



Taking Forward the Specification for New Qualifications

Background Paper for an Ideas-Building Event focused on Strand 1 of the Vocational Qualifications Reform Programme at

St. George's House, Windsor Castle, 18th – 19th January

Welcome

I'm delighted to welcome you to this confidential ideas-building event. The purpose of this event is to develop a shared agreement of how best to move forward in developing appropriate criteria for new qualifications across the sectors over the next 24 months.

At this event, we will be focusing on Strand 1 of the Vocational Qualifications Reform Programme: the production of Sector Qualification Strategies, building on the pilots to be rolled out across the Skills for Business Network.

Not an isolated piece of the jigsaw

One difficulty in trying to keep a narrow focus, that I'm sure many will feel familiar with, is that Strand 1's goals **cannot** be achieved in isolation.

- They are related to the business governance, development, and planning of Sector Skills Councils, which have other priorities competing for their attention.

While qualifications reform will be high on their agenda, it may not be perceived as *the* most urgent priority by employers leading in the development and growth of the Councils.

- Strand 1 goals are linked closely with the activities and goals of other strands. For example, the Sector Qualification Strategies need to align closely with improving National Occupational Standards, which is a key focus within the work of Strand 2: Framework Development.

The inter-relationship between the Strands' activities and goals does carry a degree of risk. If the work of one strand is delayed this can have a direct impact on the progress of others.

- The remit for the achievement of Strand 1 goals covers all 4 nations. Starting points for moving forward on this work varies from one country to another. Moreover, the work is taking place within different contexts that are outside of the scope of the Reform Programme but can have a direct impact upon it.

Different viewpoints

This is why the Reform is viewed differently depending on where you're looking from. Of course, it isn't rocket science: we all know this to be the case. But it is surprising how easily we can forget this when we get into discussions with those who have different viewpoints from ourselves!

However, sticking to our own viewpoint – and trying to persuade others to change theirs – is not the way we want to work and, of course, goes against the Reform Programme's operating principles of transparency, engagement and trust.

This is why I hope everyone joining the event will be prepared to be as open minded as possible, and take on board different perspectives about how best to take the Reform forward. If we can manage to do this, we stand a much better chance of breaking new ground in our thinking, and agreeing actions.

St. George's House

The reason that we are holding this event at St. George's House is that the aim of the House is to create an atmosphere of trust in which well-informed people can bring fresh thinking to key issues that will have impact on our future. It is **NOT** the sort of place where delegates with badges listen to speeches. It **IS** a place where free spirits can try out new ideas without fearing the consequences.

At the end of this paper, I have included the Conventions of St. George's House which are used at all consultations and ideas building events held here at Windsor Castle. At the beginning of the event, I will ask you if you are happy to adopt them as ground rules for our discussions.

I very much hope that you'll be open to giving them a go, as experience has shown that their application can make an enormous difference to both the quality of debate and the ideas that emerge.

We are conscious that we're welcoming many of you to St. George's House for the first time, which is why we'd like to forewarn those booked you that when you arrive, you will find that you are not offered a key to your room. This is quite intentional, and is because the Dean, Canons and Warden welcome you to the House, as their home.

We hope that you'll feel that you can enter into the spirit of the place as a safe and welcoming environment, and that the experience will be both creative and enjoyable.

Key Timings and Contact Numbers

On pages 3 – 4, our agenda and key timings are outlined for the two days. If anyone needs to contact you urgently whilst you're attending the event, the 'phone number for St. George's House is **01753 848848** and the fax number is **01753 848849**. There are computer points in the bedrooms.

When you arrive, you will find your name badge on a table in the Patricia Hotung Room, on the ground floor of St. George's House. We just put first names on badges to make it easier to see each other's names, and also to spare us what can be the 'creeping death' of introductions. We are very keen to create an informal atmosphere during our time together, and we have found that making a point of using each other's names – instead of saying "*I agree or disagree with the person over there, who's name I can't remember!*" really does help people to relax and spark creative discussion. Please don't think we're being over familiar!

