

July 1998

Ref:

Letter to Baroness Blackstone regarding post-16 education

*From the Chairman of the Education Committee
Professor W.F. Vinen, F.R.S.*

Dear Minister,

I write on behalf of the Education Committee of the Royal Society. As you know, the Society has a long-standing interest in post-16 education. As long ago as 1991, the Society published recommendations for reform of the 16-19 sector in the report, *'Beyond GCSE'*. It was in this report that we first outlined proposals for a single curriculum framework, based on a modular system, of academic and vocational education. It was proposed that a flexible choice of modules, drawn from three broad domains (social, economic and industrial; scientific, mathematical and technological; and languages, humanities and creative) would allow both breadth and depth of study. Since the publication of *'Beyond GCSE'*, there have been many changes to post-16 education. In response to these, last year the Society published the policy statement, *'Re-appraising post-16 education'*, a copy of which is enclosed.

Having conducted such studies on post-16 education, the Society is naturally interested in the implementation of the proposals suggested by the DFEE in its *'Qualifying for Success'* consultation and we welcome the more flexible structure proposed for the post-16 sector. We have noted advice given to the Department by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority in light of the consultation and the Government's decisions based on this advice. Further to a recent meeting of the Society's Education Committee, and with particular reference to your letter to Sir William Stubbs of 3 April 1998 explaining proposed Government action, I outline below comments and concerns of the Society on the reform of post-16 education which I hope you and your colleagues will find useful.

AS LEVEL

- The revision of the AS level provides a golden opportunity to increase participation in the sciences post-16. The Society firmly believes that the current AS cores and syllabuses must be re-written if we are to realize this potential increase.
- AS and A level cores and syllabuses must be written such that the AS level is capable of acting as the first year of a two-year A level course.
- The Society stresses the importance of ensuring that AS syllabuses are attractive to a wide audience; AS cores and syllabuses need to be drawn up with this audience in mind. Whilst recognizing that an AS level should provide a realistic taste of studying a subject to A level, AS level syllabuses should not be too specialist in nature.
- When re-writing the cores it will be vital to include a substantial number of practising teachers in schools, further and higher education (both of the subject being

examined and other related disciplines); university admissions tutors and people with a knowledge of the public understanding of science.

- Syllabus development, including associated consultation on content is crucial - it must be assigned adequate time. The Society is concerned by the Government's proposal to encourage pupils to study five AS-level subjects in parallel in their first year of post-16 learning. Within our discussions it has been questioned whether this will be feasible in terms of timetable and load for the majority of students. It has been suggested that a '4+4' model (four subjects studied in each of Years 12 and 13) might be a more sensible alternative to the proposed '5+3' structure, whilst recognizing that a student of more modest ability could gain credit from following a less demanding course of study.
- The Society questions whether the full resource implications of the Government's proposals have been considered. A broader curriculum, in addition to the provision of Key Skills, will demand more staff hours for teaching and marking. The new curriculum structure will stand or fall on the provision of appropriate resources.

GNVQ

- The Society is disappointed that the Government has not accepted the QCA advice to change the name of the Advanced GNVQ to 'Applied A level'. We recognize that there would be objections to this specific name, particularly since it implies current A level syllabuses contain no applied material, but a change of name to one incorporating the phrase 'A level' would be a valuable step to removing the barriers between vocational and academic studies and would encourage students to mix courses.
- The Society has grave doubts as to whether a coherent three-unit GNVQ, (equivalent to the new AS level), can be designed. The Society urges caution and asks that the Government consults widely amongst teachers and educationalists when looking to develop such a qualification.

KEY SKILLS

- The Society strongly supports the need to develop in students a range of Key Skills. Furthermore, we firmly believe that such skills can best be taught in the context of other subjects where appropriate.
- Whilst recognizing that the contextualisation of Key Skills may not be feasible within all students' programmes of study, the Society suspects that students and teachers would find a 'stand alone' course in these skills unattractive and tedious.
- The Society is concerned by the notion of a *single qualification* in Key Skills; whilst tests covering the Key Skills might be taken together, it is essential that, for example, a student who has strong numeracy but weak literacy skills may be awarded different grades in each Key Skill - students must not receive a single, aggregated, grade. Clear direction from the DFEE is required on the curriculum and assessment structure for Key Skills.

