The Government's plans for the 14-19 phase of education: an assessment

IoD Policy Paper

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1.1 Introduction

Whereas much of the Labour Government's focus on education in its first term of office was concentrated on primary schools, in its second term it has given a greater emphasis to secondary education and further education. Proposals for encouraging greater diversity in the provision of secondary schools were announced in a White Paper in 2001;[1] plans for reform of further education were set out in 2002;[2] and at the beginning of this year the Government promised changes to the education system for 14-19 year olds.[3]

The 14-19 phase of education is naturally important because it is during this period that pupils should receive a good general education that prepares them for future participation in British society. It is also the period when pupils should acquire the qualifications that they need for progression in further and higher education and training and the time when they should gain some of the skills that they use in later employment. Regrettably, there are a variety of weaknesses in the 14-19 period of education and the Government's White Paper, *14-19: opportunity and excellence*, is an attempt to remedy these problems. This research paper describes and assesses the principal measures set out in the aforementioned White Paper.

1.2 Summary

There are significant weaknesses in the 14-19 phase of the education system.

Qualification attainment levels are comparatively poor

Whereas 53% of the UK workforce holds a Level 2 qualification (5 or more GCSEs at A* - C, an intermediate GNVQ, NVQ Level 2 or an equivalent qualification), the proportion of the German and French workforces holding a similar qualification stands at 82% and 71%, respectively.[4] Similarly, while 38% of the UK workforce has a Level 3 qualification (2 or

[1] *Schools. Achieving Success* (Department for Education and Skills, 2001, Cm 5230).
[2] *Success for all. Reforming Further Education and Training* (Department for Education and Skills, discussion document, June 2002).
[3] *14-19: opportunity and excellence* (Department for Education and Skills, 2003).
[4] Cited in *14-19: extending opportunities, raising standards* (Department for Education and Skills, February 2002, Cm 5342), p. 9. The UK and French data refers to 1998, whereas the German data is based on 1997 figures.

more GCE A Levels, an advanced GNVQ, NVQ Level 3 or similar qualification), 73% of the German workforce possesses an equivalent qualification.[5]

Problems with the qualifications system

The GCSE examination does not suit all pupils. In 2000/01, at GCSE/Standard Grade Level, 5.5% of pupils in their last year of compulsory schooling failed to achieve any graded results and 19.4% of pupils only managed to gain one or more GCSEs at grades D-G. Conversely, 51% of pupils in their last year of compulsory schooling secured five or more grades at A* - C.[6]

AS Levels, introduced under the Curriculum 2000 reforms, have simply added to the burden of examinations. The A Level marking debacle of 2002 undermined confidence in A2 Levels in particular, while ever increasing pass rates have undermined respect for A Levels in general.

Vocational education is weak

Weaknesses in the country's vocational education system have resulted in the UK turning out a smaller proportion of vocationally trained people in comparison to other advanced industrialised countries. In 2000, it was reported that just 27% of the UK workforce had vocational qualifications at Level 2 compared to 58% of the German workforce, while at Level 3 the figures were 17% and 52% respectively.[7]

Participation levels in post-16 education and training are low

One in four 16-18 year olds abandoned education and training at the end of 2000, a figure notably higher than the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) and European Union (EU) averages.[8]

The Government's White Paper proposes the following measures to ameliorate the deficiencies in the 14-19 stage of the education system.

Targets to improve qualification attainment rates

The Government wants to see the proportion of 19 year olds achieving five GCSEs A* - C or the equivalent vocational qualification to rise by three percentage points by 2004 in comparison with the figure achieved in 2002 and by a further three percentage points by 2006.[9] However, targets can distort behaviour, have unexpected consequences and generate perverse incentives.

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[5] Ibid, p. 9. The UK and French figures are based on data from 1998, the German data from 1997.
[6] *Education and Training Statistics for the United Kingdom 2002 edition* (National Statistics, London: The Stationery Office, 2002), p. 79.
[7] *Skills for all: Research Report from the National Skils Task Force* (Department for Education and Employment, 2000), p. 63. The data for the UK is from 1998, that from Germany (the former Bundesrepublik), from 1997.
[8] *14-19: opportunity and excellence*, p. 9.
[9] Ibid, p. 17.

Changes to the Qualifications system

The Government proposes to introduce 'hybrid' GCSEs "with a common core and optional vocational or general units".[10] However, a "pick and mix" GCSE could see students opting out of difficult, but important, subject areas and studying easier units.

The introduction of vocational GCSEs and A Levels is to be welcomed, provided that they are rigorous and satisfy employers' needs.

The Government remains attracted to "a baccalaureate type of award".[11] To this end, it has established a Working Group for 14-19 Reform under the Chairmanship of Mike Tomlinson to examine this issue.[12] However, the introduction of an "English baccalaureate" is unnecessary and potentially disruptive.

Standard Assessment Tests (SATs) should be retained at 14 (and also at 7 and 11) in order to sustain the system of school league tables, without which parents would have difficulty comparing the performance of different schools and their children's progress. Pupils should continue to sit for GCSEs, but for those who find them unchallenging the Government needs to consider allowing schools to offer such pupils an opportunity to work towards a more demanding qualification. If schools chose to provide an alternative qualification for their more able pupils, though, the examination should receive at least the same weight in the school league tables as GCSEs.

AS Levels should be abolished, not least in order to lighten the burden of examinations. A Levels should be retained, but now that a fifth of students are achieving an 'A' grade at A Level, the Government and the examination boards need to consider ways to help employers and universities differentiate between the very good performers at A Level and the elite. A smaller proportion of pupils should achieve an 'A' grade at A Level, otherwise the grade loses distinction. Educational institutions should be able to offer students the International Baccalaureate in place of A Levels if they wish to do so.

Changes to the National Curriculum

The Government proposes to retain a slimmed down National Curriculum, incorporating English, mathematics, science, Information and Communication Technology (ICT), Religious Education (RE), sex education, Physical Education (PE), citizenship and careers education. Schools will also be obliged to teach 14-16 year old pupils about work and enterprise and pupils will be required to undertake some work related learning. This should mean that statutory teaching requirements fall from absorbing 80% of teaching time to about 50%.

The Government should reduce the content of the National Curriculum still further by removing ICT from the list of core subjects. ICT skills can be acquired through the teaching

[10] Ibid, p. 24.
[11] Ibid, p. 46.
[12] Ibid, p. 47.

of other subjects. Schools should be able to teach British History as an alternative to Citizenship.

Vocational education and training

The Government's approach here includes the development of vocational and hybrid GCSEs, requiring all young people to undertake some work related learning at Key Stage 4 and setting a target for 28% of young people to enter Modern Apprenticeships (MA) by the age of 22, by 2004.

The development of vocational GCSEs should give students a greater opportunity to take a more practical and trade related route to learning, but it is vital that such qualifications are demanding, marking is rigorous and useful skills and knowledge are acquired in the course of study. Work related learning could enrich pupils' educational experience, but placements must be matched to pupils' interests. The target for increasing the number of MAs should be dropped because targets can change behaviour, have unexpected ramifications and create perverse incentives.

Participation rates

New types of GCSEs (hybrid and vocational), a slimmed down National Curriculum and a revamped vocational education stream should help to improve participation rates in post-16 education.

