

## **Have academies made greater use of alternative qualifications?**

- *Academies rely on 'equivalents' to GCSE twice as heavily as other schools to boost their attainment scores.*
- *Government ministers call this practice 'gaming'. Although some other schools use this strategy too when faced with the pressure of league tables and Ofsted inspections, academies exploit it most.*
- *In a fifth of academies, the use of equivalents inflates statistics for five or more A\*-Cs including English and Maths by over 20 percentage points.*

There is a clear contradiction in Government policy in that its claims for the success of academies depend extensively on qualifications that ministers distrust and many of which are to be removed from school league tables. It also impacts on the curriculum, as we show in a later section.

It is unjust that other schools are being forcibly converted to academies because they fall below the 'floor', whereas existing academies go unchallenged despite having very few pupils actually achieving five or more higher-grade GCSEs (5ACemG).

### *The use and misuse of 'equivalents'*

It is a well established principle in England and elsewhere that comprehensive secondary education should include vocational courses alongside a broad academic curriculum, as part of a broad and balanced curriculum. The inclusion of some vocationally oriented courses in the English curriculum provides a wider curriculum offer to all young people and can raise the motivation and opportunities of those who are less 'academic'.

Problems arise when the curriculum is driven by accountability statistics and surveillance systems such as league tables and Ofsted inspection. Schools with less advantaged pupils are often placed under pressure by threats of closure if their headline statistics are deemed to be 'too low'.

This has led schools to engage in what the current Secretary of State calls 'gaming' with alternative qualifications. The irony is that the Coalition Government is claiming that academies are successful on the basis of academic performance which does not stand up to scrutiny when the heavy use of equivalent qualifications is examined.

There are various problems with the way that vocational qualifications have been used in recent years as equivalent GCSEs:

- 1) There is the danger of students being channeled into taking these subjects in order to enhance their school's league table performance, rather than being able to select them as part of a broad and balanced curriculum.

2) Some of these alternative certificates are unrealistically deemed to be equivalent to one or more GCSE qualifications at A\*-C grades. These include qualifications which are not actually vocational subjects but simply easier duplicates of existing GCSE subjects.

3) There has been a perceived lack of rigour in differentiating between genuinely robust and industry-recognised qualifications (such as the Engineering diploma) and others thought to be less reliable or useful to students as a passport to further and higher education or the world of work.

#### *GCSE or equivalent?*

As schools were encouraged to offer vocational qualifications to Key Stage 4 students, it was clearly unreasonable not to count them towards attainment statistics. Unfortunately the process was poorly managed. Perhaps the very idea of drawing up numerical equivalences between very different kinds of qualification is too simplistic. GCSEs are organised so that currently about a third of candidates achieve D-G grades, whereas many vocational alternatives are premised on students passing the qualification provided that they complete the required tasks to a basic specification. There is nothing wrong with this in itself, but the official assumption that these alternative qualifications are automatically 'equivalent' to A\*-C grades is seriously misleading.

Surprisingly, earlier correspondence with a senior official in its research division (26.1.2006) established that even Ofsted had not ascertained whether 'equivalents' were genuinely on a par with a C grade at GCSE. In some academies with low GCSE results, the whole cohort is entered for these vocational alternatives and no pupil fails to obtain the 'equivalent' of A\*-Cs. Our investigation found numerous examples of academy students obtaining E, F or G grades at GCSE in Science or Maths who were deemed to obtain the official 'equivalent' of an A\*-C grade in the same subjects through alternative certificates. (See also TN3 for earlier data.) It should also be noted that many of the 'equivalent' qualifications to GCSE are not in genuinely vocational areas such as Engineering or Health and Social Care, but are rebranded versions of traditional school subjects readily available as GCSEs, for example ICT or Art and Design, and even Science or Maths.

#### *Playing the 'equivalents' game*

A third of academies make no more use of alternative qualifications than maintained schools nationally, and a few don't use them at all. However, many of the academies making little use of them are selective schools (former grammar schools or CTCs) or other schools with very low levels of deprivation. In half of academies, the gap between 5ACemEQ and 5ACemG is more than 10 percentage points, and in a fifth it is more than 20 percentage points.

The data shows very little difference whether we examine academies which have been open for at least two years or at least five years, and whether or not they are run by the major sponsors. In every case the proportion is fairly similar:

- Only a quarter to a third of academies have a gap of 6 percentage points or less;

- Around half have a gap of more than 10 percentage points; and
- Around a fifth of academies have a gap of over 20 percentage points (one in seven for long-established academies, i.e. open five years or more).

The average gap between the percentage of pupils achieving 5ACemEQ and 5ACemG also shows little variance, remaining between 11 and 14 percentage points, whether we are looking at all academies or only the longer-established ones, and whether or not they are run by major sponsors. (Please see later sections concerning older academies and major sponsors for details.)

‘Gaming’ like this dramatically inflates academies’ performance statistics. For example, a gap of 20 percentage points can mean that 40% of pupils count as achieving five or more A\*-C grades with English and Maths including the ‘equivalents’, but only 20% of pupils actually achieve five or more higher level *GCSEs*. This makes many headline claims of academy ‘success’ fraudulent. Here are some illustrations:

- Around the half way mark for ‘gaming’ with ‘equivalents’, one Yorkshire academy with 37% 5ACemEQ, i.e. just above the current floor target of 35%, has just 26% for 5ACemG.
- One of the earlier academies, run by a major sponsor in inner London, has a very respectable 50% 5ACemEQ; this falls to 29% by GCSEs alone.
- In the three worst cases, 67% becomes 22%, 45% becomes 1%, and 70% becomes 0%.

The exploitation of equivalents affects not only attainment statistics overall, but evaluation with regard to:

- the achievement of disadvantaged students;
- the Government’s ‘floor target’;
- achievement of the EBacc group of GCSE subjects;
- curriculum breadth and balance; and
- how many academies have improved and by how much.

(For further details see later sections; also Titcombe 2008 for an earlier analysis)