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| Key Theme Report | |
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| Qualifications and Progression  Policy Development Convention, 5-6 December 2013 |

**Background to GCSE and A level reform**

Reforms to GCSE and A level qualifications have been a part of the Government’s education reform plans since they came in to Government.

In November 2010 these reforms were articulated in The Schools White Paper 2010, The Importance of Teaching.

This white paper proposed:

* The reform of GCSEs so that exams are taken at the end of the course; an end to modular assessment
* A greater emphasis on synoptic learning in A levels, with significant input from Universities in the design of the curriculum
* A removal of the number of re-sits in GCSEs and A levels
* A re-introduction of marks awarded specifically for spelling, punctuation and grammar

Since 2010 the Government has worked with Ofqual to consult on the reforms and design both a new structure and content for GCSEs and A levels in England.

In November 2013 Ofqual confirmed the key features of the new **GCSEs in England:**

* There will be a new grading scale that uses the numbers 1 – 9 to identify levels of performance, with 9 being the top level. Students will get a U where performance is below the minimum required to pass the GCSE
* Tiering will be used only for subjects where untiered papers will not allow students at the lower end of the ability range to demonstrate their knowledge and skills, or will not stretch the most able. Where it is used, the tiering

model will be decided on a subject-by-subject basis

* There will be a fully linear structure, with all assessment at the end of the course and content not divided into modules
* Exams will be the default method of assessment, except where they cannot provide valid assessment of the skills required
* Exams will only be in the summer, apart from English language and maths, where there will also be exams in November for students who were at least 16 on the preceding 31st August. Ofqual is considering whether November exams should be available in other subjects for students of this age.

English language, literature and maths will be the first subjects to be taught, from 2015, as new GCSEs. English language will be untiered and fully assessed by an external exam with a speaking assessment that will be reported separately. English literature will be untiered and assessed by external exam only. The new Maths GCSE will be tiered. A foundation tier will cover grades 1-5 and the higher tier will cover grades 4-9. It will be assessed by external exam only.

Consultation on A level reform is still in progress. Ofqual currently expects to introduce **new A levels in 2015 in:**

* English Language and Literature
* English Language
* English Literature
* Physics
* Chemistry
* Biology
* History
* Geography
* Psychology
* Art and design
* Sociology
* Business studies
* Economics
* Computing

Changes to maths and further maths have been delayed. They will be developed for first teaching from September 2016.

The proposals for the new A levels advise that the qualifications will be fully linear, with more synoptic assessment. Non- exam based assessment will only be included in subjects when necessary.

Geography will include a fieldwork element and art and design will remain 100 per cent non exam based. English literature, English language, history, geography and computer science will be 80 per cent exam and 20 per cent non exam.

For biology, chemistry and physics practical skills will be assessed and the results reported separately. The results will not count towards grades. Understanding of experimental methods will be assessed in exams.

It is proposed that AS levels will be stand-alone qualifications. They will no longer contribute to an A level grade.

It's anticipated that the specifications for the new A level qualifications, for first teaching in September 2015, will be available to schools and colleges in autumn 2014.

**NUS’ research**

We are seriously concerned about the impact of these reforms on future learners.

As a result we launched a piece of research in July 2013 in to students’ opinions of the Government’s proposed reforms.

Between July and September almost 600 FE and HE students answered a survey on GCSE and A level reform. This research, along with opinion polling results, was included in an Interim Research Report which was launched at FE Zone conference in October.

**NUS Qualifications Reform Survey**

The survey took a broad overview of the reforms, asking questions on the most substantial changes. The questions also did not, for the most part, focus on either GCSEs or A levels but rather asked more generally about the principles behind the qualifications.

**The headlines**

**Strong rejection of the removal of coursework/ controlled assessment from GCSE and A level qualifications**

**Preference for modular exams, with more than one exam period during the year**

**Criticism of the reduction in re-sits, across all subjects**

**Reluctance to alter the existing grading structure**

Breakdown of questions:

The first question asked about the tiering of qualifications and which subjects are most appropriate to be tiered. There was a mixed response to this first question on tiering. The second more specific question revealed a strong preference for only certain subjects to be tiered.

