

2013/36

16 May 2013

## Pocket Watch – Some big exam questions

### Introduction

The current wave of qualification reform has inevitably raised a number of issues. The nature of some of the specifications, how and even who wrote them, best models of testing and assessment, the impact on different ability levels of students, the sheer volume of change, all have been hotly debated but arguably three particular issues, listed below, have provoked the strongest debate. Each was raised with the Education Secretary when he came before the Education Committee again this week. None is particularly new, tiering or at least differentiation has been debated ever since GCSEs were first designed years ago, Ofqual signalled last year it was on the case about GCSE grading while A level reform featured in the DfE's seminal 2010 White Paper. Michael Gove believes reform in all three areas will enhance his current reforms

### Tiering

In launching his proposals for reform of GCSE earlier this year, Michael Gove called for an end to tiering in exams citing concerns it limited aspiration and de-motivated learners. His preference was for the development of core and extension papers. Tiering which allows for different levels of exam to be achieved within one overall qualification is more popular in some subjects than others, maths as opposed to history for example but does raise serious questions about exam design and equity of opportunity. Evidence, however, about the impact of tiering, positive or negative, remains hard to disaggregate and the Secretary of State seems to have accepted advice that some form of tiering, perhaps separate papers may be 'appropriate' in some subject areas. For the moment, work continues to determine best subject fit

### GCSE grading

Lettered grades or numerical scores, that seems to be the question at present. Issues with the current grading system have been debated for some time, for example about how far it signals differentiation, whether it reinforces the C grade default line and how effectively it provides for comparability of standards. Of course any change in reporting structures would have an impact on standards measurement over time but given impending changes to both GCSEs and accountability arrangements perhaps now is the time to re-consider. In his responses to the Education Committee this week, Michael Gove expressed interest in a numbering system perhaps running from 1-15 allowing for finer differentiation of the highest performance levels. Much now depends on advice from the regulator this summer

### AS standalone

The proposal to decouple the AS level from the A level from 2015 announced earlier this year provoked strong feelings and just a week ago, Labour confirmed that it would revoke the decision. The Government's argument, re-iterated in a Westminster debate in April, was that the current AS added to the exam burden on young people, prevented them from spending time developing deeper knowledge and wasn't used by many universities as an entry tool anyway. That has been disputed and this week the Schools Minister wrote to his opposite number to substantiate the claim that GCSE is a better HE predictor than AS. Cambridge university beg to differ and so the debate goes on with the Government sticking with its pledge "to develop (in the long-term) a brand new AS at the same level of challenge as a full A level"

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