



THE 14-19 CURRICULUM AND QUALIFICATIONS: OPTIONS IN INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

INTRODUCTION

From one perspective, teachers in independent schools have never had it so good!

For the first time in twenty years there is some sort of certainty about what will happen nationally in relation to the 14-19 curriculum and qualifications, and when. Not since the inception of the original national curriculum, back in the late 1980s, with its progressive introduction of subjects and key stages stretching into the next century, has there been such mathematical precision and surety about the future.

Take the following fixed points over the next five years:

- GCSEs have just been reviewed (and are now being revised) for first teaching of the new specifications in September 2009
- AS and A levels have been revised, with new specifications introduced for first teaching from September 2008, the award of the first A*s at A level in 2010, and the promise of no further review or change until 2013
- Diplomas at three levels (Foundation, Higher and Advanced) are being progressively introduced in 17 areas (or 'lines of learning'), beginning in September 2008 and going through to 2013.

In addition, the next five years are likely to witness continuing interest and expansion of take-up in the IGCSE, the IB, the Cambridge Pre-U and the AQA Bacc. Small scale take-up of various free-standing vocational qualifications, notably BTECs, is also likely to continue although any expansion in this area seems unlikely.

If the fixed points are known and the timetable reassuringly mapped out, the details are much less clear. From this perspective, the picture looks far less rosy. It is here that the real risks and challenge lurk for independent schools, but so, too, do the opportunities.

This paper seeks to present the choices and challenges facing independent schools today (and over the next five years), in their broader national context. In particular, it provides available evidence about how independent schools are responding to these challenges. Even as I write, some of the 'facts' may already be out of date. However, unless there is a seismic change of policy (from whichever political direction), the topography sketched out here should remain recognisable and reasonably secure.

CURRENT 14-19 CURRICULUM AND QUALIFICATIONS OPTIONS

There have been many developments in 14-19 qualifications since the publication of the Tomlinson report in October 2004. A QCA summary of these at the end of 2007¹ highlighted:

- the refinement of the 2005 White Paper proposals for a 'specialised' diploma which was envisaged to be *constructed largely out of existing qualifications and units of qualifications*. (The first five suites of Diplomas accredited by QCA are very different from this vision)
- the launch of the Functional Skills pilot were in English, mathematics and ICT
- the launch of the pilot of "extended projects" within Diplomas (compulsory) and alongside A levels (optional)
- the revision of A levels to reduce the assessment burden and include more challenging questions, recognised through a new A* grade
- the likely phasing out of Advanced Extension Awards (AEAs) as a consequence of the above
- the start of the review of GCSEs (and the increasing take-up by independent schools of the International GCSE (IGCSE) as an alternative)
- the withdrawal of GNVQs and the subsequent rise in qualifications such as BTECs
- the new benchmark of five A*-C GCSEs to include English and maths and, from 2008 science with modern languages following in 2009 in three subjects
- renewed concerns about science, technology, engineering, maths (the so-called STEM subjects) and modern foreign language achievement and participation nationally
- the change towards compulsory participation in education or training to age 18 instead of 16
- the emergence of new alternative Level 3 "composite qualifications" (or group awards) such as the Cambridge Pre-U and the AQA baccalaureate (AQA Bacc)
- the increasing use of the International Baccalaureate (IB) and its recognition by government as a desirable Level 3 qualification in the maintained sector
- the announcement in October 2007 of a set of phase 4 diplomas in science, languages and the humanities.

The above developments mean that, in theory, there are now five suites of qualifications and curriculum pathways open to 14-19 year olds, not three as envisaged in the 2005 White Paper. These are:

- GCSE/IGCSE and AS/AL (and equivalent academic qualifications in other countries such as Scottish Highers and Advanced Highers)
- the IB/Cambridge Pre-U/AQA Bacc (and composite awards in other countries such as the Welsh Bac)
- Diplomas (England only, at present), also a composite award but with a more practical or applied focus
- Vocational qualifications (e.g. applied A levels, BTECs, OCR Nationals)
- Apprenticeships (leading to occupational qualifications such as NVQs).

