

QCA's review of curriculum 2000 – report on phase two

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QCA's REVIEW OF CURRICULUM 2000 – REPORT ON PHASE TWO

OVERVIEW

The widespread support for the Curriculum 2000 reforms remains firm. There are clear indications that, as noted in our first report (July 2001), some of the initial problems are abating with time as the reforms bed down. We would expect this settling down process to continue over the next two years.

Since the first QCA report, however, two significant issues have come to the fore, namely some aspects of AS mathematics and criticisms of the quality of service provided by awarding bodies. These demand immediate attention and so they are examined in detail and solutions to them are proposed.

Some minor problems remain. It is important to bear in mind that students in the first cohort have by now reached the end of the first term of their second year. Not until the end of summer 2002 will institutions, teachers and students have a full, two-year experience of the reforms. Introducing changes now to attend to relatively minor difficulties could make matters worse, or make it necessary to introduce yet further changes the following year. The constant introduction of minor adjustments can easily lead to confusion and irritation. We advise that it is more prudent, for the time being, to continue monitoring and investigating implementation. It would be premature to make further changes based on the first cohort's experience, which is likely to have atypical characteristics.

We recommend that summer 2003 is the appropriate time for the next stage of the review of Curriculum 2000. By then, when two cohorts have the full experience of Curriculum 2000, everybody will be better placed to consider whether changes are desirable, and if so, to agree what form they should take.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 QCA reported to the Secretary of State in July 2001 on the initial phase of the review of Curriculum 2000 that she had requested. The report identified and evaluated the concerns expressed during the early implementation of the reforms. In her response, and in accepting the proposals in the report, the Secretary of State asked QCA to attend to several tasks during the second phase of the review, including:

- improving the examinations timetable so as to reduce the number of clashes;
- improving the arrangements for AS and A2 examinations, including developing single papers of up to three hours as an alternative to end-of-unit assessments;
- examining the appropriateness of the content of AS specifications;
- developing further guidance for schools and colleges, and for students and parents on Curriculum 2000;
- reducing the assessment burden and developing a greater range of proxy qualifications for the key skills qualifications;
- reviewing the appropriateness of the provision of qualifications in the area of post-16 mathematics.

1.2 This second phase has addressed these tasks. In doing so, the review has continued to draw on the experience of students, teachers, professional associations, awarding bodies and other partners. This report focuses strictly on Curriculum 2000 and associated remits from Ministers. It is not a general review of 16–19 education and training; rather, it describes the progress that has been made and action already taken, identifies some new problems, and makes further recommendations. It has been compiled in conjunction with ACCAC and CCEA but is essentially the report of QCA to Ministers in England. The regulatory authorities in Wales and Northern Ireland broadly concur with the proposals but they will report separately to their Ministers with a commentary pertaining to their own contexts.

1.3 In addition to the specific tasks highlighted by the Secretary of State we have followed up other proposals set out in the phase one report. We have, for example, reviewed the provision and structure of Vocational A levels and, addressing an existing remit to QCA, continued work on the development of the Advanced Extension Award (AEA).

1.4 Following a short account of the current state of play, the report has three main sections: areas where action has already been taken; two urgent issues where immediate action is essential; and some medium-term concerns. It ends with some considerations for the future.

2. CURRENT STATE OF PLAY

2.1 The experience of AS in its second year, for both teachers and students, is a more positive one than was sometimes true last year. The

uncertainties among both teachers and students during the first year of implementation about the standards and demands of the AS are abating during the second year. Familiarity with the requirements of both the specifications and assessment materials is giving teachers greater security, and they report a subsequent reduction in 'over-teaching'.

2.2 However, evidence on Curriculum 2000 from research and inspection is limited at this stage. The first year of implementation alone does not provide stable data on the number of student entries to AS courses and the combinations of courses, the breadth of students' programmes of study, or the use of assessment opportunities. Moreover, different pieces of research often throw rather different light on Curriculum 2000, reflecting different research purposes, instruments and samples. As the evidence is still far from complete, conclusions must be tentative. Initial indications are that students in year 12, like their equivalents last year, are taking more extended programmes of study than was the norm before the introduction of Curriculum 2000, including a greater incidence of students combining VCE and GCE within their programmes.

2.3 Not surprisingly, there are some uncertainties about the A2 in its first year, though these too are likely to abate after the first A2 examinations next summer. Teachers indicate that the pace of A2 is more measured compared with the air of 'cramming' that sometimes characterised AS courses last year. They continue to raise issues about the content of some subjects and about the ratio of content between AS and A2.

2.4 Although there are variations in practice, emerging evidence on assessment patterns indicates that June will be the main assessment point for both AS and A2. Some schools and colleges will use January only in the second year (year 13) for AS re-sits. There are also initial indications that, in some subjects, more schools and colleges may choose to leave the assessment of all six units of the A level until June of the second year, thus following an end-of-course or 'linear' pattern of assessment. It was always intended that the reforms should allow for such diversity of practice.

3. ACTION ALREADY TAKEN

3.1 The phase one report pointed to several areas where immediate action was necessary. These tasks were covered in the Secretary of State's July letter. This section sets out the action that QCA has taken during the summer and early autumn to address these immediate concerns.

