



# The exam question

## *Changing the model of assessment reform*

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### Introduction

The question of whether exams taken at 16 and 18 in England are effective and proportionate is a vexed one. Secondary assessment in the highly centralised English system is particularly high stakes and multi-purposed – being used to test young people’s understanding of the national curriculum, provide the basis for their further and higher education applications and hold the schools they attend accountable for performance. Disruption during the pandemic has only heightened concerns about the fairness and practicality of the system, with many politicians and sections of the media calling for wholesale reform.

While GCSEs and A-levels are certainly imperfect, the proposals for overhauling the system typically exaggerate the benefits while failing to acknowledge the costs. Education systems are interconnected and changing one major component dramatically can cause upheaval elsewhere. Moreover, the last thing schools need as they deal with the after-effects of the pandemic and ever tighter funding is another assessment revolution. Instead, the education system in England should move to a new model of incremental improvement rather than periods of stasis followed by highly disruptive change.

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## Momentum for reform

Covid seriously disrupted the assessment system in England.\* For two years there was no standardised, externally marked exams for 16 and 18 year olds. In 2020 the government attempted to use an algorithm based on teacher rankings to assign grades to pupils, but poor implementation and communication meant that the process fell apart once grades were awarded. After a media furore it reverted to using teacher assessed grades (TAGs). In 2021 the government refused to plan for a repeat of the previous year, and insisted exams would go ahead – though it was forced into a U-turn and cancelled them again when the country went back into lockdown in January 2021. As in 2020 it reverted to TAGs, having run out of time to develop better options.<sup>1</sup>

In both years the use of TAGs was largely unmoderated by the exam boards: in 2020 because there wasn't time, given the rush after abandoning the algorithm; and in 2021 because the boards were asked to give substantial leeway and avoid statistical checks.<sup>2</sup> This, unsurprisingly, led to a huge rise in top grades, particularly at A-level where the stakes for students are higher. The percentage of A\* or A grades almost doubled, from 25.2% in 2019 to 44.3% in 2021. Moreover, because there was no meaningful standardisation the consistency of grading between institutions was much lower than normal, creating unfairness for students.

The net effect of these changes was to dramatically increase the number of students at 'high-tariff' (most selective) universities as far more young people than normal met their grade targets. Medium- and low-tariff universities did not see any increase, and indeed their numbers dropped slightly in 2021 as students who would have attended those ended up in more selective institutions.<sup>3</sup> The consequences of this are as yet unclear but there is concern that the proportion of students struggling with degrees at highly selective institutions has increased. There has been, for instance, a 28% increase in drop-outs by February, across all higher education institutions.<sup>4</sup>

In 2022 exams took place largely as normal, albeit with some limited additional support given to students given how much school time they had missed during lockdowns.<sup>5</sup> These have been externally assessed. The exams regulator Ofqual, and the government, faced a tricky decision about how to normalise grades following the inflation of the previous two years, ultimately deciding to try to take grades back to the 2019 level over two years. In 2022 grades will be roughly halfway between 2019 and 2021 and, the hope is, in 2023 all the way back to where they were.\*\*

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\* It also disrupted it in the other UK countries but, as education is devolved, this paper focuses only on England.

\*\* Grades are not completely fixed in advance – the system is not norm referenced but grades are tied to previous years and only move if the exam boards can provide evidence of real change in performance as opposed to inflation. For English and Maths there is a National Reference Test that gives us a real benchmark of change in performance to tie GCSE grades to. This system, called Comparable Outcomes, also prevents grades unfairly “deflating” due to, e.g., a new format of exam being introduced. Essentially for 2022 Comparable Outcomes is not being applied in full and grade boundaries will be targeted on creating an average between 2019 and 2021. In 2023 the full process will be applied.

