

## ISSUES PAPER 10

# GENERAL EDUCATION IN THE 14-19 PHASE

June 2008

### Introduction

Following its Annual Reports in 2004, 2005 and 2006, the Nuffield Review is producing Issues Papers on specific areas of concern with a view to widening the debate, testing conclusions and seeking further evidence. Recent papers have given considerable attention to the role of the new Diplomas and Apprenticeships in the reform of 14-19 education and training in England. This Paper focuses on what we term 'general education' in England and Wales, which is largely defined by GCSEs and A Levels. It asks: *What is happening to general education for 14-19 year olds in England and Wales and what differences will the reforms make?* More attention is given to the English system because the Review considers that it is in greater need of reform.

General education (traditionally known as 'academic education') is the dominant form of education for 14-19 year olds. In fact, it is so dominant quantitatively, politically and culturally, it is almost as if

it cannot be questioned or discussed. This has certainly been the attitude of the Government since its 2005 14-19 White Paper<sup>1</sup>, with its politically inspired defence of GCSEs and A Levels, on the grounds that they are well known nationally and internationally. Instead, reform and policy attention has been almost entirely focused on vocational qualifications and, in particular, on the new 14-19 Diplomas.

Yet, even the most cursory analysis of the role and nature of general education in the 14-19 phase in England reveals problems. It is selective, particularly post-16, casting a shadow over 'alternative' vocational provision, which is populated with 'refugees' from GCSEs and A Levels. The focus on preparation for GCSE and A Level examinations encourages mechanical and instrumental learning habits in young people. Its

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<sup>1</sup>DfES (2005) *14-19 education and skills*. London: DfES.

individual subject approach also fails to support a broad and coherent curriculum; which by the A Level stage is reduced for most learners to three areas of study. The policy emphasis on examinations, exacerbated by their use in performance tables in England, contributes to learner alienation and drop-out. For those who do not succeed in general education pre-16, there is no real option to continue with it post-16. Moreover, learners of all abilities, who do remain in this route because of its status and progression opportunities, are often unchallenged and bored. All of this amounts to a systemic 'crisis' of general education.

This issue, however, has been largely swept under the carpet in England by a Government fearful of the consequences of a deeper debate, which would inevitably refuel arguments for more radical change. This Issue Paper attempts to break this silence by reviewing the basic historical features of English general education, together with recent government reforms. We also consider contrasting developments in Wales. What we refer to as a 'policy silence' in England has not meant inaction. In fact, the Government has been actively promoting a diverse range of new qualifications, as part of its 'choice agenda', in what the Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF), has recently referred to as the 'general route'<sup>2</sup>.

The implications of recent and proposed qualifications changes in both England

and Wales are considered. In the former, these include revised GCSEs and A Level qualifications; the promotion of the International Baccalaureate (IB); the introduction of Functional Skills, the availability of an Extended Project at Level 3, the Foundation Learning Tier (FLT) and, most recently, what have been termed the '4th phase Diplomas' in Languages, Science and the Humanities. In Wales, the approach is different with the development of a single framework, 'Learning Pathways 14-19', credit and an overarching award - the Welsh Baccalaureate. The picture for general education in both countries is complicated by the fact that awarding bodies have been developing their own 'alternatives' to GCSEs and A Levels and introducing their own versions of overarching awards (e.g. Pre-U, AQA Bac).

### **What is 'general education' in the English system?**

Despite the existence of a national curriculum for compulsory schooling to the age of 16, general education for 14-19 year olds in England, and still to a large extent in Wales, is primarily defined by two national examinations that young people take at the ages of 16 and 18 – GCSEs and A levels. Since 2002, the National Curriculum ensures that all 14-16 year olds follow a course of study in English, Mathematics, Science, ICT, Physical Education, Citizenship, Work-related Learning and Enterprise, Religious Education and Health and Careers Education.<sup>3</sup> At the age of 16, the vast

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<sup>2</sup>DCSF (2008) Promoting achievement, valuing success: a strategy for 14-19 qualifications. London: DCSF

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<sup>3</sup>When the National Curriculum was first introduced in 1988 there was a greater degree of compulsion, including the requirement to study a Modern Foreign

majority of young people in England and Wales sit one or more GCSEs, with most taking at least five and a significant minority taking ten or more<sup>4</sup>.

