An English Baccalaureate system: inclusion and high standards for 14-19 education

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The A-level crisis of autumn 2002 finally ended talk of defending what had long been called the 'Gold Standard'. In any case, the Government's reform of advanced level qualifications, collectively known as *Curriculum 2000*[1], put paid to the traditional A-level. Under these reforms, all advanced level qualifications were broken down into modules and the gradient between GCSE and the full A-level was made less steep by the introduction of AS-levels pitched at a level between GCSE and the full A-level. Advanced Vocational Certificates of Education (AVCEs), designed like A-levels in smaller qualification blocks to encourage mixing of academic and vocational qualifications, were brought in to promote parity of esteem between applied and academic study. In addition, a key skills qualification in communications, application of number and IT was introduced, with the hope that all advanced level learners would take the award alongside their main qualifications. At the last moment, Advanced Extension Awards were introduced in some subjects to provide 'stretch' for the more able. The overall aim of the reforms was to encourage more learners to take on advanced level study and to increase the breadth of programmes at this level (DfEE/DENI/WO 1997). *Curriculum 2000,* which we have described elsewhere as a 'qualifications toolkit' (Hodgson and Spours 2003a), was by no means a baccalaureate system, but it did mean the end of A-levels as we had known them.

After three years of implementation, it is now generally accepted that *Curriculum 2000* has been, at best, a partial success. Our research, funded by the Nuffield Foundation [2], suggests that learners strongly support the increased flexibility and choice provided by the AS, together with the opportunities it offers to maximise their grades. However, while early implementation issues have abated, deeper structural problems have become more apparent. The new A-level is split into AS and A2 years, with the easier

1 To read the full list of changes, and the background to them, visit the DfES qualifications website at www.dfes.gov.uk/qualifications.

2 For more detail of the research project, 'Broadening the Advanced Level Curriculum: Institutional Responses to the Qualifying for Success Reforms', and a number of research papers on *Curriculum 2000* see website at www.ioe.ac.uk/leid/nuffield

AS and the harder A2 each contributing 50 per cent of the marks to the full A-level grade. This 'semi-hooked' approach has promoted mechanical and superficial learning in the first year of study. It has also created a culture of instrumentalism, where learners carefully calculate their resit opportunities and point scores. Teachers have found themselves teaching to the test. The AVCEs, sometime called vocational A-levels, are foundering with many further education colleges reverting to more vocationally-focused BTEC National Diplomas. The Key Skills Qualification has been widely recognised as a failure. Most serious of all, the *Curriculum 2000* reforms suddenly revealed a 14-19 phase of education dominated by year-on-year examinations and an awarding system that has become unstable and unsustainable (Hodgson and Spours 2003a).

A more radical climate for reform

Interestingly, these problems have not diminished the desire for curriculum and qualifications reform but have, instead, radicalised both the education profession and the Government. Ministers, therefore, find themselves with a once-in-a-generation opportunity fundamentally to reform the English 14-19 education system. But the case for reform has to go further than putting right the wrongs of *Curriculum 2000*. Arguably, there are more pressing problems. The GCSE is looking tired – it succeeds in alienating those who by 16 will not achieve the higher grades, but it also fails to foster independent learning skills in those who do make the threshold. Vocational qualifications are in a mess after nearly 20 years of ill-considered experimentation – there are too many different types of qualifications, many of which are not widely recognised, and some which are not really vocational. What this means is that those who suffer most in the current system are not the most able, although they do complain that learning has become too mechanical, but young people of average and below average ability. Our view, therefore, is that a baccalaureate system for students aged 14 and over should not only produce a better curriculum for those taking GCSEs and A Levels, but should also be designed to meet the needs of all learners in this age group.

While there may be a consensus that curriculum and qualifications reform is required for the 14-19 phase, an agreement around the principles and architecture of a new system still needs to be forged. In this chapter, we make the case for a genuinely inclusive and unified English Baccalaureate system from 14-plus. By coining the phrase 'genuinely inclusive' we refer to the capacity of a 14-plus curriculum and qualifications system to be motivating and accessible to low achievers as well as challenging and demanding of high flyers. The goal is a '100 per cent system' in which all learners can achieve to their full potential in lifelong learning.

Options for reform – division and elitism or unification and inclusion?

While the idea of creating a fully-inclusive and unified 14-plus curriculum and qualifications system is rapidly becoming mainstream thinking (Working Group on 14-19 Reform 2003), not everyone agrees with this goal or thinks that it is possible. However, our research on *Curriculum 2000* suggests that it is only a very small proportion of teachers and learners who would like to see the restoration of the old A-level system. (Savory *et al.* 2001, Spours *et al.* 2002, Hodgson and Spours 2003b). Quite simply, there is little appetite within the education profession, employer groups or the universities to turn back the clock. That is not to say, however, that the old A-level system was wholly bad, far from it. Some positive aspects of the old A-levels, particularly more 'fluid' approaches to teaching and learning and reading around a subject, have to be more actively built into a future system than has been the case with *Curriculum 2000.* Similarly, there are strong vocational traditions on which we need to build. Grouped awards, such as those still offered by BTEC and City and Guilds, were designed to provide 'rich' learning programmes comprising general education, vocational knowledge and occupationally-specific skills. Any future 14-plus curriculum and qualifications system will need to harness the best of these strong traditions in order to ensure coherent learning programmes for all learners.

