CAMBRIDGE ASSESSMENT

Is 14 the new 16?
Summary report

Summer 2011

01 Introduction

In June 2011 Cambridge Assessment hosted a debate at the British Library to consider whether the age at which children take GCSEs should be lowered to 14, and to look at the pros and cons of a 'routed' education system. We believe that recent discussions in the media and elsewhere about whether the age at which children take GCSEs should be lowered to 14 avoids the real discussion about what is being tested, why and what kind of education should follow.

Nearly 100 people attended the event, with a further 1,000 watching online. Participants explored issues such as: Should there be a national examination at 14 rather than 16? What would be the implications for what a student does next? Should this be the starting point for students to take courses leading them in different directions? Should these different directions allow students to opt for different 'routes' in different types of institutions – academic, technical or vocational?

Presenters and panellists included:

- Tim Oates, Group Director of Assessment Research and Development, Cambridge Assessment;
- Professor Geoff Hayward, Head of the School of Education, University of Leeds;
- Professor Ken Spours, Head of Continuing and Professional Education, Institute of Education, University of London;
- Dr Hilary Steedman, Centre for Economic Performance, London School of Economics and Political Science;
- Dr Matt Grist, Senior Researcher, Demos;
- Christopher Morecroft, President of the Association of Colleges;
- Graham Stuart MP, Chair of the Education Select Committee;
- Chair, Bene't Steinberg, Group Director of Public Affairs, Cambridge Assessment.

Tim Oates, Cambridge Assessment.

02 Making choices and receiving advice

Some of those present questioned whether in fact 14 is already the new 16 – and whether this is now the key age for making choices about the next steps for education. References were made to the impact of raising the participation age from 16 to 18, and the fact that this had led to more of a focus on the 14–19 group, rather than 16 being so much of a focal point. Mark Dawe, Chief Executive of OCR, suggested that it was the recommendations of the Wolf Report that have reintroduced the importance of 16 as a break point.

Dr Matt Grist, from the think tank Demos, said that 14 is already the new 16 for those 60–70 per cent of students who eventually go on to Level 3 or above because they start thinking about their options at 14. However, he said that the situation was very different for the lower achieving 30–40 per cent who currently have no choice but to go on to FE colleges, to do a course with little labour market value, and to effectively be in "a holding pen" for two years.

Tim Oates, from Cambridge Assessment, pointed out that even in integrated systems where all students study a similar programme until 16, students still have to make choices. For example, students have to choose between their GCSE options even though they may not know the consequences of these choices. He said that the basis of the choices needed to be scrutinised – for example, he said that often a student will choose a course because the teacher is exciting and not because it leads in the right direction in respect of their career aspirations.

However, it was nonetheless pointed out by other speakers that the path to success is clearer for the more able. Professor Geoff Hayward, from the University of Leeds, said that those students "on the Royal Road to higher education" (i.e. those studying GCSEs and A levels) don't really make decisions at 14 and 16. He said that the real issue is lower attaining young people without access to the 'Royal Road' – as it is this group who have to make the real choices about what to do next. Hilary Steedman also commented that the path for the more able is well marked and well understood, but that the less able face a "catastrophic lack of clarity and direction with respect to the very legitimate goals they have for their lives".

In light of these choices that need to be made, several speakers also referred to the importance of informed choice and the need for a good careers service. Matt Grist in particular emphasised that the one thing that is key is objective and high quality information, advice and guidance at 14. He raised concerns that meeting with career advisers tended to be intermittent and happened too late for children to make informed choices. He said that information and guidance needed to be given earlier, that it should be informed by the labour market, and that it should be more objective and professional. Christopher Morecroft also referred to the insufficient careers support in schools, and said that it was important to consider the individual needs of the

Professor Geoff Hayward, University of Leeds.

Dr Hilary Steedman, London School of Economics and Political Science.

Graham Stuart MP.

03 Fitness for purpose

Tim Oates criticised the past focus on qualification-led change and pointed to the importance of focusing instead on the quality of vocational training programmes. He said that in the past we have been too worried with system 'tidiness', explaining which qualifications were equivalent to which other qualifications, as well as focusing on the parity of esteem of vocational and academic qualifications. Instead, he said we should establish each route as being of high status in its own right and by virtue of its 'fitness for purpose', in other words that they get people to the right places, with the right skills, knowledge and understanding.

Geoff Hayward agreed with Tim's point that what was important was a focus on qualifications which are fit for purpose. He said that he was in fact agnostic about whether we should follow a tracked or unified system and that fitness for purpose was the key. However, his concern was that we still hadn't decided what the purpose of qualifications is and that we need to have a serious debate about their purpose.

