

Cambridge Pre-University Qualification

February 2006 Newsletter

Introduction

This newsletter provides information on the progress of the new pre-university qualification being developed by University of Cambridge International Examinations (CIE)

Background

In October 2005, University of Cambridge International Examinations (CIE) began consultation with schools in the UK and internationally and with universities about its proposals for the design of a pre-university qualification to be offered as an alternative to A Levels.

During the development phase the new qualification will be referred to as Cambridge Pre-U. The essence of the new qualification is to prepare students with the skills and knowledge required to enable them to make a success of their subsequent studies.

Bearing in mind the need for close collaboration with those for whom the qualification would be designed, CIE has also established a Liaison Committee representing schools, universities and subject associations. The first meeting of the Committee took place at the end of January to review CIE's proposals and the outcome of the initial phase of consultation.

Endorsement of CIE Proposals

Consultation indicated strong support for CIE proposals. Schools and universities particularly welcomed CIE's commitment to an underpinning set of educational values. These were overwhelmingly approved by 92% of the respondents.



Educational Values Underpinning Cambridge Pre-U

Schools particularly supported the importance of designing qualifications which centred on:

- Developing well-informed, open and independent-minded individuals capable of applying their skills to meet the demands of the world as they will find it and over which they may have influence.
 - A curriculum which retains the integrity of subject specialisms and which can be efficiently, effectively and reliably assessed, graded and reported to meet the needs of universities.
 - A curriculum which is designed to recognise a wide range of individual talents, interests and abilities and which provides the depth and rigour required for a university degree course.
 - A curriculum which encourages the acquisition of specific skills and abilities, in particular the skills of problem solving, creativity, critical thinking, team working and effective communication.
- The encouragement of 'deep understanding' in learning achieved via the CIE structure and orientation.
 - The development of a perspective which equips young people to understand a range of different cultures and ideas and to respond successfully to the opportunity for international mobility.

Recognising that a 'broad' curriculum is not at all the same thing as the requirement to study numerous subjects, schools and universities agreed with the proposal that for the new qualification students should be required to offer three main subjects, one subsidiary subject and have a further opportunity to develop and demonstrate skills of value in higher education. The Liaison Committee and 82% of all respondents to the Consultation supported this outline. There was no evidence of support for the introduction of an additional tier - Advanced Plus. A strong view was that well-designed syllabuses with



appropriate question papers could effectively challenge the most able without recourse to a separate tier.

Schools and universities welcomed the concern with developing 'deep understanding' and approved of the essentially non-modular structure proposed for the qualification.

Almost unanimously, Consultation respondents wished to avoid the type of Diploma or Baccalaureate structure which might constrain the flexibility of student choice post 16. All agreed that subject specialisms should be regarded as paramount:

"It is often not in a student's long term interests to have to perform well right across the academic spectrum. For those with a passionate interest in, say, mathematics and science to have their overall grading inextricably linked to subjects in which they have neither real interest nor reasonable competence can be de-motivating and damaging" (a UK Head, articulating a commonly held view).

Extending Student Learning

Sector support for the inclusion of a student's independent study, whether investigation or extended essay, was strong. CIE's proposal required students to submit a substantial - but manageable - extended essay, report or

investigation. Not only was this felt to give the opportunity to explore a topic in more depth, it was also considered to foster critical thinking, and the disciplines of independent learning so all-important for successful higher education and graduate employment.

Creating an Entry Threshold

74% of Consultation respondents agreed that a broad pre-entry requirement would be of value and 77% agreed with the subjects proposed (Maths, English or a First Language, Second or Foreign Language, Science and Social Science/Humanities). Given the importance of meeting the needs of international students, it was agreed there would be a strong need to ensure a wide list of proxy qualifications and that there should be sufficient flexibility to meet the needs of student returners who might have gained only a few (I)GCSE passes on which they wished to build.

Harnessing CIE's Global Reach

In the process of liaison with schools and universities, attention was drawn to the unique potential for CIE to harness its global reach in such a way that international learning opportunities were offered to young

people. As in its existing examinations, CIE will take into account the needs of both international and UK students in its syllabus design. Consideration will also be given to incorporating into the Cambridge Pre-U a requirement to show evidence of international networking and collaboration.

Subject Specific Consultation Plans

CIE is working with panels of subject advisers for each of Biology, Business Studies, Chemistry, Economics, English, Geography, History, Mathematics and Physics. The members of these panels have commented on broad subject principles and CIE will now, following the feedback from schools and universities, begin the process of syllabus development. First drafts are expected to be available for comment by September 2006.

Feedback from the sector suggests that the timeline proposed in the original Consultation Paper might well receive further consideration by CIE. The development focus will be the effective realisation of the design of the Cambridge Pre-U qualification:

- in strong alignment with CIE's underpinning educational values;
- in close collaboration with end-users;
- harnessing the potential of CIE's global reach to offer assessment opportunities which encourage international networking, inter-country projects and reciprocal recognition.

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