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Is the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) in England incongruous in the light of other jurisdictions' approaches to assessment?

Conference Paper Abstract

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Abstract

Educational policy makers consider their strategies and practice in the light of what other jurisdictions are doing; informed by results from international comparisons, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Trends in International Maths and Science Study (TIMSS), and by observation of teaching, learning and assessment practices worldwide. Those jurisdictions which perform strongly in international comparisons are often labelled 'high performing jurisdictions (HPJs)'. Cambridge Assessment has, during the past two years, investigated the existence, function and timing of high stakes assessment within education systems across many jurisdictions, including HPJs.

The General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) is an internationally recognised assessment taken by most students in England in 8-10 subjects at age 16+. Students also take A level assessments in 3-4 subjects at age 18+. Some other jurisdictions test only at 18+. In view of this, questions have arisen about whether carrying out such tests in England at age 16+ is incongruous in the light of other jurisdictions' approaches (e.g. Wilby, 2014).

This paper explores the strategies that Cambridge Assessment has used recently to select comparator jurisdictions systematically and analyse available data sources effectively. The results of the investigations are presented, illustrating that the GCSE is not incongruous, and that England's assessment structure is just one of a wide variety of different approaches taken.

Information has been sourced from major (inter)national comparative websites and documents including: the Eurydice website; the Classbase website (US); the Nuffic website (Netherlands) and the UCAS international qualifications publication. Wherever possible, information was triangulated from several of these sources. Ministry websites and other sources, such as published research articles, were used in addition to verify information.

Scrutiny of the structure of other jurisdictions' education systems was combined with details of assessments (both examination-based and formal teacher assessment). This resulted in

a summary table of assessments at the end of the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) level 2 for the jurisdictions from which information had been obtained.

Such work faces challenges and has its limitations. Firstly, the information extracted from the various comparative websites and from Ministry websites and other resources has been obtained in good faith, but its pedigree can be clouded. All the major comparative databases are managed by reputable organisations, but nothing is known of the many individuals who upload the detailed information into those databases; translation issues occasionally blur the detail of the explanations, and often the system does not quite fit into pre-set categories of description. As a result, some ambiguity in interpretation can occur.

Secondly, the information obtained in pursuit of this investigation is transient in nature, and can only exist as a snapshot in time. Jurisdictions are continuously seeking to change their system, and there is an ongoing exercise in updating the comparator websites.

Thirdly, defining and identifying high performing jurisdictions (HPJs) within this work has proved challenging. There are many jurisdictions which may be considered HPJs according to different criteria. A definition of **highest** performing jurisdictions was developed which resulted in a list of seven jurisdictions which met the definition in 2015/2016 - Hong Kong, Singapore, Finland, Australia, Japan, Chinese Taipei and South Korea (Elliott, 2016).

This poster presentation will provide a summary of our method and findings, as well as a discussion of the challenges and limitations inherent in this work.

References

Wilby, P. (2014). GCSEs are obsolete and have been for years. Let's scrap them. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/aug/22/gcse-obsolete-scrap-them-exams-at-16-no-function>

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