

# PROPOSED CHANGES TO QUALIFICATIONS FOR 14-16 YEAR OLDS AND PERFORMANCE TABLES

## Response of the Association of School and College Leaders

- 1 The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) represents 15,000 members of the leadership teams of maintained and independent schools and colleges throughout the UK. This places the association in a unique position to consider this from the viewpoint of the leaders of both secondary schools and colleges.

### Key proposed changes

**“We will encourage schools to focus on GCSEs and a narrower range of high quality vocational qualifications by limiting the number of so-called equivalent qualifications that count in the Key Stage 4 performance tables”**

**“Only a maximum of two non-GCSE qualifications per pupil will be counted in the headline indicators in performance tables in future. We will reform the system by treating one qualification as ‘one’ in the tables”**

- 2 ASCL has serious concerns about these proposals. It is accepted that some courses have been overvalued in terms of equivalence and that some students may have “specialised too much too early”, but the implications of the current proposals do not appear to have been fully worked out, and at least some of them would seem likely to be damaging.
- 3 The term GCSE will have to be defined more clearly. The proposal refers to GCSEs being accepted without question for performance tables but then states that they must be full GCSEs (“All full course GCSEs, AS Levels and iGCSEs will continue to be included in performance measures”). Does this mean that half GCSEs will in future have no value? If so, this must be clearly stated and awarding bodies should be encouraged to withdraw them. This would be a particular blow to Religious Studies where students are frequently entered for a half GCSE (and indeed the teaching time allocated reflects this).
- 4 In the performance indicator for the E-bac, applied GCSEs were not counted. If this is the intention for all indicators for the future, then again this should be made clear. If there are different categories of GCSE of which some are acceptable and some are not there will be no clarity or transparency in the system.
- 5 The proposal makes no specific reference to diplomas. Under their current organisation, it would make no sense for a level 2 diploma to be considered as equivalent to one GCSE as there is a requirement for a much greater amount of teaching time. Diplomas are not vocational courses. They provide a more generic education for those students who enjoy and benefit from applied and practical learning. If the government intends in this way to reduce the value of diplomas to such an extent that they are no longer considered an appropriate qualification at Key Stage 4 (KS4) then it should say so or publish clear plans to revise diplomas so that they occupy a similar teaching time to GCSEs. It is wrong to allow young people to continue to take a qualification which is to have no value in the future.

- 6 There is a need to review courses in terms of equivalence, but reducing the value of every vocational course to no more than one GCSE, combined with initial uncertainty about which courses will be considered equivalent, will have a serious negative impact on the ability of schools and colleges to cater for a full range of ability and interests. There are many examples of students whose engagement in education has been maintained only by following a vocational course in an area which holds their interest. The result of forcing students into GCSE courses in which they are not interested will be disengagement, an increase in truancy in KS4, and an increase in young people aged 17 and 19 not in employment, education or training (NEET).
- 7 These proposals, therefore, disadvantage those learners who require the greatest support; such as those described above and students with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities. The government is right that we need to have high expectations for the achievement of these students: but relevant vocational qualifications are often crucial for their achievement and progression.
- 8 Although it is stated that "Section 96" listing all those qualifications approved for use in schools will allow teachers to use their professional judgement to consider what qualifications might be of benefit to some young people, the fact that not all of these will feature in the Key Stage 4 performance tables provides a perverse incentive (describe in the forward as "a consequence of misconceived accountability measures") to force students to follow inappropriate GCSE courses with the results suggested above.
- 9 Those schools and colleges who do use their professional judgement to provide courses appropriate to the needs of their learners and thereby promote their engagement and achievement, will be disadvantaged both in performance tables and during inspection (see paragraph 11 below). Parents and carers of those learners described will find performance tables of little use in demonstrating the extent to which these schools and colleges successfully cater for their needs. Students will be given the message that their achievements are of little value.
- 10 ASCL is concerned at the timescale proposed for this reform which is that the new indicators will apply to performance tables for the 2014 results. The students who will complete their GCSEs in 2014 are in year 9 (Y9) in September 2011. Most schools publish KS4 options and discuss them with Y9 students during the latter part of the autumn term or early in the spring term. They need a reasonable idea of the Y9 choices before Easter so that the staffing needs for the curriculum for the following September can be identified. In this particular case, the change to performance indicators is likely to have serious implications for the curriculum and could well result in staff changes leading to redundancy, which needs considerable advance planning. Schools will not be able to carry out their planning during 2011-2012 for the following year with any great certainty about the courses which will be counted in 2014 unless they have firm information before the end of 2011. This uncertainty has a particular impact on the science curriculum because of the complexity of the various choices of course available (see paragraph 11 below).
- 11 These changes will have an impact on inspection. The effect on performance tables will be felt in Ofsted judgements of the attainment of schools. Depending on the nature of their intake, schools following courses appropriate to the students in their school will find that there are disadvantaged if only GCSE subjects and approved vocational subjects on a "one to one equivalent" basis are to be counted. Some vocational courses that are highly suitable for some students do require more time than a GCSE, but will only have the value of one GCSE. Having students follow these courses would therefore potentially depress the position of the school in the performance tables. Yet under the proposed new framework the judgement on leadership and management requires inspectors to decide if the curriculum is appropriate to the pupils in that school.

- 12 This change will also affect judgements on core subjects. Under the proposed new framework a school will be deemed inadequate for achievement (and hence overall), if there is a weakness in attainment and progress in a key subject. In science the BTEC qualification has been counted as equivalent to GCSE double science as a qualification in the subject. This has been successful development for many schools allowing the most appropriate science course to be followed by pupils, leading to students in the same school following Triple Science, Double Science and BTEC. If BTEC science is listed as an acceptable course to follow it will only be worth the same as a single science qualification. Therefore, there has to be very clear guidance for inspectors on how to evaluate performance in science as schools may well be disadvantaged for inspection and could be judged less than satisfactory as a consequence.
- 13 If this change comes into effect in 2014 it will immediately cause issues for inspectors (as it did when CVA became CVAEM) in making comparisons in year on year results and viewing a three year trend. It could paint an erroneous picture of declining attainment.

## **Challenge and external assessment**

### **“Only those qualifications that provide evidence of substantial amount of external assessment will be counted in the tables”**

- 14 All assessment should be fit for purpose. It is therefore inappropriate to make hard and fast rules to apply to a wide variety of subjects. Practical courses such as performing arts, physical education, art and design will necessarily need different forms of assessment from paper-based subjects. It is to be hoped that the phrase “external assessment” does not mean just externally set written tests but also practical assessments which are externally marked and/or moderated.
- 15 If the future system is to be limited to GCSE and external assessment only then there is strong concern about the effect on some young people. Clearly, some schools and some students would be disadvantaged by this, including many already struggling with many other disadvantages. This confirms ASCL’s view that nationally published performance tables with their competitive format do more harm than good.
- 16 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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