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Pocket Watch – Making sense of the GCSE reforms

Introduction

This week saw the latest stage in the protracted programme of reform for GCSE as two sets of **consultation** were launched, one from the DfE on proposed specs and assessment objectives for the first batch of new styled GCSEs and the other from the regulator Ofqual on proposed design and assessment principles. The proposals, for England only at present, at least stick with the name GCSE but do include plenty of other changes to help create the world class qualification system for young people that the Education Secretary craves.

The aim is to have things in place for first teaching in '*the core academic subjects*' at least from Sept 2015 which will mean some rapid footwork this autumn to allow for the consideration of a number of other technical consultations yet to be conducted. It will also mean that new GCSEs will be introduced at the same time as the first batch of new A levels which explains the sharp intakes of breath evident in some of the initial reactions.

Context

The consultations bring to a head a reform programme that started back in November 2010 with the launch of the landmark Schools White Paper, took in a diversion last year in the shape of English Bacc Certificates and eventually settled earlier this year on new style GCSEs.

There have been plenty of ups and downs along the way but through it all the Education Secretary has remained constant in his belief that the GCSE system in its current form needed changing. An unloved member of the qualification family for some time perhaps, Michael Gove's criticisms of it, some of which were repeated in his Statement to the House this week, pretty much boil down to one word: rigour, or rather a lack of. Resits, modules, coursework, specs, qualification design, all have come under the spotlight and for many were compounded in last year's problems with English, incidentally given a final airing in a Report issued by the Education Committee on the eve of these latest announcements.

So now we move towards new style GCSEs, more like O' levels according to some, more fulfilling and valuable for young people according to the Education Secretary. The journey takes us up to summer 2018 when the last of the new GCSEs will be examined for the first time and the new aspirational system that the Prime Minister enthused about recently is fully in place.

So what are these so-called new GCSEs like?

A number of the more technical aspects such as the conversion to the new grading scale and the format for differentiated assessment have yet to be determined but essentially four new features mark out these new style GCSEs.

1. **More demanding specs.** Details of these can be found in the various consultations released by the Dept setting out the proposed content and assessment objectives for the first wave of new GCSEs due to start in Sept 2015. These include Eng Lang and Lit, maths, the sciences, geography and history and, at this stage, ancient and modern languages although these come in a year later. The Education Secretary has argued for some time that the current specs were not challenging enough and has highlighted international benchmarking evidence to support his case. In his accompanying Statement, he gave further examples of what he was looking for: 'more extended writing in English and history; more challenging mechanics problems in physics; a stronger focus on evolution and genetics in biology; and a greater focus on composition in foreign languages.' Subject content has been fiercely argued over as the new National Curriculum has taken shape and further such debate seems likely this summer as subject experts chew over the details

2. **A new assessment structure.** This has been trailed for some time and indeed some of the features such as a shift towards linear assessment and the introduction of marks for spelling, punctuation and grammar in some subjects, have already been introduced. Further details can be found in Ofqual's regulatory consultation and in particular page 36 which contains a good summary of what's being proposed. In essence, linearity will remain but with a synoptic aspect, assessments will be held in May and June only, although November resits would be permitted for Eng Lang and maths, courses would run for two years, and assessments would typically consist of 3.0 or 3.5 hour exams depending on whether any 'practical' assessment was to be included as in sciences, meaning that for these first subjects at least, the virtual removal of controlled assessments
3. **A new grading system.** One of the more challenging aspects of the changes, for which again details can be found in the Ofqual Paper. Apparently there is no one commonly accepted best system but most countries use one that has four to six grades. The issue, however, is whether grades, marks, scores, percentages should be used to reflect achievement, each has its pluses and minuses for use in reporting. The preference is to retain a grading system but using numbers, eight down to one and to conduct further consultation on how best to reflect finer levels of achievement. The current system for example, offers more discrimination at the lower than the higher end and the Education Secretary is keen to ensure higher achievement is better incentivised and reported. As for providing more detailed information about individual student performance, Ofqual believe this is not the time
4. **A stricter regulatory framework.** Details on this can be found in both the DfE and Ofqual Papers and point to stricter but more strategic regulatory arrangements. For example, Ofqual will prescribe minimum amounts of assessment time, use international expertise to review the setting of exam questions, require each awarding organisation to come up with a clear assessment strategy for GCSEs, develop an annual overview process and review where best to use any tiering

Initial Issues

- Universality. The aim is for a qualification to be taken by as many pupils as currently but more challenging specs may limit the intended target group
- Big bang. Introducing new GCSEs and new A levels, let alone a revised National Curriculum in one go can be challenging and risk creating instability
- Confusion. Under current proposals, pupils in different parts of the UK would end up taking different types of GCSE and even in the UK in 2015, Yr 7 and Yr 8 pupils would be taking different versions
- Loose ends. A number of critical issues including permissible tiering and grading require further development
- Accountability. What alignment is there to the new accountability arrangements?
- Support. Previous reform programmes of similar magnitude were backed up by extensive teacher support programmes, what is available this time?

Next Steps

- 20 August. Consultation closes on DfE released draft subjects specs
- 3 September. Consultation closes on Ofqual's draft regulatory criteria
- September 2014. Revised GCSEs in 9 subjects in schools/colleges
- September 2015. First teaching of 9 new GCSEs
- June 2017. First examination of the 9 new GCSEs



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Reforming GCSEs June 2013