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Examining exams: GCSEs, the E.Bacc and the question of Equity

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The coalition government has proven itself willing to be bold in reforming the state education system. The landscape of schooling has already begun to change as a result of moves to make academy status the norm across England and establish so-called 'free schools', both directly funded (in whole or part) by the state and systematically lessening the role of local authorities. Michael Gove's recent statement on the status of GCSEs and the introduction of a new qualification – the English Baccalaureate Certificate (EBC) – have been greeted as another momentous change, but what do the reforms really mean and who is likely to win (and lose) as a result?

The end of GCSEs?
Much of the publicity surrounding the proposed reforms has given the impression that GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) examinations are to be abolished. In fact, there are no plans to abolish GCSEs as a whole. If the government's proposals are enacted in full, GCSEs will still remain as the dominant examination in most subjects. The proposed new examination, the EBC, will only apply in six subject areas: English, mathematics, the sciences, history, geography and language. The very first EBCs will be sat by school pupils in English, maths and the sciences in 2017.

From E. Bacc to EBC
There is considerable scope for confusion because two separate exam-related reforms have been introduced using the same term, *'English Baccalaureate'*.

- **The E.Bacc:** The coalition's first White Paper on education (published in November 2010) introduced the 'English Baccalaureate' as a summary measure applying to pupils who gained higher grade GCSE passes (A*–C) in a specific range of subjects: English, maths, two sciences, a modern or ancient foreign language and a humanity (history or geography). The stated rationale was 'to encourage schools to offer a broad set of academic subjects to age 16, whether or not pupils then go down an academic or vocational route'.
- **The EBC:** The proposed new qualification will be offered in a limited range of subjects and differ from GCSEs in several key ways, including the use of a final written examination as the only form of external assessment, thereby abolishing the use of internal assessment and modular approaches to teaching and learning.

So, the EBC is a *type* of exam while the E.Bacc is an overall *profile* of examination passes.

Questions of access and equity
It is too early to say what the impact of the EBC will be in terms of equity and opportunity for different groups of pupils. However, experience with the E.Bacc so far suggests that there are some significant problems to be addressed. The government has been clear in stating that the EBC should be open to the majority of pupils. Unfortunately, this is not a reality for the E.Bacc. Taken together (looking at the six subject areas needed to attain an E.Bacc) only a minority of pupils in England are even entered for the necessary subjects, let alone gain higher pass grades in them.

According to official statistics, in 2011 the majority of school pupils could not possibly attain an E.Bacc: around one pupil in five (21.6%) sat examinations in all the subjects required to qualify for an E.Bacc. These include some high status subjects (such as separate sciences) which schools often restrict to the pupils they judge to be 'most able': sometimes these judgements reflect genuine differences in achievement but research (both quantitative and qualitative) has consistently shown that teachers' preconceptions about certain groups also play an important role. As a result, all children do not have an equal chance of attaining an E.Bacc. Less than one in 12 pupils in receipt of free school meals (7.9%) and only one in 18 pupils designated as having a 'special educational need' (5.5%) access the full range of subjects, compared with almost a quarter of pupils who do not receive free school meals (23.8%). A similar pattern of unequal access is evident between pupils in different ethnic groups: whereas 32.8% of Indian and 21.5% of White British pupils entered the full range of E.Bacc subjects, this was true of 17.3% of Pakistani and only 13% of Black Caribbean pupils. These patterns of differential access are compounded by differences in attainment which mean that the introduction of the E.Bacc has widened inequalities of achievement between different groups.

The lesson of the E.Bacc experience to date is highly significant. In theory every pupil has the possibility of entering and achieving the E.Bacc: in reality, however, different groups do not have an equal chance of entry nor success. If policy-makers, educators and commentators are serious about widening opportunity and raising standards for all, then more work is needed to identify and address key aspects of the new examination.

Problems and possibilities
As the new examination is designed and implemented it will be crucial that all those involved take care to examine how the reforms impact on different groups of pupils. Simply applying the reforms to all is no guarantee of equity. Indeed, the lesson of previous reforms is that unless explicit steps are taken to account for questions of diversity, the reforms will likely deepen existing inequalities.

For example, one of the aspects of the EBC that has been emphasised by government is the return to a more traditional structure of assessment, where examinations are set (and marked) externally to the school and through a terminal exam at the end of the year. We should not forget, however, why different approaches were pioneered. The introduction of internal assessment and modular curricula were intended to avoid the all-or-nothing terminal exam at the year's end which often tested memory rather than real skills and understanding. Greater diversity of approach has allowed for assessment to become part of the learning process itself, helping to inform pupils (about their progress, strengths and weaknesses) and not merely operating as a badging exercise. The changes proved to be an excellent way of keeping more pupils engaged and raising achievement, especially among groups who were less successful in the more traditional examinations. A return to 'O' level style examinations could mean a return to lower levels of achievement among the groups who are frequently cited as the intended beneficiaries of reform, such as pupils in receipt of free school meals.

A welcome aspect of the EBC is the proposal to do away with 'tiering'. This is the system whereby two pupils who are taking the same subject, say maths, can find themselves entered for different papers which restrict the grades they can attain. Pupils judged likely to be high attainers are entered to the 'Higher' tier (where grades A* to D are available) but everyone else is entered in the 'Foundation' tier where, under normal circumstances, the very highest grade they can achieve is a C. Research consistently shows that differences in free school meal status and ethnicity can influence a pupil's chance of access to the higher tier. Abolishing tiers, therefore, could offer greater opportunities to groups who currently under-achieve. Once again, however, it will be necessary to keep the real-world impact of the changes in view. At present most secondary schools use selective teaching groups (called 'setting by ability') in many, if not all, E.Bacc subjects. Research shows that setting can institutionalise differences in attainment between groups and, because lower sets cover less of the curriculum, abolishing tiering will be of little use if Black pupils or their White peers on free school meals remain over-represented in bottom sets throughout their schooling.

Concluding thoughts
At the heart of public debates about school exams is a deep and unresolved contradiction. On one hand, examinations are meant to record an individual pupil's achievements and, of course, raising levels of educational success is seen as a desirable goal by policy-makers, employers and parents alike: a sign that standards are *rising*. On the other hand, the year-on-year improvements in GCSE results led to an annual argument about whether exams were being 'dumbed down'. In 1988, when GCSEs were introduced, the highest passing grades (A–C) were awarded in 41.9% of cases; this year the figure (for grades A*–C) was 69.4%. This alone is evidence enough for some to condemn the GCSE as contributing to a *fall* in standards. The furore about alleged changes to grade boundaries in some GCSEs taken in the summer of 2012 is further evidence of the vital importance of public examinations. Amid the claims and counter-claims about 'standards' we should not forget that examinations play a vital role in the future life chances of young people.

It is unlikely that the conflicting views about GCSEs, standards, and the role of public examinations will be resolved anytime soon. In the meantime it is essential that the real-world impacts of the reforms are kept under scrutiny because, in the absence of clear moves to ensure equality of opportunity, research suggests that the unintended consequences could be a deepening of existing inequalities.

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