

Review of Curriculum 2000 – QCA’s Report on Phase One

Overview

- The review shows that there is overwhelming support in schools and colleges for the principles of Curriculum 2000.
- Whilst very few wish to see these reforms abandoned, there is widespread concern about a number of implementation problems that demand immediate attention, and some more structural problems that require attention in the medium term.
- Rapid action is required to reduce ‘the burden of assessment’ in the new qualifications.
- The key skills qualifications need to be redesigned with lighter assessment, and schools and colleges should be allowed to adopt more a flexible and student-centred policy towards them, supported by a modified approach to funding.
- The examination timetable for next year must be improved.
- More guidance and support should be provided for schools and colleges, based on successful ways of managing the reforms.

The task

1.1 In her letter of 14 June 2001, the Secretary of State asks the Authority to identify the range of issues underlying the concerns being expressed about the *Qualifying for Success* reforms, popularly known, and here referred to, as *Curriculum 2000*. The Authority is asked to make a careful assessment of these concerns and to advise on any early action that could be taken. The Secretary of State indicates that the review should concentrate on the assessment arrangements: whether the requirements are excessive; and, if so, how they might be improved. The report should cover (i) whether the arrangements for sitting AS papers have a significant effect on the learning time available for study in both AS and A2 courses; (ii) the effect of the examinations timetable; and (iii) the key skills qualifications, on which QCA already has a ministerial remit. QCA is asked to liaise with ACCAC and CCEA and to consult with key players.

1.2 This is the report on phase one of the review. A second report will be made in December 2001.

Procedures and activities in phase one of the review (June/July 2001)

2.1 The focus of phase one of the review is to identify and evaluate the concerns being expressed within the broader responses to the reforms at the end of the first year of implementation. Strengths and weaknesses are examined through evidence and advice from:

- the associations/unions of principals, headteachers and teachers;
- the unitary awarding bodies (popularly referred to as the examination boards);
- key partners, including Ofsted, the LSC, UCAS and LSDA;
- correspondence received from schools, colleges and individuals, characterised by cogent arguments and constructive recommendations;
- discussions of the implementation of the reforms at already scheduled and specially arranged QCA meetings;
- visits to, or telephone discussions with, teachers and students in some schools and colleges;
- on-going monitoring and evaluation studies of Curriculum 2000.

Further details are provided in the annex.

Summary of the general response to Curriculum 2000

3.1 The concerns identified and evaluated in this report have to be set within the context of the general responses to Curriculum 2000. This is the first year of the reforms. In schools and colleges, students in year 12 have come to the end of the first year of study on GCE AS or VCE courses and have just started their second year courses, or will do so in September. Students who are just ending their year 13 have been following the old style A level or Advanced GNVQ courses.

3.2 On the basis of all the sources we have consulted, it is evident that an overwhelming majority of principals/headteachers and teachers maintain their full support for the main principles of the Curriculum 2000 reforms. Only a tiny minority regards these principles as misguided and would support a return to the *status quo ante*. The view of the vast majority is that Curriculum 2000 provides a sound basis for the further development of advanced studies in years 12 and 13 in schools and colleges, but that adjustments need to be made to improve implementation of the reforms. Many have reported that talk of 'crisis' is highly misleading and gives a distorted picture of what has happened in most schools and colleges. The clear message is that Curriculum 2000 should in no circumstances be abandoned, but that action is needed to support schools and colleges to make the reforms work more effectively in practice.

3.3 It is more difficult to judge opinion among students, but our impression is that a majority supports the principles that underpin the reforms, though they have clear views on some of the adjustments that are needed. Some real gains are evident. Teachers report that the work ethic of year 11 has continued into year 12, and they welcome this. Students are more focused on their work and are clearer about their objectives. Moreover, the majority of students who have taken at least four AS subjects seem to regard this as a substantial benefit. They endorse the greater breadth of study and value the increased choice. Some students have changed their initial selection of the three A2 subjects they intended to continue, and yet others have decided to continue with all four. Some students are mixing vocational and academic courses. Early indications are that retention rates in year 12 have improved – a key objective of the reforms.