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It is understandable that the government wants to revert to the pre-Covid grade profile, but this does come at the expense of the 2022 and 2023 cohorts, who will reasonably feel hard done by. They will have lower grades than their predecessor cohorts, through no fault of their own, and will find it harder to secure university places. This is not only because they will be less likely to meet grade targets, but also because there will be fewer places due to the squeeze on space caused by the bulge from the last two years, which has also led more students to defer to this year. They are also part of a large A-level cohort, which exacerbates the problem.

In addition to this there's no way for Ofqual to adjust results to acknowledge that some parts of the country had higher numbers of Covid infections, and more student absences, across the pandemic, and so are likely to see worse results. This again seriously challenges the fairness of the current system.

In effect it won't be until 2024 that things start to properly even out, with four cohorts negatively affected in one way or another. Each will have results that can't be meaningfully compared to the others by universities or employers.

The impact of all this disruption has been to supercharge the wider debate over assessment. Criticism of GCSEs and A-levels had been growing for some time, but has intensified in the past year. The Times Education Commission, which was set up by the *Times* newspaper in 2021 to propose a new way forward for the education system, and enlisted many influential educationalists, politicians and business leaders, is a good example. In its final report, *Bringing Out the Best*, published in June 2022, the chapter on assessment has numerous quotes from former prime ministers and education secretaries, business leaders and academics, all attacking the current system.<sup>6</sup> The concerns about exams are varied, ranging from the time taken to prepare for them, to the stress they cause students and teachers, their cost, and the supposed elitism associated with tagging some young people as failures.

Some of these criticisms are more valid than others but their prevalence has led GCSEs and A-levels to become increasingly discredited, at least in some, often influential, quarters. To date the government has resisted calls for reform and has defended the current system, but given the weight of opinion against them it seems likely that at some point a new education secretary or a new government will make it a priority. During the contest for the Conservative Party leadership, for example, Rishi Sunak proposed the Times commission's recommendation for replacing A-levels with a "British baccalaureate".<sup>7</sup>

However, most critiques of the current system, and proposals for alternatives, don't set out what secondary assessment *should* do. Failure to do this means proposals are muddled and ignore the trade-offs inherent in assessment policy. For instance, a desire to make the system as fair as possible inevitably increases the number of papers students will sit so as to increase accuracy, but at the expense of time for other things. Likewise, using exams to hold schools accountable inevitably leads to distortions and perverse incentives but not doing so means any accountability is based on more

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subjective measures. Indeed, there are regular proposals to scrap GCSEs all together without proper thought as to what would be lost from doing so.<sup>8</sup> Alternative purposes of assessment are also implied that are entirely unrealistic. For instance, critics often complain that one-off written exams don't measure 'real ability' but no assessment could do this because 'real ability' is a subjective and vague concept.

## The purpose of GCSEs and A-levels

Secondary exams in England are used for several purposes and this makes them much more complicated than equivalent qualifications in other countries. GCSEs have three main purposes:

- to assess whether students have learnt the curriculum\*
- to allow post-16 institutions, and universities, to select students based on a consistent measure
- to provide a metric to hold schools to account for performance.

For A-levels these are the same except the relative importance of each is balanced differently. Student selection is more important for A-levels as university choice has such a big impact on career and life opportunities. A-levels as a school/college accountability metric, on the other hand, is less important than for GCSEs because A-level cohorts are higher ability, so there is much less variation in performance than at GCSE. Effectively, GCSEs are higher stakes for schools and A-levels higher stakes for students.

It is the combination of these purposes that leads to the system in place in England. The high stakes nature of the tests, for both students and schools, makes external assessment critical, to avoid extensive 'gaming'. It also encourages the use of one-off written assessments as alternative methods are harder to mark reliably and also lead to 'gaming'. In previous iterations of the GCSE system there was much greater use of things like coursework and controlled assessment (coursework done in classroom conditions), but the pressure to perform well led to schools interpreting every rule as generously as possible, distorting results. As seen during the pandemic, school-based assessment will always inflate results in a system where schools themselves are held accountable for those results, and where they have such significant consequences for their pupils. This doesn't need to be a conscious process, if marginal calls are always made in the direction of generosity then grades will go up.

