DfE and Ofqual call for evidence on the sector subject area classification system in England

Response of the Association of School and College Leaders

A. Introduction

1. The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) represents over 23,000 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 children and young people across primary, secondary, post-16 and specialist education. 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 the opportunity to contribute to this consultation.

B. Key points

3. The background to the development and use of SSAs is complex. It is important to remember that, in some cases, institutions have built their organisational structures around these categories so that students and staff can share expertise, equipment, management and employers. It is necessary to review the SSA categorisations on a regular basis, but any changes to the categorisations must be introduced slowly over time and not rushed to meet policy deadlines.

C. Answers to specific questions

Question 1: How familiar are you with the Sector Subject Area (SSA) classification system?

4. Familiar.

Question 2: If you are familiar with the system, which tier do you make most use of? Tier 1 or Tier 2?

5. Both tiers are used in some capacity in post-16 education, especially when organising and reporting on exams and other relevant groupings of financial or curriculum data, although Tier 1 is probably used more than Tier 2.

Question 3: Is the allocation of qualifications into SSA tier 1 and 2 accurate and consistent enough for your needs? If not, please describe the issues you have encountered.

6. It is accurate and consistent in most instances. However, Tiers 1 and 2 include a very wide range of subjects. For example, medicine and nursing are very broad subjects, and

science and mathematics covers a number of subjects which are also engineering-based.

7. The range of subjects may be too broad to attract the same funding bands in some cases. Some refinement may be necessary to some subject sector categorisations, although the subjects mentioned above often have a high, if not equal, cost.

Question 4: How frequently do you use the SSA classification system and what do you use it for? For instance: identifying local or regional skills needs, curriculum planning, monitoring, and reporting, financial planning.

8. The classification system is extensively used for reporting of examination results at cohort level, enrolment detail, grouping subjects in curriculum areas, curriculum planning and reporting and financial budgeting and reporting.

9. Different institutions will use the SSA classification system differently, but all will use it in some way.

Question 5: To what extent do you feel the current structure of the SSA classification system adequately accommodates both academic and technical learning?

10. In some cases, such as grouping similar subject sectors together, the system is adequate. In others, technical learning has moved on and the classification does not necessarily reflect this, such as in technology and in low carbon building.

11. Another example is Art (8), which covers a very wide range of subjects and is integrated with other tiers in industry sectors. In addition, Tier 7 is very closely linked to Tier 15 in terms of industry sectors.

12. However, for both academic and technical learning, the SSA classification system is currently adequate.

Question 6: To what extent do you feel the current system can accommodate all levels of learning from entry to level 8? The challenges around SSAs and other classification systems in the sector (notably occupational routes and maps)

13. The current system largely reflects SSAs in learning levels 2, 3 and 4. Entry level and level 5 and above are more multidisciplinary and are not as well covered by the current system. Some refinement may be necessary in this instance at level 1, and level 5 and above.

Question 7: Do you use any other education, sector, or occupational classification systems (e.g., Standard Occupational Classification, occupational routes, higher education classification of subjects)? Please list them here and describe what you use them for.

14. We use standard occupational classifications **and** higher education classifications for describing technical routes for learning and progression.

Question 8: Do you use the SSA classification system alongside these other classification systems? If so, please describe how you do this and what you do it for.

15. No. We usually use one SSA classification system at a time.

Question 9: What are the barriers, if any, that prevent you from using the SSA classification system jointly with other classification systems?

16. Using two types of classification system together complicates reporting and creates a barrier to use. It may be possible to combine usage of different classification systems, but we would not usually use two systems at once.

Question 10: Are there any other areas of learning or levels of learning where you feel the current system is inappropriate or does not serve your needs? For instance, there are some SSAs which are not focussed on vocational or 13 occupational areas, but describe more preparatory learning or independent learning? How far do you feel these sit comfortably within a sector subject classification system?

17. SSA 13 covers a very wide range of learning and SSA 14 is also very broad. However, the post-16 sector is familiar with and uses these SSAs without too much difficulty.

18. These categories still sit comfortably within the current sector subject classification if used appropriately, especially when used in relation to entry level, level 1 and 2 qualifications.

Question 11: Do you feel that tier 2 SSAs provide a useful level of detail to the tier 1 SSAs? a. If not, Which SSA tier 2 areas do you feel would benefit from revision or change and why?

19. Generally, yes.

20. The two subject areas are quite different, however, especially for professional qualifications. Therefore, Tier 2 SSAs may need some refinement as qualification requirements change.

Question 12: To what extent do you feel the current SSA classification system is able to identify qualifications related to the sectors and/or occupations you are interested in?

21. Generally, the system works well in identifying qualifications related to the sectors and also identifies qualifications related to occupations in the different sectors.

22. Institutions use the SSA classification system extensively for reporting on enrolments in subject areas, exam results and financial reporting of curriculum areas.

Question 13: Do you feel the current SSA classification system adequately takes account of new and emerging sectors and/or occupations? a. If not, please describe which emerging sectors and occupations are not accounted for, and please describe how we could improve the system to better account for new and emerging sectors.

23. No. The SSA classification system does not take account of all new and emerging industries, especially in technology and the low carbon industries. These industries may benefit from being given a new SSA classification, or at the very least some more refinement in Tier 2 categories.

Question 14: To what extent do you feel we should keep the SSA classification system under review and if so, how often do you feel it should be updated?

24. It is always helpful to keep the SSA classification system under review, as industries are changing rapidly as IT improves and business diversifies. The system could be updated every four to five years to ensure it meets all sector subject categories requirements.

Question 15: Please tell us of any other concerns you have regarding the structure or quality of the SSA classification system.

25. There are no major concerns with the current system. However, it is important to ensure the system is clear, unambiguous, simple to use and under review as subject sectors develop.

Question 16: How resource intensive would it be for your organisation to deal with any changes to the SSA classification system? Please give examples of any time, financial or other resource implications you have identified.

26. Any changes to the current system would be quite time and resource intensive for a number of institutions, as often organisational structures, IT systems and procedures are set up around the existing structure.

27. In addition, where organisational structures follow the SSA classifications for curriculum planning and delivery, resulting reorganisation may have staffing resource implications.

C. Conclusion

28. We value the opportunity to consider the possible changes to the SSA classification system. We do not feel that the current system is broken but we can understand the need to keep this under review.

29. We therefore urge that within any changes made, the likelihood of additional cost to provider organisations is borne in mind. Any potential additional costs are unhelpful when delivery costs are already increasing.

30. We also advise that any proposed changes to subject sector classifications, if implemented, are introduced slowly. Some institutions use the SSA classification system as a means of structuring curriculum areas, and others use the system for reporting on financial areas, curriculum outcomes and exam results. Implementing change at institution level would impact on work in these operations.

31. We hope that this response 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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