Agenda

<p>Thursday, 18th January From 3.30 pm</p>	<p>Arrival at St. George's House</p>
<p>4.15 pm</p>	<p>Light tea (optional) sandwiches and cakes in St. George's House</p>
<p>5.05 pm</p>	<p>Sung Evensong (optional) A rare opportunity to attend evensong in St. George's Chapel and listen to the Chapel's choir. You are seated in the Knights of the Garter Stalls. Evensong lasts approximately 45 minutes.</p>
<p>6.00 pm sharp</p>	<p>Opening Session In the Vicars' Hall. Welcome and confirmation of our goals for this event, ground rules and language for discussions. Begin our discussions by agreeing our goals for Strand 1 by 2008 and affirming the working principles that have been adopted by the Vocational Qualifications Reform Programme</p> <p>We then want to explore briefly the impact that people feel that the Leitch Review might have on the work of Strand 1 of the Vocational Reform Programme. Do we feel that the Review underlines the need for this work, or do people feel that it calls for a 'raincheck' on the direction, scope and timescale of Strand 1?</p> <p>Before breaking for the evening, we want to sharpen up the key practical actions that we collectively feel need to happen in the next 24 months</p>
<p>7.45pm</p>	<p>Pre-dinner drinks in St. George's House</p>
<p>8.15 pm</p>	<p>Dinner in St George's House Dining Room Reflecting on our earlier discussions, we want to continue our debate over dinner by considering a couple of key issues:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Which of the actions put forward – if any – feel like we're going over old ground? If there is a sense that this is what is happening, what is stopping us from moving forward? ➤ Which of the actions suggested feel like they will break new ground? Why is this? Is it because the timing is right, other pieces of the jigsaw are in place, blockages have been shifted? <p>When we come back the following morning we want first to explore the insights and ideas that we hope will have emerged from our informal discussions over dinner.</p> <p>With this in mind, you may want to jot down a few notes as an aide memoire. I should say though, we won't be sharing the twists and turns that your discussions take over dinner: just the headlines, as a way of helping us focus how best move forward in the time we have on the 19th.</p>
<p>9.45 pm</p>	<p>Private Tour of the Chapel led by Andrew Carter, Warden of St. George's House</p>

<p>Friday, 19th January 9.15 am prompt</p>	<p>Second session Drawing on our earlier discussions, we want to explore how we are going to take the actions forward. What must we do to minimise the risk of blockages or being driven off course? Do we need a plan 'B' up our sleeves to ensure that if issues arise within the complex network of relationships and links surrounding Strand 1, we do not resort to blame culture but (we the support of all) take a different route to achieve the goals we want to achieve?</p>
<p>10.45 am</p>	<p>Short break</p>
<p>11.00 am</p>	<p>Third session At this stage, we want to draw up a composite action action plan, that identifies not only</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ milestone achievements and roles in taking forward the Strand 1 actions needed over the next 24 months, but also ➤ the key actions and milestones that will be priorities for each of the four nations, the Sector Skills Councils and different agencies over the next 12 months. We will attempt to highlight those that are likely to have direct impact on the work of Strand 1
<p>12.15 pm</p>	<p>Buffet Lunch</p>
<p>1.00 pm</p>	<p>Final session In this final session we want to measure whether we feel we have gained greater clarity about how best to take forward the work of Strand 1, and our respective roles and responsibilities.</p> <p>Before leaving, we will invite participants to share any new insights that they have gained through our discussions, especially on ways of working that will create greater momentum in achieving change and keep a sharp focus on achieving the end goals.</p>
<p>No later than 2.30 pm</p>	<p>End of event</p>

Our approach to the opening session

Starting at promptly 6.00 pm, we have about an hour and a half to get really stuck into our debate. We want to use this session not only to agree what we want to discuss and where we want to get to by 2.30 pm the following day, but also how we are going to work together.

Important key notes of our approach to these events are **informality** and **confidentiality**. So we dispense with the usual 'round robin' of introductions (I'm sure most of you know each other already anyway!) and format of opening presentations. However good, opening speeches encourage the 'us and them' habit, with one or two people being expected to produce all the answers, and the rest of us

lobbing in questions and indulging in the sport of picking holes in their arguments! We want to begin this event as we mean to continue – with a fast flowing informal discussion, in which we **all** feel that **we have a responsibility** to put forward ideas and, in doing so, **take risks** in breaking new ground.

