

COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION

Informal briefing event with A-Level Practitioners

Wednesday 20/03/13 at 6.00pm in Long Gallery

PRESENT:

Members - Mervyn Storey
Danny Kinahan

Staff - Peter McCallion
Sheila Mawhinney
Sharon McGurk
Sharon Young
Paula Best

NOTE OF ISSUES RAISED

1. Defining and assessing achievement in schools

Many participants referred to A-Levels as the 'gold standard' of education. It was unanimously agreed that A-levels provided a good definition and assessment of pupil progress and are quite properly a conduit to undergraduate study at higher education institutions within and outside of the UK.

Participants however, recognised that employers looked at other qualifications including BTEC etc. and schools needed to appreciate the value of these other qualifications for both employers and universities. Some participants highlighted that some students' focus is employment rather than further study. These students need a qualification which will help them get a job. It was suggested that A-levels currently do not necessarily provide the vocational elements which will assist pupils in this way.

Some participants argued that pupils often choose A-Level subjects which are not necessarily linked to their ultimate choice of studies at university and that the ability to choose a diverse set of A-levels was something to be cherished in the current system.

2. Defining A-levels – grades and guided learning

The Ofqual consultation refers to each A-level course including as a minimum 360 hours of guided learning.

Many participants were uncertain as to whether the 360 hours of guided learning was more or less than they currently provided. Some commented that at present, timetable restrictions (and the use of modular exams) tends to limit teachers in their allocation of time and the depth of exploration of a subject.

Participants agreed that they very much valued current transparency in respect of what pupils need to do to achieve e.g. a pass or an A grade etc. Participants called for greater transparency in this regard. Others suggested that guidance did not always appear to be followed by the exam boards and that this led to confusing and unexpected results.

It was also suggested that the grade bands A* to E are not always meaningful particular when comparison between students is made. Some participants felt that sub-grades could be developed so as to better guide students in respect of their learning. Others suggested that further grading would not recognise extra effort or aptitude.

Some participants raised concerns that the introduction of the A* grade served to de-value A grades.

3. AS / A2s - Linear or modular

There was a broad agreement among all participants that the removal of modular assessment and the replacement of this for all subjects with a linear 2 year course of study in which all assessment would be at the end, would not be welcome.

Participants argued that this would unduly pressurise pupils and could affect their ability to study and indeed their mental health. AS modules were described as stepping stones which serve to motivate (particularly boys) and build pupils' confidence in learning and exam techniques. It was argued that the modular approach matches the practice in universities in respect of undergraduate learning and further professional qualifications.

Participants noted that there has been some abuse of the modular assessment system. Participants referred to students undertaking modular assessments in January (of lower sixth) leading to very high levels of repeats – all of which generate substantial costs for students (in some cases up to £200 each) and presumably substantial profits for the examining bodies. Participants suggested that some changes to the use of modular assessments were needed to combat this issue.

A participant advised that universities were using the number of attempts that a student required to pass a module as an additional criterion for admission in a tie-break or clearance situation.

4. AS – a standalone qualification

There was a strong consensus that ASs should not become a standalone qualification. Participants suggested that there would be no academic benefits in doing so nor would the qualification match employers' needs or requirements.

Participants felt that ASs should probably remain a building block for A-levels. It was noted however that Scottish Highers allow for the equivalent of ASs to be taken which are not linked to the final A-level result. The thinking in Scotland is that this allows students to undertake a wide range of study without committing to a limited choice which might constrain future career options.

5. AS - 1 assessment per year

Participants strongly agreed that 1 assessment per year - in the Summer term, with resit opportunities limited to 1 only - would greatly benefit pupils and teachers.

It was suggested that pupils often develop a “lazy” approach and “give it go” attitude to exams they know that they can repeat. Consequently teachers are more pressurised to deliver results and their time is wasted with exam preparation and resits in January.

As indicated above, it was noted that resit costs can be substantial where there are multiple resits and pupils from socio-economically deprived backgrounds would simply be unable to afford these costs. Participants felt that this was serious equality issue.

6. Multiple choice questions and synoptic skills

Participants agreed that the nature of the subject determined the feasibility of restricting the use of multiple choice questions and requiring the demonstration of synoptic skills.

Participants indicated that in respect of A-level Maths, pupils would be rewarded for showing their skills, knowledge and thinking processes to come to a particular answer - this would not be demonstrated through the use of multiple choice questions.

Participants felt that the requirement to demonstrate synoptic skills can allow pupils to highlight a higher standard of thinking skills.

Other participants referred to the widespread use of multiple choice questioning in the USA in respect of high stakes professional exams for e.g. doctors. It was argued that the multiple choice questions are not an easy option and Ofqual's fixation with this subject was a red herring.

7. External assessment

Some participants felt that too much emphasis is placed on coursework and that this detracts from learning. They indicated that they would be in favour of a percentage in excess of 60% for external assessment. Participants felt that for

some subjects the constant round of preparing and submitting internally assessed and externally moderated work was a substantial burden on teachers and limited time for actual teaching.

Participants felt that the percentage of external assessment would depend very much on the subject – subjects like Art would always require a high degree of continuous assessment which could not be managed if it all was subject to external assessment.

8. Higher education institutions - A-Level curricula and examinations

Participants agreed that higher education institutions should have some involvement and input to A-Level curricula and examinations but that they should not have control in respect of the content of curricula and exams. Participants felt that as pupils planned to attend higher education institutions, it was reasonable that these institutions should have some input in respect of teaching and exams.

Participants felt that the role of teachers and their professional judgement may be significantly undermined if the responsibility for A-levels was fully devolved to higher education institutions.

Participants suggested that some higher education institutions may not want to be involved in developing A-levels.

Other participants suggested that there may be a conflict of interest between universities as the partner of exam boards in the development of A-levels and as a destination for A-level pupils. It was suggested that universities might exclude pupils if they had not undertaken the particular A-Level with the exam board with which the university had the development relationship. It was suggested that there was therefore a danger to the portability of A-levels.

Participants also felt that business and commerce should have some input to the content of A-level curricula and exams.

Participants made reference to the impact of the Entitlement Framework and recognised the value of more interaction between schools and tertiary level education to establish that nature of mutual needs.

9. Portability / transferability to other jurisdictions

Participants agreed that grades should be transparent and transferrable, and that Northern Ireland is producing A-level students of a very high standard.

Some participants suggested that there was an argument for a single examining body – the suggestion being that this would ensure consistency of grades for everyone in the UK.

Participants felt that the Minister should resist calls from Ofqual for unnecessary change and should maintain existing standards in NI GCE A-levels.