

*Putting learning at
the heart of assessment*



CAMBRIDGE ASSESSMENT

GCSE reform

basics of agreement

FOREWORD

Now is the time to launch a fundamental discussion about the role of GCSEs, and whether 16 is the right age for young people to move from general to specialist education. Changes to the National Curriculum and the Raising of the Participation Age (RPA) to 18 mean that GCSEs currently operate in a completely different educational universe to that which existed when they were introduced in the late 1980s. 25 years after their introduction there are also increasing signs of strain. Employers complain that young people with strings of GCSE passes to their name don't have the right skills or attitudes to be employable, and the future of GCSEs is anyway uncertain as a result of the planned launch of the EBC.

Cambridge Assessment is the part of the University of Cambridge which is responsible for its three exam boards that design and deliver examinations – and education reform – in over 170 countries. Our predecessor bodies include the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA) Examination Board, which invented vocational examinations in 1856; the Exam Boards of both Oxford and Cambridge which invented academic exams in 1858, as well as the Southern Universities and Midlands GCSE Boards. Thus, we draw on the legacy of a number of boards each with various areas of expertise, all of them not-for-profit operations, and now all underpinned by the quality standard that is the essence of the University of Cambridge.

With this expertise underpinning our approach, there are a number of principles we believe should form the basis of examinations. At the heart of this is that examinations exist to support and validate **learning**. The focus of examination reform should begin first with the curriculum and what is in the syllabus, rather than how it is being examined. When we get this right, then high quality exams will follow.

Qualifications should have a **clarity of purpose** that is made explicit, with the end-users of the qualification, be they employers, FE or HE, having an active role in the development

of the qualification. The role of exam boards is to design examinations and syllabuses that validate learning and enable progression to the next stage – it is not to serve as a proxy for measuring schools, teachers or the system.

Central to the idea of progression is the concept of the **currency** of exams. Examinations are a means to an end, not an end in themselves, and as such it is of fundamental importance that qualifications have recognition from, in this case, other education institutions and employers, that enables the learner to secure progression to some further good; in this case move on the next stage having demonstrated the knowledge, skills and understanding that they have acquired. Without such currency, an exam is a mere memory test.

And finally, the state's use of examinations as an **accountability** measure needs to be seriously considered when reforming in examinations. Of course, when the government spends that many billions of taxpayers' money on something so centrally important to our society, it should be able to monitor the quality of service that is being delivered. However, such measures must be intelligent and should cover the complete range of undertakings that our schools and colleges carry out, rather than simply being based on the exam results of a select group of subjects. When GCSEs were introduced, the majority of the population left school at 16 at the conclusion of their general education. Now that the leaving age is being raised to 18, everybody will have a right to a specialist education, and a system designed around a 25 year old exam that was a previous reforming Secretary of State's answer to a different set of problems is clearly not the best basis for this. We hope therefore that these radical proposals – to do away with GCSE at 16 and to re-design the 14 to 16 phase of secondary education – will add to the debate about what should happen next.

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Appendix 1:

WHITHER THE GCSE? An alternative approach,
by Ron McLone

INTRODUCTION

GCSEs have many purposes. For example, despite the rise in the age of participation to 18 many continue to regard GCSEs as terminal examinations of a broad general education; sixth forms use them as entry criteria to courses at the next level; many subject teachers regard GCSEs almost as a 'licence to specialise'; some Higher Education (HE) institutions use them as additional information for HE entry; businesses regard a broad spread of 'decent' GCSEs as a proxy for a 'bright person worth employing'; Government uses them for measuring school effectiveness; schools use them for measuring teacher effectiveness.

To launch a debate on GCSE reform, Cambridge Assessment invited former OCR chief executive Dr Ron McLone (in post 1985 to 2004) to produce an alternative proposal to the reforms suggested by the Secretary of State for Education and the Education Select Committee. His recommendation is the adoption of a two-phase education system – the first reflecting the objective of a 'good general education' by age 14 and the second, a four-year programme (14 to 18) focusing specifically on individual interests, capabilities and ambitions for life beyond compulsory education. As a consequence Key Stage tests, GCSE and AS examinations would go, with alternative forms of assessment being proposed, mainly an intermediate assessment around age 16 to validate the pathway the student was on. The paper, entitled 'Whither the GCSE?' can be found in Appendix 1.

Following the completion of the paper four roundtables were organised by Cambridge Assessment involving key and diverse sets of stakeholders to discuss proposals for GCSE reform.

Stakeholders were organised into four distinct stakeholder groupings. These groups were:

- ◆ Think tanks
- ◆ Current 'users' of the GCSE (e.g. teaching professionals)
- ◆ Student and parent organisations
- ◆ 'Direct' users of the GCSE (e.g. employer organisations, sixth form colleges)

In the interests of openness and honesty the discussions were conducted under Chatham House rules. This document contains an outline of the topics discussed, selected typical unattributed quotes and highlights those issues on which all four groups reached a form of consensus.

SUMMARY OF SOME OF THE MAIN POINTS OF DISCUSSION AT GCSE ROUNDTABLES

THINK TANKS:

Much of the debate in the 'think tank' session was around the need for additional learning and project work. Participants were keen to discuss the need to engage all students and there was much debate about whether a 'one size fits all' approach was appropriate. There was also much discussion around accountability within the system and the negative effects caused by league tables (such as schools over-focussing on those on the borderline). There was a general consensus that students should have greater scope for owning choices and shaping their own curricula by having a choice of qualification.

When considering a broad and balanced education it did not take long before comparisons of GCSEs and the IB came to the fore:

"One of the ways of recognising the limitations of the current GCSE model is to understand why the International Baccalaureate (IB) is so attractive to institutions, be it academies, be it the private sector. One of the main differences is this layer of additional learning that happens within the International Baccalaureate. It is a diploma within the qualification where you go away and do your projective study as opposed to GCSEs which are subject specific".

"We have a GCSE qualification that is not meeting the demands of the stakeholders, be it higher education, be it employers, be it parents possibly if their children get the grades, and, equally, if we are looking to put a new product in place are we saying that a one-size-fits-all approach works?"

Although a Baccalaureate style qualification was by no means seen as a panacea:

"There are a lot of young people that the English Bacc will not suit at all and, in fact, encouragement to take a foreign language will be a major turn-off".

There was some discussion on what 'broad and balanced' actually meant – skills focused, knowledge focused or a mix of the two:

"One of my pet dislikes is the phrase "a broad and balanced curriculum"...it assumes that "broad" and "balanced" are the same thing and they are not...what we have got now...is such a range of

subjects that people can choose subjects which are not remotely broad or remotely balanced because of the breadth of options available to them".

This also raised the issue of how students across the ability range could be encouraged to learn and a number of solutions presented themselves:

"We have research that suggests that there is a substantial proportion, I think it is up to 23%, who are disengaged by the time they get to 16 because of the existing system that they are going through...If that product is a qualification, that is fine, but I think we have established in this discussion that it is broader than the qualification; it is actually the curriculum.Should employers have a bigger say, if we are looking at a UK plc approach, or should we have a bigger say from universities? All of this adds to the holistic approach to education as to where should that balance exist".

"What is happening in the classrooms at the moment, I think, is that you are teaching to such a wide ability range... there is a real argument to look at a project-based system".

One contributor explained a programme they had worked on:

"It is based around literacy, so you take a literacy text and then you combine and cross curricular everything through it so the children really see that they are learning. They are not taught in units. They are taught skills and then they use and apply those skills rather than being lectured".

In this group the issue of what motivates, and how to motivate, learners was a key topic:

"...if we want to motivate pupils using an assessment system we need some regular milestones because otherwise they have three or four years of nothing ahead of them. The tone now seems to be completely the opposite, which is that we have way too many exams and it is turning people off because they are over-assessed".

"[It is] a strength of Ron's proposals insofar as bringing in the choice earlier, post 14. Take it up to 14 and give them [learners] a greater scope for owning choices and shaping their own curricula in a sense through the choice of qualification that they are doing at phase two. One of the key issues with motivation is choice, particularly for those that are disengaged, helping them to choose what they are going to actually be stimulated by".

However, questions of innovation within the curriculum and teaching soon brought on discussion of accountability measures:

"We know that high stakes testing is a huge driver for parents. League tables at the moment are dominating that train...I understand that once those results come out either we have happy parents or unhappy parents. It does not matter what else we do during the academic year; it is the results".

"If you did a lot of these reforms but still held schools highly to account by the percentage that pass or get a merit in their qualification, you are going to have a lot of the same perverse incentives that there are at the moment. Schools will still just focus on those kids that are on the borderline, wherever you draw that borderline".