3.4 There is a diversity of professional response to Curriculum 2000 both within and between institutional types – comprehensive and selective schools, sixth-form and FE colleges, and independent schools. Overall, this first year has been a difficult one for many staff. At the beginning of the year many felt a lack of guidance and support for the implementation of the reforms. About half the teachers were already familiar with modular A levels and thus partly prepared for the reforms, but for other teachers the structural changes were profound. Although there was a plethora of guidance documents, some of the necessary supports were absent or in short supply when they were needed, well in advance of the new academic year. Some specifications (syllabuses) arrived late; exemplar materials and textbooks linked specifically to the AS awards were in short supply; there were too few specimen examination papers, and a few proved to be misleading.

3.5 Three concerns stand out. Many teachers were unsure about the standards expected for the AS awards; secondly, the content of the AS was sometimes held to be excessive; and thirdly, the teaching time consisted of just over two terms before the June AS examinations. Inevitably, students too have felt some of these uncertainties and insecurities. The most common complaint has been that the assessment demands are excessive. Most students taking four AS subjects, and key skills, followed by three subjects at A2 will take, over the two years, about twenty written examinations, taking a total of almost thirty hours, plus coursework/portfolio/practicals.

3.6 Many teachers have conventionally viewed years 12 and 13 in a holistic way. There is a change of approach from styles of teaching and learning at GCSE, with less emphasis on acquisition and retention of facts by students, and more on the skills of inquiry, evaluation and debate. Over the two years as a whole, students are helped to develop a maturity of judgement. Moreover, students are expected to engage in extra-curricular activities (such as music, drama, sport) to foster their intellectual, cultural and social maturation.

3.7 The evidence indicates that the uncertainties experienced by some staff and students this year have led to the replacement of this holistic, two-year approach to advanced study with a short-term approach. Many report a distinct change in teaching and learning styles in year 12. Some teachers have become more didactic and instructional in style or have engaged in 'over-teaching' to ensure that students cover the content: this can produce a climate of 'cramming'. The load for students has increased considerably, since in contrast to the three A level subjects of past years, over half of them have this year studied at least four subjects, and many have followed courses for the three key skills as well. In comparison with previous year 12 cohorts, students are being required to learn more in less time. Many students resent the loss of private study periods and their contribution to greater independence in learning. Student participation in extra-curricular activities, external leisure activities and community service has been reduced in some, but by no means all, institutions.

Structure of this Report

4.1 In most submissions to QCA, and to ACCAC and CCEA, concerns have been divided into implementation (sometimes referred to as 'teething') and structural (or 'systemic') problems. In this report concerns are sorted into three categories:

- concerns that should abate naturally with time;
- concerns that should abate with further guidance; and
- concerns that require action.

Concerns that should abate naturally with time

5.1 Many of the anxieties and uncertainties associated with the initial implementation of reform should dissipate naturally. Senior managers and teachers in schools and colleges have, of course, learned much from their experience and will adapt their arrangements and procedures accordingly. There will be a much higher level of confidence among teachers next year. Curriculum 2000 offers an assessment system that is much more flexible than in the past: it appears that some teachers interpreted this as an implicit recommendation that they should make maximum use of the staged (in-course) assessment options. Linear options (end-of-course assessment) are still available and more schools and colleges may choose them next year within a generally more cautious and judicious use of assessment opportunities.

Concerns that should abate with further guidance

6.1 The guidance provided last year should now be complemented by further guidance grounded in the experience of the first year. QCA will issue *Managing Curriculum 2000 for 16-19 students* to all relevant schools and colleges in electronic form in July and in hard copy in August when examination results are released. This document clarifies the most important advice and reports emergent good practice reported to us by schools and colleges that believe they have managed the reforms well. It concentrates on issues within the control, or partial control, of the institutions themselves and contains case-study material. Particular attention is paid to successful ways of managing student workload. The six sections of the booklet deal with:

- breadth and enrichment – how they have been interpreted and introduced;
- assessment – possible assessment patterns and guidance on how to use them;
- student guidance – ensuring that students are taking appropriate programmes and that guidance systems are in place;
- student workload – strategies to smooth out and reduce student workload;
- teaching and learning – determining levels of demand and approach, supporting students, and use of time;
- key skills – information and case study material illustrating successful and flexible approaches.

