



The Future of GCSEs, A-Levels and University Admissions Post Covid-19

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ABOUT REGENT GROUP

Regent Group is an innovative, technology-enabled private education provider that has grown exponentially over the past 20 years. Its vision is to be the UK's first truly local London University with a global focus, a global brand and global campuses from 2025. It aims to provide students of all ages and from non-traditional backgrounds with an outstanding education that enhances knowledge, skills, employability and character.

From modest beginnings – a single £20 private tuition – Regent successfully launched its first independent sixth form college in 2000 and established Regent College London in 2010 to deliver BTEC Higher National Diplomas and provide students with alternative progression routes into Higher Education.

Since 2013, Regent has offered a range of HND business programmes and partnered with four respected Universities to deliver foundation degrees, bachelor's degrees, top-up degrees and master's degrees in a range of subjects.

From March 2020, Regent Group has offered all of its secondary and higher education programmes virtually via Regent Digital.

INTRODUCTION

This short report was commissioned by Regent to investigate the impact of Covid-19 on examinations in the UK and globally, and to identify any lessons to be learned that can inform future reforms to assessment and higher education admissions practices. It builds on Regent's recent report entitled 'Digital Learning: The Impact of Covid-19 on the Higher Education Sector.'¹

The key findings are set out below with a small number of constructive recommendations for decision-makers and sector stakeholders. The report is divided into three parts exploring the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on examinations in 2020 and 2021; the history of public examinations in England; and options for redesigning assessment in England post Covid-19.



KEY FINDINGS

- Globally in 2020, governments were forced to rapidly adapt assessment and examination systems in light of the Covid-19 pandemic. In particular, those countries most reliant on terminal examinations faced huge challenges adapting their assessment systems so that results were accurate, fair and delivered in time to facilitate entry to higher education.

- Although these problems were not unique to England, educational reforms implemented in the last five years that have limited the role of ongoing assessment, coursework and modular tests, meant that there was a scarcity of moderated information about students' attainment to inform final judgements once examinations had been cancelled.

- The devolved governments of the UK have already put in place arrangements to mitigate potential disruption to examinations in 2021. At the time of writing, exams will still go ahead in England and Northern Ireland but with adjustments. Scotland has cancelled its GCSE equivalent, Higher and Advanced Higher exams. The Welsh government has cancelled both GCSEs and A-Levels, replacing them with assessments that will be delivered in the classroom but set and marked externally.

- In England, the government has announced that it will consult on future degree places being offered on the basis of actual grades rather than predicted ones. Universities have welcomed this proposal which, it is hoped, will be implemented before the next election. Whilst future changes will undoubtedly mitigate current variations in teacher predictions, it remains vital that students have access to reliable in-course assessment information to help them make well-informed decisions about their higher education applications.

- At nearly 70 years old, A-Levels are one of the world's longest surviving school examinations. They are considered by many as the 'Golden Standard'. Initially designed as a higher education entry exam, the A-Level system has been criticised for being 'too narrow' with unsuccessful efforts made to broaden the number of A-Levels studied in the 1960s and 1970s, and an ill-fated attempt to introduce a 14-19 Diploma in 2008.

- A modular approach to A-Levels was first introduced in 2000. Under this system, AS-Levels were studied and examined in Year 12 that were worth 50% of the overall A-Level qualification. Reforms implemented in 2015-17 have seen a return to a more traditional, linear, two-year format with all exams taking place at the end of

Year 13. Critics of these reforms argue that the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the potential weaknesses of terminal exams and strengthened the case for a return to modular assessment and qualifications that incorporate both coursework and summative testing.

- Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, some high-profile commentators have argued that England's current examination system is no longer fit for purpose.

- Education Select Committee chair Rob Halfon has called for a 'true baccalaureate at 18' arguing that 'GCSEs have had their day. Young people need the opportunity to develop the knowledge and skills that they need for future employment through a broad and relevant curriculum that links explicitly to the real world and is assessed holistically.'

- Former Education Secretary Lord Baker has argued that the present curriculum does not correspond to the needs of students or employers in the digital age. He concludes that pathways should lead at 18 to an Academic Bacc, a TechBacc or a Creative Bacc, all of which could be a combination of exams, coursework and teacher assessment.

