

GCSEs and A Levels continue to be trusted qualifications

Whilst the levels of trust in GCSEs and A Levels remains high, Ofqual's annual [qualifications perceptions survey](#) highlights areas where communications to everyone who has an interest in the education system need to be enhanced.

The survey which interviewed over 3000 people including school heads, teachers, parents, students, the general public, employers and higher education institutions in England, aimed to investigate the overall perceptions and confidence in A Levels, GCSEs and other academic and vocational qualifications delivered in schools.

Headteachers continue to see GCSEs and A Levels as trusted qualifications. GCSEs are seen by all groups to develop a broad range of skills for students and are good preparation for further study whilst overall, A Levels are seen by those involved in higher education, teachers and employers as good preparation for higher study. Although exam reform is welcomed by respondents,

many believe there has been too much change too quickly, with a particular lack of clarity around the new 9 – 1 grading system for GCSEs and a mixed response on the de-coupling of A and AS Levels.

Young people do not consider Level 3 vocational qualifications as equivalent in challenge to A Levels or to be perceived as valued as highly - but this view is not consistently held by all other groups.

A majority of respondents agreed that Ofqual was too close to the government.

In a further move to increase confidence in the exam system, Ofqual has [announced plans](#) to introduce "publishable marking metrics" that will demonstrate the quality of exam boards' assessment processes. Details of how accurately exam boards mark GCSE and A Level papers will be published from 2017.

Government pushes Ebacc for all

Nick Gibb has set out the government's plans to reinforce the importance of a core academic curriculum for all pupils in order to strengthen academic standards. In a recent speech given by the Schools Minister - *The social justice case for an academic curriculum* - Nick Gibb reported on the steps already underway to achieve this challenge:

- Reforming GCSEs and A Levels so that they are more rigorous
- Improving standards of mathematics by supporting schools to adopt the proven mastery approach to teaching maths
- Working with teachers and publishers to increase the use and availability of high-quality textbooks in schools.

He also outlined the government's next steps: "In due course, we will also set out details of our expectation that secondary school pupils should take English Baccalaureate subjects* at age 16. In doing so, we will listen closely to the views of teachers, head teachers, and parents on how best to implement this commitment. And we will ensure that schools have adequate lead-in time to prepare for any major changes."

Nicky Morgan, the Education Secretary, has also reinforced the Ebacc message, stating that pupils starting secondary school this September (and taking GCSEs in summer 2020) must study Ebacc subjects.

*English Baccalaureate subjects: English, mathematics, history or geography, the sciences (from biology, chemistry, computer science, physics, core and additional science, science double award), a language.

What is a good GCSE pass?

The Secretary of State for Education has also announced that, for reformed GCSEs, a "good pass" - currently a C grade - will become a grade 5 under the new 9-1 scale. The new "good pass" is comparable to a high C or low B under the current GCSE system. Nicky Morgan believes that this will make the achievement comparable to the standard aimed for by pupils in other top-performing countries.

For an opportunity to comment on this announcement, visit the latest blog *What's half of 9?* on the [OCR website](#).

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2017 GCSE, AS and A Level reform subjects confirmed

Following a [review](#), Ofqual has decided that reformed content could be developed for first teaching in September 2017 in four further GCSE, AS and A Level subjects, but adds that there is no certainty that it will prove possible to develop content that meets its principles. This means there is a possibility that some of the subjects being taken forward at this stage by exam boards may not be reformed for 2017. The confirmed qualifications are:

- GCSE geology
- AS and A Level creative writing
- AS and A Level health and social care
- AS and A Level music technology.

Ofqual does not have sufficient confidence that content could be developed to meet its principles in the following qualifications, but does not rule out the possibility that these may be offered at some point in the future:

- GCSE environmental and land-based science
- GCSE health and social care
- GCSE home economics: child development
- AS and A Level international development.

The future of other qualifications for 2017, such as lesser-taught languages, is subject to continuing stakeholder engagement and further input from the regulator and the new government.

For clarification, the last assessment opportunity for most qualifications that will not be reformed for 2017 is summer 2018. The last assessment opportunity for a number of qualifications which are listed as not available for teaching from September 2016 is summer 2017.

OCR's A Levels in applied business, applied art and design, and human biology are listed in Ofqual's review as not available for teaching from September 2015. OCR has decided to make these qualifications available to schools and colleges that already offer them for an additional year, so they will be available for teaching in September 2015, with the last assessment opportunity in summer 2017.

A timeline for the phasing of all reformed qualifications is available on the [OCR website](#).

Teachers to undertake GCSE English spoken language assessments

Ofqual has announced how the new GCSE English spoken language assessments will be conducted, assessed and graded:

- Spoken language assessments will be assessed by teachers.
- There will be three levels of achievement, *Pass*, *Merit* and *Distinction*, and *Not Classified*, which will indicate the required standard was not met.
- A student must meet all of the criteria in relation to a level to be awarded that level.
- Exam boards will monitor the assessment of spoken language where this is undertaken by teachers by requiring schools to submit audio-visual recordings of a sample of their students.

