

Really raising standards in GCSE English : responding effectively to the new specifications and Progress 8

Summary

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The changes to the new GCSEs are unparalleled in that a general school examination is being reformed simultaneously in all its aspects: specification, content, demand, assessment process, grading and school accountability. When GCSE replaced O Levels and CSE in 1986, only specification and content were changed. Demand and assessment process remained unchanged, reflecting the previous two components; the A – G grading system simply unified O Level and CSE; and school accountability (such as it was) was unaffected. Schools are accordingly facing an unprecedented challenge at present with implications of which they may not be aware owing to lack of information from the DfE and Ofqual.

The reasons for these simultaneous changes is acceptance by all the main political parties that England's education system is performing inadequately compared with some others, as shown by all the established international educational surveys (PISA, PIRLS, TIMSS and PIACC). This has led to two overarching aims stated in the 2010 White Paper *The Importance of Teaching*:

- to raise school attainment in England towards that of other higher-achieving jurisdictions
- to reduce the 'tail' of students leaving school with poor qualifications or none.

Since 2012 a complex interlocking series of policies has put in place to achieve these aims. They include reforming GCSEs to make them much more demanding; judging secondary schools' success primarily on the value they add to the attainment of all their students between the Key Stage 2 tests and GCSE (Progress 8); and substantial investment in raising attainment by disadvantaged students, chiefly but not only through the pupil premium. These policies, their origins and their intended effects are described in greater detail in the full paper (pages 2 - 4).

The changes to GCSE have been publicised in previous years. These include the move in 2017 to wholly end-of-course examinations taken only in June; for English, increased demand in terms of unseen and set texts and more open-ended questions requiring evaluation and comparison; the requirement that only GCSE can count in the English 'slot' for Progress 8; and, related to this, double-weighting of English Language or English

Literature for students who sit both; greater similarity between specifications with close control by Ofqual of examination papers, marking and awarding; and a move to a value-added measure of school accountability centred on Progress 8 which compares students' attainment in a specified range of GCSE subjects with their attainment in the KS2 tests.

However, there are other less evident factors will have profound effect on teaching and learning so that schools that are aware of them will be at an advantage over others. These have not been publicised owing to the DfE's and Ofqual's policy of providing limited guidance for schools. The most important are:

1 In relation to Attainment 8 estimates (expected grades indicated by students' KS2 fine-level scores), Progress 8 will reward progress by less able students particularly highly at all levels of prior attainment

Raising a student's expected performance from grade 2 to 3 has equal value for Attainment 8 to raising it from grade 7 to 8 but, within this, **students with a low KS2 fine level score in relation to their next grade above expectation will obviously achieve a higher Progress 8 score if they achieve that grade than those with a higher KS2 fine level score.** Each KS2 fine level score gives an expected Attainment 8 score at GCSE and students who attain this will have a Progress 8 of zero. But students who are taught well enough to attain grades above expectation will achieve a commensurately higher Progress 8 score.

As Appendix 2 (attached) shows, this applies to all levels of prior ability. It is not to be assumed that attaining higher grades will be easy, especially given the greater demand of the new GCSE specifications, but as Appendix 2 shows, **similar Progress 8 scores can be achieved by students with all levels of prior attainment as shown by their KS2 fine-level scores.** Several detailed examples are provided in the full paper (pages 9/10). **This provides a strong incentive to schools to rethink their teaching and learning policies to maximise the attainment of *all* their students.**

2 Ofqual's published policy indicates much higher grade boundaries for the new GCSEs

Ofqual's published indicative grade boundaries for grades 4 to 6 are reviewed and extrapolated to give indicative grade boundaries for grades 7 – 9 and 1 – 3. The mark range for the new floor standard grade 5 is compared with current mark ranges for grade C to indicate the extent of the higher demand from candidates. As will be seen, the new grade boundaries will be considerably higher than at present – see pages 13/14 of full paper and Appendix 3 (attached). This arises from Ofqual's obligation to raise standards in schools in England towards those of higher-attaining jurisdictions.

3 The number of students awarded grades 9 – 7 (and 6 – 4) will be fixed in advance so that schools will compete for them; in particular, grade 8 will be much more difficult to attain than grade A.

Under Ofqual's comparable outcomes policy, the same proportion of candidates will attain 9 – 7 in 2017 as A*/A in 2016. Any element of criterion-referencing is to be discontinued in the first year of the new examinations and grade boundaries fixed wholly statistically and arithmetically. The numbers of each of grades 9 – 7 (and 6 – 4) will be known in advance and schools will therefore compete for them. In subsequent years, the proportions of grades set in the first year will be carried forward, subject to the outcomes of the new National Reference Tests in English and Mathematics.