Given such a wide choice and diversity of qualifications and curriculum pathways facing young people from the age of 14, how should independent schools respond? How, in reality, are they responding?

¹ Adapted from "Managing the changing 14-19 qualifications and curriculum landscape": a paper written by Mary Curnock Cook (QCA) for a meeting of the QCA 14-19 Advisory Group on 6 November 2007

ACTUAL AND LIKELY TAKE-UP OF QUALIFICATIONS BY INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

GCSE/IGCSE and AS/AL

It is worth dispelling two common 'myths' about the independent sector's attitude towards GCSE and A levels. The first is that the majority of schools would like to see GCSEs 'wither on the vine'. The second is that AS and A levels, as the dominant qualifications post-16, are about to be abandoned en masse by independent schools. Neither is true. Support for an external, public exam at age 16 has never been in doubt. Back in January 2004, a then quite unique Joint Policy Statement on the post-13 curriculum and examinations, issued under the collective logos of HMC, GSA, ISA and SHMIS² stated:

We believe that there is a continuing role for national qualifications at intermediate level, at or around the age of 16, for all pupils in our schools. GCSE currently meets pupils' needs as both a "progress check" (for those who are continuing to advanced level) and as an "exit point" (for those not intending to progress further in a particular subject at this stage). We wish to see it retained, albeit with the removal of coursework in many subjects.

The government's tardiness in responding to concerns about coursework explains some, but by no means all, of the growing popularity of the IGCSE, particularly in mathematics.

However, the continuing flight to IGCSE (now that coursework is to be optional in GCSE mathematics) cannot be explained by this alone. Nor is the mischievous media presentation of IGCSE as a modern-day equivalent of the traditional 'O' level accurate; proponents of the IGCSE are quick to point out that it serves students both at the top and at the lower ends of the grade range equally well. In the ISC qualifications survey of December 2006, nearly 40% of independent schools were offering one or more IGCSEs. The figure for HMC schools was closer to 60%. By August 2007, the comparable HMC figure was 90%, with 52% offering maths, 22% science, 15% English and 5% doing all three. The government's refusal to recognise the IGCSE, and hence its exclusion from the school and college achievement and attainment tables, appears to have done nothing to dampen schools' enthusiasm for it. With the introduction of a new 5 A*-C measure from September 2006, including English and maths, many schools effectively took themselves out of the government's performance tables (scoring 0% on this measure) and clearly rejoiced in doing so. In January 2008, the list of independent schools scoring 0% in the government's official tables, yet 100% when IGCSEs are counted, included not only household names such as Eton, Winchester and Harrow but also a growing cross-section of the sector as a whole.

It is important to note, however, that support for an academic qualification, at or around age 16, remains high. There is no reason to believe that this will change, although there are signs of growing interest in ways of reducing the assessment burden and dominance of the exam itself. The most radical example of this, to date (other than Winchester College where some GCSEs have routinely been skipped or taken early for many years), is the initiative by Bedales School, featured in a collection of case-studies of innovation

² 13-Plus: Joint Policy Statement on the Post-13 Curriculum and Examinations: GSA, HMC, ISA, SHMIS (January 2004)

published by HMC in 2006³. The innovation here was to cut back the number of externally examined subjects taken by pupils at age 16 (normally nine or ten GCSEs) to

a core of five or six. Breadth (and depth) beyond this core is provided by internally awarded 'Bedales Assessed Courses' (BACs).

At A level, too, the consensus is in favour of a reformed but retained A level. This was flagged clearly in the January 2004 policy statement cited above:

We see a continuing role for an Advanced Subsidiary (AS) qualification, possibly reduced from three to two units in its assessment. We favour a strengthening of A2 (the second half of A level), decoupled from AS to form two discrete qualifications. A strengthened A2 should include more challenging and stimulating content, assessed in a more holistic way. We wish to see a return to more synoptic examinations, where appropriate, designed to allow the A level to differentiate better between the most able students at grade A.

