

The future of GCSEs

Results of a survey conducted by the Association of School and College Leaders

Who participated in the survey?

We sent emails to about 11,000 school and college leaders in England in January 2020, inviting them to fill in a short online survey. We received 799 responses: 9% from executive heads/ CEOs; 42% from heads/principals; 24% from deputy heads/ deputy principals; and 26% from assistant heads/ assistant principals and other senior leaders. Of these, 82% were from mainstream state-funded secondary or all-through schools; 9% from independent schools; and the rest from colleges, alternative provision, special schools and other providers. All participants confirmed they work in establishments which deliver GCSEs.

The findings

We asked the question: Do GCSEs work well for all students?

Yes	11.51%	92
No	88.49%	707
TOTAL		799

We looked at whether there was any difference between responses from independent schools compared to state sector providers. The results were very similar, with 87.67% of independent sector leaders saying GCSEs did not work well for all students compared to 88.57% who said this in the state sector.

Those who felt that GCSEs **did work well** for all students said variously that the grading system allowed students to follow suitable curriculum pathways post-16, that GCSEs were rigorous and provided an opportunity to explore subjects in depth, and that they were valued by students and seen as a benchmark to which to aspire. Other respondents said GCSEs were established qualifications understood by all stakeholders, that they provided a breadth of subjects, and the nine grades covered the ability range. However, some respondents said that, while GCSEs worked well for the majority, they should be adjusted or supplemented with other qualifications for less able students.

Many of those who felt that GCSEs **did not work well** for all students said that these qualifications are not accessible to a significant proportion of lower-attaining pupils, including many with special educational needs, and that attaining grades 1-3 left students feeling like failures, even though it might represent a huge achievement. New GCSE specifications introduced since 2015 which have increased the content and difficulty of these qualifications were frequently criticised. Various factors were mentioned in terms of the inaccessibility of GCSEs. These included the amount of content in the qualifications and the need to memorise large amounts of information, the pressure and stress of a large number of terminal exams taken at the end of courses, and the lack of tiered papers for different abilities in some subjects. Some respondents also felt that GCSEs are outdated and do not necessarily prepare students for future skills needed within industry.

Comments included:

- Because the GCSE does not necessarily address the skills that will be required for employment, they do not mirror skills needed for certain careers and are very rigid and linear in a world that often is not. They have not changed with the times, and still favour the academic student.
- Because GCSES are now so content-laden and deliberately harder, they disenfranchise many students for whom these exams are just too daunting. This is leading to greater anxiety and mental health problems for these students.
- They are not accessible for many learners and this leads to a lack of engagement and limits their opportunities for future progression routes as they are not able to achieve and be successful. It can also lead to a detrimental impact on a young person's motivation and mental health as they view themselves as a failure.
- The style of assessment at GCSE is now weighted in favour of students who are able to retain and recall information more readily. This approach disadvantages cognitively/neurologically diverse learners who may not perform as strongly in this way, but are equally capable of grasping and applying concepts, skills and knowledge.
- Basically, any child who doesn't get a grade 4 gains no benefit, and in the case of English and maths it can actually be a lifelong disadvantage.
- They have become a "one size fits all" method of assessing with the onus on reaching an academic standard rather than knowledge and skill development. Some students find learning in different ways more accessible for many reasons but are penalised (as are schools) in having to take the current GCSEs.
- Some students require a more practical, hands-on-approach to learning and currently there are no valid qualifications to take them forward. The grading system of 9 to 1 is also demoralising for students predicted to achieve a 3, 2 or 1.

The future of GCSEs

We asked whether GCSEs should be scrapped and assessment reviewed at 16; retained but reformed; or retained in their current form. These were the results:

Scrapped and assessment at 16 reviewed	39.55%	316
Retained but reformed	46.93%	375
Retained in their current form	13.52%	108
TOTAL		799

We invited participants to give their reasons for these answers.

Scrapped and assessment at 16 reviewed

Many respondents pointed out that students were now required to remain in education or training until the age of 18 so felt that GCSEs were no longer needed at the age of 16. There were a variety of ideas about what might replace GCSEs with a common theme being that any new system should be less high stakes and geared towards facilitating onward progression. Proposals included a diploma or certificate which denoted the ability of the student in a range of subjects and moving towards 14-18 courses. Many respondents felt

that there should be more emphasis on vocational and technical subjects; that a wider variety of assessment methods should be used such as online tests, portfolios and practical work; and that assessments should be taken at the point when the student is ready rather than by age.

