

Effects of the new GCSE grading and accountability systems

how teaching and learning will need to develop with particular reference to English

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Introduction

This paper explores several combined effects of the new secondary school accountability system announced by the DfE in March 2014 and the new GCSE grading system announced by Ofqual in September 2014 which have significant consequences for schools. As an initial technical issue, it is noted that transition from the current grades to the new ones will cause large falls in the point scores on which schools' Attainment 8 and Progress 8 accountability measures will depend. Schools need to be aware of this so that teachers of English and Mathematics, the first subjects to be examined under the new grading system, are not held responsible for a decline in Attainment 8 and Progress 8 between 2016 and 2017.

The longer-term issue is that the new grading system is designed to influence the distribution of grades and the accountability system based on them. This accompanies higher-demand specifications aligned with the standards of other more successful countries which are, in turn designed to influence teaching and learning. Schools which understand the rationale and practical implications of these changes will respond to the new GCSE specifications more successfully than those which do not.

Unlike other aspects of Coalition Government policy such as promoting academies and free schools, there is cross-party agreement about the need for these changes. They arise from concerns about the need to raise England's educational performance as measured by international comparisons and to reduce the number of students leaving school with poor qualifications or none. These issues are considered more fully on page 10.

A practical problem is that the DfE will provide no guidance for schools on how to respond most effectively to the new GCSEs and their grading and accountability arrangements. This is similar to the lack of guidance or advice on how schools should respond to the new National Curriculum without levels. It indicates a libertarian approach which is a reaction against the centrally-led target-driven policies on raising attainment of previous governments and particularly the Labour governments from 1997.

These had established the National Strategies, led from the DfE and delivered by Capita, which had created a formulaic approach to lesson delivery, and a curriculum advice body, eventually called the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCDA). This had promoted a policy, adopted in due course by the Strategies, of ever more detailed assessment of students' work as a way of raising attainment with, in sequence, National Curriculum sublevels, assessment focuses and Assessing Pupil Progress (APP), each underpinning National Curriculum tests in Years 2, 6 and 9.

Neither the Strategies' nor QCDA's approach was based on significant research and by October 2008 the Government accepted that neither had delivered improvements in education in England as measured by international comparisons. The Secretary of State (Ed Balls) abolished the KS3 National Curriculum tests and announced that the Strategies would be wound up and not replaced when Capita's contract ended in March 2011. The decision to legislate to create Ofqual was taken at the same time.

QCDA was left in existence and was abolished in 2012 following transfer of its regulatory powers to Ofqual in 2010 and its responsibility for the remaining National Curriculum tests to the Standards and Testing Agency in 2011.

England is accordingly in the unusual position of undergoing complex reforms of school curriculum and assessment without guidance on how to respond most effectively to them. Schools are left to obtain advice from the Awarding Bodies which, as providers of examinations, have a commercial interest in maintaining their market share; from commercial providers of advice such as PiXL and Building Learning Power; and from professional bodies such as the Association of Teachers of Mathematics and the National Association of Teachers of English.

Academy chains have established their own directors of educational research to filter the various kinds of advice and formulate teaching and learning programmes for the chain, and secondary schools in some Local Authorities are maintaining effective cooperation, but most standalone secondary schools tend to respond to change by a process of trial-and-error. In some cases teachers and their Senior Leadership Teams continue with kinds of teaching and assessment which are now considered by the DfE and HMI to be ineffective and have been abandoned as recommended public policy; for example, the National Strategies' model of lesson delivery; the frequent tracking of student progress using National Curriculum sublevels, assessment focusses and APP or commercial and other replacements for these; and the view that every student needs to show progress in every lesson (abandoned by Ofsted in 2009 as promoting a narrow, heavily teacher-directed approach to teaching and learning).

The Coalition Government's lack of guidance for secondary schools on major curriculum and assessment reform is understandable in the light of its predecessors' ineffective target-driven approach, but it is regrettable and may be contributing to the "stalled" performance of secondary schools described by the Ofsted Annual Report 2013/14 (Ofsted 2014B, pages 4

– 9). By contrast, primary schools are more successful – few have become academies so that Local Authority primary curriculum support teams have remained largely intact.

Secondary schools are having to respond to a reversal of government policy, from a detailed focus on teaching and formative assessment to a libertarian approach to these matters monitored by higher demand GCSEs and a complex accountability system based on them. In these circumstances a detailed consideration of some practical consequences of the new GCSE grading and accountability systems may be helpful.

Features of the new grading system

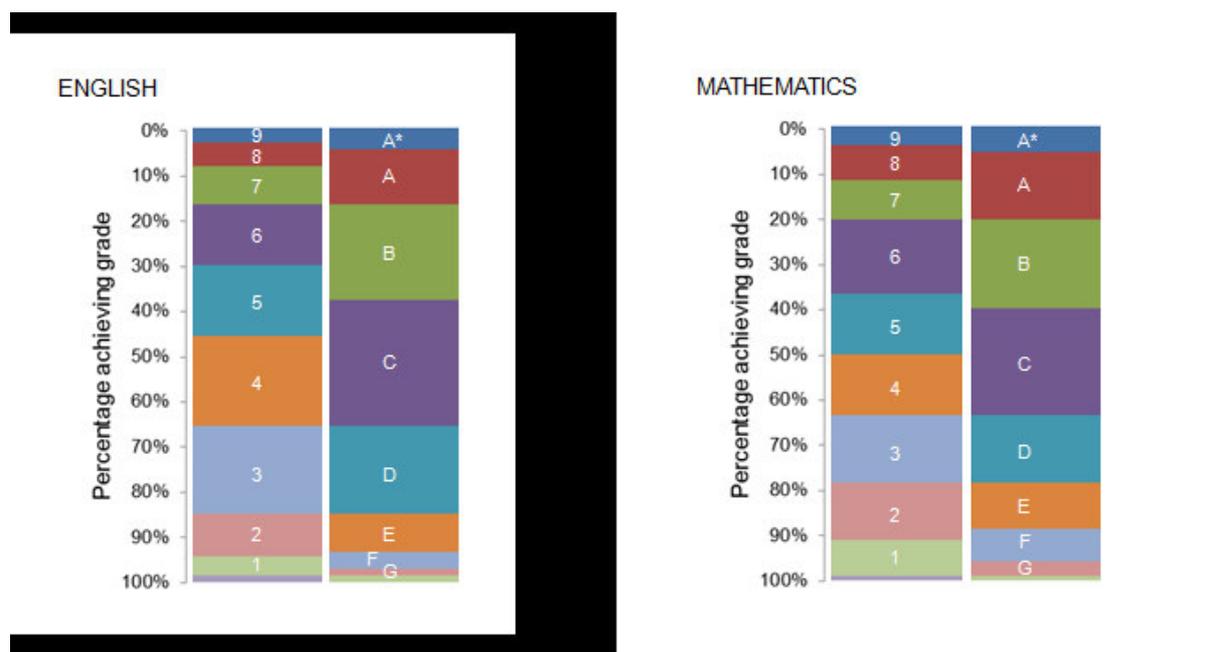
The new grading system replaces A* to G with 9 to 1, beginning with English and Mathematics in 2017 with the other subjects following in 2018. The new grades will be aligned by statistical prediction with the present grades in three grade-groups:

- new grades 9 – 7 will have the same proportion of students as A*/A
- new grades 6 – 4 will have the same proportion of students as B/C
- new grades 3 – 1 will have the same proportion of students as D – G

This method of deriving the numbers of students awarded each grade is a development of present arrangements. The total numbers are calculated in advance using predictions by the Awarding Bodies together with evidence from the students' Key Stage 2 test results. This is a feature of Ofqual's policy of seeking comparable outcomes year on year, as required by its statutory remit to ensure comparability of standards between Awarding Bodies and over time, but will be subject to new procedures to ensure closer similarity of grade outcomes between the Awarding Bodies (see page 11).

Ofqual gives the following examples of the new grading system for English and Mathematics.