The number of exams per subject in the English system is also a function of the desire for reliability, as more questions will be more likely to return an accurate grade. If the only purpose of assessments was to check understanding of curriculum material then reliability would be much less important. Shorter tests, or a wider variety of assessment, could be used as there would be no need to make exact comparisons between individual students or schools.

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\* This paper uses 'curriculum' in the broader sense of the content studied during the course rather than referring solely to the National Curriculum. For most GCSE subjects and all A-level ones there is no National Curriculum but there are syllabuses designed to cover the relevant content.

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## Interpreting the criticisms of GCSEs/A-levels in light of their purposes

Most of the criticisms that are made of secondary exams stem from the high-stakes nature of the tests rather than the assessments themselves:

- **Exams take too much time.** The amount of time schools spend on exams is a function of their importance to the students and to school staff.
- **Written assessments are too narrow.** Exams are linear and written because that makes them easier to mark reliably. Other forms of assessment, in a high-stakes system, lead to widespread gaming. Schools may say they don't game but as long as some do then any that don't are putting their students at a disadvantage.
- **Exams lead to worsening mental health.** The stress of exams, for both pupils and teachers, comes from the stakes attached to them, not the exams themselves. It should be noted there is no evidence that even high-stakes tests have any impact on mental health or wellbeing. One study by Professor John Jerrim at UCL showed no difference in wellbeing or happiness between children in England and other UK nations that do not use externally assessed end of primary tests; though these tests are only high stakes for schools and not pupils.<sup>9</sup>
- **Exams are elitist and create failures.** That some young people fail is again a function of high-stakes assessments that are used for the purposes of selection. Critics often point to the 'forgotten third' – students who miss out on good passes in English and Maths – as a failure of the GCSE system. But it is impossible to have exams used to sort by ability and not have some students come at the bottom of the distribution, even if the overall standard increases. How we then support those students is, of course, a policy choice. It's also the case that if a third of young people are not meeting a minimum standard in English and Maths at 16 it's important that we know about it and attempt to remedy the problem earlier in their time at school rather than claim it is the fault of the assessment.\*
- **Exams are expensive.** The cost of the exams is due to the large numbers of questions required across all subjects in order to improve reliability and validity (assessing across the whole curriculum), and to ensure those subjects are studied. GCSE fees alone cost schools £200 million a year. In a high-stakes system subjects that aren't examined will inevitably get reduced curriculum time. This was seen when science stopped being assessed externally in end of primary tests in 2010. Since then primary schools have spent less time on science and pupil attainment in the subject has declined dramatically in international assessments.<sup>10</sup> The Times commission's proposal to assess only five subjects at GCSE does not acknowledge that it would lead to a similarly distorted curriculum where schools focused primarily on the assessed subjects.

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\* It is sometimes claimed that a third of students *have* to fail because of Comparable Outcomes, but, as explained above, this is not how the system works. If the National Reference Test showed real improvement in English and Maths across the cohort then the grade boundaries would be adjusted and more students would pass.

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Properly recognising the role GCSEs and A-levels play in young people's educational development therefore must be considered when discussing any criticism – or reform. It is important that those proposing changes to secondary assessment are honest about whether they would keep the existing purposes of GCSEs and A-levels and, if not, how those aims would be achieved without exams. Pretending, for instance, that it is possible to use GCSEs for selection without having some young people come at the bottom of the distribution is unhelpful. Discussion of the 'forgotten third' rarely acknowledges this.

## Reducing the stakes would be difficult

The obvious starting point for any major reform of assessment is to look at whether there needs to be such high stakes for students and schools, given this is what causes so many of the identified concerns. Contrary to popular belief it is not the case that students in England are assessed more regularly than in most other countries. Almost every high-income country has assessments at the end of compulsory academic schooling (usually 15 or 16) and again at 18. What is unusual about England is the stakes placed on the tests. It is these that should be addressed in more detail to understand why this is true here and whether it can be changed. As ever with education reform, simplistic comparisons between countries miss the point, however; lower stakes for exams in other countries lead to trade-offs elsewhere in their systems, which we may not be prepared to make.