The numbers of grade 9s will be similar to A*s, but the number of grade 8s has been estimated for the first time in this paper and these will far fewer than grade A. ***The reductions in number of awards for grade 8 compared with grade A are estimated at 49.2% fewer for English and 47.6% fewer for English Literature..***

4 The end of 'gaming'

Concern has arisen following a blog by Tom Sherrington about a meeting of Partners in Excellence (PiXL) at which school leaders were advised to enter whole cohorts for low-demand qualifications such as the European Computer Driving Licence and AS levels in Use of Mathematics and Creative Writing in order to maximise students' Progress 8 scores. It is reported that Ofsted inspectors will be instructed to penalise schools employing such tactics in terms of student outcomes and leadership judgements and that Ofqual is likely to disallow such qualifications from 2019.

In any case Ofqual is already phasing out these low-demand qualifications. The European Computer Driving Licence no longer appears in Ofqual's list of regulated qualifications; AS Use of Mathematics can be sat for the last time in 2016 (last resits in 2017) and AS Creative Writing is last examinable in 2019. As Ofqual's document *Timings for the withdrawal of legacy GCSEs AS and A Levels* (March 2016) shows, all current low-demand qualifications are being withdrawn.

As with the need to end grade inflation by the GCSE Boards, there is cross-party agreement that higher standards require a tightly controlled examination system in which all the qualifications have comparable demand.

The effect of these four developments is to present challenges for schools at each part of the new grading scale: at grades 1 – 4 because progress disregarded by the current examination system will count towards Progress 8; at grade 5 as the more demanding floor standard; and at grades 7 – 9 (and 6 – 4) as the numbers of grades will be fixed in advance and schools will compete for them.

EFFECTIVE SCHOOL RESPONSES

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the new GCSEs are unparalleled in that they have been radically and simultaneously reformed in all aspects. **In these unprecedented circumstances the GCSE Awarding Bodies can give schools only limited help because they themselves have no experience of how the new papers will perform.** Their specifications are wholly new, written to Ofqual's tight requirements, and their marking of the first examinations in 2017 will be closely scrutinised by Ofqual which has the power to require Awarding Bodies to alter grade boundaries.

Similarly professional advisers and consultants, whether independent or employed by local authorities or academy chains, have no experience of preparing students for the new GCSEs. **Accordingly the only advice which they or anyone can reasonably give is that which is based on academic research so repeated and robust as to be incontrovertible. Anything less risks allowing schools and their students to underperform in the new GCSEs.**

Three areas of research have produced evidence of consistently higher attainment – two applicable to all GCSEs and one specifically to English.

RAISING ATTAINMENT IN ALL GCSEs

1 **HMI surveys and advice especially relating to questioning, discussion and feedback, supported by evidence on oracy and Assessment for Learning**

During the late 1990s and the 2000s, HM Inspectorate was reduced to training Ofsted inspectors employed by third parties and monitoring school improvement because curriculum development was led by the National Strategies. By 2008 the Government had accepted that international surveys showed that the Strategies had failed to raise attainment and decided to discontinue them when Capita's contract ended in 2011. HMI then began to reassert its traditional role of surveying good practice in schools and publishing advice. For English, there were a series of reports culminating in two major surveys which provided the necessary basis for rethinking English teaching: *Excellence in English* (Ofsted 2011) and *Moving English forward : action to raise standards in English* (Ofsted 2012).

These surveys indicate a change in what Ofsted expects as good English teaching – away from the teacher-led, fast-paced, several-part lessons recommended by the National Strategies to a more pupil-focussed, reflective approach with detailed recommendations relating in particular to questioning, discussion and feedback. **In addition to raising students' attainment, following Ofsted's recommendations is strategically sound now that privately-employed inspectors are no longer used for inspections. HM English Inspectors can reasonably be expected to follow Ofsted's published recommendations when making their judgements.**

HM Inspectorate's recommendations are supported by evidence from major research programmes in oracy and Assessment for Learning (AfL). Evidence of the success of these approaches in raising student attainment is summarised in the full paper.

2 Mixed attainment grouping

Mixed attainment (often called mixed ability) grouping was common at first in comprehensive schools, but the introduction of school accountability based on A – C (later A* - C) grades at GCSE often led to setting and streaming. There is robust and repeated research evidence that mixed attainment grouping raises the attainment of less able students without reducing attainment by the more able.

The only circumstances in which setting by ability is justified by results is where a group undertakes an accelerated curriculum for the purpose of early entry. However, the DfE is opposed to early entry as a “damaging trend that is harming the interests of many pupils”. Schools that enter students a year early for English Language or English Literature will need to interrupt this in 2016 if they are to achieve double-weighting in Progress 8 in 2017 (entries in 2016 to a ‘legacy’ GCSE cannot count towards double-weighting). This interruption may persuade some to discontinue early entry permanently.

