

TOPICS

Diplomas unveiled

Robotics, aerospace engineering and nutrition are among the topics pupils will be able to select in the first wave of the 14-19 diploma when it is launched in 2008.

Construction and the built environment, IT, creative and media, engineering and health and social care have been unveiled as the first five diploma themes. They were selected in consultation with the sector skills councils (SSCs), which represent employers.

"After meeting the SSCs we chose the five diplomas most ready to deliver for first teaching in 2008," said a spokesman for the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority.

The diplomas have been designed by employers and educators, working together in diploma development partnerships, and combine academic and applied learning.

Every diploma will include generic material including English, maths, IT user skills and work experience. Schools and colleges are being invited to form local consortia in order to offer a full range of courses for all students.

"Diplomas will offer employers what they need – young people with superb reading, writing, maths and ICT skills," said Jim Knight, schools minister.



CONSTRUCTION IS ONE OF THE FIRST FIVE THEMES

A-LEVELS

Maths success multiplies

Maths was the big winner in this year's A-level results. The record 805,698 entries for 2006 – up 5.8 per cent on 2005 – mean that maths is now the third most popular subject at A-level.

Entries for further mathematics were also up, by 22.5 per cent.

The rise is being attributed to the revised curriculum introduced in the wake of the review by Professor Adrian Smith in 2004 of GCSE maths.

Overall, the A-level pass rate rose for the 24th year in a row in 2006 to 96.9 per cent – slightly up on 2005 – and 24.1 per cent of students were awarded grade As.

Boys continued to narrow the gap on girls but girls surged ahead in the top grades and did even better in most of the main subjects, according to the Joint Council for Qualifications, the umbrella group for awarding bodies.

Girls bag GCSE glory

This year's GCSE pass rate rose to 98.1 per cent in England, Wales and Northern Ireland with the number of students awarded A* to C grades rising 1.2 percentage points to 62.4 per cent.

Entries for the sciences increased across the board on 2005, with rises in physics (6.6 per cent), biology (6.3 per cent) and chemistry (6.2 per cent).

For religious studies, the number of candidates was up by 8.2 per cent.

As happened with A-levels, girls still performed significantly better overall, although boys' results are improving more quickly.

Assessors give feedback on the exam season

The workload was greater than ever this summer, said Martin Walker, a principal examiner for GCSE General Studies and a senior examiner for A-level.

"It has been the worst year I have known. The exam boards seem to be reaching critical mass pretty quickly and the systems can't take more candidates. I have never had so many last-minute requests for help as this year."

The increased number of entries has affected quality, he suggested.

"The best scripts are still extremely strong but there are larger numbers of people who are not the ideal candidates for some of these tests. You wonder why we are asking them to do these things in which, you can tell from what they write, they have little interest."

Problems with new software added to the difficulties, Walker added.

"I have been involved in a technology pilot of on-screen submissions. I was spending more time in June on the phone talking to examiners about software than talking about marking scripts."

Quality of candidates is an issue

David Dalton-Leggett (right), a principal examiner in GNVQ performing arts, also had a hectic summer, partly due to exam reorganisation in his subject.

"The workload has been the heaviest I have known it," he said.



A big issue

has been the quality of candidates at intermediate levels, he said.

"Advanced level is no problem, as candidates are clearly focused on it, but for the intermediate paper many candidates are being entered whose weak areas should have been addressed at foundation level."

No noticeable shortage of examiners

But for Charles Smith, a principal examiner for A-level economics: "The volume of work has been about the same, possibly there's been a slight increase. But there wasn't a noticeable shortage of examiners this year as there has been in the past."

Preparation for the switch from six to four A-level units has taken up some time, he added.

"That's the next upheaval. We had one meeting for that before we got very busy with the assessment. Now that teachers are used to the six units, we have got to sacrifice things that they see as being valuable, which won't be easy."