While it is possible to leave the education system at the age of 16, in 2006 77 per cent of young people in England remained in some form of education and training between the ages of 16-18, with 61 per cent on full-time courses<sup>5</sup>. Of these full-time learners, about two thirds (40% of the total cohort) took advanced level qualifications, with three quarters of this group on A Level traditional and applied programmes<sup>6</sup>, demonstrating the continuing dominance of this qualification in the English system.

Learners can decide which subjects they wish to study at A Level. Since the inception of *Curriculum 2000*, which introduced a two-stage Advanced Subsidiary AS/A2 approach to A Levels<sup>7</sup>

most learners take four subjects at AS Level in the first year of post-compulsory study and continue on to three full A Levels in their second year<sup>8</sup>, with a very small minority opting for applied subjects<sup>9</sup>.

From these brief facts and figures it is possible to identify five defining features of English general education, the first three of which are shared by Wales.

1. Qualifications-led and dominated by GCSEs and A Levels;
2. Selective at 16+;
3. 'Elective' with considerable learner choice in terms of individual qualifications post-16 and increasingly post-14;
4. Individual subject focused rather than programmatic;
5. Little curriculum breadth – particularly post-16.

## The proposed reform of general education in England

In the area of general education, the Government has been adamant to retain existing general qualifications 'because GCSEs and A levels are well understood'<sup>10</sup>, while 'continuing to

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Language, Art, Design and Technology, History and Geography.

<sup>4</sup>Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) (2007a) *Improvements in results for English, mathematics and science at GCSE*, News Release. 23 Aug. (<http://www.jcq.org.uk/attachments/published/394/GCSEpressrelease2007.pdf>) accessed 20 Sep 2007.

<sup>5</sup>DfES (2007a) *Participation in education, training and employment by 16-18 year olds in England: 2005 and 2006 and participation in education by 16 and 17 year olds in each local area in England: 2004 and 2005*, Statistical first release 22/2007. London: DfES.

<sup>6</sup>This figure includes both traditional AS/A2 A Level qualifications and applied A levels which used to be called Advanced Vocational Certificates of Education (AVCEs).

<sup>7</sup>Under this reform, which began in September 2000, all A Levels were split into two three-unit blocks – Advanced Subsidiary (AS) and A2 – with the first part normally taken in the first year of study and the second, dependent part in the second year. The AS is set at a lower level than the A2 but has the same number of grade points attached to it – both scores are aggregated to achieve the final A Level grade.

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<sup>8</sup>Hodgson, A. and Spours, K. (2003) *Beyond A Levels: Curriculum 2000 and the reform of 14-19 qualifications*. London: Kogan Page.

<sup>9</sup>JCQ (2007b) *Improvement in A Level results and increased entries in maths, science and modern foreign languages*, News Release 16 Oct. (<http://www.jcq.org.uk/attachments/published/386/A%20level%20News%20release%20FINAL.pdf>) accessed 20 Sep 2007.

<sup>10</sup>DfES (2005) *ibid.* p12

transform standards in the basics'<sup>11</sup> and to strengthen GCSEs and A Levels 'to stretch the most able'<sup>12</sup>. In the case of A Levels, there was also a desire to 'help universities to differentiate between candidates'<sup>13</sup>.

## A Levels

The changes to A Levels are designed to correct what the Government sees as dysfunctional features of the *Curriculum 2000* reforms. University admissions tutors had voiced concerns that *Curriculum 2000* was not adequately preparing young people for higher education study<sup>14</sup> and both learners and teachers had complained about the quality of teaching and learning<sup>15</sup>. The Government thus aimed to reduce the negative impact of modular testing on the experience of A Level learning and to provide 'stretch and challenge for our brightest students'<sup>16</sup>. The new A Level specifications, on offer from September 2008, have four rather than six units to limit the amount of assessment in these qualifications and to offer more space to study a subject in depth. A related change is the introduction into the A2 of more 'stretching questions'<sup>17</sup> which

means fewer short answers, more extended writing and more synoptic questions, as well as an A\* grade. This latter grade has been designed to be awarded only to that small proportion of young people able to attain an overall A grade at A Level with very high achievement in the A2 units: AS results will not contribute to the A\* grade. In addition, coursework is only allowable in a minority of subjects (e.g. Art and Design and PE) and all candidates will have to demonstrate a high quality of written communication.

