

2013/14

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Policy Watch – How Key Stage 4 looks now

Introduction

So 'new' GCSEs rather than EBCs it is then with the emphasis heavily on the 'new.' The EBacc, not to be confused with the English Bacc Certificates (EBCs), remains as a headline measure in the also new accountability system but that's as far as EBC developments go at present.

Whether it was a case of red mist or the red warning lights signalled in the critical *'too far, too fast'* Report from the Education Committee ten days ago, the Secretary of State has acceded to the growing chorus of criticism and backed down from replacing the GCSE by the EBC. The *"bridge too far,"* as he described it was the attempt to transform the exam system at the same time as the qualification system. Warning lights about the possible risks involved in such a double whammy had been pressed by the regulator before Christmas and reinforced in the Committee's Report recently so it's back to current workings here as well, although with Ofqual given a clear watching brief and the operation of the exam system remaining under scrutiny.

It means attention now switches to getting the 'new' GCSE ready for first teaching in core subjects at least by September 2015. Throughout the consultation on changes to Key Stage 4, summary responses of which were also released this week, the point was made that the GCSE was in need of repair rather than removal. In his accompanying letter to Ofqual explaining the changes, the Secretary of State mentioned the need to reform the GCSE three times in his opening two paragraphs variously prefacing it as *'urgent,' 'comprehensive'* and *'significant.'* This is therefore clearly the priority. But it won't stop there for also released at the same time was an update on the changes to the National Curriculum and an important new consultation on secondary school accountability. With changes announced to AS/A levels just the other day and to apprenticeships and 16-19 Programmes of Study last year, it seems that at last the shape of the school curriculum, so grandly set out in that seminal White Paper two and a half years ago, is beginning to come together.

This is how things look following the latest announcements.

The National Curriculum

First drafts of the core specs at Key Stages 1 and 2 were released last summer but since then the attention has rather been on the EBC/GCSE developments. With confirmation that the Government hopes to get full specs out this autumn ready for implementation in English, maths and science from Sept 2014, this latest swirl of papers containing consultation on some of the reforming principles behind the changes to the National Curriculum and on proposed Programmes of Study for Key Stages 1, 2 and 3 as well as first sight of Key Stage 4 Programmes, (formal consultation on these will follow once the position on the 'new' GCSEs is clear,) jacks up the pace again.

The broad intent behind the reform of the National Curriculum remains the same, namely slimmed down specs, a sharper focus on knowledge requirements, single statements of attainment, increased levels of school autonomy and removal of what the Secretary of State melliflously described in a keynote speech this week as *"the rhetorical afflatus, prolix explanatory notes and inexplicable level criteria"* that he claims has gone with it.

Specific details at a subject level can be found in the various subject drafts but essentially the structure of the National Curriculum remains the same with all current National Curriculum subjects retained at both primary and secondary level though with foreign languages added as a foundation subject at Key Stage 2 and ICT shifting to computing, pending consultation in both cases. Finally, in a bid to ease the transition to the reformed curriculum, schools will be able to disapply some aspects from this September. Schools will still have to teach the required subjects

but in certain areas will be able to apply their own content and approaches. This applies to both primary and secondary schools in various guises, details in Section 12 of the consultation.

GCSE

A number of changes included in the Secretary of State's announcements such as the adoption of a linear mode, are already under way while others such as formats for dealing with tiering and grading continue to be debated. The main ingredients of what was said are that: the GCSE remains multi-functional, a qualification for all abilities so no two tier or Statements of Achievement; specs and exam questions are to be more '*challenging*'; and the use of internal assessment and exam aids curtailed.

A shopping list of the changes proposed which Ofqual will be taking forward and consulting on "*as soon as possible*" includes the following:

- 'New' GCSEs to be the same size and appropriate for the same proportion of pupils as currently
- Qualifications to be linear and to be offered by Awarding Organisations as currently
- Internal assessment kept to a minimum, "*used only where there is a compelling case to do so*"
- Exam aids such as calculators to be '*restricted*'
- Tiering to be avoided in favour of flexible forms of assessment such as extension papers
- New grading scale to be considered
- English to include both Language and Literature but not a combined option, science to include a combined option worth 2 GCSEs but not one worth one GCSE
- The benefits of additional feedback material for pupils in English and maths to be considered especially to support transition to post-16 learning
- A post-season review to be considered similar to that proposed for A levels

Accountability

Underlying the changes outlined above will be a revised accountability system aimed at secondary schools, designed to remove some of the perverse incentives of the current system and developed to ensure that schools deliver on the new, more challenging curriculum. Aspects such as floor targets remain and will be subject to further information later but the key feature is the shift away from a narrow focus on set subjects and set pupils towards recognising and incentivising progress for all through an '*average point score measure*' across eight subjects. Details are set out in an accompanying consultation but in headline form are as follows:

- The development of a new School Performance Data Portal, to be available from 2015 and to be an open access repository for a wide range of school performance data
- The introduction of a new threshold measure, potentially to be included in future floor targets, and to highlight the % of pupils achieving English/maths required standards
- The introduction of a wider attainment measure based on each pupil's average score across eight qualifications that constitute English/maths, any combination of three other EBacc subjects and three other 'high value' subjects either recognised academic or vocational subjects. In addition, this measure to include a progress rating identifying a pupil's progress between Key Stages 2 and 4 in such subjects allowing progress measurement against national performance levels
- The potential introduction of national sampling testing, modelled on current international benchmarking applications such as PISA tests and focused on English, maths and science
- Other: the ending of reporting of Key Stage 3 result data to the Dept, instead this would feed into the new Portal; continuation of performance reporting through league tables of disadvantaged pupils such as those in receipt of the pupil premium; consideration of other headline measures

Steve Besley

Head of Policy (UK and International)

Pearson Think Tank

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