Comments included:

- GCSEs are now not fit for purpose. They were useful when some students left school at 16. They are not now needed in the same way and because of the way they are constructed they do not allow students to develop the best cognitive skills that they will need for the next level, lack flexibility and creativity. A possible replacement could be a 'school certificate' issued by the school confirming that certain milestones have been reached and achieved.
- In an ideal world the entire assessment system would be re-imagined utilising a range of assessment practices including verbal assessment and new technology.
- A lower-stakes set of internally assessed progress measures to inform students of the best pathways for them 14-18. And then a gold standard final assessment at the end of formal education at age 18.
- Greater focus on what will be useful for future employment, such as skills and effort. A lighter touch system where criteria can be ticked off when achieved rather than leaving it to a final high stakes examination.
- A suite of exams in core subjects only such as maths, English, science and a language to ensure that all young people have reached a minimum standard. Remove any sort of league table as this inevitably leads to distortion. Quite possibly these exams would be taken when the student was ready rather than at the end of Year 11 and it would be considered enough to pass to show the standard had been reached rather than this current unhelpful emphasis on getting a really high grade. Then allow young people to get on with post 16 apprenticeships or study.
- Purely from a pupil point of view (disregarding accountability) some record of what has been achieved, in all its breadth, would be essential. For those that do leave school a leaving certificate outlining levels of competence in numeracy, literacy or other areas - similar to ASCL's suggestions for a passport in English.

Retained but reformed

Responses in this group were focused largely on how to make GCSEs more accessible to lower-attaining students, and again, several respondents felt that new GCSE specifications introduced since 2015 had made the qualifications less accessible. Suggestions included reducing the amount of exams, the volume of content in courses, and the emphasis on having to recall large amounts of information. Many respondents suggested that tiered papers for students of different abilities should be available in more subjects, and that there should be a mix of assessment methods such as practical and controlled assessment, and coursework. Many respondents felt that more value should be placed on vocational qualifications as a valid alternative to GCSEs, and that school performance measures needed to be reformed so that a wider mixture of qualifications was recognised beyond the restrictions in the existing Progress 8 and English Baccalaureate measures. Several respondents were wary of wholesale change having already experienced so many changes to GCSEs over the past five years.

Comments included:

- There are lots of strengths to the GCSEs – students, staff and parents understand them and have just got used to the new grading system. There is rigour but the content in many subjects has become too large to cover over the two-year period and still allow sufficient room to discuss, debate and explore questions as they arise.
- We need more options around tiers of entry. It's not fair to put a student aiming for a grade 3 through the same paper as someone aiming for a 9.
- They work to differentiate the ability of a huge number of students; they do the job for a lot of students. However, we require alternative, recognised and valued pathways that are accessible to the large numbers of students who simply cannot access GCSEs.
- I don't think the name of a qualification matters, but others do. I have never understood why vocational qualifications can't be GCSEs, thereby removing the stigma of the name. When you have an established identity, the energy required to launch a replacement and not have it be lampooned by the media is huge.
- Consider a meaningful range of qualifications at 16 – functional, vocational as well as academic. We can't have students who can barely read sitting the same English paper as those who will go on to get a first from Oxbridge – it's not fair.
- Young people, their parents and future employers do not need a new system so soon after the change to 9 to 1 grading. However, the content of courses and their assessment would benefit from reform to better match the skills and aptitudes required in the 21st century – as opposed to relying on memorising large amounts of information and being tested on this primarily in formal written exams.
- End the description of standard and strong passes. Ensure all exams are graduated in difficulty so that every current ability level can access them while also stretching the most currently able further into each paper. Many exams are pitched at the top level from Q1.

Retained in their current form

The majority of this group of respondents did not want to see more reforms to GCSEs after so much change to the specifications and grading system since 2015 and favoured a period of stability. This included both respondents who said 'yes' and 'no' to Q1 (Do GCSEs work well for all students?). However, several suggested that there should be more vocational qualifications and credible alternatives alongside GCSEs.

Comments included:

- We have had way too much reform. We have just reformed GCSEs to 9 to 1 grading. Leave them alone for many years.
- GCSEs should be retained. However, they do not suit all students. For many, they are too hard, irrelevant and demoralising, leading to increased anxiety and low self-esteem. There should be alternative education as an option that runs alongside academic qualifications, e.g. English and maths; skills; general knowledge.
- GCSE provide a good general assessment of knowledge and understanding in a suite of subjects. If you scrap GCSE you either have nothing or yet another version of GCSE.

