

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*

Dr Ron McLone is the former Director General of Assessment at Cambridge Assessment, and former Chief Executive of OCR. Before that he was Chief Executive of the Midland Examining Group. He has also been a Chair of the Joint Council for Qualifications (an association of the largest Awarding Bodies in the UK), a member of the Sir Richard Sykes Review Group, and Chairman of Governors of Culford School in Bury St Edmunds.

Dr McLone joined Cambridge Assessment in 1985, and was responsible for several new developments such as the International GCSE, skill-based testing and modular schemes of assessment, as well as the inter-board research activity through IGRC and SRAC, for both of which he has been convenor. He was also responsible for UCLES/MEG Key Stage test development.

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.

He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, the Institute of Mathematics and its Applications and also of the Royal Meteorological Society.

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 14-19 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 14/16 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 16-18+ 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 2 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?

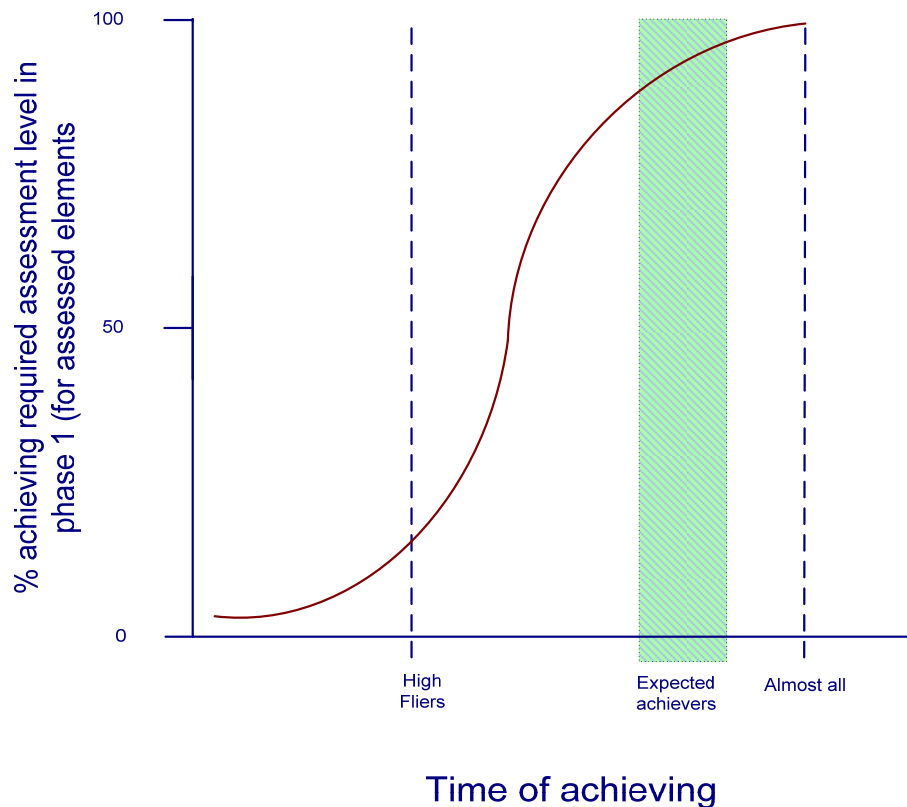
One of the constraints on a really flexible model which recognises the variability in progression across the whole cohort of students at any age is the year by year transition built into our school systems.

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.

Fig. 1 – Phase 1 Achievement



This shows a typical achievement curve by age for the “essential core” element. The shaded area on the horizontal axis gives an example of where “societal expectation” might lie. The question for debate is where an aged-related cut-off might lie – the shaded area should give a good indication for the start of Phase 2 (preferably at the right-hand end). A four year Phase 2 programme suggests this should be achieved by age 14 (Year 9).

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.

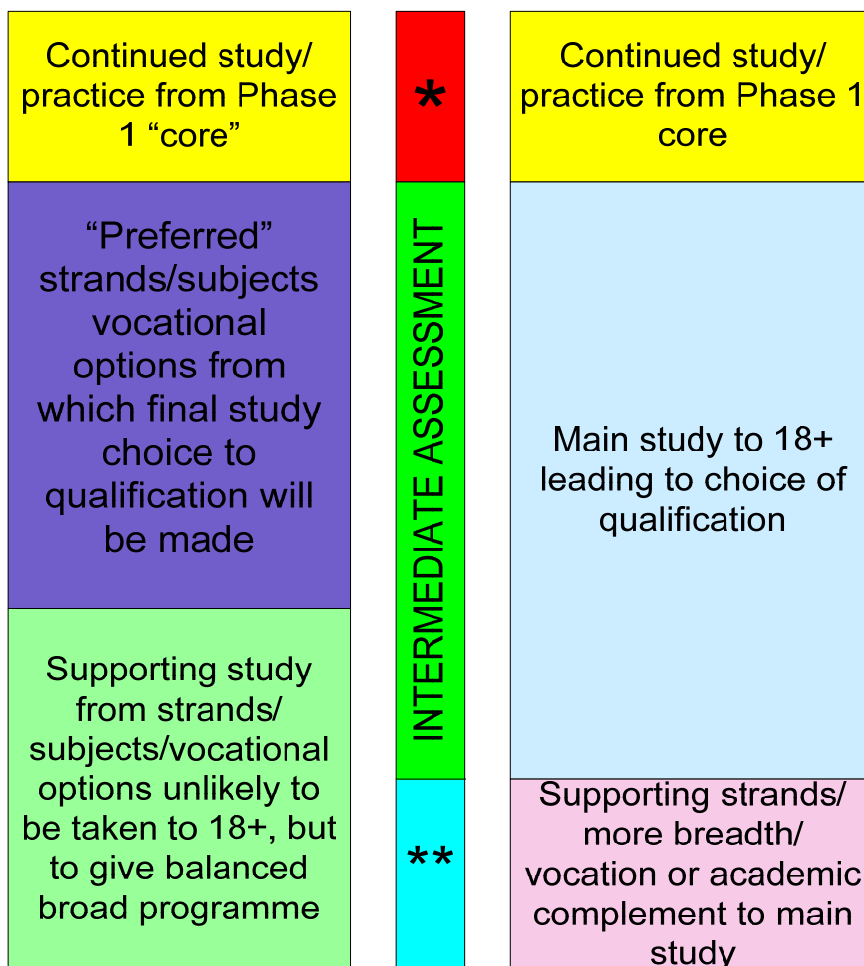
It is important that students should begin Phase 2 with a balanced programme covering a breadth of study, avoiding premature closing of pathways and allowing development of a range of skills as well as a breadth of knowledge. It should not be necessary to give incentives to teaching institutions to provide, 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 14-18 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+, 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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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 14-19 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.