CURRENT USERS: (E.G. TEACHING PROFESSIONALS)

In this session there was also much debate about the amount of assessment and the negative affects of the accountability regime as well as a good deal of debate about a 'broad, balanced and relevant' curriculum; in particular what it should look like and how prescriptive – or not – it should be. Many recognised the need for some sort of qualification(s) or 'recognition of achievement' at 16 whilst others felt that it was pointless and instead a four-year programme of learning would be better. Most agreed that GCSEs cannot be all things to all people and there was a good deal of debate around the need for other routes that delivered "more practical, work-based and different styles of learning".

Initially the conversations started by questioning the need for qualifications at 16, particularly given the age of participation is set to rise to 18. It was initially though this might change the fundamental purpose of some exams:

"I think there will still be a call for a qualification at 16 or maybe not a qualification; a recognition of achievement at 16".

"You do not certify 90% of the children because 10% are doing something different".

Some thought discussion of the curriculum ought to come before any discussion of reform of assessment:

"Every conversation I have starts with assessment and accountability and we have yet to have any sort of meaningful discussion with the Government about the curriculum...what should we be teaching to secondary age pupils? That is the first thing we need to do. Is it going to be a national curriculum or what is it going to be? Is there a

certain basic provision that everybody should cover, a certain range of things, and only then can you start talking about assessment? And then I think the other thing that is becoming increasingly tiresome is that we always end up before we have even talked about the curriculum talking about external assessment. I think we need a mature debate about those high order skills that every teacher ought to have which are assessment skills, so what we should be expecting a highly qualified professional to be doing as part of their normal work and then where do external qualifications come into it. Only then, when you put that jigsaw together, can you say we need it to look like this".

Discussion then developed to cover the purpose of qualifications and the need for clarity around the routes that learners could take:

"There should be qualifications that prepare people for university. We also need other qualifications that prepare people for other routes, provided we have clarity about what the purpose of that

qualification is and what the routes are, and that is the debate we have not had... Not everybody is going to go down one route. We have to...have a range of qualifications and not pretend that one qualification is doing different things. If you want a qualification that prepares you for university, call it that, and then have another qualification that prepares you to do a different route, but do not try and call them the same thing and have two qualifications that are between a rock and a hard place and do not meet either of those objectives”.

“The difficulty that we have run into for years is that for some reason the British people appear only to value the academic and not the rest”.

Some questioned what GCSEs and other vocational qualifications were for and what they actually prepared learners for:

“The GCSE is about some shadow version of preparing people to move on to A Level and many of the things you talked about before. A vocational GCSE has got nothing to do with vocation, as far as I can tell. It is barely anything to do with work experience as far as I can tell. However, GCSEs are about preparation for students going on to A Level who are on course for university. If you explore the hypothesis and say “Do we make that bit work well and then make other bits work well?” I think you might get closer to a consensus. Otherwise we will end up trying to make it into all things for all people and we are doomed”.

Again and again the failure to develop relevant pathways for vocational learners came up, not to mention worthwhile pathways for lower ability students:

“...the GCSE was originally intended for the O Level/CSE cohort of 60% and it stretched to encompass virtually everyone. There was a failure to develop appropriate courses and pathways at that stage. I think we are very much seeing the consequences of that now”.

“I am not convinced that academic subjects are necessarily what all children should be studying. I think that we should be going back to valuing whether we are going to call them “applied subjects” or some other title other than the word “vocational”, but to actually have more practical, work-based different styles of learning”.

“You are more optimistic than I am because we have been working for years with other organisations, for example the Institute of Education, to get a 14 to 19 curriculum that is fit for purpose for all students”.

However, that didn’t mean ignoring core skills:

“...we got it wrong on the vocational/academic debate where we look for this other thing about preparing people for practical life. What we were really doing was trying to deal with the people we had not taught to read, write or think”.

The group then considered whether the GCSE had been stretched too far to be of value or relevance to either academic or vocational learners:

“At the root of some of this discussion is what is the purpose of it? If we are saying it is part of the academic pathway...I think that would lead to serious questions about whether it was even needed in the first place. If it is about students being prepared to leave school at 16 and go and get jobs, is the GCSE appropriate? Maybe...it is not relevant to those going on to A Level or appropriate for those leaving school...”

“You do not need to do GCSEs any more with your top sets; you can go straight to AS Level as part of a route through to further maths”.

At this stage most of the participants were quite despondent about the current process of qualification reform and what had been proposed thus far:

“...you have got that balance between the pragmatic solution and an innovative or creative one that might actually achieve something or we have to find ways of saying as a profession perhaps as a consensus across the board no, we are not having any of this nonsense and we are not going to create another qualification that is only fit for some people, and actually across the board we are saying this is what we need. Perhaps a bit more courage is necessary there”.

The perceived failures of current qualifications to prepare learners for future work and study led to discussion of what learners should be taught and the importance of the curriculum:

“...the important word everybody forgets to put in is a broad and balanced and “relevant” curriculum. That is a key word that seems to have disappeared in a lot of people’s talk about what a curriculum should be”.

“A broad and balanced curriculum does not necessarily mean that every single child has to study in every single subject that is there...”

“I would like people to be able to come in and learn a wide range of things and not have to be channelled all the time down something that is going to come out at the end as an accountability”.

Some thought the assessment regime hindered the education of learners as did accountability measures:

“Teaching to the test and the focus on accountabilities and so on, that is a real problem in the state sector and much less of a problem in the independent sector because you do not have the same straightjacket”.

“The tendency of the system to want to make everything comprehensive and assessed is an absolute folly. We just need a whole lot less [assessment]. It needs to be a lot more clever in what it actually measures”.

"If you look at University Technical Colleges (UTCs) which are being praised to the heights by people who love academic subjects, they are actually teaching through projects and in a vocational way. I like the idea you can take any subject and you assess it in a different way that will bring out different things".

However, the impact of high stakes assessment had an effect right through the education system to which independent schools were not immune:

"...many students were resisting the notion of being taught anything they did not perceive to be within the specification and therefore likely to be examined. So the assessment regime – back to one of our original points – is a barrier to breadth and balance".

"For quite a lot of students doing an age 16 qualification in itself in a number of subjects is a waste of time. They have known for two years they were going to do it [A Levels] and so they did not need to do the GCSE in the first place. You may as well take a four-year programme of learning with assessment points on the way and not have to do the certification and external validation stuff which distracts from learning and undermines the integrity of it in so many cases".

This prompted discussion as to how breadth and balance could be returned to learning and by what means the negative features of high stakes assessment and accountability measures could be controlled:

"One-size-fits-all does not work so let's not try to say let's have two sizes then. Let's build it around individual children, individual communities and individual schools, with a huge amount of autonomy and a huge amount of accountability [through Ofsted]... not accountability through exam certificates".

"...a real worry, and sociologists identified it formally around 1991, which is the discourse of derision; teachers are not trusted. I think we have to find a way back to doing what Ken Spours, Institute of Education, called "work of the course" as opposed to coursework. What was great about CSE was that it was all about assessment, the work of the course".

"Long-term strategy – teachers have to become more expert at assessment and schools have to have more expert practice across their staff. Paradoxically we need less assessment".

"The minute you [the Secretary of State] said no more than eight GCSEs and we will be looking for added value at key stage four, schools would switch... That is what schools do because they are scared stiff of accountability".

STUDENT/PARENT ORGANISATIONS

This session saw a lot of debate about the purpose of qualifications. Like the 'current user' group, participants recognised the need for more project work and called for a better learning experience within the classroom. They recognised that accountability is driving the system but felt that teachers are the experts. Ideas included: having vocational qualifications that build confidence and team work; removing key stage tests; extending phase-two learning; and re-structuring schools.

The discussion began with levels of dissatisfaction with GCSEs. Question as to their purpose and their suitability were closely linked:

"The problem with the current qualification and the lack of confidence that can be seen is that students and employers and everyone really feels that GCSEs alone are not enough".

"Perhaps that is the nature of a comprehensive, you are used to all being in it together, but what we found was that the more articulate kids were saying what they really wanted was project work".

Everybody in the group agreed that, despite the failings in GCSEs, society's obsession with high stakes testing made delivering a broad and balanced curriculum much more difficult:

"...we find that when we do mock GCSEs the attendance rockets and despite all of their fairly horrendous experiences of education prior to coming to us, they are still engaged; they want GCSEs".

"It is just a feature of our society. If it is not examined or not tested and you do not get a certificate at the end of it, it is not worth

anything. It does not matter what the national curriculum throws up at the end of the day when it comes out; it is what teachers do with it”.

