

## A comment on the proposed GCSE reforms 2012

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"There are some very worthwhile elements among the proposed changes to GCSEs in England, as described by the Secretary for Education this week. But none of these require the abolition of the GCSE, and several other elements have no secure evidence base.

The introduction of the GCSE qualification along with the Education Reform Act 1988 was part of an integrated radical shake-up that set the current landscape for school education in England. Most importantly, GCSEs helped to make schooling more comprehensive as a process, so matching the largely comprehensive structure emerging from the 1970s. The national curriculum, SATs and GCSEs provided a national entitlement coupled with QTS, OFSTED inspections, pupil-driven funding, and greater parental choice, which extended further the universal entitlements to schooling in the Education Act 1944. Increasingly, the evidence showed that it did not matter where a pupil lived.<sup>1,2</sup> The nature of their local schools, the subjects they studied and the 16+ qualifications they took would be largely similar. The ideal of any rational society is surely that it does not matter where a pupil attends school. This is not to say that the ideal was fully realised, but history shows slow progress towards desegregation of social groups between schools, reduced attainment gaps, and the opening of access to post-16 opportunities. This suggests that an important component of such equality, like the GCSE, should not be removed unless there is evidence that the replacement is clearly better. Does the proposed English Baccalaureate pass this test?

A number of reasons have been proposed by the Secretary of State for Education for replacing the GCSE. These include the changing educational context since 1986, the grade inflation and 'dumbing down' that has purportedly taken place, the competition between examining authorities, the practices of coursework and re-sitting individual modules, the need for a broad education, and for a new form of testing suitable for the 21st century. Some of these reasons make sense, but some are questionable.

One of the advantages of the GCSE initially was that it reduced the proliferation of school-age qualifications – GCE, CSE, Mode III, CoE etc. It was intended to provide one terminal qualification in each subject on a comparable criterion-referenced basis for all levels of ability and attainment. This meant that teachers and administrators did not have to pre-judge, often years beforehand, who should be entered for which courses. GCSE therefore reduced the stratification of a two (or more) track system at a stroke. Of course, it never worked out quite that simply, and the track system was quickly re-invented in some subjects like mathematics. But this could be solved within the current setup by having papers in which the questions get harder towards the end, just as Michael Gove is currently proposing.

For the same reason, it has been quite wrong to have a market in examinations, with examining authorities perhaps competing for clients by making their qualifications easier and easier. This creates a needless lack of comparability, and perverse incentives for all. A national qualifying system needs a single qualifying body. It is too late for a UK qualification system because Mr Gove only speaks for England, but the move to one qualifying body here makes perfect sense. However, the creation of one examining body again does not entail the abolition of GCSEs themselves.

Another sensible suggestion is for a meta-level certificate like the English Bac recognising success in a range of subject areas, even though one could argue about which subjects should be in the Bac. However, this Baccalaureate has already been in place since 2010, and so it clearly does not require the abolition of GCSEs either.<sup>3</sup>

The proposed move away from modules and coursework is plausible but not so clearly evidence-based. It is true that the nature and format of assessments can directly influence which social groups tend to do well in them. For example, the so-called 'gender gap' in favour of girls only appeared in England from 1988 onwards, just as norm-referencing was abolished, grades started to creep up every year, and modules and coursework became standard.<sup>4</sup> On average, boys would still tend to do better on terminal examinations, especially those based on multiple choice rather than essays. Abolishing modules and coursework in many subjects could therefore eliminate or even reverse the current gender gap in education. It is not clear that this would necessarily be the way forward for a society where the early advantage for girls at school has yet to cash out into true equality in the workplace. Policy-makers tinker with such systems and any unintended consequences at their peril.

Finally, the underlying rationale for the main change is not established. It is true that when GCSEs were introduced only perhaps 25% of the annual pupil cohort attained 5 O-levels (the equivalent of 5 'good' GCSEs). And this has risen to over 60% now. There is an annual debate about whether this represents a decline in standards as exams are now too easy, or a rise because more young people are reaching what was O-level standard. In reality, there is nothing independent to calibrate the results with – certainly not the sample-based low response generic surveys that make up the international 'horse race'.<sup>5</sup> What little evidence there is, from careful standard tests applied to a small sub-set of each cohort, suggests that little has actually changed in terms of literacy or numeracy over 15 years. Michael Gove seems to be in a somewhat contradictory position. On the one hand he abhors the grade inflation that has taken place since 1988, and has already taken reasonable steps to stem it – again without any need to abolish GCSEs. On other hand, through his department, he is labelling schools as failures under the National Challenge if at least 30% of their pupils do not achieve 5 good GCSEs – much higher than the national average in 1986.<sup>6</sup> He wants to maintain standards while also punishing any school for not being above average for the standard he seems to want to return to.

The qualification process in England urgently needs simplification and greater comparability between subjects, modes, boards, papers, years and grades. The public needs the information that Ofqual and others are now trying to provide about how enormously difficult it is to moderate national qualifications, and how much good work is done every year. And everyone needs to recall that measuring outcomes, however well it is done, is not the same as learning or improving teaching. It may be something of a red herring, given the more urgent issues of social justice in English education.<sup>7</sup> "You can't grow a cow by weighing it".

1. Gorard, S., Taylor, C. and Fitz, J. (2003) *Schools, Markets and Choice Policies*, London: RoutledgeFalmer

2. Gorard, S. (2010) Serious doubts about school effectiveness, *British Educational Research Journal*, 36, 5, 735-766

3. [www.education.gov.uk/schools/teachingandlearning/qualifications/englishbac/a0075975/the-english-baccalaureate](http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/teachingandlearning/qualifications/englishbac/a0075975/the-english-baccalaureate) (<http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/teachingandlearning/qualifications/englishbac/a0075975/the-english-baccalaureate>)

4. Gorard, S. and Smith, E. (2004) What is 'underachievement' at school?, *School Leadership and Management*, 24, 2, 205-225

5. Gorard, S. (2000) *Education and Social Justice*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press

6. [www.direct.gov.uk/en/NI1/Newsroom/DG\\_078681](http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/NI1/Newsroom/DG_078681) ([http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/NI1/Newsroom/DG\\_078681](http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/NI1/Newsroom/DG_078681))

7. Gorard, S. and Smith, E. (2010) *Equity in Education: an international comparison of pupil perspectives*, London: Palgrave