## GCSEs

The Government's 2002 14-19 Green Paper<sup>18</sup> talked of GCSEs moving from a school-leaving examination to a 'progress check'. This suggested a declining role for a 16+ examination at a time when more young people were staying-on in education and training. Associated with this was the idea of 'acceleration', with students taking qualifications early, represented in the slogan 'stage not age'. The 2005 14-19 White Paper, however, emphasised the continued role of GCSE as a 16+ threshold by asserting it was widely recognised by parents and respected internationally and should, therefore, remain. The role of GCSE as an important educational milestone was further strengthened by changes to performance tables to include a higher threshold for the 5A\*-C benchmark by

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<sup>11</sup>DCSF (2007a) *Confidence in standards: regulating and developing qualifications and assessment*. London: DCSF.

<sup>12</sup>DfES (2005). *ibid*.p12

<sup>13</sup>DfES (2005) *ibid* p61

<sup>14</sup>Wilde, S. and Wright, S. (2007) On the same wavelength but tuned to different frequencies? Perceptions of academic and administrative staff in England and Wales on the articulation between 14-19 education and training and higher education, *London Review of Education* 5(3) 299-312.

<sup>15</sup>Fisher, L. (2007) Pedagogy and the Curriculum 2000 reforms at post-16: the 'learn it, forget it' culture? *The Curriculum Journal* 18 (1) 103-114.

<sup>16</sup>DfES (2005) *ibid*. p59

<sup>17</sup>DCFS (2007b) *Changes to A Levels*.

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(<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/14-19/index.cfm?sid=3&pid=233&ctype=None&ptype=Content>) accessed 20 Sept 2007.

<sup>18</sup>DfES (2002) 14-19 Education: extending opportunities, raising standards. London: Stationery Office.

including English and Mathematics GCSE. This focus on improving basic skills can also be seen in the proposals to incorporate the Functional Skills of English, Mathematics and ICT into the revised GCSEs in these areas. Another important change to these qualifications, referred to as 'toughening GCSEs'<sup>19</sup>, is the replacement of course-work by 'controlled assessments'.<sup>20</sup>

The growing rigour of GCSEs may be offset by expanding the range of GCSEs in vocational subjects and by the possibility of developing more unitised specifications so that learners can re-sit parts of the new more externally assessed qualification. The majority of the revised GCSE specifications will be available from September 2008 for first teaching in 2009.

The 14-19 reforms in relation to GCSEs and A Levels may lead to three inter-related outcomes. First, they reinforce a 16+ divide and call into question a coherent 14-19 phase. Second, they can be seen as part of the move to make the general education more selective and are likely to lead to a reduction in the proportion of young people gaining the new threshold of 5\*A-C at 16 or achieving three high grades at A Level, particularly in the state sector. Third, they are likely to

make a difference to pedagogy with more focus than ever on learning for examinations.

## Additional reforms

Instead of fundamentally reforming general education, as recommended by the Tomlinson Working Group<sup>21</sup>, the Government has sought to 'add' to general education a number of disparate measures and has also stimulated a 'market reaction' from the independent sector and awarding bodies. General education is becoming more diverse and complex.

*Functional Skills* - are the latest in a long line of qualifications designed to improve young people's basic skills in English, Mathematics and ICT, because of constant complaints from employers about low skills in new recruits. All young people taking GCSE English, Mathematics and ICT will have to study the Functional Skills as part of their course and gaining an A\*-C grade will be dependent on the attainment of these Functional Skills. Functional Skills also constitute a compulsory component of the new Diploma qualifications and are part of the National 14-19 Entitlement. They are currently being piloted at Levels 1, 2 and 3, with the aim of being ready for delivery in 2010. While there are few who would argue with the importance of English, Mathematics and ICT for all, it remains to be seen what effect

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<sup>19</sup>DCFS (2007c) *Getting the basics right: generic definition of functional skills*.

(<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/14-19/index.cfm?sid=3&pid=225&lid=188&ctype=Text&ptype=Single>) accessed 20 Sept 2007.

<sup>20</sup>From 2009, all attainments in GCSEs will be measured through controlled assessment in which there will be varying degrees of external control over task setting, task taking and task marking [see QCA (2007) *Controlled assessment*. London: QCA].

