

# **The University of Cambridge's Response to the Consultation on the Principles for Reform of 14-19 Learning Programmes and Qualifications (Tomlinson Report), October 2003**

## **Question 1**

**Do you broadly agree or disagree with these criteria in paragraph 9 for a reformed 14-19 framework?**

Strongly agree - We strongly agree that all young people should be enabled to follow high-quality learning programmes, which give them access to specialist learning and skills needed for progression to university. A single coherent phase of learning 14-19, with clearly defined progression routes would be welcomed. General skills, including essay writing, critical thinking and the ability to argue logically should be integrated into all learning programmes from much earlier in the learner's school/college life than the current Key Skills. They should not be taught separately but should be an integral part of each subject of the learner's programme.

Wide recognition and acceptance of the four levels nationally is essential. Differentiating achievement in ways that are clear, credible and relevant is vital. We would like to see the reforms go further than just maintaining the levels of challenge associated with the current system of GCE A Levels. A difficulty in selecting the best applicants to Cambridge is that the majority of applicants are predicted or already have at least three A grades at A Level. There is insufficient differentiation at this level and a variety of additional methods, such as tests, have had to be developed and are still being developed to help us select from among the group achieving top grades. Nor is this just a matter of university selection. It is in its own right desirable that the ablest students are stretched and challenged fully in mainstream education - this is a matter of personal fulfilment and intellectual stimulation. For these reasons it is imperative that the best students be stretched further at the highest level, and we would welcome the inclusion of the current Advanced Extension Awards (AEAs), well-established and excellent examinations, as an integral part of the advanced diploma.

## **Question 2**

**Do you broadly agree or disagree with the priority objectives we have identified in Section C for reform of 14-19 learning programmes?**

Strongly agree - We agree that high-quality, high-status programmes that are well valued and respected are a priority. They need to have the flexibility to allow high academic achievers to be stretched further, to motivate and excite them to explore the subjects they study in great depth and with intellectual rigour. The Admissions Forum strongly agrees that improved transparency and the simplicity of the structure for 14-19 courses and qualifications is essential. Students entering HE should have the relevant, key knowledge specific to their core subject. The current variety of specifications of qualifications makes it difficult to run first-year university courses in some subjects, as incoming students now have such different sorts and levels of knowledge, even where they have sat the same or similar A levels.

That qualifications might have clear and declared roles as suitable routes to particular higher education courses would be welcomed as making options more transparent to learners and their advisers. As highlighted in paragraph 28, we too are deeply concerned about many applicants' lack of language, numeracy and personal skills, which inhibits their ability to progress and succeed. We currently combat this through our admissions system, where interviewing applicants within the Colleges helps to ensure that we select the best applicants, whatever their background, and allows us to choose students who can demonstrate they have the generic skills as well academic achievement and potential we seek.

### **Question 3**

#### **Do you broadly agree or disagree with the priority objectives we have identified in Section D for reform of 14-19 assessment arrangements?**

Strongly agree - We strongly agree with the statement that assessment needs to be fit for purpose, and employ a variety of flexible methods. We would welcome more trust in, and recognition of, the value of the teacher's role in assessment and agree that their professional judgement in this area has been undervalued. We have learnt of the proposals by the Secondary Heads Association for Chartered Examiners in schools and colleges. While we have not seen the detail of these proposals, still being developed, we would support the idea in principle, as it would recognise the value of teachers as assessors while maintaining robustness. A system of external scrutiny analogous to the External Examiners system used within HE to maintain standards and ensure the integrity of internal assessment procedures may well have a useful role to play in this context.

We agree that teachers are overburdened by assessments and learners are over-examined. The time taken up preparing coursework in particular, and also for examinations, should be reduced to enable more time to be devoted to teaching and learning. We would be especially pleased to see the former reduced, both because of the pressure on teachers it would relieve, and because of rising concerns across education about the dangers of plagiarism or unacceptable levels of assistance from outside school.