- We've just had reform of all specifications and assessments at GCSE. In some subjects, these are barely embedded. Every time there's a change, the impact on teachers is huge. Constant change and reform is a significant part of the problem.
- The current system, whilst far from ideal, is understood by parents, employers and students alike.
- GCSEs work well for nearly all students. They are increasingly understood by employers, FE and HE providers. I am not convinced there is a better model for an alternative qualification.

How else might the qualification system be improved?

Finally, we asked participants to the survey: "Aside from GCSEs, if you think the qualification system needs to be improved, how else might this be achieved?"

The question was answered by 667 respondents.

The most common theme was the need for a broader range of qualifications, and in particular a greater emphasis on vocational subjects, which suit the needs of all pupils. Several respondents connected this to school performance tables saying that they should be reformed to give more value to alternative qualifications. A number called for removal of the English Baccalaureate – which judges schools on entries and performance in a combination of traditional academic subjects. There were also several calls for different ways of assessing pupils rather than mainly through exams as is currently the case. Another recurring theme was the need to focus more on what skills and knowledge are needed by employers.

Comments included:

- We need students to be able to demonstrate their achievement in a variety of different ways, not just terminal exam (same goes for A level). There are very few instances in later life where the examination format applies to achievement.
- More vocational qualifications that count on the performance tables, and training and support for staff to deliver these effectively.
- A mixture of GCSEs for true academic research study and then vocational, practical-based learning which develops practical skills needed for industry and manufacturing and construction.
- Not all future jobs are academically based, this surely needs to be reflected in our assessment of young people.
- Do away with EBacc to allow students greater choice to do subjects they enjoy and are more likely to succeed in!
- We need alternative, practical courses which recognise practical skills and do not try to be GCSE equivalents. We also need, therefore, a way to prevent schools being penalised for running these qualifications by the accountability system.
- We have not managed to achieve a parity between academic and vocational qualifications, as successfully done abroad. Until we find a way through this difficulty we will always struggle to have the rich, broad curriculum required for all our students.

- Provide more alternatives to GCSEs that less academic student can access. Some students will never cope with GCSEs for many reasons and putting them through qualifications that we know they will fail is immoral.
- The recent changes to the exam style and syllabuses have disproportionately disadvantaged the least able. We must revert to an exam style that is more accessible and where the difficulty within the paper builds from start to finish. As a head of school for children with mental health issues, we have seen first-hand the disastrous impact of the new GCSEs...and it has been heartbreaking!
- There needs to be a real and honest assessment of how we prepare young people for their future lives – many lessons can be learned from other countries, but we seem wedded to a 19th century model and obsession with measuring.

Conclusion

A large majority of respondents – the people who are responsible for delivering GCSEs in England's schools – do not feel that GCSEs work well for all students, and that the specifications introduced since 2015 have made these qualifications difficult for lower-attaining students to access. Nearly half felt that GCSEs should be retained but reformed with suggestions focused largely on making them more accessible. However, it is notable that a significant proportion of respondents – nearly 40% – believe that more radical action is needed and that GCSEs should be scrapped and assessment at 16 reviewed. Among other respondents there is, however, a weariness of change with so much upheaval having occurred over the past five years, and a desire for a period of stability.

Perhaps the most common theme which emerges from the survey is the need for a broader range of alternative qualifications to GCSEs and in particular vocational qualifications. Equally importantly is the need for these qualifications to be better recognised and valued in school performance tables which currently judge schools largely on the performance of pupils in traditional academic subjects. A greater degree of flexibility would allow schools to tailor options to the needs of the student rather than being driven by the pressure of performance tables to prioritise academic GCSEs. Another recurring theme is the use of a greater range of assessment methods rather than the heavy emphasis on terminal exams taken at the end of a course which do not play to the strengths of all students. It begs the question of whether technology could play a greater role in assessment and whether we could begin to move away from the annual ritual of ranks of students assembled in exam halls every summer.

The survey demonstrates widespread concern with the premise that GCSEs are a suitable qualification for all students. Most school leaders do not think this is the case and worry about the impact on young people who fall below the hard edges of the grading system in terms of their future prospects, and often on their mental health and wellbeing. There is a clear and overwhelming desire for a system which is more flexible and nuanced than the current one-size-fits-all approach.

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