The fact that much of this was both reflected in Tomlinson and has since been implemented by the government is encouraging. Indeed, had it not been, there is little doubt that the flight to alternatives, such as the IB or the Pre-U, would have been much quicker and greater. Although the reform of A level could be dubbed as 'almost too little, almost too late' (with the policy delay and u-turns on introducing the A* grade at A level the clearest example of this), the overall verdict is that the A level has been saved. Many schools, however, will be reserving final judgement until the first new-style AS and A2 papers have been sat, and the first awards made (in 2009 and 2010 respectively).

A rough estimate (based on extrapolating figures from the ISC survey in December 2006) is that between 80 and 90 per cent of independent schools in England still use A levels as their main qualification. Some, of course, would like reform to go further. There remains an interest in 'decoupling' AS from A2 and two studies by SHMIS (in 2006 and 2007⁴) lend weight to this. A minority would welcome even greater differentiation at the top, with some supporting the introduction of a double A starred grade at A level, as in the original Tomlinson proposals and subsequently adopted as distinction grades by the Cambridge Pre-U. On resits, there is some evidence of double standards. While 45% of respondents to the ISC survey in 2006 favoured a national limit on these, 90% of schools allow resits and QCA data suggests that independent schools are, by some measure, the biggest users of resits nationally⁵. Pupil and parental pressure may well explain these mixed messages; a national limit would help schools do what they think is best educationally.

As with GCSEs, there is also evidence of schools adapting A levels to suit their own purposes, notably in relation to a 'linear' assessment model. But the numbers are small, with only 3.5% of schools adopting a pattern whereby all modules (AS and A2) are taken together at the end of the upper sixth year. While part of the appeal of the Cambridge Pre-U is attributed to its linear assessment model, on the basis of the above figures for A level, in practice this seems to be only a relatively minor issue for independent schools.

³ Independent and Innovative: examples of innovation in HMC schools (edited by Bernard Trafford). John Catt Education Limited, 2006

⁴ "Member Heads' Attitudes to A level examinations" and "Statistical Research on A level results"

⁵ QCA report on resits at A level (September 2007)

The final issue to do with A levels is what the government has dubbed 'stretch and challenge'. Official rhetoric surrounding the 'new' A levels introduced in September 2008 centres on promoting them as even more rigorous than their precursors. Attractive as this might seem politically, especially with enduring allegations of the erosion of standards over time, there are dangers inherent in such an approach. The reality is that, in spite of calls for better differentiation at grade A at A level from a significant number of schools, there is little thirst in the independent sector as a whole for a more rigorous assessment of students at the lower end of the grade range. This again has implications for the Cambridge Pre-U which, if it is not careful, will discourage some schools from offering it for fear of disadvantaging average (or below) students. Both the design and the promotion of the Pre-U will need to respond to this concern.

So far as the A grade goes at A level, with almost 30% of all independent sector students now attaining 3 grade As (or better) at A level, the introduction of some form of finer differentiation at the top was, sooner or later, inevitable. While an A* is probably the most convincing response, there is likely to be a continuing exploration by higher education of alternatives (including unit grades or UMS scores), at least until the A* become established. Politically, of course, with the likely scenario of independent schools dominating the A* grade (as they do at grade A), pressure to minimise the importance of A* may incline future governments to review this. However, as experience with GCSE has shown, once introduced and understood by parents and the wider public, the A* will be hard to withdraw. The same is not true of Advanced Extension Awards.

Although about 50% of independent schools have offered at least one AEA, their lack of availability in all subjects and all schools doomed them to virtual irrelevance from the start, at least so far as higher education was concerned. Of far greater significance is the fate of universities' own admissions tests. With over fifty different tests currently available, and with about three quarters of independent school pupils having to sit two different tests in medicine (BMAT and UKCAT)⁶, there clearly was a problem with the pre-2008 A level in differentiating sufficiently at the top. Whether the reformed A level will rectify this, and stem or reverse the tide of proliferating admissions tests, remains to be seen. In the meantime, public statements by people such as Richard Levin, President of Yale University⁷, to the effect that the depth of knowledge displayed by the best A level students makes them prime targets for America's Ivy League universities, act as a salutary corrective to our innate British tendency to criticise ourselves and what we do, often in the direct contradiction to how others, internationally, view us.