A far more serious challenge to an inclusive and unified curriculum and qualifications system comes from proposals to create an elitist and divided baccalaureate approach. While these ideas have yet to coalesce in a significant way, it is hard to imagine that they will not rear their head. Basically, those who want to see improved programmes of

study, but not a fully inclusive system, may argue for a curriculum and qualifications approach which is built upon the offer of the International Baccalaureate (IB) for 'academic' learners and BTEC-style diplomas for 'vocational' learners' (see other chapters in this volume). Both these awards, if offered to more learners than at present, would in many cases improve their experience of learning. Both awards have a proud history. They are, however, not in themselves the basis of a national curriculum and qualifications system from 14-plus. The reasons are obvious. The IB exists at advanced level only, is generalist and highly prescriptive and, as such, could only be taken a minority of learners. BTEC awards can play a very important role in providing progression routes in further education and in modern apprenticeships, but they assume that learners have made clear early vocational choices. Our research suggests that while some learners are quite happy to do this, the majority want to keep their options open for longer (Hodgson and Spours 2003 forthcoming). In our view, the positive aspects of both these awards have a vital role to play in a single and inclusive system which is what we now seek to describe.

Five principles for the design of an English Baccalaureate System

If a unified and inclusive curriculum and qualifications system is to build on the strengths of what we have and to respond to the long-standing or new system weaknesses outlined above, it will need to be founded on a number of key principles and design features.

1. Promoting inclusion through a single system

One of the major criticisms of baccalaureates that have been voiced in England has been that these awards cater for a minority of 'academic' learners. However, there are some baccalaureates or leaving certificates, for example in Sweden and France, which do include both general and vocational education at advanced level. In the English context, which has traditionally been so divided and elitist, we believe that we have to go even further than the French and the Swedes. A concept of inclusion has to be built into the whole architecture of the English Baccalaureate system. As Figure 1 below demonstrates, the proposed system is inclusive in two major ways. It offers diplomas at

four levels (Entry to Advanced) to provide a ladder of progression for all learners 14-19 and a means of accrediting study at different levels and different ages. It also seeks to include all types of learning from broad academic and applied study (which we term general) to specialist study of different types - domain (groupings of academic subjects, for example humanities), vocational (broad areas of vocational study such as Engineering) and occupational (study and experience related to a specific occupation, for example electrical installation). In this sense, the proposed inclusiveness of the English Baccalaureate approach is based upon the premise that every learner, whatever their ability or orientation, has a place – hence the concept of a 100 per cent system.

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2. Developing coherent learning programmes 14-19

We suggest that it will be important to lay out a framework of requirements and entitlements for each of the four levels of diploma within an English Baccalaureate system (Entry, Foundation, Intermediate and Advanced) to secure coherent learning programmes for all 14-19 learners for the first time in the English education and training system. The curriculum framework accredited by the diplomas provides a means of securing both breadth and depth of achievement. For each level of diploma, curriculum demands would be specified in the form of a common core of learning and options for specialisation and breadth. The English Baccalaureate diplomas would not be based upon a 'one size fits all' model, but would attempt to combine common learning with a high degree of customisation and personal choice – a strong feature of the English system which deserves to be built upon. The diplomas also need to be flexible enough to be able to respond to future learning needs as the system evolves. Such a system of diplomas would, therefore, represent a compromise between the traditional free-choice nature of A Levels and the more prescriptive IB.

As we have outlined above, we propose that there would be four types of diploma within this unified system – General, Specialist 1 (domain-based), Specialist 2 (broad vocational) and Specialist 3 (occupational). Diplomas would be awarded at four levels – Entry, Foundation, Intermediate and Advanced but Specialist Diplomas would only be offered post-16 and at Foundation, Intermediate and Advanced Level on the grounds that learners need to keep their options open for as long as possible. All diplomas would contain elements of study at more than one level (like the IB) in order to ensure access, breadth and depth.

In addition, all diplomas would have a prescribed core of learning, comprising three components flexibly applied to all levels of diploma. First, they would contain a specialist research study related to the learner's programme as a whole; second, there would be underpinning taught elements (at advanced level, this could be critical thinking or theory of knowledge) and, third, wider activities and experiences (like the. Duke of Edinburgh Award, sport, drama and music). The core would need to be supported by individual guidance, mentoring and supervision.

3. Creating a ladder of progression

While there would be design principles based on the concept of breadth, depth and common learning, which would be germane to all the diplomas, the design and requirements at each level of diploma would reflect its different purposes. The Entry Level Diploma would be the first level in the English Baccalaureate awarding structure at 14-plus. It would provide basic, practical and life skills alongside project work to motivate learners, including those with special learning needs. The role of the Foundation and Intermediate Level Diplomas would be to mark a stage of development for the majority of learners and an exit qualification for a minority. These lower level diplomas would be designed primarily to motivate learners to progress to the next stage of education, although for some they would be used as the basis of preparation for participation in the workplace. The intention would be to provide a balance of breadth and specialist study, to create the space for learning skill development and practical activities, to reduce the examinations burden associated with GCSEs and to promote progression and genuine employability. The main function of the Advanced Level Diplomas would be to provide broad programmes of study with enough specialisation to prepare young people for higher education or for high-skilled employment.

