

Why do we need qualifications: a comparison between the US and the UK



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Please note that this is a personal view

The English System

- ❑ Qualifications-driven for post 14 year olds
- ❑ Almost all learners embark on programmes of study that culminate in qualifications
- ❑ An average of nine or 10 GCSE qualifications at age 16
- ❑ A levels, and/or vocationally related qualifications at age 18
- ❑ 9624 accredited qualifications on QMIS – thousands of which are approved for use by 14 to 19 year olds

UK – positive aspects

- ❑ National suites of qualifications are based on national standards – common, qualifications and subject/sector/skills criteria
- ❑ What learners are taught in London is pretty much the same as learners in Loughborough
- ❑ Comparability, reliability, standards over time, etc can be ascertained
- ❑ HEIs, employers can make certain assumptions about applicants

UK – negative aspects

- ❑ Qualification achievement becomes shorthand for school/college achievement
- ❑ Achievement and attainment points and tables based on qualifications, providing incentives for schools and colleges to enrol learners on qualifications that will gain maximum points
- ❑ All learners' abilities judged at age 16
- ❑ Post 16, only 'successful' students (five A* to Cs at GCSE) carry on in general education – everyone else pursues vocationally oriented learning
- ❑ Need for external judgements to validate learner achievement

The US system

- ❑ Curriculum-driven system
- ❑ Post 14 learners pursue a series of one year courses during their four years of high school
- ❑ Some of these courses are more challenging than others (honours courses) but they are not age related
- ❑ No qualifications at all, except for high school diploma
- ❑ SAT, ACT, AP provides some national measurement of achievement

US – positive aspects

- ❑ Learners can take the right course for them at any age
- ❑ No age 16 judgement point, i.e. less successful learners can still take history at age 17
- ❑ Learners can take a mix of general and vocational courses
- ❑ Teacher assessment is valued (some states also have state-wide assessment systems, e.g. New York)

US – negative aspects

- ❑ School accountability is more difficult to establish (some states/districts use standardised tests)
- ❑ Lack of consistency between states (hence the recent move toward establishing national subject standards)
- ❑ Large textbook companies can establish the curriculum
- ❑ Consistency, comparability, reliability, standards over time, etc difficult to establish
- ❑ HEIs and employers need to have a greater knowledge of individual states, districts and schools to inform decisions about applicants

Audience debate

- So ... which system is better?
- If you were going to design a perfect assessment system for 14 to 19 year olds what would it look like?