

## Assessment in education in England

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### Abstract

This profile explains the assessment system in England from pre-school through to university admissions testing. It begins by putting the system in context; it then describes the national educational structure, curriculum and assessment arrangements. The government agencies responsible for carrying out education policies are introduced. The profile explores the history of national curriculum and qualifications assessment and describes and discusses some of the assessment policy issues that affect the development, implementation and monitoring of England's national curriculum tests and 14 to 19 qualifications.

### Background: The education system in England<sup>i</sup>

England has a highly regulated centralised system of curriculum and assessment, with its government responsible for almost every aspect of schooling. In 2009 there were 8.9 million students in over 24,000 schools and 350 further education colleges in England, consisting of approximately 4.4 million primary students and 4.5 million secondary and college students (Department for Education (DfE) 2010a; DfE 2010b; Association of Colleges 2010).

Since the end of the Second World War, English education policy has evolved in response to changes in society and the economy. From 1947 children up to the age of 15 had to attend school. The school leaving age was increased to 16 in 1972 and by 2015 all 17 and 18 year olds will have to be in some form of education or training (Teachernet, 2009). The government put in place a national curriculum in 1988, which mandated that schools teach certain subjects and carry out certain assessments (Daugherty 1995, O'Hear & White 1993). Performance tables that report statistics about students' test and examination results for each school have been compiled and published since 1997 (Ray, 2006).

In the second half of the twentieth century, the qualifications that students undertake after the age of 14 also changed. The General Certification of Education (GCE) was introduced in 1951, replacing the School Certificate and Higher School Certificate. It included an increased range of subjects available to students and provided feedback on those subjects separately. The examinations were divided into Ordinary Level (O level) for 16 year olds and Advanced Level (A level) for 18 year olds. O levels were meant to be taken by the top 20% of students; Certificates of Secondary Education (CSE) were introduced in 1965 to cater for the next 40% of 14 to 16 year olds. In 1988 the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), which catered to an even wider ability range, replaced both O levels and CSEs (Daugherty 1995).

### Structure and governance

Compulsory education begins at age 5, with all local education authorities also offering some form of pre-compulsory education. Most students move from primary to secondary school at age 11, and many secondary schools offer post-compulsory education for students aged 16 to 18. There are also post-compulsory colleges, called Sixth Form and Further Education (FE) colleges, which cater for 16 to 18 year olds.

Schools are open 190 days a year; recommended weekly lesson times are 21 hours for five to seven year olds, 23.5 hours for 7 to 11 year olds, 24 hours for 11 to 14 year olds and 25 hours for 14 to 16 year olds. Class size is limited to 30 for the youngest students and classes are generally mixed ability in the primary phase (INCA, 2010). All schools are required to provide a broad and balanced curriculum and there are statutory requirements for particular subjects. Compulsory schooling is divided into four key stages, topped and tailed by non-compulsory schooling, as shown in Table 1 (Isaacs & Colwill, 2005):

Table 1: Organisation of Schools in England

Stage	Year/Grade	Typical age	Type of Institution
Early Years Foundation Stage	Pre-school and nursery education	0 – 5	Pre-school settings
	Reception	4 – 5	Primary school
Key Stage 1	Year 1	5 – 6	
	Year 2	6 – 7	
Key Stage 2	Year 3	7 – 8	Primary school; Middle school
	Year 4	8 – 9	
	Year 5	9 – 10	
	Year 6	10 – 11	
Key Stage 3	Year 7	11 – 12	Secondary school; Middle school
	Year 8	12 – 13	Middle school
	Year 9	13 – 14	
Key Stage 4	Year 10	14 – 15	Secondary school
	Year 11	15 – 16	
Post compulsory	Year 12	16 – 17	Secondary school; 6 <sup>th</sup> Form college; Further Education college
	Year 13	17 – 18	

Overall responsibility for education in England rests with two government departments; the Department for Education (DfE) and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) led by their respective secretaries of state. BIS's responsibilities are solely post-16 year olds. The department(s) responsible for education has changed over time, as shown in table 2. The title changes reflect the priorities of the government of the day and responsibilities of the departments.

