

A-LEVEL SHAKE-UP

New look for post-16 exams

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A new A* A-level grade and the chance for one state school in every local authority to offer the International Baccalaureate (IB) are among changes to post-16 education unveiled by the government.

Prime minister Tony Blair has announced plans to give each local authority in England £2.5 million to support more schools and colleges to offer the IB by 2010.

Ian Andain, head teacher of Broadgreen High School in Liverpool, which has offered the diploma-style IB since 1992, said the wide-ranging qualification should not mean extra assessment work for schools.

"The assessment regime for the IB is not unlike A-level, although there's no equivalent of the AS exam in the lower sixth. Coursework is assessed internally and moderated externally. Students do their main exams at the end of the upper sixth.

"In lots of ways, in terms of assessment, it's easier than A-level because the lack of the AS means it is less time-consuming."

Announcing changes to make A-levels tougher, education secretary Alan Johnson said the new A* grade level was designed "to encourage the best students to demonstrate the upper limits of their ability".

Charles Smith, senior lecturer at Swansea School of Education and an assessor for AS



TONY BLAIR: £2.5M TO HELP AUTHORITIES OFFER IB

and A2 economics, said it was unclear as yet whether the A* would mean more work for examiners.

"At GCSE the establishment of the grade boundary for the A* is a statistical procedure that follows the setting of other grade boundaries. It involves no judgement by examiners and therefore does not add to their workload in any way.

"We do not yet know how the A* boundary will be set at 'A' level, but we cannot assume

that it will be organised on the same basis as it is for GCSEs.

"If there is an element of professional judgment, there will need to be some discussion about the framing of suitable criteria, together with training for assessors in how to recognise work that meets the A* criteria."

● See pages 30 and 31 for a debate on the respective merits of A-levels and the IB diploma.

COMPETITIVENESS

UK tackles skills targets

Skills training in the UK needs an overhaul if the country is to maintain its edge in the face of intensifying global competition.

That was the message of a major analysis of the UK's long-term skills needs commissioned by chancellor Gordon Brown.

Carried out by Lord Leitch, chairman of Bupa, the study recommends that the UK aim to become a world leader in skills by 2020 or risk being outperformed economically by India, China and others.

"Without increased skills, we would condemn ourselves to a lingering decline in competitiveness, diminishing economic growth and a bleaker future for all," claimed the report. "The case for action is compelling and urgent."

Its proposed targets include raising the number of adults with basic literacy

and numeracy skills to 95 per cent of the population, and boosting the number of apprentices in the UK to 500,000 annually.

Radical changes recommended include distributing funds for vocational skills through "Train to Gain" and "Learner" accounts and compulsory education or workplace training up to age 18.

The new functional skills qualifications – being trialled by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, with early results due this January – will directly address the challenges outlined by Leitch, said Sue Georgious, head of the framework development and skills team at the QCA.

"The Leitch report highlights the crucial nature of these skills in terms of guaranteeing competitiveness in the global marketplace as well as for equipping all individuals with the

skills to operate in the modern landscape," she said. "The QCA and its development partners are already well advanced in a comprehensive programme to deliver these critical requirements."



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