

The Impact of Govian Reform

Overloaded and too high-stakes, today's GCSEs are doing little to prepare students for their future lives, writes Stephen Burley, Head Master of King's High Warwick.

On 11 June 2013 Michael Gove, then education secretary, addressed parliament on the government's reforms of GCSEs and A-levels. It was one of the most significant moments for British education this century.

Mr Gove told MPs: "By making GCSEs more demanding, more fulfilling, and more stretching we can give our young people the broad, deep and balanced education which will equip them to win in the global race."

At the time, there were calls for more academic rigour. Controlled assessment, spoken assessment and coursework more generally were perceived as too soft, too easy. Instead, and with reference to the education systems in East Asia, we moved almost entirely to "linear, externally marked end-of-course exams."

"Content heavy GCSEs have squeezed Key Stage 3."

According to Mr Gove, the new GCSEs would be "more challenging, more ambitious and more rigorous". Inspired by the educational philosophy of E.D. Hirsch, the reforms ushered in a new era of content-heavy, "knowledge-rich" courses assessed by final exams.

The impact of the Govian education reforms has been unremittingly negative. Content heavy GCSEs have squeezed Key Stage 3, with many schools using Year 9 to cover overburdened specifications. The EBacc, in the state sector, has devastated uptake in the creative and technical subjects, with music and DT fairsing worst. Learning has narrowed to focus much more on memorisation as students cram for final exams.

Nationally, we have moved to an assessment monoculture of terminal exams with most students sitting 25-30 hours of GCSE exams at the end of Year 11.

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Our world now is, of course, a very different one from those pre-Covid years and there is a growing sense of the urgent

need for educational change to address these issues and to prepare our young people for their future lives.

The Times Education Commission's report highlighted this powerfully and now, a report authored by a Select Committee in the House of Lords and published in December 2023, provides a very thorough and persuasive vision for 11-16 education. It concludes that "the evidence left us in no doubt of the need for urgent action".

The report's recommendations are eminently sensible: reduce the volume and lower the stakes of GCSE exams; reduce the content of GCSE courses; increase the use of coursework and more varied assessment methods such as project-based qualifications.

It also stresses the importance of prioritising digital skills by introducing a new digital literacy qualification and abandoning the EBacc to ensure a more balanced curriculum that embraces creative, technical and vocational skills.

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We know that the quickest and most effective way to change teaching practice is to change the assessments that the teaching leads towards. Assessment shapes, informs and dominates the teaching and learning that precedes it. Under the reformed Govean GCSEs, the teaching drives relentlessly to the high-stakes written exams, and the processes of memorisation, on which success and failure is decided.

It is important to emphasise that there is, and always will be, an important place for terminal exams in the assessment of student progress and attainment, but we must work towards a far broader assessment portfolio that embraces oracy, creativity, collaboration and digital skills. Some schools are making exciting progress in this direction, introducing new courses with varied assessment methods that more accurately reflect experiences in the workplace.

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Rethinking Assessment, for example, is championing a more balanced vision for the future of assessment, and there is growing interest from the exam boards. King's High is one of a group of founding members of the School Directed Courses Consortium (SDCC) which meets to share best practice on

innovative course design and assessment. There are new courses being developed – inspired by the EPQ – that draw on the model of independent research, learning and mentoring, leading to a range of ambitious outcomes (essays, creative responses, artefacts and performances).

Other courses – like the King’s High Global Changemaker Programme and our Innovation and Entrepreneurship Programme – cover new, future-facing content and encourage pupils to design, create, reflect and problem-solve.

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Rethinking Assessment, for example, is championing a more Assessment methods include TED-style talks, presentations, “viva voce” dialogue, film-making and business planning. For example, the assessment for the Sustainable Engineering module sees students build model electric vehicles, wind-powered generators and load-supporting frames; the assessment of the Law and Legal System module sees students practise advocacy skills in a courtroom scenario overseen by a serving magistrate.

The learning is inspirational to see and students are excited and motivated to develop new skills and move out of traditional comfort zones on challenging and ambitious tasks. It is very clear that rigorous assessment does not need to be monocultural; on the contrary, education can easily be more compelling and more relevant by introducing a genuine and powerful variety of assessment methods. In doing this, the culture of learning and teaching will be uplifted and enhanced.