

Some thoughts on the English curriculum and examination system

Reading the comments by Michael Gove on the reforms he wishes to make to our examination system, the report on examination administration by the all-party education select committee and Ron McLone's stimulating and radical proposals, I offer this short paper to add to the debate. Hopefully, the debate will look beyond present systems and comfort zones to produce an examination system fit for purpose and one which allows and underpins a curriculum which is both sufficiently challenging and sufficiently flexible to encourage students to develop their various talents as fully as possible.

I start from the following observations:

1. I agree with Ron McLone's analysis of the four purposes of GCSE as set out in the Sykes Commission's report and that GCSE in its current form does not and cannot satisfy requirements (iii) and (iv).
2. The current three year Key Stage 3 is too long with an overcrowded and unsatisfactory curriculum in Year 9.
3. It is not possible to test the whole ability range satisfactorily with the same papers.
4. As syllabuses change – as they must if they are not to stagnate – an emphasis on comparative standards over time is not particularly helpful. What matters is whether the curriculum and the examination system are fit for current purpose; I would argue that for this to continue to be the case, one would expect standards to INCREASE over time, not to remain constant.
5. The DfE's obsession with age related statistics, as against Year Group statistics, is detrimental to the interests of individual students.
6. The two year final stage of secondary education is not ideal; a three year final stage would allow for a more appropriate preparation for university or other 18+ options.
7. Much time is wasted in first year university courses because of substantial differences in A level syllabi within a given subject.

Years 7 to 10

I am very much in sympathy with the approach taken in Ron's paper but would argue for an extension of this phase to the end of Year 10 rather than to the end of Year 9.

I would envisage national syllabi for mathematics, English, science and modern foreign languages and agreed graduated skill targets in ICT.

National examinations, graded so as to produce appropriate challenges across the ability range, would be taken in mathematics, English, science and a modern language (I would argue for a restricted choice of Spanish, Chinese and French at this level) at the end of Year 10. Graded on-line tests in ICT skills would be taken as appropriate throughout the

four years of this stage and all other subjects – plus co-curricular involvement - would be internally assessed and certificated (possibly via e-portfolios). Some of these other subjects could be compulsory (history/geography) but there should be sufficient freedom for schools to design a curriculum which reflects student needs and aspirations.

Year 11 to 13

Again, I would agree with Ron's proposals that a variety of pathways should be available at this stage.

For those choosing the academic route, I would propose a 'norm' of six AS levels plus a research essay/project and a course similar to the Pre-U Global perspectives.

The AS levels would all be examined terminally at the end of Year 12.

There is an argument for making mathematics and English AS levels compulsory, in which case there would need to be two or even three different mathematics syllabi. I would not envisage any further restriction on subject choice.

Year 13 would be devoted to the study of three or four subjects to A level. The terminal examinations would be suitably rigorous and demanding so as to discriminate at a sufficiently high level for our top universities.

National syllabi

The arguments in the select committee's report for agreed national syllabi are well founded. The content in each subject at a given level should be the same whichever examination board is chosen by the student/school. This would allow end users to be confident that a student would have covered the same subject matter in a given discipline, irrespective of the board chosen, and would end the frustration of many science and mathematics students who currently find themselves repeating A level work in their first year at university.

Age related statistics

It is surely right that a student should proceed at a rate suited to his/her ability and stage of development. We should not be concerned about the brightest students and may often argue against accelerating their progress through our educational system, preferring instead to see them stretched through additional work. We should, however, be very concerned about those currently forced into GCSEs in their 'correct' year age-wise when repeating an academic year at some stage would allow them to achieve much more success. The obsession of successive governments and the DfE statisticians with age-related statistics penalises any school which allows a student to repeat a year and take examinations twelve months after the majority of the age cohort. Is it too much to hope that this obsession should be put to rest in the interests of those students who could benefit from the extra time to develop?

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