



Reforming Key Stage 4 Qualifications

Submitted
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About NFER

NFER is the UK's largest independent provider of research, assessment and information services for education, training and children's services. We make a difference to learners of all ages, especially to the lives of children and young people, by ensuring our work improves the practice and understanding of those who work with and for learners.

NFER's purpose is to provide independent evidence which improves education and training. As a charity we are always thinking about ways in which we can achieve this purpose. In particular, we are focusing attention on the use of evidence for improvement, taking a proactive approach to setting the research agenda for education and children's services in order to make a real impact on policy and practice.

About this document: Reforming Key Stage 4 Qualifications

Between September and December 2012 the Department for Education held a consultation on *Reforming Key Stage 4 Qualifications*. The NFER submitted a response. This is set out in this paper. Our comments were of two sorts.

- Observations based on NFER's long experience of curriculum and assessment research.
- Detailed reference to recent projects that produced relevant evidence in relation to the issues around low achievers, vulnerable groups and post-16 provision.

There were questions we did not address: for example, issues around the practical implementation of reformed qualifications. This was because we felt those questions were seeking responses from those directly representing schools.

Related documents

A broader picture of the issues affecting young people at key stage 4 can be seen from responses that NFER has submitted to other consultations:

- Careers guidance
- Work related learning
- Vocational education (the Wolf Review).

These are available on the NFER website.

In addition, an NFER paper, *Policy Developments and the Risk to NEET Young People*, draws attention to the impact of policy proposal on some groups of vulnerable young people: this is also available on the NFER website.

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Do you agree that the new qualifications should not be called "GCSEs"?

There are pros and cons to changing the name of the new qualifications. On the one hand, if they are very different in terms of model, content and/ or standard then they should not have the same name. On the other hand, we would argue that it does not make sense to have a very different qualification for a small number of subjects creating a two-tier system. In addition the GCSE name is well known and recognised internationally, including in terms of approved recognition for university entrance etc which would need re-negotiating if there is a name change

Do you agree that the new qualifications should be called English Baccalaureate Certificates?

A set of independent qualifications in a range of subjects is not a Baccalaureate – it is not being designed as a group award. It does not make sense to use a name that is from a different educational context.

Do you agree with our expectations for grading structures, set out in paragraphs 5.4 to 5.5?

The expectations set out in 5.4 and 5.5 suggest that you aim to have improved discrimination and provision of information at both the top and the bottom ends of the ability scale, as well as clearly assessing literacy and numeracy as part of the syllabuses. There is a large ability range at this stage of education in all subjects and to provide an assessment that can achieve these different purposes will be very challenging. The difficulties of such a system will also lead to significant risk of failure to achieve any of the stated purposes effectively. By making the standard more challenging overall there is a risk that the lower ability students will become more disengaged. (See response to question 16.)

Do you believe that we should insist on a common grading structure for all English Baccalaureate Certificates or should we allow Awarding Organisations the freedom to innovate?

For this to be a meaningful qualification the grading should be consistent across the different subjects. This will ensure that stakeholder groups understand the outcomes e.g. employers, universities, pupils and parents.

Do you agree that it will be possible to end tiering for the full range of subjects that we will be creating new qualifications for?

Section 5.4 suggests that there will be increased differentiation at the top and the bottom end of the ability scale. It will be necessary to have tiering for all the subjects given the wide range of ability we have at around 16 years old. This is particularly true for subjects in which there is differentiation by input (i.e. the nature of the questions), such as mathematics – it is not possible to have questions of appropriate difficulty for all students in a single tier paper, and each student would be presented with a large number of questions at the wrong level of difficulty which will affect reliability and engagement. For subjects in which it is more possible to have differentiation by outcome such as English, the questions could apply to all students but it would be necessary to have such generic mark schemes that marking reliability would be compromised.

Are there particular approaches to examinations which might be needed to make this possible for some subjects?

Question types which differentiate by outcome, eg essays, can be appropriate to a broader ability range although again this will impact on reliability (they have more subjective mark schemes) and it is likely that you would need different mark schemes for students of different abilities (or very generic mark schemes). We would really not recommend this approach in terms of high quality assessment. For this to work in practice, the assessment schemes would need to be so generic or so complex as to introduce unnecessary risk.