Table 2: Departments of Education (BBC, 2010)

Department Name	Years
Department of Education and Science	1964 – 1992
Department for Education	1992 – 1995
Department for Education and Skills	1995 – 2001
Department for Children, Schools and Families	2001 – 2010
Department for Education	2010 –
Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills	2001 – 2009
Department for Business, Innovation and Skills	2009 –

Government agencies, as shown in Table 3, have responsibility for both curriculum and assessment development and implementation. The influence of those bodies has increased over time as successive governments introduced new, centrally controlled, curriculum and assessment instruments. This article concentrates on the years after 1988, when the Education Reform Act put in place the national curriculum and national tests for students aged 7, 11 and 14. In the same year GCSEs were examined for the first time.<sup>ii</sup>

Table 3: Advisory and regulatory bodies in England<sup>iii</sup>

Organisation	Responsibility	Dates
Secondary Schools Examinations Council (SSEC)	Examinations	1917 – 1964
Schools Council	Curriculum and examinations	1964 – 1984
Schools Curriculum Development Committee (SCDC)	Curriculum	1984 – 1988
Secondary Examinations Council (SEC)	Examinations	
National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ)	Vocational curriculum and assessment	1986 – 1997
National Curriculum Council (NCC)	Curriculum	1988 –
School Examinations and Assessment Council (SEAC)	Assessment	1993
School Curriculum Assessment Authority (SCAA)	Curriculum and assessment	1993 – 1997
Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA)	Curriculum and assessment (including vocational)	1997 – 2009
Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCDA)	Curriculum and assessment development (including vocational)	2009 – 2010
Office of the Qualifications and Examinations Regulator (Ofqual)	Regulation of tests and examinations	2009 –

The Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCDA), which the coalition government of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, formed in May 2010, is abolishing, currently develops and advises ministers on the curriculum and related qualifications, improves and delivers national curriculum tests, and reviews and develops qualifications. It is not clear at the time of this writing which agency or agencies will take over QCDA's functions (QCDA, 2009).

The Office of the Qualifications and Examinations Regulator (Ofqual) ensures public confidence in standards and regulates qualifications, examinations and tests in England by monitoring and holding accountable the awarding organisations that offer and deliver qualifications, ensuring that qualifications are fair and are comparable with other qualifications, monitoring standards in qualifications, examinations and assessments, and monitoring the quality of the marking of examinations and other assessments (Ofqual, 2010).

Awarding organisations, which are sometimes called awarding bodies, develop the qualifications and their attendant examinations that Ofqual accredits. The government will not fund schools and colleges to offer qualifications that are not accredited. While there are over 150 awarding organisations registered on the National Database of Accredited Qualifications (NDAQ), there are six

main providers of qualifications for 14 to 19 year olds in England (NDAQ, 2010). They are the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA), the Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), City and Guilds (C&G), Edexcel, Oxford, Cambridge and RSA (OCR) and the Welsh Joint Education Committee (WJEC).

The QCDA acts as an awarding organisation for the national curriculum tests, although it outsources their development, generally to one or more of the awarding bodies above, and Ofqual regulates them.

## **The National Curriculum**

### Introduction of a National Curriculum

Schoolchildren in England are subject to a highly regulated curriculum and assessment regime from the time they enter pre-school or school. What they learn is spelled out in great detail through national curriculum orders. Until recently a child entering the system at age five could sit as many as 105 formal assessments before leaving formal education at 18, leading any number of critics to complain that English students were the most over-assessed children in the world (NUT, 2002). However, the pendulum has swung back to a certain extent, as the following explains.

Before 1988 there was no national curriculum but, concerned about the lack of basic skills among the population, the government set one out for children aged 5 to 16 (Machin & Vignoles, 2006). It has been amended on numerous occasions since, sometimes to make it less complicated, other times to change its emphasis. The Education Reform Act of 1988 demanded a curriculum that set out:

- the knowledge, skills and understanding which pupils ... are expected to have by the end of each key stage [attainment targets];
- the matters, skills and processes which are required to be taught to pupils ... during each key stage [programmes of study]; and
- the arrangements for assessing pupils at or near the end of each key stage for the purpose of ascertaining what they have achieved in relation to the attainment targets for that stage (OPSI, 1988).

It set out core- and foundation-subjects and defined the key stages. It gave the Secretary of State for Education the authority to establish the content of the national curriculum and revise that curriculum whenever s/he considered it necessary or expedient. These powers, and those delegated to the regulatory agencies on the secretary of state's behalf, have been used frequently over the last twenty plus years, fundamentally changing the character of national curriculum and its assessment on a number of occasions. A brief outline of the key stages follows.

### Early Years Foundation Stage

Pre-compulsory education for 0 to five year olds was legislated in the 2006 Childcare Act (OPSI, 2006); the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) was introduced in 2008. The curriculum is not subject based, but centred around early learning goals in six areas: personal, social and emotional development; communication, language and literacy; mathematical development; knowledge and understanding of the world; physical development; and creative development. Children are supposed to achieve 69 goals by age five.