The IB, Cambridge Pre-U and AQA BAcc

From one perspective it is wrong simply to lump these together; the first, in particular, has very different origins from the others and is, in many ways, a very different qualification. However, all three have three things in common. First, they are often presented as alternatives to A levels; second, they are all group or 'composite' awards and, as such, have less flexibility than discrete awards like the GCSE and A levels; third they all aspire to promote the overall award regarded as greater than the sum of their parts. These, of course, are also features that they share with the government's Diplomas which are dealt with in the next section.

The IB

As with other aspects of the 14-19 qualifications framework touched on earlier in this chapter, appearance and reality are often quite different. For a start, the IB need not be an alternative to A levels; it can be an additional option within the same school. Even

⁶ ISC survey of University Admissions and Aptitude Tests (Summer 2007)

⁷ As reported in The Times, Telegraph and Daily Mail (29 October 2007)

early pioneers such as Sevenoaks offered a dual programme for many years before committing finally and exclusively to the IB. The same is likely to be true of any school introducing the IB from scratch.

However, as Pamela Edmonds has observed in her study of the take-up of the IB in HMC schools⁸, dual provision is not an option for most schools in the long term, however attractive it is in principle and however necessary initially.

The schools that do run the IB Diploma alongside A level are offering students the choice between breadth of study and/or specialisation and are thereby able to cater for a wide range of students' interests and abilities. However, timetabling complexities and associated costs are deterring a number of schools from his option.

Moreover, she goes on to point out:

The IB Diploma's inflexibility serves to underscore its solid educational rationale, its coherence and firm adherence to the educational principles and philosophy that underpin it, but it is this inflexibility which may also serve to limit its application in the HMC school sector in England.

ISC and HMC survey data support this view. The former found only 5.5% of schools actually offering the IB (26 schools in total) in 2006, with a further 3% (13 schools) intending to offer it. This is considerably lower than the figure of 50 independent schools often cited in the press and official statistics. While HMC data in 2007 also probably under-represented the true extent of take-up (at just 12%), it seems unlikely that there will be any mass expansion in the IB market, in spite of new inroads in Scotland, where, traditionally, the IB has had no following.

As Ann Hodgson and Ken Spours observed after a year long study of the 13-19 curriculum in HMC schools⁹:

What this research shows is that the media representation of the HMC as either supporting the old pre-Curriculum 2000 A level system or wanting to move wholesale to an IB to replace Curriculum 2000 does not reflect the views of the sector. Moreover, the idea that the independent sector wishes to see itself as separate from the rest of the national education system is also not borne out by this research.

Interest in the IB is also linked, of course, to perceptions of the shortcomings of A levels. There is little doubt that the increase in numbers considering the IB over the last two or three years reflected an unprecedented level of dissatisfaction with A levels immediately after the 2002 "A level grading fiasco", as well as the realisation by some schools that to offer the IB might give them a competitive edge and marketing advantage. Pamela Edmonds' study suggests that more recent adopters of the IB may not always embrace fully its true international dimension, something which would be almost inconceivable to early supporters of the IB. What all IB schools have to embrace, however, is the subject breadth which lies at the heart of the qualification, together with

⁸ "What has motivated independent schools to consider and introduce or reject the International Baccalaureate Diploma programme?" A report of research conducted by Pamela Edmonds as part fulfilment for the degree of Doctorate in Education, University of Bath, 2006

⁹ The 13-19 Curriculum in HMC schools' perspectives on current arrangements and future curriculum and qualifications reform: report of a research project undertaken by Ann Hodgson and Ken Spours of the Institute of Education (October 2003)

the mandatory additional elements of theory of knowledge, the extended essay and CAS (Community Action and Service). For many independent schools, it is the compulsory subject breadth and prescription, rather than the other elements, that provide the biggest barrier to take-up. It is this aspect, as well as dissatisfaction with A level, which largely explains the development of the Cambridge Pre-U.

