

Functional Skills

Response of the Association of School and College Leaders

- 1 The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) represents more than 18,500 education system leaders, heads, principals, deputies, vice-principals, assistant heads, business managers and other senior staff of state-funded and independent schools and colleges throughout the UK. ASCL members are responsible for the education of more than four million young people in more than 90 per cent of the secondary and tertiary phases, and in an increasing proportion of the primary phase. This places the association in a strong position to consider this issue from the viewpoint of the leaders of schools and colleges of all types.
- 2 ASCL welcomes this review, and strongly supports the concept of Functional Skills qualifications.
- 3 ASCL is not in a position to comment on the details of the content and assessment of these qualifications.
- 4 GCSE English and maths, valuable as they are, are far too prominent in the educational scene. Employers are often dismayed to find that they are not closely related to normal literacy and numeracy as needed in most workplaces and in daily life. Likewise, many young people who struggle with these GCSE qualifications see them only as passports to further study or employment, and with some justification do not see their content as relevant to future lives.
- 5 Functional Skills give an opportunity to address these issues, and largely do so already. No doubt there are further improvements to be made in the content and assessment of these qualifications, but the key need is for them to be established more firmly in the education system, and valued more widely within and outside it.
- 6 As your earlier work showed, employers who have used these qualifications, by recruiting people who have them or training their workforce to obtain them, have found them satisfactory, and better-suited to their purposes than GCSE. However, many other employers are unaware of them.
- 7 Young people and their parents, and adult students, are often also not sure of the value of these qualifications, and there is a general tendency to see them as an easier alternative for people unable to pass GCSEs, which is not (or should not be) the case.
- 8 This tendency is not helped by the fact that many politicians, including some ministers in the DfE, have apparently not understood or publicly valued any route other than the GCSE/A level/ degree path that they followed themselves. It is encouraging to see that Skills Minister Nick Boles has commissioned this review, but he has work to do in educating some of his colleagues.
- 9 Therefore the greatest need with regard to these qualifications is for a communications strategy to try to ensure that they are more fully understood and properly valued by the various stakeholders mentioned above. No doubt that is already under consideration.

10 I hope that this is of value to your consultation, ASCL is willing to be further consulted and to assist in any way that it can.

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Association of School and College Leaders
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