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<sup>21</sup>Working Group on 14-19 Reform (2004) *14-19 curriculum and qualifications reform: final report of the Working Group*. London: DfES.

these new qualifications will have on learning, achievement and progression. Much will depend on their assessment regime.

*The Extended Project* - the Tomlinson Final Report envisaged all 14-19 year olds undertaking a major piece of work in order to develop their learning skills and to motivate them to pursue a topic of their choice in depth. The Government borrowed this idea for the Extended Project. This award, which can take different forms, ranging from an extended essay to a performance, will be internally graded A\*-E and subject to external moderation. Candidates will need to present their work. In its current form, the Extended Project has limited scope, being confined to use within the Diplomas and, on an elective basis, for students undertaking A Levels. It is not available for learners in general education below Level 3, nor is it on offer to learners on vocational programmes other than the Diplomas. A potentially powerful tool for learning has so far been relegated to a 'bit part' in the 14-19 curriculum.

*International Baccalaureate, Pre-U and International GCSE* – these 'exotics' could be seen as a 'reaction' to inadequacies in GCSEs and A Levels, promoted either by a passing fancy of a particular senior politician or by privatised awarding bodies with a keen eye on gaps in the market. The IB has been the subject of policy whim, most notably by Tony Blair. In 2006 local authorities were asked to nominate one suitable institution in

their area to deliver the IB<sup>22</sup>. The IB Diploma Programme for students aged 16-19 is a highly respected qualification offered in 1,597 schools and colleges worldwide, 101 of which are in the UK.<sup>23</sup> It contains a common core, comprising an extended essay, theory of knowledge and community action service and six subject groups. In comparison with a standard A Level programme, therefore, the IB is considerably broader, more holistic in curriculum terms and more structured. However, it is considered to be a tough option because of its demands for achievement in sciences as well as the humanities and its requirement of two modern foreign languages<sup>24</sup>. It is also costly to deliver.

There are two other qualifications in the general education track that are not endorsed by government and might be seen as alternatives or even competitors to GCSEs and A Levels - the International GCSE (iGCSE) and the Pre-U qualification - both of which are being actively supported by the independent school sector. The former, developed in 1988 by the University of Cambridge International Examination (CIE) Board, acts as an alternative to GCSE for 14-16 year olds. The qualification is now offered

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<sup>22</sup>It appears, however, that this requirement is not going to be pursued now that the 'Extended Diplomas' have been introduced. Nevertheless some local authorities will already have put plans in place to offer this award for some learners.

<sup>23</sup>IBO <http://www.ibo.org/country/GB/>

<sup>24</sup>Hill, I. (2003) 'The International Baccalaureate' in Phillips, G. and Pound, T. (eds) *The Baccalaureate: A model for curriculum reform*. London: Kogan Page.

by two awarding bodies and is proving popular with independent schools, particularly in mathematics.<sup>25</sup> State schools are not currently funded to offer iGCSEs, but some would like the opportunity to<sup>26</sup>. The Pre-U is a newer qualification, designed by CIE, as an alternative to A levels for 16-19 year olds. The programme, comprising three full linear A Levels, an Independent Research Report and a course in Global Perspectives, is available for teaching in September 2008.

*Foundation Learning Tier* - right at the other end of the spectrum, in terms of political interest, lies the Foundation Learning Tier (FLT). It was developed in relative obscurity as a response to the Government's focus on Level 2 attainment and its failure to implement the more inclusive aspects of the Tomlinson Report's recommendations – i.e. a unified diploma system from Entry Level upwards. The FLT is being designed to 'establish an inclusive curriculum offer at Entry Level and Level 1 for learners from age 14 upwards'<sup>27</sup>. It will be programmatic and include skills for life and work, vocational subject-based learning and personal and social development<sup>28</sup>. This suggests that it is

quite discrete from other areas of learning and, if anything, should be considered as part of vocational or pre-vocational education rather than general education. Does this mean that learners below a certain level will not be considered eligible to take general education programmes from 14+?