(i) Guidance

3.2 The first phase report identified a number of issues that we judged would abate if further guidance were issued. In July, QCA published *Managing Curriculum 2000 for 16–19 students* on its website and distributed a hard copy to secondary schools and colleges in August. In the light of the first year's experience, the document offered guidance on managing assessment

options, key skills, teaching and learning. It also featured case studies exemplifying successful approaches adopted by schools and colleges. This guidance has been well received.

3.3 In August, QCA also published guidance on its website to support students and their parents/guardians as choices were being made about post-16 programmes following receipt of GCSE results. We are currently developing new web pages focused on the curriculum for 16-to-19 year-olds that will allow the guidance to be improved and brought up to date regularly.

(ii) AS examination arrangements

3.4 The most serious problem reported to us last summer was the sheer amount of assessment now being required (phase one report 7.2). There were also significant problems with clashes in the examination timetable in summer 2001 (phase one report 7.5). At the Secretary of State's request, we investigated the possibility of devising, for each AS, an additional linear assessment comprising a single three-hour paper. It soon became clear, however, that an alternative, additional system of three-hour papers could not be achieved either quickly or without difficulty. New specifications to complement the existing modular structure would be required. Additional examiners would be needed, which would add to already significant difficulties with the recruitment of examiners in some subjects. The complexities of the examination programme would increase and there would be new problems of comparability between the modular and the proposed alternative approach to assessment, which would reduce confidence that standards in the new examinations are being maintained. We therefore recommended a slightly different approach.

3.5 To reduce the clashes in the examination timetable without extending the examination period (a prospect against which there is considerable opposition) meant condensing the two or three written unit examinations of most AS subjects into a single half-day session. To achieve this, some AS examinations were reduced in length to enable the examinations in three units to be taken in one half-day. In practice, although these are three separate examinations, the structure is similar to that of a three-hour paper, but with a short break between papers at the discretion of schools and colleges. Where the AS assessment consists of one unit by coursework and two units by written examination, the two examinations are now to be taken in one half-day session. By this method, the number of clashes can be reduced considerably, and for many students the amount of formal assessment will also be reduced. It is expected that, based on a projection from 2001 entries, the vast majority of AS students will benefit from these changes in summer 2002.

3.6 From summer 2002, about three-quarters of AS subjects will conform to the following assessment principles:

- the total time for compulsory papers in AS subjects within the main examination timetable will be three hours or less;
- the lengths of individual AS examination papers will be in multiples of 15 minutes.

The intention is that most of the remaining AS subjects should meet the above assessment principles by summer 2003.

3.7 Some AS specifications already conformed to these principles. Others required minor adjustment to their assessment arrangements. Full details were sent to schools and colleges in mid-October. The adjustments mean that most AS examinations will take place in a single half-day session in summer 2002. This timetabling change, together with the reduction in length of AS examinations, reduces the assessment burden for many students. Schools and colleges will benefit, as fewer AS subjects will be timetabled concurrently, reducing pressures on accommodation and invigilation. These adjustments to the AS examinations arrangements and timetable have been generally welcomed by schools and colleges, although we recognise that some students prefer to revise separately for each unit and so may not welcome taking all their AS examinations in a subject in a single examination session.

3.8 We take the view that the current arrangements for the A2 examinations should not be disturbed. QCA and the awarding bodies will monitor closely their operation over the next two summers. However, while the length of A2 papers remains unchanged, the adjustments to the AS arrangements will also ease timetable pressures for A2 next summer.

(iii) The examination timetable

3.9 The Joint Council for General Qualifications produces a common timetable for every examination session. It ensures that examinations in all but the smallest entry subjects are timetabled at the same time, regardless of awarding body. Each awarding body uses this common timetable to construct its own version, adding any further subjects and details of the individual units.

3.10 The Joint Council sent the provisional timetable to schools and colleges in mid-October and sought comments. Previous practice had been to consult on the common timetable only through teacher associations. QCA discussed the responses to the consultation with the awarding bodies and the other regulatory authorities at a meeting in early November. The final versions of each awarding body's timetable, that build on the common timetable, will be published on their websites in December and distributed to schools and colleges shortly thereafter. During the autumn, the Joint Council also consulted schools and colleges on the sequence of AS and A2 examinations in the timetable. In England, an absolute majority favoured the existing arrangements where the AS examinations take place before the A2. We propose that the sequence remain unchanged at least until the suggested summer 2003 review.

3.11 We discussed the timing of the January examinations with the awarding bodies (phase one report 7.8). Whilst shifting the timing of the examinations to later January or early February could help alleviate pressures on teaching time at the end of the preceding autumn term, on balance the evidence suggests that this concern is diminishing as some of the

implementation problems of the first year abate. In the interests of keeping further change to a minimum, we do not propose that the timing of the January examinations be altered significantly at present.

(iv) Key skills

3.12 There are six key skills - Communication, Application of Number, Information Technology, Working With Others, Improving Own Learning and Performance and Problem Solving. The first three are qualifications with both internal and external assessment. The second three (often referred to as the 'wider' key skills) are certificated on the basis of internal assessment only. The key skills are designed for use in a wide range of settings - schools, colleges, training, and in higher education and employment.

