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Pocket Watch – Bringing on GCSEs

Introduction

New GCSEs moved a step nearer last week with the release of a further round of Papers from both the DfE and Ofqual. They included the Dept's **response** to its summer consultation on subject content for the main EBacc subjects, an outline of what now to expect for English Lang, Lit and maths, the three new GCSEs due to be introduced from Sept 2015, and further development of **Ofqual's** design principles not just for these first three GCSEs but potentially others in due course, also following earlier consultation. There are still some who believe that an exam at age 16 let alone the GCSE itself should be replaced altogether and its certainly had its difficulties in recent years but these changes, as the Secretary of State told the House last week, are intended to ensure that these new GCSEs will be '*rigorous*' and '*robust*,' two words that have driven many of these reforms.

What are the main headlines?

Much of what's in these latest Papers will come as little surprise. This is partly because the direction of travel had been outlined by the Secretary of State in his letter to Ofqual earlier this year and followed up in consultations over the summer. And partly because there's been a string of announcements around GCSE recently, ranging from extra marks for spelling, punctuation and grammar and restrictions on resits both announced last year to the more recent changes for the reporting of Speaking and Listening in English and for early entry in GCSE generally, most of which are now incorporated into the reforms.

Two things that will certainly attract interest however are the decision to go for a nine point grading scale although we don't know what that will look like yet and won't at least until December when "*Ofqual will be publishing proposals for discussion.*" And secondly, the new, more demanding outcomes for maths which will require some careful planning by schools on the basis that they will need "*greater teaching time and greater testing time.*" One further point that stands out is just how much more is to come. Grading, standards maintenance and international benchmarking, new technical design rules, the position on non EBacc subjects, the case for allowing any other November resits, all require further development and/or consultation over the coming months before the new GCSE system is in place.

How are these first GCSEs shaping up?

At present what's been published is the outline content and assessment framework for each of the first new GCSEs: English Language, Literature and maths. The final specs for each will be ready by the end of 2014 for first teaching a year later. In each case, there are now "*higher expectations*" with the shift to endpoint assessment allowing for "*deeper and broader understanding.*" Schools will want to look at the details carefully particularly given the new accountability arrangements announced last month but this is how they look at present.

For English Language which covers reading and writing, the emphasis is on a critical appreciation of "*challenging*" texts taken from the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries, both literature and non-fiction, and on developing an ability to write clearly and effectively for different audiences and purposes. Standard English thus features prominently, the stronger emphasis on literature is to ensure coverage of Eng Lit for all, already an issue of some concern, while of course speaking and listening will be teacher assessed and reported separately.

For English Lit, which also covers reading and writing, the emphasis is on "*high-quality English literature,*" whole texts not bits of and defined here as including "*at least one Shakespeare play and one 19thc novel, a selection of poetry since 1789 including representative Romantic poetry, and fiction or drama from the British Isles from 1914 onwards.*" The aim is to encourage students to read widely and critically, hence analysis of form, structure and style feature prominently in the assessment objectives but it will be the emphasis on poetry and the

selection of texts, given that English will only be double weighted in the new Progress 8 accountability measure if students have taken Lit as well, that may attract most interest.

For maths, where the Government is keen to increase the amount of time allocated to it in schools as well as provide a platform for further study beyond 16, the emphasis is on securing what might be called the essentials of maths, namely fractions, decimals, algebra, ratio, measures and so on in the foundation tier and the more demanding aspects in the higher tier. Maths may be the subject that provides most headaches for schools not just because of how much has to now be covered but because of the emphasis on mastery and application: *"every pupil should be confident and competent in the basics of maths and as many pupils as possible should get to the 'pass' level by the age of 16."*

What about assessment and grading?

The big picture can be seen in Ofqual's 2013-2016 Corporate Plan with the more specific picture in this latest Paper from Ofqual's. Broadly this is how things now look.

- Overall approach. As indicated in its Corporate Plan, Ofqual will require each Awarding Organisation offering GCSEs to develop an accompanying assessment strategy setting out how it will *"ensure that assessments compare well with international counterparts and are designed to produce valid, reliable and comparable results."* The reference to international benchmarking remains an important feature
- Linear assessment. Most GCSE subjects will be assessed by final exam, indeed the principle of *'exams as the default method of assessment'* as originally prescribed for A level applies here as well. It means that for these first three subjects, maths will be assessed entirely by exam, English Language by exam but with speaking and listening marked by teachers and reported separately and with 20% of the exam mark given over to 'accurate' spelling punctuation and grammar (SPaG,) a figure regarded as too high by some in the consultation but which has remained nevertheless. English Lit will also be assessed by exam but with 5% of the marks given over to SPaG
- Grading. As yet just a nine point scale has been proposed with development work under way and consultation to follow. Ofqual is not underestimating how difficult this might be, calling it *"our next big piece of work."* It's looking for a 'big conversation' with key stakeholders
- Tiering. Stricter rules will apply here with tiering only permitted where *"one exam cannot assess students across the full ability range."* For the future, tiering will be considered on a subject by subject basis but for these first three GCSEs, the position is that it will remain for maths but not for either of the two English subjects. Different models of tiering were considered in the light of the consultation and some thought was given to whether there should actually be two maths GCSEs rather than one given the volume of content required. In the event we have one but with a different overlap between the tiers. The foundation tier will cover grades 1-5 and the higher tier grades 4-9
- Resits. As previously announced, exams will take place in the summer with November resits reserved for English Language and Maths only and for students who are aged at least 16 on the preceding 31st of August



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