Geoff Hayward also talked about the importance of vocational qualifications allowing for progression to HE. He referred to the importance of both universities and employers understanding how prepared a student is to embark on either Higher Education or employment. He said: "Our experience suggests that hard pressed HE admissions staff don't want to become cognoscenti of complicated qualifications systems. I suspect the same is true of employers as well. They require clear signals about preparation to progress, which well-designed tracked systems do seem to provide."

04 A core programme

There was broad consensus throughout the debate that all programmes need to be based on the fundamentals of maths, language and science.

Tim Oates talked about the "essential elements of maths, science and literacy", emphasising that this was the important feature of the Dutch system – that whilst students may get onto separate routes early, the content of all routes is equally demanding in terms of the core programme studied.

Throughout the debate, reference was made to the fact that other high performing systems, particularly those across Europe, are routed education systems, where a high proportion of students go into a high quality vocational route at the age of 16. Tim Oates pointed out that this defied the myth that seemed to pervade that high performing systems are not routed systems. In particular, these examples highlighted the way in which a core programme can be followed in different routes. For example, Germany, Austria, and Switzerland all have 'dual' systems where a high proportion of young people, around 45 per cent, go into a vocational route at 16. In Finland, 45 per cent also go into a vocational route at 16. In the Netherlands, 40 per cent go into the vocational system. Despite students making this choice, students continue to receive a general education, and the content of the curriculum is met in a vocational context, thus motivating people to achieve demanding aspects of science, maths and language. So whilst the context is vocational, the content is very similar to the academic route.

Hilary Steedman said that Professor Alison Wolf had done a great service in pointing out the need for a core of serious study to continue for all students. However, others suggested that the devil is in the detail – and that whilst there was some consensus about the need for a core of education, the question was what should be in it, how much time it should take up, and what age it should stop.

05 Stage not age

Several speakers referred to the need to focus on 'stage not age', i.e. where students progress onto the next level at a time that suits their own rate of progression rather than as a result of their age.

Hilary Steedman asked: "Why must we oblige people to take GCSE and fail it, so that they can then take it and pass it? It's nonsense and it's extremely de-motivating."

Christopher Morecroft also highlighted the importance of only examining people when they are ready – he made the comparison with the driving test, commenting that not everyone made the decision to take the driving test at the age of 17. His view was that we should instead aim for everyone to have achieved a Level 3 qualification by the age of 24.

Mark Dawe made a similar point – he said that age 16 should not necessarily equate to a Level 2, nor age 18 with a Level 3, and that we needed to get away from learners getting a Level 1 qualification through virtue of failing at Level 2.

Graham Stuart MP also highlighted the need for a 'multi-lane' system. He said that we needed to allow for a more flexible system with different 'lanes' to allow those who learn at different paces to learn at different times.

06 Interchange and permeability

Several speakers spoke about the need for allowing permeability between routes if we were to head towards a more routed education system. Tim Oates commented that in good systems, including routed education systems, there are opportunities to move across the system. For example, in Germany, there is some allowance for bridging arrangements.

Graham Stuart also said that if we went down the path of a more routed education system, it would be important to maximise permeability, although he recognised that no system in the world allows for complete permeability.

However, Professor Ken Spours, from the Institute of Education, highlighted some of the concerns of a tracked education system. He said that it is important to have a framework where young people can make choices, experience more holistic programmes and which allow for greater movement when young people change their minds. He emphasised that young people do change their minds and that we should therefore not design systems which lock them in.

He also put forward the view that rather than allowing for interchange and permeability, track systems bring about division, and that the more selective academic track will always culturally dictate the vocational track.

Others in the audience also raised this issue of interchange between routes. Dale Bassett, from the think tank Reform, suggested that whilst it was possible to 'trade down' from an academic to a vocational route, the problem is that you cannot 'trade up' from vocational to academic, and therefore a genuine interchange doesn't really exist. He referred to the issue of 17 year olds who have had their choices limited in terms of post-16 education because of this inability to 'trade up'.

In terms of the issue of whether the introduction of separate routes necessarily would mean that students should learn in different types of institutions, Matt Grist said that we didn't need to return to a "1944 Education Act, three institutions, three strict routes" kind of scenario, and that we just need to provide a set of options to serve young people's needs. However, he also said that we should give some thought to other institutions which give children the opportunity to move out of school at 14, pointing out we need to bear in mind that some students have matured beyond teaching methods of schools at the age of 14.

Ken Spours, on the other hand, suggested that the odd University Technical College (UTC) was not going to change the system, and that "if you enter the vocational track, you know you will be the second best, despite the odd UTC".

Tim Oates, Cambridge Assessment.