- Post Covid-19, a newly established coalition of headteachers and educationalists - The Rethinking Assessment Group - has argued that most public examinations don't examine the right things. They contest that 'the wider capabilities and dispositions wanted by employers such as creativity and collaborative problem solving are largely absent; important aspects of the development of character, resilience and social and emotional learning are missing; and important aspects of practical and applied learning are almost entirely overlooked.'

- There is an internationally growing body of innovative and often digitally enabled assessment practices that can help to bridge the current gap between testing what students 'know' and what they can 'do'. Advances in education software are also enabling students to move away from 'pen and paper' exam responses to digitally completed, submitted and marked alternatives. Such potentially transformative assessment systems merit further consideration to ensure that any future educational reforms in England are underpinned by global best practices.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Decision-makers and stakeholders should consider educational reforms that include:

- 1 Reintroducing some form of modular examinations or externally moderated teacher assessment to safeguard GCSEs and A-Levels for 2021 and beyond;
- 2 Consulting with stakeholders on the longer-term future of GCSEs and A-Levels to ensure that assessment systems in England better meet the needs of students, universities and employers in a digital age;
- 3 Commissioning a comprehensive international review of alternative, technology-enabled assessment systems to ensure that any future educational reforms in England are underpinned by global best practices;
- 4 Piloting and implementing secure and reliable digital alternatives to 'pen and paper' testing and marking; and
- 5 Ensuring that any future changes to degree admissions practices take into account the need for reliable in-course assessment information that helps students make well-informed decisions about their higher education applications.



PART A: THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON EXTERNAL EXAMINATIONS IN 2020 AND 2021

1. Across the globe in 2020, governments were forced to rapidly adapt external assessment and examination systems in light of the Covid-19 pandemic (see Table 1). The changes were most urgent for students in 'secondary school' settings (or equivalent) who were preparing for end of phase examinations, commonly required for higher education entry.



2. In particular, those countries most reliant on a short season of terminal examinations faced enormous challenges adapting assessment systems so that final results were accurate, fair and delivered on time to facilitate entry to higher education.

3. All UK countries experienced similar challenges redesigning their assessment systems. In England (for GCSEs, A-Levels and many vocational qualifications) schools and colleges were asked to provide judgements of the final, centre assessment grades (CAG) that students would have been most likely to achieve. Ofqual and the exam boards then developed a statistical model to standardise grades, with awarding organisations completing quality checks in other qualifications. However, following concerns about the fairness of the 'algorithm', it was announced in August 2020 that A-level and GCSE results in England would be based on unmoderated teacher-assessed grades.^{1 ii}

4. Although these problems were not unique to England, recent educational reforms that have limited the role of ongoing assessment, coursework and modular tests, meant that there was a scarcity of moderated information on students' attainment to inform judgements once examinations had been cancelled.

5. In its briefing from May 2020, Ofqual noted that a wide variety of high-stakes school-leaving exams and university-entrance exams are used around the world.ⁱⁱⁱ These exams are of different styles and the significance of teacher assessment varies greatly between them. Ofqual argues that it is unsurprising, therefore, that a variety of actions were taken by different countries in relation to their exams in response to the pandemic.

6. Exams were also cancelled in France, Norway, Italy and the Netherlands but with differing levels of impact. In France, the Baccalauréat was cancelled for the only time since its introduction in 1808, with results based on students' average in-year tests and homework marks. In Italy, written exams were cancelled with teacher assessment accounting for 60% of the final marks rather than the usual 40% (oral exams continued). In the Netherlands, results were based on in-school exams which usually account for 50% of the final result. Whilst exams were cancelled in Norway teacher assessment only counts for 80% of final marks so the impact was much more limited.

7. Exams were postponed in Spain, China and the Caribbean. In Spain, university entry exams were delayed and adapted to reflect the proportionate loss in learning. In the Caribbean, exams were postponed with final results based on newly designed multiple choice papers and teacher assessment. In China, the Gaokao university entry exam was put back by one month to July.

