

<http://www.ebaccpetition.org.uk>

The NUT, along with many other organisations, launched a petition in December 2012 against government proposals to abolish the GCSE and replace it by the English Baccalaureate.

Please read the explanation below for the implications. (TW)

The Government are rushing through a proposal to abolish GCSEs in favour of an “English Baccalaureate”. The consultation document suffers from flawed logic, limited evidence and vagueness about the consequences.

- i) GCSEs will be replaced by English Baccalaureate Certificates (EBCs) in a select list of academic subjects (English, English Literature, Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, a Language, and History or Geography)
- ii) An English Baccalaureate (EB) will be awarded to students passing the whole list.
- iii) The pass mark will be harder than the present GCSE grade C.
- iv) Those getting below this will not receive a Certificate, but a ‘statement of achievement’ with a grade showing by how much they have failed.

The document proposes to introduce a different set of examinations for other subjects – they will not be GCSEs but they yet even have a name.

This proposal is elitist. It abandons the idea of a common qualification for all, and will lead to massive demoralisation.

We are told that the EBCs will be harder to pass than a current GCSE grade C, so presumably grade B or higher. Currently 42% get a B in English and 38% in Maths. Even fewer will pass the full range of subjects (perhaps 25-30%).

The rest will not get a Certificate but simply a 'statement of achievement' from their school. It will state a grade but as a **fail** - as feedback in case they retake it later.

The consultation document says almost all 16-year-olds will be entered, but the majority, it seems, are being **set up to fail**. This will seriously demoralise young people already facing a high risk of unemployment.

It could also have serious consequences for those passing some subjects but not all. If the EB becomes an entry requirement for university, it will bring about severe cuts in student numbers.

The curriculum

An assumption is made that the EB subjects constitute 'a core set of academic subjects that are valuable for the majority of students'. They will take up almost the entire timetable, making it difficult to achieve breadth and balance.

The exclusion of **creative and performing arts** has already generated many objections. This is a serious omission in terms of students' experience and development, cultural appreciation and self expression, as well as the economic importance of the creative and performing arts. These are subjects which give young people considerable satisfaction, confidence and motivation.

Many 14-16 year olds are motivated by their curriculum including a **vocational** course (engineering, health etc.). The new arrangement gives a strong signal that these are of little value.

Many other fields of study are marginalised and neglected, including design and technology subjects, ICT, religious education, and different ways of **understanding the world**. The University of Oxford calls economics, philosophy and politics *Modern Greats* and Cambridge has a well established Social Sciences degree, but Michael Gove appears to regard a study of contemporary society as unimportant in schools.

This proposal takes us back to the School Certificate of the 1920s and 30s. It is important to encourage schools and individual students to aim for a broad and balanced curriculum, but there are easier means including school inspections, statistical returns, and monitoring by local authorities or their replacement.

Coursework and examination aids

One of the major functions of calculators, periodic tables and source materials is to reduce the emphasis on memorisation and recall and to enable students to concentrate on problem-solving and critical understanding. It is, arguably, limited cognitive development as opposed to memorisation which has led to embarrassing PISA results – arguably a consequence of rote-learning driven by England's accountability regime.

Moreover, in the computer age, there are strong arguments for focusing on **cognitive development** rather than duplicating the information storage which, in daily life, academic institutions and the world of work, is increasingly carried out by digital technologies.

The consultation document is unconvincing in its advocacy of timed written examinations. While these can serve as a check on an individual's independent attainment level and the integrity of work they submit for assessment, many forms of achievement are **assessed more appropriately by other means than exams**.

This is well recognised, for example in the field of Medicine, at university and beyond, where a wide variety of **authentic assessment** is used.

Even within the designated EB subjects, there are many areas which are poorly assessed by timed written exams, including creative or persuasive writing, problem solving in maths, or the application of scientific knowledge to real-world situations.

While coursework has come under attack in the GCSE, it has flourished in **iGCSEs** (mainly used by independent schools). Ironically these are now fully recognised by the Department for Education in its KS4 attainment statistics. Many iGCSEs allow up to 50 percent coursework. Teacher assessment is valued by the iGCSE examination boards, which have good arrangements for moderation. No one has suggested that these are prone to abuse. Will iGCSEs be de-recognized in the future, or permitted only in independent schools or academies?

Grade inflation and accountability

Secretary of State Michael Gove's central argument is 'grade inflation' but the logic of his response is seriously flawed.

There has been considerable concern that an increasing proportion of students are achieving A*-C grades, but little coherence in explanations. It has, unfortunately, been assumed that a higher proportion achieving the target grade must arise from 'grade inflation', either in terms of the nature of questions or the strictness of marking or allocation of grades. This should not be taken as axiomatic.

The accountability system, including Ofsted inspections and the rising 'floor target', have placed considerable pressure on teachers to maximise A*-C grades. This has doubtless led to rote learning, repeated resits, and much out-of-hours coaching of borderline students. These factors may account for most of the upward movement over the past two decades. This is not grade inflation.

There are also times when this gradual increase has accelerated, including the increase in Mathematics from 2009 to 2012 of 10 percentage points. One factor marking out this period is the unsustainable annual rise in the 'floor target' announced by the Secretary of State, and the exacerbated pressure on secondary schools to avoid special measures, potential closure and replacement by academies. These are both brought about by Government policy.

This is not to deny that competition between examination boards may have contributed, but it is unlikely to be the dominant factor. The problem could be resolved more practically by a moderating body which would stop boards competing with each other like commercial businesses. It does not require the complete replacement of GCSE by EBCs.

The consultation document says grade inflation arises from 'the interaction of our qualifications and accountability system' but no attempt to [do something about the accountability system](#). England has a uniquely high-stakes accountability system (Ofsted, league tables of results, variable pay for teachers etc.) which has failed to promote the advances in achievement looked for by PISA international evaluations, for example. It is time for politicians to abandon 'accountability systems' which threaten schools and bully teachers, and to support professional development to encourage new ways of teaching.

The answer does not lie in abandoning a common qualification at age 16 and replacing it with a new arrangement which will fail the majority of young people.

TW, 7 Dec 2012