Assessment arrangements for students wishing to progress to HE should take cognisance of the types and methods of study that the learner will experience when they progress to university, which include research reports, essays, dissertations, oral presentations, written examinations, laboratory reports, e-assessment, group and individual assessment etc.

Whatever methods of assessment are used they must be fair and consistent; validity and credibility must be demonstrated if the processes and outcome of assessment are to be widely recognised and accepted.

### **Question 4**

#### **Do you broadly agree or disagree with the priority objectives we have identified in Section E for reform of 14-19 qualifications framework?**

Agree - While acknowledging that recognition of different types of learning is important, at the University of Cambridge a framework of qualifications that stretches the performance of learners, motivates them to achieve academically, with the ability and potential to continue to develop at University, is key to the principal aims of our admissions system. These are to admit students of the highest intellectual potential and capacity to succeed and flourish on our courses, irrespective of social, racial, religious and (for UK/EU students) financial considerations. The University wants to raise aspirations and to encourage applications from groups that are, at present, under-represented in Cambridge; to ensure that each applicant is fairly and individually assessed, without partiality or bias, in accordance with our policy on Equal Opportunities, and to ensure that an applicant's chance of admission to Cambridge does not depend on choice of College.

We support measures that motivate and encourage progress and acknowledge that, if the proposed changes are accepted, in the future applicants to the University may have returned to complete their diploma post-19 after a period away from study. The University has considerable expertise in assessing and supporting this kind of applicant through the four Colleges for mature students. We would wish to see the continuation of public academic qualifications that differentiate between levels of achievement as one of the means contributing towards the selection of our students, and stress the need for this differentiation among the top students to be more transparent. With so many of the ablest students

achieving A grades at A level, these formal qualifications are only one element in a whole range of information that is considered when assessing applicants for a place.

There is strong support for a qualifications system that delivers a wider range and variety of skills and knowledge as an integral element of any qualification package. If the demise of separate Key Skills qualifications led to more teaching and learning time in the students' main subjects being available, this would be welcomed.

As evidenced by its Matriculation Requirements, the University of Cambridge has always valued breadth in a student's education, as well as high level specialist skills. In the new framework proposed we can foresee the successful completion of the Diploma, at an appropriate level, replacing our currently defined Matriculation Requirements.

Simplifying and clarifying the options available post 14 and the routes into HE through a transparent qualifications framework is strongly supported. Subjects at university level differ considerably in content and styles of teaching and learning. It is vital that this is clear to applicants to ensure that students are progressing to the type of degree programme that they are best suited to.

### **Question 5**

**Do you agree or disagree that the approach outlined in paragraph 46 covers the strands of learning which should be present in all 14-19 programmes?**

Agree - We agree with the need for a general core of skills, the need for specialist learning and the recognition of supplementary learning, but suggest these terms and their definitions may need changing and expanding to give more clarity as to the differences between them and what they are intending to achieve. The strands of learning outlined are all currently considered, together with interview and test results, by Admissions Tutors when making decisions.

### **Question 6**

**Do you agree or disagree that the emphasis on specialist learning should generally increase as learners move towards the end of 14-19 phases (paragraph 49)?**

Strongly agree - We would strongly agree with this proposal to move from a broad preparatory programme to one which, for those students who may be thinking about HE entry, allows the study of subjects suitable for their particular strengths and/or preferences. Rigorous subject-specific advanced learning, as part of a prescribed programme incorporating the general and supplementary learning, would be welcomed for entry to HE.

### **Question 7**

**Do you agree or disagree that earlier; more effective delivery of generic skills should be a high priority within a reformed 14-19 framework (paragraphs 50-51)?**

Strongly agree - There is strong support from members of the Admissions Forum for the suggestion that generic skills should be developed in earlier years than post-16, allowing more teaching and learning of subject-based material in the later part of a post-14 programme than is currently the case. However, we recognise that learners develop at different paces and that some generic skills may need to be developed further post-16 by some learners.

