VOCATIONAL GENERAL CERTIFICATE OF SECONDARY EDUCATION (GCSE): EDUCATION, TRAINING AND THE WORLD OF WORK?

IAN ABBOTT

Institute Of Education, University Of Warwick

Introduction

The English System

In England at the present time 14-19 education and training is undergoing a period of rapid change. The recent Green Paper* published by the government (DfES, 2002) is the latest part of a strategy designed to reform the education system. During their first term in office the Labour government claim to tackle many of the problems in the primary sector and to have raised educational standards and improved pupil attainment. They are now attempting to do the same to secondary education. According to the Secretary of State for Education and Skills:

In the last Parliament we said that we would get the basics right in primary schools. We have made an excellent start. Standards of literacy and numeracy have risen sharply. …

The drive for world class performance demands that we now modernise secondary education. We want to ensure that every secondary school and college is excellent in providing the central core of learning, but also has a distinctive mission and ethos. (DfES, 2002, p.3)

A number of policy initiatives have already been announced by the government who are committed to the development of a coherent and unified system which provides parity of esteem between academic and vocational programmes. The recent Government White Paper* highlighted the need for continued debate and development:

We want to promote a wide debate about how to implement further improvements in education for our 14-19 year-olds and achieve necessary changes to long established structures. As we move forward we want make sure we do so together. We want to discuss with all involved the vision, the challenges and how best we can overcome them, taking account of other pressures on schools and colleges. It is important to avoid over-burdening pupils and teachers or undermining confidence in the curriculum and qualifications framework. We will work closely with all our partners in the education service and with employers to make sure that vocational and work-based learning instils the same confidence as academic courses and qualifications. (DfES, 2001, section 4.13)

The White Paper contained details of new Increased Flexibilities for 14-16 years old, which will come into operation during the 2002-03 financial year. The programme is designed to increase opportunities for work-related study at Key Stage 4:
We will begin the introduction of GCSEs in vocational subjects in September 2002. They will have a major part in expanding vocational opportunities and raising the status of the vocational route. We will make sure that the qualifications match the best international standards so that we can promote them with confidence to parents, students, employers and the academic community.

(We will introduce) a £38 million programme of work-related learning placements to benefit up to 40,000 14-16 year olds from 2002. In most cases the young people will study at a college or with a training provider. The placements will need to be of high quality and provide opportunities to gain worthwhile qualifications. (DfES, 2001, sections 4.6-4.7)

In summary the Increased Flexibilities programme includes:

- Policies to ensure that by 14 all pupils have a good standard of numeracy and literacy
- Greater parity of esteem between vocational and academic subjects
- Allowing greater space in the 14-16 curriculum which provides more opportunities for vocational work
- A £38 million programme of work-related learning placements which will be available for up to 40,000 14-16 year olds
- The introduction of a range of General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSE) programmes in vocational subjects in September 2002

These proposals build on earlier policy initiatives, which allowed the National Curriculum requirements to be set aside for some 14-16 pupils. Under these arrangements school pupils spent part of the week studying vocational programmes at local general further education colleges. An evaluation of work-related learning by the Office for Standards in Education (OfSTED, 2001) concluded that the overall effect on pupils was positive and that the programmes offered good value for money. In particular OfSTED reported:

*The programmes were most consistently helpful in improving pupils’ motivation, social learning and confidence arising from achievement in areas new to them. There was an encouraging effect on attendance and attainment, but this was less consistent. (OfSTED, 2001, p.8)*

However, a number of concerns were raised by OfSTED including that these programmes were not recognised as part of a coherent curriculum and were separate from main school activity. In addition a wide range of qualifications were available to young people and some did not have the currency of the GCSE. Partly as a response to these criticisms the government have introduced new Vocational GCSE programmes.
‘Vocational’ GCSE Programmes

The GCSE was introduced in 1986, replacing O level and CSE examinations. Most school pupils, aged 16, take a minimum of 10 GCSE examinations at the end of year 11. All pupils have to take certain subjects, as part of the National Curriculum e.g. Maths, English, Science, but some limited choice is allowed. Pupils normally make their choice, about their option subjects, at the end of year 9 and their GCSE programmes last for two years. Sixteen signifies the end of compulsory education in England and traditionally the system has seen this as a finishing point with young people either remaining in full time education and training or going into employment.

