

## Examinations at 16+ require incremental and radical change

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February 2021

In 1960, in a divided system, 20% of young people went to grammar school. The rest were more or less written off in terms of examination success. In fact only 16% of sixteen year-olds achieved five O-level passes.

The lack of credentials for the vast majority of young people led to the introduction of the Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE) in the mid-1960s. This had six grades, with Grade 1 being the equivalent of O-level.

One of the great innovations of the CSE was ‘Mode 3’, an arrangement whereby schools designed their own syllabus and assessments, approved by the regional board. The grading was carried out by the school and verified by external moderators responsible to the board. This proved very popular at a time when curriculum innovation flourished, partly in response to the raising of the school leaving age to sixteen in the early 1970s.

Fast forward to 2019 and ASCL’s Commission *The Forgotten Third* recommended the abolition of GCSE English and mathematics in favour of a **Passport at 16** which would recognise students’ skills in the core subjects after 12 years in the school system – and serve as a platform for future education and training.

The Commission further recommended that – in common with CSE Mode 3 – *teachers should lead the assessment*, including portfolios of written work, team orals and online tests. The summary of achievements would be externally moderated.

The extraordinary becomes the commonplace, at a faster and faster rate. The global pandemic has at a stroke passed the assessment torch to teachers to set their students’ grades – and how much easier and fairer this would be today were there to be a suite of assessment tools already designed.

- **For 2021** my fervent wish is for teachers to be trusted to determine their students’ grades without the additional burdens of a muddled, last-minute cocktail of controlled assessments and moderation.

- Let teachers judge the GCSE grades - signed off by headteachers, chairs of governors and multi-academy trust CEOs.
- Let grades be published by mid-July so that the troubled cohort of 16 year-olds (and their families) can know where they are going next – and enjoy a carefree summer holiday. It's the least they deserve.

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**For 2022** (current Year 10) the certainty of sitting familiar GCSEs in examination halls is probably the best option, for students' and teachers' continuity and sanity. That should not preclude some agile development work by the examination boards, especially as they plan to raise their fees. Online tests devised before September 2021 (with models given to schools) could be purposefully woven into next year's GCSEs.

**For 2023** (current Year 9), further incremental steps in how we examine at 16+ can surely be taken, including orals and portfolios in *all* subjects.

**And for 2024** – should GCSEs continue to exist when almost all students are now in education and training until 18? A growing consensus suggests not.

A recently opened international school in Lisbon – teaching the International Baccalaureate from early childhood - seeks to attract families with the words: '*We believe in connecting our children to the ecosystem of education - through links to outside institutions such as the Red Cross and Shark Coders, through shadowing projects, internships and entrepreneurship experiences.*'

This is an increasingly mainstream vision of schooling fundamentally at odds with a series of subject examinations at 16+, rooted in the early years of the 20th century. Students learn best when working together, not apart.

I am fond of reminding education leaders and policy makers that the landmark 1944 Education Act was conceived amidst the Blitz and the Normandy landings. The vision for a better schooling system for all was set out by Churchill and Rab Butler in a time of grave uncertainty, much as the world and our nation face today.

'Advisers advise and Ministers decide' runs the old adage. In order that Ministers can find a way to set the course for both incremental and radical change, the affectionately titled 'Blob' (teachers, leaders, unions, etc.) must unite in an eloquent and creative voice for change – and help today's politicians deliver that change for the second part of this decade.

*Roy Blatchford's forthcoming book 'Equity & Excellence' will be published in April 2021.*