### **Question 8a**

**Do you agree or disagree with a framework of diplomas which recognises whole programmes within a single qualification?**

Agree - We would welcome a framework of diplomas, which we would want to see having high status and national recognition and acceptance. We would be particularly interested in the advanced diploma for entry to the University of Cambridge but recognise that different types and levels of diplomas for those entering vocational education or employment may also be needed.

Differentiation between the performance of individual learners, both at the level of the overall award and in individual specialist components is crucial for progression to the University of Cambridge. As we stated in our comments on Q1 there is currently insufficient differentiation at the highest level, as such a large proportion of students achieve grade A at A level. We would want the best students stretched further, and would welcome the inclusion of Advanced Extension Awards (AEAs) as an integral part of the advanced diploma.

We would endorse the need for the whole programme qualification to be recognised; we would anticipate the overall advanced diploma as meeting our general Matriculation Requirements. If this was graded overall, for instance, as pass, merit or distinction, this would be acceptable to us provided that we also had more detailed information on the individual components making up the diploma. This could be provided, perhaps electronically, in the form of a transcript or record of the individual scores or marks comprising the diploma. Assuming we are not by then in a Post Qualification Application regime, we would need to be able to set our conditional offers based both on attainment of the complete diploma (at an appropriate level) and on attainment in some of the individual specialist components contributing to the diploma (A levels and AEAs if existing qualifications are retained).

**Question 8b**

**Do you agree or disagree that the framework should replace the existing qualifications taken by young people?**

Agree - While many of us feel Curriculum 2000 has not worked as intended, if a new framework is to be introduced as a way forward post-14, we agree that consideration should be given to replacing existing qualifications. More details are still needed.

However, if existing qualifications do form part of the diploma, we would want to see the AEA and the proposed extended essay or research project included as an integral part of the level 3 advanced diploma to stretch the most able. If the AEA is to be more widely taken and used for progression to HE, it must be an integral part of the qualification. If it is not integral to the diploma, it is unlikely to receive funding and it will not be seen as a natural requirement for the most able to progress to universities seeking students with high academic achievement and potential.

**Question 8c**

**Do you agree or disagree with a required balance of specialist, general and supplementary learning?**

Strongly agree - The balance between these forms of learning will be vital when considering whether or not the advanced diploma is acceptable for entry to HE.

**Question 8d**

**Do you agree or disagree with awards at all levels from entry level to level 3?**

Strongly agree - We would support awards at all levels.

## **Question 8e**

**Do you agree or disagree with differentiation of performance in individual components of the diploma to help inform selection processes?**

Strongly agree - This is crucial in assessing students' academic achievements to date and would form an important part of our assessment of an applicant's potential to succeed at Cambridge. An overall grade derived from the grades of the individual components, similar to that used by the International Baccalaureate, could also be used. A transcript which gave the overall grade, individual component grades and the ability to look at the marks contributing to those grades would be extremely useful to us in the selection of students.

We would support an advanced diploma that included learning at least as demanding in terms of volume and depth as the GCE A level programmes students currently follow. The vast majority of those to whom we make offers have good levels of generic skills. What we would like to see is a qualification that stretches the most able more. This stretching should derive from the study of subjects in more depth, rather than simply the study of more subjects. In the currency of the existing qualifications system, we would prefer to see students studying three subjects at A level and taking two AEAs, rather than taking five subjects at A level.

We would want assurance that there is a synoptic test in the individual components and that these would have to be passed in order to be awarded the overall diploma, even where the programme the learner is studying may be taken over a period longer than two years.

## **Question 9**

**Do you agree or disagree with our view that a framework of diplomas should offer learners an extended range of styles and types of learning, settings and experience as well as options for additional study (paragraphs 57-59)?**

Agree - The Admissions Forum would support the introduction of an extended research project or similar component which would draw together material from more than one subject area, similar to the extended essay that is a required part of the International Baccalaureate. We already welcome the International Baccalaureate as an entry qualification for all our courses, recognising the breadth and depth it offers.

