

The University of Cambridge's Response to the Interim Report of the Working Group on 14-19 Reform (Tomlinson Report), May 2004

The Interim Report can be viewed/downloaded from the Working Group on 14-19 Reform website (<http://www.14-19reform.gov.uk>)

Introduction

We welcome the proposals presented in this interim report, which we believe offer the possibility of preparing students better for university study, of reducing the burden of assessment and of introducing clearer differentiation between high achieving students. Cambridge has always valued breadth in a student's education, as well as high-level specialist skills, and we welcome the fact that the proposed framework embraces both these ideals.

We strongly believe that all young people should be able to follow high-quality learning programmes, which give them access to specialist learning and the skills needed to realise their ambitions. We support any developments that would create a single coherent phase of learning, with clearly defined progression routes and without assessment procedures that fragment learning.

In addition to expressing this general support for the proposals, we would like to emphasise the following points:

Accessibility

While welcoming these proposals, we would, however, caution that our support is predicated on the assumption that the new opportunities for learners envisaged are genuinely accessible to all, not merely to those fortunate enough to attend schools and colleges currently able to resource their delivery. It is vital that any changes to the 14-19 curriculum are properly funded to ensure that this fundamental principle of equality of access for those in all schools and colleges is achieved.

Coherent Programmes

We welcome the proposal to introduce a range of specialised diplomas to provide clear educational pathways for learners, and we would, where appropriate, be pleased to assist in the task of designing these programmes.

We also welcome the declared intention to develop breadth within programmes through appropriate complementary learning, so that learners acquire a continuum of knowledge and skills rather than dispersed islands of these.

We are pleased to hear that the proposed reforms will increase the time available for subject study within the learner's specialisation, thus allowing a broader and deeper engagement with subjects than is possible within the present system.

The proposed reforms offer the opportunity substantially to reduce the confusing diversity of qualifications currently available to learners. Diversity on educational grounds is to be welcomed. Diversity introduced primarily to attract business to the awarding body concerned is not. It would ease the transition from secondary to higher education considerably if the present heterogeneity in the knowledge and skills of students who have notionally achieved the same qualifications could be reduced.

Stretching the Most Able

We strongly support proposals to ensure that the programmes within the Advanced Diploma stretch and challenge the country's most able students. In our view, if this is to be achieved, it is essential that Advanced Diploma programmes offer learners the opportunity to take on academic challenges similar to those presented by Advanced Extension Awards (AEAs) or STEP Mathematics papers. This would not only stretch our most able students while still at school and college, but also ease their transition from secondary to higher education. This stretching could be achieved by retaining free-standing qualifications like AEAs within the new diploma framework, but, given concerns about the excessive burden of assessment faced by learners, it might be preferable to incorporate this element of challenge within A2 examinations (or their successors).

We also welcome the suggestion that the learners may obtain access to Level 4 provision at school or college, and would be most interested in discussing how such provision might in practice be provided. However, if Level 4 provision is to be introduced, the fundamental principle of equality of access must still apply.

Extended Projects

We welcome the proposal to include an extended project at Level 3 as part of the core of the Advanced Diploma, and the fact that Critical Thinking will be one of the skills explicitly developed as part of the project. This will help to develop skills and an approach to learning that will, again, ease the transition from secondary to higher education.

Higher education institutions, including Cambridge, have considerable experience in the delivery and assessment of extended projects, and we would be pleased to offer whatever help we can in the development of this part of the proposed new 14-19 curriculum.

If the extended project is to assist universities in selection for admission, and in particular provide a basis for submitted written work to be assessed by universities or a subject for discussion at interview, then, given the present UCAS timetable, students would need to complete their project in the first term of Year 13.

Recording and Grading Achievement

We welcome the suggestion that an extended grading range be introduced for those Advanced level components in which detailed differentiation is appropriate and relevant. This will undoubtedly help selective universities choose fairly between the increasing numbers of well-qualified students applying for admission.

We also welcome the proposal that transcripts be introduced giving full details of learner's programmes and their achievements. The more information they have, the happier Cambridge Admissions Tutors are!

To give a full picture of each learner's knowledge, skills and achievements it is desirable that the transcript include details of results achieved in the units that make up diploma components (e.g. AS module scores) in addition to the overall grade on that component. Information placing a learner's achievements in the context of those of their cohort, for instance percentile information, which is commonly provided on educational transcripts issued in other countries, would also be welcome. Such fine-grained information would, again, assist universities in the difficult task of choosing fairly between well-qualified applicants for admission.

We have no strong views about the desirability of grading the overall diploma, other than expressing the hope that the basis of any overall grading be the quality rather than the quantity of a learner's achievements. Given the inherent difficulty, indeed probable

impossibility, of devising an equitable, fine-grained overall grading system, it is unlikely that the overall grading will assist selective universities in differentiating between students, but we recognise that an overall grading may be wanted by other stakeholders.

Assessment Burden

We welcome the proposals to reduce the burden of assessment on learners, thus freeing up time for deeper engagement with subjects of study. A move to reduce the number of modular assessments associated with diploma components is also to be welcomed, because this will naturally encourage a more holistic and synoptic approach to the subject. We strongly support the recommendation of the 2002 Tomlinson Inquiry (repeated in this report) that AS and A2 be decoupled, creating two free-standing qualifications, as this will, at a stroke, remove a feature of the current system that encourages additional, and in some cases excessive, examination taking. We would hope that this simple change could be introduced as soon as practicable.

Returning Learners

We welcome the explicit consideration given in the report's recommendations of the needs of returning learners, and are encouraged by the prospect of a new curriculum that should make it easier for those above school-leaving age to re-engage with the educational system.

Primary-Secondary Transition

Although as an institution our primary concern is, of course, with the impact of this report's recommendations on the transition from secondary to higher education, as members of the general public and, in many instances, parents, we are collectively also concerned about the impact of this report's recommendations on the transition from primary to secondary education. There is strong evidence that many of the problems that this report seeks to address have their roots in the first two years of secondary education, which for many young learners seem to be little more than an exercise in treading water. The many welcome changes proposed for the 14-19 curriculum, on which we have commented above, will produce only limited benefits if the enthusiasm for education and learning which students have on leaving primary school is not maintained and encouraged when they start their secondary schooling.