2 Weaknesses in the secondary education system

2.1 Qualification attainment levels are comparatively poor

Perhaps the most striking failing about the country's education system is the disappointingly small proportion of good qualifications achieved by pupils. In the early 1980s, only 27% of school leavers in England and Wales achieved five or more O Levels.[13] Even today, only 51% of pupils achieve five good GCSEs (i.e., A* - C) or the equivalent by the age of 16. Indeed, 5% of pupils fail to achieve any GCSEs at all.[14] Many school children proceed through compulsory education without acquiring basic literacy and numeracy skills. As a consequence, a fifth of the adult population is functionally illiterate and innumerate.[15]

Moreover, the quality of the UK workforce, when measured in terms of the qualifications that it holds, is inferior to that of some of our principal competitors. Whereas 53% of the UK workforce holds a Level 2 qualification (5 or more GCSEs at A* - C, an intermediate GNVQ, NVQ Level 2 or an equivalent qualification), the proportion of the German and French workforces holding a similar qualification stands at 82% and 71%, respectively.[16] Similarly, while 38% of the UK workforce has a Level 3 qualification (2 or more GCE A Levels, an advanced GNVQ, NVQ Level 3 or similar qualification), 73% of the German workforce possesses an equivalent qualification.[17] The proportion of the French workforce holding a qualification equivalent to a Level 3 qualification is on a par with that of the UK, standing at 38%.[18]

[13] D. H. Aldcroft, *Education, Training and Economic Performance 1944-1990* (Manchester University Press, 1992), p. 41. By way of contrast, approximately 60% of German school leavers were achieving the equivalent of five or more O Levels at this time.
[14] *14-19: opportunity and excellence*, p. 9.
[15] *Improving Literacy and Numeracy – A Fresh Start* (Report of the Working Group chaired by Sir Claus Moser, Department for Education and Employment, 1999, Ref: CMBSI). See also, *Second Report of the National Skills Task Force. Delivering Skills for all* (Department for Education and Employment, 1999), especially p. 23.
[16] Cited in *14-19: extending opportunities, raising standards*, p. 9. The UK and French data refers to 1998, whereas the German data is based on 1997 figures.
[17] Ibid, p. 9. The UK and French figures are based on data from 1998, the German data from 1997.
[18] Ibid, p. 9. The French figure is based on data from 1998.

2.2 Problems with the qualifications system

There are also problems with the qualifications themselves that school children work towards in the 14-19 phase of education. To begin with, it is far from clear that the GCSE examination is suitable for all school children at Key Stage 4, even though it is a differentiated exam which is set at different levels of difficulty (there are three separate levels). On the one hand, some pupils apparently pass a multitude of GCSEs, thereby conveying the impression that the qualification is comparatively easy to obtain. In 2000/01, at GCSE/Standard Guide Level, 51% of pupils in their last year of compulsory schooling secured five or more passes at grades A* - C.[19] As the Government acknowledges, some students in Key Stages 3 and 4[20] are merely coasting "because the work is insufficiently challenging or interesting".[21] Indeed, the Government has recognised that GCSEs can be so unchallenging for some pupils that there should be scope for them to take the examinations early or even to skip them altogether and proceed onto study for AS or A2 qualifications.[22] On the other hand, some pupils evidently find GCSEs a challenge. In 2000/01, 5.5% of pupils in their last year of compulsory schooling failed to achieve a single GCSE, 19.4% of pupils only managed to obtain one or more GCSEs at grades D-G and 24.1% of pupils secured one to four passes at grades A* - C.[23] More generally, the Government fears that GCSEs have been transmogrified into two separate qualifications: Level 2 (grades A* - C) is regarded as a success, but Level 1 (grades D – G) is seen as a failure.[24] In short, the GCSE qualification has not been a success in catering for students of differing abilities.

Moreover, suspicions abound that GCSE examinations have become easier over time. In 1974/75 just 22.6% of pupils gained five or more O Levels and by 1986/87 this had only risen to 26.4%, the last year that the majority of school children in the country sat for this particular set of examinations. However, the improvement in GCSE results has been much more dramatic. In 1987/88 when GCSEs were first introduced, the proportion of pupils achieving at least five GCSEs at grades A – C was 29.9%. However, in 2001/02, the proportion of pupils securing five or more GCSEs at grades A* - C stood at 51.5% (GCSE grade A* was introduced in 1993/94).[25] The improvement in pass rates could be put down to better teaching, harder working pupils and the incentive given by school league tables to perform well. However, it has also been argued that changes to syllabuses have made some

[19] *Education and Training Statistics for the United Kingdom 2002 edition*, p. 79. Some pupils manage to gain a cornucopia of GCSEs. For example, Prince Harry passed 11 GCSEs in 2001. See *The Guardian*, September 10th 2002.

[20] The National Curriculum established four Key Stages. Key Stage 1 relates to children aged five to seven, Key Stage 2 relates to children aged seven to eleven, Key Stage 3 relates to children aged 11-14 and Key Stage 4 relates to children aged 14-16. See the Department for Education, *The National Curriculum – England* (Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1995) and Department for Education and Employment and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, *The National Curriculum: Handbook for Secondary Teachers in England – Key Stages 3 and 4* (The Stationery Office, 1999).

[21] *14-19: opportunity and excellence*, pp. 10-11.

[22] *14-19: opportunity and excellence. Annexes,* Annex 2, p. 12.

[23] *Education and Training Statistics for the United Kingdom 2002 edition*, p. 79.

[24] *14-19: opportunity and excellence*, p. 11.

[25] Data from the Statistics Department of the Department for Education and Skills, sent to the author on 25th April 2003. See also J. Marks, *The Betrayed Generations. Standards in British Schools 1950-2000* (Centre for Policy Studies, November 2000), p. 53. See also C. Woodhead and J. Clare, *The Best for Your Children* (Daily Telegraph, 2001), Part 3, "Ages 11-18 secondary".

GCSE examinations easier.[26] Additionally, assessment of students who study for GCSE may not be sufficiently demanding. GCSEs involve coursework, which permits most pupils to excel, but it also has the potential for cheating and plagiarism. Moreover, the pass marks for some GCSEs may have been lowered.[27] The perception that GCSEs have become easier to pass has inevitably resulted in a loss of respect for the qualification. After the A Level marking debacle (see below) David Hart, general secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers, called for a parliamentary inquiry into the whole exam system, including GCSEs and National Curriculum tests. This was necessary, he said, because "there is a perception out there that we don't have an independent system people can have confidence in".[28]

At the same time, the old gold standard of the country's education system – A- Levels - has been devalued. The pass rate at A Level has risen for twenty years in succession, rising from 68.2%[29] in 1982 to 94.3% in 2002.[30] Additionally, the proportion of pupils achieving 'A' grades at A Level has increased from about 11.4% in 1989 to over 20.7% in 2002.[31] Again, this increase in pass rates at A Level could be the consequence of students and teachers working harder and more effectively than in the past. Also, as with GCSEs, the improvement in pass rates at A Level might be partly due to the effect of school league tables, which encourage schools and pupils to excel. However, it is also possible that A Level examinations have become easier. Again, there are some reports that syllabuses have become less demanding[32] and that marking has become easier on the student.[33] York University's electronics department, which has been giving the same maths test for the last 15 years, has seen average test scores of those with 'A' or 'B' grades in A Level Mathematics fall from 78% to 54%.[34] Similarly, Coventry University's diagnostic tests for new students show that those with a 'B' grade at A Level now have the same or worse maths as those with an 'N' grade in 1991.[35] Changes to the assessment of A Levels, have probably also contributed to rising pass rates. In the past, the assessment of A Levels was largely linear in fashion – students were typically examined at the end of their two years of study on the whole of their course. However, now students take examinations on separate modules of their syllabuses at different points over their period of study, rather than taking examinations at the end of their course; they may also retake papers in separate modules to improve their results. This has almost certainly resulted in higher pass rates and higher grades.[36] Additionally, whereas in the past there was a fixed percentage of students who achieved a particular grade each year ('norm referenced' assessment), since the late 1980s students have received a particular

[26] Bentham, "Official: A Levels & GCSEs are getting easier", *The Sunday Telegraph*, 16th August 2001.
[27] Jeffrey Robinson, retired principal examiner in maths for the Cambridge Board (now OCR), has said that easier marking has resulted in better grades. See J. Robinson, "Passmarks lowered throughout the decade", *Evening Standard*, 23rd August 2001.
[28] Quoted in *The Times*, September 30th 2002.
[29] R. Lea, *Education and Training. A Business Blueprint for Reform* (Institute of Directors, 2002), p. 73. See also W. Woodward, "College Concern Over A Level Surge", *The Guardian*, August 15th 2002.
[30] *The Times*, September 16th 2002.
[31] J. Clare, "Pass Rate Soars as Pupils Play the System", *The Daily Telegraph*, August 15th 2002.
[32] See, for example, J. Clare, "Any questions", *The Daily Telegraph*, 11th July 2001 and J. Clare, "Study shows pupils need to know less for A Levels", *The Daily Telegraph*, 27th March 1999.
[33] Owen, "A Level examiners 'too soft'", *The Times*, 18th January 2002.
[34] R. Cairns, "Are Results too Good to be True?", *The Independent*, 21st March 2002.
[35] "Hard Numbers", *The Economist*, 19th April 2003.
[36] On this point, see House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, *A Level Standards* (London: The Stationery Office Limited, HC 153, Third Report of Session 2002-03, April 2003), p. 7.

grade provided that they reach a certain standard ('criterion referenced' assessment).[37] This has enhanced the potential for an increase in higher grades.