Ofqual is now consulting on [proposals](#) for:

- schools to provide a written statement indicating that they have taken reasonable steps to ensure that their students have undertaken the spoken language assessment
- all outcomes to be reported on certificates, including *Not Classified*
- the rules and guidance needed to put in place Ofqual's decisions.

Statistical evidence shows links between gender and subject choice

For the first time, a single source of data shows that a significantly unequal numbers of boys and girls progress from year 11 to AS and then to A Level in certain subjects like Physics, Psychology, Sociology, English and Economics.

In its recent short research [report on A Level subject take up](#), Ofsted provides data on the numbers and proportions of girls and boys that progress from year 11 to AS and then to A Level. The report will enable schools to compare their own performance against the national picture.

In a similar [study](#) exploring the links between gender and

subject choice, the Institute of Physics calls for:

- School accountability measures to include an indicator of gender imbalance in progression to A Level and other post-16 qualifications
- Ofsted to require schools to monitor and counter gender imbalance in progression, participation and achievement
- Schools to reflect on their own statistics and put in place whole-school measures to counter gender stereotyping.

Exam data shows decline in GCSE entries

Ofqual's [statistical release](#) for Summer 2015 exam entries in GCSEs, Level 1/2 certificates, AS and A Levels in England, shows that the overall entry for GCSEs in England has decreased from 2014 to 2015 from 5,085,000 to 4,916,000. Other key findings include:

- the overall entry for students in year 10 and below for GCSE has decreased by 32%, from 504,000 to 344,000; one notable exception is computing where the entry increased by 83%
- the year 11 entry in most individual EBacc GCSE subjects has decreased including in English, English language, biology, chemistry, physics and German, ranging from 3% to 14%, whereas there were some significant increases in equivalent subjects for Level 1/2 certificates (commonly known as IGCSEs), ranging from 78% to 447%, but overall total entries for all the EBacc subjects has increased
- overall entries for AS in England have decreased by 1%, while overall A Level entries have increased by 1%
- Computing and Spanish both saw large increases at AS and A Level.

Plea for new government to promote creative subjects in schools alongside STEM

Britain's top scientists and engineers are calling on the government to give arts education equal status to science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

This joint [initiative](#) launched by the Creative Industries Federation - the national body representing the creative industries, public arts and cultural education – and the Institution of Civil Engineers, is backed by research showing that more than a third of Civil Engineers considered for a top-ranking scholarship studied a creative or design subject to AS/A Level and 35% play a musical instrument, yet only one in a dozen students in

England combine arts and science disciplines at AS.

The report argues that creative subjects like the performing arts, design, music and film studies should not be excluded in favour of STEM subjects and are asking universities to review their selection criteria to “positively encourage a mixed portfolio of qualifications” at GCSE and A/AS Level.

The research also showed that, for a large majority of the Creative Industries Federation's members, education is the greatest policy concern.

Judge schools on a five-year picture

Schools should be judged by their results over a period of at least five years rather than condemned by one year's performance, says Cambridge Assessment. The [study](#) suggests that once the impact of things such as reliability of marking are removed, significant volatility still exists. The study shows quite clearly that exam results in a school may go up or down in unanticipated ways, caused by a wide and complex set of factors.

Researcher Tom Bramley provides clarification behind the study results: “When swings occur they could be because of what is happening in the school or the children's lives,

they could be to do with the assessment itself or the way that national standards are applied, or to do with teaching and learning. But what our study shows is that when we've taken account of the variations which can be attributed to quality of marking and to the location of grade boundaries, surprisingly high levels of year-on-year volatility in exam results remain.”

Group Director of Assessment Research and Development, Tim Oates, says this has implications for the current approach to school accountability and for accountability measurements.

Trustees required for new College of Teaching

The recruitment of a founding board marks a major milestone in making the new College of Teaching a reality. The Claim Your College coalition is currently seeking to appoint the 13 founding trustees of the new College.

The founding board will be tasked with establishing a professional body that can deliver the broad vision set out for the College of Teaching and create a membership offer that will attract the critical mass of members needed to be sustainable.

The role of trustee, which is a voluntary position, offers the opportunity to play a key leadership and governance role in the creation of a professional body that will have a profound and positive impact on the teaching profession and, ultimately, on the lives of learners. Further information can be found on the [Trustees website](#).

Character education initiatives grow

A new report calls for the new Government to formally embed character education in England's school curriculum, and reform Ofsted to capture students' participation in civic and community activities on an equal par with attainment measures.