8. In Germany, Hong Kong and the USA exams continued but with adaptations. In Germany, all 16 federal states agreed that exams would go ahead with modifications made for social distancing. Similar arrangements were put in place in Hong Kong. In the USA, the College Board rewrote new exams for all subjects which could be taken across a range of digital devices (PC, tablet and phone).

9. All approaches can be seen, to some extent, as a compromise. Several countries saw students' results rising to varying degrees. In the USA, students reported technical difficulties completing the digital tests. However, overall, the impact was less apparent in those countries where assessment systems routinely incorporate a balance of both teacher assessment and external examinations.

10. The devolved governments of the UK have already put in place arrangements to mitigate any potential disruption to examinations in 2021. However, their approaches differ.

11. At the time of writing, exams are still going ahead in England, but some have been moved back with reduced content in some subjects. The Prime Minister's official spokesman has reinforced the view that: 'exams are the fairest way of judging the students' performance.'

12. In Scotland, the GCSE-equivalent National 5 exams have been cancelled and replaced by teacher assessments and coursework. Higher and Advanced Higher exams, initially scheduled for a delay of two weeks, have now also been cancelled. Exams in Northern Ireland are still going ahead but the number of papers in some subjects has been reduced.

13. By contrast, GCSE and A-Level examinations in 2021 are to be cancelled in Wales. Instead assessments will be externally set and marked but delivered within the classroom. Although broadly welcomed by the education sector, one teachers' union has claimed that the proposed system promises 'exams by stealth'. Sophie Howe, Future Generations Commissioner for Wales, has also suggested that GCSEs should be permanently replaced with assessments which are centred around pupils, "not testing".

14. The impact of Covid-19 on A-Level examinations (and equivalents around the globe) also created specific challenges for universities managing the entry of new undergraduates. In particular, rising grades has meant fewer students not meeting entry requirements. In France, a rise in the proportion of students passing the Baccalaureate led to the government creating an additional 10,000 university places. In England, the Office for Students (OfS) has committed to

funding extra places for medical, dentistry and some laboratory-based programmes to cater for an increased numbers of students meeting their conditional offers in 2020.

15. In England, the government has recently announced that, in the future, Universities will offer degree places on the basis of actual grades rather than predicted ones. Universities have backed such a change following a review. A government consultation will be carried out and it is expected that changes will take place before the next general election.^{iv}

16. Predicted grades have been a core feature of the English education system, with teachers' predictions of students' A-Level performance forming the basis of university applications. Over time, teachers' predicted grades have been shown to be inaccurate (typically too high).^v

17. It can be argued, however, that predictions were broadly more accurate when teachers had access to externally validated assessment information such as coursework, modular examinations or AS level qualifications. For example, a 2011 study by the Department for Business Innovation and Skills found that around half of teacher predictions were accurate.^{vi} By comparison, a 2019 study by UCAS found that only 21% of accepted 18 year old applicants had met or exceeded their predicted grades.^{vii} Whilst future changes will undoubtedly mitigate such variations in teacher predictions, it remains vital that students have access to reliable in-course assessment information to help them make well-informed decisions about higher education applications.

ⁱ Unless the algorithm gave a higher result than the CAG in which case it stood.



PART B: A BRIEF HISTORY OF PUBLIC EXAMINATIONS IN ENGLAND

18. The first public examinations for schools in England were introduced in 1858. Schools approached universities such as Cambridge and Oxford and asked them to produce exams that boys could take 'local' to where they lived.²

19. Andrew Watts, former Director of the Cambridge Assessment Network, notes that 'In the early papers, question after question asks for the recall of facts, often from set books or periods of history, or sections of the Bible. This reflects a view of the educated person as being a collector of knowledge.'^{viii}

20. In that latter part of the nineteenth century exams demanded students learn large amounts of information by heart, draw maps from memory, list the names of kings and queens, and recount significant events from English history. However, from the outset, examiners complained that students were cramming facts 'to pass' and did not demonstrate that they understood what they had learnt.