It is probably impossible to prove conclusively that A Levels have become easier to pass and to achieve higher grades than it was in the past.[38] However, the perception is that the examination is not as demanding as it once was and as a consequence, confidence in the qualification has been eroded.[39] Indeed, confidence in the A Level system was shaken to its very foundations following the grade fixing debacle that occurred in 2002.[40] The origins of this fiasco lie in the Government's Curriculum 2000 reforms. These changes replaced Advanced Supplementary Levels that had been introduced in the late 1980s with Advanced Subsidiary (AS) Levels, which were meant to represent half an A Level. It was hoped that students would study five AS Levels in their first year in the sixth form and then study for three A2 Levels in the following year. The purpose of this reform was to encourage students to study a wider range of subjects in the sixth form and avoid over-specialisation. However, the immediate impact of AS Levels was to impose an unreasonably heavy workload on students[41] and to squeeze out extra curricular activities.[42] Additionally, AS Levels resulted in rising pass rates, not least because pupils could retake their papers in order to improve their grades. The Oxford, Cambridge and Royal Society of Arts board (OCR), under the impression that the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) wanted the 2002 A Level results to be in line with the previous year's awards, at the last moment altered A Level grade boundaries in order to depress the results.[43] In the uproar that followed the emergence of this scandal in mid-September, Estelle Morris, the Secretary of State for Education and Skills, dismissed Sir William Stubbs, chairman of the QCA, but she in turn was seriously undermined by the fiasco and resigned in October.[44]

Before Estelle Morris departed from the Government, Mike Tomlinson, the former head of Her Majesty's Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED), was asked to conduct two reviews on A Levels. As a consequence of the first of his reports, 1,953 A and AS Level entry grades were revised.[45] The second review resulted in Tomlinson recommending a number of reforms to the A level system, in particular that AS and A2 Levels become separate

[37] R. Lea, *Education and training. A Business Blueprint for Reform*, p. 70.
[38] On this point, see M. Tomlinson, *Inquiry into A Level Standards. Final Report* (Prolog, December 2002).
[39] For example, a survey of IoD members in 1996 showed that the majority of members did not believe that standards in GCSEs and A Level had been maintained. See R. Lea and D. Boyle, *Education: Results of an IoD Member Survey* (Institute of Directors, 1996).
[40] See House of Commons, Education and Skills Committee, *A Level Standards*.
[41] See, for example, *The Daily Telegraph*, 17th August 2001, *The Guardian*, 19th December 2001, *The Times*, 19th December 2001.
[42] See, for example, *The Times*, March 28th 2002.
[43] See, *The Times*, September 19th 2002, *The Financial Times*, September 20th 2002, *The Sunday Times*, September 29th 2002, *The Times*, September 30th 2002, *The Times*, September 26th, *The Guardian*, September 27th 2002.
[44] Morris was ultimately driven to resigning because she had given a commitment to step down if the Government's 2002 National Learning Targets for literacy and numeracy were not met. These stipulated that, by 2002, 80% of 11 year olds should reach the expected standard for their age in literacy (level 4 in Key Stage 2 tests), while 75% should reach the expected standard in numeracy. In the event, 75% of 11 year olds achieved the literacy standard and 73% the numeracy benchmark.
[45] "Tomlinson inquiry brings clarity for A Level students. Morris details steps to help students & restore A Level confidence", Department for Education and Skills press release, October 15th 2002.

qualifications, thereby reversing a key aspect of the Curriculum 2000 reforms.[46] (The Government is presently considering this proposal). Although the outcome of the Tomlinson review should limit a similar fixing of AS and A Level results this year, the grade fixing fiasco further undermined public confidence in these examinations. Indeed, even the Government has lost faith in the A Level system. This is partly, it claims, because "too many students [at A Level] still study narrow programmes"[47] (although there is little evidence that employers and universities consider traditional A Levels to be too specialised). Additionally, the Government recognises that the most able A Level students "find that their studies fail to stretch them".[48]

2.3 Vocational education is weak

One of the long-standing weaknesses of the British economy has been a failure to develop an adequate system of vocational education. Acts of Parliament were passed in 1889, 1918 and 1944 that empowered local authorities to create vocational educational institutions. Unfortunately, on each occasion the efforts of local authorities proved to be disappointing, partly because they lacked sufficient financial resources for the task at hand.[49] For example, following the 1944 Education Act only half the local authorities required to set up technical schools actually did so, with the result that at their peak only 3-5% of the school population attended technical secondary schools.[50] Moreover, historically speaking the education system has tended to promote academic over vocational education. By the end of the 1980s, two thirds of school leavers had no "worthwhile vocational qualifications".[51] Even today, the vast majority of 16-year-olds study for GCSEs and a significant proportion subsequently proceed to do A Levels. In the absence of this critical mass of support, vocational education has struggled to achieve parity of esteem with academic education. This in turn has probably deterred many teenagers from the vocational route, and so the circle continues.

At the same time, until comparatively recently, British employers failed to give adequate priority to training. In the 1950s and 1960s, one third of young people went into employment where no significant training was provided.[52] As late as 1987, there was no systematic training for over half the workforce and less than one third of employers had a training plan or budget dedicated for training purposes.[53] As a consequence, Britain has tended to turn out a relatively small proportion of vocationally trained people in comparison to other industrialised countries. In 1988, 26% of the country's workforce had intermediate vocational qualifications, compared to 40% in France and 64% in Germany.[54] As late as 2000 it was reported that just 27% of the UK workforce had vocational qualifications at Level 2 compared to 41% of the French workforce and 58% of the German workforce. At Level 3, only 17% of the UK workforce held vocational qualifications, compared to 52% of the

[46] M. Tomlinson, *Inquiry into A Level Standards. Final Report.*
[47] *14-19: opportunity and excellence*, p. 11.
[48] *14-19: opportunity and excellence*, pp. 10-11.
[49] C. Barnett, *The Audit of War* (Macmillan, 1986).
[50] D. H. Aldcroft, *Education, Training and Economic Performance in the UK 1944 – 1990*, p. 32.
[51] Ibid, pp. 72-3.
[52] Ibid, p. 53.
[53] Ibid, pp. 72-3.
[54] Ibid, pp. 67.

German workforce.[55] The UK's relatively weak system of vocational education has probably exposed businesses to skill shortages and skill gaps, with the result that they have not operated as efficiently as they might otherwise have done. This has been detrimental to the economy at large.

