



Consultation on the 16-19 Funding Formula Review

Response from the London Mathematical Society

General remarks

We highlight what appear to be important issues that need to be borne in mind by whoever is responsible for making the final decision. We leave those who oversee the complete 16-19 scene to assess how these concerns are best addressed.

The document begins by recalling that Alison Wolf's review of vocational courses found that the current funding structure

- “forces institutions to steer a high proportion of learners into courses they are likely to pass easily ...
- gives institutions strong incentives to choose qualifications that pay well ...
- gives institutions no incentive to offer coherent programmes of study.”

Much of what follows appears directed towards reshaping the funding of *vocational* programmes – perhaps in order to address these shortcomings. However, if the principles underlying these proposals were then applied to 16-19 funding *as a whole*, they would seem likely to exert precisely these same pressures on *academic* courses as have been seen to distort vocational provision. In particular, they seem likely to penalise ‘harder’ A levels (and especially Further Mathematics). This has to be addressed.

Detailed comments

1. Having declared the goal of being “clear and transparent”, we then read that funding should be based on

“the lagged learner number approach to allocations”.

We found no further explanation.

2. It is good to read in para 8f on page 5 of the wish to avoid destabilising good quality provision. Yet our attempt to imagine how these proposals would impact on Mathematics and Further Mathematics at A level suggests the need for clarification if this undesirable goal is to be avoided.

3. The principles listed in para 17 on page 7 will not be easy to square with protecting funding for hard subjects.

(If funding is “per learner”, what is to prevent this leading to a drift **away** from the need to encourage students to embrace harder A level subjects, and for schools/colleges to teach them well?)

4. It is hard to assess the very general wording of paras 50-56 on pages 18-19; they need to be checked with experienced Head teachers in academic schools and colleges.

5. Para 57 on page 20 again raises questions about devising a scheme which allows for adequate funding for harder subjects, and for those subjects that are often taken as a “4th A level ” (like Further

Maths). The suggested scales in the Wolf review did not seem well-suited to support Further Mathematics (which is often taken as a 4th A level), though the current proposals (e.g. para 67 on page 22) may help to accommodate funding for students taking a 4th A level.

6. There are excellent precedents to defend a formula supporting a 4th A level (para 67 on page 22). But, though individuals may take more than four A levels, we doubt whether *public policy* should actively encourage students or colleges to go beyond this.

(Some of our best schools explicitly prevent their 18 year olds from taking more than 3 A levels on general educational grounds, and public policy should not risk giving the impression that better 16-19 education can be routinely interpreted as aiming at ‘more and more examination success’.)

7. The proposed solution in para 84 on page 26 appears bizarre. We **strongly oppose** the third category listed. Public policy has to allow institutions to handle predictable challenges which are in the public interest: this includes

- (i) supporting those who choose harder A levels;
- (ii) supporting those who do Further Maths as a 4th A level.

We cannot prevent individuals from taking on a heavier load; but schools and colleges should be left to decide on a case-by-case basis how to respond to such requests. We do **not** need a *policy* that might encourage more students to by-pass the intended 16-19 academic structure of studying a limited number of subjects in depth.

Thus (for example, to discourage students taking lots of easier A levels in order to score more UCAS points) an effective version of this proposal should perhaps be specified in terms of *harder*, or ‘core’, A levels, not simply in terms of the *number* of A levels.

About the London Mathematical Society

The London Mathematical Society, <http://www.lms.ac.uk/>, is the UK’s learned society for mathematics with an international membership. The Society's main activities include publishing journals and books, providing grants to support mathematics and organising scientific meetings and lectures. The Society is also involved in policy and strategic work to support mathematics and the mathematics research community. This work includes engaging with government and policymakers on mathematics education and research, participating in international mathematical initiatives and promoting the discipline.

4 January 2012