Moving on to new ground is especially important for the success of this event. I'd like to suggest that we all need to be open to the idea that we need work differently if we're going to succeed in achieving Strand 1 goals.

We're not starting with a blank page. Clear principles¹ have been agreed about the way in which the Vocational Qualifications Reform Programme is to be taken forward. These principles are transparency, engagement and trust. These are in place to ensure that:

- all thinking is shared openly;
- there is equal engagement across partners and agencies;
- time is invested to ensure that:
 - ➔ the different policy drivers and developments in each of the 4 UK nations, and
 - ➔ the language/terminology used

is understood by all;

- as a programme, we deliver what we say we deliver.

With your agreement, and along with Open Agenda's ground rules which include the Conventions of St. George's House, we will adopt these principles throughout our discussions. On the language issue, to save us from a debate on semantics I will prepare a 'definition sheet' of words that have a range of meanings and could trip us up. This definition sheet is only for the purpose of our discussions at Windsor!

As you know, we are starting off our discussions by affirming our goals. I hope you agree that we don't want to spend too much time on this. That said, I fully endorse the view that it is well worth reminding ourselves of where we want to get to before we set out!

Drawing the Vocational Qualifications Reform Programme Brief, Final Version, 27.06.06, both the overall goal and the goal for Strand 1 are set out succinctly:

The overall goal is summed up in the following paragraph:

¹ Para 5.8.2 Vocational Qualifications Reform Programme Brief, 27.06.06

1.2 **"We all share the goal of ensuring that employers have the right skills to support the success of their businesses, and that individuals have the skills they need to be both employable, and which allow them to participate in economic, social and civil life."**

The specific goals for Strand 1 of the Programme covering all 4 countries is given as follows:

3.2.3 **"The production of Sector Qualification Strategies covering all sectors by 2010 at the latest, which are supported by appropriate National Occupational Standards and Labour Market Intelligence. These should set out the need for accredited qualifications and other learning provision in each sector, together with the production of implementation plans."**

Based on the outcomes of the implementation plans, there will then be the production of appropriate qualification criteria, the development and accreditation of qualification specifications based on those criteria and the development of support materials."

A key principle in the development of the Sector Qualification Strategy is that it reflects what employers will value. With this in mind, the Sector Skills Councils have a major role to play in the development of the Strategy and ensuring that their employer members and their employees find it fit for purpose.

Having reached agreement that these **are** the goals that we want to achieve, we want to spend just a short time exploring the impact that the Leitch Review may have on the goals themselves, and our capacity to achieve them in the timescale that the Programme Board has said it will deliver.

Then we want to focus on the nitty gritty: the action we need to take to get where we want to be 24 months from now. Exactly, what this action might include will in some degree depend on the outcomes of our preliminary discussions about goals, and the impact of the Leitch Review. Before we break our discussions for the evening, we want to have captured what we see as the priority milestone actions that we collectively agree will be essential to meet our goals.

At this stage in our debate, it will be important that we don't get caught up in the detail of the actions that we feel need to be taken. If we allow this to happen, we will not give ourselves sufficient time to put together an overall framework of the actions needed. We will have the opportunity to explore particular ideas in greater depth over dinner and the following morning.

As our agenda is big and time is short, we want to continue the thread of our discussions over dinner. In particular we want to focus on:

- Which of the actions put forward – if any – feel like we're going over old ground? If there is a sense that this is what is happening, what is it stopping us from moving forward?

- Which of the actions suggested feel like they will break new ground? Why is this? Is it because the timing is right, other pieces of the jigsaw are in place, blockages have been shifted?

We determine the agenda

One of the key principles of Open Agenda events is that we determine the agenda as we go, in order to get the most from our time together. This means that, at any stage of our discussions, we can change the structure of a session, if we feel that it will help us achieve stronger outputs from the event. I say this, with one important proviso.

We find that groups go away far more satisfied with what we have accomplished by the end of an event, if we start off with a commitment to achieving **as much clarity as possible** in our discussions, and really push ourselves in **breaking new ground** and **moving ideas forward**.

Working in idea-generating groups

As an important part of the ideas-building process, we will break into '**idea-generating**' groups during the event to tackle key questions raised through our discussions.