3.13 The issues arising with key skills in the first year were described in the phase one report (7.17 *et seq*), with recommendations for change. In September 2001, as a result of the phase one report, the action taken included:

- the removal of the combined Key Skills Qualification which had unintentionally created inflexibilities in programme design (certification for the individual key skills remains);
- changes to the funding regime in England to enable centres to obtain funding without the requirement for formal assessment and certification and so allow more flexibility and choice in key skills achievement;
- the publication of new policy guidance by the regulatory authorities that reflected the Secretary of State's two specific expectations: that candidates who had not achieved A*–C in GCSE English, mathematics or ICT should be expected to achieve the relevant key skills qualifications at level 2; and that institutions should support candidates starting on advanced level programmes to achieve at least one level 3 key skill qualification;
- the publication of an addendum to existing guidance to clarify requirements and discourage excessive and unnecessary collection of evidence for portfolio assessment;
- the publication of a new and extended proxy list of qualifications;
- confirmation of the removal of the two-week window for taking the key skills tests at levels 3 and 4.

3.14 The Secretary of State asked us to consult those involved in work-based learning and to explore alternatives to the removal of the two-week assessment window, since it was apparent that reducing access to the tests could cause difficulty for some in the work-based sector. The response to this consultation indicated a need for more opportunities for those on the work-based route to have access to the tests, rather than a need to maintain the window for taking the tests. The security of the tests, which is essential to their integrity and public credibility, was acknowledged by consultees to be important.

3.15 QCA, with ACCAC and CCEA, has carried out a review of key skills in response to a separate remit from Ministers. The outcomes of the review, the

details of which are in a full, separate key skills report, fall into the following five broad categories:

- the continuation of support and promotion;
- improvements to the current assessment arrangements for key skills that can be implemented by awarding bodies;
- simplifications to the administration of the assessment arrangements;
- trialling of alternative models to the current tests;
- a move to on-demand and, eventually, on-line testing.

3.16 The move towards a system of on-demand and, eventually, on-line testing is central to the future success of these qualifications. It will simplify the administration of the tests, increase access to them and reduce the administrative burden to schools, colleges, employers and other settings. Improved access to tests resulting from on-demand testing will allow large centres to enter candidates in smaller and more manageable groups. It will also provide the flexibility needed by employers and training providers for candidates to take the tests at times better suited to their needs and working conditions.

3.17 Work has already begun to prepare the ground for a system of on-demand, on-line external assessment. Since the summer of 2001, QCA has been working to deliver on-demand tests in a limited scheme with the Employment Service. In early 2002, the regulatory authorities will begin considering whether to expand this project. A QCA research project will evaluate the technology and systems available to awarding bodies for the delivery of key skills and adult literacy and numeracy tests. It will also advise on how we can build on the best of current practice to deliver a secure, high quality, on-demand, on-line system of testing, and on the nature of the role of the regulatory authorities within such a system.

3.18 The changes recommended in the phase one report, and the associated action taken by the Learning and Skills Council on funding arrangements, have been widely welcomed in schools and colleges. The lack of interest in the key skills by many higher education admissions tutors remains a problem, since this discourages both teachers and students and makes it difficult to devise and explain a clear and coherent national policy on the key skills. In the light of this it will be necessary to continue to emphasise the importance of students developing their key skills, particularly in the context of the development of the 14–19 phase.

3.19 Notwithstanding the outcomes of this review of key skills, the current key skills standards have been approved for a five-year cycle and will be reviewed as part of the regulatory authorities' normal accreditation process in 2003–04. QCA will keep the current standards under careful scrutiny. Any adjustments to reduce the assessment burden further should be considered during the general review of Curriculum 2000 that we recommend for summer 2003, when possible changes could be fed into the next accreditation cycle.

4. TWO URGENT ISSUES

(i) Post-16 mathematics and AS mathematics

4.1 Ministers accepted the suggestion in the phase one report (7.28) of a review of post-16 mathematics. We have established an expert panel to assist the work of the review, which is chaired by the head of QCA's Curriculum Division, a mathematics graduate, and includes teachers, examiners and representatives from HE. The issues in the review are many and complex and they will take time to analyse and resolve. There remain, however, serious concerns about AS mathematics, which is the main topic of this section.

4.2 At A level, mathematics has traditionally been regarded as one of the more difficult subjects, with Lord Dearing's Review of post-16 qualifications concluding that mathematics was the most difficult subject in the years 1993–1995. However, universities expressed concern about standards in A level mathematics, suggesting that new undergraduates on a range of degree courses, including mathematics, science and engineering, were hampered by a lack of technical facility. Lord Dearing recommended that the regulatory authorities should draw on the results of the SCAA/Ofsted study, *Standards in Public Examinations 1975–1995* and enter into discussion with awarding bodies about the requirements for A level mathematics. The recommendations of this study were then built into the new AS and A level specifications for mathematics. The intention was to secure appropriate rigour, challenge and a more independent approach to solving problems. The requirements in the GCE subject criteria for mathematics were designed to encourage improvements in technical facility while retaining the key features that had made modular specifications in mathematics so popular.

4.3 Inspection evidence shows that progress in AS level mathematics in its first year, although inconsistent, was satisfactory overall and improving. However, during 2000–01 a number of schools and colleges wrote to QCA indicating concerns about AS mathematics. The main concerns were that:

- AS mathematics appeared to be harder than AS in other subjects;
- there was difficulty teaching the amount of material in AS mathematics specifications in the time available.

4.4 In August 2001 the AS results showed that mathematics candidates achieved a comparable proportion at A grade to science candidates. There was, however, a failure rate in mathematics of almost 30 per cent, which contrasted unfavourably with other subjects including science subjects, where the failure rate was about 15 per cent. In the legacy A level mathematics in 2001 the failure rate was about 10 per cent - about a third of that at AS level - although it did include results that had been boosted by re-sits in year 13.