4. Reducing the assessment burden and securing standards

A major challenge for any new system would be to reduce the assessment burden without compromising standards. The existence of the diploma as an overall qualification would remove the need for all individual components within it to be externally assessed. Standards would be secured in a number of ways. First, as now, there would need to be external assessment of some components, but not all. Second, there could be moderation and internal assessment of other areas of learning, such as the proposed specialist research study in the Core. Third, there could be an institutionally-derived grade representing the overall performance of the learner over time for assessing some components of the diploma. This three-fold approach to assessment suggests that the concept of standards is found not simply in the individual

components of the award, but is ultimately secured through the diploma package as a whole and the requirement to complete all its aspects. At the same time, when making these demands, it will be important to employ a wide range of assessment tools to ensure validity, to recognise all types of learning and to promote skill development. In addition, what a diploma also offers is the opportunity to stretch the most able and reward excellence through the possible award of an overall distinction grade.

5. Involving stake-holders

The use of the title 'diploma' for all post-14 awards could be seen as a form of qualifications rationalisation and would provide clarity for and recognition by end-users. The diplomas within an English Baccalaureate system could provide a single set of high-trust qualifications outcomes around which the various stakeholders could collaborate. It is important to stress that these new awards would, like the IB, comprise specifically designed credit-bearing units and would not simply be a cluster of existing qualifications contained within an overarching certificate. Creating these new awards would involve re-engineering current qualifications blocks and designing new ones.

Moreover, the development of this system would provide end-users with a concrete and simple point of involvement in the curriculum and qualifications reform process. While employers and higher education providers should not dictate what is taught and learned at the previous stage, they obviously do have a stake in the outcomes of upper secondary education, not least because they need to build upon it. As a matter of principle, they should, therefore, be involved in its design. Moreover, their involvement would help to secure clear progression pathways for learners taking the new diploma awards.

Taking the reform forward

One of the most important principles underpinning the proposed system is the need for an open, consensual and carefully-planned reform process. Such a process would involve the identification of a clear future goal and milestones towards its attainment. One of the major lessons to be learned from the *Curriculum 2000* reforms was how complex it is to implement changes to the qualifications system and how important it is to involve teachers, learners and other key stakeholders actively in this process. It will be vital to have a clearly articulated vision of the future so that teachers, learners and end-users can see what they are working towards, what changes will be necessary and what steps they will need to take to make this vision a reality. From this perspective, which we term 'strategic gradualism' (Hodgson and Spours 2003a), there appear to be six major milestones in the transition from the current curriculum and qualifications system to our proposed new system.

First, there will need to be an extended period of open and inclusive debate about the end-goal of reform; the principles and design of the new system and steps and stages to its attainment. Such a debate will not only cement the professional consensus for reform, but will also raise awareness more widely among stakeholders about the new system and its implications. We see the work of the Tomlinson 14-19 Working Group as a necessary first step in this direction (Working Group on 14-19 Reform 2003).

Second, the Government will need to commit itself in its next election manifesto to the building of an English Baccalaureate system in a third term of Office. It will also need to ensure that this reform is part of an integrated approach to education policy as a whole. This action would be taken by all major stakeholders as a signal of genuine political will for change and the desire for a lasting settlement, capable of achieving cross-party support.

Third, it will be necessary to set in train a process for designing the architecture of the new system which involves all major stakeholders so that they see the emerging system as 'their reform'. In addition, it will be important that planned adjustments to the current qualifications system are undertaken with the new end-goal in mind.

Fourth, it will be important to establish a programme of piloting for the new diplomas

involving the testing of new components; re-engineered qualifications and whole programmes of study. In this respect, it is important to emphasise that the building of an English Baccalaureate system is not seen as a top-down imposition, but as a national framework harnessing the best of local experimentation and innovation.

Fifth, no fundamental reform of this type could take place without consideration of key levers and drivers, as well as wider contextual and shaping factors in the education and training system. It will, therefore, be necessary to ensure that factors such as teacher recruitment, training and professional development, performance tables, funding arrangements and planning mechanisms, are also reformed to support the establishment of the new system.

Finally, there will be a need to design a formative evaluation framework to underpin and inform the reform process and to facilitate a virtuous cycle of 'policy learning'.

Even with a ten-year reform programme, we do not underestimate the transformation that such a process will entail. We believe that a process of strategic gradualism can bring steady change without upheaval. The enduring message from *Curriculum 2000* is that piecemeal reform with no clear future direction has the potential to cause the greatest turbulence of all to the education system, because of the way in which it produces unpredictable complexity and lack of transparency. It's time we stopped harking back to qualifications designed for a small elite in the 1950s, moved beyond A Levels and focused instead on creating a modernised and inclusive curriculum and qualifications system for all 14-19 year olds in the future.

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