Character Nation from Demos, published in partnership with the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues at the University of Birmingham, calls for 'character' to be permanently embedded in the UK's educational curriculum – to ensure the next generation of school graduates are equipped with the social and professional skills critical for them to become successful and civic-minded individuals in their adult life.

Evidence shows that character skills and virtues are important for securing higher educational achievement, good jobs, living healthy lives and contributing to society. Education Secretary, Nicky Morgan, has also announced

details of projects being funded to build character and resilience in pupils. The Government is funding 14 professional rugby clubs to design and deliver programmes to use the sport's ethos of discipline and respect to help to develop character in pupils. The scheme will reach more than 17,000 pupils in schools across the country, as well as providing an intensive 33-week training course for almost 500 young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET).

Other organisations which will receive funding under the character grants scheme include:

- the St John Ambulance, which will work with 100,000 pupils to develop resilient and confident young first aiders
- the PSHE Association, which will develop and pilot a PSHE character curriculum to foster positive character traits in pupils.

Benefits of vocational qualifications confirmed

"All types and levels of vocational qualifications are associated with increased likelihood of being in employment, with a significant wage return for all levels and most types of vocational qualification." This is just one of the positive messages coming out of the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) [literature review of vocational qualifications](#) commissioned by the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) in to the value of vocational qualifications offered in the UK by JCQ members (OCR, AQA, City and Guilds, Pearson, CCEA, WJEC and SQA).

The review, which was carried out from February to April 2015, focused on young people aged 14-25 and identified benefits for all stakeholders in young people taking vocational qualifications:

- Learners: increased likelihood of being in employment and a significant wage return for all levels and most types of vocational qualifications. Increased access to higher education for the poorest learners.
- Businesses: increased productivity and a more skilled workforce.
- Economy: a positive financial return for most qualifications, with particularly high returns associated with Level 3. A reduction in benefit dependency and increase in income tax.

Returns are highest and more long-term for those who achieve a Level 3 or higher – this suggests that young people should be encouraged and supported to progress from lower level qualifications on to further, higher levels of learning.

Membership body for FE and skills sector launched

The new FE sector professional body – the [Society for Education and Training](#) – has been launched. Run by the Education and Training foundation (ETF), it aims to promote the professionalism of FE sector staff and make sure they are recognised for their expertise.

The new professional membership service has been designed to:

- reflect members' needs
- support their professional development and career progression
- equip practitioners with the tools to be excellent in

their practice, improving outcomes for learners and employers

- enable members to network with peers to share knowledge and debate the issues that matters to them as teachers and trainers.

Further benefits of the non-compulsory membership are expected to be announced in the coming months, with a chair, chief executive and board members in place by autumn. The aim is to get 35,000 members in the next 3 years.

Government sets out education and skills priorities for new Parliament

With David Cameron back in 10 Downing Street, it is clear that education reform will continue. Perhaps, with the Prime Minister having already said that he will not fight the 2020 election, reform may even gather pace in an effort to “finish the job” before he departs.

Opening the new Parliament on 27 May, the Queen’s Speech contained 21 Bills, three of which will directly affect education and skills. They are:

Education and Adoption Bill

The Education and Adoption Bill will give extra controls to regional school commissioners to bring in “leadership support” from other high-achieving schools and to “speed up the process of turning schools into academies”.

“Barriers would be removed” for schools that are rated as “inadequate” by inspectors for a rapid conversion into an academy.

The emphasis so far has been on “coasting schools”. These are schools which are described as having “mediocre performance” and “insufficient pupil progress”, but an explicit definition of what constitutes a coasting school is yet to be clarified.

Full Employment and Welfare Benefits Bill

The Bill will put new requirements on Ministers to report annually on employment and apprenticeships. This comes on the back of the Government stating that it will increase the number of apprenticeships to 3 million by 2020.

It also outlines some of the measures the Government will be taking to meet its deficit reduction target of £12 billion from welfare costs. Those we know of include a cap on benefits and requiring unemployed 18-21 year olds to “earn or learn”. This will take the form of a new Youth Allowance for 18-21 year olds, which will require claimants to take up an apprenticeship, training or community work placement.

Cities and Local Government Devolution Bill

This is the Government’s major drive for devolution. The Bill contains a strong push for local control of skills which will build on City Growth Deals. The Bill will grant generic powers to any elected mayor in a combined authority of councils in major English cities and will give “greater local control” of transport, housing, skills and healthcare to cities with elected metro mayors.

The plan for devolution to city regions would start in Greater Manchester.

No major reshuffle for new Cameron Government

The Conservative victory in the general election has meant that there have been very few Ministerial changes.

Nicky Morgan MP continues as Secretary of State for Education with the two Nicks – Gibb and Boles - continuing to serve as Schools Minister and Skills Minister respectively in her Department. Nick Boles continues to have responsibility across both DfE and BIS for Further Education.