EYFS is assessed through the completion of a government-set profile for every child, which includes information on children's attainments across the six areas of learning and is based on the caregiver's observation of daily activities. The information is passed on to parents and to year one teachers. The

profile consists of 13 assessment scales, with up to nine points available on each scale. The government uses the outcomes of the assessments to evaluate the effectiveness of early years provision (DCSF, 2009g).

#### Key stages 1 to 4

Key stage 1 to 4 students study the statutory national curriculum. Since its inception in 1988 the curriculum has been subsequently reviewed in 1993-95, 1998-2000, 2006-07 (key stage 3) and most recently in 2008-09 (primary). The pace of change reflects the political nature of England's curriculum and assessment policy. Secretaries of state want to be associated with improvements in standards and achievement, and use curriculum reviews as one of the vehicles to achieve these aims.

The most recent version of the curriculum can be found at [www.curriculum/qcda.gov.uk](http://www.curriculum/qcda.gov.uk). It details its main component subjects:

- English (core)
- Mathematics (core)
- Science (core)
- Art and design
- Citizenship
- Design and technology
- Geography
- History
- Information and communications technology
- Modern foreign language<sup>iv</sup>
- Music
- Physical education

Students are also required to study religious education. Key stage 3 students must study careers and sex education. In 2006-2007 the then QCA reviewed the key stage 3 curriculum. All of the core and foundation subjects were kept, but were re-organised to stress the aims, key concepts and key content of each. The revised key stage 3 curriculum was introduced in September 2008, and featured a greater emphasis on numeracy, literacy and the development of personal, learning and thinking skills. It retained subject-specific programmes of study, many of which have prescribed content. Revised level descriptions were due to come into force from September 2010, but the new government has decided not to proceed with them.

In 2009 an *Independent Review of the Primary Curriculum* recommended that the primary curriculum should be organised into six areas of learning, commencing in September 2011, with literacy, numeracy, ICT and personal development forming the new core: understanding English, communication and languages; mathematical understanding; scientific and technological understanding; historical, geographical and social understanding; understanding physical development, health and well-being; and understanding the arts (DCSF, 2009c).

However, the new government announced in June 2010 that it does not intend to proceed with the new primary curriculum. It has stated that it wants to give schools more freedom from unnecessary prescription and bureaucracy. Its goals for the national curriculum are to focus on the basics and

prescribe a minimum national entitlement organised around subjects rather than areas of learning. Until it carries out its review, the existing primary curriculum will be in place for the academic years 2010/2011 and 2011/12 (DfE, 2010c).

Each national curriculum subject is divided into programmes of study for each key stage and attainment targets setting out national expectations for performance (level descriptions) on an eight-level scale. The average seven-year-old is expected to reach level 2 and the aim is to have students move up one level every two years. The programmes of study and attainment targets direct teachers on what they should teach and to what level.

## **National Curriculum Assessment**

### **Assessment policy**

The Conservative government in the early 1980s had an interventionist view of education. Its concerns included the perceived falling standards in schools and children's relatively poor basic skills. (Machin & Vignoles, 2006). Ball speaks of 'indirect evidence of the DES interest in an assessment-led mode of curriculum change and control' (quoted in Daugherty, 1995:10). However, the mode of assessment was not set in stone when the national curriculum was first introduced in 1988.

The DES created a Task Group on Assessment and Testing (TGAT) to recommend what the curriculum should look like and how it should be assessed. It recommended 10 age-related levels of attainment, assessed by a variety of different means including tests, practical tasks and observation (DES, 1987). The government's initial response to the TGAT report was sceptical, branding it complex, too reliant on formative assessment and expensive. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was more inclined to accept back-to-basics tests (Daugherty, 1995).

Despite government reservations, many of the report's recommendations were implemented, albeit briefly. However, the early versions of these assessments proved time consuming and burdensome for teachers and were quickly reshaped in the early 1990s. Gipps argues that it was not simply the assessment burden that forced the change, rather it was a government intent of raising standards and forcing accountability of schools, coupled with a mistrust of teachers, which resulted in reliable and cheaper objective tests (Gipps, 1993). Over the course of the 1990s national curriculum assessment moved away from teachers' control and was transformed into written examinations in English, mathematics and science taken by an entire year group simultaneously. At key stage 3 the then secretary of state, Kenneth Clarke, intervened directly and demanded terminal written examinations taken under controlled conditions (Daugherty, 1995).

The 1993 review of national curriculum and assessment resulted in tests that were shorter than before and externally marked at key stages 2 and 3 (House of Commons, 2009). In 1997 the government started to publish the results of the tests' outcomes. National newspapers published rank orders of schools based on test results, leading schools to scramble for ever higher places in national league tables.