*Three new diploma lines* - we cannot complete a description of planned reforms to 14-19 general education in England without mentioning the three additional 14-19 Diploma lines in Science, Languages and the Humanities, which were unexpectedly announced in October 2007 by the new ministerial team at the DCSF, led by the Secretary of State, Ed Balls. Originally confined to 14 vocational sectors, the introduction of the three new lines now brings general education subjects into the Diploma suite, albeit at a later stage than their vocational counterparts. It is unclear what the practical and political implications of this move will be. Does this announcement signal a significant step towards the development of the unified diploma framework recommended by the Tomlinson Final Report, or is it simply a desire to shore up the current 14 Diploma lines which have had a chequered start in life?<sup>29</sup> What was abundantly clear from Ed Balls' speech in October 2007, however, was that the introduction of Diplomas into general education does not mean the imminent demise of GCSEs and A

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<sup>25</sup>Lucas, G. (2008) *The 14-19 curriculum and qualifications: options in independent schools*. Nuffield 14-19 Review discussion paper, (<http://www.nuffield14-19review.org.uk/>), accessed 4 Feb 2008.

<sup>26</sup>[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/education/4263600.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/education/4263600.stm)

<sup>27</sup>QCA/LSC (2007) *Foundation Learning Tier*. London: QCA. p1.

<sup>28</sup>DCSF (2008) *ibid*.

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<sup>29</sup>See Nuffield Issue Paper 1

levels.<sup>30</sup>

## The Welsh approach to 14-19 general education

The Welsh approach to general education is structured by two major influences – the continued use of GCSEs and A Levels while, at the same time, the development of a distinctive approach through *Learning Pathways 14-19*<sup>31</sup> and the *Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification*. The former comprises six key elements:

- Individually tailored learning pathways.
- Wider choice and flexibility.
- A learning core.
- Entitlement to learning support: a learning coach.
- Access to personal support.
- Impartial careers advice and guidance.

Although these two sets of reforms are both important in terms of a curriculum approach, the Welsh Bac may prove the more influential in the future because of its potential role as a universal overarching framework or even qualification. Developed at advanced, intermediate and foundation levels, the role of the Welsh Bac is increasing each year with the aim of at least 25 per cent of learners over 16 being involved by 2010.

Wales is part of the UK Qualifications Framework, so the Welsh Bac

incorporates the traditional qualifications of GCSE and A level. However, it is the Welsh Bac Core which provides the driving force of values and Welsh identity. The Core contains:

- A “humanities” component for all: “Wales, Europe and the World”, together with the Welsh language.
- An extended project.
- Community focused education.
- Greater emphasis on Key Skills.

Moreover, the Welsh Assembly Government has also been discriminating with regards to the adaptation of recent Whitehall Government qualification reforms. The 14-19 Diplomas will not be used as discrete qualifications in Wales, but individual components, the Principal Learning and Project qualifications, will be available for inclusion in the Welsh Bac. The Project qualification will also be available outside the Welsh Bac from September 2009.<sup>32</sup> Wales has not followed England in developing Functional Skills. Instead, it has created its own ‘version’ and has not accepted that they should be stand-alone qualifications. Furthermore, rather than phasing out the Applied A levels, Wales will retain them within the Welsh Bac. The more ‘exotic’ qualifications such as the IB and the Pre-U have not been adopted widely in Wales. Only one school and one college offer the IB, and none has adopted the Pre-U.

Viewed more widely, distinctiveness in qualifications policy in Wales parallels other differences. It has maintained a community-based comprehensive school

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<sup>30</sup>DCSF (2007d) *Diplomas could become qualification of choice for young people*. DCSF Press release 2007/0195, 23 Oct.

<sup>31</sup>Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) (2002) *Learning pathways 14-19: consultation document*. Cardiff: WAG.

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<sup>32</sup>DCELLS (2008a) DCELLS Notice to Stakeholders. Cardiff: WAG.



system and has abandoned national testing at 7, 11 and 14. In the longer-term, there is an expectation that Wales will cease to use GCSE as a stand-alone qualification. Furthermore, according to the Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills Consultation Document, *Proposals for a Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure*,<sup>33</sup> there is an aspiration to have an educational system, which has entirely its own qualifications – a full Welsh Bac system – in the same way that Scotland has its *Higher Still* reform process<sup>34</sup>. This represents a move away from ‘versioning’, to a clear and distinct Welsh curriculum and qualifications offer for young people.