“...I think the exam system and the national curriculum need to be set up to make the learning experience in the classroom fun and exciting. You are competing with Xbox 360. That is the reality of it. You might as well be real about it. That is what you are competing against. So let’s start competing. Richard III is easily as interesting as Call of Duty if you present it in the right way”.

As in the other groups, discussion quickly moved on to the negative effects of accountability measures, in particular the use of exam results.

“...teachers are under so much pressure to get them through the content so they are prepared for the exam or they have got their controlled assessment done because obviously there is a gun to everybody’s head in terms of the results. That is kind of what people have fallen in to doing: handing out worksheets so it is heads down and everybody is working on their own and there is no conversation going on in the class”.

“I think Ron’s idea is a good one to remove loads of those tests so we are not constantly testing them”.

Yet again those attending felt it was the type of test, the frequency and their high stakes nature that skewed teaching practices and the delivery of a broad curriculum:

“...I think any good school will have an assessment system in place. Why that then has to be something that they are held to account against every other school in the country seems pointless”.

“What about some of the vocational qualifications that are out there, personal and social development-type things that do build confidence and team work because they are quite popular with schools. They are at the moment used in the league tables as GCSE equivalents because learners do enjoy and find them useful in some cases. ... The problem is, especially with Professor Alison Wolf’s report, the quality of them is always questioned and at the end of the day, “Is it a GCSE?”, “No!”, “I don’t want to do it then.””

The accountability system also prevents more innovative changes to the system which could aid the delivery of a broad and relevant curriculum. This breadth was considered to be

the most important reform that could be undertaken. Like other groups this one thought the system should cater to individual students who develop at different rates:

“In a sense age does not matter, as we have been saying, but maybe the average age should be 15. I love the idea of the extended phase two and giving the ability to provide a broader education so you are not having to make huge choices even at 14 or 15 or whenever it is”.

“...I do want to see a broad curriculum for as long as possible. A little bit from the other side of the coin, I do want to see the importance of subjects maintained...”

“If you really want to do something big at 14 you would have to go down the route of thinking about how we structure schools and you would have to have such a good argument for changing that assessment”.

“It is a developmental thing and yet again we are obsessed with at five you need to be able to write your name. I do not understand again that obsession with cramming stuff into kids when they all develop at different rates”.

In designing a new system inclusivity was a consideration, most wanted all learners in the ability range to be motivated to learn and progress. This brought to the fore issues about grading, many of which followed on from discussion about accountability measures:

“I think you have to be careful in terms of having an inclusive system because if you are setting a pass mark like you said at B..., you have just failed over 50% of the entire cohort”.

“We have to decide do we want something for everybody or are we saying no, we are discriminating at a much earlier point in the education system between the prospective A Levels and the others”.

“I am all in favour of letting teachers teach how they want to teach, but I think it is the job of government because they are paying for it after all and the electorate is expecting it, to say we would hope and expect children to reach a certain level. It is not to do with accountability. It is so they can go out into the world and be functioning adults eventually”.

“Teachers are the experts. They are the ones who know how to teach and how to get it across to their children. They know their children. I do not think the Government or anyone else should interfere with the methodology and the way they teach, but there should be expectations”.

DIRECT USERS: (E.G. EMPLOYER ORGANISATIONS, SIXTH FORM COLLEGES)

Participants largely agreed that the current system of putting students into groups with other students of the same age can be detrimental to learning. They discussed the feasibility of a graded system (similar to music tests) and the possibility of a transcript which is a graduation certificate. Many commented on the need for a close link between education and employment, and emphasised the importance of making students fit for the workplace – following widespread calls from businesses that students are lacking in basic English and maths. There was also a call for more project and cross-subject work, and a call for Government to get a ‘national understanding’ of what education should be about and where it should be going.

This group started by discussing the significance of age 16 for determining routes and how fixing any system around age might close pathways rather than open them. Some saw this as intimately related to how the system caters to the bottom 40% of the ability range and as before accountability measures were discussed:

“I think our major concern is that there could be a tendency in any new system to shut doors rather than open them for students”.

“I would like to see a system that allowed people that are developing more slowly to take longer to get whatever it is that qualifies”.

“In the independent sector they are allowed to do that because people are not so worried about Department for Education (DfE) statistics, but the way the Government insists on reporting on age cohorts rather than year groups prevents colleagues in the maintained sector holding people back to allow them to get the right qualifications”.

As part of this discussion they also considered an alternative marking regime:

“My idea is based more on the graded tests in music and I wondered if in the core subjects you had graded tests like the graded tests in music, then people could do them at an appropriate stage and you would have distinction/merit/pass, as you do in music, and it would be the level you have you got to and the range within that”.

“How then do you know if a school is a good school or not?”

...That is not the role of a qualification system”.

It was during this part of the discussion that participants began to question the validity of GCSEs:

“...It is the thing we get time and time again from our members that there are so many people coming out of the education

system at 16 who cannot cope with the maths and English that you need for a basic entry level career, even if they appear to have a good grade in GCSE maths”.

*“The current system does not serve the bottom 40%, probably more than that, because even those getting a C in maths in some years have got a very, very low percentage on the paper to get a C, which means the paper is not really appropriate because it is not testing what they know, it is testing what they do not know. At the top end only a small percentage get A*s, but it is not necessarily the right percentage because I do not think it is challenging enough for them...At the bottom end it is very unsatisfactory and at the top end it is not very satisfactory”.*

This brought to the fore discussion of the curriculum and increasing breadth of learning without increasing the number and pressures caused by high stakes assessment.

“I personally would get rid of all the key stages and allow the education system to get the students to the end of the phase. That would be my solution”.

“I hear you, differentiating between certification and actually what is in the curriculum. I would have compulsory arts subjects in the curriculum, but I would argue that if people want to take those for AS and A Level they do not actually need an intermediate qualification to do that because they are not linear subjects”.

“The curriculum should be wide and it would give the opportunity to do much more project and cross-subject work which would make a lot of sense and we could re-think how we stack up the curriculum and what we put into it and how it relates to each other, which I think would help all young people, from the brightest down to the least bright, because it would become more coherent as a way of selling it”.

However, the group conceded that eliminating exams at 16 was not necessarily straightforward, for example, some students would switch institution during their academic career. They considered what form any certification may take:

"You still do need that bit of paper, but the point we are making is that you may get that piece of paper when you are 16 or 17 or you may even get it when you are 18. In the whole of life does it matter whether it took you until you were 18 because you probably worked really hard to get it and if you did that, that is what most employers are looking for. We are looking for people who are determined to achieve things".

"I think the idea of a transcript which is a graduation certificate from that stage of schooling, done by the school or college, is the obvious answer to that, that you have on that transcript what you have studied and if it is not broad and balanced then you are not so employable at the end of the day and you are certainly not as well educated".

"If the purpose of education is that somebody should gain gainful employment, then surely there should be some link?"

In pursuing this strand of the debate, as with other groups, it was not long before the issue of accountability measures came up and the effects on the education environment:

"Where there are sixth generation workless families, we have to be really careful what messages we put out about general education before we get to the icing on the cake, which is making people fit for the workplace and targeting and really encouraging them to look for particular areas of work, which is what we are doing. We are being much more focused in colleges around being realistic about the local economy and local opportunities and what the routes are. We need businesses to work with us much more closely on that. It is really complicated".

"... This is no reason to worry about equivalence of qualifications unless you are using them to mark schools. That is the only reason for doing them.

That is what has led to the proliferation of the use of those qualifications in schools. It is as simple as that".

"I have got four kids and they are all different. They did not all develop in the same way.

"It is really important to find a way of giving validity to the recognition that you give to the less able children. We are all different abilities. This is the problem with GCSEs, where the D to U grades are all lumped together as one grade which is essentially a fail because of the way that we use the results, which is so not what it was intended to be".

Again this group looked at the issue of core curriculum (English, maths, science) and how all students might achieve core knowledge. The idea of age not stage proved popular:

"If you have a graded test like in music you do not necessarily have to take each grade but you can do. Even people of the same ability, some may take all of them, some may jump straight to grade three or whatever".

"We have created the stigma by saying everybody at this age will be in that age group".

In this group the conversation concluded with the view that one of the most important things the education system needed was a degree of consensus and stability:

"If we want to make an impact and we get this coalition together, it has really got to be about getting a national understanding as to what education should be about and where it should be going. What we have got now is the Government are coming along and saying we are going to fiddle with A Levels or we are going to fiddle with GCSEs, we are going to change the school leaving age, not this is what in the past we have tried to do with education and now we are going to do something different. You would not run a business like that. You would not last very long".