2.4 Participation levels in post-16 education are low

Participation rates in education beyond the age of 16 are poor in comparison to other countries. In a league table of participation rates for 17 year olds, the UK came 25th out of 29 OECD countries. In fact, one in four 16-18 year olds abandoned education and training at the end of 2000, a figure notably higher than the OECD and EU averages.[56] However, this does represent an improvement on past performance: in 1978 56% of 17-18 year olds in the UK were not participating in either education or training, compared to just 21% in West Germany.[57] Using a different measurement, 88% of 15-19 year-olds in Germany were in education and training in 2001, compared to 72.5% of the same age group in the UK.[58]

The Government blames the high drop out rate amongst school pupils from education and training on a combination of factors including: an assumption that leaving school at 16 is natural; disaffection with study at school and a preference to be at work; financial circumstances; and poor advice.[59] Relatively low rates of participation in education and training in the post-16 phase probably has the effect of leaving the UK with a comparatively less skilled workforce in relation to many other OECD countries.

[55] *Skills for all: Research Report from the National Skills Task Force*, p. 63. The data for the UK and for France is from 1998, that for Germany (the former Bundespublik) from 1997. The workforce refers to those aged between 16-64 (UK women 16-59). At level 3, the UK's position was superior to that of France, where only 12% of the workforce held vocational qualifications.

[56] *14-19: opportunity and excellence*, p. 9. The relatively low participation rate in education and training amongst 16-18 year olds in the UK may be partly explained by the fact that there is no statutory requirement for them to do so. By way of contrast, in both The Netherlands and parts of Germany there is a legal requirement to attend at least part time education once compulsory schooling has been completed. See *14-19: Opportunity and Excellence. Annexes*, p. 61. However, this alone does not explain the low participation levels amongst 16-18 year-olds in the UK.

[57] D. H. Aldcroft, *Education, Training and Economic Performance in the UK 1944 – 1990*, p. 60.

[58] *14-19: opportunity and excellence. Annexes*, p. 61.

[59] *14-19: opportunity and excellence*, pp. 10-11.

3 The Government's response to deficiencies in 14-19 education and training

3.1 Targets to improve qualification attainment rates

In response to the poor attainment rates for qualifications at the end of Key Stage 4, the Government has set pupils and schools targets for improvement. The proportion of 19 year olds achieving 5 GCSEs A* - C or the equivalent vocational qualifications is meant to rise by three percentage points by 2004 in comparison with the figure achieved in 2002 and by a further 3 percentage points by 2006.[60] Possibly, targets can help to focus the attention of students and teachers on improving attainment levels. However, the effect of target setting is by no means entirely benign. In the first instance, the consequence of target setting can be to distort behaviour. For example, during the previous Parliament the establishment of targets for literacy and numeracy may have distorted the behaviour of teaching staff by leading them to reduce the amount of time that they previously devoted to other aspects of their children's education. Additionally, the introduction of targets can have unforeseen consequences. For example, although the Government's target for reducing class sizes in primary schools was successful, unfortunately class sizes in secondary schools increased. Average class sizes in maintained primary schools declined from 27.5 pupils in 1997 to 26.3 pupils in 2002. Conversely, average class sizes in maintained secondary schools rose from 21.7 pupils in 1997 to 21.9 pupils in 2002.[61] Moreover, the setting of targets can create perverse incentives for those who are expected to meet the objectives. For instance, in the summer of 2002 it was reported that a primary school headmistress corrected her 11-year-old pupils' wrong answers in the SATs[62] for maths and science in order to meet the national standards.[63] Similarly, it has been reported that the tests in English and science for 11-year-olds have changed every year and have become easier in the process.[64]

It is conceivable that the new targets that have been set for GCSE attainment could result in similar unintended effects. For example, teachers and pupils might be tempted to opt for easier GCSEs in order to hit the new targets. Consequently, target setting can be counter-

[60] *14-19: opportunity and excellence*, p. 17.
[61] *Statistics of Education: Class Sizes and Pupil Teacher Ratios in England* (National Statistics, Issue No. 01-03, February 2003), p. 15 and p. 17.
[62] SATs are taken at the ages of 7, 11 and 14 as part of the National Curriculum's requirement for testing pupils.
[63] *The Daily Telegraph*, June 29th 2001. On the subject of teachers cheating over SAT results, see also Phillips, "Schools learn to cheat at exams", *The Sunday Times*, September 19th 1999.
[64] *The Economist*, September 20th 2001.

productive because it can distort behaviour, have unexpected consequences and generate perverse incentives. The use of targets smacks of the USSR's approach to economic policy, a strategy that literally failed to deliver the goods. Improvements in results require better teaching and learning and these are not easy to achieve. Ministers should abandon their focus on targets.

3.2 Changes to the Qualifications System

The Government not only hopes to improve the qualification attainment rate by its use of targets to spur achievement on, but also by reforms to the principal qualifications taken at the end of Key Stage 4 and post-16. However, this aspect of the White Paper is not well developed at all and in many respects the sections of the Paper dealing with qualifications reads like a Green Paper.

With respect to Key Stage 4, the Government intends to keep GCSEs (although see below), but it also plans to create 'hybrid' GCSEs "with a common core and optional vocational or general units".[65] Additionally, the Government has scrapped the prefix 'vocational' from vocational GCSEs and it plans to do the same to vocational A Levels.[66] These changes are animated by the desire to break down the divide that exists between academic and vocational education in the country and by the aim of creating a parity of esteem between academic and vocational qualifications.

With regards to post-16 general or academic qualifications, for the time being the Government intends to retain both the AS Level and the A2 Level (but see below). However, the Government has sensibly decided to drop a proposal that it made in the Green Paper on education for 14-19 year olds that it should be possible to achieve an A grade at A2 "with distinction", over and above the straight forward A grade.[67] This move would have amounted to a de facto admission that grade inflation had taken place. Rather than adopting this fudge of a policy, the Government has instead decided that the best way to challenge and stimulate able pupils is by offering them the opportunity to take exams for Advanced Extension Awards (AEAs). These qualifications appear to be extremely similar to the old S Levels, which particularly talented, intelligent and imaginative students used to take.

Although the Government has decided to retain GCSEs, AS Levels and A Levels for the time being, their long term prospects are uncertain. In last year's Green Paper on the 14-19 phase the Government proposed the establishment of an Overarching Award, called the Matriculation Diploma. This would have been based on existing qualifications, incorporated a core set of skills (literacy, numeracy and ICT) and included recognition of pupils' participation and achievement in a range of extra-curricular activities.[68]

However, the consultation process that followed the publication of the Green Paper showed that there was a general lack of support for the Matriculation Diploma, so the Government

[65] *14-19: opportunity and excellence*, p. 24.
[66] Ibid, pp. 24-5.
[67] *14-19: extending opportunities, raising standards*, p. 34.
[68] Ibid, Chapter 4. See also, *14-19: opportunity and excellence*, pp. 45-6.

elected not to include it as a proposal in this year's White Paper.[69] Nevertheless, this does not mean that GCSEs, AS Levels and A Levels will remain in their present form, if at all, in the future. The QCA is examining the sustainability of the existing exam processes and systems.[70] Already Dr Boston, Chief Executive of the QCA, has suggested that GCSEs should be unitised, thereby enabling pupils to construct qualifications to match their own interests. GCSEs would consist of a series of different credits and the accumulation of a sufficient number of these credits would result in the student acquiring a GCSE.[71] Rather like AS Levels, A Levels, and GNVQs, then, GCSEs would be modularised. At this stage, the future shape of the GCSE is unclear.

More fundamentally, the Government remains attracted to "a baccalaureate type of award".[72] To this end, it has established a Working Group for 14-19 Reform under the Chairmanship of the seemingly ubiquitous Mike Tomlinson.[73] The Working Group's objectives are to examine providing more coherent learning programmes, particularly in the vocational area, investigate assessment arrangements throughout the 14-19 phase and make recommendations for a unified framework of qualifications.[74] Rather comically, Tomlinson's Group will also review his own proposal that AS and A2 qualifications should be become two separate qualifications (see above)! It seems fair to presume that the Tomlinson Group will endorse the Tomlinson proposals on AS and A2 qualifications.