21. The School Certificate for 16 year olds and the Higher School Certificate for 18 year olds were introduced in 1918. Students had to gain six passes including English and mathematics to obtain the School Certificate.³ Students who passed could then stay on at school to take the Higher School Certificate. At this time, most pupils left school at fourteen without any formal qualifications.^{4ix}

22. In 1943, The Norwood Report recommended the tripartite system (grammar, technical and secondary modern) and the introduction of the General Certificate of Education (GCE).^x The report also noted that whilst exams can motivate pupils, provide teachers with a syllabus and give an objective measure of achievement, they can also dictate the curriculum, invite children to view education simply as passing exams, encourage cramming and uniformity, and neglect the knowledge teachers acquire of the pupils in their class over time.

23. The GCE was introduced in 1951, divided into Ordinary or O-Level for 16 year olds and Advanced or A-Level for 18 year olds. For many these two examinations, particularly the A-Level, represent and remain the 'gold standard'. The lack of credentials for the vast majority of young people (i.e. those not attending

grammar schools) led to the introduction of the Certificate of Secondary Education or CSE in 1965. This had six grades, with grade one being the equivalent of O-Level.

24. The General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) was introduced in 1986 as a replacement for O-Levels and CSEs. It was more consistent with 'comprehensive' education and allowed secondary modern schools to compete with grammar schools in those areas where they still existed.

25. At nearly 70 years old, A-Levels are one of the world's longest surviving school examinations. Initially designed by Universities as a higher education entry exam, the A-Level system



has been criticised by some since as early as the 1950s for being ‘too narrow’ and for consigning too many students to predictable failure (until 1987 results were norm-referenced meaning 30% of students automatically failed to achieve a pass grade).

26. A-Levels have undergone a number of changes over the years (see figure 1) with unsuccessful efforts made to broaden the number of A-Levels studied in the 1960s and 1970s, and an ill-fated attempt to introduce alternative 14-19 Diploma style qualifications that bridged the gap between academic and vocational study in 2008.

27. A modular approach to A-Levels was first introduced in 2000. Under this system, AS-levels were studied and examined in Year 12 that were worth 50% of the overall A-level qualification.⁵ Reforms implemented between 2015-17 have seen a return to a more traditional, linear, two-year format with all exams taking place at the end of Year 13.

28. Perennial complaints that exams are getting easier, concerns about grade inflation at both GCSE and A-Level, and a declining position in the OECD’s international comparison of achievement between 2005 and 2009, led former Education Minister, Michael Gove, to drive through a comprehensive suite of major exam reforms.⁶

29. Gove abolished many vocational qualifications, formulated plans for an English Baccalaureate (Ebacc)⁷, introduced a new numerical grading system and new attainment and progress measures at GCSE^{8 xi}, minimised coursework in favour of unseen examinations, made A-Levels tougher, and phased out the modular AS-A2 system.^{xii}

30. Whilst plans are emerging across the UK nations that take into account the potential disruption to GCSE and A-Level exams in 2021, it would seem prudent to consider, and where possible begin to put in place, reliable and robust solutions for 2022 and beyond.

² Girls were not officially permitted to enter public examinations until 1867.

³ Performance in each subject was graded as: Fail, Pass, Credit or Distinction.

⁴ The 1918 Education Act raised the school leaving age from 12 to 14.

⁵ Typically, students studied four subjects in their AS year, dropped one (achieving an AS level) and continued with the other three in their A2 year to achieve full A-levels in those subjects. Examinations for modular courses were available at different points in the year.



⁶ Michael Gove served as Secretary of State for Education from May 2010 until July 2014. The reforms he instigated at GCSE were implemented predominantly between 2015 and 2019, and the A-Level reforms were implemented predominantly between 2015 and 2017.

⁷ The Ebacc is an accountability measure in England. It measures the proportion of children who secure a grade 5 or above in English, Maths, Science, a humanity and language GCSE.

⁸ Attainment 8 – Pupils’ grades in their 8 highest GCSEs are combined to produce a number score. These 8 Best GCSEs must include their grades in Maths and English Language or English Literature GCSE. Progress 8 – Students’ progress from a baseline when entering secondary school and results in their 8 Best GCSEs, five of which have to be in Ebacc subjects.