Figure 1 : Ofqual examples of new grading system



Other aspects of the new grades are that grade 9 will be limited to the top 20 cent of students attaining grades 7 and above (Ofqual 2014, paras 55 – 68); and the new mid-grade (5) will be aligned with average performance in countries such as Finland, Canada, the Netherlands and Switzerland so is more demanding than current grade C (paras 39 – 50). Within each grade-group the mark ranges for each grade will be set arithmetically as at present.

Transition between the two grading systems

Transition from the current grades to the new ones will cause large falls in point scores when schools move from the current grades to the new ones. Attainment 8 and Progress 8 will be calculated on current grades in 2016 for the first time with A* = 8 points, A = 7, etc. As the new GCSE grading system is implemented, Attainment 8 and Progress 8 will be calculated directly on the new 9 to 1 scale. As noted above, this process begins with English and Mathematics in 2017 with other subjects following in 2018.

In Figure 2, a school's English Language and English Literature grades in 2014 have been treated as its 2016 grades. Exactly the same mark ranges and numbers of students have been used for 2017 using the new grading system. 20 per cent (rounded up or down) of those achieving grades 9 to 7 have been awarded new grade 9. The other grades have been distributed fairly across 8/7 and 6 to 4 (= B/C), and D to G have been mapped across directly to 3 to 1.

Figure 2 : Examples of effect of new grading system

GCSE English Language 2016

Grade	Students	Points	Total
A*	5	40	
A	14	98	138
<hr/>			
B	61	366	
C	80	400	766
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D	34	136	
E	4	12	
F	2	4	
G	1	1	153
U	1	-	
Totals	202		1057

GCSE English Language 2017

Grade	Students	Points	Total
9	4	36	
8	5	40	
7	10	70	146
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6	35	210	
5	45	225	
4	61	244	679
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3	34	102	
2	4	8	
1	3	3	113
U	1	-	
Totals	202		938

GCSE English Literature 2016

Grade	Students	Points	Total
A*	2	16	
A	15	105	121
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B	66	396	
C	66	330	726
<hr/>			
D	39	156	
E	9	27	
F	2	4	
G	1	1	188
U	2	-	
Totals	202		1035

GCSE English Literature 2017

Grade	Students	Points	Total
9	3	27	
8	5	40	
7	9	63	130
<hr/>			
6	30	180	
5	40	200	
4	62	248	628
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3	39	117	
2	9	18	
1	3	3	138
U	2	-	
Totals	202		896

As a result of the new grades, there are large falls in points for 6 to 4 (B/C) and 3 to 1 (D to G). This is because the bottom third of grade Bs are now worth 5 points instead of 6, the bottom two-thirds of C grades are now worth 4 points instead of 5 and D is worth 3 instead of 4. On the other hand, although few students attain A*/A, the points for grades 9 to 7 rise slightly because some grade As are now worth 8 points instead of 7.

The total point scores fall from 1057 to 936 (English Language) and 1035 to 896 (English Literature). Similar falls will happen with Mathematics in 2017 and the other GCSE subjects in 2018.

These falls will cause a significant drop in schools' Attainment 8 between 2016 and 2017, and again in 2018 when the other new GCSE specifications are examined, and therefore in schools' Progress 8.

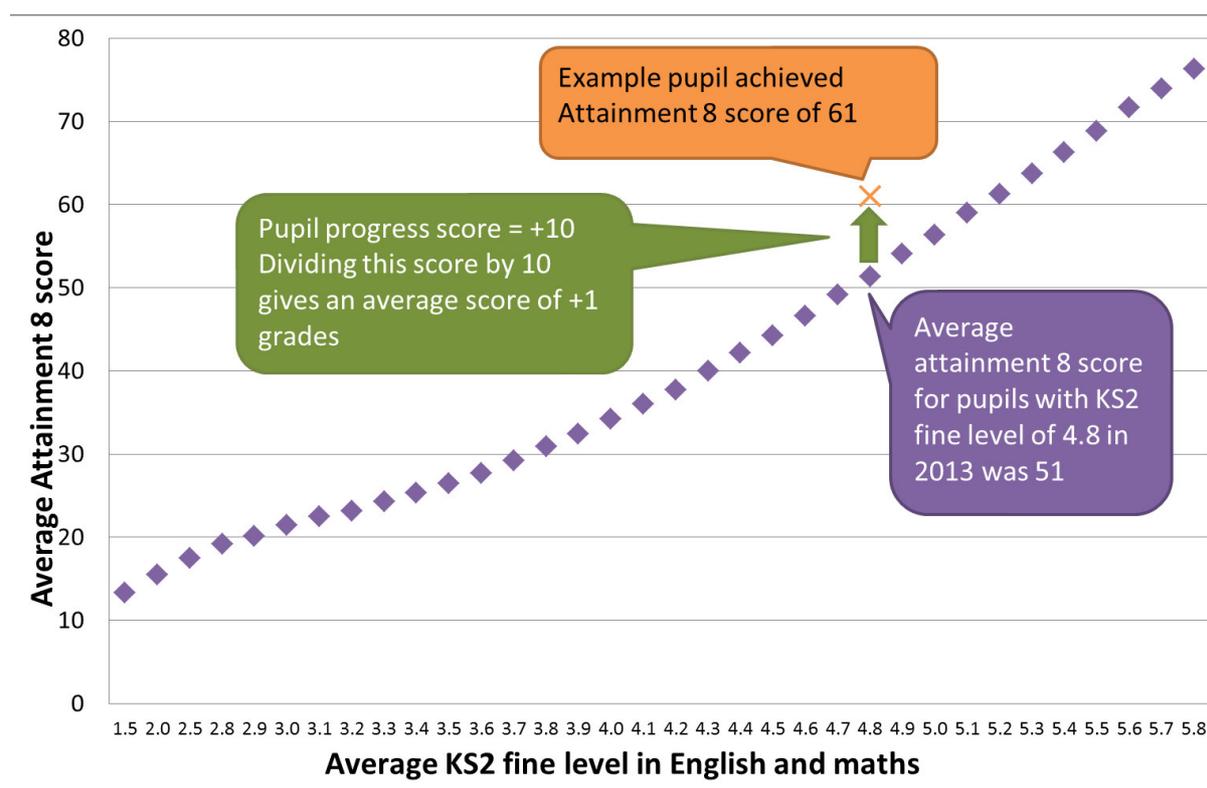
Accountability measures

From 2016 secondary schools will be required to publish four accountability measures:

- Attainment 8 – each student's best 8 GCSE results including English Language or English Literature (one double weighted if both are taken in the same series), Mathematics (double weighted), 3 other EBacc subjects and 3 others from prescribed list; the school's Attainment 8 figure is the average of its students' Attainment 8s;
- Progress 8 – each student's progress score from their KS2 test scores in Reading and Mathematics; this is calculated by relating each student's Attainment 8 score to their Key Stage 2 test score in Reading and Mathematics using an annual matrix of average fine level scores (see Figure 3); the school's Progress 8 is the average of its students' Progress 8s;
- the percentage of students achieving a threshold measure in English and Mathematics; when the new GCSE examinations are taken, this will almost certainly be grade 5 as the new mid grade; and
- the percentage of pupils achieving the English Baccalaureate.

Schools will be required to publish these four figures in a standardised format on their website each year for easy comparison by parents and others. It appears that they will also be required to publish the school's average point score for each GCSE subject.

Figure 3 – example of Progress 8 calculation (source : DfE Powerpoint)



Schools will be judged primarily on their overall Progress 8 score to show those that add value to their students' prior attainment at KS2 as against those that are coasting. *If the Progress 8 score is less than minus 0.5, i.e. less than half a GCSE grade, this will trigger an Ofsted inspection.*

Schools obviously need to be aware that their Attainment 8 and Progress 8 scores will fall between 2016 and 2017/18 solely as a consequence of the new grading system. This will not necessarily reflect on the competence of their English and Mathematics teachers in preparing students for the new GCSE examinations in 2017 or of other teachers in 2018. It is to be hoped that the DfE or Ofqual will make schools aware of the transitional effect of the new grading system on Attainment 8 and Progress 8.