The purpose of these groups is to focus on sharpening up the issues and developing ideas that we want to pick up and run with. Please use your time in groups to sound out your ideas and do **not** be tempted into trying to develop a group view.

We use these groups because it gives everyone an opportunity to think through different points of view and have their say, when this would be impossible as one large group because of time constraints. As a result, a number of different – even opposing – ideas can emerge from small group discussions.

This is what we're after: ideas and not a group view. For those who haven't been in on a Windsor event before, it's worth saying that it really helps us to leave the groups behind, if you make a point of **not** sitting with members of your group afterwards, and agree to outlaw the phrases "we think" or "my group thought that".

"We think" makes it difficult for group members to change their minds without feeling disloyal to their group. Also, "we think" has more authority than "I think" and, completely unintentionally, can make it less easy for others to challenge or discard ideas.

We may also break into groups for longer periods of time to '**build ideas**'. In this instance, it is more likely (but not certain!) that there will be agreement amongst members of the group. What we ask is that

when you come to share your thinking with the rest of us, you **just give us the idea**. Please don't feel you need to share the journey your group has travelled in developing this idea! If we are not clear about its rationale, we can always ask questions.

Going with the flow

We need to manage our time together carefully as one large group, if we're going to develop the momentum we need to move our discussions forward. Developing ideas needs careful listening. Let's try and stick to the rule that when someone comes in on the discussion, they **follow on** from what the person before them has said, before moving on and starting a fresh train of thought. Please also resist the temptation of making more than one point! As soon as someone says "*I'd just like to make two or three points at this stage in our discussions*" the ideas stop flowing, as we are drawn to recap on what's gone before.

Of course, when we're together as one large group we want **as many people as possible to participate**: brainstorming is not a spectator event! So I'll try and ensure that the more confident, natural talkers amongst us don't squeeze others out.

Meeting everyone's expectations

We are bound to arrive at Windsor with very different views about the priority actions we need to take to achieve the goals set for Strand 1. This is especially so given that this work is being viewed from a wide range of perspectives. While this is an enormous strength, it can lead nowhere unless we're ready to try and see issues through others' eyes and be committed to finding common ground. This is why we should give ourselves some time early on to work through **as a group** the issues we feel are most important for us to explore during our time together.

Developing ideas is always a messy process, especially during the opening stages! It can be frustrating for those who like to focus quickly on what they feel is **the** key issue that needs to be tackled, and want to get on with sorting it out. The difficulty with this approach is that one person's key issue is another's back burner!

So, I would like to ask that we all try to be as relaxed as possible in the opening session, and let as many as possible have their say, so that we can build up a head of steam **as a group** in identifying the issues we want to explore in greater depth.

I'm really looking forward to meeting you all next Thursday.

Krysia Hudek, Open Agenda, 10th January 2007

St. George's House Conventions

1. *Please be open to changing your mind*

We hope that during your time at the House you will see yourself as a “free spirit”, open to the possibility that the opinions you hold most dearly, on the topic under discussion, might actually be wrong. Once we each take that step, we find that it is much easier to persuade others to question their own assumptions, as well.

2. *Please do not attribute remarks to individuals after the event*

At all House events, we ask groups to agree at the outset that comments made in plenary or small group sessions will not be attributed to individuals afterwards. We have a firm convention that people should not be quoted without their permission, and commend this to you most strongly.

3. *Please take risks with ideas*

The most successful Consultations at the House have been those where individuals feel sufficiently relaxed, and supported by others, to be able to take risks with ideas. This requires a high degree of trust among a group, and we hope that from the outset you will seek to build that trust.

4. *Please try and avoid any false consensus*

We hope that if you find a consensus emerging in your discussions, you will check to ensure that it is soundly based. It can sometimes be very difficult for individuals to resist the pressure to agree with their peers, and we hope that healthy debate will not be stifled by a false consensus.

5. *Please use “plain English”*

At just about every event, one of the biggest struggles is with the weight of technical language that some speakers tend to use, and others leave unchallenged for fear of displaying ignorance. We ask **everyone** joining a Consultation at the House to avoid using acronyms, and to be ready to intervene in debate to ask colleagues to use “plain English”.

Andrew Carter
Warden of St. George's House