PART C: REDESIGNING ASSESSMENT IN ENGLAND POST COVID-19

31. Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, a growing body of commentators have argued that England's current assessment and examination system is no longer fit for purpose. In particular, it has been suggested by some high-profile commentators that the GCSE is now redundant given that, in England, young people are required to stay in full-time education, start an apprenticeship or traineeship, or spend 20 hours or more a week working or volunteering while in part-time education or training up to the age of 18.^{xiii}

32. Radical changes to A-Levels have also been proposed by some commentators, with critics suggesting that (as the qualification primarily serves to aid entry to higher education) it would be better if universities controlled the testing process rather than exam boards who tend to 'produce predictable papers amenable to teaching to the test'.^{xiv}

33. In a 2019 speech given by Education Select Committee chair Rob Halfon, he argues that 'The acquisition of core knowledge is important. But dry rote learning for exams is not the way forward and GCSEs have had their day. Young people need the opportunity to develop that knowledge and the skills that they need for future employment through a broad and relevant curriculum that links explicitly to the real world and is assessed holistically'...'what

we need is a true baccalaureate at 18. Just as the International Baccalaureate does in more than 149 countries, this should recognise academic and technical skills together with the young person's personal development.'^{xv}

34. This accords with the recent thoughts of former Education Secretary Lord Baker who argues that the present curriculum does not correspond to the needs of either students or employers in the digital age. He notes that data from PISA show that tests at the age of 16 in 8 academic subjects are rare.⁹ Moreover, most tests at 15 or 16 years are also accompanied by coursework and teacher assessments and in almost all cases there is some assessment of technical and vocational study. He concludes that education pathways should lead at 18 to an Academic Bacc, a TechBacc or a Creative Bacc, all of which could be a combination of exams, coursework and teacher assessment.^{xvi}

35. An alternative to A-Levels has already been introduced but the qualification is in its early days. Launched in September 2020, T Levels are 2-year courses which follow GCSEs and are equivalent to 3 A-Levels. They have been developed in collaboration with employers and businesses and offer students a mixture of classroom learning and 'on-the-job' experience during an industry placement of at least 315 hours.^{xvii}

36. It is worth noting that any future examination reforms at 16 would inevitably require a rethink of A-Levels (and other qualifications typically taken at 18) to meet the needs of both secondary age students and the growing body of mature students returning to education as a result of the Prime Minister's recent 'lifetime skills guarantee'.^{xviii}

37. Covid-19 has further galvanised those calling for reform of the current exam system in England. One newly established coalition of headteachers, educationalists, academics and policy makers (The Rethinking Assessment Group) contests that most public examinations, especially in secondary education, don't examine the right things.^{xix} They argue that the wider capabilities and dispositions wanted by employers such as creativity and collaborative problem solving are largely absent; important aspects of the development of character, resilience and social and emotional learning are missing;



and important aspects of practical and applied learning are almost entirely overlooked.^{xx}

38. Critics of recent educational reforms argue that the 2020 pandemic highlighted the potential weaknesses of terminal exams and strengthened the case for a return to modular assessment approaches and qualifications that incorporate a balance of both coursework and summative testing.^{xxi} This argument was reinforced when Ofqual chief, Dame Glenys Stacey, told MPs that exams are only reliable to one grade either way.^{xxii}

39. Whilst it is broadly agreed that coursework is not a panacea, it has been suggested that greater availability of externally moderated assessments during Covid-19 would have provided a more reliable view of achievement than data on previous pupils' attainment. Although some critics argue that coursework is an 'easy option', ongoing assignments that include research, data collection, wider reading and presentations (rather than a memory test) are seen by some to align strongly with the requirements of both university courses and future employers. In addition, the Covid-19 experience has highlighted the potentially transformational role for digital technology in enabling remote assessment as well as rapid and reliable external marking and moderation of coursework.

40. To ensure that reliable systems are in place for teacher assessment in 2021 and beyond, John Dunford has proposed that key senior staff (Lead Assessors) should be trained to conduct internal assessment at external standards, with at least one Lead Assessor per exam centre.¹⁰ These assessments should be made across the full syllabus of knowledge and skills in each subject, thus increasing their validity. The Lead Assessors would oversee grading in their own institutions and moderate grading in other centres. In order to provide confidence across the education system, Lead Assessors could be trained and accredited by the Chartered Institute of Educational Assessors (CIEA).^{xxiii}

41. Looking beyond 2021, there is a globally growing body of innovative, holistic and often digitally enabled alternatives to traditional assessment methods.^{xxiv} These include digital badges (that enable 'micro-credentialing'); digital high school transcripts; digital portfolios (using web pages to curate wide-ranging student achievements); character scorecards; online validated critical and creative thinking tests; comparative judgement processes; and extended project qualifications that are equivalent to 50% of an A-Level.