6.2 Some schools and colleges have complained of a lack of co-ordination between the awarding bodies, poor communications with centres, and inadequate support and training. QCA will work with the awarding bodies to improve the service they offer to schools and colleges, including further guidance on candidates' work exemplifying AS grade standards in external assessment. QCA will also work with the awarding bodies to provide further guidance in the form of support materials, specimen papers and exemplar materials to illustrate the expected standards.

Concerns that require action

7.1 The two main areas in which some immediate action is needed are the assessment requirements and examination arrangements, and the key skills qualifications.

(i) Assessment requirements and examination arrangements

Several concerns demand action.

- **The 'burden of assessment'**

7.2 By far the most serious concern reported by many teachers and students is the sheer amount of assessment, in both examinations and coursework, now being required. A related concern is the overall manageability of assessment schemes, including the duration of papers and the balance of internal and external assessment. We believe that QCA should immediately start work to find ways of reducing the overall burden, where possible for the academic year 2001-2 as well as for the following academic year. Introducing changes in the middle of an academic year can pose problems for teachers and students and also for the awarding bodies. However, where it is a matter of reducing, rather than adding to, assessment requirements, change is easier to achieve. At the same time, great care must be taken to maintain the rigour of the qualifications.

7.3 In the few weeks of the first phase of the review it has not been possible to make a considered judgement on the scale of some reported problems of the new AS qualifications. Our provisional assessment is that three strongly expressed concerns should receive immediate attention:

- the excess of content in the new specifications in a few subjects;
- the level of demand - claimed in some cases to be too high and in other cases too low - in examination papers and coursework in a few subjects;
- poor correspondence between specifications and actual examinations in a few cases.

7.4 We shall supplement our normal monitoring programmes with investigations into these matters and other issues that appear from early evidence to be causing greatest concern. Subjects that have been a target of criticism from many practitioners will be given priority for investigation. In some cases it may be possible for awarding bodies to make small adjustments in time for courses that start in September 2001.

- **The examinations timetable**

7.5 The major problem with this summer's AS examination timetable was the number of students experiencing clashes. Since over 600 AS papers had to be slotted into fewer than three weeks, some clashes were inevitable. Some institutions were affected more severely than were others. Sometimes the clashes resulted in excessive examination burdens in one day; sometimes they made overnight supervision necessary. Neither outcome is desirable, but an increase in clashes was probably inevitable in a year when most candidates took more subjects than their predecessors and the combinations chosen were far more extensive and varied – and difficult to predict.

7.6 It will not be possible to eliminate clashes totally in summer 2002: the aim must be to reduce their frequency. A study of patterns of combination in this year's examinations may reveal some limited scope for better programming. Extending the examination period would reduce the frequency of clashes, but our consultations indicate reluctance among school and college staff to erode teaching time by allocating more than two additional days for examinations. A relaxation of the restriction on examinations in major subjects being placed in the first week of the common timetable would reduce clashes, as would the holding of some examinations during half-term or on Saturday mornings. QCA will pursue a range of possibilities with the awarding bodies before the official timetable for summer 2002 is issued.

7.7 The summer 2001 examination timetable was constructed after extensive discussions between the awarding bodies and teacher associations. Views on the sequence of AS and A2 examinations were divided. Placing the AS examinations at the start of the timetable maximises the total teaching time available over the two-year A level course. However, it restricts the learning time available in AS courses. A reversal of the sequence in 2002 would disadvantage those who took AS examinations this summer by reducing the teaching year for this cohort once again. We therefore propose that the AS-A2 examination sequence should remain unchanged in 2002, but that in phase two we should review and consult on other possible arrangements.

7.8 There are some concerns about AS re-sits and 'cashing in' units to gain the qualification. These will be reviewed in phase two.

- **The January examinations**

7.9 In 2001, some teachers and students used the January examinations as an opportunity to obtain first-hand and early experience of the papers and the standards. It is evident that some students were entered before they were ready and so received a disappointing and discouraging result. Preparation for examinations in early January can result in revision sessions or mock examinations at the end of the autumn term, with a loss of teaching time. It has been suggested by some that no year 12 student should be allowed to enter the January sitting. We believe that, whilst many students are not ready for examination in the first January, the opportunity should remain available, but at a slightly later date. QCA will work with the awarding bodies to find a more satisfactory timing in late January or early February.