The biggest change comes in the form of new Business Secretary, Sajid Jhavid MP. Son of a London bus driver, Sajid has been the MP for Bromsgrove since 2010. His new post will combine the skills acquired from his previous ministerial posts at the Treasury and as private secretary to the then Skills Minister, John Hayes MP. His department’s budget is not protected and big spending cuts, some of which will be borne by FE, will be required if the government is going to meet its deficit reduction target by the end of this Parliament.

Neil Carmichael MP has been appointed as the new Chair of the Education Select Committee, taking over from Graham Stuart.

Apprenticeship Taskforce established

A new taskforce of eight MPs has been established to assist the Government reach its 3 million apprenticeship starts target by the next Parliament. The “earn or learn” taskforce will be chaired by former Skills Minister, Matthew Hancock, and includes amongst its members current Skills Minister, Nick Boles, Secretary of State for Education Nicky Morgan, and Work and Pensions Secretary Iain Duncan Smith. Included in the taskforce’s remit will be ensuring that all young people are either earning or learning, and helping businesses create two million new jobs to achieve full employment.

The taskforce is one of ten new groups established to track policy performance from immigration to childcare. Each group will be looking at whether policy is being followed through and tracking the progress of new measure in that space.

The Government has also appointed Richard Harrington MP as an apprenticeships adviser to the Prime Minister.

Reformed grading: impacts for NI schools

The Northern Ireland Department of Education has opened a consultation on GCSE grading in NI schools.

This consultation is intended to seek views on a potential change of grading from the current alphabetic grades A* to G, to numeric grades 9 to 1 for GCSE specifications produced by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA).

An open qualifications market operates in NI. This means that GCSEs developed for use in England and Wales are available for use in NI schools. It is important, therefore, that full consideration is given to any impact that the GCSE grading changes in England might have on schools and/or pupils in NI.

The Last Word

Paul Steer, Head of Policy and Public Affairs, comments on some of the issues featured in this issue.

The latest Ofqual perceptions survey confirms that GCSEs and A Levels continue to attract strong public trust. They are highly valued brands, deeply embedded in our psyche and encapsulate an understanding of our education system and people retain a sense of their purpose and fundamental design. This robustness shouldn't be taken for granted, though, with signs of concern over the pace and nature of current reforms.

The new grading system for GCSEs will take some explaining, not least the definition of grade 5 as a good pass, which will have a significant impact on pass rates. The decoupling of AS is not a trivial change either and it will take time before this is widely recognised.

All of the reforms will require careful explanation, reassurance and transparency, not least because the days when things were simply taken on trust and public institutions were relatively free from close scrutiny are long gone. We have seen for example how young people have used social media to challenge and debate questions in this summer's exam papers. It is important that the exam boards and the regulator respond to this sort of scrutiny with openness and transparency. OCR has taken steps to shine light on the exam process with a series of illuminating guides aimed at young people which are available on [our website](#).

In this spirit we must also welcome Ofqual's proposals to publish metrics on quality of marking, and the boards should be vocal about the processes they have in place to secure and improve the quality assurance of marking and the important role teachers can play as highly trained and professional examiners.

There are always dangers, of course, that public debate can lead to an oversimplification of issues and it is important that we take every opportunity to explain that which is more nuanced and complex. We must be robust in explaining why exam papers contain some

highly challenging questions and, indeed, surprisingly simple ones. Any metrics on quality of marking must point out wider issues, such as volatility, as described in Cambridge Assessment's fascinating [research](#) which highlights how candidates simply don't always perform on the day quite as expected.

Whereas, public awareness and trust in general qualifications overall remains high, it is dismaying that Ofqual's report shows that the same levels of regard are not held for vocational qualifications. Young people themselves, we learn, regard Level 3 vocational qualifications as inferior to A Levels. There are many deep-seated cultural reasons for this, but one factor, surely, is that VQs simply haven't had the same kind of enduring stability associated with general qualifications. The names have changed over the years almost as frequently as Secretaries of State. Hopefully, the reforms introduced as a result of Baroness Wolf's report on vocational education will prove more enduring than other ill-fated attempts to impose order and clarity in this complex area. This is important not least because the recent [JCQ report](#) highlights the value of vocational qualifications both to the economy and the people who achieve them.

There is a risk, however, that with poor advice and guidance pushing people into wrong choices, government policies focussed on a binary system of A Levels and Apprenticeships and the sort of signals sent by the introduction of the 'compulsory Ebacc', that vocational qualifications stay out of the limelight. Quality vocational qualifications, such as Cambridge Nationals and Cambridge Technicals, can lead into technical and professional careers and a pipeline into higher education and apprenticeships. Following the Queen's speech, it is clear that funding will be tight, especially in the Further Education sector, but we cannot afford to continue to overlook the importance of vocational qualifications.