However, given the drive to increase participation rates and to encourage more young people into higher education, the government is keen to see the 14-19 phases as an integrated unit. As a result of this policy shift curriculum reform policies now concentrate on the 14-19 age group rather than two distinct phases, 14-16 and 16-19.

In the past pupils have been allowed to take some vocational qualifications during the 14-16 phase. These were traditionally General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs), which could be studied in place of two GCSE courses. The most popular vocational option for 14-16 pupils has been GNVQ Business. The vocational GCSE is designed to replace the GNVQ and provide greater coherence and credibility for vocational subjects. From September 2002 new vocational GCSE programmes will be available in the following broad vocational areas:

- Art and Design
- Business
- Engineering
- Health and Social Care
- Information and Communication Technology
- Leisure and Tourism
- Manufacturing
- Science

According to Criteria laid down by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCQ) each vocational GCSE is the equivalent of two ‘traditional’ GCSEs, must contain three equally sized and weighted compulsory units and external assessment must contribute at least one-third to the final assessment (QCA, 2002a). To give a better idea of subject content it is worthwhile looking in greater detail at the vocational GCSEs in Business and Leisure and Tourism.
Business

The three units in the programme are:

- *Investigating business*
- *People and business*
- *Business finance*

The emphasis in all three units is on real world examples and experiences and to provide opportunities for employment, further education and training. For example in Unit one:

This unit helps you to understand how businesses organise themselves in order to meet their aims and objectives. You will investigate how ownership affects the running of the business. You will explore businesses, which produce a range of different goods and services and find out how such business activities are changing the UK as a whole. You will investigate the different functional areas of a business, how they affect each other and how they communicate.

*You will investigate two contrasting businesses in detail. You will find out about their type of ownership, what they do and how they are developing in response to different external influences. You will need to understand how the businesses you are investigating fit into the wider business world and which influences have the most effect on them. (QCA, 2002b)*

Leisure and Tourism

The three units in the programme are:

- *Investigating leisure and tourism*
- *Marketing in leisure and tourism*
- *Customer service in leisure and tourism*

The aims of the course, which are set out in the specifications for GCSE Leisure and Tourism, clearly support the development of specific links between education and employers in the sector:

Vocational GCSE specifications in leisure and Tourism encourage courses which will:

- *Provide a broad background of understanding and core knowledge of the leisure and tourism industries in the UK*

- *Encourage a student-centred approach to learning together with the opportunity to apply knowledge of the leisure and tourism industries in a vocationally relevant way*

- *Provide centres with the opportunity to forge links with leisure and tourism businesses*
Foster cross-sector themes and approaches so that students can gain an insight into related sectors, such as business, retail and distribution and hospitality and catering.

Provide opportunities for progression into employment into the leisure and tourism industries or higher level vocational qualifications in these or related sectors. (QCA, 2002c)

Common features

In both examples given, indeed in all vocational GCSE programmes, there is a strong emphasis on vocational relevance, on opportunities for work based-learning, the development of a range of links with business, and progression into employment or further training. In many cases these programmes will be delivered in local further education colleges by experienced vocational lecturers rather than in secondary schools. Pupils will be allowed to attend their local college for part of the week, providing them with a taste of alternative routes post-16, the facilities available and the different teaching methods employed in further education. Potentially pupils will have access to a wider range of resources and the opportunity to work with specialist staff. In addition work-related learning, which will involve visits, business resources, placements, information gathering and the use of outside speakers from industry, will be an integral part of all the vocational GCSE programmes.