4.5 The results in AS mathematics reflect several different features of the 2001 examination, all of which may have to some extent contributed to the problem. There is some evidence that the content of the AS mathematics specifications is too great to be taught and to be mastered by students in the

time available before the May/June of their first year of post-16 study. For some students the gap between GCSE and AS is such that time was taken up acquiring important background knowledge that was not itself part of the new AS specification.

4.6 A careful analysis of the 2001 AS mathematics papers has shown that the amount of content in the AS and the demands of the papers were in line with those in previous years, and less demanding than in specifications before 1996. Nevertheless, the marks achieved by candidates in the 2001 AS mathematics papers were substantially lower than in previous years. In part, this may have reflected decisions by students to concentrate on two rather than three units, producing unexpectedly large numbers of extremely low marks.

4.7 In the light of all the evidence it is clear that the criteria and specifications for AS mathematics need to be reviewed and revised. This cannot be completed before autumn 2002. There then needs to be a preparatory period before its first teaching in September 2003 with first examinations in 2004. This leaves some problems to be addressed. In the light of the AS results in 2001, many students have dropped mathematics as an A2 subject (though some would have done so anyway, of course). Of greater concern are the anecdotal indications that fewer of the next cohort of students have chosen AS mathematics courses this autumn. A further unwarranted high failure rate could permanently damage recruitment to A level mathematics courses, lead to reduced recruitment to university departments of mathematics (and to subjects requiring mathematics qualifications), and ultimately exacerbate the shortage of mathematics teachers in schools and college.

4.8 Before candidates can be examined in accordance with a revised specification in summer of 2004, there are three cohorts of students for whom adjustments are needed:

- the cohort taking the A2 mathematics examinations in 2002;
- the cohort that has already started the AS course in September 2001 and the cohort that will start the AS course in September 2002.

4.9 In considering the options available for this interim period 2001–2003, we have rejected any that could lead to an actual or perceived diminution of standards. During these interim years, QCA will monitor closely the work of the awarding bodies in setting papers and awarding grades to ensure that the AS examination is both accessible to candidates and rigorous in its standards.

4.10 We also recommend that:

- candidates for A level mathematics in summer 2002 and others who took AS mathematics in 2001 should be made aware by centres of the opportunities to re-sit units already taken, with a view to improving their AS and subsequent A level results;
- for those starting their AS courses in September 2001 and 2002, an extra examination opportunity should be introduced in the following autumn. Candidates may then enter for two AS units in June, with a further

opportunity to take the third unit the following autumn. This will allow the pace of teaching to be adjusted to match student progression and will reduce the pressure on candidates to succeed at an appropriate level in all three units in the May/June examinations. This is particularly important for students who wish to obtain an AS in mathematics but do not intend to proceed to the A2. It would be for schools and colleges to determine their policy on whether, and in what ways, to take advantage of this additional opportunity.

4.11 It should be emphasised that this extra examination opportunity would be a temporary measure for the years 2002 and 2003 only and strictly confined to AS mathematics. It would be difficult for the awarding bodies to provide this facility, but the need to maintain the flow of candidates through AS and A2 mathematics, and for them to be treated fairly, demands that this measure should be provided if centres consider it to be helpful. We recommend that QCA consult centres urgently.

4.12 The QCA review of post-16 mathematics provision will examine AS and A level mathematics specifications within the broader context of the range of mathematics qualifications available post-16 at levels 2 and 3. The report will be submitted to Ministers in the summer of 2002.

(ii) The awarding bodies (commonly referred to as ‘the exam boards’)

4.13 During the first year of Curriculum 2000 there was much criticism of the awarding bodies, especially in relation to insufficient guidance on standards, exemplar materials and specimen examination papers. Schools and colleges have reported problems with lack, or late receipt, of support materials for A2 in some subjects. There was also considerable concern about lack of co-ordination between awarding bodies in their communications with centres. Although most candidates at A and AS level received their results on time last summer, there has been much further criticism of the awarding bodies, and of one in particular, by centres about the quality of the service they provide. Concerns includes quality of marking, timeliness of materials, delays to enquiries on results and lack of responsiveness to complaints. This had led to some discussion, especially among headteachers and principals, about whether the number of unitary awarding bodies should be reduced.

4.14 There are arguments to support the existence of the three English unitary awarding bodies as against the creation of a single one. It can be argued that competition helps to keep examination fees down, and provides an incentive to innovate as well as to be responsive to customers. The choice provided is highly valued by many schools and colleges. There is concern that reduction to a single awarding body would create a less responsive monopoly with a potential for failure at a catastrophic level. There is also the potential for severe disruption during any transition from three to two or one, as well as disturbance to the process of developing and implementing new qualifications. We consider that for the present a better way forward is to find other mechanisms for improving the quality of service provided by the unitary awarding bodies. Their performance should continue to be monitored closely

by QCA over the next two years and the discussion resumed in the suggested general review of Curriculum 2000 in summer 2003.

4.15 The alleged lack of co-ordination between the awarding bodies was pursued by QCA with the Joint Council for General Qualifications. QCA asked that further work be done to develop common documentation and procedures in order to reduce bureaucracy for centres and increase the simplicity and clarity of documentation for students and other users. In November, the Joint Council reported to QCA that, in addition to the range of common documentation and procedures already in place, the awarding bodies have agreed to:

- common penalties and approaches to cases of malpractice from summer 2002;
- common inspection arrangements from 2003.

