



# 14-19 Curriculum and Qualifications Reform

## Final Report of the Working Group on 14-19 Reform Summary

October 2004

# Summary

## Why do we need reform?

The choices young people make between age 14 and 19 affect their whole lives. So, the curriculum they study, the examinations they sit and the qualifications they earn are all crucially important.

The present system has its strengths. It 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 and college. English youngsters perform well at age 15 in international test comparisons.

But it also has significant weaknesses:

- **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.** Government reforms are improving standards in the 3Rs but too few school-leavers can communicate, calculate and use computers effectively. This is undermining the potential of individuals and the strength of our economy.
- **Too few vocational qualifications meet the needs of learners and employers.** Too many vocational qualifications are of uncertain value and do not allow young people to progress. Employers say courses don't always provide the right skills.
- **There is too much assessment.** The current mix of coursework and formal exams from 16-18 means students now sit too many external exams, which crowd out other activities.
- **The system is confusing and unclear.** There are too many qualifications and specifications, too few of them valued or understood by employers or university admissions officers. A levels don't do enough to stretch the most able students and reflect their achievements.

If we are to avoid wasting the talents of so many young people, and to meet the challenges and aspirations of a new generation, we must:

- **Tackle the reasons why young people underachieve and leave education early**, by providing lessons and courses that stretch and engage all learners, including the most able.
- **Equip all young people with the basic skills and attributes they need to succeed in life**, and which our economy and society need for the future. This means ensuring that they can think creatively for themselves, as well as being competent in mathematics, English and computing and other generic skills.

- **Raise the quality and status of vocational education and training**, with employers playing a key role in the process.
- **Reduce the amount of assessment** faced by young people, their teachers, schools and colleges.
- **Simplify the system**, so that young people can progress more easily and flexibly from one course to the next, with their achievements properly valued and recognised.
- **Do more to reflect students' achievements at advanced level**, so that they are well prepared for university.

## A new 14-19 diploma framework

We propose a new diploma framework which would allow young people to progress at their own pace, stretching the most able and helping less able students to reach their potential. Diplomas would be awarded at four progressively more demanding levels: entry, foundation, intermediate and advanced.

Level equivalences		
Diploma level	National Qualifications Framework level	Existing national qualifications
Advanced	Level 3	Advanced Extension Award; GCE AS and A level; level 3 NVQ; equivalent qualifications
Intermediate	Level 2	GCSE at grades A*-C; intermediate GNVQ; level 2 NVQ; equivalent qualifications
Foundation	Level 1	GCSE at grades D-G; foundation GNVQ; level 1 NVQ; equivalent qualifications
Entry	Entry	Entry Level Certificates; other work below level 1

Diplomas would replace existing qualifications taken by 14-19 year olds – including A levels, AS levels, AVCEs, BTECs and GCSEs. However, we want to build on what is good in these qualifications, and much of their content would be retained as ‘components’ of the new system, but with less external assessment, particularly coursework.

Every young person is different, so they should not all have to study the same mix of subjects at school or college. We propose up to 20 different subject mixes through which young people can gain their diploma.

Young people could choose an 'open' diploma with a mix of subjects similar to those taken by many GCSE and A level students today. 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 in those subjects. All students under 16 would take open diplomas to avoid narrowing their options too soon.

### What would young people study?

Most of a young person's time should be spent on those specialist subjects or programmes that reflect their strengths, interests and aspirations. This would be their **main learning**.

There would also be **core learning** for all. Young people would have to reach a minimum standard in mathematics, English and computing to receive a diploma. These subjects would be taught and assessed in ways that relate to their practical use in the workplace and everyday life. Every young person would also have to complete an **extended project** which would replace coursework.

The curriculum would develop other personal skills, including time management, problem solving and teamwork. It would teach rights and responsibilities, active citizenship, ethics and diversity. Young people would learn how to manage their own studies better to help them improve. They should be able to use their skills and knowledge creatively and think for themselves.

Young people would be strongly encouraged to participate in sports, arts, work experience and community service, and would be entitled to such wider activities. Their participation would be recorded on their diploma, but would not be compulsory. Personal review, planning and guidance would help young people to understand themselves better and choose the best learning and 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.

## Stepping stones to achievement

Young people would amass the credits needed for a diploma at a pace appropriate to their capabilities. More than half of students currently reach intermediate standard by age 16 – the equivalent of at least five A\*-C grades at GCSE – but others take until the age of 17 or 18.

The diploma framework would give more time to those who need it. It would also allow those who could achieve their intermediate diploma at 14 or 15 to do so.

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 in their best subjects, if they wish, or to study units from more than one diploma at the same time.

It should also be possible for students to change direction more easily. So, a young person specialising in science could move to engineering mid-course, transferring the relevant credits already earned.

For those young people unable initially to reach the standard expected in the foundation diploma, 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.

## Stretch and challenge

Every young person should be set demanding but realistic goals, whatever their personal capabilities and aspirations. The diploma would be flexible enough to stretch students throughout their education, and to allow students to draw down components from higher levels when they are ready and able to do so.

## 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.

### Tackling disengagement

The diploma should be particularly valuable for young people who are currently disengaged from education, those who drift from truancy to poor results. The new system would allow young people to select from a range of vocational and academic options and achieve qualifications that have real currency with employers, education and training organisations and the public.

### 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.

### Reporting achievement

Students should be given strong incentives to achieve more than the basic requirements needed to pass a diploma at a particular level.

Each diploma would therefore record a student's overall achievement as a **pass, merit or distinction**.

Detailed **transcripts** of a young person's performance would be available to employers, universities and colleges. Such transcripts would provide information about the components and grades achieved, the skills developed, the extended project and wider activities.

### Benefits for employers and higher education

The new diploma would support employers by ensuring that young people have acquired the basic and personal skills they need to succeed in today's labour market and that vocational courses are of high quality.

The diploma would support university and college requirements by developing the skills of independent study and stretching students to greater breadth and depth of study. The transcript and the extended grading scale would allow them to differentiate between candidates without separate tests.

## Timetable for change

These changes should 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 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 fully 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](http://www.14-19reform.gov.uk). Copies of the full report can also be obtained by calling 0845 602 2260, quoting reference **DfE-0976-2004**.

**Additional copies of the document can be obtained free of charge from:**

**DfES Publications**

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<b>14 -19 Reform Final Report</b>	DfE-0976-2004
<b>14 -19 Reform Final Report Summary</b>	DfE-0977-2004
<b>14 -19 Reform Final Report Summary - Employers</b>	DfE-0978-2004
<b>14 -19 Reform Final Report Summary - Higher Education Institutions</b>	DfE-0979-2004
<b>14 -19 Reform Final Report Summary - Parents, Guardians and Young People</b>	DfE-0980-2004
<b>14 -19 Reform Final Report Summary - Teachers, Lecturers and Trainers</b>	DfE-0981-2004

Copies of the summary version will also be available in the most commonly used minority ethnic languages and in audio (Ref: Audio DfE-0991-2004), and Braille (Ref: Braille DfE-0992-2004) versions.

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