**Qualifications should be tiered**

Strongly agree and agree- 46 %

Strongly disagree and disagree- 42%

**In which subjects should tiering be used?**

Maths- 68%

Science- 65%

English Language- 49%

English Literature- 41%

Geography- 10%

History- 10%

All subjects- 39%

The next questions asked about types of assessment and showed a strong preference for a mixture of assessment types, both exam based and non-exam based. The question on exams at the end of assessment also showed that the majority of respondents would prefer a modular structure with the opportunity to take exams at other times in the year.

**Assessment should solely take the form of externally marked and set exams**

Strongly agree and agree- 25%

Strongly disagree and disagree- 66%

**Controlled assessment should be a part of assessment**

Strongly agree and agree- 71%

Strongly disagree and disagree- 16%

**Coursework should be a part of assessment**

Strongly agree and agree- 81%

Strongly disagree and disagree- 11%

**Exams should only take place once a year, in the summer term**

Strongly agree and agree- 17%

Strongly disagree and disagree- 72%

We also asked about the proportion of marks allocated to spelling, punctuation and grammar. Respondents clearly indicated that the percentage of marks allocated should be higher for English language.

**A percentage of exam marks should be allocated to spelling, punctuation and grammar**

Strongly agree and agree- 60%

Strongly disagree and disagree- 26%

**This percentage should be higher for English Language**

Strongly agree and agree- 86%

Strongly disagree and disagree- 8%

The next questions on re-sits produced some of the most interesting results from the survey. Respondents were split on whether students should be able to re-sit an exam more than once. However, they very strongly believed that students should have the opportunity to re-sit in all subjects.

**Students should only be able to re-sit an exam once**

Strongly agree and agree- 46%

Strongly disagree and disagree- 46%

**Students should be given the opportunity to re-sit in all subjects**

Strongly agree and agree- 90%

Strongly disagree and disagree- 5%

Respondents were also divided on whether students should only be able to re-sit maths and English language.

**Students should only be able to re-sit maths and English Language, and only in November**

Strongly agree and agree- 43%

Strongly disagree and disagree- 40%

The final questions focused on the planned alterations to the grading system in GCSEs. Respondents overwhelming

rejected the idea of introducing a new system.

**The current number of grades (A\*-E) is appropriate**

Strongly agree and agree- 81%

Strongly disagree and disagree- 10%

**Changing to a grading system with numbers (1-8) would better distinguish levels of ability**

Strongly agree and agree- 9%

Strongly disagree and disagree- 70%

**What grading system would you prefer as an alternative?**

Marks- 59%

Percentile scores- 30%

Scaled scores- 11%

**Opinion polls**

In early October 2013 NUS conducted a short opinion poll with students.

The poll included three specific questions about GCSE and A level reform. 463 Further Education students took part in the poll.

**Non- exam based assessment should be a part of GCSE and A level qualifications**

Strongly agree and agree- 78%

Strongly disagree and disagree- 12%

**Students should be able to re-sit GCSE and A-level exams as many times as they want**

Strongly agree and agree- 53%

Strongly disagree and disagree- 37%

**Students who do not achieve a grade C in English and Maths at GCSE should continue studying these subjects until they reach the grade**

Strongly agree and agree- 70%

Strongly disagree and disagree- 18%

The responses to the first two questions mirror the results of the earlier survey. They show a rejection of purely exam based assessment and a preference for coursework and controlled assessment. The question on un-capped re-sits also shows a divide in opinion, although more respondents in this opinion poll favour no cap.

The third question was not included in the original research but provides an interesting insight in to this more recent policy announcement from the Government.

**FE Zone Conference 2013**

The first day of zone conference this year was devoted to the topic of qualifications and progression. Discussion was centred on different aspects within qualification reform and delegates were given the opportunity to debate specific questions.

This is an overview of the discussions:

**Coursework**

Pros

It allows you to gather your thoughts and construct arguments more carefully.

It offers help in developing skills that are essential for HE.

Exams are just a ‘memory challenge’ where you rely on the teacher to give you the information.

Cons

Exams stop plagiarism and parents helping students too much.

Exams help people learn time management and revision skills.

Coursework should be linked to certain subjects but less so to others.

**Re-sits**

A Poll was taken with the following results:

Should we have unlimited resits for all subjects?