In theory these features should lead to the development of a range of exciting and relevant courses which will appeal to a wide number of young people. Pupils who choose these GCSE programmes should develop a good understanding of a particular vocational area whilst maintaining their general education without specialising too early. At the very least these programmes should improve the overall understanding of particular vocational areas, provide a more appropriate curriculum for a group of young people and encourage pupils to undertake further education and training.

However, in practice, the introduction of vocational GCSEs has created a great deal of controversy and there has been significant opposition to their introduction. So how do we decide if vocational GCSEs are a positive step forward for the English educational system or a further example of another missed opportunity to enhance the status of vocational education and to reform the 14-19 curriculum?

A positive or negative development?

As stated earlier the present Labour government are committed to an increased role for vocational education as part of their reform of 14-19 education and training. However, this is not a new development, and over recent years the issue of parity of esteem between vocational and academic programmes or pathways has been a central part of the ongoing debate in education in England (see for example: Finegold et al 1990; Green, 1995; Dearing, 1996). Since the 1980s there has been a steady stream of courses, programmes and initiatives designed to raise the status and profile of vocational education, examples include:

Certificate of Pre-Vocational Education (CPVE)

Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI)
Alongside these, which have been largely offered by schools and further education colleges, are a whole range of policies and qualifications designed to improve vocational training. The introduction of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) has been at the centre of this policy initiative, but a number of specific programmes have been introduced to encourage more young people to undertake work-based training. Examples include:

- **Youth Opportunities Programme (YOP)**
- **Youth Training Scheme (YTS)**
- **Modern apprenticeships**
- **Foundation apprenticeships**

The two major academic programmes, GCSE and A levels have remained separate from these vocational developments. However, there has been some limited reform of both GCSE and A levels, especially in content and assessment. The most significant changes took place with the implementation of Curriculum 2000 and the restructuring of the A level programmes (QCA 1991, 2001).

One of the major criticisms of the education system in England has been the continued importance of A levels which are often described as the ‘gold standard.’ The perceived superiority of academic over vocational qualifications has been a major issue for the education system in England. The decision to introduce new vocational programmes as part of the existing GCSE structure has to be partly related to the issue of status.

There is clearly an argument in favour of a coherent and unified system at 16, but replacing GNVQ at part one with GCSE is an attempt to raise the status of vocational programmes. There has even been much debate about the use of vocational in the title because it is considered that the title vocational GCSE would be considered to be inferior to a ‘traditional’ GCSE. For the purposes of this paper I have used the term vocational GCSE. However, official documentation now refers to applied GCSE in Business; applied GCSE in Leisure and Tourism etc. There has been a determined attempt to remove the term vocational from these programmes. Yet they are clearly general vocational programmes. The marketing of these programmes without using the term vocational will require a creative approach on the part of teachers.
Wolf (2002) has been openly critical of the new GCSE qualifications:

No sensible parent will want their child channelled into a particular vocational option at the age of 14. But if these new GCSEs are not really vocational then what are they for?

Muddle is often the result of being unwilling to say, or even think about, what you are really trying to do. There are, in our schools, significant numbers of 14-and 15-year olds for whom education isn’t working well, and whom the constant changes of vocational policy have served badly. Pretending that we can produce courses for them which at the same time are as “rigorous … as the traditional academic pathway”, and “attractive to the full spectrum of ability” is muddle which serves no one well.

Yet these courses are not designed to channel pupils into a specific vocational area. They will provide a broad introduction to the area and enable better choices to be made regarding future education, training and career destinations. Taking a GCSE in leisure and tourism, for example, will not commit young people to a lifetime of working in the travel industry. It might encourage some young people to go on to further vocational training in the area, or it might give them sufficient information to choose other options. A vocational GCSE will only be taken as part of a much broader curriculum, but it will provide a vocational option to many young people.