We intend that English Baccalaureate Certificates should be assessed 100% by externally marked examinations. Do you agree?

We would argue that longer pieces of work, developed over time, are a valuable addition to many subjects, including mathematics. There is a real issue with assessing higher level skills such as planning, creativity and problem solving in relatively short, terminal examinations. For science there is a very real risk that the practical aspects would no longer be taught in an appropriate way.

Which examinations aids do you consider necessary to allow students to fully demonstrate the knowledge and skills required?

The new syllabuses should be engaging, relevant and challenging for students. This is likely to mean that some examination aids are needed. For example, calculators in

mathematics allow students to answer more complex problems, which can often be more authentic. Similarly in science, calculators are needed to allow realistic questions to be posed. There are similar examples in other subjects.

Do you agree that these are appropriate subject suites? If not, what would you change?

It is not clear what the real purpose of the E-Bacc/EBC is. If this is to provide a broad and balanced, rigorous curriculum, then the range of subjects is too narrow and it should include other areas such as art, computer science, RE etc. However, if the purpose is to ensure that all students have a solid grounding in the basics, particularly now that the participation age is being raised to 18, then it might be sufficient to offer examinations that ensure functionality in literacy and numeracy. We really need to have a clearly stated purpose for the new suite of qualifications.

What qualities should we look for in English Baccalaureate Certificates that will provide evidence that they will support students to be able to compete internationally?

They should assess a range of skills in addition to the core subject content such as: creativity, problem solving, good attitudes to learning, adaptability, cross-curricular links, and ability to innovate.

Do you agree that we should place a particular emphasis on the successful English language and mathematics qualifications providing the best assurance of literacy and numeracy?

It is important that all students have a grounding in the basics on which they can build higher order skills. In order to achieve this there needs to be a clear definition of what is meant by literacy and numeracy at this level. As mentioned above we also need to agree a clear purpose for these qualifications. English language and mathematics are not synonymous with literacy and numeracy, but if there are sufficient assessment questions focusing on these elements then success in the examinations could assure success in the required skills. It is not possible to have a 'hurdle' in terms of a sub-set of items which assess literacy and numeracy within the broader qualification. (NB this was attempted when functional skills were introduced.)

In order to allow effective teaching and administration of examinations, what support do you think Awarding Organisations should be prevented from offering:

- Syllabus
- Specimen papers and mark schemes
- Clear indications of standards including examples of student work to act as exemplars.

We feel that there is a real risk in awarding organisations offering the 'official' text book that links to the syllabus. This can lead to a teaching to the test culture and a narrowing of the curriculum.

Similarly, there should be restrictions on awarding organisations offering a broad range of CPD courses. It is reasonable for an awarding organisation to offer an introduction and overview of a new syllabus, but they should not go beyond that to broader 'school improvement' topics, where an improvement is measured in terms of success in the examination which they also offer.

Which groups of students do you think would benefit from a "Statement of Achievement" provided by their school?

We feel that a Statement of Achievement would be of value for all students to demonstrate their learning across the curriculum (not just in their academic qualifications). If it was used for all students it would also have greater value. However, it may be of particular value for those students who will not pass their EBC, for example the following groups may particularly benefit:

- Those *at risk of becoming NEET* – evidence from NFER's Research Programme *From Education to Employment* suggests that young people with complex barriers to engagement are likely to benefit from a personalised 'passport' for post-16 progression. A more personalised record, which is differentiated by subject, is likely to help post-16 providers or employers see potential in young people.
- *Applied learners*, who are more 'vocationally inclined' – NFER's evaluation of Diplomas, for instance, suggests that some young people are less motivated by more academic studies and, thus, might not achieve the EBC qualification.
- Those with special *educational needs/learning difficulties and disabilities* – a Statement of Achievement could highlight strengths and support needs.
- Learners in *pupil referral units* (PRUs), who do not follow the 'standard' curriculum and might not take the EBC - the Statement of Achievement could act as a positive log of achievements whilst in the PRU (they often focus on development of personal skills, for example).
- Those engaged in *alternative provision* – NFER's recent research on alternative provision suggests that future consideration needs to be given to the measurement and assessment of the impacts, outcomes and achievements of

such provision. The Statement of Achievement could act as a way of recording impact/outcomes for young people who are engaged in provision – often those de-motivated by ‘academic’ studies and arguably unlikely to achieve the EBC.