### Reducing stakes for students

The main reason A-levels are so high stakes is that UK universities are so variegated. In most other rich countries, with the exception of the US, university admissions are largely based on having an academic certification at the end of upper secondary school, the precise grades are much less important. Usually some courses and institutions are more competitive than others and have some additional criteria but the differentiation is much higher in the UK. The highest tariff universities in the UK offer very substantial career and life advantages over others and are exceptionally competitive. Missing a A\* grade by one mark can be the difference between getting into Oxford, Cambridge or Imperial or going to a university that is seen as markedly less prestigious in the labour market.

In France, by contrast, universities have historically had to accept anyone with a baccalaureate (except the grandes écoles, which typically require an additional two years of study). This has led to extremely high drop-out and failure rates, with just 40% of undergraduates passing their first year. In 2018 the French government introduced reforms to allow universities to apply additional selection criteria, which caused widespread protests.<sup>11</sup> In the recent election the candidates on the left, like Jean-Luc Mélenchon, vowed to reverse the changes. It's not yet clear, partly because of Covid disruption, what impact these reforms will have but there is already a sense it is making the baccalaureate higher stakes, with increasing scrutiny over the reliability and fairness of the exams.<sup>12</sup>

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In Germany universities have been able to apply criteria beyond a high school certificate for longer, and a few subjects have central quotas. But on the whole it's much easier to get into courses, and again drop-out rates are much higher. Among comparable high-income countries, only the US has an admissions system as elitist as the UK's and, indeed, the US SAT admissions test is a highly politically contentious and high-stakes exam.

The intense competitiveness of UK university admissions, and the stark differences in life outcomes between institutions, creates the stakes that in turn create the pressure for A-levels to be as reliable and fair as possible. This is best achieved through written tests in typical exam conditions, as these are both harder to 'game' and easier to mark in a consistent way.

At GCSE the difference with other countries is even more stark. Elsewhere, many assessments at 15 or 16 contain coursework or continuous assessment as well as or instead of written tests. England is unusual in the extent to which it relies on linear written exams and also in the number of papers young people sit, which also leads to the expense for schools.

This is, again, in part because GCSEs are higher stakes for pupils than equivalent assessments elsewhere. This is for two reasons. First, universities in the UK run their admissions processes before A-level results are known. They use predicted A-level grades but the only definitive data available on candidates is GCSE results and so these are used in the admissions process; elsewhere admissions happen after final examination results are known. Second, post-16 education in England is also unusually variegated, which is a symptom of variegation in higher education admissions.

In almost all high-income countries, like England, there is a split between lower secondary, which is primarily focused on compulsory academic education and finishes at 15 or 16, and upper secondary, where students are split into vocational and academic pathways. Where England is unusual is the level of differentiation within these pathways. Broadly speaking there are three vocational routes: T-levels, which are still currently in a pilot phase and are supposed to provide a higher quality vocational offer to rival A-levels; general vocational qualifications at level 3, such as BTECs, which is the most common pathway; and level 2 qualifications for those who have not achieved good GCSE passes. There are many difficulties with this system that are beyond the scope of this paper but the differentiation between these routes does require accurate, fair and reliable GCSE results.

For those who go down the academic pathway in England there is one dominant route – A-levels – but there are no rules about how selective schools and sixth form colleges can be in choosing which students they accept for A-level courses. Just under half of secondary schools in England finish at 16, so any pupils at these schools who want to take A-levels need to change institution. And around 15% of students at schools that do have a sixth form move to a different one to do their A-levels.<sup>13</sup> This movement between increasingly selective institutions creates still higher stakes for GCSEs.