### Debating general education<sup>35</sup>

*Aims, values and purposes* – English general education can be regarded as lacking a common set of aims and values, because its purposes have been reduced to ‘selection’, ‘choice’ and ‘specialisation’. This failure to communicate a set of overriding values stems from a number of historic and current policy factors. Perhaps the main reason is that general education comprises a loose collection of individual subjects rather than a curriculum conception. Individual subjects do communicate values, but these are eroded by the focus on examination attainment. The English approach to

general education means that it is used primarily as a selection or sifting device which, post-16, makes this form of education only available to particular groups of students. This elective and examination focus relegates the broader functions of general education – criticality, enquiry, application and persistence. Moreover, it leads to learner avoidance of difficult areas of study. The vacuum created by the absence of a strong set of educational values is thus filled by learner instrumentalism and competitiveness.

We would argue that the only way that aims, values and purposes can play a shaping role in post-14 education is with the introduction of a curriculum framework. One way of achieving this, as we discuss below, is through a unified English Baccalaureate Framework similar to the Welsh Bac approach.

*The idea of an English Bac* - we have suggested that general education cannot be enhanced within an individual qualification approach and that there is a strong case for the study of subjects to be undertaken within a multi-level Bac Framework. Not only would this bring us more into line with successful Continental education systems, it could lead to a number of fundamental improvements – the provision of greater breadth and space for innovative learning; more subject sensitive design and assessment within an overall framework, and some level of local control over elements of the curriculum. It could also bring general and vocational learning into one Framework for the first time to the potential benefit of both.

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<sup>33</sup>DCELLS (2008b) *Proposals for a Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure* (046/2008)

<sup>34</sup>Raffe, D., Howieson, C. and Tinklin, T. (2007) The impact of a unified curriculum and qualifications system: the Higher Still reform of post-16 education in Scotland, *British Education Research Journal* 33 (4) 459-478.

<sup>35</sup>This section of the Paper is based on previous Nuffield Review publications and notes of a meeting of the Nuffield Review Core Group in April 2008

*The role of subjects* –we are not arguing for the abolition of subjects but for looking critically at their role within the overall understanding of ‘general education’. They reflect, often loosely, the distinctive ‘logic’ of subject matter and they are the focal point of professional identity and development (e.g. Historical and Geographical Associations and the National Association of the Teachers of English), and thereby, of teacher ‘inspiration’<sup>36</sup>. We do not want to lose any of this. However, it is important to ask how far subjects should stay as they are, often conceived and practised as ‘knowledge silos’, and how they can contribute to the development of an ‘educated 19 year old’. A key issue is the balance and relationship between subject knowledge and skill and broader competences such as problem-solving and interdisciplinary learning, increasingly associated with developing capacities for the future.

*The future of GCSEs and A Levels* – should they be abolished or incorporated into an English Bac Framework? If we follow the logic of the argument about the relationship between subjects and wider competences, then it would be the latter. For example, 14-16 year olds could take a combination of GCSEs and applied/vocational courses within what would be called a General Bac . Learners would take less than 10 subjects and some could be a smaller size than a GCSE. This would open up space for a Common Core, which could contain an Extended Project and opportunities for learning outside the school environment. Post-16, A Levels

could be brought into the English Bac Framework, along Pre-U lines, with an Extended Project and other aspects of a Common Core. If A Levels were to remain their current size, then the number of subjects would probably have to be constrained initially to three or four, with breadth being found largely in the Common Core and within the subjects themselves. In the longer term, individual subjects could be moulded to provide a better fit within the English Bac Framework, providing the kind of breadth that is possible in the IB as a result of including different levels of study. What an English Bac Framework could provide is the opportunity for a richer and more diverse general education. It appears that Wales, with its Welsh Bac, will explore this well before England.

*Pedagogy* – general education is often equated with breadth, and breadth is often equated with content (knowledge to be transmitted). But it should also include, for example, different modes of learning and assessment (including practical and oral), the use of experience, discussion-based exploration of ideas and collaborative working. The role of these elements of the curriculum has declined in the more performative and examined general education route defined by GCSEs and A Levels. This takes us back again to the potential of an English Bac Framework and, in particular, the function of a Common Core as a major provider of these experiences. But subjects also need to play their role in developing innovative approaches to study, because they provide very particular opportunities and contexts for learning. How far subjects can support innovative pedagogy will depend on how far assessment plays a

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<sup>36</sup>See Issues Paper 7, The Whole Curriculum 14-19, and Issues Paper 8, 14-19 Humanities.

constraining or facilitating role (see below).