In 1997 the new Labour government introduced literacy and numeracy strategies, which measured schools' success in those areas by the test scores their students achieved, as well as a target culture, mandating ever higher proportions of students reaching certain levels of attainment. National Curriculum assessment continued to be used for a variety of purposes: as a tool to raise standards, to ascertain individual students' progress, to judge individual teacher performance, to ascertain where intervention in a school was necessary, and to hold schools accountable (Stobart, 2008). National

Curriculum assessment remained fairly stable during the first ten years of Labour government, although school leaders complained that in the quest to improve tests results, teaching was being narrowed down to those subjects tested and excessive attention was being paid to those students on the borderline of attaining level 4 at key stage 2 and level 5/6 at key stage 3.

In May 2008, the Children, Schools and Families Committee published a report on national testing that stated that "national testing for school accountability has resulted in some schools emphasising the maximisation of test results at the expense of a more rounded education for their pupils" (House of Commons, 2008a). It claimed that teaching to the tests was widespread, narrowing teaching to English, mathematics and science and in particular those aspects that were tested, which compromised teachers' creativity and children's access to a broad and balanced curriculum. While in principle supportive of national testing, it agreed with Newton's arguments that national curriculum tests were used for too many purposes (Newton, 2007) and recommended that the system should uncouple the multiple purposes of measuring pupil attainment, school and teacher accountability and national monitoring. It also recommended that sampling should be used for national monitoring (House of Commons, 2008a: para 186).

The government initially rejected the Committee's report (House of Commons, 2008b), but in the summer of 2008 problems with the marking and distribution resulted in some schools getting their key stage 2 and 3 results late. An inquiry blamed both QCA and ETS Europe, the agency responsible for marking and distribution (Sutherland, 2008). The most surprising, if indirect, outcome of this incident was the government's sudden abandonment of national curriculum tests at key stage 3 in October 2008. Then Secretary of State Ed Balls appointed an Expert Group on Assessment to look into key stage 2 tests but stated that for key stage 3 enough information was available later from GCSE results to provide students and parents with individual feedback and for school accountability purposes. When the Expert Group recommended the retention of key stage 2 testing in English and mathematics and moving to teacher assessment in science, Balls accepted its advice.

#### Assessing Pupils' Progress (APP)

Another assessment fact that the Labour government took in 2008 was Assessing Pupils' Progress (APP), a three-year strategy that combines teacher assessment in English, mathematics and science with designated measurement of national curriculum levels using 'assessment focuses.' It contains Assessment Guidelines, which are the criteria for each level and provides a recording format for the assessment focuses at each level. There are also standardised exemplar materials, known as Standards Files. Teachers are supposed to assess a sample of their students each term and record their progress against the assessment focuses. They then select the appropriate level boundary for those students. In-school standardisation and moderation provides quality assurance (National Strategies, 2010). The new government has not made any policy announcements about APP, so its future is unclear.

#### Current assessment arrangements

The new coalition government has announced that it will review the national curriculum and its assessment for all key stages. As of this writing, the following assessment arrangements are in place.

All subjects are assessed each year through teacher assessments. Teachers make summary judgements against the attainment targets at the end of each key stage. At the end of key stage 1 students must be assessed in English, mathematics and science. The emphasis is on teachers' judgements, but there are also external tests that teachers use in reading comprehension, spelling and mathematics. The tests are marked within the school and schools decide when to administer them.

All of the tests are criterion referenced. Results of the tests and teacher assessments are provided to parents and the public, and because of the latter, are used to judge school as well as student performance. Teachers' overall assessments are reported both to the local authority and to the DCSF. Aggregated school data are used to form an overall picture of local and national attainment.

Alongside teacher assessment, students must take statutory external tests in English and mathematics at the end of key stage 2 as a key accountability measure for all primary schools. Up until 2009 they also had to take tests in science, but after the publication of *The Report of the Expert Group on Assessment* (DCSF, 2009f) the DCSF withdrew whole cohort testing of science at the end of key stage 2 in 2010. National standards in science at key stage 2 are now measured through a statutory sampling arrangement.