KEY POINTS OF AGREEMENT:

Although the broad themes of each discussion group reflected the particular interests, prejudices, backgrounds or agendas of the contributors certain key issues came up time and again across all the groups, with broad areas of agreement on solutions. These included:

THE CURRICULUM

- ◆ The requirement for broader learning that encompassed key skills and transferable learning, project work, critical thinking and extended learning
- ◆ It was felt there was too much top down direction and that teachers and schools with more freedom could develop more motivating packages of study which could, for example, have a local focus or allow for broader experiences

Beyond these points some of the groups also felt that learning needed to be tailored to real life in order to motivate students and give it relevance, this was felt to be of particular importance in the case of less gifted students. The aim of this broader learning was to prevent narrowing too early, enhance the learning experience and recognise that all children were different while providing the knowledge and skills children needed no matter which routes into employment and further education they might take.

It was pointed out in one group that there is a precedent in the form of curriculums and qualification that had no government direction but which were perceived to be of value (they had currency); for example ESOL and TEFL courses.

The effect of the internet was also raised in another group. It was felt that this made teacher and school collaboration and cross fertilisation a much more realistic prospect leading to the effective dissemination of best practice very quickly.

HIGH STAKES TESTING

- ◆ There were too many high stakes tests
- ◆ High stakes testing skewed learning outcomes and teaching practises, teaching to the test etc.
- ◆ High stakes testing narrowed the curriculum and prevented broader study
- ◆ Teachers, parents and pupils were equally guilty of ramping up the pressures on and expectations of assessment

While all groups mentioned getting rid of tests at 16 it was accepted that learners left institutions at various ages.

While looking at the negative impact of too many high stakes tests it was also thought that currently pupils took too many GCSEs which in turn lead to insufficient focus on core knowledge and core skills, although there was a divergence of views as to what exactly constituted 'core knowledge'. For most, however, this meant at the very least basic literacy and numeracy.

There were certain practical considerations to think about with reducing the number of high stakes exams particularly at age 16. While there is a requirement to stay in education or training to the age of 18, currently over 50% of pupils studying A Levels do so at sixth form colleges. Other students might wish to move on to apprenticeships, courses provided in the FE sector, not to mention those who physically move location. Only a proportion of students would experience an uninterrupted career at one institution. This might therefore necessitate some form of recognition, a 'piece of paper' to allow progression from one institution to another. However, this didn't need to be in the form of sets of high stakes assessment.

On the whole the groups, when challenged for a solution, looked to internal assessment or assessment of a core knowledge and skills curriculum. It was suggested by many that only those students moving institution could be tested. In one group it was pointed out that movement from one institution could be done by word of mouth and recommendation, an example of this was with the recent problems experienced by pupils around GCSE English. It was pointed out that GCSE qualifications no longer actually qualify people for things but indicate potential for progression.

One solution which was discussed in several groups was assessment by teachers trained to the level of Chartered Assessors, sufficient to provide rigour and credibility. It was thought this might also help professionalise the teaching profession and rebuild faith in itself. Another suggestion was using improved careers advice as a motivator.

As indicated, although there was agreement that there were too many high stakes tests and that this distorted learning outcomes it was acknowledged that they do allow diagnostics permitting appropriate interventions. It was also said that testing reassures and can motivate students.

High stakes testing was also thought by many within the groups to reinforce the system of 'age not stage' which was considered a negative feature of the current system which adversely effected learning outcomes for some students. However, high stakes testing was not the only mechanism within the system considered to distort the teaching of a broad curriculum and ultimately learning outcomes.

ACCOUNTABILITY MEASURES AND GRADING

- ◆ Current accountability measures distort learning outcomes by reinforcing teaching to the test and a concentration on C/D boundaries
- ◆ They restrict the freedom of institutions to innovate and also reinforce 'age not stage' hindering genuine skills and knowledge based learning particularly amongst lower ability pupils
- ◆ They can change the nature of learning in a negative way, for example, helping create the environment for 'gaming'
- ◆ Current grading arrangements reinforce teaching to the test and the negative features of current accountability measures

All the groups agreed that the current accountability measures hindered the teaching of a broad based curriculum and genuine development of pupils of all ability ranges. It was thought that the test has become the centre of the education system rather than a supporting component and that this also contributed to a lack of faith in the system.

What is of particular interest is not necessarily the symptoms of the disease which have been discussed at length in many other documents but the fact the groups all agreed so completely on their negative effects. It was pointed out by one group that even learners themselves nowadays are resistant to learning things that do not appear in the examination.

The setting of the 'C' grade in five subjects as the accountability measure and the focus on the C/D boundary brought up for discussion the issue of grades. There was no agreement on what should replace the current grading structure. One idea that was discussed in some groups was a grading metric which operated in a similar way to that of music exams in which pupils strive for levels at their own pace. This was thought to be a means of motivating lower ability students as well as allowing high ability pupils to develop at a faster more challenging rate.

Amongst all the groups there were discussions around the big philosophical questions and large scale system refinement. Of those discussions the groups all covered:

- ◆ The purpose of GCSEs
- ◆ The fundamental purpose of education
- ◆ The role of teachers

Discussion of these topics was linked closely to those already outlined above. Discussion of these issues was considered fundamental to any reform process.

CONCLUSION:

If education reform is to deliver a sustainable, long-term framework that will stand the test of time, enable us to create exams that prioritise and promote learning there is a fundamental need to achieve a national consensus on:

- ◆ What skills, knowledge and understanding do our children need in order to prosper in the 21st century?
- ◆ In light of the raising of the participation age to 18 in the coming years, at what age should we examine our children externally and to what purpose?
- ◆ Should any 16-plus examination be a touch-point to monitor their progress and assist with students' decisions on routes? Or should it be a certificate that demonstrates the student's subject competence to employers or for onward education? Or should it provide employers, and FE with a tool that helps them differentiate between students?
- ◆ Are exam results a suitable form of accountability measure for schools?

Addressing these questions is difficult and controversial, but by getting the fundamentals right in terms of the curriculum and putting learning at the heart of assessment, we will forego the need for constant change, will restore trust to the examinations system and reach a hitherto unachieved level of common cause and agreement.

APPENDIX 1.

WHITHER THE GCSE?

An alternative approach

Ron McLone
September 2012

This report was commissioned by Cambridge Assessment for discussion alongside other proposals – including the reforms suggested by the Secretary of State and the Education Select Committee – at a series of roundtable events on GCSE Reform. Representatives from teacher organisations, business leaders, think tanks, students and parents and direct users of GCSEs are being invited to take part. Cambridge Assessment hopes that the findings of the discussions – which will be published in a report submitted to Government – will enable policy makers to make valid and informed choices based on sound evidence.

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Appendix 1: *The Original Purposes of the GCSE, Where is the GCSE now? User expectations*

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Before joining Cambridge Assessment, Dr McLone was Senior Lecturer and Admissions Tutor at the University of Southampton. He has written numerous research papers, and has spoken at international conferences on many aspects of applied mathematics and mathematics education. He has been a GCE examiner, and an external examiner for degree courses in mathematics at several universities.

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WHITHER THE GCSE? *An alternative approach*

1. SUMMARY

This paper proposes that this country refocuses on the internationally recognized goals of education by adopting a two-phase education system. The first phase reflecting the objective of a 'good general education' by age 14 and the second, a four-year programme focusing specifically on individual interests, capabilities and ambitions for life beyond compulsory education. As a consequence Key Stage tests, GCSE and AS examinations would go, with alternative forms of assessment being proposed.

In appendix 1 there is a history of the GCSE and an analysis of where we are now. However, outlined below are some general observations which set these proposals in their context.

2. SOME GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

Education systems around the world are many and varied. Nonetheless, almost all follow a pattern which acknowledges phases of educational development associated with a general level society expects of each child and something more specifically preparing for life beyond compulsory education.

In the UK (but allowing for deviations between the countries making up the UK) this was originally seen in terms of a single phase for compulsory general education for all, with a select few going to a second phase almost exclusively through independent education, privately financed. Since the mid 20th century this has developed into a complex pattern of age-related 'stages' (in England, Key Stages), seemingly more concerned with school and system structures than the educational development of individual children. The natural desire to measure progress has led over time to various assessment regimes at the conclusion of each stage, typically at ages 7, 11, 14, 16 and 18. The result is a separation from the prime purpose of education of individual students to one more associated with the accountability of learning institutions.