MODULAR COURSES

- The Society welcomes the Government's commitment to ensuring a significant element of synoptic assessment is incorporated into post-16 courses.
- The Society is not convinced of the wisdom of imposing a formal limit of one retake per module for modular courses and the requirement to complete courses within two (or exceptionally three) years. Both these moves seem to imply an inflexibility that is contrary to the Government's commitment to life-long learning.

In view of the importance the Society places on these issues it is making this letter publicly available as well as copying it to Sir William Stubbs as Chairman of the QCA. We would, of

course, be happy to discuss any of our concerns with you personally should you consider it helpful.

Yours sincerely,

Chairman, Education Committee

Response from Baroness Blackstone

Dear Professor Vinen,

Thank you for your letter of 28 May and for the continued interest of your committee in the Qualifying for Success consultation and for your support for our proposals to produce a more flexible structure for the post-16 sector.

I was interested to read your comments on the proposed new AS qualification. The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) is currently consulting the Awarding Bodies and other interested parties, including practising teachers, HE representatives and other subject experts, in order to develop new criteria - and subsequently syllabuses - for all subjects offered at AS and A level. The intention is certainly that the AS will represent the first half of the full A level. We are also discussing with the QCA and others the implications - including resources - of the proposal that young people should be encouraged to study up to five subjects in the first year of post-16 study.

On GNVQs, I have not rejected the QCA's advice to change the name of the Advanced GNVQ. I have asked the QCA for further advice in the light of a comprehensive review of the implications of such a change for the pattern of names across the qualifications framework as a whole, including GNVQs at other levels. I note your reservations about developing three unit GNVQs. I have asked the QCA for further advice on this issue too, and would certainly expect the Authority to consult widely before finalising their advice.

I welcome the Royal Society's endorsement of the importance of Key Skills. The intention is that over time Key Skills will be taught as an integral part of all education and training programmes, where evidence of competence can be gathered as it naturally occurs.

Identifying and labelling opportunities (signposting) for Key Skills teaching, learning and assessment in all other qualifications would help ensure effective integration of learning wherever possible.

The QCA are currently conducting a trial of a single Key Skills qualification and of an assessment and accreditation regime, which is designed amongst other things to establish whether the new approach to assessment is both reliable and valid. However, although assessment and accreditation may be a separate component, the learning and training of Key Skills needs to be set within the context of the education or training programme being undertaken. This would address the concern you have expressed over the possibility of Key Skills being taught as a 'stand alone' course.

QCA's intention is that within the single qualification, candidates will demonstrate competence in all three key Skills at the appropriate level, but no final decision has yet been made.

I welcome the Society's endorsement of our commitment to ensure that a significant element of synoptic assessment is incorporated into modular A levels. The decision to impose a formal limit of one retake per module for modular courses and the requirement to complete the course within two (or exceptionally three) years applies to 16-19 year old full-time students because we need to ensure that there is consistency of standards between modular and linear A levels. We believe it is right that young people on full-time programmes should be expected to complete their course within a reasonable period. A level and Advanced GNVQ courses are designed to be taken by full-time students within two, or exceptionally three, years, and most full-time 16-19 year olds achieve this. Although the evidence suggests that most candidates do not indulge in repeated or speculative resits, we believe it is important to ensure that this will not happen. These rules do not apply to adults and part-time students because we recognise that they have different circumstances and may require greater flexibility. I believe this demonstrates our continued commitment to lifelong learning.

I am pleased that the Society continues to recognise the importance of these issues and thank you again for your considered contribution to the ongoing public debate. However, I do not think that much more could be gained from a meeting at this stage.

I am copying this letter to Sir William Stubbs of the QCA.

Yours sincerely

Tessa Blackstone