The Cambridge Pre-U

At the time of writing, the fate of the Pre-U seems to hang in the balance. Independent schools are notoriously fickle and, while often quick to sign up to a new idea in principle, are usually far more cautious and conservative in committing themselves in practice. This appears to be the case with the Pre-U. In the ISC survey of December 2006, no school said it would definitely offer the Pre-U and only six schools said they were likely to, at some point in the future. In contrast, two thirds declared themselves to be 'interested in principle'. HMC figures from September 2007 suggest a slight improvement in prospects (if replicated across the other independent school associations) with seven schools likely to offer the qualification. However, over half (53%) of the HMC schools declared themselves to be unlikely to offer it at all.

The key attractions of the Pre-U for schools disaffected with A levels, but not attracted to the IB, are its lack of subject prescription (with a minimum of three principal subjects of a student's choice), its linear assessment model, its recognition of achievement above grade A (with three distinction grades, of which D1 and D2 are effectively A* and A**) and its additional elements, in particular an independent research project and a global perspectives portfolio. Originally conceived as a composite award in which all components had to be those offered by Cambridge International Examinations (CIE), the Pre-U has had to make compromises and accept a 'mixed economy' whereby subject components from other awarding bodies (i.e. A levels) can be substituted for CIE's own principal subjects (in the short-term, at least). Like the IB, the whole is meant to be greater than the sum of the parts. Nevertheless, also like the IB, individual subject certificates will be issued separately and have currency in their own right.

The AQA Bacc

The AQA Baccalaureate (AQA Bacc), unlike the Pre-U, was never designed to be anything other than a form of overarching certificate. Comprising three A levels, an AS in General Studies, Citizenship or Critical Thinking, plus an extended project and enrichment activities, the bedrock of the AQA Bacc is the reformed A level. In this sense, it is very different from the Pre-U which set out its stall as an alternative to A level. In this context it is also interesting to observe the emergence of schools designing their own overarching certificates. The 'Dulwich Certificate of Achievement' is a good example of this, involving the award of a certificate to recognise achievements and activities in addition to GCSEs and A levels, including a 3000 word research essay, one year's service activity, work experience or shadowing, co-curricular involvement and a test in world citizenship. What both these initiatives have in common is an attempt to fill the academic gap left by the rejection of Tomlinson's "General Diploma" and the creation, instead, of fourteen sector-related Diplomas in broadly vocational areas such as engineering and the three more recent 'academic' Diplomas in science, languages and the humanities. It is to these that we now turn.

14-19 Diplomas

Diplomas (originally branded "Specialised Diplomas") were born out of the government's rejection of the Tomlinson report for a national system of unified Diplomas covering both academic and vocational learning. Although they are broadly vocational in focus, Diplomas are not vocationally-specific (in the way that apprenticeships are).

Initially, only fourteen broad employment-related areas (or “lines of learning”) were planned, the first five available from September 2008 in:

- construction and built environment
- society, health and development
- information technology
- creative and media
- engineering

From September 2009, a further five Diplomas – land-based and environmental studies, manufacturing, hair and beauty, business administration, and finance and hospitality – will be available, followed in September 2010 by the next four – public services, sport and leisure, retail, and travel and tourism.

Finally, from 2011, three new ‘subject’ rather than ‘sector’ based Diplomas are to be introduced in science, languages and humanities. Unlike the first fourteen Diplomas, whose development has been led by employers, these subject based Diplomas will have more equal involvement of employers and higher education. While independent schools are unlikely to show much interest in the first fourteen Diplomas (with the possible exceptions of engineering, ICT and creative and media), the three new Diplomas might be expected to excite more interest. For a start, all Diplomas provide an opportunity for students to do additional or specialist learning (which could take the form of an A level or 2 ASs), and all include elements of ‘general education’ (in particular, the functional skills of English, mathematics and ICT; personal learning and thinking skills; and an extended project involving independent research, extended writing and an oral presentation). However, while there is much in the Diplomas that independent schools would recognise and value, there are four potential drawbacks, even with the new subject-based Diplomas.