The research evidence that mixed attainment grouping raises overall attainment is summarised in the full paper at (pages 23 - 25), including the Education Endowment Foundation's evidence that attainment grouping is one of only two school policies that *reduces* attainment – the other is requiring students to repeat a year

RAISING ATTAINMENT IN ENGLISH

The approaches to teaching and learning recommended by HMI, oracy and AfL, and related programmes such as Guy Claxton's Building Learning Power, are based in solid research and are unquestionably successful in raising students' attainment. However, implementing them requires teachers to develop their approach to teaching through adapting their existing practice by rethinking how their lessons are delivered. To be effective, this requires initial training and ongoing support on a collaborative, preferably whole-school, basis over an extended period. Schools generally do not have the resources for this, particularly at a time of radical curricular change.

At the same time the new GCSEs' requirement to raise students' attainment makes more effective teaching and learning urgent. There is accordingly a strong argument for using one of the established programmes for increasing students' cognitive skills for which well-designed and thoroughly trialled lessons are provided.

Only three teaching programmes have been repeatedly proven in international trials to increase students' cognitive (reasoning) skills substantially: Lipman's Philosophy for Children, Feuerstein's Instrumental Enrichment, and Adey and Shayer's Cognitive

Acceleration. All three provide a sequence of rigorously trialled lessons which teachers can deliver effectively with appropriate training.

Of these, only Cognitive Acceleration (CA) relates directly to school subjects – English, Mathematics and Science with more limited programmes in Visual Art, Drama and Music. Cognitive Acceleration in Science Education (CASE) is the longest established of the CA programmes, having been developed during the 1980s. It is firmly based on principles defined by Vygotsky focussing on social construction, facilitated challenge, feedback, and metacognition, and is assessed in terms of Piaget’s stages of cognitive development. **The programme has been repeatedly shown to increase attainment by between one and two GCSE grades (Adey and Shayer 1994, Adey 2012, CASE 2013).** In the full paper, further evidence is given from several sources of Cognitive Acceleration’s success in raising attainment.

In 2011 the Cognitive Acceleration programmes were renamed Let’s Think. The Let’s Think in English (LTE) programme provides:

- fortnightly lessons which enable students to interrogate unseen texts of all kinds (fiction, non-fiction, poetry, drama, occasionally film)
- deepening experience in swift, perceptive inference and deduction
- ‘verbal drafting’ of responses through group discussion and feedback
- experience in recognising higher-order features of writing such as pace, irony, wit, suspense, variety of structure, unreliable narrator, etc
- enjoyable, high-interest lessons which stimulate memory
- suites of KS3 and GCSE lessons which develop awareness of 19th to 21st century literary history as a basis for ‘placing’ unseen texts
- optional practice GCSE test questions
- bridging to related texts

The lessons raise the attainment of students of all ability with those of lower prior attainment, including students with special needs and EAL, making particularly good progress. The programme is currently being used by over 300 schools in England with more joining each month.

CONCLUSION

National grade rates will be held steady for English and Mathematics between 2016 and 2017 by Ofqual’s policy of comparable outcomes, ensuring that the same proportion of students achieve grades 9 – 7 in 2017 as A*/A in 2016, grades 6 – 4 as B/C and grades 3 –

1 as D to G. However, individual schools' grade rates are likely to vary considerably between the two years owing to a combination of two factors:

- students' preparedness for the higher demand of the new specifications, in particular (in English) for the evaluation and comparison questions for which most marks will be awarded; and
- the school's response to issues like higher Progress 8 scores for progress by students with lower prior attainment, the capping of numbers of higher grades so that schools compete for them and the greater difficulty of attaining grade 8.

It should be remembered that it will not be possible to compare grades directly between 2016 and 2017 because English and Mathematics will be graded on a 9 point scale in 2017 rather than the current 8 point scale (A* – G). Comparison between the two years will be solely through Attainment 8 and Progress 8.

In these circumstances schools will be more successful if they review and develop their teaching and learning in the light of the imperatives of the new grading and accountability system, especially Progress 8, earlier rather than later. All schools will need to undertake this development in due course and those that do so earlier will be at an advantage. As the reforms to GCSE are unprecedented in their scope, the only reliable guide to the necessary development is repeated, robust, independent research of the kind outlined above.