- **Vocational A level**

7.10 There are particular concerns with this qualification. Of these, the most strongly held, which is already part of an existing ministerial remit to the regulatory authorities, has been the lack of alignment in the standards of the units in GCE and VCE. In the case of academic subjects, the standard for the AS units is set at what can reasonably be achieved in one year of study, with a compensatory higher standard than A level being set for the A2 units. By contrast, the standard for all vocational units is that of the full A level. Advanced GNVQ units could be taken in any order over two years, as determined by course tutors. This flexibility was retained in the conversion to vocational A level. Aligning vocational with academic A levels would entail a loss of this flexibility for teachers. There are also profound questions as to whether robustness and rigour for vocational qualifications at advanced level are best achieved by strict conformity to criteria established for academic subjects.

7.11 Other matters about which concerns have been expressed include:

- the restricted range of subjects currently offered as a vocational A level;
- the number of units offered in individual qualifications in academic and vocational A levels; and
- whether an AS equivalent should be introduced for some additional vocational A level subjects.

7.12 Our December report will be informed by additional evidence from portfolio moderation and the June examinations. We shall consult key stakeholders – including employers' representatives, teachers and students to establish a clear picture of the implications of any change. We shall also extend the work currently planned to incorporate other VCE matters emerging from this review, including:

- the vocational relevance of the specifications;
- the flexibility, validity and manageability of the assessment model;
- the case for introducing three-unit qualifications in more subjects.

Again, we shall give priority to subjects in which immediate adjustment is desirable.

7.13 The first deadline for GNVQ/VCE portfolio moderation causes problems. To ease the pressure on students and teachers, we have agreed a change with the awarding bodies. In 2002, the date by which 75% of units will have to be available for moderation will be put back from 15 May to 31 May.

- **Possible developments**

7.14 Further thought will be given to ways of reducing the amount of assessment for those who prefer to follow a linear pathway. One possibility is to introduce a linear option in the AS, in which a single, three-hour paper at the end of the course replaces the examinations and coursework for three units. This would reduce the assessment burden. QCA will report to Ministers on feasibility in September.

7.15 Another possibility would be to reconsider the number of units, normally six, in some subjects. This possibility will be examined in the December report.

7.16 With the imminent arrival of the Advanced Extension Awards, it might be possible to devise ways in which able students could fast-track through the AS-A2-AEA structure. This will also be examined in the December report.

(ii) The key skills qualifications

7.17 There are six key skills. The three main key skills, Communication, Application of Number, and Information Technology, are separate qualifications, and when combined form the Key Skills Qualification. There are three other key skills, often called the 'wider' key skills, of Working with Others, Improving own Learning and Performance, and Problem Solving. The assessment of the three main skills is in two parts: an external assessment (a test) and an internal assessment (portfolio) that assesses the ability of the candidate to apply the skill. Proxy qualifications are those qualifications that have been agreed to assess the same or broadly comparable knowledge or skills and so may be used to claim exemption from some or all of the assessment.

7.18 The evidence indicates a wide range of views about the place of the key skill qualifications in the curriculum. In no other aspect of Curriculum 2000 are the attitudes of both staff and students so strongly held, with at one extreme some real hostility to the qualification and at the other a passionate defence of it. Such marked differences can be found within the same institution, as well as between institutions. It is fair to say that the key skills qualifications, or aspects of them, have been the most frequent target of criticism among the Curriculum 2000 reforms. There is no clear agreement on what should now be done.

7.19 In the colleges, there is near universal provision of the key skills because of the funding incentive. Many principals and college staff support the principles underlying the qualification, but believe that the funding system gives them little choice but to make all students study for the qualification. In schools, there has been a mixed reaction: some have responded with enthusiasm to the qualification, whereas others have ignored it, on the grounds that students and staff were already heavily involved with the AS levels/VCE qualifications. Take-up in independent and selective schools has been relatively rare.

7.20 Approaches to how the key skills should be taught and learned have also varied enormously. In some institutions they have been integrated, in whole or part, into AS or VCE courses; in others they have been taught separately. In some there has been strong staff commitment, but in others staff have often been indifferent or even hostile. Among students in many institutions, perhaps even the majority, key skills have been the least popular element in Curriculum 2000. Students often support the concept of the key skills, but their level of commitment and their attendance at classes have been influenced by three factors: the generally high AS/VCE workload; the heavy assessment requirements for the key skills qualifications; and the indifference to the qualifications shown by admissions tutors in universities.