Alongside this structural adaptation of the education system there have been several government moves to define the curriculum with increasing detail and prescription of what it should contain. The National Curriculum, introduced just over 20 years ago, became over-prescriptive and over-burdening on teachers and learners and at the same time led to a testing and examining system that encouraged a belief that learning was only valued if assessed. More recently moves are being taken to alleviate this but the underlying structure is again likely to prohibit progress unless radically altered to reflect the essential underlying purpose for educating our young people.

In the 25 years since its inception, the GCSE has gone through many modifications. All these changes have left an examination which has become divorced from its original purpose but without any obvious sense of identity in its present form. Confusion has arisen by virtue of a conflation of providing a certificate to recognise specific subject achievement at the end of compulsory education with fulfilling the continuing educational needs of

individuals across a broad range of aspirations and abilities in the midst of a 14 to 19 educational programme.

Alongside GCSE many vocational qualifications are offered to the 14 to 16 age group. 'Vocational Qualifications' have become both for individual students and institutions a means of achieving a respectable qualification 'score' as 'equivalences' with GCSE were established. Professor Alison Wolf's Report, accepted by the Government, showed that not all of these offered useful progression to further learning or a preparation for the workplace and called on them to be abandoned.

3. A NEW APPROACH

A 2-phase proposal

Making adjustments within the present structure, although providing apparent short-term gain, will not address the fundamental problems of:

- (i) an over-structured education system with too many "stages";
- (ii) an overburdened regulated curriculum with too much detail;
- (iii) too much testing;
- (iv) lack of confidence in the rigour and relevance of the qualification and assessment system;
- (v) single assessments used for multifarious purposes, some confusing and others inappropriate;
- (vi) lack of external confidence in the standards defined or achieved;
- (vii) frequent changes to curriculum and examinations with increased prescription and regulation, but within the same basic structure;
- (viii) a large proportion of the yearly cohort leave education lacking in basic skills and knowledge expected for all pupils;
- (ix) many at 14 to 16 are disaffected and lack motivation in a system which is increasingly alien to them;
- (x) students collecting large numbers of GCSE certificates at high grades (or their equivalents), without a clear educational benefit for the individual student.

An initial prescription is therefore to adopt a two-phase education system, representing the dual nature of the goals of compulsory education. The first phase should reflect the objective of a 'good general education' and the second phase focus more specifically on individual interests, capabilities and ambitions for life beyond compulsory education.

Countries vary in their approach to the nature and timing of a transition between these phases; it is proposed that in this country there should be just one such transition. Moreover the current system by restricting the final phase to two years places unnecessary constraints on the nature and extent of the preparation for either HE or employment at age 18.

Given the current structures it is probable that 14 would best reflect the average age at which a 'general' education is achieved and recognised, and be least disruptive overall for present school systems. It also provides a good balance between enough time for the second phase without forcing premature option choice.

The adoption of a two-phase model need not be constrained by an age-related point of transition. Students progress at different rates and an ideal system would make allowance for both early and late developers.

The two phases might therefore be described as follows:

Phase 1

A general education sufficient to deliver for each student

- (a) competence in *absolutely* key areas;
- (b) a range of academic and practical skills appropriate for the 21st century on which future progression can be based.
- (c) general knowledge of the development of their country in its history, traditions, culture and environment;
- (d) effective participation in a civilised, articulate, caring society.

This forms a basic accredited and regulated 'core' (e.g. English, mathematics, science, IT) alongside a broader curriculum extension within which the schools should have greater freedom to encourage individual talents as they develop. The balance of time between 'core' and 'extension' is likely to vary as a child progresses through this phase. Evidence of progression through the phase in both 'core' and 'extension' should be required of the place of learning. There would be no requirement for national, formal Key Stage tests. This separates assessment for pupil progress from anything associated with accountability of the institutions.

Phase 2

Individual study programmes that

- (a) lead to nationally accredited and regulated assessments and qualifications;
- (b) are flexible in allowing students of differing abilities and aspirations to develop on courses that motivate their interests;
- (c) challenge their performance and result in trusted and recognisable user (HE/employer) outcomes;
- (d) do not make the system too complex or diverse(!).

The essence of this model lies in the greater time given to the second phase than is available for most students in the present system. It aims to allow individual strengths and aspirations to be encouraged and accommodated on the basis of an already achieved 'good general education'.

Currently, most students' public examinations are taken at 16, 17 and 18 (with some at 15). This restricts the teaching institution's flexibility in coping with wide-ranging abilities and interests naturally developing in most teenagers. Moreover a longer time for this phase can encourage breadth as an integral part of the individual's development.

The 16 to 18-plus stage in this country has often been criticised over the years for the narrowness of focus, particularly for the more 'academic' students, although this has a lot to do with university degree structures and consequent admission

requirements. Greater breadth has been a feature of a number of government commissions and reports (e.g. Dearing in mid 1990s and Tomlinson almost a decade later) but never successfully implemented since the underlying structures and qualifications were not addressed.

There are, of course, complications arising from the institutional structure present in some areas but that should not override a more flexible and motivating education which will give all students a greater chance of successful preparation for adult employment.

Individual learning and societal expectation

The dilemmas besetting most education systems are that they:

- (i) seek to provide maximum flexibility in progression with breadth of learning;
- (ii) try to keep as many options as possible open for as long as possible for the individual student;
- (iii) work within the physical and temporal constraints of the administrative structure which governs schools and the teaching therein,
- (iv) meet the demands and expectations of society as represented by both the end-users and government.

The demands of (iii) and (iv) have usually prevailed; in the UK, in particular, the age-related progression inbuilt into our schools has dominated both curriculum and examinations at each stage of education.

Teachers know that there is always a range of abilities in the classroom and organise their teaching to cope, but at the end of any period of teaching there will be a spread of achievement across the individual students in the class. On the other hand those representing society have a duty to express the overall expectations, for example, of a 'good general education' and define the achievement levels that represents accordingly. Assessments can then be designed to measure this achievement.

In this two-phase proposal, there will need to be publicly recognised and regulated assessments/examinations in the 'core' subjects at the end of Phase 1. At the same time other assessments (internal or external) may be available to assess other objectives set out for this Phase (see section 3).

It is anticipated that most students will complete this Phase by age 14 (Year 9) with successful outcomes in the assessment. Some may have exceptional ability and could take the assessments earlier; others may take longer to achieve success. Ideally for the individual student the assessments should be available 'when ready' and each school should be left to judge what is most advantageous to each student.

It is vital that the individual assessment outcomes should not be the source of institution accountability measures; as with the GCSE, this would lead to distortion in the assessment and encourage unhelpful practices in the institutions themselves.

Flexibility and transfer

The essence of Phase 2 lies in the individual study programme. Underpinning this is the availability to the student (and the institution) of a variety of course provision with the possibility of transfer as the student progresses in his/her learning.

Phase 2 institutions should be free to offer as many/few strands at whatever level they deem suitable for their clientele of students; this does *not* have to imply that all institutions must be inordinately large, or that the education offered is over complex and encourages uncoordinated and disparate portions of study. It *does* imply that students must have available throughout good professional advice from the teaching institution in the development of each study programme.

A 4-year programme does not have to imply premature option choice. Each programme can have a broad pattern in the early stages (e.g. up to two years) followed by more focussed study for the final stages in preparation for taking intended qualifications leading to either further study (e.g. HE), employment, or work-based further training. These options need not be alternatives.

The clear intention is to enable the student to follow patterns which motivate and reflect competence in achievement. The more 'academic' students can focus on academic subject patterns over a 4-year period which reflect interests and lead to appropriate degree programmes at university. Some students may follow more work-based practical qualification routes throughout, while others may take a mixed programme, possibly with particular employment in mind. In each case it would be ideal if the particular end-users could be involved in the construction and expectation levels of the resulting qualification.

Not all institutions will wish or be able to offer all strands; this will be a decision for the institution itself, although care will need to be taken that every student understands the possible limitations in this regard. Measures may need to be in place to allow appropriate transfer between institutions in these cases.

4. ACCREDITING AND ASSESSING THE PHASES

Rationale for change

A golden rule of assessment is that it is 'fit for purpose'. This presupposes that 'purpose' has been properly and clearly defined at the outset.

Part of any definition of 'purpose' lies in the nature of what is to be accredited which naturally changes across the phases of education. One of the guiding concepts established by QCA, predecessor to Ofqual, has been the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF), into which all 'qualifications' are 'fitted'. There is an underlying assumption that all that is accredited forms part of a qualification, with a further assumption that all that is learned has to be accredited before it has a 'worth' or 'value'.

Both these assumptions are misplaced and have fundamentally distorted the accreditation and assessment of learning in

general education. What we are providing, for all students in Phase 1 and many in Phase 2, is a report on educational progress, not a qualification.