There is no doubt that what is currently offered to some young people in the final two years of compulsory schooling is not suitable and can act as a positive discouragement to further study or training (see for example Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 2000). The vocational GCSE programme will provide further opportunities for school pupils to gain experience of a wider range of subjects which, hopefully, are delivered in a non-traditional way, and for the development of more individualised provision. By ensuring that the new courses are part of the existing GCSE system the government is attempting to give them greater credibility and make them more acceptable to parents and employers.

The range of subjects available for the vocational GCSE is varied and they represent a wide spectrum of vocational activity. It will be interesting to see how many schools offer Manufacturing or Engineering and the number of pupils who choose these options. Manufacturing was available as a GNVQ programme and was a spectacular failure, only recruiting a small number of pupils. Availability to staff and resources in FE college and greater opportunities for links with industry may change this, but given the decline in the manufacturing and engineering sector in the wider economy it’s doubtful. Certainly greater integration of work-related programmes to the wider curriculum can only be a positive step in encouraging pupils to choose these options.

Making science available as a vocational rather than academic subject is an interesting development (one which many would argue is long overdue). However, ‘traditional’ science will still remain as an option at GCSE. The GCSE programmes based on the service sector, (Business, Health and Social Care, ICT, Leisure and Tourism) are likely to be the most popular choices with school pupils. However, there are also major omissions from the list of available vocational subjects. Why, for example, when it is a growth area and major employer, was retail and distribution omitted from the list of vocational areas available?
If the vocational GCSEs are accessible and attractive to pupils of all abilities then they can be judged to have been a success because vocational programmes will have achieved equal status to academic programmes. However, if they are confined to a small minority of disaffected or less able pupils they will merely be repeating the mistakes made by earlier vocational initiatives.

Conclusion

A unified and coherent system at 14-19 is a first step towards raising standards and improving participation in education and training. Movement to the use of GCSE as a mid point check rather than an end point is a strong possibility given the government’s commitment to the development of a new award to mark the completion of the 14-19 phase of education:

At present attainment at 19 is recognised in terms only of individual qualifications. A consequence is that many young people pursue a relatively narrow programme of study, that activities and achievement beyond formal qualifications are undervalued, and that old and unwarranted prejudices about academic and vocational learning are sustained. We propose that a new overarching award should be introduced to stimulate greater breadth and coherence for all learners to mark the completion of the 14-19 phase and to recognise substantial and worthwhile achievement. As a key goal it should motivate a greater proportion of young people to remain in education and training until 19. (DfES, 2002, 4.2)

Vocational GCSEs would be part of a much broader range of qualifications and experience, which would contribute to this award. The gap between education and training would be reduced and the vocational programmes could be given much greater prominence. This will require a major culture change in education and training (CEI, 2002). However, we are still a long way from the implementation of this and other initiatives. At the present time we still await a final decision, from the government, about many of the proposals which have been put forward.

From September 2002 vocational GCSE programmes will be available in schools and colleges. A £38 million programme of work-related learning placements will be underway. A major new vocational initiative will have become reality. The role of partners from FE and industry will be crucial to the success of this programme. A number of questions still remain to be answered:

Will this programme be different or any better than the long list of vocational initiatives, which have already been implemented by successive governments?
How will schools ‘sell’ these programmes?
Is the list of vocational areas available appropriate?
Will pupils choose to study these subjects?
Which pupils will choose to study these vocational GCSEs?
Will pupil attainment levels improve?
Will greater numbers of young people remain in education and training post-16?
What is the extent to which parity of esteem has been achieved with traditional GCSEs?
Are generic skills more relevant to employers than vocational skills?
How effective have the partnerships been between the key partners?
Would government policy be better directed at developing academic skills, especially literacy and numeracy?

Over the next two years on going research work on the delivery and implementation of vocational GCSEs will, hopefully, provide some answers to these questions.

Notes:
* In the British political system a Green Paper is a consultation document and is usually followed by a White Paper which contains a government’s specific plans for legislation.

References


