

Qualifications for 14 – 16 year olds and Performance tables

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Foreword by Professor Alison Wolf

For young people today, education at Key Stage 4 is more critical than ever before. In a world of shrinking youth employment, achievement at this age has a dramatic impact on the pathways open to them in the future. Pupils need to acquire the broad skills which will enable them to progress in the short term, and thrive over a lifetime of worldwide economic change, and frequent individual changes of job and occupation. They also need to be able to signal their achievements clearly to gatekeepers, within and outside the educational system.

The government therefore needs to give schools every incentive possible to offer the programmes and qualifications which will achieve this end. In recent years we have, instead, promoted accountability measures which have the opposite result. When schools are under enormous pressure to pile up league table points, and when any qualification under the English sun can contribute these, the pernicious effects are obvious. League table points, rather than pupils' best interests, become critical to decision-making.

That is why the very first recommendation of my review of vocational education was:

The DfE should distinguish clearly between those qualifications, both vocational and academic, which can contribute to performance indicators at Key Stage 4, and those which cannot. The decision criteria should be explicit and public. They will include considerations of depth and breadth (including consultation with/endorsement by relevant outside bodies), but also assessment and verification arrangements which ensure that national standards are applied to all candidates.

I am delighted that the government accepted my Review's proposals, and this recommendation in particular. As part of its implementation process, it is now proposing to identify a set of high quality vocational qualifications that will be included in league tables, and is publishing criteria that can be used to identify such qualifications now and in the future. Qualifications on this list need to offer broad progression, be stretching, standardised, and fit easily into a typical pupil's programme, and into a school's overall timetable. The list needs to be quite short, because if qualifications are not understood by a wide range of gatekeepers, they will not, in practice, be given any weight, no matter what the regulations promise.

The government's proposals will, I believe, meet these objectives. The list of qualifications which will emerge is not intended to encompass everything that Key Stage 4 pupils are ever offered: on the contrary. Around a well recognised core, I would hope that English schools will continue to offer a wide range of different options and subjects. But in future, these should be offered because they are right for a pupil, and not as a consequence of misconceived accountability measures.

Professor Alison Wolf

July 2011

Policy Paper for Consultation – Government Proposals for Qualifications for 14 to 16 year old and Performance Tables

Introduction

Professor Wolf's Review of Vocational Education published in March 2011 sets out the case for change. The number of vocational qualifications taken in schools up to age 16 has grown dramatically in recent years - from 15,000 in 2004 to 575,000 in 2010. In her report, Professor Wolf describes how this rapid growth was less about the inherent worth of these qualifications and more about the value they have been given in performance tables. Some of these qualifications are valued by employers and further education. However, too many do not offer the broad progression opportunities and skills that properly prepare young people for further learning and the modern world of work.

The Government response to the Wolf Review, published in May 2011, accepted all of Professor Wolf's recommendations. In relation to the recommendation quoted in Professor Wolf's foreword, the Government committed to reform school performance tables by breaking free from the existing equivalency-based system.

At present, any qualification taught in a school to *14 to 16 year olds* is counted in Key Stage 4 performance tables. All of these qualifications have been given a value based on their size compared with GCSEs. We are proposing to replace the current system with the one set out below.

Summary of key proposed changes

Professor Wolf's research shows that every other country in Europe maintains a strong academic core of study until age 16. We believe that it is in the interests of the majority of students to study an academic core (Professor Wolf supports a proportion of approximately 80% of the timetable) with up to 20% comprising courses leading to high quality vocational qualifications.

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 the performance tables in future.

As part of our commitment to transparency we will also publish all the information the Department holds on schools in a single place and in a way that is accessible to all.

The current system gives qualifications a value in the Key Stage 4 tables based on an estimate of their size compared with GCSEs. There is clear evidence in Professor Wolf's report that this system creates perverse incentives to seek qualifications that attract heavy weighting for the tables, but in fact can be taught in less time than the weighting implies.

We will reform the system by treating one qualification as "one" in the tables. We will replace existing headline performance indicators with new measures in the future that recognise achievement in a new, shorter list of preferred qualifications. Only qualifications that are at least the size of a GCSE will be counted in the tables in the future.

What are the characteristics of qualifications that will feature in the headline Key Stage 4 Performance Tables in the future?

In future, we propose that all those qualifications that are suitable for 14-16 year olds are approved for use in schools (that is they are on the list of qualifications approved for public funding known as “Section 96”). This is important as teachers must be able to use their professional judgement to consider which qualifications might be of benefit to some young people. But we only intend to incentivise teaching of a subset of those qualifications at Level 1 and Level 2: those which are demonstrably of high quality and support broad progression will feature in the Key Stage 4 performance tables in the future.

We will have a transparent way of determining the list of qualifications which will be recognised in tables. Annex A provides a flow diagram demonstrating how the process of selecting the preferred qualifications that will count in the tables will work.

All full course GCSEs, AS Levels, and existing and approved Level 1/Level 2 certificates regulated by Ofqual (commonly known as ‘iGCSEs’) will continue to be included in performance measures. All other qualifications will have to meet the following characteristics in order to count in the tables:

1. Good progression

We do not think that young people should specialise too early in one area. 14-16 year olds should be taking qualifications that provide the foundation for them to progress to a broad range of qualifications post-16, rather than qualifications that limit their options to one or two occupational areas.

In order to assess progression, we will look at progression rates from individual qualifications to level 3 qualifications (or level 2 where appropriate) from existing statistics. Where appropriate we will also examine individual qualifications to check that they are not too specialised in focus and that they offer good progression routes post-16.

We will include Level 1 qualifications in the tables where there is clear progression to Level 2 qualifications.