18 said yes, 24 said no

Should there be a cap on the number of resits?

16 said yes 26 said no

Only those who can afford to resit can continuously resit, it not an option for every student.

Resits should be for maths, English and sciences as they are the most important subjects.

Resits should be for all subjects as some people are more suited to non- academic subjects. It would be prejudice to only look at only maths and English.

There should be a cap on resits as it cheapens the value of the course.

Students should be able to resist just once.

In a time where there are limited places for University I don’t want to compete with someone who has failed three times.

There should not be a cap as people fail or do not do well for a number of reasons that are not always academically related.

**Linear assessment**

Pros

Exams at the end of the course allow you to gain a better grasp of the subject.

It gives you longer to understand the subject.

Cons

It is not supportive to different learning styles.

Modules increase confidence as you can review progress.

Linear assessment encourages teaching to the test.

**Work experience**

It should be linked to what students want to pursue in their future career.

It should be relevant to the courses students are studying.

IAG on work experience should be better

It is valuable as a concept, but needs improving.

**Remaining in education or training until the age of 18**

It is good to receive training, past the age of 16, but not good for those who have other responsibilities such as student

parents or those with caring responsibilities.

What infrastructure and support will be put in place to support this change?

This is just an exercise in removing NEET numbers.

There are worthwhile jobs which do not need to involve education or training.

**Continuing maths and English past GCSE if you don’t achieve a grade C**

These subjects are very important at GCSE and the grades you achieve impact on your career and future education. You should therefore continuing studying.

What will the quality of our future workforce look like with young people who do not have C grade and above.

Are functional skills an alternative?

**IAG**

There is a huge difference between the IAG offer in schools compared to colleges.

Schools brainwash people to stay whereas colleges are better as they offer face to face impartial advice.

Schools need to give better advice on a range of qualifications, not just A levels

Schools must focus on what is good for the student and not the school.

Colleges should give more guidance earlier on.

Both need a better website to map route from A to B, from where you are to where you want to be.

**Apprenticeships**

They need to be seen as more than just cheap labour and the companies involved need to be regulated.

Bigger companies are better at providing well-structured and meaningful apprenticeships than smaller ones.

Many apprentices are moved out of their jobs once they have completed which halts progression and affects future employment

In practice they are good, but in reality often delivered poorly.

**Vocational Qualifications**

These qualifications are less valued by employers and HE and this is unfair.

These qualifications are seen as less academic and less prestigious.

Careers guidance needs to include more information on vocational qualifications.

More Choice is needed, Stop pigeon-holing people into vocational or academic.

**The future of research in to GCSE and A level reform**

The Interim Research Report provided a broad overview of students’ opinions on GCSE and A level reform. Our next step is a piece of work in conjunction with OCR which will look more specifically at the consequences of the reforms. As the GCSE reforms have been finalised by Ofqual, this joint research will look more towards AS and A levels.

This research will be launched in January and focuses on the following areas:

Subject choice and transition from level 2 to level 3

IAG

The AS level as a standalone qualification

Linear assessment

Enrichment

Academic and vocational courses at level 3

# **Conclusions and Recommendations**

**Recommendations for future NUS work in this area:**

* Tracking the impact of GCSE reforms on participation, attainment, and progression to further study and work
* Looking specifically at the removal/reduction of coursework and resits in GCSEs, and the impact on learners with learning difficulties and disabilities (work with Disabled Students’ Campaign here)
* Student voice in shaping maths and English provision for 16+ for those repeating level 2 (we should push for new applied, functional qualifications here, to form part of the Tech Bacc)
* Lobbying for clarity on what GCSEs are intended to be for/do. Are they a proxy for essential skills/knowledge, or are they a test of memory, resilience, mental stamina or something else? Employers criticise them, as do schools. But what do students think, and what are their stories about how they’ve been useful? (this could be a nice project linking to public value of education?)
* The impact of more limited subject choice (owing to prioritisation of English, stem etc through E Bacc) on access to arts/humanities provision, and the impact on social/cultural capital of this (we’ll take care of this through the joint work with OCR)
* Any tracking/research findings on impact of GCSEs to be used to campaign on A level reforms
* What level 2/3 vocational qualifications should look like in future (this is the other side of the coin and we mustn’t forget to reflect in policy development)