42. PISA at the OECD is moving away from just assessing how 15 year olds perform across the world in single subjects like English, Maths and Science and are now assessing a variety of learning skills and dispositions using their framework for assessing how young people do in the vital skill of collaborative problem-solving.

Promisingly, the UK ranked 15th and above average against this measure in 2017.^{xxv}

43. Taken together, the highly promising alternative assessment systems that are emerging internationally, the challenges highlighted by Covid-19, and the apparent global appetite for assessment reform, suggest that the time is ripe for wider consultation on the future of assessment and examinations in England so that any educational reforms are underpinned by global best-practices.

⁹ PISA is the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment.

¹⁰ John Dunford is a former secondary head, general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, National Pupil Premium Champion and current chair of the Chartered Institute of Educational Assessors (CIEA).



Table 1: a comparison of international approaches to examinations during the Covid-19 pandemic 2020

COUNTRY	SUMMARY OF APPROACHES, ISSUES AND OUTCOMES ^{xxvi xxvii xxviii xxix}
England Scotland, Wales and NI took a similar approach and faced similar issues	<p>For GCSEs, A-Levels, and many vocational qualifications, schools and colleges were asked to provide judgements of the final, centre assessment grades (CAG) that students would have been most likely to achieve.¹¹ Ofqual and the exam boards developed a statistical model to standardise grades, and awarding organisations completed quality checks in other qualifications.</p> <p>However, following controversy about the algorithm, it was announced in August 2020 that all A-level and GCSE results in England would be based on unmoderated teacher-assessed grades.^{xxx} At A-Level, there was an increase of 10 percentage points in the number of top grades awarded. At GCSE in England, 78.8 per cent of GCSE results were pass marks, up from 69.9 per cent in 2019.^{xxxi}</p>
France	<p>High-school students did not sit the Baccalauréat exam for the first time since its introduction in 1808.¹² Students received an average score in each subject, calculated from marks given for tests and homework throughout the year. The 2020 pass rate was 95% - over 7 percentage points higher than 2019. The government created about 10,000 extra university places for September.</p>
Germany	<p>Initially expressing differing views, all 16 German states agreed in March that the 2020 exams would go ahead. Several states reported results that were marginally higher than usual.</p>
Norway	<p>All written exams for high school students were cancelled. In Norway, classwork contributes 80% of a student's final report card marks with only 20% of marks based on final exams.</p>
Netherlands	<p>Central national exams were cancelled. Students gained their school-leaving certificates based on school exams which normally contribute 50% of the final grade. A third of secondary schools reported that 100% of their pupils had graduated - about five times more than in previous years.</p>
Italy	<p>Written exams were cancelled with teacher assessment counting for 60% rather than the normal 40%. Oral exams went ahead on schedule but under socially distanced conditions. Marks were generally higher than in previous years with examiners awarding the maximum possible score in 9.9 per cent of cases, compared with just 5.6 per cent in 2019.</p>
Spain	<p>The 2020 university entrance exams, the Selectividad, were delayed with the university enrolment adapted to new dates. Overall, the Spanish pass rate was within one percentage point of 2019.</p>
China	<p>The Gāokǎo university entrance exams were postponed by one month to July.</p>
Hong Kong	<p>The main Diploma of Secondary Education continued under socially distanced conditions.</p>
The Caribbean	<p>High school exams were postponed to July and based on marks from at least one newly designed multiple choice paper plus teacher assessments.</p>
USA	<p>The College Board wrote new AP exams for all 28 subjects in response to the crisis (the Advanced Placement tests are like A-Levels). Most tests lasted 45 minutes and had one or two free-response questions. Students wrote and submitted their responses within an allotted time for each question and were able to take the tests on any computer, tablet, or smartphone. There were reports of technical problems completing tests. Some subject areas saw improved results: others worsened slightly (results have been increasing year on year over the last decade).</p>

¹¹ International research shows that disadvantaged students fare badly when it comes to predicting grades.