The first is the requirement for ten days’ work experience in an area related to the principal learning of the Diploma. For many schools (state and independent) this will not be practical.

Second, the ‘principal learning’ component, equivalent to two full A levels in volume, will be new, rather than based on existing qualifications and fifty percent of it has to be ‘applied’. This will mean that, even in the new ‘academic’ Diplomas in science, languages or humanities, new content will probably be developed, making it less likely that independent schools could co-teach these Diplomas alongside their existing mainstream academic provision of AS and A levels.

Third, Diplomas are group awards. Like the IB, the Welsh Bac and Scottish group awards, the overall Diploma is only awarded for the achievement of all its constituent parts. Although partial achievement of a Diploma at level 3 may be recognised by a two A level equivalent called a “progression award”, the full Diploma (equivalent to three and a half A levels) will be needed for progression to a first degree in higher education. Unlike vocational or applied A levels, it will be virtually impossible for students to take a Diploma alongside a traditional academic programme of study of three A levels. It is simply too big. (It will, however, be possible for Diploma students to include an AS and/or an A level as part of their Diploma; for example, physics A level as part of an Engineering Diploma, but this would be exceptional).

Fourth, the ‘delivery’ model for Diplomas requires collaboration, ideally with another school or FE College and/or training provider with experience of offering vocational courses, as well as employers to provide the mandatory ten days work experience in a relevant, professional setting. The expectation that delivery will be shared with a school

or college with vocational experience and expertise raises a particularly thorny issue for independent schools: how many parents will be prepared to pay independent school fees for their child to be educated post-16 partly, if not mainly, in the local maintained sector school or college? Whatever groupings of institutions and employers result from collaborative arrangements, the consequential risk that not all students and parents will be pleased with the prospect of part of the course being delivered outside their current school will at best make independent schools cautious.

The absence of independent schools from any of the initial expressions of interest by local consortia to offer the first five Diplomas from 2008 is therefore hardly surprising. The most recent sector-wide survey of qualifications offered in independent schools, undertaken by ISC at the end of 2006, found that three quarters of schools were either not aware of Diplomas or not interested in them. Of the quarter that were "interested in principle" (some 97 schools), only one claimed to be "likely to offer" any of the Diplomas and even this later turned out to be an error! None said they would definitely offer Diplomas.

Lest the above seems unremittingly negative, it is worth observing that, for some young people in independent schools (not all of which, contrary to popular belief, are academically selective), a Diploma might be a better choice for progression to employment or higher education than a wholly academic diet of A levels. If "personalised learning" means anything at all, it must mean matching the most appropriate choice of curricula and qualifications to a young person's needs and aptitudes. For some learners, in whatever sector, this will mean a more applied or broadly vocational choice.

Fortunately, for schools not wishing to commit to Diplomas, existing free-standing vocational qualifications will continue to meet the needs of a minority of learners, at least until 2013. It is to these that we now turn.

Vocational Qualifications (VQs)

It is important to put these in perspective. In the last survey of vocational qualifications in independent schools some two years ago, only 28% of schools were offering any vocational qualifications at all. In rank order, the top five reasons for the low take-up were:

- a perceived lack of currency in Higher Education
- negative parental attitudes
- the cost and resource implications
- the low status accorded to VQs in media coverage/league tables
- negative staff attitudes.

