

How are GCSE grades used in post-16 admissions decisions in England?

Conference Abstract

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AEA-Europe conference, 1–4 November 2023

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How to cite this publication:

Walland, E., & Leech, T. (2023, November 1–4). *How are GCSE grades used in post-16 admissions decisions in England?* [Paper presentation]. Annual conference of the Association for Educational Assessment – Europe (AEA-Europe 2023), Malta.
<https://2023.aea-europe.net/>

In England, the fifth year of secondary education (when learners are 16) has historically been pivotal. At the end of this year, many students would leave compulsory education for employment, while others continued to further educational settings, for academic or vocational study. However, since the school leaving age has been increased to 18, some argue that GCSEs taken at age 16 are no longer necessary. Hence, recent policy discussion in assessment in England has included ideas such as the scrapping or streamlining GCSEs. The Independent Assessment Commission chaired by Louise Hayward suggested that “GCSEs need to change fundamentally” (Hayward, 2022), while a commission funded by the *Times* newspaper argued that at 16 it was only necessary to have examinations in five core subjects, including English language and mathematics (Sylvester, 2022). To determine the value of such suggestions of reform, we need to consider the roles played by GCSEs in the present system. We must consider whether these roles are desirable, and, if so, whether they could still be played by a reformed or abbreviated qualifications system at 16.

GCSEs play many roles and there has been research on many of them (see, for example, Opposs & He, 2011; Taylor, 2016). However, their role in selection for and admission to further study is under-explored. We therefore investigated the use of GCSE grades in admissions processes for post-16 education, including sixth form and further education colleges. This was with a view to deepening our understanding of the potential impacts of a reform to GCSE.

Our research study used multiple methods. We analysed, using a rigorous document analysis methodology (Gibson & Brown, 2009), online documentation published by 18 schools and colleges detailing their admissions processes. This included details of the typical GCSE-grade and other entry requirements for post-16 courses. We surveyed teachers at post-16 schools and colleges using an online survey platform called Recollective, with administration undertaken by exam board OCR. We posed a 14-item questionnaire to teachers, and we received 64 usable responses. The teachers we sampled worked in various subjects at sixth form colleges, further education colleges and schools with sixth forms, across different regions of England. Some were subject teachers and others department heads. We asked them to what extent and how GCSE grades were used in admissions processes in their schools and colleges, and for their views on this. In addition, we posed alternative scenarios to them, imagining that policy were to change such that a smaller number of GCSEs were to be sat, and asking whether they would still have enough information to make appropriate admissions decisions. Finally, we undertook follow-up interviews with nine teachers to gain further in-depth insight. We followed BERA ethical guidelines (British Educational Research Association [BERA], 2018) and the Cambridge University Press & Assessment Ethics policy. We analysed the closed questions using descriptive statistics, and the open-ended questions, interview transcripts and documents using thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This allowed us to understand the important role GCSEs play in admissions to post-16, and the potential impact on progression should GCSEs be reduced or scrapped.

We found that GCSEs play the central role in post-16 admissions, as selection is based primarily on academic factors. We analysed the various ways in which GCSE grades provide evidence of achievement, and the different factors that inform admissions decisions. We found that schools and colleges in our sample tended to have both institution-wide and subject-specific entry requirements, expressed primarily in terms of grades to achieve (rather than mean scores). We analysed the rationales for such requirements, which were that GCSEs were used to both *predict* which students would succeed at post-16, and *prepare* students for success at post-16.

The teachers in our sample valued external national examinations at age 16 for making post-16 admissions decisions. Teachers described to us the main advantage of a GCSE-grade-dominated admissions system as being that it offers a fair, objective and reliable basis for selection as it is built on national and standardised assessments. This was especially valuable in schools and colleges that were selecting from students from a variety of different previous schools, in which teacher assessment was perceived as inconsistent. Many teachers said that the experience of the pandemic had highlighted the perceived inadequacy of teacher-led assessment systems (at least for situations where the comparability of grades across contexts is important). In some subjects, especially the sciences, teachers regarded particular GCSE grades – such as grade 6s and 7s – as necessary to provide evidence that essential prior content knowledge had been learned by students for post-16 study. Many reiterated the value of ensuring that students were placed on post-16 courses and pathways appropriate to their ability, so they could succeed and progress to work or further study. However, concerns were raised about the wellbeing implications of high-stakes assessment at 16, as well as the potential drawback of missing students with undemonstrated potential. We highlight the importance of flexibility in admissions system in this regard. We expand on these findings and analyse the impact and consequences of the current use of GCSEs in selection to post-16. We also debate the potential impact on selection of changes to GCSEs. We discuss this in relation to the wider education system, framed by theories of the uses and purposes, impact and consequences of assessments (e.g., Newton, 2017).

Our study is limited due to its small scale and the nature of the questionnaire sample. There are also many areas of importance, such as teachers' wider views of GCSEs, that are out of scope. We highlight, nonetheless, at least one valuable role of GCSEs in the existing system. We hope to help ensure that future policy decisions are based on strong evidence, and that they take account of the opinions and experiences of teachers, and the multiple uses of GCSEs. While GCSEs are not beyond reproach, reducing or scrapping them could impact admissions and student progression in various ways. Any reform to the nature and volume of GCSEs would need to be carefully considered in relation to the purposes they fulfil, relationships between these purposes and the extent to which they can all be achieved, and their relationships to other areas of education.

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