The Admissions Forum would strongly support the integration into advanced diplomas of the higher levels of intellectual demand associated with AEAs. This would ensure their take-up as part of the requirement to achieve the overall diploma, and thus they would be part of the overall achievements of applicants being considered for admission to HEIs.

Breadth, depth, enrichment and other wider activities are all considered when selecting students for higher education, and if this could be recognised in a formal way, it would enhance transparency within the admissions process. These are also important aspects of any young person's education, and we would not want to see them overshadowed or even excluded by over-emphasis on the acquisition of advanced subject-specific knowledge and skills.

## **Question 10**

**Do you agree or disagree with our view of the opportunities offered by a system of programme-level diplomas for more varied styles and volumes of assessment?**

Strongly agree - Reducing the assessment burden especially in terms of repetitive coursework assignments, whilst ensuring that learners develop and use the underlying generic skills they require, would free up more time for teaching, learning and wider

exploration in the subject-based components. This would, in our view, be a positive way forward.

This increased teaching time would give the opportunity for more innovation in teaching, a feature that has largely been lost under Curriculum 2000 due to the large assessment burden. More co-operation and partnerships between schools and colleges post 14 would hopefully cut out some of the time wasted between the end of GCSEs and the student starting a post 16 course at the same or at another institution. There would need to be trust and credibility to assure accountability within the partnership.

## **Question 11**

**How much importance do you attach to each of the factors listed in paragraphs (63 and 64)?**

**11a Providing clear milestones during the 14-19 phase?**

A lot

**11b Giving young people as much choice as possible over the content and breadth of their learning?**

Some

**11c Certifying the achievements of those who move between institutions during their 14/19 learning?**

A lot

**11d Certifying the achievements of those who leave learning before 18/19?**

A lot

**11e Reducing the impact of the potential break-point at 16?**

A lot

**11f Ensuring balanced programmes of general, specialist and supplementary learning?**

A lot

**11g Ensuring status and currency for the diploma?**

A lot

**11h More flexible, manageable assessment?**

A lot

11a This is with the proviso that these milestones do not add to the burden of assessment but are diagnostic tools to assist both the learners and those advising them in making their choices

11b We agree that choice cannot be wholly unfettered and that to achieve breadth as well as depth some subjects that learners would not normally choose to study may need to be taken. Learners will need a programme that suits their needs and is coherent. Combinations within the diplomas will need rules and supplementary study to support the learner's main subject choices could form part of an advanced diploma being studied with the aim of entering HE. Rules will be needed to define how the levels can be achieved and to ensure the learning is stretching but manageable.

11e A transcript showing subjects studied and to what level and the learner's achievement in those subjects would be helpful to those who leave before completion of the diploma. If the learner wishes to re-enter education later in life, it would then be possible to add to the achievement already gained. Consideration may need to be given as to whether or not some fixed life-span for the earlier achievement is needed.

11f See also 11c

11g If the overall diploma is to be widely recognised it needs value and currency. Assessment and certification of individual components should not detract from this, but their grades/marks too need to be transparent.

11h We would be pleased to see less external assessment to allow greater breadth and enrichment within the learning programme. Recognition of the value of teachers and tutors in the assessment process is important. Teachers' time could be used more effectively to make internal assessments, rather than as present spent in the checking of coursework requirements for external assessment etc.

## **Question 12**

### **Further comments**

We welcome this opportunity to express our views as higher education Admissions Tutors on these proposals for reform of the 14-19 learning programmes and qualifications, as contributing to the on-going wider debate on progression to HE and fair admissions. We would like to thank Mike Tomlinson for the opportunity for the Admissions Forum to meet with him on 1 October 2003 to discuss the working party's proposals, we would welcome the opportunity for further discussions in the future.

The views expressed are those of the majority of the members of the Admissions Forum. Our Admissions Forum has representatives from all 29 Cambridge Colleges that accept undergraduate students. We agree with the working party that whatever reforms are introduced, balance and the need to keep the learning programmes and assessment transparent and easy to understand are vital, but that to achieve this will be challenging.