We are urging the Joint Council to expedite the further work that it is undertaking on:

- common decline/late cash-in forms;
- common labels for question paper packets;
- common wording and explanations for GCSE modular assessments;
- a new document on procedures for AS;
- a review of entry documentation;
- other areas where common documentation/procedures might be introduced;
- common application forms and dates for centres requesting Welsh medium examinations.

4.16 The responsibility for the Joint Council is hosted in rotation by the awarding bodies on a two-year cycle. From January 2002, this responsibility passes from Edexcel to AQA. The Chief Executive of AQA will chair the Council and its Management Committee and has expressed to QCA her commitment to improving the quality of service to centres. AQA is seconding one of its Directors, a second tier officer, to serve full time as the Council's convenor and to chair the Qualifications Committee. QCA will work with, and monitor, the Joint Council in its recent commitment to strong, united and positive action to deliver to schools and colleges the examinations for which the awarding bodies are collectively responsible. This will put the Joint Council in a better position to achieve its objectives. In particular, we want the Council to be even more effective in co-ordinating the common activities of the awarding bodies and the exchange of information between them.

4.17 QCA, with ACCAC and CCEA, will set challenging targets and performance indicators for the awarding bodies. Possible targets would be:

- (i) marking 85 per cent of GCSE and GCE scripts and entering the outcomes into the IT system by the time that the awarding meeting is held;
- (ii) issuing all qualification results to centres on the agreed day;
- (iii) handling enquiries on results and appeals to schedule, for example, completing 95 per cent within 30 calendar days of receipt;
- (iv) responding fully to centres on all information requests and complaints within seven working days.

4.18 Schools and colleges pay substantial fees for the services of the awarding bodies, which must therefore be able to demonstrate that they are delivering high quality, value-for-money services and are publicly accountable. For competition to work effectively, centres need accurate and objective information in order to enhance their trust and confidence in the awarding bodies. QCA, in conjunction with ACCAC and CCEA, will work with the Joint Council to measure customer satisfaction and evaluate the extent to which centres judge that individual awarding bodies are meeting their requirements and responding to their needs.

4.19 The outcomes of the above mechanisms will enable QCA to use the information provided as part of an annual report on the performance of the unitary awarding bodies. The report will be made public and be freely available for use by schools and colleges.

5. MEDIUM-TERM ISSUES

(i) Re-sits and cashing-in rules

5.1 QCA's phase one report (7.8) noted concerns about AS re-sits and 'cashing-in' rules and moved a review of these to phase two. QCA asked the awarding bodies, through the Joint Council, to consider the re-sit and cashing-in rules used in 2001 and to advise on alternative approaches. We also invited professional associations to: (i) consider options, ranging from no re-sits to unlimited re-sits; and (ii) comment on the current cashing-in rules, which are complicated, not well understood by teachers, students and parents, and open to confusion.

Re-sits

5.2 Almost all A levels have six assessment units - three AS units and three A2 units. Candidates may re-sit each unit once. The AS, whilst being a subset of the full A level, is also a qualification in its own right. AS units can therefore be sat (and re-sat) either for the AS or as the first part of the full A level.

5.3 We have considered alternatives to the current rules, ranging from no re-sits to unlimited re-sits. There are advantages and disadvantages associated with each of the alternatives and there is no clear consensus among professional associations about which alternative is the most appropriate.

5.4 The main disadvantage of changing the rules at this stage is that schools and colleges are becoming familiar with them, and any change could cause further confusion, particularly with different rules applying simultaneously to the students part way through their courses and those starting after any rule change is implemented. It will be important to monitor the impact of re-sits on the supply of examiners.

Cashing-in

5.5 Cashing-in is the process whereby schools and colleges ask awarding bodies (by submitting requests towards the end of the spring term) to generate qualification certificates for their students. Once a qualification certificate is awarded, the assessment units are used-up (cashed-in) and cannot be re-used for the award of the same qualification. Schools and colleges have a short period, between receipt of examination results and the award of qualifications, to rescind requests to cash-in. This system has operated since modular A levels were first introduced over ten years ago.

5.6 Professional associations expressed some concerns about the perceived complexity of the cashing-in rules, but were unanimous that these rules require more time to bed down within Curriculum 2000. Some professional associations have suggested that certification should become automatic, rather than on request, with institutions retaining the opportunity to decline certification after receipt of students' results slips.

5.7 The issues that have arisen during 2001 are, however, not principally to do with the cashing-in rules themselves, but rather with uncertainties as to whether or not students will be disadvantaged if they proceed to the full A level qualification without cashing-in the AS on route. This uncertainty has been brought about by conflicting messages from the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) and individual universities about whether or not they expect to see AS grades on UCAS application forms. It would be helpful for higher education institutions generally to make expectations clearer and consistent for students applying to university.

5.8 QCA advised UCAS that it could make no assumptions about students cashing-in the AS on route to the full A level. QCA does not advise schools and colleges on whether or not to cash-in. If, for the purposes of entry to university, the current flexibility regarding cashing-in is considered undesirable, changes will be required to some of the technical rules associated with the qualifications.