Qualifications exist in their own right. The associated 'certificate' (i.e. piece of paper) gives a licence/report used by others as an indication of competence, enabling the owner to claim recognition in the public domain for what has been accomplished. The assessment on which the candidate is judged is set against specific objectives/criteria, related to identifiable aspects of the qualification.

A 'report on educational progress' on the other hand is just that – sometimes confined to areas of study (usually labelled 'academic') which have well-defined and often longstanding identity, although in recent years increasingly extending into other areas of activity forming part of a broader curriculum. The assessments have customarily been less strictly referenced against criteria, with a greater degree of 'compensation' of strengths and weaknesses across the domain of study. There is potentially a greater freedom to determine the nature of the assessment in keeping with the activity in question.

In consideration of the nature of the assessment associated with the phases of education it is important to keep to these distinctions. It is also important to recognise the differences in the types of assessment.

The final report of the Task Group on Assessment and Testing, a group set up to consider assessment issues in parallel with the development of the National Curriculum in the late 1980s, defined four fundamental types of assessment – Diagnostic, Formative, Summative and Evaluative.

Many of the criticisms directed at the current examinations can be seen to derive from the use of an inappropriate form of assessment for the purpose intended, or an attempt to use the same tasks to achieve more than one assessment type (for example, the GCSE is used simultaneously in a Summative mode for the individual, but Evaluative for the institution; some of the tasks actually set would be more appropriate to an assessment in Formative mode).

Returning to the QCF, this framework was derived from a previous framework (NQF) which categorised qualifications by level of difficulty (nine Levels in all, from Entry to 8). Qualifications at the same Level were deemed "broadly similar in terms of the demand they place on the learner".

Since GCSE Grades D to G are deemed 'Level 1' and GCSE Grades A* to C are deemed 'Level 2' (Ofqual website), there is at least the potential for some confusion. Moreover, this framework of equivalences, coupled with target driven accountability of schools and colleges through league tables based on point scores associated with these equivalences has led to distortion both of the pattern of education available in institutions and the individual study programmes of individuals.

The use of GCSE assessment to cover two Levels of the QCF has a particularly distorting effect on what is accredited and assessed. Examination tasks are designed to assess a curriculum context; papers in GCSE subjects without tiers, covering all grades from A* to G, are then open to the challenge 'at which QCF Level are they targeted?' Is it the intention that the Level covered is defined by the achievement outcome? But what about students at the critical D/C borderline? One mark extra and they move from a Level 1 Qualification achievement to a Level 2 achievement, or is it from a Level 2 'fail' to a Level 2 'pass', as it might be if the GCSE subject in question has targeted tiers and we are referring to the Higher tier.

Phase 1 accreditation and assessment

In the model proposed in Section 3 above, the end of Phase 1 is designed to represent the achievement of 'a good general education'. It therefore requires

- (i) national certification of an essential core;
- (ii) record of progress for curriculum extension –
 - (a) in subjects developing further academic and practical skills;
 - (b) in recognising the development of the country's history, traditions, cultures and environment;
 - (c) as civilised, articulate and caring members of society.

There are models in some countries in which all of the above would be determined through assessments designed and conducted *internal* to the teaching institutions. However in this country this is likely to be a step too far requiring a considerable investment in training in assessment methods for the teaching profession.

To provide credible recognition, externally accredited and regulated assessments will at least be expected for the essential core (i), covering English, mathematics, science and IT, (and possibly a language and a history based subject) delivered by an established awarding body (or bodies). The content to be covered should be determined at a national level. The assessments set and the achievements measured will equally be according to nationally set criteria, but allowing for compensation and 'referencing' as described above.

The record of progress referred to in (ii) above would more suitably be determined by the learning institution. There may be situations or subjects in (a) or (b) where institutions would welcome some externally provided assessment as a contribution to the individual record. That would be for assessment agencies and institutions to develop, subject to regulatory approval.

Can anyone 'fail' Phase 1?

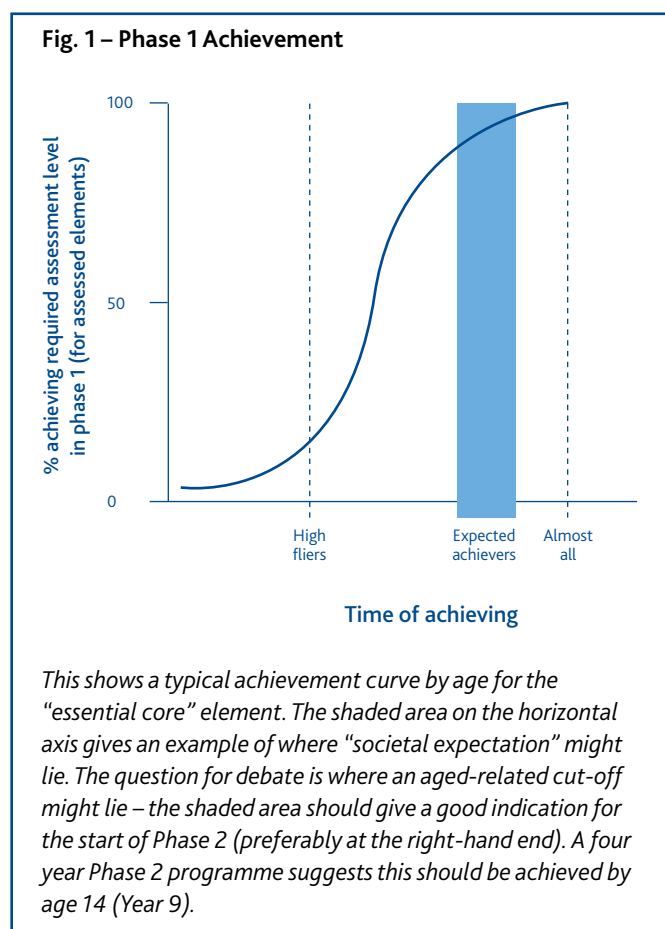
One of the constraints on a really flexible model which recognises the variability in progression across the whole cohort of students at any age is the year by year transition built into our school systems.

Some argue this in itself introduces the concept of 'fail' since an inevitable outcome is that some students will, for a variety of reasons, not satisfy the achievement conditions at any year end – and hence for transfer from Phase 1 to Phase 2 at the point of transition. If age-related transfer is retained (highly likely) it is

important at the outset to recognise this with a positive approach in Phase 2. In particular, institutions should have available for students who have not yet satisfied the requirements for successful completion of the Phase 1 core subjects courses with assessments which build in these Phase 1 requirements as part of their Phase 2 study programmes. The 'Repeat GCSE' syndrome should be avoided.

An ideal situation would be to avoid age-related transfer. This would also help 'high-fliers' who could be encouraged to complete Phase 1 and proceed to Phase 2 earlier, if appropriate.

For example, Fig 1 shows a typical achievement curve which could represent expected performance for Phase 1 assessed elements. What is *not* suggested is holding the main body of potentially successful students back, so that all can complete Phase 1 at the same time.



Phase 2 accreditation and assessment

The nature of this phase implies a variety of assessments, appropriate to the objectives of each course and meeting the expectations of targeted end-users. This could mean, for example, highly challenging academic assessments for those seeking admission to selective world-ranking universities or competence based assessments with practical/work-based elements for employer designed/targeted qualifications. The 'end-point' is the qualification achieved at the end of the phase; designed and developed with the involvement of the key end-users and subject to national accreditation.

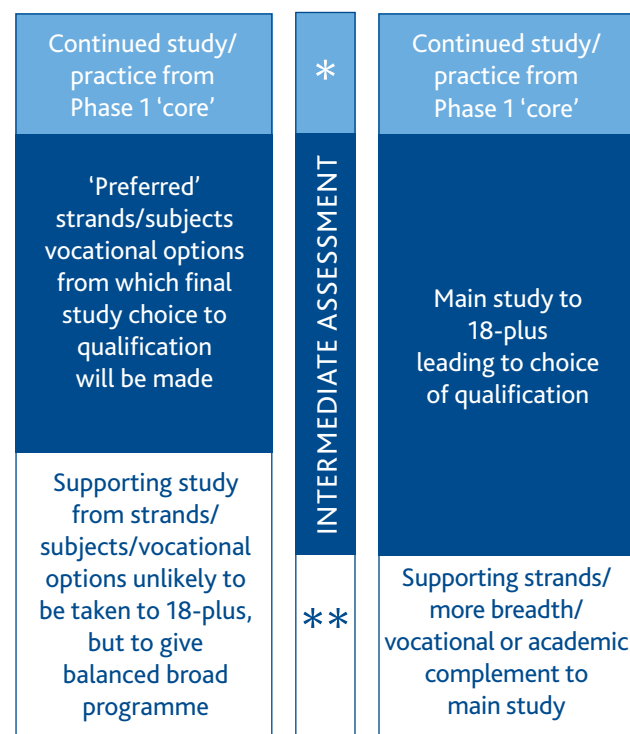
It is important that students should begin Phase 2 with a balanced programme covering a breadth of study, avoiding premature closing of pathways and allowing development of a range of skills as well as a breadth of knowledge. It should not be necessary to give incentives to teaching institutions to provide, and students to follow, an appropriate range of courses. Study programmes are individual but many will become 'common' to groups of students, leading to recognised broad study patterns. It should be a 'bottom-up' process, rather than imposed either by the education establishment for whom structural considerations will be more pressing, or politicians with other agendas. Each teaching institution will find patterns of study develop, and respond to them. They must nonetheless be flexible enough to allow transfer when in the interests of the students.

