Joint Advisory Committee for Qualifications Approval (JACQA) Biennial Review

I wanted to write to thank you and all involved in producing this first review of the 14-19 Qualifications System.

In setting up the Committee we asked it to focus in its first year on reducing the number of new stand-alone qualifications and supporting Awarding Organisations through the new approvals process, before turning its attention to existing qualifications from 2010. The Biennial and JACQA’s recently published ‘Committee Annual Summary’ confirm that good progress has been made on both these objectives. I was pleased to note that Awarding Organisations are increasingly aligning and developing qualifications for the National Routes rather than as stand-alone. JACQA is to be commended for its work in driving and supporting these changes which represent the first necessary steps toward our 2013 goals. I am content to accept all seven high level recommendations made by JACQA subject to further work on the areas I have identified below.

In the White Paper ‘14-19 Education and Skills’ we said that to retain approval for public funding, qualifications must support progression and be understood and valued by learning providers, employers and most importantly, young people.

It cannot be right that public funding continues to support a learning offer in which two thirds of the qualifications attract fewer than 100 learners each year. On that basis I fully accept Recommendations 1 and 2 including the actions on non-approved learning which were confirmed in December by the Learning and Skills Council’s fifth Statement of Priorities. JACQA and the YPLA should take forward quickly the proposed actions to facilitate the removal of sustained low/zero enrolment qualifications and should in doing so consider equally National Route qualifications (in particular Diploma Additional and Specialist Learning) alongside stand-alone. I will however, expect to see protected any qualification that is shown to be essential in meeting the needs of learners with learning difficulties or other disabilities, other vulnerable learners, or which provides sector-specific skills that cannot be gained through the national routes.

I welcome the proposal (under Recommendation 2) for JACQA to begin now to review high
take-up stand-alone qualifications. It is important that we are able to confirm quickly which qualifications we expect to fund as stand-alones beyond 2013 so that Awarding Organisations and learning providers can prepare for and begin to make changes to their offers. I will maintain my commitment not to withdraw funding from any existing high take-up stand-alone qualification before 2012. But this guarantee will not protect current options such as Adult Literacy and Numeracy qualifications, which were never intended for younger learners and will progressively be replaced by the national roll out of Functional Skills.

Recommendation 3 highlights an important challenge. If we are to ensure the coherence of the 2013 learning offer we must ensure that providers and the YPLA have a clear understanding of how qualifications can be combined in each of the National Routes. The Biennial called for more clarity on the circumstances in which ‘stand-alones’ can be combined with National Routes and on the scope of the General Qualifications route. Feedback from Diploma Learners has shown that they genuinely value the breadth and variety offered by these new qualifications. I am keen that students following a GCSE or A Level route are similarly able to create broad and coherent programmes which include core learning and Functional Skills. I have asked my officials to develop further guidance on the General Qualifications route and will ask the YPLA to work with my Department from April 2010 to produce options for using funding and other levers to shape and secure the National Routes.

The Biennial proves again that the effective use of data is a powerful aid in identifying trends, measuring performance and highlighting risks. My Department is currently developing a new Data and Statistics Strategy which will engage stakeholders such as schools, local authorities, the FE Data Services and the Information Authority. The aim of the new strategy will be to ensure that we have the strongest possible evidence base to shape and determine achievement against our strategic policy objectives.

I also agree that the new arrangements for commissioning of learning will be a powerful driver of participation on the National Routes. The DCSF and LSC’s recently issued Statement of Priorities and draft National Commissioning Framework make clear that investments in young people’s learning must be focused on securing a broad and high quality curriculum offer that delivers full access to the 14-19 Entitlements. This will in turn help to engage young people in learning and support the Raising of the Participation Age.

I am keen to see developed further the proposals under Recommendations 5 and 6. It is vital that JACQA is aligned properly with Ofqual and that it can draw on the expertise of both the new regulator and Sector Skills Councils to improve the quality of its own scrutiny process under Section 96. I would ask JACQA to continue to develop these proposals with Ofqual and officials from my Department and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

The reforms we are making to 14-19 learning are substantial. The successful transition to 2013 can only made if our partners understand why change is necessary, where we are going and what is required of them. My Department will continue to develop and improve its communications and to offer support to our partners and I will expect JACQA to continue to operate in a consultative and open fashion as it has throughout this first Biennial review.

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