

Pocket Watch: Education Committee report on GCSE reform

2013/13

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“We call on the Government to balance the pace of reform with the need to get it right”

Introduction

The pace let alone the extent of education reform is being keenly debated at present and the Education Committee has now added its thoughts with a [report](#) out today on some of the issues associated with the proposed shift from GCSEs to EBCs. It doesn't exactly call for the Government to postpone the changes but it does urge it to slow down, think a bit more about the effect and recognise that considerable risks are involved. The Secretary of State stressed in his evidence to the Committee before Christmas that he was keen to stick to his preferred timetable but did acknowledge that if, in his own words a red light flashed, he would take account of it. The question now is whether, as with A level reform, the red light has flashed clearly enough for brakes to be applied here as well

Report context

The reforms of GCSE are part of an extensive reform agenda intended to create 'a world class education system.' Much of this was signalled in the Dept's landmark White Paper of November 2010 but one of the Committee's concerns is that the changes proposed now are much more extensive than originally indicated. Also they are taking place without all the pieces of the jigsaw in place, the review of the National Curriculum for instance has yet to be completed while that on accountability has yet to start. Fundamental questions also remain about the longer term vision for 14-19 education and whether there should be exams at 16 at all

Headline messages

Apart from the pace of change, the Committee question a number of the key reform principles. First, the question about whether the GCSE is 'busted' or just needs repair. Some repairs are needed, most witnesses seem to agree that modularisation, controlled assessments, the resit culture, all need to be looked at but whether as the Dept put it 'a clean break with the past is needed' appears questionable. Second, what about other subjects such as the arts, D/T, RE, already the subject of considerable lobbying? Despite reassurances from Government, the Committee question whether 'it's possible to upgrade some subjects without implicitly downgrading others.' Third, providing for the under-achievers. The Committee express concerns that some of the mechanisms being adopted to 'raise the bar,' the removal of tiering and the adoption of terminal assessment for instance, could make things worse. Equally it has little faith in proposed Statements of Achievement. Fourth, is it a good idea to transform the exam system at the same time? The Committee think no and call for market reform to be decoupled from qualification reform. Fifth, will it all raise standards? The Committee say this needs 'careful management'

Some of the conclusions

- 'We have serious concerns about the Government's proposed timetable for change and about the risks of making fundamental changes to qualifications and the way they are administered at the same time'
- 'We have not received evidence that GCSEs are so discredited that a new qualification is required'
- 'We are very concerned about the potential impact of EBCs on subjects outside the EBC'
- 'We have serious concerns about how well the proposed reforms will serve lower attaining pupils'
- 'We recommend that that the Government re-considers its proposals for a Statement of Achievement'
- 'Changes to assessment and school accountability should only be implemented as part of a coherent review of Key Stage 4 education'
- 'We recommend that the Government states clearly what it sees as the essential purposes of qualifications and assessment at age 16'

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