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All this means that reducing stakes for students would require substantial reform to the structure of tertiary and upper secondary education. Universities would need to become less selective – this could only be done by either shifting to where France is trying to get away from, and forcing universities to accept anyone with A-levels, or introducing a lottery element to admissions, which would increase equity but would be politically contentious, to say the least.

Reducing stakes for pupils at GCSE level would still require considerable reform but may be more politically plausible. It would, though, require moving to post-qualification applications (PQA) for university admissions, which would allow actual A-level results to be used rather than a combination of predicted grades and GCSEs. There are good reasons for doing this but the university sector is opposed. The DfE has recently reviewed moving to PQA and decided against doing so as “now is not the right time to press ahead with what would be a major, time-consuming reform”. It also raised concerns that it could harm lower-income students (who are more likely to have predictions higher than their final grades).<sup>14</sup> Lastly, it would also require introducing restrictions on post-16 academic selection, which, while less controversial than changing university admissions, would still be politically hard.

None of this would eliminate the stakes altogether. Young people still need to decide whether to go down vocational or academic routes at 16, and decide on which type of tertiary education might be suitable for them, if any. Moreover, employers will still use school-level assessments to make decisions about applicants. These substantial reforms, risky and contentious as they are, would however be the minimum requirement for reducing stakes for pupils.

### **Reducing stakes for schools**

As reducing stakes for students would require a fundamental shift in the philosophical underpinnings of the English education system, reducing, or even removing, stakes for schools may seem a more palatable option. Here, the English system is an even greater outlier against its comparators. The Department for Education facilitates a high level of data transparency, publishing detailed school-level exam performance information online, which is then used by media organisations to make league tables. And England has an unusually centralised and stringent accountability system, which means that poor student performance can lead to quick and severe career consequences for school leadership teams.

This is much more of an issue at GCSE than A-level. Headline measures and league tables for A-levels are made public, and these do have an impact on school behaviour, but the extremely high stakes for students tend to be the main driver post-16.<sup>15</sup> There is much less variation in performance at A-level because the cohort is selected to some degree. Moreover, destination data – which universities students go on to attend – is arguably more important to school sixth forms and sixth form colleges in establishing reputation and status than the grades themselves.



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For GCSEs, though, accountability is the single biggest driver for school behaviour; for example, through focus on exam technique and reduced time on content or subjects that are not going to be examined. Various government reforms to accountability metrics and consequent behavioural shifts by schools show how powerful this effect is. In the 2000s the Labour government decided to count various non-academic qualifications as 'equivalent' to GCSEs in performance data. (The GNVQ in IT, for instance, was worth four GCSEs until 2007 even though it took less time to teach the course.)

This led to a huge increase in the use of these qualifications, even when it wasn't appropriate or useful to young people – for instance, if doing two qualifications in similar subjects – until the coalition government changed the rules again.<sup>16</sup> The subsequent introduction by the coalition of the 'EBacc' measure, showing the number of students getting good passes in English, Maths, Science, a language and History or Geography, led to a big increase in the take-up of those subjects and drops in others, even though it was (initially) voluntary.<sup>17</sup>

GCSE grades have become somewhat less important within the accountability system in recent years (in 2020 and 2021, accountability metrics were suspended altogether because of the pandemic). In 2019 the then education secretary Damian Hinds announced that DfE would no longer apply a "floor target" to grades below which schools would be defined as failing, ending a practice that had been in place in various forms since the late 1990s.<sup>18</sup> Ofsted inspections alone are now used to define whether schools are failing or not, and the most recent iteration of the inspection framework downplays GCSE results versus, for instance, delivery of a broad and balanced curriculum.<sup>19</sup> One reason for doing this was to try to reduce schools' focus on narrow metrics.