The lower figures will then continue after the first year of the new examinations because Ofqual's method of statistical prediction assumes similar numbers of students in each grade group year on year. *However, schools will not necessarily be allowed to continue at the lower Attainment 8 and Progress 8 figures.* These will depend on whether they achieve the specified threshold measure in English and Mathematics, the third of the accountability measures listed above. The implications of this are considered in the next section.

Other features of the new grading system

Falls in Attainment 8 and Progress 8 between 2016 and 2017/18 will not affect all schools equally. Schools that are aware of the underlying implications of the new grading system for teaching and learning, and implement the necessary changes, will achieve more of the higher grades (and a smaller drop in point scores) than those that are not. In the second and subsequent years of the new GCSE examinations, these schools' Attainment 8 and Progress 8 will rise more quickly.

Three features of the new grading system are directly relevant to schools' examination results.

(a) Abolition of the C/D borderline

Current school accountability by grades A* to C is replaced by Attainment 8 and Progress 8 in which all the GCSE grades count. At present, schools concentrate much of their energy at the C/D borderline to ensure that as many students as possible achieve grade C or above. Typically this leads to large numbers of students with marks at the lower end of the grade C mark range. Under the new grading system, these students will score 4 points, not 5.

Abolishing the C/D borderline means that schools will need to ensure that *all* their students attain the highest possible grades. For the first time there will be a fully unified assessment and accountability system at age 16. The amalgamation of GCE O Level and CSE as GCSE in 1987 was quickly followed by an accountability system in which only grades A to C, subsequently A* to C, were counted in school results tables. Alternative qualifications were developed for students regarded as less able or motivated; these were less demanding than GCSE but were often treated as GCSE-equivalent. Many of these alternative qualifications are now disallowed for Attainment 8 and Progress 8 purposes, although some will still be permitted in the third (non-EBacc) group. As currently understood, for English, Mathematics and other EBacc subjects only GCSE (and IGCSE conforming to GCSE specifications) will count towards Attainment 8 and Progress 8.

All students will therefore need to be taught to do their best in GCSE English and Mathematics and in the other EBacc GCSE examinations. Schools will need to report numbers of students not taking these examinations with the reasons, so that attempts at 'gaming' by not allowing certain students to sit the examinations would in principle lead to investigation by Ofsted.

(b) New mid-grade 5

Ofqual has published decisions on the setting of standards for new grades 9, 7, 5, 4 and 1 with the remaining grade boundaries to be set arithmetically as at present. Grades 7, 4 and 1 will be aligned by statistical prediction with the lower boundary of current grades A, C and

G. Grade 9 will be awarded to the top 20 per cent of those attaining grade 7 and above (Ofqual 2014).

Grade 5, the mid-grade of the new 9 point scale, will be awarded on a different basis from the others. It will be aligned with the average performance of 16 year olds in higher-attaining countries such as Finland, Canada, the Netherlands and Switzerland. *Grade 5 will therefore be more demanding than current grade C, consisting of the top third of marks for grade C and the bottom third of marks for current grade B* – see figure 1.

Because of its importance in securing the DfE policy of raising the attainment of students in England in relation to those in countries which are more successful in international comparisons, it is very likely that the threshold measure in English and Mathematics for accountability purposes will be the percentage of students achieving grade 5 in these subjects. Schools will therefore be under pressure to ensure that a specified proportion of students attain grade 5 or above.

(c) Narrower mark ranges per grade

The current top four grades (A* to C) are replaced with six grades (9 to 4) each with narrower mark ranges than at present. This will make it easier for students to move up a grade with appropriate teaching.

Ofqual has suggested that grades 6 to 4 (replacing B/C) will be the same number of marks wide and suggests 11 for each rather than, as at present 17 marks for grade B and 16 for grade C (Ofqual 2014, paras 88 – 93 and Annex C). Grades 9 to 7 (replacing A*/A) will be awarded in the proportions 20:30:50 respectively of candidates attaining marks above grade 6 (Annex C).

In the new grading system, the top four grades (A* – C) are replaced by six grades each with a narrower mark range than previously. The bottom four grades (D – G) are replaced by three grades (3 – 1). Arithmetically the new mark ranges for these lower grades will be wider than currently, the reverse of the position with grades 9 – 4.

As a corollary, the six top new grades carry considerably more points than the current top four – 39 of 45 points (86 per cent) as against 26 of 36 (72 per cent).

The implications of the new grading system are that most students are expected to continue to attain grades 9 – 4 (as they do A* - C at present) despite the fact that the examinations will be significantly more challenging than at present. *Finer grading with narrower mark ranges per grade will enable students to attain higher grades more readily if they are appropriately taught*, with a majority attaining mid-grade 5 (the international benchmark) or higher. The Government accordingly expects schools to respond effectively to the greater demands of the new GCSE specifications and to the opportunities provided by the new

grading system, backed by a system of school accountability which includes a calculation of the value added in the five years since Key Stage 2.

Rationale of the new grading and accountability systems

There is cross-party agreement about the new grading and accountability systems which reflects two policy objectives of the Coalition and previous Labour governments. The first is a response to the fact that, while GCSE and A Level grade rates rose steadily year on year from 1987 to 2012, this rising attainment has not been reflected in international comparisons – PISA, PIRLS and TIMSS (see Appendix 1). The previous Government therefore created Ofqual with a statutory remit to ensure consistency of standards between Awarding Bodies and year on year, and the present Government has extended this remit to include international qualifications taken in England such as IGCSE. The first policy objective is therefore to ensure that examinations set by the various Awarding Bodies are valid, reliable and consistent in standard year on year, and that they make demands on students and teachers comparable to those of higher-achieving jurisdictions.

The second policy objective reflects governments' longstanding concern about low attainment by less able students. England has one of the longest attainment 'tails' among advanced countries – students who leave school with poor qualifications or none. Rectifying this, like raising standards as measured by international comparisons, was one of three policies outlined by the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister in their foreword to *The Importance of Teaching* White Paper in November 2010 (DfE 2010). It has led to the pupil premium; the establishment of the Educational Endowment Foundation with £110 million funding to research ways of raising attainment of disadvantaged pupils; the creation of a National Curriculum without levels; and the requirement on Ofsted to report on schools' progress in 'closing the gap'.

The implementation of these policies since 2010 have led to cross-party agreement that the new GCSE specifications and the grading system and accountability systems based on them should be:

- **more demanding** in examination (end of course only), content and assessment (more challenging questions)
- **consistent in standard** between the various Awarding Bodies
- **internationally referenced** to standards in more successful jurisdictions
- **referenced to national standards over time** by national reference tests in English and Mathematics
- **equitable** so that all students' grades count towards Attainment 8 and Progress 8 and, with consistent standards between Awarding Bodies, 'gaming' by multiple entries becomes pointless

- **focussed on effective teaching** through commissioning and promotion of formal research into effective teaching methods through e.g. the Education Endowment Foundation and the London Schools Excellence Fund. Influences include research-based presentations such as HMI's *Moving English forward* (Ofsted 2012) and Robin Alexander's presentation in February 2012 (Alexander 2012).

The aim is to provide public recognition of schools that do well with all their students, including the less able and disadvantaged, and to expose those that are coasting or concentrate on the more able.

Although these policies are clear, the Government has made little effort to explain them to schools and none to help schools to prepare for them. As outlined earlier, the Government has a libertarian approach to teaching and learning, partly as a reaction to the target-driven approach of its predecessors and partly owing to its preference for free-market solutions as also shown by its espousal of academies and free schools. The Government believes that schools should respond to the demands of the new GCSEs by choosing between the products and advice offered by various providers such as the Awarding Bodies, PiXL with its APP-derived assessment criteria, content-driven curricula promoted by certain academy chains and, indeed, programmes like Let's Think in English.