The English and mathematics tests are administered on set days. Each test takes about two years to develop and is trialled beforehand. The QCDA had been the commissioner of outside agencies to develop the tests, but this responsibility will probably be taken back to the DfE now that the new government had decided to abolish the QCDA. The average student at the end of key stage 2 is expected to reach level 4, and the former government's goal for 2020 was to have 90% of students achieving this level in English and mathematics (DCSF, 2009a). Schools are expected to set and publish performance targets for the percentage of students who will achieve levels 4 and 5 (DCSF, 2009d). In 2010, 81% of students reached level 4 in English and 84% in mathematics (DfE 2010d). Eighty-one per cent of the national sample for science achieved level 4 (DfE, 2010e)

Students used to be assessed externally at the end of key stage 3 in English, mathematics and science. Achievement at the end of this key stage is now reliant on teachers' summative judgements across all subjects. The former government had announced that external assessments through a national sampling might be undertaken (DCSF, 2009e), but the new government has not announced its intentions in this regard. An average student is expected to achieve at level 5 or 6 by the end of key stage 3. In 2007 (the 2008 test results were never published) 74% of 14-year-olds achieved a level 5 or above in English; 76% in mathematics; and 73% in science.

## **The examinations system**

### **Background**

The qualifications system for post-14 students is also highly centralised and regulated; regulators oversee the system and awarding organisations develop and implement the qualifications and their assessment.

There is a national curriculum for key stage 4, but the system shifts at that stage from a curriculum-led model to an examinations-led one, with almost all students embarking on one or more accredited qualification (Stobart, 1991). Rather than having a school leaving certificate, secondary students in England take individual, subject-based courses, usually of two years' duration, that lead to individual qualifications. The government measures its success in upper secondary education by the number of qualifications 16 and 18 year olds achieve and how well they do in them.

Fourteen to 16 year olds have more flexibility in what they can study than younger students. They are required to follow programmes of study in English, mathematics and science and also must study citizenship, ICT, religious education, sex education and work-related learning. They are entitled to, but do not have to, study modern foreign languages, the arts, humanities subjects and/or design and technology. The introduction of subject choice allows this age group to pursue vocationally related

qualifications should they chose to. Prior to 2004, 14 to 16 year olds had to study languages, humanities and D&T and it is possible that the new government will re-instatement some or all of these subjects after its curriculum review. There is no compulsory curriculum at all for post-16 students.

New curricular opportunities for secondary students were introduced following the 2005 *14-19 Education and Skills White Paper* (DfES, 2005), which formed the mainstay of the previous government and current assessment arrangements. Its six main goals were to:

- provide a strong foundation at key stage 3,
- tackle low post-16 participation,
- ensure that all students have a grounding in the basics of English and mathematics and the skills they need for employment,
- provide better vocational routes that equip students with the knowledge and skills they need for further learning and employment,
- stretch and challenge all young people, and
- re-engage the disaffected.

To support these goals, government introduced or expanded new opportunities for this age group including apprenticeship programmes both for 14 to 16 year olds and 16 to 25 year olds. The former allows students to pursue vocational qualifications for two days per week, while otherwise following the national curriculum; the latter allows young people to engage in paid work while pursuing vocational qualifications. It also introduced functional skills qualifications in English, mathematics and ICT; new Diploma qualifications in 14 vocational and three academic sectors/subjects, and incorporated more challenging material in GCSE and A level programmes. None of these goals is antithetical to the new government's stated education policy, but doubtless it will recast the emphasis. Its earliest policy efforts have been centred on school structure rather than curriculum or assessment, but it has already announced that it is dropping the three academic Diplomas.

Although programmes of study are detailed within the national curriculum for 14 to 16 year olds in the subjects mentioned above, key stage 4 and beyond is dominated by assessment through qualifications. Each qualification is graded separately, and there is currently no overarching certificate at the end of compulsory schooling, although the former government's Diploma, introduced in 2008, is a composite qualification. A qualifications framework, the National Qualifications Framework, which may be replaced by a Qualifications and Credit Framework (Ofqual, 2008), is currently in place that houses accredited qualifications from entry level (special educational needs) to level 8 (PhD) across a number of subjects and sectors. The framework is maintained by Ofqual but independent awarding organisations produce and assess individual qualifications.

Qualifications can be academic or vocational and most qualifications are not tied to a specific age, even if some, such as GCSEs, are predominantly taken by one age group. Because the post-14 curriculum is flexible, it allows for qualifications beyond the national curriculum subjects; the post-16 curriculum is absolutely flexible and, for an individual student, is defined by the qualifications s/he takes. At key stage 4 most students take level 1 and 2 qualifications, the most popular of which are the GCSEs. GCSEs are graded A\* through G, although only a grade of A\* through C (level 2) is considered a good pass. Students take on average about eight GCSEs (JCQ, 2008), generally including English, mathematics and science, because these are compulsory subjects and also because

the government's accountability policy is based on how many of their students schools can get to obtain five or more GCSEs at grades A\* to C, including English and mathematics. In 2010 almost 70% of students achieved five or more GCSEs (or the equivalent) grade A\* to C and 98.7% achieved five GCSEs (or the equivalent) grade A\* to G (JCQ, 2010b). In 2009 (the 2010 figures were not available at the time of this writing) almost 50% of students achieved five or more GCSEs (or the equivalent) at grade A\* to C including English and mathematics (DCSF, 2009b)