Thus a broad spectrum of 'academic subjects' alongside more vocationally oriented and skill-based alternatives should normally be on offer for the commencement of Phase 2, all based on an expectation that students have successfully completed Phase 1. Each element of the programme of study can be seen as a developing 'strand' leading to the end qualification, for which there would be benefit in marking progression by assessments designed to cover essential groundwork and confirming progress for the student. The outcomes would help form decisions on the later stage of their study programme.

This intermediate assessment is integral to the programme of study leading to the associated end assessment for the qualification. It also exists as an end point in its own right for those wishing to progress elsewhere in the final stage of their Phase 2 studies. It can, and should, be registered as part of the total achievement of the student in Phase 2. In an academic strand, customarily leading to A Level, it replaces the need for both the current GCSE and AS examinations; "Intermediate" may be an appropriate title. In addition there should be some continued development and practice in the core subjects (English, mathematics, science, IT as well as a language) whatever the chosen pathway, with associated assessments at least to a level equivalent to the Intermediate assessments in the qualification strands. Some would argue that assessments at full qualification level should be required in English and mathematics; this may be debatable for all qualifications, but there is a good case for some assessment to be required.

By 'mid-term' in Phase 2, possibly coinciding with and on the basis of Intermediate assessments, most students will be proceeding more specifically on a programme of clear end-user outcomes. Each 'strand' (subject or specification) will be accredited by the regulatory body; as will the 'end-user' qualifications. All Intermediate assessments (and certification) should be seen integrally with the associated 'end-user' qualification. These assessments should be designed and delivered by the same awarding body, with involvement of the key end-users, as with the end of phase assessment (eg HE for A Level). Fig 2 shows a possible outline study plan covering Phase 2.

Fig. 2 – Possible Phase 2 outline study plan



* Assessment (when ready?) to Phase 1 requirements included for those not yet achieving required level; further assessments to "Intermediate level" for those already of Phase 1 "standard"
 ** Not expected that all supporting study should be assessed at this stage, but some may be carried to final part of Phase 2.

So what happens to the GCSE?

There would be no need for a national examination at 16. GCSE is in practice reformed/replaced by two separate assessments (and certification) representing properly the present disparate functions it now attempts to serve, unsuccessfully.

The 'general education' aspect is represented in the assessments contributing to the certification at the end of Phase 1. The role of the GCSE as a preparation for future study (currently associated with the higher grades – Level 2 in QCF terms) is replaced by a single progression stage on the way to the final assessment at the end of Phase 2. This stage, which we have called 'Intermediate', should preferably be taken 'when ready' and not be age-related. However, it can also have recognition in its own right, of value to those students progressing in other studies, and also as an indication to future 'end-users' (eg HE) of achievement potential.

5. IMPLICATIONS AND ISSUES

Standards

'Standard' is all about 'demand'. That is to say the level of difficulty inherent in all aspects of recording achievement following a course of study or practical training (or a mix of both).

In practice this turns on defining a range of criteria from which assessment objectives are derived, on the basis of which tasks are set and performance is measured. Many have written about the nature of 'demand' in the process of establishing how and what to measure in fulfilling the objectives of any assessment. A general consensus has developed around (i) the subject/training itself (knowledge, understanding and expertise required); (ii) the tasks set (and associated measure of performance); and (iii) the determination of the reported result (e.g. grade). This is well known to, and there is considerable established expertise and research in, awarding and regulatory bodies. Nonetheless there is a prevailing public view that 'standards have fallen'.

It is crucial that the determination of what is required and how it is measured is fully transparent and understood by all participants, especially teachers and their students, when defining and maintaining any new standard. This will apply to the assessments required at the end of Phase 1 and the Intermediate stage in Phase 2.

It is inevitable that comparison will be made with previous assessment regimes, however inappropriate. Nevertheless these previous assessments do provide a form of benchmark. The need to determine a new standard for the core at the end of Phase 1, for example, gives an opportunity to meet some of the criticisms and expectations made of the GCSE by external users; a standard set at least equivalent to that of level 1 on the current QCF scale would be desirable, if not essential, to regain public confidence and provide a sounder preparation for Phase 2.

Once agreed requirements for Phase 1 certification are in place time must be found for any assessments to be piloted before national introduction. Experience has shown this to be rarely the case in the past.

Setting the criteria for the new Intermediate level will be equally important. There are more benchmarks available both in the UK and from other countries, and the expertise referred to above will prove invaluable. Given the proposal that the Phase 1 standard should be at least at QCF Level 1, and accepting that the end of Phase 2 remains at QCF Level 3, one proposal for any Intermediate stage could be 'at least QCF Level 2'. There is room however for further work on defining a standard for this progression stage, which would benefit from the involvement of end-users as well as the expertise of the awarding and regulatory bodies. Again, piloting is essential.

Curriculum issues

Phase 1 is likely to continue to be dominated by the National Curriculum, which has been under review. It is a fundamental assumption of this proposal that the requirements of the end of this phase, and especially the national core (i), are common to

all and can be relied on by Phase 2 providers. These requirements should be nationally determined and nationally monitored. Defining the available curriculum in Phase 2 is (as now) going to be more complex and diverse.

The importance of this proposal lies in treating Phase 2 as a whole, whether of three or, preferably, four years. End-users should be involved in developing the specification requirements for the whole phase, although may be expected to have particular influence in the final assessments. Other broader interests are likely to have a place at the Intermediate stage.

The more academic subjects, for example, will have input from subject associations and professional bodies; vocational qualifications will have input from sector skills organisations. Clearly the content covered by, for example, the current GCSE specifications will form the basis for the early years of Phase 2 and be relevant to the Intermediate assessment. This also gives some continuity for teachers, parents and students. But the context is completely different – as part of a strand or course of study across the whole phase, not just leading to a certificate at what is no longer the completion of secondary education.

There *is* an implication for the continued existence of the current AS as part of A Level. AS was introduced as part of Curriculum 2000 in an attempt to broaden the sixth-form curriculum, which feature is now part of the whole approach to Phase 2. On top of which AS has had a somewhat confused double role, being seen as a qualification in its own right but also embedded in (i.e. an integral part of) the A Level. Given the general criticism of an over emphasis on external assessments at 16, 17, and 18, the existence of the Intermediate stage in Phase 2 leads naturally to questioning the need for a further separate assessment such as AS. Incidentally on no account should the Intermediate assessment be carried forward to be part of the final A Level result!

Titles

Although it is the content and context that defines almost everything, what we call it inevitably has an impact. What is clear is that we must not allow our thinking to be constrained by the overt and covert meanings attached to current titles. The General Certificate of Secondary Education no longer says what it is, let alone fits its original purpose. The titles suggested in this paper are precisely that – suggestions. Clarity of purpose and design may well present us with appropriate titles that derive their legitimacy from their educational worth. More especially, a title is needed that indicates satisfactory completion of Phase 1 – with a clear understanding that it is a certificate recognising achievement across all elements; it should *not* be graded!

Managing and monitoring

There are many issues arising in managing and monitoring the proposed changes to our education structure. Teachers will not need telling that preparing students for Phase 2 at an earlier stage in their education requires great care. But they will also know that it need not, and should not, be an irredeemable step change; hence the vital importance of continued management of individual study programmes and care in developing the aspiration and skills of each student. This does not come easily

and needs monitoring institutions to act with due support and care, as well as pointed advice where necessary.

Raising standards, a common aim for all, means improved motivation as well as development of skills and knowledge, which inevitably varies in individuals. Equally the quality of the specifications, assessments and end qualifications need to be constantly monitored and maintained.