Some products and advice will lead to greater success than others. The downside of the Government's free-market approach is that schools which choose ineffective responses to the policy changes will be less successful, and their students achieve poorer results through no fault of their own, than those which make better choices. The effects of ineffective choices about teaching and learning will be exacerbated by changes in the grading system which will require schools to compete for the higher grades (see pages 14/15).

Changes at Ofsted

The move to a wholly objective assessment of secondary schools' teaching to age 16 through their GCSE results will enable Ofsted inspections to be more focussed and, in principle, much less frequent. It is intended that Ofsted's contracts with private providers of inspections will not be renewed when they expire. From 2016, schools will undergo Section 5 inspections only when their Progress 8 is below minus 0.5, there is a steep decline in the performance of Outstanding or Good schools or there are other concerns such as safeguarding. Otherwise schools previously judged as Outstanding or Good will have a one-day visit by an HM Inspector each two or three years for "a challenging but also constructive conversation" with the Senior Leadership Team which will be reported by letter to parents. There will be no lesson observations on these one-day visits.

The return to inspections by HMIs arises from continuing concerns about inconsistency of inspections by contractors. The Chief Inspector has said that inspection is too important for Ofsted simply to have oversight of third party arrangements (Ofsted 2014A). Independent

schools are not subject to such inconsistency because their inspectors are directly employed by the Independent Schools Inspectorate.

The end of criterion-referenced assessment

A further development which will impact on teaching and learning is the abandonment of criterion-referencing as part of the awarding process. As Ofqual points out, GCSE has never actually been criterion-referenced (Ofqual 2014, 25). The Awarding Bodies have traditionally followed a policy of “comparable performance” by which grade boundaries have been set by a trade-off of senior examiners’ judgements of the quality of answers in relation to previous years (criterion-referencing) and calculations based on historical statistics. This process has led to gradual grade inflation with larger numbers of higher grades awarded year on year.

The Awarding Bodies decided to prioritise “comparable outcomes” over “comparable performance” in 2002 to prevent the first cohort to take the reformed A Levels from being unfairly disadvantaged. This ensured that the national proportion of students of students attained each grade remained the same.

Since its inception in 2010, Ofqual has required Awarding Bodies to use “comparable outcomes” rather than “comparable performance” as better fulfilling its statutory remit of ensuring comparability between the Awarding Bodies and year on year. With the new GCSEs, Ofqual has decided that grades will be awarded on the basis of statistical prediction only, not with reference to examiners’ judgement of performance in relation to previous years. Ofqual’s rationale for this is expressed bluntly, seeking “an approach that has to work in a system in which different exam boards provide competing products in the same subject – a peculiarity of the British system that provides additional challenges to standard setting” (Ofqual 2014, 27).

For the new GCSEs these challenges are to be met in three ways:

- all Awarding Bodies are required to use the same tightly-drawn subject content and assessment objectives resulting in very similar specifications and mark schemes
- continued and improved use of KS2 scores to refine predictions (Ofqual 2014, 94)
- using interboard screening of results data to improve comparability of standards between Awarding Bodies (Ofqual 2014, 95).

The aim is therefore for the various specifications in each subject to be marked and graded with such consistency between Awarding Bodies that they are in effect a single national test, as in other countries. For example, if an Awarding Body sets a paper which is ‘easier’ than those of others, it will not be allowed to generate a larger proportion of higher grades. The use of KS2 scores and interboard screening of results data will reveal this anomaly and

Ofqual's statutory powers to ensure consistency will allow it to require the Awarding Body to alter its grade boundaries appropriately.

Under this system a similar proportion of students will receive each grade each year. There may be changes in national cohort performance over time and, to identify this, national reference tests in English Language and Mathematics will be taken by a representative sample of 16 year olds each year. These tests will be trialled in 2016 and taken fully early in 2017 with the new GCSEs in those subjects being used to establish equivalent performance standards for the national reference tests (Ofqual 2014, 99). As students will take the same national reference test each year, changes in the standards of GCSE English Language and Mathematics over time will be apparent and changes in the proportions of each grade permitted accordingly.

Setting standards in 2017

Schools are unlikely to be able to predict their students' GCSE English and Mathematics grades in 2017, and grades for other subjects in 2018, with much accuracy for three reasons.

- 1 Abandoning any element of criterion-referenced assessment and moving wholly to "comparable outcomes" by statistical prediction will free the Awarding Bodies and Ofqual from any need to relate standards of attainment in 2017 (and 2018) with those in previous years. Provided that similar numbers of students attain the equivalent grade groups (A*/A = 9 – 7, B/C = 6 – 4, D – G = 3 – 1), distribution of grades within those grade groups can be subject to other policy considerations (see next).
- 2 The new mid-grade (5) will be aligned with average performance in countries such as Finland, Canada, the Netherlands and Switzerland. This is an over-riding policy objective, set out by the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister in *The Importance of Teaching White Paper* (DfE, 2010) as necessary to ensure England's competitiveness with other countries. As such, it is not contested by Labour or any other political party.

Ofqual has not yet explained how new grade 5 will be aligned with performance in other countries, but it will inevitably involve a detailed comparison of subject content and standards of attainment. It is to be hoped that this work will be carried out and published in time to inform the teaching of the new specifications.
- 3 As mentioned above, the new national reference tests in English Language and Mathematics will be taken fully for the first time early in 2017 and the GCSE results those subjects will be used to establish equivalent performance standards for the national reference test (Ofqual 2014, 97 - 99). The

standards established in GCSE English Language and Mathematics in 2017 will therefore be very important because they will establish the standards against which secondary education in England will be judged year by year for many years.

It is difficult to envisage a more far-reaching decision than to increase the demand of GCSEs so as to align standards with attainment in other more successful countries and simultaneously to use these as the baseline both for national reference tests and a school accountability system (Attainment 8 and Progress 8). Standard-setting in 2017 by the Awarding Bodies, supervised by Ofqual, will therefore need to be done with great care.

It is likely that, for many schools, grade rates in English Language, English Literature and Mathematics will be considerably lower in 2017 than in 2016. The reasons for this are explored below. Politically this will presumably be presented by Ofqual and whichever government is in power as students' 'true' level of attainment in contrast with previous grade inflation and as a springboard from which England's future education success can be accurately measured.

Schools' success with the new GCSE specifications will depend on two factors:

- how well they compete with other schools for the higher grades as a result of the new grading system, and
- how well they understand and respond to the higher demands of the new specifications including international comparative factors which are as yet unknown.

These are now discussed.

Success in 2017 - competing for grades

"Comparable outcomes" by which similar proportions of each grade are awarded each year by statistical prediction means that schools compete with each other for each of the higher grades. As the number of candidates awarded each grade is known in advance, the number cannot be increased as a result of higher attainment in the examination as would be the case with criterion-referenced assessment. When some schools' students achieve higher marks, schools whose students attain less well are pushed downwards.

From 2017 this situation will become particularly acute with the new mid grades 6 to 4. This can be shown by comparing the current national percentages for each grade with Ofqual's envisaged percentages in 2017. In figure 4, the percentages of each grade awarded for English Language in 2014 (Joint Council for Qualifications, page 5) is compared with Ofqual's outline predictions (see figure 1). Grades 9 – 7 are allocated within the top 18 per

cent according to Ofqual’s designated proportions of 20:30:50. The total percentages for each grade group is given in red.

Figure 4

	2014		2017		
			9	3.6	
A*	3.6		8	5.4	
A	10.7	14.3	7	9.0	18.0
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B	20.1		6	12.0	
C	27.3		5	15.0	
		47.4	4	20.0	47.0
<hr/>					
D	22.9		3	20.0	
E	9.1		2	10.0	
F	3.6		1	5.0	
G	1.6	37.2			35.0

As in figure 2, replacing A*/A with three grades results in an increased number of grades 9 – 7, but replacing B/C with 6 – 4 results in the highest number attaining grade 4 which is worth 4 points rather than 5 as a grade C in the present grading system.