Post-16 students mostly study level 3 qualifications, which include Advanced Subsidiary Levels (AS), A levels and a wide variety of vocational and vocationally related qualifications. Most students take four or more AS levels in year 12 and complete three or more A levels in year 13. The AS is a free-standing qualification, but it also makes up the first half of an A level. A levels are graded A\* through E and the pass rate in 2010 was 97.6% (JCQ, 2010a). Much of the reason why the pass rate is so high is that schools and colleges are highly unlikely to admit students onto an A level course who they do not believe can pass that course. Another reason is that students who do badly on their AS qualifications are unlikely to continue the course. Vocational students are more likely to be studying at FE colleges than at schools and some work as part-time apprentices.

#### GCSE and A Level assessment

Qualifications assessment is almost as tightly regulated as national curriculum assessment. The major purpose for this regulation is ensuring standards and comparability, and those are of great importance in a system where students' life chances are determined by the outcomes of the examinations they sit. But with increasing specificity comes a loss of teachers' professional control over what is taught and awarding bodies' ability to innovate. Baird and Lee-Kelley (2009) argue that politically driven education reforms often exacerbate issues and problems in qualifications development.

While there are myriad other qualifications available to post-14 students, the two flagship national qualifications are the GCSEs and A levels. GCSEs, first examined in 1988, combined content and standards from O levels, aimed at the top 20% of the cohort, and CSEs, aimed at the next 40%, and which also met the needs of the bottom 40%, were over a decade in the making. Spurred on by the raising of the school leaving age to 16 and by the fact that many students were leaving education without qualifications, the Schools Council worked on forming a single system of examinations during the 1970s. In 1984 the government accepted the SEC's recommendation that a single system of examinations should be introduced, as long as the new qualifications were underpinned by qualification and subject specific criteria, the standards of the O levels (grades A to C) and CSEs (grades 2 to 5, subsequently D to G) should be carried forward, and that most subjects should offer two or more tiers of assessment, each aimed at part of the cohort, and each based on positive achievement (Torrance, 2002; Daugherty, 1995; Lambert & Lines, 2000). Almost the entire cohort at age 16 takes at least some GCSEs; in 2010 over 700,000 students took GCSE English and over 750,000 students took GCSE mathematics. Both of these subjects' test-takers included older students who were re-taking the qualifications because results above grade C are the gateway to further education and good employment (JCQ, 2010b results).

Originally, A levels were not graded, but as early as 1953 the government introduced a distinction grade. When five grades (A to E) were established in 1963 A and O levels were norm-referenced, that is, a certain proportion of the candidates were awarded certain grades. For A levels the recommended percentages were: 10 % A, 15 % B, 10 % C, 15 % D, 20 % E and a further 20 % allowed an O level pass (Robinson, 2001). In a system that specifies proportions of candidates, the band of marks in a grade can be very small, for example, in 1982 the difference between a B and a D grade could be as few as eight marks. While norm referencing guarantees that a relatively small

number of students will achieve grade A, the standard of that grade A can fluctuate from year to year depending on the cohort. In 1984, the Secondary Examinations Council advised that grade boundaries should be more criterion referenced. Examiner judgement was used to the award of grades B and E, with the remaining grades determined arithmetically. A levels ceased to be norm referenced in 1987 (Select Committee, 2003) and the approach to grading remained the same until the introduction of Curriculum 2000. Most A levels were linear, i.e. students took their examinations at the end of the two-year course.

The numbers of students entered for A levels has increased dramatically from fewer than 7% in 1951 to well over 40% in 2010. Although the number of subjects available has increased dramatically since the 1950s, the most popular remain English, mathematics, the sciences and history, with psychology and business studies the most popular 'new' subjects. (Robinson, 2001)

In September 2000, A levels became completely modularised six-unit qualifications (although since the 1990s, awarding bodies increasingly offered subjects such as mathematics and the sciences in modular form), the first three units of which formed the AS. Examiner judgement was used to determine grades A and E, the other grades were determined arithmetically. A uniform marking system was introduced to facilitate awarding bodies' equating the outcomes of different modules taken by different students at different times. Curriculum 2000 was criticised for breaking subject teaching into too many parts, for creating an unmanageable assessment burden on students and teachers and for stifling creativity and teaching 'around' subjects, as opposed to teaching directly to the examinations. Independent schools' questioning of the grading of the summer 2002 examinations also increased the suspicions around the revised qualification structure and the policy that underpinned it (Priestley, 2003).