5.9 The Joint Council will shortly issue an improved and clearer explanation of the awarding and aggregation rules including those for cashing-in.

The synoptic rule

5.10 Students are currently required to sit the synoptic unit(s), testing their understanding of connections between different elements of the subject, at the end of their course. Whilst not strictly associated with the re-sit and cashing-in rules, the synoptic rule interacts with them and adds a further complexity. Removing this rule would simplify the procedures. This would not detract from the rigour of the A level or alter the purpose of synoptic assessment as it is probable that most students will still wait until the end of their course to attempt this assessment. The most important feature of the synoptic assessment is the nature of what it assesses rather than the fact that it is taken at the end of the course.

5.11 In summary, we recommend that the re-sit and cashing-in rules continue in their present form and be re-considered at the time of a general Curriculum 2000 review in summer 2003. Until then QCA will continue to monitor application of the rules. The rule requiring students to take the synoptic units at the end of the course will be removed.

(ii) The amount of content in AS

5.12 During the implementation of Curriculum 2000, some teachers, students and parents expressed concern that the content in some AS specifications is overloaded and of a standard more appropriate to full A level. The Secretary of State's response to the phase one review asked QCA to examine, in conjunction with the awarding bodies, the appropriateness of these specifications.

5.13 The responsibility for structure, content and assessment of qualifications is shared between the regulators and the awarding bodies. QCA produces subject criteria, which govern the scope, content and assessment of A levels. The awarding bodies produce specifications that meet the criteria. In order to ascertain whether adjustments to content and assessment were necessary in particular subjects, therefore, QCA concentrated on evidence on subject criteria, while simultaneously exploring information it had received on specifications. The awarding bodies concentrated on the specifications themselves.

5.14 We consulted 76 subject associations, which were invited to complete a questionnaire for the 28 subjects governed by criteria. Fifty-one responded, at least one for every subject. The questionnaire concentrated on three issues: specification content; assessment objectives; and schemes of assessment. Most responses consisted of minor criticisms and few contained major critiques. Some responses offered suggestions for moving content from the AS to the A2 or for deletion. Some suggested altering the weighting of the assessment objectives.

5.15 QCA received about 100 letters from schools, colleges and others with relevant comments. Few of these were specific about the awarding body or specification; they did not indicate where the perceived overload lay, nor what

should be done to alleviate the problem. Even when specific, comments often were about examination papers rather than subject matter. In the 20 schools and colleges visited by the QCA research team, interviewees said that the AS qualifications had too much content. Many claimed that the AS examinations were at the standard of legacy A levels. The Joint Council provided QCA with its brief initial thoughts on some specifications that might require some adjustment to content.

5.16 Overall, no clear picture has emerged on the issue of overload. It may be that the insecurities and uncertainties surrounding the first year of Curriculum 2000, including the shorter teaching time in year 12, have focused around generalised concerns about overload, and these might abate with time. As with other matters causing concern, hasty adjustments to specifications could easily make matters worse. Further investigation, which includes listening to the views of teachers and lecturers, is warranted before action is taken. The regulatory authorities will work with the awarding bodies to ascertain what changes might be required on a specification-by-specification basis. In a few cases it may become clear that some early action is justified, but there will be others where adjustments are best made within the context of the regular accreditation cycle. There will probably be some areas where minor modifications to examination papers or further guidance are more appropriate than changes to the specification. To avoid disruptive change, any amendments to the AS specifications should be put in place for first teaching in September 2004 at the earliest. We recommend the same caution with respect to suggestions that the 3+3 unit structure of the A level be amended, for example, to 2+3 or 2+2. Structural change at this early stage would be particularly disruptive for teachers and students.

(iii) Level of demand in the assessment requirements

5.17 In our phase one report (7.3) we promised to give immediate attention to concerns that had been expressed about the level of demand of examination papers and the perceived poor correspondence between specifications and actual examinations.

5.18 Such concerns are investigated each year by QCA's scrutiny programme. Scrutinies are detailed checks of individual examinations carried out by small teams of experts with experience of teaching and/or examining at an appropriate level in the subject concerned. In 2001, this activity focused on question papers, candidates' scripts and sample assessment materials covering 10 mainstream subjects at AS level. Normally QCA scrutinies of each of the three unitary awarding bodies focus on a sub-set of the year's selected subjects. In 2001, however, we reviewed AS question papers and candidates' scripts in all of the 10 selected subjects across all three awarding bodies. The aim of this was to provide a full comparison across all papers in a given subject.

5.19 In the great majority of cases the scrutiny teams found that the level of demand and correspondence between specifications and actual papers was commensurate with the design intentions of the AS examination. There were

a few notable exceptions. In just two other subjects the papers appeared to be set at the wrong level of demand. In geography, there was evidence that some AS papers were set at the full A level standard; in physics, one specification was criticised for including questions that were insufficiently demanding. In drama there was concern that live papers did not match specimen papers issued with the specifications. This issue did not arise in any of the 10 subjects in the scrutiny programme.

5.20 QCA is working with the awarding bodies concerned to ensure that the identified problems are solved as soon as possible.

(iv) Vocational A level (VCE) structure, standards and numbers of units

5.21 Following the examination results for the tested VCE units in January 2001, some centres expressed concern about the lower levels of achievement of Vocational A level candidates as compared with GCE candidates. In summer 2001, the AS VCE pass rate was 64 per cent; the Advanced VCE pass rate was 55 per cent. These compare with a pass rate of 60 per cent for the legacy 12-unit Advanced GNVQ in summer 2001.