With respect to the Government's short-term changes to the country's qualification system, the final verdict on the value of hybrid GCSEs remains in the balance. A qualification that entails pupils selecting different units to construct their preferred form of GCSE might mean that important elements of study were missed out. A 'pick and mix' GCSE could see students opting out of difficult, but important, subject areas and studying easier units. Employers and universities would also find it difficult to know precisely what pupils with hybrid GCSEs had actually learnt if they were to be made up of a great diversity of different units. It could be argued that hybrid GCSEs would enable pupils to broaden their study by

[69] The IoD argued that the proposed Matriculation Diploma would not have been a separate qualification and from an employer's point of view it would not have told him anything that he did not already know. The typical school leaver already sets out his or her academic and extra-curricular achievements onto a C.V. and presents this to an employer. The Matriculation Diploma would have simply repeated this exercise. Most employers would have still wanted to know what GCSEs and A Levels prospective employees had, not whether they had been awarded a Matriculation Diploma at a particular level. Moreover, by itself the Matriculation Diploma would not have secured parity of esteem between vocational and academic routes. Unless vocational courses and examinations are held to be demanding, rigorous and ultimately useful, they will continue to be the poor relation of academic qualifications. Combining academic and vocational qualifications under the auspices of a Matriculation Diploma would not have got round this fundamental point. Additionally, the Matriculation Diploma would not necessarily encourage more pupils to participate in further education post-16. Pupils would only stay in further education to attain a Matriculation Diploma at a higher level if they believed that employers and universities placed significant weight upon it. However, as the Diploma was only repeating information held elsewhere, employers and universities would be unlikely to take this attitude.

[70] *14-19: opportunity and excellence*, p. 44.

[71] *The Times*, March 22nd 2003. See also Ken Boston, "Evolution not Revolution", *The Times Educational Supplement*, March 21st 2003.

[72] *14-19: opportunity and excellence*, p. 46.

[73] Ibid, p. 47.

[74] *14-19: opportunity and excellence. Annexes*, Annex 6.

working towards GCSEs that combine both academic and vocational elements. However, it might just be simpler for pupils to take a variety of GCSEs that are unambiguously academic and vocational in nature if they wish to widen their area of study.

The Government's intention to maintain and develop vocational GCSEs and A Levels is sensible. The development of these qualifications should give pupils an opportunity to traverse along an alternative educational route to the well established academic one that currently exists, or combine aspects of the two. This in turn could help to play a part in ameliorating the weaknesses that currently exist in the country's vocational education system. These new qualifications might also enhance participation rates in post-16 education and training if students enjoy studying for them and if they consider them to be beneficial. However, if the UK is to develop a respected system of vocational education it is imperative that vocational GCSEs and vocational A Levels are rigorous and satisfy employers' needs.

Parity of esteem between vocational education and general or academic education is ultimately to be achieved by developing well respected courses and qualifications. Simply abolishing the labels between academic or general GCSEs/A Levels and vocational GCSEs/A Levels will not suddenly transform the value in which particular qualifications are held. Pupils, teachers, trainers, employees and employers will respect qualifications if they are rigorous, demanding and useful. If a qualification for a particular course fails to achieve these objectives, it will not be held in high regard, irrespective of whether it is called 'vocational', 'academic' 'hybrid' or something else.

Turning to GCSEs, on balance the Government is right to retain this set of examinations for pupils to work towards at the end of Key Stage 4. GCSEs give pupils an end goal for their studies. They also provide pupils with a set of qualifications to show potential employers and higher educational establishments. However, the Government should steer clear of unitising GCSEs. As with hybrid GCSEs, the effect of unitising general or academic GCSEs could be that students would opt out of difficult, but important, subject areas and study simpler units. Again, businesses and universities would also find it difficult to know precisely what pupils with unitised GCSEs had actually learnt if they could choose from a wide diversity of different units.

However, as it stands the GCSE qualification clearly does not cater for the needs of all 14-16 year olds: some find it difficult to acquire any examinations in this qualification at all, while others have a surfeit of them. Hopefully, the advent of vocational GCSEs will provide some of those pupils who presently find academic or general GCSEs difficult or even insurmountable with a qualification that they are able to attain. For those pupils who find GCSEs unchallenging, the Government needs to consider allowing schools to offer such pupils an opportunity to work towards a more demanding qualification. If schools chose to provide an alternative qualification to their more able pupils, though, the examination should receive at least the same weight in the school league tables as GCSEs. Schools would not want to route their most able pupils away from GCSEs towards more difficult examinations if the result was to depress the institution's position in the school league tables.

With regards to AS Levels, the best course of action would be to abandon this exam altogether, which got off to a difficult start in 2001. The intrinsic worth of this qualification is far from clear and its abolition would have the advantage of lightening the burden of

examinations on students and teachers. The AS Level represents an unhappy compromise between the traditional A Level system and the International Baccalaureate (IB). The value of a qualification that is taken after little more than two terms of study must be questionable (assuming the student does not continue to study the same subject in the following academic year). Early reports suggest that some employers and universities do not appear to be particularly convinced of the worth of AS Levels.[75] Schools have found that AS Levels bring little breadth to study but that their effect has been to eat into the time available for extra-curricular activities.[76]

With AS Levels abolished, the stage would then be set once more for students to study the traditional A Level at the end of two year's of study. However, A Levels should be reformed. Now that a fifth of students are achieving an 'A' grade at A Level, the Government and the examination boards need to consider ways to help employers and universities differentiate between the very good performers at A Level and the elite. A smaller proportion of pupils should achieve an 'A' grade at A Level. Otherwise, the grade loses distinction.

At the same time, the Government could encourage some schools to offer some of their post-16 students the opportunity to take the International Baccalaureate (IB), provided that the results are given due weight in the school performance tables. The IB qualification requires students to study for six subjects, including English, mathematics, a language, a science, a social science like history, a creative subject such as art, write a 4,000 word essay, study a theory of knowledge and participate in voluntary work.[77] The IB is a highly respected qualification, suitable only for a minority of students[78] and is relatively costly to deliver.[79] Nevertheless, it might complement A Levels (both vocational and traditional) as a post-16 qualification. Those schools that feel able to deliver the IB should be free to offer it to their students and be supported financially.

The case for an English Baccalaureate is considerably less appealing. All the signs are that the qualification would be pitched for pupils of all abilities (although with different levels of attainment), with the ineluctable consequence that it would fail to satisfy the divergent needs of different pupils. Moreover, after the shambles and revelations of recent years concerning examinations in this country, it is difficult to believe that an English Baccalaureate would be sufficiently demanding or rigorous. Confidence in the QCA as the guardian of standards is low.[80] Far better, then, to introduce vocational GCSEs and

[75] See for example, *The Daily Mail*, March 11th 2002. However, see also *The Sunday Times*, March 17th 2002.
[76] *The Independent*, November 8th 2001.
[77] See "Diploma Programme" (International Baccalaureate Organisation, February 2000). See also *The Financial Times*, May 18th/19th 2002 and *The Times*, September 24th 2002.
[78] It has been suggested that the IB would not suit at least 40% of the average comprehensive sixth form. See Giles Whittell, "Can we afford a Baccalaureate", *The Times*, September 27th 2002.
[79] The IB costs "at least half as much again to teach as A Levels" partly because of the extra staff that its implementation requires. See Giles Whittell, "Can we afford a Baccalaureate", *The Times*, September 27th 2002.
[80] For example, the QCA initially defended a new test for Shakespeare for 14-year-old pupils that would have enabled students to achieve more than half the marks without showing any knowledge of the Bard's plays. Dr Boston, who took up his position as head of the QCA in September 2002, ordered a review. The previous year the QCA recommended that the Shakespeare examination be reduced to 45 minutes, but it was overruled by the then Secretary of State for Education and Skills, Estelle Morris (*The Times*, 10th March 2003).

vocational A Levels, retain GCSEs but provide a more difficult qualification for those Key Stage 4 pupils needing a challenge and offer a reformed A Level and the IB for academically minded post-16 students. Schools and colleges should consequently be able to choose which of these qualifications to offer their students.