¹² 2020 was to be the last year of the Baccalauréat in the form familiar to generations of French students. Reforms due to be introduced next year were to dilute its final exam focus with a shift to 40% of marks awarded through continuous assessment, marked in the main by external assessors.

FIGURE 1: A-LEVEL TIMELINE

1951 General Certificate of Education (GCE) A-Level introduced (run by university exam boards as a university entry test and as a record of achievement for the many sixth form students who wouldn't go to university).

1953 'Distinction' grade introduced (initially, A-Levels were pass or fail).

1963 An A-E grade system was introduced. This was a 'norm-referenced' system that meant each year the same 10% were awarded an A, 15% a B, 10% a C, 15% a D, 20% an E and 30% would fail.

1964 The Schools Council (stakeholder body on curriculum reform) proposed that A-Levels were divided into 'major' and 'minor' halves (studying two of each to give more breadth). This was rejected by schools.

1972-79 – Further proposal to study five rather than three A-Levels, with three subjects at 'N' (normal) level worth roughly half an A-Level and two at 'F' (further) level worth roughly three-quarters. This idea was opposed by the universities and, ultimately, rejected by both Labour and then Conservative Education Secretaries.¹³

1987 – To address the frowning number of students 'falling' at A-Level a partially 'criterion based' grading system was introduced. This also marks the start of perennial complaints about grade inflation and 'dumbing down'.¹⁴

1988 – The Higginson report (commissioned by Margaret Thatcher) expressed concerns that A-Levels were designed solely for top achievers with non-university students seen as expendable.

1989 – AS level (advanced supplementary) was introduced but not made an intrinsic part of the A-level.

1997 – The Dearing Report calls for AS levels to be an integral part of A-Level study.

2000 – Curriculum 2000 reform introduced a modular system that included AS levels, renamed as 'advanced subsidiary'. Designed to be easier than the A2 final A-Level exams they still made up half an A-Level.

2004 – The Tomlinson Report recommends 'A-levels should cease to be free-standing qualifications' and calls for a Diploma combining

academic and vocational study, but the Blair government sticks with A-Levels.¹⁵

2008 – Ed Balls attempts to introduce academic versions of the ill-fated 14-19 Diploma.¹⁶

2010 – The A* grade was introduced. Michael Gove announces reforms to A-Levels with 'fewer modules and more exams at the end of two years of sixth form and, as a result, a revival of the art of deep thought.'

2015-17 – 'new' style A-Levels are phased in across subjects with all reforms in place from 2017.¹⁷

¹³ Shirley Williams and Mark Carlisle, respectively.

¹⁴ A-Level entries rose from c. 104 thousand in 1951, to c. 500 thousand in 1975, to c. 635 thousand in 1985.

¹⁵ Tomlinson's main recommendations were: That all students would work toward the attainment of one overarching qualification—the Diploma. This would be attainable at four 'levels', from foundation through to advanced. Existing qualifications, such as A-Levels, GCSEs and National Vocational Qualifications "should cease to be free-standing qualifications in their own right but should evolve to become components of the new Diplomas." That all students should undertake 'core' learning which was "about getting the basics right, and developing the generic knowledge, skills and attributes necessary for participation in higher education, working life and the community". This would include an extended project, to provide more stretch and challenge for the most able, and to better develop independent skills of inquiry. That students would also undertake 'main' learning. This would be chosen by the learner to reflect their particular interests and aspirations, and could combine both 'vocational' and 'academic' options. That assessment would be undertaken internally up to intermediate level; thereafter, external assessment would continue to take place but would be less intensive than it is currently at, for example, A-Level.

¹⁶ The 14-19 Diploma was a composite qualification in England launched in September 2008. It was available to learners between the ages of 14 and 19, crossing the divide between general education and vocational education. It was closed by the Department for Education in August 2013.

¹⁷ Under the old system, AS-levels were studied in Year 12, with exams taken in May-June that were worth 50% of the overall A-level qualification. Under the new system, all A-level exams take place at the end of Year 13, with no marks from AS-levels (if taken) contributing to the overall final grade.

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