After a review in 2006, the A levels underwent more fundamental structural and assessment changes. Most<sup>v</sup> of the A levels that have been taught since September 2008 contain four modules rather than six; the first two comprise the AS. The second two modules are called A2 modules and the 2006 review resulted in these modules including material that was more challenging than in those introduced in 2000. In order to recognise this increased demand and to enable selective universities, which had been complaining about excessive numbers of students obtaining A grades, to separate applicants with the most potential, the government introduced an A\* grade, which was awarded for the first time in the summer of 2010. In order to achieve the new A\* a student must achieve an A grade overall on his or her A level and 90% scaled marks in the A2 modules. In 1990, 6.1% of grades awarded were grade A; in 2000 the number had risen to 17.8%; by 2006 it was over 20%. An A grade is awarded at 80%; B 70%; C 60%; D 50%; E 40%. In 2010, 8.1% of candidates got an A\* (an additional 18.9% got a grade A) (JCQ, 2010a: provisional results).

#### Assessment policy

Over its first 20 years the GCSE remained relatively stable, although like the A level, the number of subjects available dramatically increased. GCSEs have always been criterion referenced, and based the outcomes on the specifics of what each student had achieved in each subject. Criterion referencing was seen to be both fairer and more motivating for students.

The SEC published GCSE national criteria in 1985 in 17 subjects. SEAC published revisions to the criteria in 1990, SCAA published further revisions in 1995, and the QCA revised them further in 2000 and 2007. Agreed 'Common cores' for A levels were first produced by the awarding bodies in 1983. They were not regulatory – they were simply descriptions of content that the awarding

bodies agreed on. A-level principles were agreed between SEAC and the then Secretary of State in 1991. In 1993 SCAA produced A-level cores that were used to accredit all A-level specifications for the first time. (Greig, 2009: personal correspondence). QCA revised the A-level criteria in 1998 and again in 2006.

Subject criteria create more uniformity – and by extension more reliability – but you could argue that they also allow potentially less innovation. By 2009 the number of GCSE subjects that had criteria increased to 37; if more than one awarding body were going to offer a particular subject the regulatory authorities wanted that subject to have criteria associated with it.

Subject criteria set out the knowledge, understanding, skills and assessment objectives common to all syllabuses in that subject. They provide the framework within which awarding bodies create the syllabus details. Those syllabuses must also meet the regulators' general requirements, including the common and qualifications criteria as defined in *The statutory regulation of external qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (QCA, 2004). Common criteria set out the functions of qualifications, content (including titles, structure and subject matter), assessment (including design of assessment and application of assessment methods) and determination and reporting of results (including aggregation and grading). Additional criteria for different types of qualification, including GCSEs and A levels, provide more detail on content, assessment and reporting. Subject criteria are intended to help ensure consistency and comparability of standards across the awarding bodies and that rigour is maintained. That rigour comes at a price; as with the national curriculum, secondary teachers complain that they have to teach to the examinations and that reading around a subject is no longer rewarded.

Each set of subject criteria elaborates upon aims and learning outcomes, content coverage (for example, GCSE history syllabuses must contain 25% British history), assessment objectives and weightings, the scheme of assessment (including the balance of internal and external assessment) and grade descriptions (Ofqual, 2009c).

Most qualifications aimed at 14 to 19 year olds are also governed by codes of practice, the aims of which are to promote quality, consistency, accuracy and fairness in the assessment and awarding of qualifications, as well as to help maintain standards across syllabuses both within and between awarding bodies, and from year to year. To achieve this the codes set out the principles and practices for the assessment and quality assurance of qualifications, the roles and responsibilities of awarding bodies and centres, and the requirements for a high-quality examination process (Ofqual, 2009a). Ofqual uses the codes of practice to monitor awarding body practice and has the power to intervene if it judges that standards are not being upheld. Tattersall (1994, 2007) argues that awarding bodies' powers have been eroded through the increasing use of criteria, codes of practice and scrutinies (post-delivery analysis of how well a qualification is working, which Ofqual runs).