Many of these reasons are likely to be shared by maintained schools that offer a mainly academic diet of GCSEs and A levels. Moreover, changes over the last two years, including the renaming and increasing academic drift of GNVQs/vocational/applied A levels, appears to have done nothing to counter these obstacles to take-up. If anything, things could get worse as free-standing vocational qualifications become absorbed into Diplomas and cease to exist in their own right. This appears to be the government's intention, with free-standing vocational qualifications ceasing to exist outside the Diploma framework beyond 2013. However, the awarding bodies may well resist this pressure arguing, rightly, that there is a continuing need and market for discrete vocational qualifications for adults who want the freedom and flexibility to take free-standing qualifications. The same, of course, is true of AS and A levels.

Although take-up is low, a surprising range of vocational qualifications is, nevertheless, currently offered by independent schools, ranging from the well known brands (BTECs, OCR Nationals and City and Guilds qualifications) to the odd NVQ (for example, in catering). The flexibility for individual pupils to take such qualifications, alongside academic qualifications, as part of an overall programme which is 'personalised' to their needs, is something we should strive to retain.

CONCLUSION

As with so many other things in education, the freedom of independent schools to use their independence in the interests of their pupils is a huge asset. This is nowhere more evident than in 14-19 education. Indeed, one of the most interesting (and least observed) phenomena with regard to 14-19 qualifications in independent schools is the way in which schools use their freedom to 'mix and match'. Consider the rich variety of this in practice at present:

- GCSEs and IGCSE
- A levels and the IB
- Scottish Highers and A levels
- academic and vocational qualifications (in the past A levels and GNVQs)

In future, this may well extend to such combinations as A levels and the Pre-U or A levels and Diplomas and, in theory, more mixing of qualifications across national boundaries. Why, for example, do more schools in England, Wales or Northern Ireland not offer Scottish Highers or Advanced Highers? Why do those developing qualifications in this country not learn more from, for example, the Irish Republic with its unique "transition year" and Irish Leaving Certificate?

All of this, of course, lies in the future, as does the implementation of a number of other developments which are beyond the scope of this chapter but relevant to it. The list would include the impact of the 'hiving off' of QCA's regulatory functions (to give it greater independence from government and more credibility in monitoring standards over time), ongoing competition between awarding bodies (and whether this will stimulate further innovation or yet more new qualifications as they compete for market share), and future developments in school and college achievements and attainment tables as well as the UCAS tariff. All three of these could have a profound impact on the way 14-19 qualifications are perceived, nationally and internationally, and on their future take-up by independent schools. As Simon Lebus commented towards the end of 2007¹⁰

We are moving from a relatively straightforward environment in 14-19, where Key Stage 3 is followed by GCSE and A level and a significant element of the cohort leaves at 16, to one where the leaving age is effectively to be raised to 18 and where there will be GCSEs, A levels, IGCSEs, Diplomas, a more widely available International Baccalaureate, and the Cambridge Pre-U. I welcome the choice and pluralism represented by these arrangements and believe it is a thoroughly positive educational development. However, it also introduces significant scope for confusion as to how the different qualifications compare with each other and what standards should be used as the metrics for measuring attainment.

¹⁰ Intelligent regulation: trust and risk (Simon Lebus, Group Chief Executive Cambridge Assessment)

Advances in the application of new technologies to assessment and examining, as pioneered by Edexcel, add yet another dimension to this which is worthy of an entire chapter on its own.

Reading this paper, however, it would be reasonable to conclude that the primary strategic tool used over the last five years in 14-19 education policy has been the reform of qualifications. Even the Tomlinson report was largely a document about a new national suite of qualifications as the instrument of curriculum reform. The emergence of a new generation of composite awards, including Diplomas, and attempts by individual schools to use national qualifications in creative and innovative ways to suit their own purposes, suggests that the overall curriculum (or programme) offered to 14-19 year olds is once again becoming centre-stage. The need for strategic planning for the medium to longer term has therefore never been greater. It is hoped that this summary of recent and current developments, together with data about how other schools are responding to this challenge, provides a secure basis for informed discussion of the 14-19 curriculum and qualifications in schools in the independent sector over the next few years, as well as schools and colleges in the maintained sector who may be interested in working in partnership with one or more of their neighbouring independent schools.

Geoff Lucas, Secretary of the Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference (January 2008)