There will be competition for grades in 2017 and thereafter, but this will be most acute at grades 6 – 4.

Success in 2017 – higher demands

The expectation that all schools will enable all their students to be as successful as possible requires schools to respond to the greater demands of the new GCSE specifications.

Demand has been increased in three ways besides grading:

- examinations to be end-of-course only; no modules, coursework or controlled conditions assignments
- content to be more challenging, and

- assessment by more open-ended questions which are less amenable to practice and coaching.

There is a further demand which has not been commented on – the commitment to align new grade 5 with average performance in a number of other higher-performing countries. This is a response to the policy stated in *The Importance of Teaching* White Paper (DfE 2010) under the heading “Ofqual will measure our qualifications against the best in the world”:

4.39 The independent regulator of exam standards, Ofqual, plays a vital role, but until now has been asked to focus too narrowly on simply maintaining the standards of qualifications over time. This does not help us when other countries are improving faster and making their education systems more rigorous. So we have asked Ofqual to widen its view to reflect the importance of keeping pace with – and learning from – the rest of the world.

4.40 We will legislate in the forthcoming Education Bill so that Ofqual’s objectives include securing international comparability of qualification standards. And we will strengthen Ofqual’s governance by establishing the Chief Executive as the Chief Regulator. This will create a single figurehead within Ofqual who is able to act as the guardian of qualification and examination standards.

4.41 We will invite Ofqual to review and report on the quality and standards of tests and exams at ages 11 and 16, comparing England with high-performing nations and building on work already started for 18 year-olds. Subsequently, Ofqual will make international comparisons an ongoing part of regular reviews of standards.

Work has already taken place on comparing A Levels with qualifications taken by 18 year olds in other countries. This has led to comparisons of approaches to assessment and analyses of syllabus content in Mathematics, Chemistry, English and History as representative subjects (Ofqual 2012). But these comparisons relate wholly to the structure of the assessments and to their content in general terms. They make no attempt as yet to compare the *standards* of the various assessments, that is, their detailed content.

For the new GCSEs in English Language, English Literature and Mathematics, the comparator high-achieving jurisdictions are likely to be some or all of those studied in respect of maintaining qualification standards: Alberta (Canada), Finland, France, Germany, Hong King (China), New Zealand, Singapore, The Netherlands and Massachusetts (USA)(Ofqual 2014, para 26, note). To align the standards of the new GCSEs with some or all of these will require considerable work by subject specialists comparing the detailed content of the various qualifications in order to establish comparative standards.

This work is fundamental to government policy on relating educational standards in England and the secondary school accountability system based on them to those of competitor nations. It will also underpin the standards of the new national reference tests and be necessary to ensure consistency of standards between the Awarding Bodies.

This last issue has apparently already arisen in relation to an AQA specimen paper for new GCSE Mathematics which has apparently been criticized by other Awarding Bodies and the DfE as being insufficiently challenging, prompting concerns that Awarding Bodies may still attempt to maintain or increase their market share by this means (Stewart 2015).

Without assuming any commercial intentions, specimen papers and/or sample answers may be insufficiently challenging in international terms because the examiners who set new papers and select sample answers may be insufficiently aware of standards required in more successful countries. As an example, one of the assessment objectives for new GCSE English Language is:

Explain, comment on and analyse how writers use language and structure to achieve effects and influence readers, using relevant subject terminology to support their views [emphasis added].

Questions will therefore require candidates to analyse literary structures in relation to unseen texts.

The specimen papers and mark schemes published by some Awarding Bodies give rather simplistic accounts of literary structure while others address this in greater depth. For example, AQA states that “Structural features can be: at a whole text level, e.g. beginnings / endings / perspective shifts; at a paragraph level, e.g. topic change / single sentence paragraphs; at a sentence level e.g. sentence length” and addresses the specimen answer in these terms (AQA 2014A, pages 10 -12). In AQA’s discussion of question design rationale, a list of 11 “possible areas for students to develop understanding” of structure are given, again in mostly simple and general terms, e.g “sequence through passage”, “movement from big to small – ideas or perspectives” (AQA 2014B, page 3).

On the other hand, OCR provides a commentary which is more closely focused on structural devices such as figures of speech, e.g. sarcasm/irony, hyperbole/exaggeration, heroic/prosaic language, tricolon and sibilance, inversion of word order (OCR pages 12/13).

The issue here is that it is currently unknown which approach is closer to the standard of examinations for 16 year olds in more successful countries. If awareness and explicit discussion of figures of speech is the norm in these countries, Ofqual is committed by government policy to take this into account when supervising grade setting in GCSE English Language in 2017. A similar problem will presumably arise if an Awarding Body sets unseen texts which are linguistically simpler than the norm in more successful countries and, potentially, than other Awarding Bodies. To fulfil its commitment to aligning the standards of the new GCSEs with average performance in more successful jurisdictions, Ofqual would

presumably need to require Awarding Bodies whose examination papers and mark schemes did not meet those standards to adjust their grade boundaries downwards.

This final uncertainty about grading standards arises because Awarding Bodies and schools have not yet been informed of the international standards with which new grade 5 will be aligned. As the new specifications are to be taught from September 2015, this information becomes increasingly urgent.

How should schools respond? Suggested developments in teaching and learning

Schools are in an unprecedented situation in that, from September 2015, they need to teach examination courses on which their accountability will be based but for which essential information about the required standards is currently unknown. In these circumstances it seems prudent to analyse the requirements of the new specifications *and to make the best decisions possible in the light of available research. In a situation where various commercial providers offer solutions, it would be reasonable to ask for the academic research supporting what is offered and to make decisions by the clarity and robustness of the evidence.*

My subject is English and much of what follows relates to this. It may be also be helpful as an example because it will be examined as two separate subjects – English Language and English Literature – which together will in most cases constitute 30 per cent of students' Attainment 8 and Progress 8 scores. Attainment 8 will consist of each student's best 8 GCSE results including English Language or English Literature (one double weighted if both are taken in the same series), Mathematics (double weighted), 3 other EBacc subjects and 3 others from prescribed list. In most cases English Literature will count in the student's EBacc subjects if English Language is double-weighted, and vice-versa, so that English will count as 30 per cent of the whole. (For a worked example of Attainment 8, see DfE Powerpoint, slide 9). Some English leaders have already used this successfully to argue for additional teaching time for English in Key Stage 4.

Under Ofqual's requirement of consistency, all the specifications and sample examination papers produced by AQA, Edexcel, OCR and WJEC Eduqas are similar in content and demand. IGCSE examinations for state-maintained schools in England will follow the same pattern. The content of the new specifications is summarised at Appendix 2.

The new GCSE English Language sample papers provided by the Awarding Bodies indicate that:

- unseen texts have a higher linguistic demand than at present and will always include words and phrases that most students will not understand;
- unseen texts have a historical and cultural context; students will understand them better if they have read and discussed others of the same period and genre; and

- students will need confidence and resilience to do well on the new papers and these qualities can best be built up by frequent experience in making reasonable deductions and inferences about unfamiliar texts.

Each of these considerations also applies to English Literature in the context of texts which are studied. *The greater emphasis on literary unseen texts in English Language indicates a greater overlap between the two subjects than at present.*

It is clear that to answer questions successfully with the necessary confidence and resilience students will need:

- higher-order reading skills including the ability to make reasonable deductions and inferences when faced with complex or unfamiliar language;
- ‘cultural capital’ – enough experience of a variety of texts to ‘place’ unseen texts historically and draw on this experience when reading and writing about them;
- ability to analyse texts in relation to their underlying literary features (intention, genre, structure, mood, figurative language, etc); and
- experience of these beginning in Key Stage 3.