Example references:

Lynch, S., McCrone, T., Wade, P., Featherstone, G., Evans, K., Golden, S. and Haynes, G. (2010). *National Evaluation of Diplomas: the First Year of Delivery* (DCSF Research Report 220). London: DCSF [online]. Available: <http://publications.dcsf.gov.uk/eOrderingDownload/DCSF-RB220.pdf> [10 May, 2010].

Nelson, J and O'Donnell, L. (2012). *Approaches to Supporting Young People Not in Education, Employment or Training: a Review* (NFER Research Programme: From Education to Employment). Slough: NFER [online]. Available:

<http://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/RSRN01>

[4, Dec, 2012].

White, R., Martin, K. and Jeffes, J. (2012). *The Back on Track Alternative Provision Pilots: Final Report*. Slough: NFER [online]. Available:

<http://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/APIZ01>

[4, Dec, 2012].

How should we ensure that all students who would benefit from a "Statement of Achievement" are provided with one?

We feel this is a *process* issue. A Statement of Achievement should be considered at the *start* of a learner journey and completion should be *on-going*. Retrospective completion is unlikely to be as accurate or useful. To be a quality and complete document, the Statement should be discussed at regular review meetings with relevant staff. It would be beneficial for one person to take responsibility for overseeing the Statements, but for all relevant staff to have an input at review meetings e.g. subject teachers, support workers, mentors. This type of review meeting will already take place for ‘vulnerable’ individuals who are likely to benefit from a Statement. Information for the Statement could be incorporated into tracking systems, although this is dependent on good systems being in place. NFER’s evaluation of the Gaining Ground programme highlighted the importance of *systems* for monitoring and evaluating pupil performance.

Reference: Walker, M., Sims, D., Lynch, S., Durbin, B., Henderson, L. and Morris, M. (2012). *Evaluation of the Gaining Ground Strategy: Final Report* (Research Report DFE-RR216). London: DfE [online]. Available:

<http://publications.dcsf.gov.uk/eOrderingDownload/DCSF-RB220.pdf>

[10 May, 2010].

There should be consistency in the way that Statements are completed, so they hold equal value. There will be a likely need for training for staff implementing the new Statement (including in FE settings if some learners study for part of their learning pre-16 in an FE setting). They should be recognised by FE colleges and employers.

Do you believe any of the proposals in this document have the potential to have a disproportionate impact, adverse or positive, on specific pupil groups?

There is a potential *adverse* impact for 'at risk' learners, such as lower achievers, vulnerable young people, those with SEN/LLDD, and those at risk of becoming NEET. Evidence gathered by NFER, for example from the evaluation of Foundation Learning, the evaluation of the implementation and impact of Diplomas, NFER's *From Education to Employment* Research Programme, and research on young people with special educational needs/learning difficulties and disabilities for the Local Government Association, suggests that 'at risk' learners are likely to benefit from:

- having a different environment to traditional 'school-style' settings e.g. outreach programmes/alternative provision (which offers tailored support to nurture young people)
- having a varied curriculum relevant to the world of work
- having a flexible and personalised approach, with one-to-one support
- informal methods of learning which are varied, creative and innovative
- provision which focuses on skills development (through practical and theoretical approaches), resilience-building, self-confidence and motivation.
- The above approaches are likely to be more engaging for some learners than the more 'traditional' and 'academic' EBC.

Our research has shown that 'at risk' learners often benefit, and get a sense of reward, from continuous assessment and regular accredited learning. The EBC would be examination-only, which could be a disadvantage to some learners.

There is a risk that, following these proposals and those made in the Wolf report, schools might discontinue offering vocational courses, which our research (including the evaluation of Diplomas) has shown that many young people can benefit from, and be motivated by.

We feel that the proposal to include a Statement of Achievement is likely to have a *positive* impact on 'at risk' learners, if implemented effectively (see response to Question on Statement of achievement, p5 above).

See the following references:

Allan, T., Dalgliesh, K., Hedland, K., Latimer, K., Thorpe, L., Spielhofer, T. and Golden, S. (2011) *Foundation Learning National Evaluation. DfE Research Report 130*. [online]. Available:

<https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/DFE-RR130.pdf>

[4, Dec, 2012].