3.3 Changes to the National Curriculum

The Conservatives introduced the National Curriculum as a consequence of the 1988 Education Reform Act. Prior to this, Local Education Authorities (LEAs) and teachers had considerable discretion over what was taught in schools. In contrast to Japan and many continental European countries, there was no core curriculum. There was a lack of central Government control over what was taught in schools or how it was taught.[81] The purpose of the National Curriculum was to ensure that all schools provided their pupils with an elementary education, establish basic standards for schools to attain, promote greater coherence in provision and bring greater transparency to the education system. The National Curriculum introduced programmes for study in different subjects, four Key Stages of study for pupils and testing procedures at the ages of 7, 11 and 14, along with attainment targets that set out what pupils are expected to know.[82]

The National Curriculum has been reformed twice already, in 1995-97 (following a review by Sir Ron Dearing in 1995) and in 2000 (following another review in 1999)[83] and now the Government wants to make further changes. This is for two basic reasons. Firstly, the Government wants to create more space in the school time table for pupils to study for vocational subjects (see below). Secondly, the Government hopes that greater flexibility in the Curriculum at Key Stage 4 will indirectly promote higher post-16 participation rates in education (see below). If pupils find that their experience of education at Key Stage 4 is generally positive, then they should be less inclined to drop out once they have reached the end of compulsory education.

Today, English, mathematics, science, design and technology, modern foreign languages, Information and Communication Technology (ICT), PE, Religious Education, sex education and careers education and Citizenship are compulsory subjects. The Government estimates that these statutory teaching requirements absorb 80% of curriculum time.[84] This inevitably restricts the ability of pupils to study the subjects that are of interest to them.

The Government's White Paper proposes important changes to the National Curriculum from 2004/05. In essence, the Government's intention is to retain a slimmed down National Curriculum, the core of which will comprise English, mathematics, science, and for the time

[81] D. H. Aldcroft, *Education, Training and Economic Performance 1944-1990*, p. 39.
[82] At seven, pupils are tested on reading, writing, spelling and mathematics, at 11 they are tested on English, mathematics and science and the same subjects again at 14, using Standard Assessment Tests (SATs).
[83] "Blunkett details new curriculum focused on raising educational achievement for the next century", Department for Education and Employment press release, September 9th 1999.
[84] *14-19: extending opportunities, raising standards*, p. 22.

being, ICT.[85] Pupils will also be expected to be taught Religious Education (RE), sex education, Physical Education (PE), citizenship and careers education. Schools will additionally be obliged to teach 14-16 year old pupils about work and enterprise and pupils will be required to undertake some work related learning (see Section 3.4).[86] However, schools will no longer be obliged to teach modern foreign languages or design and technology. The Government estimates that these changes should mean that the National Curriculum is delivered in approximately 50% of pupils' time.[87] Nevertheless, while the National Curriculum will be thinned down, pupils will be entitled at Key Stage 4 to study a modern foreign language, design and technology, a subject in the arts and a subject in the humanities.[88] If a pupil's educational establishment is unable to deliver this entitlement directly, arrangements will have to be made for study in an alternative institution. Additionally, students will be entitled until the age of 19 to study towards literacy, numeracy and ICT until at least Level 2 (a good GCSE or equivalent Level 2 Key Skill qualification).[89]

This approach is broadly sensible. It is right to retain a National Curriculum. There are some subjects, such as English and mathematics, which are of such importance because they are often vital for progression in other subjects and are useful for future employment that all publicly funded schools should be required to teach them. The National Curriculum ensures that the most important subjects are taught to a statutory standard and so gives parents the confidence to know that their children are receiving a basic education. Interestingly, many other economically advanced countries (for example, Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, The Netherlands, Sweden and the USA) have a common core of subjects that pupils study during at least the lower part of the secondary education period.[90] Indeed, a common core of subjects is typically studied in the upper secondary phase of general education in such countries, either because it is a statutory requirement or simply because it is generally accepted practice.[91] The UK, then, is in good company in requiring pupils to learn a specific core of subjects during their time in secondary education.

However, the National Curriculum should only be retained in a slimmed down form. It presently inhibits flexibility in teaching and its burdensome requirements restrict schools from tailoring the curriculum more closely to the needs of their pupils. Curtailing the mandatory aspects of the National Curriculum should create greater opportunities for pupils to study the subjects that interest them and should provide sufficient space in the timetable for those pupils who wish to concentrate on work related learning. Moreover, many schools already take advantage of legislative provisions that enable them to exempt pupils from the requirements of the National Curriculum. At the moment, a pupil can opt out of up to two National Curriculum subjects in order to free up time to take part in work related learning or drop weaker subjects to create a greater opportunity to concentrate on other subjects. Approximately a third of schools already use regulations in respect of 5% of pupils nationally

[85] *14-19: opportunity and excellence*, p. 20. The White Paper sensibly points out that in the future it may be possible drop ICT as part of the National Curriculum because children will acquire ICT skills in the course of studying for other subjects.
[86] *14-19: opportunity and excellence*, p. 20 and p. 22.
[87] *14-19: extending opportunities, raising standards*, p. 27.
[88] *14-19: opportunity and excellence. Annexes,* Annex 2, pp. 6-7.
[89] Ibid, p. 10.
[90] *14-19: opportunity and excellence. Annexes*, p. 48.
[91] Ibid, p. 51.

to allow them to opt out of the National Curriculum on these grounds.[92] The subjects disapplied are, in order of frequency, modern foreign languages, design and technology and in a relatively small number of cases, science. Consequently, reducing the content of the National Curriculum should bring statutory provisions into line with reality on the ground in the nation's schools.

As previously mentioned, under the Government's plans modern languages and design and technology will no longer be subjects that have to be taught under the National Curriculum. This is sensible. Certainly, the study of modern foreign languages is valuable in its own right and it can have indirect benefits, such as improving a pupil's understanding of English grammar. A mastery of modern foreign languages can also be useful for some employers. However, 36,000 pupils are currently opting out of the study of modern foreign languages at Key Stage 4.[93] Arguably, this shows that a relatively large minority of the secondary school population either lacks an aptitude for the subject and/or fails to see the relevance of it for their future careers.

Additionally, while the study of a modern foreign language is of value, it would be wrong to argue that all pupils should be able to speak a foreign tongue in order to enable UK businesses to compete and win overseas orders. Fortunately for the UK, English is the language of business and of the Internet. Additionally, English looks set to become the language of the European Union (EU) – of the 375 million inhabitants of the EU, 55% speak English as either their mother tongue or second language.[94] It can be useful and satisfying to learn a modern foreign language, but it is not a national economic necessity to have every pupil in the UK learn one up until the age of 16. The Government is right, therefore, to propose that all pupils should have an entitlement to study a modern foreign language after the age of 14, but that it should not be obligatory.[95] In contrast, it could be a mistake to guarantee that every pupil at Key Stage 2 should have an opportunity to study a language by 2010.[96] In theory, thousands of modern language teachers might be required to enable primary schools to provide this teaching experience. This could devour a substantial proportion of the scarce resources that are available for the education of the nation's primary school children. Moreover, teaching a modern foreign language could detract from the emphasis in primary schools on the teaching of the 3Rs.[97] It is crucial that primary school children master the basic subjects before proceeding onto other, secondary, subjects. On balance, those primary schools that are in a position to teach a modern foreign language should be permitted to do so, should the governors and head teachers wish to do so, but primary schools should not be obliged to offer this facility.