There is strong evidence that these four needs would be met and higher grades under the new grading system achieved if schools adopted the following four policies relating to teaching and learning:

- (1) use a teaching programme which explicitly develops the higher-order cognitive skills of response and analysis, beginning in KS3;
- (2) recognise that, for English, the new GCSEs require a rich programme of teaching and learning based on exploratory discussion of high quality literature, beginning in KS3;
- (3) accept that the National Strategy model of teaching and detailed tracking of progress, and Ofsted’s previous support of it, are now regarded as unsuccessful and have been abandoned as a distraction from more appropriate teaching; and
- (4) adopt mixed-ability groupings preferably for all lessons but initially at least for skill-development lessons.

Each of these propositions is now considered.

(1) Developing higher-order response and analysis skills

Higher grades in the new GCSE English examinations will require students to discuss underlying features of unseen texts as well as those studied for English Literature. These include genre, mood, tone, the writer’s purposes as evidenced in language and structure,

and figurative devices including possible symbolism. As an example, take the final couplet of Carol Ann Duffy's *Prayer*:

Darkness outside. Inside, the radio's prayer –
Rockall. Malin. Dogger. Finisterre.

The last line may be glossed in an examination as some of the sea areas around the UK and Ireland used by BBC Radio for twice-daily weather forecasts to ships at sea.

A lower level response would identify "the radio's prayer" as a metaphor but struggle to go further. A somewhat higher response would relate "Darkness" in the penultimate line to the dusk falling earlier in the poem and "the radio's prayer" to the other sounds described there as sounds which give their hearers comfort. A higher response still would perceive a symbolic implication – that the poem presents its characters in darkness and needing guidance or at least reassurance in a secular age as sailors at sea do. The highest possible response might relate "the radio's prayer" back to "the minims sung by a tree" in the first stanza as minims are long notes typically sung in hymns or plainsong, or explain that Finisterre means the end of the world and perhaps bring the poem to an end on a questioning note – where do we go after life ends?

My point is that it is impossible to teach students all the information they will need to answer questions on unseen texts well (and that content-driven schemes of work will fail for this reason). To achieve higher level responses to unseen texts, students will need regular opportunities to develop the skills of inference and deduction in a literary context and, to do this, they will need to explore the implications of a variety of texts with light-touch guidance by the teacher rather than instruction.

Instruction is sometimes called IRE: *Initiation-response-evaluation*, or teacher (closed) question – student (recall) answer – teacher yes/no or correct/incorrect feedback. This has been identified as the 'essential teaching exchange' that differentiates classroom interaction from human interaction elsewhere, and it is the default teaching mode in Britain, the United States and perhaps worldwide.

It has long been evident that this is an inefficient method of developing students' understanding because it relies on their working with information provided by the teacher in ways prescribed by her. Effective teaching needs to use young people's natural curiosity to develop both their cognitive skills (understanding) and their ability to perform well in tests which assess understanding rather than recall. This has been repeatedly demonstrated in England by the work of Robin Alexander, Neil Mercer and others. The case is well summarised by Alexander in *Improving oracy and classroom talk in English schools: achievements and challenges*:

Pupils need, for both learning and life, not only to be able to provide relevant and focused answers but also to learn how to pose their own questions, and how to use talk to narrate, explain, speculate, imagine, hypothesise, explore, evaluate, discuss,

argue, reason and justify ...

... we now have robust and replicable evidence, from studies using pre-test/post-test with experimental and control groups, that talk that is cognitively demanding, reciprocal, accountable and/or dialogic has a direct and positive impact on measured standards in English, mathematics and science” (Alexander 2012, pages 4 & 5)

I would add that, for English, talk of this kind needs to be carefully focussed on literary features of text such as genre, mood, tone, the writer’s purposes, language, structure, and figurative devices in order to achieve cognitive development effectively.

A common response by teachers using cognitively stimulating approaches is that students are more fully engaged in the work and enjoy the lessons which are also enjoyable to teach. This may have a bearing on the low-level disruption which Ofsted has noted as a feature of lessons in some schools and the draconian behaviour policies implemented by some schools to prevent this which, in turn, require a passive, teacher-led approach to learning.

As regards evidence, three teaching programmes have been repeatedly proven substantially to increase students’ higher-order response and analysis skills: Philosophy for Children, Feuerstein’s Instrumental Enhancement, and Adey and Shayer’s Cognitive Acceleration. Of these, only Cognitive Acceleration (CA) relates directly to school subjects – English, Mathematics and Science. Cognitive Acceleration in Science Education (CASE) is the longest established of the CA programmes, having been developed during the 1980s. It has been repeatedly shown to increase attainment by between one and two GCSE grades (CASE 2013). The Mathematics programme (CAME) was developed during the 1990s with similar results.

The CA programmes were renamed Let’s Think in 2012. An English programme (Let’s Think in English) has been developed since 2009 on the same principles. It is currently under formal trialling, but initial outcomes are of the same order as Science and Mathematics – see Appendix 3.

(2) A rich and challenging programme of literature-based lessons

The new GCSE specifications and sample papers for English Language and English Literature provide evidence of the need for this. The questions are set on more challenging unseen and set texts than in the past, and most of the marks are for questions requiring whole text responses including evaluation and comparison of unseen texts, that is to say, holistic responses. As shown by the specifications and sample papers, very few marks are awarded for word and sentence level answers.

As outlined above, to answer these questions effectively students will need confidence and resilience; higher-order reading skills; the ability to make reasonable deductions and

inferences when faced with complex or unfamiliar language; and 'cultural capital' – enough experience of a variety of texts to 'place' unseen texts historically and draw on this experience. These qualities are provided most effectively by a programme of varied, engaging and challenging literary texts. For greatest effect, this needs to begin in Year 7 and continue through Key Stage 3 into Key Stage 4, although primary schools are increasingly adopting this approach in Key Stage 2 as preparation for secondary school.

An example of this is given by Alex Quigley, director of learning and research at Huntingdon School, a large comprehensive school in York. Quigley gives the example of Ellie, an able and hardworking student who struggles to achieve university entrance to study English. Her problem "was that she hadn't read enough literature. Her understanding was beset by gaps in her knowledge".

The school reviewed the content of its Key Stage 3 curriculum, looking for better ways of embedding knowledge lower down the school. What would Ellie need in English by the time she left school in order to be ready for university or a professional career?

She would need to have a sound knowledge of the chronology of great literature; she would need to understand the magic of metaphor; and she would need to comprehend and control the infinite complexities of the humble sentence.

From this point we planned where we would address these 'big ideas' and when we would revisit this crucial knowledge and repeatedly hone students' skills. The result: the etymology of English, Beowulf and Shakespeare in Year 7; Restoration comedy and revenge tragedy in Year 8; war poetry. *Animal Farm* and more in Year 9. In effect, the literary texts that we would traditionally teach students at A-Level or GCSE were transported into a more challenging KS3.

Now you may walk into a Year 8 lesson and hear a student just like Ellie talking about comedy conventions; for example, why poor ladies of fashion wore absurd wigs twice as long as their face, or how semi-colons were a vehicle for Restoration comedy.

Quigley confronts the issues of difficulty and student motivation:

You may think this is too much, too young, or that students would be put off by difficult and 'boring' texts far from their experience. I had similar fears myself. But all my reservations have been quickly disproved. Indeed the schemes of learning have ensured that the 'how' of teaching connects these challenging texts and big ideas with pupils' worlds, interest and knowledge. The sitcom *Miranda* stumbles comically and meets Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer*.

The school's subject leader for English adds that "far from being weighted towards the brightest, this approach gives all students, across the ability spectrum, the opportunity to

study high-quality literature, but adds that its success relies on high-quality teaching and differentiation” (Quigley 2014).

This approach gives students the ‘cultural capital’ they need to attain higher grades in the new GCSEs but, as Quigley and his colleague indicate, this will depend on the quality of teaching. Little will be achieved in terms of understanding or student motivation if the lessons are delivered on a whole-class teacher-directed basis. These qualities will be achieved if students are invited to explore texts and concepts in an open-ended way which promotes their engagement and depth of response as outlined at (1) above.

