formal exams available centrally. External exams would also remain in the advanced diploma. And there would be external assessment in functional literacy and communication, functional mathematics and functional ICT in each diploma.
A more manageable system for teachers, lecturers and institutions

The new system would be more manageable for teachers, lecturers and students, as it would be easier to timetable exams and manage courses.

Additional work from teachers should not be required since continuous assessment is already an important part of the job. Indeed, with less external assessment, teachers should find the new system easier to manage.

However, each change should be properly piloted and tested, with appropriate training, before it is introduced so that unforeseen problems are addressed.

Supporting good teaching

With less external assessment, it should be easier to bring classes to life through engaging and innovative teaching. Teachers and lecturers would have more time to develop their specialist expertise and their passion for their subject. Less time would need to be spent preparing pupils for external exams.

Reporting achievement

Students should have strong incentives to achieve more than the basic requirements for a diploma. Each diploma would record a student’s overall achievement as a pass, merit or distinction.

Detailed transcripts of a young person’s performance would be available to teachers, employers, universities and colleges, recording the grades achieved in particular components of the diploma.

Timetable for change

These changes should be introduced over the next 10 years, fully consulted upon, and properly piloted and resourced. The changes would not affect those currently preparing for GCSEs and A levels. Some changes, such as a reduction in the assessment burden, reforms to A level and improvements in vocational programmes, 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 introduced for at least 10 years to allow the changes to be fully piloted.

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.