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[92] *14-19: extending opportunities, raising standards*, p. 22.
[93] Ibid, p. 26.
[94] *The Times*, 20th March 2002.
[95] *14-19: opportunity and excellence. Annexes,* Annex 2, pp. 6-7.
[96] Ibid, p. 7.
[97] OFSTED has reported that only "…one [primary] school in five is still able to provide a curriculum which, while paying due regard to achieving high standards in English and mathematics, is broad, exciting and challenges pupils across the full range of national expectations" (*Standards and Quality in Education 2000/01. The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools* (Office for Standards in Education, February 2002), p. 30). This being the case, the last action that one would want to take is to absorb still more teaching time in primary schools with national requirements.

Likewise, there is no reason why pupils should not be able to dispense with design and technology in favour of an alternative course of study after the age of 14. As with modern foreign languages, the study of design and technology is not a precondition for the study of other subjects post-14 and although it can be useful it is not so imperative that every pupil should have to study it until the age of 16. The fact that 23,000 pupils are currently opting out of the study of design and technology indicates that a relatively sizeable proportion of the secondary school population either lacks an aptitude for the subject and/or fails to see the necessity of it for their future study and work.[98] Additionally, in approximately one fifth of secondary schools the provision of design and technology is inadequate because of the poor quality of resources and accommodation.[99] It would be wrong to force all children in all schools to take this subject up until the age of 16 if it cannot be taught properly. It would be preferable for a smaller number of schools to specialise in design and technology and offer to teach the subject to pupils from other institutions that have an interest in it. However, the Government is right to give pupils an entitlement to study design and technology post-14. As mentioned previously, if a school is not in a position to offer the study of design and technology between the ages of 14-16, then it should make arrangements for pupils to study it at other educational establishments.

Welcome though the Government's reforms to the National Curriculum are, it could probably slim its content down still further. ICT skills are important, but as the Government has admitted, they can probably be acquired through the teaching of other subjects. Accordingly, ICT should be removed from the list of National Curriculum subjects. Sex education should certainly be taught in schools, but bearing in mind that science is a statutory National Curriculum subject, it could perhaps be taught in biology lessons.[100] This might free up further time in schools. It is also questionable whether Citizenship should be a core National Curriculum subject. It is certainly important to promote tolerance, instil support for our liberal democratic institutions and encourage a sense of community amongst all school children. Whether the teaching of Citizenship will succeed in doing this is another matter. It is possible that Citizenship might end up being somewhat flabby in content, absorb valuable teaching time and over burden the National Curriculum; at this stage it is difficult to say. The best course of action would be for the Government to revisit the issue in a few years time after OFSTED and the QCA have made assessments of the subject. In the meantime, as an alternative to teaching Citizenship schools should be permitted to teach British History. This is a useful and important subject in its own right, but teaching it might have the additional advantage of highlighting our common values and heritage and instil in the nation's schoolchildren a sense of commonality and loyalty to the UK. The 2001 census revealed that 9% of the population of England classified themselves as belonging to an ethnic minority.[101] This is a significant proportion of the population and it highlights the importance of ensuring that the bonds that unite people are strengthened, not allowed to wither away.

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[98] *14-19: extending opportunities, raising standards*, p. 26.

[99] Ibid, p. 26.

[100] It is not clear from the Government's White Paper if sex education is to be taught in schools in Biology lessons, or whether it is to be delivered as a discrete subject.

[101] "People and Places. Census Results on Ethnicity, Marriage and Families" (National Statistics, February 2003). This can be accessed at:
www.statistics.gov.uk/CCI/nugget.asp?ID=299&Pos=&ColRank=1&Rank=160.

Both PE and RE should be part of the National Curriculum. These subjects are important for physical and moral well being. However, it is important that both are well provided for in schools. In particular, the teaching of RE should be delivered by personnel who are actually committed to the subject and not by staff who may lack enthusiasm for it. If necessary, schools should invite their local clergy to teach RE. Although the content of RE should involve an examination of the principal religions of the world, it should first and foremost concentrate on Christianity. This is the established religion of the UK and the overwhelming majority of the population continues to describe itself as Christian.[102]

Finally, the Government is right to make work related learning a requirement for all pupils at Key Stage 4 as part of their preparation for the world of work.[103] There is also a case for giving students an opportunity to learn more about enterprise, business and economic issues and to develop their financial literacy, as recommended in the report by Howard Davies.[104] Although both of these requirements add to the requirements of the National Curriculum, they should not absorb too much precious time. By 2005-06, every secondary school will be funded to enable all pupils to receive, on average, the equivalent of five days' enterprise experience during Year 10 of his/her school career.[105] The crucial issue will be to ensure that the quality of provision in these two new areas is to a high standard.

3.4 Vocational education and training

Many of the proposals in the White Paper aim to rectify the historical weaknesses in the country's vocational education referred to earlier. From a wider perspective it is interesting to note that the Government's measures are part of a general trend by the governments of other economically developed nations to improve the quality of vocational education and training in their countries.[106] As with the UK, governments in other countries are concerned about their economic competitiveness and the state of their education systems.

In simple terms, there are three aspects to the UK Government's approach towards vocational education and training. Firstly, as mentioned previously, the development of vocational and hybrid GCSEs (although without these labels) are being promoted in order to break down the divide between academic and general qualifications and vocational qualifications. Additionally, more pupils will be able to have a taste of vocational education if these vocational qualifications are offered in mainstream schools.

Secondly, as mentioned earlier, the Government believes that "all young people should undertake some work related learning at Key Stage 4."[107] Schools and colleges should

[102] 37.3 million in England and Wales describe themselves as Christians, compared to 7.7 million who state that they have no religion. See "People and Places. Census Results on Ethnicity, Marriage and Families" (National Statistics, February 2003). This is available at: www.statistics.gov.uk/CCI/nugget.asp?ID=299&Pos=&ColRank=1&Rank=160.
[103] *14-19: opportunity and excellence. Annexes*, Annex 2, pp. 5-6.
[104] Howard Davies, *A Review of Enterprise and the Economy in Education* (Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 2002).
[105] *Prospectus for Enterprise Learning Pathfinders* (Department for Education and Skills, School Business Links Team, April 2003).
[106] *14-19: opportunity and excellence, Annexes*, p. 53.
[107] *14-19: opportunity and excellence*, p. 22.

strengthen their relationship with local employers so that all young people have access "to short or longer term employer placements which are challenging, innovative and responsive to individual need."[108] LEAs and local Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs) will be expected to support education-business partnerships.

Thirdly and most importantly, the Government hopes to improve the quality and quantity of vocational education in the UK through its reforms to the system of Modern Apprenticeships (MAs). This programme was launched in 1995 and apprenticeships are available for 16-24 year olds. There are over 150 types of MAs in over 80 different industries. National Training Organisations (NTOs) or Sector Skills Councils construct the training frameworks for MAs, prescribing the skills and knowledge which apprentices should acquire. The local LSCs fund MAs and employers and training providers deliver them to apprentices. There are two types of MAs: Foundation and Advanced. A Foundation MA enables young people to obtain an NVQ at Level 2 and an Advanced MA is equivalent to a Level 3 qualification. For 16-18 year olds, Foundation MAs should take a minimum of 12 months, while for 19-24 year olds Advanced MAs should take a minimum of 14 months. However, there is no set time to complete MAs.[109]

Following the outcome of the MA Advisory Committee chaired by Sir John Cassells in 2002, the Government and the Learning and Skills Council announced a series of reforms to improve the MA programme. In future, all MAs should include the following core elements: an NVQ; Key Skills;[110] a technical certificate; and other mandatory or optional elements as specified by the particular occupation.[111] In 2002, the Government established an employer led MA Task Force, which has been given the objective of increasing apprenticeship opportunities for young people and to guarantee that MAs satisfy the requirements of employers. Finally, the Government has set a target for 28% of young people to enter Modern Apprenticeships by the age of 22, by 2004.[112]

Consequently, the Government anticipates that there will be two principal routes for vocational education. The first route entails broad based vocational learning at a school or college, followed by vocational A Levels or BTEC, City and Guilds or similar awards. The second option is the MA route. Individuals taking the MA path will study for Foundation MAs and Advanced MAs. Both vocational routes will then lead onto Foundation Degrees and Graduate Apprenticeships. Foundation Degrees are being developed with the assistance of employers and National Training Organisations (NTOs) and should entail two years of