5.22 There is inspection evidence that many teachers believe that students following VCE are not able to show what they know and can do by means of the assessment model now in place. We have received similar representations. At the same time a minority say that the Vocational A level is an improvement on Advanced GNVQ and that they are managing it successfully. Some also urge caution about drawing conclusions about the need to revise VCE on the basis of one year's experience only.

5.23 Concerns about lower levels of achievement and the appropriateness of the assessment model in the Vocational A level might lead to some movement from the Vocational A level to already established vocational qualifications. Maintaining confidence in the Vocational A level must be a priority. We shall keep the assessment model under review and monitor closely the work of the awarding bodies in setting papers and awarding grades to ensure that the examinations are both accessible to candidates and rigorous in their standards.

5.24 In May, Ministers asked for a review of the structure of Vocational A level, with a view to deciding whether a staged structure – an AS equivalent – should be introduced. QCA was also asked to consult on the number of units offered in individual qualifications within both general and Vocational A levels and on the range of subjects currently offered as Vocational A levels.

5.25 Advanced GNVQs were re-named and launched as Vocational A levels in September 2000. They are available in 14 subject areas, some of which are common to GCE. Students may take a single award (six units equivalent to one GCE A level) or a double award (12 units equivalent to two GCE A levels). Business, engineering, health and social care, and ICT are also available as three-unit awards (equivalent in size to a GCE AS qualification).

5.26 Unlike GCE where AS units are not at full A level standard, all units in Vocational A level are assessed at the same standard. The units are intended to be more difficult than GCE AS units but less difficult than GCE A2 units. In addition to these structural differences, Vocational A levels contain compulsory units and up to 15 optional units. The Vocational A level structure was adopted to enable schools and colleges to retain the flexibility to teach the units in any order.

5.27 In its consultation, QCA invited some 450 organisations, including schools, colleges, LEAs, teacher associations and others, to complete a questionnaire, and almost half did so. We also held three meetings with centre representatives and considered relevant correspondence and outcomes from QCA's review of Curriculum 2000. We undertook some limited mapping work to compare the similarities and differences between Vocational A levels and GCEs in the same or similar subject areas.

5.28 The majority of respondents were in favour of introducing a GCE AS standard into all Vocational A levels. They believed it would promote parity with GCE qualifications and, as a result, could also enhance recruitment and retention for Vocational A levels. Those not favouring change preferred the flexibility for teaching purposes offered by the current structure.

5.29 Many respondents were in favour of retaining the number of units currently available in Vocational A levels. A wide range of units allows students more opportunity to make choices that reflect their interests and career aspirations; it also allows centres to make use of local resources and staff expertise. The majority of respondents were also content with the total number of units required (three, six and 12) to achieve each qualification.

5.30 Many respondents were in favour of retaining both GCE and Vocational A levels in the same subject because of the different learning and assessment approaches of the two qualifications. Others believed that there are areas where both types of qualification were unnecessary.

5.31 Further investigation will be needed to explore how to introduce a revised AS for all subject areas and the implications of this revised structure on the VCE (Double Award) in particular. Preliminary development work exploring different ways of introducing a VCE AS at GCE AS standard has shown that it cannot be achieved without a major redevelopment of VCE qualifications. We recommend that revised qualifications be introduced for first teaching in September 2004, when the first cohort that will take GCSEs in vocational subjects will start advanced level courses. To meet this timescale, development work for the revised qualifications would begin early in 2002. This would allow sufficient time to consult fully on the new VCE subject criteria and would also ensure that the regulatory authorities, awarding bodies and schools and colleges have sufficient time to prepare for the implementation of the revised qualifications.

5.32 The consultation findings were less conclusive on the range of subjects currently offered as Vocational A levels and on the number of units offered in

individual qualifications within both GCE and Vocational A levels. Further investigation is therefore recommended to explore the extent of the overlap, similarities and differences between Vocational A level and GCE in the same or similar subject areas. (The limited mapping that has already been undertaken suggests that there are complex subject-specific issues to be considered.) Analysis of the uptake and results of optional units for the Vocational A level would also help to inform decisions on whether to retain or withdraw some units, in order to have a range comparable to GCE.

5.33 In summary, therefore, it is recommended that the Vocational A level re-development and mapping work begin early in 2002, with first teaching of the revised qualifications planned for September 2004.

(v) AEA development

5.34 Ministers wrote to QCA in March 1999 about the Government's wish to improve provision for very able young people and asked for the development of new 'world class tests' for the most able 16-to-19 year-olds in each subject.

5.35 Advanced Extension Awards (or AEAs), as these 'world class tests' are named, will replace Special Papers. They are based on the subject criteria for A level. The awards are intended to test candidates' depth of understanding, their ability to think critically and creatively and to make connections between different elements of a subject. They are designed to require no teaching or resources beyond those required for the corresponding A level. There will be two grades, distinction and merit.

5.36 In summer 2002, candidates will be able to take AEAs in the following subjects: biology, chemistry, critical thinking, economics, English, French, geography, German, history, Irish, mathematics, physics, religious studies, Spanish, Welsh and Welsh second language. Sample test papers, mark schemes and guidance for candidates and tutors have been developed for these subjects.