(3) Discontinuing the Strategies approach and detailed tracking

The National Strategies introduced a formulaic lesson model which was fast-paced, directed at the whole class, with learning objective(s), a starter, episodes, learning evidenced immediately in writing and a plenary. This was introduced without any research evidence that it raised attainment. The DfE and HMI now accept that it has failed to raise standards in terms of international comparisons. As evidence of this, in October 2008 the DfE announced that Capita’s contract to deliver the National Strategies would not be renewed when it expired March 2011 and no replacement would be sought.

Evidence of the ineffectiveness of the National Strategies is provided, somewhat ironically, by *The National Strategies 1997 – 2011* which aims to give a brief summary of their impact and effectiveness (DfE 2011). In the two pages allocated to secondary English, the descriptions of effect are either wholly general or unsupported by experience; evaluation consists solely of two quotations from a Grandmother and a Head of Department; and the three graphs show no evidence of improvement. The percentage of pupils attaining level 5+ and 6+ at KS3 flatline until 2008 when the test was discontinued and rise owing to teacher assessment, and the percentages of pupils attaining GCSE A* - C at KS4 and making expected progress from KS2 to GCSE rise in line with GCSE grade inflation which led to the creation of Ofqual (DfE 2011, pages 16/17).

Accompanying their reliance on the National Strategies to guide pedagogy, from 1990 Governments followed a target-driven model of raising attainment with increasingly detailed assessment criteria – National Curriculum levels, sublevels, assessment focusses (AFs) and Assessing Pupil Progress (APP). Teachers were required to assess students frequently to track progress and Ofsted required evidence of detailed progress tracking. Again, this was implemented without any significant research evidence that it raised attainment.

The Government also accepts that this model has failed to raise standards. It removed AFs and APP from the public domain within a month of its election in May 2010 and has subsequently introduced a new National Curriculum without levels. From 2016 education 11 to 16 will be judged only on schools’ GCSE results. The requirement on schools to report students’ teacher-assessed National Curriculum levels in English, Mathematics and Science

to the DfE at the end of Key Stage 3 was discontinued after 2013 so that no record of students' attainment is now held centrally between Year 6 and Year 11.

Following the implementation of a new National Curriculum without levels from September 2014, no method of tracking students' progress has been required or recommended by the DfE or HMI. Schools are therefore free to adopt whatever method they choose. As inspections will from 2016 be triggered only by an inadequate Progress 8 score or other matters of concern such as safeguarding, detailed tracking of students' progress will no longer be required and Ofsted will accept whatever method schools adopt during their increasingly infrequent inspections.

As a corollary to the National Strategies and detailed target-driven assessment, Ofsted originally expected every student to show evidence of progress in every lesson observed. This expectation was related in an undefined way to the expectation – itself not based on any educational research – that students should make at least two levels of progress in the National Curriculum in each Key Stage. This 'progress criterion' was removed from Ofsted observation schedules in 2009. Ofsted now accepts that progress cannot be shown in a single lesson and that expecting it encourages narrow, heavily teacher-directed learning.

The removal of detailed teaching and assessment requirements is intended to give teachers the freedom to develop lessons that will enable students to be successful in the new higher-demand GCSE examinations. This is a reversal of previous longstanding policy, but this reversal has been announced only in very general terms, for example in *The Importance of Teaching* White Paper (DfE 2010). A difficulty for teachers is that they and their Senior Leadership Teams may remain unaware of the extent of the policy changes and their underlying rationale. Alternatively teachers and leaders, having had a particular approach inculcated by the DfE, National Strategies, QCDA and Ofsted for ten or more years, are understandably nervous about relinquishing or even modifying it. Teachers are therefore often still required to conduct lessons according to the National Strategies' formula, to assess students' work frequently against predetermined criteria and, when observed, to provide evidence of 'progress' by every student.

These requirements have gradually been abandoned as educational policy over several years. They are now seen as a distraction from the central issues of teaching which are to increase knowledge permanently and to develop the deeper understanding which underpins the effective use of knowledge and makes it available as skills. In reality there is likely to be a period of transition in which teachers first develop an exploratory, cognitively-aware style of teaching, accepting the more subtle and complex kinds of progression that this offers, while continuing frequent criterion-referenced 'formative' assessment. If appropriately designed and implemented, twice-yearly tests would provide sufficient evidence of cognitive enhancement and higher attainment, so that frequent criterion-referenced assessment would become unnecessary.

Tests at the middle and end of each year would formally assess reading comprehension skills (narrative and non-narrative) and writing skills including spelling, punctuation and grammar. They might be related, even in Year 7, to GCSE criteria. Answers would be objective as far as possible and those involving extended writing would be cross-moderated between staff to ensure consistency of standards. The same tests would be used at each stage in a student's progress through the school. There would therefore be a robust, detailed record of each student's progress throughout KS3 and into KS4 without the need for frequent formal formative assessment..

(4) Mixed-ability grouping

When Let's Think in English tutors introduce a high-quality text to an unfamiliar streamed or setted class in an open-ended exploratory way, it is very common for the class teacher to be surprised by perceptive comments made by students assessed as low ability. This frequent experience calls into question the value of grouping students by tests of ability and, in fact, there is considerable evidence that this prevents many students from obtaining the grades of which they are capable.

Mixed-ability groupings were common in comprehensive schools until the development of governments' target-driven policy from 1990 with its requirement to show students making levels of progress and schools being judged on their percentage of A* – C grades. With this focus on the results of able and reasonably able students only, streaming and setting by ability was understandable and became the norm.

However, the removal of levels from the National Curriculum and the requirement that all GCSE grades count towards Attainment 8 and Progress 8 make teaching by ability-groupings less appropriate.

In 2012 the Sutton Trust commissioned the University of Durham to research the 30 best ways of spending the pupil premium to raise the attainment of disadvantaged pupils. This research now appears on the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) website as a Toolkit. *Of the 30 approaches, ability grouping is one of only two to have a negative effect on students' attainment, exceeded only by requiring students to repeat a year.* The EEF comments:

Low attaining learners fall behind by one or two months a year, on average, when compared with the progress of similar students in classes without ability grouping. It appears likely that routine setting or streaming arrangements undermine low attainers' confidence and discourage the belief that attainment can be improved through effort.

This is supported by a great deal of research, summarized for example by Boaler and William (2001) in relation to Mathematics:

in bringing together the different research studies on ability grouping the general conclusion is that streaming has no academic benefits whatsoever, while setting confers small academic benefits on some high-attaining students at the expense of large disadvantages for low attainers.

But the benefits of setting for high-attaining students are now removed by the new GCSE grading system. In the past setting has had two advantages in relation to examination results: able students achieve more highly when they undertake a differentiated curriculum matched to their ability and in these circumstances, they can take an examination a year or more early and perform as well as others taking the examination later. But these advantages are now irrelevant under the new GCSE specifications. In English, all students will be required to take the same papers with all the Awarding Bodies setting very similar unseen texts (English Language) and set works (English Literature). And early entry is now discouraged by allowing only the first result to count.

On the other hand, there is substantial evidence that ability grouping does not enable students to achieve their best, summarised recently by writers like Ed Baines and Francis and Wong. In summary:

- less able students perform less well in ability groupings than in mixed ability settings, but this is not true of able students
- students are sometimes misallocated to ability groups for reasons such as behaviour or neatness of work, but once allocated to an ability group movement from it is unusual
- students assessed as lower-ability often underestimate their ability and resort to “learned helplessness” (e.g. Hattie 2011, page 53); they develop a negative view of their ability which limits their willingness to work and can cause poor behaviour
- teachers’ expectations are lower with groups of lower-ability students; they naturally provide them with less challenging work and this is reflected in poorer results
- schools typically allocate their less experienced/effective teachers to lower ability groupings
- by international surveys like PISA, the more countries group by ability, the lower their students’ performance overall; for example, Finland, which is one of the most successful countries educationally, abandoned ability grouping in 1985 (Sahlberg 2011, page 22).

