

# Department for Children, Schools and Families: Promoting achievement, valuing success: a strategy for 14-19 qualifications

## The Response of the General Teaching Council for England (GTCE)

### Introduction

1. The GTCE is the independent professional body for teaching. Its main duties are to regulate the teaching profession and to advise the Secretary of State on a range of issues that concern teaching and learning. The Council acts in the public interest to help to raise standards in education.
2. The GTCE welcomes the debate initiated by this consultation paper and supports the Department's overall aim to ensure that every young person is offered a choice of qualifications that meet their learning needs and which are held in high regard by employers, further and higher education institutions and the public.
3. The Council would make the following overarching recommendations to support the implementation of the revised qualifications and to ensure that all young people are supported by the proposals.
  - a. The qualifications structure needs to address the gap in status between qualifications perceived to be 'vocational' and 'academic'. For the diplomas to succeed they therefore need to enjoy parity of esteem with A-levels. Subject to the successful evaluation of the initial 17 diplomas, the GTCE believes that bringing A-levels into the diploma structure across all subjects over time would support this aim.
  - b. The new qualifications structure is an opportunity to address inequalities relating to the way in which young people's choices are influenced by their gender, ethnicity or social class. The new diplomas must carry a high status, enable young people to transfer to higher education and employment and be supported by well-informed, impartial careers advice.

- c. While the GTCE does not object to the principle of removing funding from ineffective qualifications, this policy should not have an adverse affect on young people's ability to follow their interests. The new Joint Advisory Committee for Qualifications Approval should therefore be an independent body that reflects the interests of learners, as well as the needs of employers and higher education.
- d. Schools and colleges will need incentives to work in partnership if the new qualifications structure is to be successful. However, the current accountability system encourages competition between institutions, rather than collaboration. The DCSF consultation on inspections from 2009 proposes coordinated inspections of partnerships, and this is a good opportunity to ensure that accountability does not hinder collaborative working.
- e. Teachers must receive professional support during the transition to the new 14-19 entitlement. In addition to the immediate support already in train, the GTCE would recommend that teachers receive a long-term entitlement to sustained, relevant and personalised learning opportunities, which will provide teachers with time and space throughout their careers to develop their practice.

### **Ensuring a high status for the diplomas**

4. The GTCE endorses the Government's ambition for young people to gain qualifications that have a real standing with employers and the public at large. It is vital that the new diplomas are attractive to young people and are considered to have a comparably high status in relation to A-levels. The Council believes that schools and teachers are facing a dilemma in terms of having to market the new diplomas to young people, without confidence in their merit. At present, the quality of the product is unknown and there are concerns about the speed at which diplomas are being implemented and the status the qualifications will have. The Council would expect that the qualifications system should become stable and have longevity, and be supported by Government incentives, in terms of institutional partnership and the professional development of teachers.
5. The GTCE welcomes the introduction of new diploma lines in Humanities, Science and Languages. The Council believes that creating diplomas across all subjects, encompassing those subjects currently delivered through A-levels, would be the next natural development following the addition of these three new diplomas. The Council has noted the Government's change of emphasis in relation to the future of A-levels, and subject to successful evaluation of the initial 17 diplomas, the Government may decide to move towards diplomas replacing A-levels across all subjects over time. Such a development would support the principle that 'academic' and 'vocational' qualifications are equally desirable and carry an equivalent status. The

diplomas will, of course, need to set high standards of achievement and be supported by strong teaching and institutional partnerships.

### **Promoting equality of opportunity for all young people**

6. In introducing the new diplomas and reforming the 14-19 qualifications structure, the Government will wish to take account of the impact these reforms will have on equality of opportunity for all young people. The new structure is an opportunity to tackle discrimination and inequality and to promote equality, as required by equality legislation.
7. The GTCE understands that young people's qualification choices at 14-19 are currently influenced in part by their background (e.g. gender, ethnicity or social class). DCSF evidence shows that at 16 many subjects are taken by similar numbers of boys and girls, but the picture changes at A level, where, for example in 2005, 71% of English literature students were female and 76% of physics students were male<sup>1</sup>. The Equalities and Human Rights Commission report that only 2% of apprenticeships in engineering and plumbing are taken by female students and only 3% of apprenticeships in children's care, learning and development are male students.<sup>2</sup> The pay differences between these career routes impact strongly on gender equality.
8. It is therefore important that, in choosing diploma options, students have access to sound and impartial careers advice which promotes equality, and tackles discrimination and stereotypes. As the diploma chosen may have a longer-term impact on an individual's education and employment prospects, the new qualifications structure must ensure that all diplomas are fully transferable - i.e. that they do not push young people into a silo from which there are no other options. The Council would recommend that the Government monitors the impact of the new qualification structure from an equalities perspective, and ensures that young people have access to transferable qualifications and well-informed, impartial careers advice.