Christopher Morecroft, Association of Colleges.

The presenters.

07 The labour market

The question of how best to prepare young people for the labour market came up throughout the debate.

One audience member suggested that there seemed to be a lack of recognition that the biggest employer in the UK is Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), and that in developing vocational programmes, we needed to engage with small businesses to find out what their needs are. However, in response, it was suggested that the stumbling block is that SMEs can't always articulate what they want. It was also pointed out that much of what goes on inside an organisation is context specific – knowledge which can only be learnt when entering the organisation, for which apprenticeships are the system which develops this best.

On the issue of apprenticeships, Tim Oates emphasised that these needed to be genuine contracts between young people and an individual employer. He said that they also needed to be of long duration and economically viable for employers, with financial incentives for employers being provided. He referred to the problems of weak apprenticeships which had occurred because of uncertainty over who is responsible for initial vocational education and training. He said this has led to a situation of 'substitution' – where the Government thinks it needs to fund it, this then leads to employers getting used to it, and in turn the Government makes them short duration because they are expensive to fund. Matt Grist agreed that apprenticeships needed to be good quality, employer led, and to be of long enough duration.

08 The implications of making 14 the new 16

In his speech to close the debate, Graham Stuart suggested that as the school leaving age was being increased to 18, and the arbitrary age of 16 became less significant, this allowed us an opportunity to potentially restructure the way we provide our education system, as well as to shake up the exam system.

However, he also pointed out that this was not just a case of looking at the exam system, but a more fundamental question about institutional and organisational structures. For example, what would be the implications for middle schools, for the capacity of FE colleges, and what would it mean for sixth form colleges. And even if we could draw up a new picture of what an education system would look like, he reminded the audience that we need to move to that place working from the basis of our existing institutions.

Nonetheless, interestingly, in an audience poll run during the debate, in response to the question about whether a 'routes' system could work in the UK, 68 per cent felt that it could/or would work. When this question was repeated again at the end of the debate the figure had increased to 77 per cent. Full results of the poll can be found in Appendix 1.

09 Conclusions

- Young people will always have to make choices, whether in an integrated, tracked or routed education system. Therefore, informed choice and a good careers service are essential. Information and guidance should be given earlier, be informed by the labour market, and be objective and professional.
- There needs to be a focus on achieving qualifications which are 'fit for purpose', ensuring that people get to the right places, with the right skills, knowledge and understanding, rather than worrying about achieving a 'tidy' system.
- All students, whether in an academic, technical or vocational route, should learn a core programme which is based on the fundamentals of maths, language and science.
- Our education system should focus on 'stage not age', allowing young people to take qualifications when they are ready to do so.
- In the event that we do head in the direction of a more routed education system, there needs to be 'permeability' between different routes, allowing students the opportunity to move across the system if they change their mind about what route is best for them.
- Apprenticeships need to be genuine contracts between young people and employers. There needs to be certainty about who is responsible for apprenticeships to ensure that they are good quality and of long enough duration.
- If we do see the raising of the participation age as an opportunity to look at whether age 14, rather than 16, provides a 'break point', we need to think carefully about the implications for institutional and organisational structures, mindful that any changes would be from the basis of our existing institutions.

Films and podcasts of the entire event, as well as presentations, can be viewed online at www.cambridgeassessment.org.uk

The panellists.

Appendix

Appendix 1: Findings of audience poll

We asked audience members a series of questions related to whether they supported an external exam at 16, what age students might be suited to go in different directions, and whether a system in which students could opt for certain routes (either at 14 or 16) might work.

The full results can be found below.

Q1 Externally set exams at age 16 are the most reliable method of validating that a student is ready to go on successfully to study subjects at a specialised level:

1. Strongly agree	15%
2. Agree	47%
3. Disagree	32%
4. Strongly disagree	5%

Q2 Age 14, rather than age 16, is the better starting point for students to take courses leading them in different directions:

1. Strongly agree	15%
2. Agree	39%
3. Disagree	21%
4. Strongly disagree	25%

Q3 If a national examination was to be introduced at age 14 (whether internally or externally assessed), what should its primary purpose be?

1. Progress check	28%
2. Subject knowledge	14%
3. Selection for routes	18%
4. No exam at 14	40%

Q4 An educational system that allows students to opt for different routes (academic, technical, vocational)…

1. Would work	5%
2. Could work	63%
3. Probably not	27%
4. Never work	3%
5. Not considered	2%

And when repeated at end of the debate:

Q5 An educational system that allows students to opt for different routes (academic, technical, vocational)…

1. Would work	5%
2. Could work	72%
3. Probably not	21%
4. Never work	2%
5. Not considered	0%

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