2. Appropriate size

The qualifications that young people study hard for must be well understood and have ‘currency’ with further education and employers. We want to avoid young people amassing lots of small qualifications that are not valued by schools, colleges and employers and do not provide a sound basis to enable them to progress to a range of qualifications post-16. We want the qualifications that appear in Key Stage 4 performance tables to be of a reasonable size. Therefore, in future, only those qualifications that are at least the size of a GCSE will count in the performance tables.

We will not set an upper size limit for the qualifications that can count in the tables (but these will only count for “one” in the future).

3. Challenge and external assessment

Vocational qualifications at Key stage 4 should offer a comparable level of challenge to academic qualifications. Ofqual, the independent regulator is responsible for safeguarding the standards of examinations.

Professor Wolf's report is very clear that assessment methods for many vocational qualifications need to be strengthened if they are to be appropriate for 14-16 year olds. Therefore, only those qualifications that provide evidence of substantial amount of external assessment, together with synoptic assessment that demonstrates pupils' broad understanding of what they have studied in their courses, will be counted in the tables.

Many vocational qualifications traditionally use grading; this is important for student motivation and distinguishing between levels of student achievement. So we will only include those qualifications that are graded – as opposed to a pass/fail – in the tables in the future. Qualifications may have a pass, merit, distinction structure or a more detailed scale.

4. Proven track record

There has been significant growth in the number of new vocational qualifications developed and offered by Awarding Organisations. Initially we will only count in the performance tables those qualifications which have a proven track record at Key Stage 4, with positive feedback from schools, colleges, young people and employers, and high levels of take up by pupils.

At the same time, we want to allow Awarding Organisations to be able to develop new qualifications that can count in the performance tables in the future. Awarding Organisations will need consider whether their qualification will meet the characteristics set out in this paper (i.e. it is at least the size of a GCSE, will provide broad progression and has a rigorous assessment methodology) and then pilot it in order to provide evidence of this. We will use this evidence to judge whether the qualification will be counted in the tables. Where Awarding Organisations have agreed with us that a qualification can be piloted, it will count in the performance tables for a time-limited period.

There will be cases where Awarding Organisations wish to modify existing, well-established qualifications. We will examine these on a case by case basis: generally we would expect that only those qualifications that have been substantially rewritten will be treated as “new” and therefore require a pilot.

Conclusion and next steps

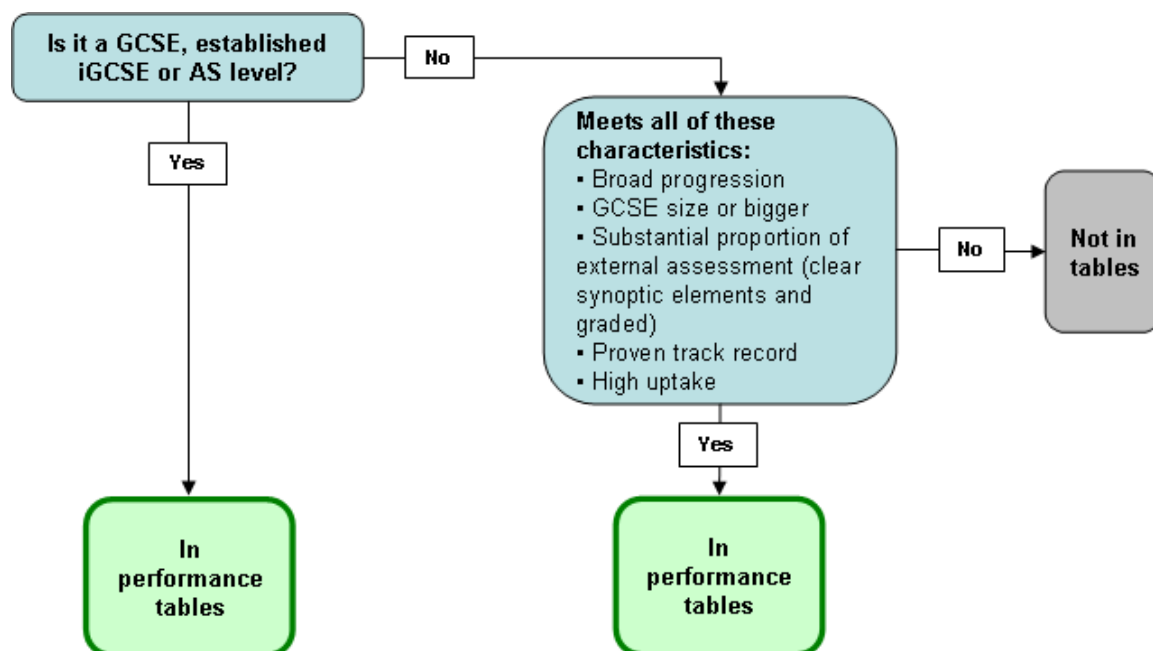
We believe that this approach will enable us to define a list of high quality qualifications, and that only these qualifications should be counted in the headline performance indicators in the future. To ensure we are taking on board views from those who have an interest in these changes, we are meeting and consulting with key groups and representatives from schools, colleges, Awarding Organisations and Ofqual over the summer.

Early next year, following this consultation, we will set out which qualifications will be counted in the performance tables in the future. We will also explain how we have distinguished between different qualifications so that there is no confusion about which count and which do not. We expect that changes will come into effect for 2014 performance tables (published 2015).

If you have any comments on how we could improve the proposals in this document please email us: 14-16vqandpt.consultation@education.gsi.gov.uk

The closing date for comments is **30 September 2011**.

Annex A: Flow diagram demonstrating the process for counting qualifications in the Key Stage 4 performance tables



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