An important additional dimension to consider is the 'digital age' and the way that it is transforming the world of young people (e.g. communication, access to information, social networking, opinion forming, musical interests). The pace of change is outstripping the context and modes of learning in the secondary and post-compulsory curriculum. It is not a question of if, but how the modern world should enter general education. So far, the Government has taken a 'Luddite' approach, focusing on its negative features – learners using the Internet to cheat or to take intellectual short-cuts. This creates a new digital divide – the divide between the digital age at home and the pre-digital curriculum in schools. It is not difficult to find ways in which the communications revolution can enter into the thinking of general education, but its integration depends on a high trust approach in which young people and their teachers develop ways of using these valuable resources for genuinely innovative and challenging study. There is simply no space for this type of experimentation in an examination-dominated curriculum.

*Assessment* – in the English system, assessment plays a defining role in framing pedagogy and the learning experience and its role in recent years has been almost entirely negative. To make assessment work for the learner, there is a need for greater weight to be given to teacher assessment (suitably moderated). Teachers are the key and there must be a restoration of trust in their judgement. Moreover, such a shift would allow the

deployment of a wider range of assessment tools appropriate to the more diverse forms of learning discussed above. Why are assessments usually written? Oral assessments and the use of new technologies should be promoted and there should be greater possibility for collaborative work. Assessment needs to liberate rather than constrain learning.

*Choice, breadth and specialisation* – the elective nature of English general education is perceived to be a strength, because there is much virtue in enabling young people to exercise choice and pursue what they enjoy rather than to continue with things they dislike. Pursuing something which motivates and which has potential for further learning is important for all learners. At the same time, how is it possible to avoid the negative side of choice, for example, the tendency to drop demanding subjects, leaving relatively few learners studying maths, sciences and languages post-16?

So how can general education be reformed and continue to provide significant specialisation, a perceived strength of the individual subject and elective English system? One possibility is balancing choice and compulsion in a 14-19 English Bac Framework. The Tomlinson Working Group did not go down the IB compulsory subject breadth road, relying instead on a Common Core, including an Extended Project, to provide for breadth and choice. In the future, as learner confidence grows, greater commonality might be introduced so that more learners engaged with 'difficult subjects'. However, the onus will be on curriculum designers and teachers to

make them more relevant and enjoyable. This suggests providing more freedom for teachers to act as curriculum developers and more space for learning and experimentation by breaking the link between curriculum, qualifications and performance measures. This latter measure has already been taken in Wales.

*Progression in the general education track* – presently, general education in the English system provides ‘track-based’ progression. By this we are referring to the selection of just over a third of the cohort to continue with general education beyond 16 to take A Levels. So how might progression be organised in a reformed general education? First, there would be a need to articulate 14-19 education with a changing curriculum pre-14. Second, there should be opportunities for a broader range of students to study general education post-16. An English Bac Framework that reduces emphasis on the break at 16 is more likely to provide this choice. Third, a universal English Bac Framework would require universities to demand the Bac, signalling that they recognise the broad skills that it would carry, as well as making very specific demands on what knowledge they want students to have.

## Conclusions

In this paper we have argued that there is a crisis of general education in the 14-19 phase which policy-makers in England are not only unwilling to tackle, but even unwilling to recognize. The Review argues:

1. The primary aim of the 14-19 phase should be to produce fully rounded and educated 19 year olds and that

this requires a fundamental debate about the values and purposes of this stage of education.

2. There should be discussions between policy-makers in the four countries of the UK to evaluate different approaches to general education and to learn lessons from different national experiences.
3. A much greater focus should be given to curriculum, pedagogy and learning rather than to qualification outcomes, accountability measures and narrow forms of assessment. A high quality learning experience should be a feature of all 14-19 programmes.
4. The development of an inclusive and unified English Bac Framework, which embraces all forms of learning for 14-19 year olds, has the potential to enrich both general and vocational education. The potential and challenges of this reform approach should be thoroughly explored.
5. The renewal of general education does not mean starting from scratch. Many of the elements of an appropriate contemporary general education exist within the systems of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Practitioners, policy-makers and researchers need to collaborate to bring these to the forefront of policy and practice.

Ann Hodgson and Ken Spours have been involved in the production of this Issues Paper, drawing on papers by David Egan and Richard Daugherty on Wales and discussions with the Nuffield Directorate and Core Group.

The Nuffield Review invites comments on its Issues Papers.

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