There are issues for managing these proposed changes where students move between institutions as they progress, whether at 14, 15 or 16, although this is not a new challenge. These proposals have particular impact for 11 to 16 schools. Consideration will need to be given to the more seamless delivery of 14 to 18 education in these circumstances.

In conclusion

There are of course many other implications and issues arising from these proposals, which are recognised to be a major change to our education structure from 14 to 18-plus, not least in their impact on the teaching institutions, teaching profession, awarding and regulatory bodies.

There has been a persistent theme throughout the last two/three decades of “too much change, too hastily introduced and without due thought for the institutions and individuals concerned”. But one can also argue that it is precisely because of such continued incremental and often disparate changes that the present situation has developed into a need for such a major change as is proposed here, for the benefit of *all* our teenagers and the future success of the UK’s education provision.

When the GCSE was introduced in the 1980s, it represented a much needed fundamental change to the provision of secondary education at the time. Now it is time to be bold again.

Ron McLone
September, 2012

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Includes:

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APPENDIX 1

The Original Purposes of the GCSE

In the UK (except in Scotland) the concept of recognising a 'general' education at the end of compulsory schooling became embedded in the examination system, first in the GCE (at Ordinary Level) and subsequently in the GCSE. The original 1984 prescription for the GCSE was seen as a logical step towards matching the examination system at the end of compulsory schooling with the relatively new comprehensive system of education. The GCSE replaced the GCE, originally the province of the grammar schools, and the CSE of the non-grammar sector.

It was intended that there would be continuity from the past through -

"syllabuses and assessment procedures designed in order to reward the attainment of pupils whose marks would be likely to place them in the top 60 per cent of candidates if an examination in that subject were attempted by pupils spanning the whole range of ability in the school population" (Examinations at 16-plus: A statement of policy HMSO, 1982).

The old GCE O Level was assumed to be targeted at the top 20 per cent of the ability range and the CSE at the next 40 per cent. The remaining 40 per cent, one assumes, were not intended to complete a "certificate of achievement for those leaving full-time education at 16-plus". This could not be sustained, and the GCSE has *de-facto* become an 'all ability' examination.

Examinations were to be governed by National Criteria, both general and subject specific, developed by the examining groups and subject to approval by the Secretaries of State, who would take advice from a newly formed Secondary Examinations Council. The assessments had to "provide proper discrimination across the ability range through differentiated papers or differentiation within papers" with grades determined "by grade-related criteria", an attempt to move to a criterion-referenced mode of examining so that it would "give an indication to users of the level of competence and knowledge that might be expected from those who obtain a particular grade" (translates to "what each candidate knew, understood and could do" in the jargon of the time). Even then, the policy document emphasised that learning opportunities should not be limited to subjects prepared for examination.

Therefore, in its origins the GCSE was seen as a continuation of a longstanding provision of formal examination in primarily academic subjects at the end of compulsory education. The highest grades were still seen as the gateway to advanced study which might lead to a university education.

Where is the GCSE now?

In the 25 years since its inception, the GCSE has gone through many modifications. Even before the first examination in 1988 a new National Curriculum was being introduced, at that time with specification across ten levels covering a child's education from entry to primary school to the end of compulsory schooling, the last two levels to be delivered in Key Stage 4 (ages

14 to 16). It did not cover all subjects but for those that were covered, the GCSE had its first syllabus revision with significantly more central direction.

Over time there have been several further revisions, both in curriculum content and in assessment structure, leading to a pattern of a modular content with associated assessments, following the style of the modular A Levels. More recently, a return to non-modular format has been announced.

All these changes have left an examination which has become divorced from its original purpose but without any obvious sense of identity in its present form. Confusion has arisen by virtue of a conflation of providing a certificate to recognise specific subject achievement at the end of compulsory education with fulfilling the continuing educational needs of individuals across a broad range of aspirations and abilities in the midst of a 14 to 19 educational programme.

What is the purpose of the GCSE in the current context?

Following the Report of the Sykes Commission (2009) it could be:

- (i) to indicate whether the student has sufficient understanding for further study in a particular subject;
- (ii) demonstrate student achievement across a range of subjects and skills (not all of which will be carried on to further study);
- (iii) in some essential (core) subjects – particularly English and mathematics – provide essential information to employers and others (including FE and HE) about an individual's attainment;
- (iv) give a measure of the success of schools in teaching everyone essential skills.

The Sykes Report, for example, argued that (i) and (ii) are within certain limits generally met. But they are not specific to the format of the current GCSE either in syllabus content or assessment. Most students have generally determined their post-16 study before receiving GCSE results and most other countries cope well with leaving external testing to the completion of formal education, generally at age 18.

There is a requirement for (iii) but little evidence that the current GCSE provides it. This is because there is little agreement on what constitutes the essential core and at what level. The challenge lies with the recognition that the requirements stretch from basic competence for everyday life, through practical application in particular contexts and subjects, to demanding study in their own right at the highest level.

A single examination at 16-plus, even with differentiated assessment, manifestly fails to satisfy simultaneously all the various users' requirements, or those of the students.

Additionally, simply repeating the same assessment, for those whose first attempts were inadequate, merely compounds the issue. Achieving the 'pass' mark in GCSE (generally thought of as Grade C) becomes the objective, rather than focussing on acquiring the necessary knowledge and skills which show that the student has sufficient competence in the subject for future studies.

Objective (iv) is equally unlikely to be met. Using GCSE performance as the principal measure of accountability for schools has a distorting effect on the whole education provision for the pupils by concentrating learning solely on what is certificated. It also militates against a proper achievement of objective (iii) as the institution is led to concentrate on its league table outcomes rather than what might be more important for the full range of individual pupils. This particularly affects those of the lowest and highest abilities.

One could argue that the very existence of targets concentrating on GCSE performance as an institutional measure constrains consideration of the effectiveness of the structure of our education system, in delivering individual achievement on a meaningful programme of study, at any particular age.

The original GCSE specification allowed for assessments to achieve discrimination across the ability range of students previously taking either O Level or CSE (60% of the year cohort). Subsequently the assessments have necessarily been designed to cater for almost all (90% plus) of the cohort; they have therefore to be 'accessible' to all. Inevitably this impacts on both the subject content and the targeted level of assessment, with consequent changes in assessment style and form.

Performance outcomes were not surprisingly affected, with tasks originally designed for the top 20% of the ability range now having to be 'available' to a much greater proportion of the cohort. Whatever the impact on awarding decisions, the nature of the tasks underwent change, not always acclaimed by future users in HE or employment. In addition, an assessment originally intended to provide a general measure of attainment at the end of compulsory education has become a way-marker collected en-route, but without the necessary rethink of style and format such a change might have indicated.

A further indication of the change in the nature of the GCSE has been the significant increase in the number of subjects taken by a large proportion of the yearly cohort. Previously students rarely took O Level examinations in more than eight subjects and performances were well distributed across the grade range. Today many students acquire the top grades (A and A*) in ten or more subjects.

There is evidence from students themselves that, although such high grades may be achieved, they do not have enough motivation or indeed preparation for further study in many of these subjects. This should not be taken as a criticism of the students who worked hard to get their results. Rather, a 'system' that encourages "multi-grade accumulation" as a performance indicator for the institutions fails in the educational development of the individual participants it serves.

At the other end, although the GCSE over time has become an 'all ability' examination at 16-plus, there remains a covert sub-text that grades below C are still regarded in many influential quarters (particularly many employers) as 'failed'.

User expectations

Comments on the purpose and outcomes of assessment at 16-plus, and student preparedness for life beyond full-time secondary education, have become more critical. Both employers and HE have commented on the often poor grasp of basic skills (literacy, numeracy, communication) even from students with high grades at GCSE. More recently the CBI, in launching an enquiry into education generally, has also criticised the inflexible structure of the examination system at 16-plus. It suggests schools are forced to prioritise short-term cramming and 'teaching to the test' rather than providing a good general education and motivation for continued further study or training.

Although GCSE grade outcomes are often quoted, for example, in recruiting new employees, it is generally in the absence of any other available measure. Moreover 'a good general education' does not necessarily equate to eleven (or more) GCSEs at whatever grade. One repeated complaint by students themselves is the lack of preparation given by GCSE for subsequent A Levels and the consequent steep learning curve experienced in the first year of the A Level course.

Alongside GCSE many vocational qualifications are offered to the 14 to 16 age group. 'Vocational Qualifications' have become both for individual students and institutions a means of achieving a respectable qualification 'score' as 'equivalences' with GCSE were established. Professor Alison Wolf's Report, accepted by the Government, showed that not all of these offered useful progression to further learning or a preparation for the workplace and called on them to be abandoned.



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