The cross-party policies underlying the changes are appropriate to the country's future educational needs and economic growth; and the changes themselves, though demanding to implement, are thorough and coherent. When understood and implemented, they will not only raise the attainment of students, especially those assessed as moderately and less able, for the purpose of international comparisons. Their focus on cognitive development rather than instruction should raise the quality of education in England for all students by making teaching and learning, in secondary schools at least, more stimulating, effective, equitable and enjoyable. As standards rise in secondary schools but not in primary ones, the current mismatch between primary and secondary pedagogies and assessment policies will eventually be resolved in the latter's favour.

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Appendix 2 – Progress 8 for next grade above expectation (page 2)

KS2 average fine level (English & Maths) 2010	2015 Attainment 8 estimate	Progress 8 when next grade attained above expectation	KS2 average fine level (English & Maths) 2010	2015 Attainment 8 estimate	Progress 8 when next grade attained above expectation	KS2 average fine level (English & Maths) 2010	2015 Attainment 8 estimate	Progress 8 when next grade attained above expectation
1.5	13.20	6.80	3.7	32.11	7.89	4.9	55.03	4.97
2.0	17.79	2.21	3.8	33.63	6.37	5.0	56.16	3.84
2.5	19.39	0.61	3.9	35.27	4.73	5.1	59.32	0.68
Average	gain a.	3.21	4.0	36.48	3.52	Average	gain e.	5.20
2.8	20.38	9.62	4.1	38.80	1.20	5.2	61.51	8.49
2.9	21.88	8.12	Average	gain c.	5.58	5.3	63.92	6.08
3.0	23.37	6.63	4.2	40.62	9.38	5.4	66.31	3.69
3.1	23.91	6.09	4.3	42.55	7.45	5.5	68.67	1.33
3.2	24.42	5.58	4.4	44.49	5.51	Average	gain f.	4.90
3.3	26.15	3.85	4.5	45.87	4.13	5.6	71.61	8.39
3.4	27.71	2.29	4.6	48.50	1.50	5.7	74.18	5.82
3.5	28.58	1.42	Average	gain d.	5.59	5.8	76.28	3.72
Average	gain b.	5.44	4.7	50.71	9.29	Average	gain g.	5.97
3.6	30.24	9.76	4.8	52.76	7.24			

a. By attaining grade 2 on average in Attainment 8

b. By attaining grade 3 on average in Attainment 8

c. By attaining grade 4 on average in Attainment 8

d. By attaining grade 5 on average in Attainment 8

e. By attaining grade 6 on average in Attainment 8

f. By attaining grade 7 on average in Attainment 8

g. By attaining grade 8 on average in Attainment 8

Appendix 3 – Ofqual’s GCSE indicative mark ranges (page 2)

New grade	Indicative mark range	Current grade	Uniform Mark Scale (UMS)	AQA English Language Unit 3 (ENL03)	AQA English Literature Unit 3 (97153)
9	99 – 100	A*	90 – 100	90 – 100	90 – 100
8	95 – 98		80 – 89	81 – 89	80 – 89
7	89 – 94	A			
6	78 – 88	B	70 – 79	70 – 80	65 – 79
5	67 – 77		C	60 – 69	58 – 69
4	56 – 66				
3	41 – 55	D	50 – 59	46 – 57	40 – 51
2	26 – 40	E	40 – 49	35 – 45	30 – 39
1	11 – 25	F	30 – 39	24 – 34	20 – 29
		G	20 – 29	12 – 23	10 – 19
U	0 – 10		0 – 19	0 – 11	0 – 9

Please note:

1 Ofqual’s indicative mark ranges are for grades 4 to 6. The mark ranges for the other grades have been extrapolated as explained on pages 13/14.

2 The Uniform Mark Scale is used by all the GCSE Awarding Bodies for aggregating and reporting examinations which consist of several papers (units) on a standardised basis. Each qualification is allocated a total uniform mark. For GCSE this is typically 200 for a full course and 100 for a short course. The total uniform mark is divided between the papers (units) in proportion to their importance (weighting). For example, in a specification allocated 200 uniform marks which has two equally weighted papers, each paper is allocated 100 uniform marks. If one paper carries three times the weight of the other, it will be allocated 150 uniform marks and the other 50 uniform marks.

If a paper is allocated 120 uniform marks, the range of marks allocated to grade B is 84 to 95 (70% to 79% of 120); for grade C, 72 to 83 (60% to 69% of 120).

3 The two AQA units give the scaled mark grade boundaries in 2015 scaled up to 100 per cent by way of illustration. Most of the other units in these examinations consist of higher and lower tiers with different C and D grade boundaries for each tier. The two units chosen are not tiered. AQA English Language Unit 3 has a top mark of 80 and AQA English Literature Unit 3 has a top mark of 40. The marks for each grade boundary have been scaled up as if the top mark in each case is 100 (AQA 2015).