### **Integrating qualifications and removing funding for qualifications**

9. There are clear benefits in implementing a more straightforward qualification structure at 14-19, and the Council can appreciate the proposals for four key qualification pathways instead of the wider range of current options. In introducing these proposals, the Department will wish to ensure that popular and valued qualifications such as BTECs are not withdrawn until their replacement diplomas are of an equal or improved standard and status.
10. The GTCE accepts that young people should be able to have confidence that their qualifications are effective in terms of meeting their learning needs, as well as being held in high regard by employers. The Council therefore would not object to the removal of funding from qualifications that are proven beyond doubt to be ineffective, discounted by employers and which have a small take

up of students. However, the Council is concerned to see that this does not have a detrimental effect on the ability of young people to choose qualifications that enable them to follow their needs and interests. Learning brings many benefits, for example, where it enables a young person to become engaged, motivated, learn personal skills, build social networks and follow an area of interest. Employability is just one, albeit significant, desired outcome from learning.

11. The GTCE will therefore follow with interest the appointments that are made to the Joint Advisory Committee for Qualifications Approval, and the extent to which this body is independent and decisive in determining which qualifications can continue to receive funding. The GTCE would expect that each qualification will be considered fairly on merit and would recommend that learner voices are included on this Committee, alongside the voices of higher education and business.

### **Implementing the diplomas and supporting collaboration**

12. Teachers and school leaders have frequently informed the GTCE about the considerable cost and space implications on schools with regard to introducing the diplomas. The new qualifications structure must be introduced consistently for all young people and on the basis of equality of opportunity. The Council is yet to be convinced that structures are in place to ensure that all young people will have access to all qualifications in a practicable way with teaching of the highest quality. Collaboration between institutions is vital to the success of the diplomas, and the GTCE would like to see greater incentives given to support collaboration and help achieve equality of opportunity for young people.
13. Some desirable aspects of collaboration, for example developing synchronised timetables, are very difficult to achieve in practice. The 14-19 Pathfinders were only able to achieve this level of collaboration with additional funding. The GTCE also recommends that the Government removes disincentives to collaborate. At present, the accountability system encourages institutions to compete with each other for students, and therefore funding, through league table placings, which does not create a supportive climate for partnership. The current consultation on inspections from 2009 proposes coordinated inspections of partnerships, and the GTCE believes this is a good opportunity to ensure that accountability does not foster unnecessary competition between institutions.

### **Preparing the workforce for the scale of reform**

14. The Council's is concerned to see that teachers will receive the support they need to prepare themselves and their students for the scale of change post 14. The implementation of these proposed reforms will result in significant upheaval for schools, colleges and teachers, at a time when many schools are

- also preparing to provide extended services. Students' learning experiences could be affected in the process.
15. The introduction of the diplomas and the proposed changes to the qualifications currently offered is likely to radically change the composition of the teaching workforce. Teachers will need to be trained to deliver the new qualifications and the role of teaching assistants will also be significant.
  16. The new diplomas, replacement of existing qualifications and a population decline for 14- to 19-year-olds from 2009 may contribute to a fall in demand for 'traditional' subjects. Some teachers may need to retrain in different subjects and additional training and continuous professional development is vital to maintain the quality of teaching during this transitional period.
  17. The Government is aware of the scale of change required for reforming the qualification structure at 14-19. The Council notes the work being undertaken by the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT), Quality Improvement Agency (QIA), National College for School Leadership (NSCL) and National Strategies, among others, to support the quality of teaching for diplomas. The Council also notes the work underway at the Training Development Agency for Schools (TDA) and Lifelong Learning UK (LLUK) to recruit and retrain teachers.
  18. The Council would recommend that approaches to teacher learning at 14-19 draw on research<sup>3</sup> which shows that teachers benefit most from sustained, relevant and personalised learning opportunities, which provide teachers with time and space throughout their careers to develop their practice in a creative and adaptive way. A long-term entitlement to this model of personalised teacher learning should be available for all teachers, to complement the immediate support already in train. This would help safeguard the longer-term success of the new qualifications.

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**For further information, please contact:**

Andy Hudson  
Policy Adviser  
General Teaching Council for England,  
Whittington House, 19-30 Alfred Place, London WC1E 7EA  
Telephone: 020 7023 3923  
Email: [andrew.hudson@gtce.org.uk](mailto:andrew.hudson@gtce.org.uk)

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<sup>1</sup> Department for Education and Skills (2005), *Education and Training Statistics for the UK, 2005 Edition*.

<sup>2</sup> The Equalities and Human Rights Commission (2008), *Daring to be Different*

<sup>3</sup> This research includes work undertaken by the Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre (EPPI-Centre). For details of this work and other research on effective teacher professional development, please visit [www.gtce.org.uk/research](http://www.gtce.org.uk/research) and click on 'Continuing Professional Development'.