[108] Ibid, p. 29.
[109] "The New Generation of Modern Apprenticeships: Question and Answer Briefing". This document is produced by the LSC and is available at:
www.lsc.gov.uk/documents_list.cfm?categoryId=34.
[110] The Key Skills are: communication; application of number [sic]; ICT; working with others; improving own learning and performance; and problem solving. See Department for Education and Employment and Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, *The National Curriculum: Handbook for Secondary Teachers in England – Key Stages 3 and 4* (The Stationery Office, 1999).
[111] "The New Generation of Modern Apprenticeships: Question and Answer Briefing". The DfES hope that by September 2003 all Advance MAs will contain technical certificates. With regards to Foundation MAs, it is apparently left to the employer or sector to decide whether a technical certificate is necessary, though in time this may come under review.
[112] *14-19: opportunity and excellence*, p. 17.

study. Graduate Apprenticeships are being designed by NTOs and should enhance the work readiness of new graduates.[113]

The Government's intention to improve the quality of vocational education in the UK is to be commended. The development of vocational GCSEs should give students a greater opportunity to take a more practical and trade related route to learning, although the case for hybrid GCSEs is less compelling, as mentioned previously. The commitment to give students an experience of work related learning could enrich their educational experience. The development of the MA programme could provide a coherent vocational stream to the education system that has been missing for so long. Providing an opportunity for young people who have studied for vocational options while at school or college to progress onto higher education in the shape of Foundation Degrees could help to enhance the attractiveness of a vocational pathway.[114]

However, there are some potential weaknesses in the Government's proposals. In principle, the development of vocational GCSEs is to be welcomed, but it is vital that such qualifications entail high standards of work on the part of students, marking is rigorous and useful skills and knowledge are acquired in the course of study. Additionally, it is crucial that there are properly qualified teachers to take classes in vocational GCSEs. From a practical point it may well only be possible to provide and teach vocational GCSEs in certain schools. Accordingly, it might be advantageous to allow some secondary schools to develop a specialism in vocational education. These schools could develop a cadre of suitably qualified teachers with the skills and ability to teach vocational education and share their experience with other schools if the need arises.

Similarly, work related learning is appealing in principle, but in practice much will depend on the quality of work placements that are available. A report published by the Department for Education and Employment (as it was then named) concluded that most participants in pre-16 work experience were satisfied that the placements were of good quality.[115] Additionally, a report by OFSTED showed that about three-quarters of work experience placements were well matched to pupils' interests.[116] This is encouraging, although there is clearly room for improvement if a quarter of placements were not well matched to pupils' interests or needs.

Above all, the flagship of the Government's vocational education programme – the MA system – suffers from three major deficiencies that must be rectified. Firstly, only a minority of individuals who embark upon MA training programmes actually finish them. Just 31% of Foundation Modern Apprentices and 36% of Advanced Modern Apprentices successfully completed their training in 2001-02.[117] Significantly, even the Government has conceded that the quality of Modern Apprenticeships "is variable and completion rates on some

[113] *Opportunity for all. Skills for the New Economy. Initial Response to the National Skills Task Force Final Report form the Secretary of State for Education and Employment* (Department for Education and Employment, 2000), pp. 10-11.
[114] *14-19: opportunity and excellence. Annexes*, p. 58.
[115] *Pre-16 Work Experience Practice in England: An Evaluation* (Department for Education and Employment, Research Report RR263, 2001).
[116] OFSTED (*Work Related Aspects of the Curriculum in Secondary Schools*, Office for Standards in Education, London, 1998).
[117] *Annual Report of the Chief Inspector 2001-02* (Adult Learning Inspectorate, 2002), p. 16.

programmes are unacceptably low."[118] Secondly, the quality of training of MAs leaves much to be desired. Shockingly, the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) has classified almost 60% of training providers as inadequate.[119] Thirdly, the MA programme is supply driven, rather than demand driven. As noted previously, the Government has set a target for 28% of young people to be entering MAs before they are 22 by 2004. However, as observed before, the use of targets can distort behaviour, have unintended effects and create perverse incentives. For example, the Government's emphasis on pumping thousands of young people through the MA system could give LSCs a perverse incentive to encourage young people to embark on inappropriate MAs with the easiest entry requirements. Similarly, a mass expansion of the MA programme might have deleterious effects on standards. It is conceivable that the stringency of training frameworks might be weakened in order to attract and retain greater numbers of MA students. As a result, quality would be sacrificed for quantity.

Research by the IoD suggests that those employers who use MAs generally find that they are a good way of equipping their employees with the skills that they need to do their jobs and that MAs have been beneficial to their business.[120] It would be regrettable if the Government's good intentions with respect to MAs actually resulted in undermining the quality of the programme.

3.5 Participation rates

Young people's participation in education and training post-16 has improved over the last two decades, although it remains poor when compared to many other advanced industrialised countries (see Section 2.4). No doubt the improvement in participation has been driven in part by a realisation amongst young people that enhanced skills and the possession of more qualifications improves their employability. The Government hopes that the combination of new types of GCSEs (hybrid and vocational) and qualifications, a slimmed down National Curriculum and a revamped vocational education stream will help to improve participation rates in post-16 education still further.

However, the Government is also taking additional steps to achieve this objective. From September 2004, Education Maintenance Allowances (EMAs) will be available throughout England. EMAs supply young people in post-compulsory education with regular means-tested payments, provided that they keep to the terms of a learning agreement signed with their school or college. The Government claims that the evidence from pilot EMAs that have been running since 1999 is that fewer students drop out of courses and that the behaviour of young men has improved.[121] More gimmicky, perhaps, is the Government's Connexions [sic] card that is available to post 16 learners as an incentive to continued participation and attainment. The Connexions [sic] card is a smart card that enables individuals to collect points for learning, work based training and voluntary activities. These can then be exchanged for discounted and free goods and services and other rewards. Perhaps more usefully, the card can also be used as a proof of age card.[122]

[118] *14-19: opportunity and excellence*, p. 11.
[119] *Annual Report of the Chief Inspector 2001-02* (Adult Learning Inspectorate, 2002), p. 5.
[120] Richard Wilson, *Vocational Qualifications and Training* (Institute of Directors, 2000), p. 7.
[121] *14-19: opportunity and excellence*, p. 37.
[122] See www.connexionscard.com.

An assessment of the value of the Connexions [sic] card should be made at the earliest opportunity. It may well be that the card has little impact on improving participation in post-16 education and training rates.

4 Conclusion

The proposals set out in the Education White Paper are a mixture of the desirable, the acceptable and the unwelcome. The intention to slim down the National Curriculum is desirable on the grounds that it should give schools greater freedom to tailor teaching to suit their particular pupils' needs. Similarly, the general intention to improve the quality and coherence of vocational education and training is a positive development, although much will depend on the details. For example, it is vital that vocational GCSEs are rigorous, that work placements are suitable for young people and that the quality of training for MAs improves.

The use of EMAs is acceptable, if the effect is to significantly boost participation rates in education and training beyond the age of 16.

What is unwelcome is the proposed use of targets to drive up results at Level 2 (five or more GCSEs at A* - C, an intermediate GNVQ, NVQ Level 2 or an equivalent qualification) and the target to expand the number of MAs by 2006. As argued already, targets can have the effect of distorting priorities, have unintended consequences and produce perverse incentives. Further changes to the qualifications system are similarly unwelcome. Previous changes have hardly been an unambiguous success. The GCSE is not an exam that suits everybody, AS Levels have burdened pupils and markers for little additional gain and the development of A2s have undermined confidence in A Levels as a whole. The qualifications system needs improvements, but the introduction of an English Baccalaureate is unnecessary, not least because of the further disruption that its implementation would cause.