7.21 Recommendations for action to QCA have varied from 'abolish this qualification' to 'keep it, but modify the assessment.' There appears to be near universal agreement that the assessment needs to be reduced and redesigned. We have therefore carefully considered a wide range of options and conclude that many have serious disadvantages that are not always immediately apparent. We believe the sensible way forward would have two main elements. First, the assessment arrangements for the qualification need to be fundamentally reviewed as a matter of urgency. Secondly, schools and colleges need to have more flexibility and autonomy to shape their policy towards the qualification, including the ability to match the qualification more closely to individual student needs and aspirations. These recommendations are supported by the evidence and arguments presented below.

7.22 Despite strong concerns about the type and load of the assessment, there is widespread, but not universal, support for the concept of key skills. This is a potential basis for a consensus that, by the age of 19, all students should be able to demonstrate capability in the key skills of Communication, Application of Number and Information Technology to at least level two. This could be achieved either by means of the qualifications themselves or through proxy qualifications, such as GCSE in English, mathematics or ICT. All post-16 institutions could be encouraged to adopt this policy as part of a 14-19 entitlement.

7.23 The assessment of the key skills should be revised as a high priority. The aim would be to devise ways of reducing the overall assessment burden and to redesign aspects of the portfolio requirements.

7.24 At level three, the level at which the majority of students following Curriculum 2000 advanced programmes have been entered, students should be free to select the key skills and pursue study and qualification in those that relate to their individual needs and aspirations and their programme as a whole. Communication, Application of Number and Information Technology are already free-standing qualifications, but there is a perception that students ought to strive for the combined 'Key Skills Qualification' certificate. To emphasise the provision of key skills along more flexible and student-centred lines, including the need to provide more opportunity for work on the 'wider' key skills, we take the view that the combined certification for the qualifications should be phased out. (This would be done over a period of time to allow students who are already enrolled on this form of certification to gain the certificate.) Certification for the individual key skills at levels one to four should continue.

7.25 Schools and colleges should have the freedom to embed key skills development into enrichment, support, and guidance programmes. They should be able to provide this development and obtain funding without the existing requirements for formal assessment and certification for students. Centres would be free to work with the key skills standards and could then have the burden of assessment removed. This would allow better use of the key skills, and ensure a fitness for purpose approach to skills development for individuals. Inspection could be used as a means to monitor the quality of skills development. Funding policies and institution policies on key skills entitlement should involve all six key skills, including the 'wider key skills' - Working with Others, Improving own Learning and Performance and Problem Solving. It is frequently said that they are highly valued by many teachers, employers and higher education, as well as by students themselves, not least because they permeate the rest of their post-16 studies.

7.26 There are at present different arrangements for funding school sixth forms and FE and sixth form colleges. The former are funded in relation to the numbers of students enrolled, whilst the latter are funded in relation to students' programmes of study and qualifications sought. The Learning and Skills Council (LSC) is currently developing a coherent system of funding which will apply to both types of institutions. However, this is unlikely to be introduced before autumn 2002 at the earliest. In the meantime, QCA recommends that the LSC consider making changes to the existing funding of FE colleges to take account of the concerns that have been expressed from the sector in relation to the provision of key skills.

7.27 QCA will, as part of an existing remit to the regulatory authorities, review the approach to proxy qualifications that cover the internal and external elements in key skills assessment.

7.28 Application of Number appears to have caused particular difficulties for many students. QCA, in association with ACCAC and CCEA, will therefore look at provision of qualifications in the area of post-16 mathematics and make recommendations in the December report on the place of these qualifications, including Application of Number level three, the new Use of Mathematics AS and the free-standing mathematics qualifications.

7.29 There are known problems with the security of the level three key skills tests. Hitherto there has been a two-week window for the test on five occasions each year. It is very difficult to protect the integrity of the tests and thus the credibility of the qualification in such circumstances. It is recommended that the tests at level three in Communication and Application of Number should be available on a single day at several points in the year, as is the case at levels one and two. Thus the tests would be available on just one day in November 2001, and on four further days up to September 2002, with a three-day window for the IT tests. This may inconvenience some candidates on work-based routes, but the change is essential to preserve the credibility of the qualifications.