Due to the Covid interruption since March 2020 it's not yet clear whether these changes will have a meaningful effect on school behaviour but it seems unlikely given grades are still taken into account in inspections, the results of which are used to decide the fate of schools and their leaderships. Moreover, there is a deeply ingrained culture among school leaders of over-compliance around metrics, because they do not trust how ministers will make use of data for accountability purposes. This is entirely understandable given that various metrics (including the EBacc) have been created retroactively and used to 'name and shame' schools. To change this culture would likely require a much more dramatic shift, such as moving away from punitive sanctions for poor inspection outcomes, and shifting responsibility for accountability away from DfE.

Whether such a shift would be desirable is a difficult question to answer given that education systems are highly contextualised and cultures develop over long periods. The lack of central school accountability in other countries can lead to a lack of urgency around poor outcomes for students. In England, prior to the introduction of central accountability in the 1990s, there were many more seriously underperforming schools, especially in areas of disadvantage, than now. Trying to find a model of accountability

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that balances this risk against the risk of distortion due to accountability metrics is one of the most difficult trade-offs in education policy. Any proposals for abolishing or minimising GCSEs' importance for schools that ignore this cannot be taken seriously.

### Changing the curriculum

Nearly all the main concerns about secondary assessment stem from the high-stakes nature of the tests for pupils and schools. But there is another purpose of assessments – checking whether the curriculum has been covered. Some of the worries people have about assessments stem from being unhappy with the curriculum rather than the exams themselves. The main issue that falls into this category, and was highlighted by the Times commission, is the narrowness of A-levels.

While this narrow specialisation for students studying academic courses at 16 is a long-standing feature of the English system it has intensified over the past few years. The average number of qualifications taken fell by 43% between 2016 and 2019. In 2010, 38% of students took A levels or equivalents covering three or more subject groups (such as sciences or humanities), but by 2019, just 17% did.<sup>20</sup> This is primarily due to coalition government reforms that meant AS levels taken at the end of year 12 (the academic year between GCSEs and A-levels) did not count towards final grades. Under the previous system students typically started with four or five subjects and then dropped one or two. But it's also due to substantial cuts to per-student funding for post-16 education. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, funding for school sixth forms will still be 23% lower in real terms in 2024 than it was in 2010.<sup>21</sup>

There have been several proposals to move to a more European-style baccalaureate system, including from Rishi Sunak during the Conservative Party leadership election. The Times commission's proposal was for students to study six subjects "covering both humanities and sciences as well as units on critical thinking, communication and creativity". There are no reasons from an assessment perspective why this, or something similar, couldn't be done. But it would have significant knock-on effects on other parts of the system. Chief among these is a teacher recruitment crisis, with numbers signing up to train well below 2019 numbers, themselves below target in many subjects,<sup>22</sup> and particularly affecting STEM subjects. Simply put, more students taking those subjects post-16 would require more teachers. In addition, those teaching post-16 need to have a degree-level qualification in their subject, which makes recruitment even harder. Institutions would also need to be resourced to teach more curriculum content.

Beyond the substantial, and expensive, changes that would need to be made to the post-16 school and college system, there would also need to be a change in the structure and content of university courses, which would have to include content currently taught in A-levels to make space for greater breadth in the upper secondary curriculum. It would require working closely with the higher education sector to align any new syllabuses with their programmes of study. Universities would likely argue another year of tertiary study would be required to get to the same level, adding a substantial cost in student loans. Again, these are trade-offs that any serious proposals for reform have to acknowledge and factor in to any cost/benefit analysis.

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## An alternative approach to reform

For a new education secretary or government to attempt an overhaul of secondary assessment would be a major undertaking. Reducing the scope of GCSEs or A-levels, or even abolishing them altogether, would require a fundamental rethink of the way post-16 and university admissions work. That would seem politically difficult given how passionate debates around merit-based admissions can get, and, in the case of higher education, would lead to a markedly different system. It would also mean changing the way school accountability works in a way that could risk a return to previous eras in which a large number of schools in lower income areas were underperforming.