Lynch, S., McCrone, T., Wade, P., Featherstone, G., Evans, K., Golden, S. and Haynes, G. (2010). *National Evaluation of Diplomas: the First Year of Delivery* (DCSF Research Report 220). London: DCSF [online]. Available: <http://publications.dcsf.gov.uk/eOrderingDownload/DCSF-RB220.pdf> [10 May, 2010].

Nelson, J and O'Donnell, L. (2012). *Approaches to Supporting Young People Not in Education, Employment or Training: a Review* (NFER Research Programme: From Education to Employment). Slough: NFER. [online]. Available: <http://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/RSRNO> [4, Dec, 2012].

If they have potential for an adverse impact, how can we reduce this?

It may well be possible to apply some of the features of the learning environment that support 'at risk' young people within an academic subject area, such as making the learning relevant and teaching in small groups. It will also be necessary to ensure that 'at risk' learners have a valuable record of their achievements, such as the Statement of Achievement (see Question s16&17), that is recognised and valued by post-16 providers and employers. There will be a likely need to work with providers and employers to ensure that they see the Statement as credible. Involving them in the design of the Statement could be beneficial.

Encourage schools to consider the flexibility of their overall curriculum offer, including the availability of vocational qualifications and alternative provision. The Wolf review highlighted the value of credible, quality, vocational courses.

Should we expect post-16 institutions to be ready to provide English Baccalaureate Certificates at the same time as secondary schools?

It would be complicated to have both GCSEs and the new qualifications running in parallel in the two different systems. This raises concerns about equity of opportunity for different groups of students. It will also lead to risks in terms of manageability of the system.

Our experience (including evidence from the evaluation of Diplomas) suggests that teachers in the further education sector are more likely to have the skills to deliver programmes such as functional/key skills, as opposed to the more 'traditional' and 'academic' qualifications like GCSEs/the EBC. We agree with the statement in Section 7.5 of the consultation document, which states that post-16 institutions will need time for capacity-building.

Reference: Lynch, S., McCrone, T., Wade, P., Featherstone, G., Evans, K., Golden, S. and Haynes, G. (2010). *National Evaluation of Diplomas: the First Year of Delivery* (DCSF Research Report 220). London: DCSF [online]. Available: <http://publications.dcsf.gov.uk/eOrderingDownload/DCSF-RB220.pdf> [10 May, 2010].

How best can we support post-16 institutions to prepare to provide English Baccalaureate Certificates?

Time needs to be allowed for the 'management of change' in these circumstances. There will be a need for time and resources for capacity building – either recruiting new staff or up-skilling existing staff. NFER research projects (see references below) have shown that learning from school-to-school partnerships can often be more effective than the outcomes of more formal training courses. Our evaluations of the Gaining Ground programme and 'Beacon Schools' have revealed that 'successful' educational establishments can very effectively help partners in managing change. It could be beneficial to put some resource into a number of 'champion' colleges, to assist them in supporting the professional development of staff in others – like the Teaching School model.

Reference:

Morton, R. (2005). *Transforming the School Workforce: a New Professional Respect? The Beacon Scheme 2004-2005* (EMIE Report No. 85). Slough: EMIE at NFER.

Smith, D. and Waxman, D. (2008). *Better Brighter Futures: 14-19 Reform. Beacon Scheme Round 9* (EMIE Report 92). Slough: EMIE at NFER [online]. Available: <http://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/EMI02/> [4, Dec, 2012].

Walker, M., Sims, D., Lynch, S., Durbin, B., Henderson, L. and Morris, M. (2012). *Evaluation of the Gaining Ground Strategy: Final Report* (Research Report DFE-RR216). London: DfE [online]. Available: <https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/RSG/SchoolsSO/Page1/DFE-RR216> [21 August, 2012]

Do you agree that five years is an appropriate period for the new qualifications to feature in the performance tables before the competition is rerun?

Again there are pros and cons to this – if you change within five years there is not enough time for teaching to be established and for the system to settle down. On the other hand there is a risk that the loss of expertise in the other awarding organisations will mean that they are unable to make a strong proposal for a new syllabus after the five years has elapsed.

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