On the other hand, high-ability students also benefit from mixed-ability grouping because students with lesser ability as measured in tests often contribute complex and original ideas in discussion when given the opportunity. Baines observes:

Mixed ability groups promote the use of elaboration, explanation and collaborative discussion between peers – all essential ingredients for developing high level understanding and high level thinking skills. Homogenous ability groups are less likely to facilitate these forms of talk possibly because all participants have similar understandings or assume that others already have these understandings.

Schools may find moving from ability grouping to mixed ability difficult to manage because it requires changes in teaching approach. Schools may also fear resistance from parents although, when the rationale of mixed ability teaching is explained in terms of pedagogy and the new GCSE grading system, parents are likely to give schools the benefit of the doubt; and when examination results rise under the new grading and accountability systems more than at schools which retain ability grouping, they will accept that the change is beneficial.

An alternative is to introduce mixed ability teaching incrementally from Year 7 although, if this began in September 2015, it would leave students to prepare for the new GCSE English and Mathematics examinations in ability groupings for several years.

As an interim measure already adopted by some schools using Let's Think in English, schools may wish to arrange for one lesson per week to be taught in mixed-ability groups, using this lesson for the fortnightly Let's Think/Cognitive Acceleration programme with the other lesson used to 'bridge' to other similar work – all Let's Think/ Cognitive Acceleration lessons include suggestions for bridging. All Let's Think lessons have been fully trialled with mixed ability classes and shown to work very well in terms of cognitive growth and student engagement.

This will give teachers who may lack previous experience of managing mixed ability teaching effectively practical experience of it. Over time the engagement of all students in these lessons and higher quality of work achieved by those deemed less able, without loss of attainment by those assessed as able, is likely to lead schools to accept that:

- students develop greater understanding through exploration (discussion) rather than instruction;
- they need time to develop understanding;
- questioning needs to be open-ended (exploratory);
- writing improves through guided discussion as well as through teaching grammar, etc (through increased vocabulary and more varied grammatical structures developed by use); and
- mixed ability achieves higher results overall than ability grouping.

In due course the issue of ability as against mixed-ability grouping will be resolved by outcomes in schools under the new grading and accountability system. It is very likely to be found that mixed ability achieves higher Attainment 8 and Progress 8 measures.

Conclusion

The logic of the new GCSE specifications and grading system, and the highly detailed accountability system which they underpin, leads to the adoption of a more exploratory approach to teaching and learning. As it happens, this has remained common in independent schools over the past 20 years. These schools have never been subject to the target-driven policies which have led to the previous National Curriculum, the National Strategies, detailed tracking requirements, and Ofsted inspections delivered by contractors and focussed on a narrow view of progress.

It is accepted by all the major parties that these policies have failed. International comparisons indicate that standards of education in England are flatlining and lower than in some other countries. The Government's policy, which Labour also accepts, is now to free teachers to focus on pedagogy rather than assessment so as to raise the quality of teaching and learning in state-maintained schools in ways not encouraged in the past 20 years. Somewhat paradoxically, the Government has developed a detailed accountability system which, when fully understood, will require schools to accept and use this new freedom.

Appendix 1 – Outcomes of international comparisons

Note: in each case the score of the highest attaining jurisdiction is given in red.

Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS)

Organised by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement

Tests 9/10 and 13/14 year olds in Mathematics and Science in 60+ countries every 4 years.

Scores for 13/14 year olds in England

	Maths	Science
1999	496 (604)	538 (569)
2003	No participation	
2007	513 (598)	542 (567)
2011	507 (613)	533 (590)

Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS)

Organised by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement

Tests 9/10 year olds in Reading in 60+ countries every 5 years

Scores for 9/10 year olds in Reading in England

2001	553	(559)
2006	539	(558)
2011	552	(571)

Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)

Financed by Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)

Tests 15 year olds in 57+ countries in Reading, Maths and Science

Surveys in 2000, 2003, 2006, 2009 and 2012

Scores for 15 year olds in the UK

	Reading	Maths	Science
2000	Scores invalid		
2003	No participation		
2006	495 (556)	495 (549)	515 (563)
2009	494 (556)	492 (600)	514 (575)
2012	500 (570)	495 (617)	516 (580)

In 2012, problem-solving was also tested with the result: England 517 (562)

Appendix 2 – GCSE English Language and English Literature Specifications

Content and assessment are as follows.

English Language : to assess Reading (50 per cent), two papers requiring response to three substantial ‘unseen’ extracts of 19th, 20th and 21st century fiction, literary non-fiction and functional non-fiction. One paper contains one extract, the other two.

Few marks are allocated for short answers at word or sentence level. The great majority (usually 45 of 50 marks) are for longer answers requiring summary or evaluation of part or whole extracts and comparison of the two extracts on one paper.

To assess Writing (50 per cent), candidates answer one of two questions on each paper. One paper requires narrative or descriptive writing, the other transactional or persuasive writing. Of 50 per cent, 30 is awarded for content and 20 for accuracy of vocabulary, grammar, spelling and punctuation.

English Literature : two papers requiring study of a Shakespeare play, a 19th century British novel, a selection of post-1789 poetry including Romantic poetry and a substantial post-1914 British novel or play (no collections of short stories).

In addition to questions on each of these – which may involve detailed discussion of short extracts which are then related in theme or treatment to the whole text – there will be a question requiring comparison of two unseen poems or of a poem from the set selection with an unseen poem.

5 per cent of marks will be awarded for accuracy of writing.

Appendix 3 – Let’s Think in English

The Let’s Think in English programme of lessons has been devised to develop students’ cognitive abilities in relation to texts, especially inference and deduction. Each lesson requires exploration of an authentic high-quality text in response to literary features such as classification, purpose, writer’s intention, genre, figurative language including symbolism, and narrative sequencing. The lessons derive from the same psychological research by Vygotsky and Piaget as the highly successful CASE and CAME programmes.

The Let’s Think/Cognitive Acceleration programmes are particularly relevant to developing the cognitive skills and confidence that students will need for the new GCSEs. The programmes provide fortnightly lessons which enable teachers to achieve the kind of discussion that increases students’ response skills and powers of analysis. For English, they use high interest texts – fiction, non-fiction, poetry, drama and film – from various periods which help to build the ‘cultural capital’ that students need. The lessons are based on structured challenge, developing higher-level reading response and understanding

through focussed discussion (social construction), problem-solving (cognitive challenge) and structured reflection (metacognition) which makes students aware of how they think most effectively. Examples of lessons are available at www.letsthinkinenglish.org/how-lets-think-works/

The lessons fit comfortably into schemes of work and can lead to written work if the teacher wishes. They work equally well at Key Stages 3 and 4. Working with Pearson Edexcel, a new suite of lessons has been developed to prepare KS4 students for the new English Language and English Literature specifications. *These are generic, relating to all the specifications, not only to Edexcel's.*

Significantly in relation to the importance of all grades in the new accountability arrangements, Let's Think/Cognitive Acceleration is particularly successful with less able students. Initial outcomes of trialling indicate that, as the students develop confidence through the oral development of their ideas leading to more extensive use of language and more varied grammatical structures, these are gradually reflected in improved writing skills. This process is exemplified in the Hampshire case studies available at www.letsthinkinenglish.org/category/updates/ A case study of success with more able students, where cognitive growth is again assessed through writing (as is necessary for GCSE), is given at www.letsthinkinenglish.org/evidence-of-success/

Let's Think in English is currently under formal trialling through the Mayor of London's Schools Excellence Fund. Although trialling is not yet complete, results are such that the programme has been adopted by 120+ schools in London and the South East, Hampshire, Suffolk, Norfolk, Bristol, West Yorkshire, Stockport and Liverpool.

Declaration of interest

The author has been commissioned by Pearson Education Ltd to write lessons and provide training for Let's Think in English to support preparation for the new Edexcel GCSE specifications although not relating directly to them.

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