The return for all this highly complex, time-consuming and risky reform would be uncertain. Reducing the stakes for assessment would mean reducing the risk of gaming and of the requirement for high levels of reliability. This would allow the use of a wider range of assessment types such as continuous assessment, coursework and controlled assessment. The benefits, though, of these different types of assessment are unclear. It is not the case that coursework, for instance, helps lower-income students.<sup>23</sup> Nor is there any reason to think it better reflects the workplace. No secondary assessment could feasibly reflect the future workplaces of every student given the wide range of careers they will go on to. The best case for a wider range of assessments is that it enables students to learn different skills (for example, through extended projects).

There is also no evidence that exams have an impact on mental health. There has been a rapid growth in mental health issues for adolescents, particularly girls, across wealthy countries, but there is nothing to indicate the stakes around exams makes a meaningful difference. And removing or lessening the importance of assessment at 16 would not stop the 'forgotten third' from being forgotten. A third of young people would still be unable to meet a minimum standard for taking more advanced qualifications post-16 and would still need other types of policy support to help them.

The only indisputable benefit is that it would save schools some money, though in the wider scheme of a schools budget of over £50 billion, it is unlikely to make a big difference, and would likely be outweighed in the short term at least by the costs of reform.

This is not, though, an argument for a permanent status quo. The critics of GCSEs are right that they take up a huge amount of curriculum time and distort behaviour. A-levels are unusually narrow compared to other countries. But rather than massive, disruptive change, the English education system would benefit more from a model of incremental improvement around assessment. Apart from anything else, this would be appreciated by time- and resource-starved schools. Unlike headline-seeking politicians and journalists, teachers tend to oppose major reform of assessment.<sup>24</sup>

The substantial reforms undertaken by the coalition to the structure and content of both GCSEs and A-levels followed rapidly by Covid have meant that Ofqual and the exam boards have had little space to progress smaller improvements that could have important benefits. These include, for instance, moving assessment online<sup>25</sup> and

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using artificial intelligence (AI) for marking, both of which could improve the security and reliability of exams and create some space for tweaking the content and style of assessments. Ofqual's investigations into using AI were stopped after the failure of the 2020 algorithm, which was a shame as it holds real promise.<sup>26</sup>

These kinds of incremental reforms need to be considered as part of a proper national assessment strategy. DfE should work with Ofqual and a commission of assessment experts on such a strategy, with the objective of improving secondary assessment over the course of a decade, or even longer. The objectives for this review could be:

- Clearly setting out the purposes of assessment in the English system, and why they are considered to be important
- Identifying genuine issues with the current systems, including comprehensive engagement with the sector
- Identifying opportunities for improvement that can be made without overhauling other parts of the education system, including analysis of assessment in other countries, where the same purposes are achieved through different means
- If it was felt more substantial reform was justified, setting out all other areas of the system the changes would affect and ensuring mitigations were in place
- A 10-year plan for testing alternative approaches and incorporating them without heavy disruption for schools.

As an example of how this could work, if DfE, working with Ofqual and the commission, decided it was important to broaden the types of assessment used, but wanted to avoid risking a reduction in reliability, it could look at alternative approaches like 'comparative judgement', whereby lots of markers compare two papers side by side and rank them. Done enough times this produces a rank order that can be turned into grades that evidence suggests are more accurate than traditional marking for these types of questions.<sup>27</sup> This could allow the introduction of longer written essays into humanities and arts subjects.

Or if politicians did want to encourage greater breadth at A-level there are options that wouldn't require completely replacing them. For instance, students not doing any STEM subjects could have a mandatory maths qualification that was at a lower standard to ensure some familiarity. Likewise those doing STEM-only A-levels could have a mandatory humanities course. Or DfE could look again at the AS/A2 format that allowed for a wider range of courses.

This approach to reform would avoid the negative effects of major overhauls, which often have unpredictable consequences for other parts of the system, and are seriously disruptive to several cohorts of students. It would also be in the interests of ministers and officials as it would avoid high-risk, resource-intensive reform programmes that have significant opportunity cost when there are so many other issues to be resolved. It's the best way of answering the exam question.

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