

The 'Forgotten Third' deserve the dignity of a new type of qualification

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It is a remarkable statistic in the home of the English language, and in one of the world's top economies, that one third of 16 year-olds, after 12 years of compulsory schooling, fail to achieve what the Department for Education describes as a 'standard pass' (grade 4) in GCSE English and maths.

This was the starting point for the independent Commission on 'The Forgotten Third' which was established by the Association of School and College Leaders, and which delivers its final report this month. Its headline recommendation is for the replacement of GCSE English Language with a new type of qualification, a Passport for English, which would be taken at the point of readiness of the student and could be built upon over time between the ages of 15 and 19.

The many hundreds of students, teachers, school leaders, employers and parents who gave evidence to the Commission argued that we cannot continue with a system that – in the poignant words of one 17 year-old – “fails a third of students so that two-thirds can pass”.

This high rate of attrition is a product of the current system of 'comparable outcomes' under which the distribution of grades is determined largely by how similar cohorts have performed in the past. It means that, unless we take action, there will continue to be a dividing line with roughly the same proportion falling short of the coveted 'standard pass'.

The Commission argues that the system must change in the core subjects of English and maths which, in the DfE's words, are “the passport to future study and employment”.

Then there is the very nature of the current GCSE English Language examination. It is, in all but name, a test in analysis of literature, rather than the everyday skills sought by employers. In the words of one Head of English: “There are,

dispiritingly, large parts of the reading element of each English Language paper which many students are simply not intended to access.”

That is why English Language GCSE should be replaced by a Passport in English, certificated by a body of national and international standing. We make a similar recommendation for maths.

The Passport would be a highly respected qualification for a new era which better reflects the full achievements of all students and supports progression to a wide range of pathways. As its name deliberately signals, this qualification would give all students a valued passport to future education and employment.

The recommended content of course-work for writing, speaking and listening would be complemented by assessments in reading and comprehension. These would be focused on young people’s abilities to handle language in a variety of everyday contexts, write with accuracy, and express themselves with confidence and articulacy – the very skills employers and parents have said to the Commission time and time again they want to see in school-leavers.

The Passport would have the merit of being able to be taken by ‘stage not age’, over the 15 – 19 age range. It would also make redundant the wasteful GCSE resit industry which currently means that many young people currently have to retake GCSE English and/or maths in post-16 education only to then suffer the further blow of failing to improve their outcomes.

In 1963, John Newsom and his colleagues presented to the government of the time a beautifully crafted report titled *Half Our Future*. The landmark report painted a picture of 50% of the nation’s 15 year-olds with an unsuitable curriculum leading to poor or no qualifications. The number one recommendation was to raise the school leaving age – which took a decade to implement.

We are hoping for a more urgent response to what we consider is a landmark report in its own right. We need policy-makers to recognise that every young person deserves the dignity of a qualification of which they can be proud.

[The full report can be read here](#)