7.30 Given the indifference or even hostility shown towards this qualification by some institutions and students, it is likely that registrations will fall, possibly considerably, next year. Some institutions and students will be further influenced in this direction by the lack of interest in the qualification shown by higher education. Devising appropriate modifications to the qualification by the end of 2001 will therefore be vital to securing the standing of the qualification.

Higher Education

8.1 The admissions policies of higher education institutions, and specifically the admission practices of the large number of admissions tutors, exert a huge influence over 16-19 education, and an even greater influence on student attitudes and behaviour. For instance, some admissions tutors have stated, in response to student enquiries, that they look for good performance in three ASs and A2s linked clearly to the HE course, and that key skills will not be significant in their decisions. This has often quickly been communicated through groups of students, some of whom soon abandoned key skills classes and tests. There has been a very varied response to Curriculum 2000 from higher education institutions and their influence upon it has, despite words of support at a formal level, often in practice been damaging to some aspects of the reforms.

8.2 Vital to the success of Curriculum 2000, we believe, is a positive acceptance of new qualifications, including the forthcoming Advanced Extension Awards, by institutions of higher education, and by admissions tutors in particular. We advise that a strategy to this end, led by ministers, is crucial to the full implementation and longer-term development of Curriculum 2000.

Implementing new qualifications

9.1 When new qualifications are introduced, there is a tension between speed of introduction so that learners may profit from the benefits, and a need to ensure that the ground is sufficiently well prepared to ensure effective implementation. The development of a new qualification normally involves several strands of preparation:

- technical development, including the preparation of new content and assessment;
- trialling and piloting;
- teacher preparation, through programmes of professional development;
- the provision of support and guidance, including explanatory material from QCA, exemplification from awarding bodies and textbooks from publishers; and
- awareness-raising and marketing amongst the principal stakeholders such as parents, employers and university admissions staff.

To maximise the chances of success, each strand of preparation needs careful planning and consultation with key stakeholders. We shall offer further advice on the lessons learned from the implementation of Curriculum 2000 in our December report.

July 2001

Sources of evidence on the implementation of Curriculum 2000

Work across national evaluations

Using established links and the routine interagency meeting convened in June, QCA collected and collated latest findings from all other organisations undertaking systematic evaluation of Curriculum 2000 - UCAS; Institute of Education/Nuffield (Hodgson & Spours); AoC; Ofsted; LSDA. 900 questionnaires recently returned from schools and colleges (part of the UCAS/QCA routine evaluation work on Curriculum 2000) were analysed on 02-05.07.01 for the Review.

Correspondence and direct submissions to QCA

The review has considered all correspondence received from 17.04.01 to 05.07.01, from professional associations, headteachers, students, etc, including those in response to QCA's letter of 14.06.01 inviting views on the implementation of Curriculum 2000. In total, 87 items were considered, including those copied to QCA from DfES. Items have been analysed to identify areas of agreement and key themes.

Visits

As part of the Phase 1 Review and the construction of guidance on good practice, in-depth interviews were undertaken during visits to 19 centres. In all cases, teachers and curriculum managers were interviewed; in a number of centres interviews were undertaken with students. Care was taken to ensure a spread of centres in terms of type (FE, VI form centre, school, etc), urban/rural location, and size. The breakdown of the 19 centres visited comprised:

7	VI form centres
4	FE colleges
4	11-18 schools
4	Schools with other age ranges

Telephone interviews were undertaken with a further one FE college and three 11-18 schools.

LSDA provided information on good practice collected through focus group work with six centres:

2	VI form centres
2	FE colleges
1	11-18 school
1	13-18 school

Twenty-nine further centres were contacted by telephone or participated in focus groups in order to obtain detailed information for construction of the new guidance for centres:

10	VI form centres
10	FE colleges
7	11-18 schools
1	14-18 school
1	13-18 school

In addition to all the above, the following scheduled meetings were used to gather information:

Qualifications Committee 14.06.01
 Heads of Sixth Form in a northern metropolitan LEA 15.06 .01
 14-19 LEA Conference (Birmingham) 19.06.01
 14-19 LEA Conference (London) 21.06.01
 A VI Form Colleges' Consortium meeting in the South East 21.06.01
 Interagency Curriculum 2000 review group 22.06.01
 14-19 LEA Conference (York) 28.06.01
 Joint Associations' Curriculum Group 29.06.01