5.37 Over the last two years 1,800 candidates from approximately 80 schools and colleges, in both the independent and maintained sectors, have taken part in the AEA trials. Participating centres were self-selecting, completing an application form posted on the QCA website. Chemistry, English, French, geography and mathematics were trialed in 2000, followed by critical thinking, English, history, physics, mathematics, Welsh and Welsh Second Language in 2001. A full evaluation report on the 2001 trial will be available on the QCA website. Other subjects were tried out in a few selected centres. Throughout the development and trials, the awarding bodies and the regulatory authorities have worked closely with schools, colleges, higher education and subject associations.

5.38 Candidates and tutors completed evaluation questionnaires on how they found tests. Candidates, most of whom had not been entered for Special Papers, generally believed they had sufficient knowledge to take the tests, and an increasing number in 2001 found the questions stimulating and were

pleased to demonstrate their abilities beyond A level. Whilst they felt confident in their analytical skills, many candidates in both years felt less sure of their research skills. The majority of tutors believed the tests were an appropriate assessment of their students' abilities. The tutors' main reservation was that, contrary to an aim of the award, candidates need to do some preparation to succeed.

5.39 Another concern on which centres, professional associations, higher education and UCAS have commented is the limited range of subjects available from 2002, because this disadvantages those able students whose programme does not include a subject offered as an AEA. This restricted provision has contributed to the lack of commitment to AEAs from higher education and also to the UCAS Board's decision not to allocate a tariff in 2002. Extending the range of subjects and qualifications would help address these concerns.

5.40 Subject to the successful phased implementation, we would recommend that the range of provision across subjects and qualifications be extended to include most GCE subjects and Vocational A levels. This could improve the standing of AEAs with higher education institutions, encouraging the UCAS Board to review its decision not to allocate a tariff to the award. It would also strengthen the role of the qualification as an accessible award for all able students regardless of their programme of study. The earliest date for introducing additional subjects would be summer 2004.

6. LESSONS LEARNT

6.1 It is important that lessons be learned from the implementation of the reforms, by QCA as well as by others. At the end of our phase one report, we noted a tension between the desire to introduce new qualifications so that learners may profit from the benefits as quickly as possible, and the need to ensure that the preparations are sufficiently thorough to permit effective implementation. Discussions about implementation issues have taken place with key stakeholders throughout the QCA review.

6.2 The phase one report identified several strands associated with the development of new qualifications:

- 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;
- awareness-raising and marketing amongst the principal stakeholders such as parents, employers and university admissions staff.

6.3 Qualifications are currently governed by criteria and codes of practice which are drawn up by the regulatory authorities. The qualifications introduced in September 2000 were backed by general criteria applying to all

qualifications as well as subject-specific criteria. In addition, detailed operational technical 'rules' were established to ensure common approaches across awarding bodies.

6.4 Changes to technical specifications for new qualifications can have major implications for the complex process of development and implementation. For example, during the development of revised A levels, a relatively late decision to change the 'synoptic' rule (by increasing the required proportion of synoptic assessment from 15 to 20 per cent) required awarding bodies to reconfigure many of the qualifications under development. A late decision to re-name advanced GNVQ as the Vocational A level required changes to materials being produced and time to agree formal qualification and certification titles. Changes to technical specifications after the development process has started inevitably delay completion of the development and accreditation programme as well as the availability of materials in schools and colleges.

6.5 There is a variable record of trialling and piloting new qualifications in England prior to their introduction. Part One GNVQ is one of the few qualifications that underwent rigorous piloting, accompanied by a substantial programme of support and guidance during the pilot stage. The success of the qualification in schools and colleges is testimony to the importance of piloting prior to national rollout. Some components of Curriculum 2000 were piloted, but there was no piloting of the Curriculum 2000 package as a whole. The capacity of schools and colleges to implement the changes successfully was not properly tested.

6.6 In future major changes to qualifications should, before national launch, allow sufficient time and resource for pilots to evaluate the changes so that they can be properly managed and implemented.

6.7 The introduction of Curriculum 2000 was supported by major DfES-funded programmes organised by the Learning and Skills Development Agency (formerly the Further Education and Development Agency). Other organisations, including awarding bodies provide training to support the qualifications they produce. In addition, a range of commercial training providers run support programmes. Despite the efforts of QCA and the DfES, co-ordination of teacher preparation materials across organisations was difficult to achieve. The timetable for the development of the new qualifications was so tight that the final materials were not made available to schools and colleges until January 2000 or even later. Teachers and lecturers repeatedly point out that the planning cycle needs to be long enough to ensure that staff with the correct experience and training and the associated resources are in place well before the start of the academic year in which first teaching of new qualifications starts. Account must also be taken of publishers' schedules if textbooks are to be available in time for new courses.

6.8 In future the development of new qualifications should be timed to allow at least a full calendar year between the availability of new qualifications and their implementation in schools and colleges.

6.9 A wide range of publications and publicity material was produced to support the introduction of Curriculum 2000, ranging from detailed briefing documents for higher education to leaflets for parents. Conferences and seminars were held with schools, colleges, higher education institution and professional bodies. Despite these activities, confusion existed in the minds of some users about the changes being introduced. For example, the status of the Government's expectation of students taking five AS subjects (or their equivalent) in year 12 of the new courses remained unclear to many in schools and colleges.

6.10 In future when qualifications are introduced or revised, strategies for communication, promotion, marketing and training should be given greater priority at an earlier stage.

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