Both GCSEs and A levels include internal and external assessment. Typically a GCSE will have 25% internal assessment, originally referred to as coursework, but now more tightly defined and managed, as controlled assessment. Controlled assessment regulations spell out the rules for how each subject's assessment is set, the conditions under which it is taken and how it is marked. In all cases, some of the assessment is taken under strictly supervised conditions. Some GCSEs in applied subjects have 60% controlled assessment; some, such as mathematics, have none at all. A typical A level will have 25-30% internal assessment, but some have none at all and applied ones will have up to 67% internal

assessment. Vocational qualifications typically have little, or no, external assessment (Ofqual, 2009b).

Both GCSEs and A levels are now modular in format, although for the GCSE this is quite recent and a product of the 2007 criteria reviews. Almost all of the new GCSEs contain four modules, which are assessed twice a year. Students can re-sit modules only once, and 40% of the assessment must be taken at the end of the course. The A levels regulations are a bit more flexible, with unlimited re-sits and no terminal assessment rules. There is no common uniform mark scale for GCSEs.

Regulation has expanded to include newer qualifications such as vocational qualifications, the Diplomas and Functional Skills. The regulatory agencies control which syllabuses are accredited. The development timescale is protracted: revising criteria takes about four months, including a public consultation, development of the syllabuses about six or seven months and the accreditation process another six months. The time available is not always sufficient to create inventive syllabuses, and Baird and Lee-Kelley (2009) argue that because the end date for qualifications development almost never shifts, it is the awarding bodies whose available time is generally truncated.

The coalition government has pledged to re-visit GCSEs and A levels' structure and content, especially the latter, but at the time of this writing has not made any policy decisions. The Conservative Party had, however, prior to the 2010 election, commissioned and accepted a report by the former rector of Imperial College, Sir Richard Sykes, which might indicate future directions. It recommended that qualifications should be subject to far less regulation, that awarding bodies should be free to develop appropriate new qualifications in consultation with universities and employers and that those qualifications need not conform to a set structure or assessment regime. It wanted to see fewer qualifications at age 16, with only core subjects such as English and mathematics externally assessed (Sykes, 2010).

### **University admissions tests and examinations**

The Sykes Review also made recommendations about university entrance tests. Currently, students apply to university through the University and Colleges Admission Service (UCAS) (UCAS, 2010). They are allowed to apply to five universities (but only to four medical schools) and those universities either reject the applicant or make a conditional offer based on the qualification grades s/he must achieve. Universities base these offers on teachers' projected grades, GCSE and AS outcomes, teachers' letters of recommendation and students' personal statements. Applications far outstrip the number of places available and in some cases universities have been using additional admissions tests to complement information about students' predicted outcomes. Sykes and his colleagues recommended that "government should consult with universities on the benefits and challenges of developing a standardised University Admissions Test" that would measure language, mathematics and reasoning skills (Sykes, 2010: 4).

Additional admissions tests used by selective universities for certain courses include the National Admissions Test for Law (LNAT), Biomedical Admissions Test (BMAT), Graduate Medical School Admissions Test (GAMSAT), and Thinking Skills Assessments created by Cambridge, Oxford and UCL. Although the number of applicants taking a university admissions test is increasing, it is still a minority. A 2009 report from Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA) stated that 21 per cent of universities would set entrance examinations for some of their applicants for entry to courses in 2010, but the numbers outside law and medicine would be very small (SPA, 2010).

## Conclusion

The highly regulated curriculum and assessment system found in England was put in place for the best of intentions: to ensure comparability of standards across subjects, syllabuses and over time. Successive governments have used the outcomes of national curriculum tests not only to gauge students' abilities, but also the success of schools and of government policy itself. For qualifications, central control has meant that syllabuses tend to look very much the same from one awarding body to the next because the content, assessment methods and assessment weightings are so tightly specified. External assessments (examinations) do not vary much from year to year and internal (controlled) assessments are now also the subject of precise rules. And because some members of the higher education community no longer believe that they get enough information from A level results, some universities are introducing their own admissions tests.

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#### ENDNOTES

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<sup>i</sup> For a fuller account of the assessment system in England, see Isaacs, T. (2010) 'Educational Assessment in England'. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*. 17, 3, 315 – 334.

<sup>ii</sup> For a fuller history, see Tattersall, Kathleen, *A brief history of policies, practices and issues relating to comparability*. In Newton, P., Baird, J-A., Goldstein, H., Patrick, H. and Tymms, P. (eds). *Techniques for monitoring the comparability of examination standards*. QCA, London 2007, pp 43 - 96

<sup>iii</sup> Adapted from a table in Tattersall (2007)

<sup>iv</sup> Recommended at primary stage, compulsory for key stage 3

<sup>v</sup> The exceptions are the sciences, mathematics and music, all of which have six modules.