

Proposed changes to the GCSE system.

Background & proposals

As you may be aware, Education Secretary Michael Gove had proposed a complete overhaul of the Key Stage 4 education system in England. This had included:

1. Replacing GCSE's with English Baccalaureate Certificates (EBCs), which would be more 'rigorous'.
2. Assessing students' knowledge and skills by a single exam at the the end of their two-year subject courses.
3. No more modules, coursework or tiered papers (i.e. foundation and higher papers).
4. No more creative subjects (e.g. art, design, drama etc).
5. The first exams would be sat in 2017.

To qualify for the **full** Baccalaureate certificate (as apposed to individual subjects Baccalaureate Certificates), students would need to have achieved at least Grade C in English, Maths, Science and Humanities (history or geography) and a language. School league tables would be assessed on the proportion of students achieving the full set of English Baccalaureate Certificates (EBac)

Criticisms

The proposals received much criticism, particularly from those concerned about the potential impact on students with Special Educational Needs such as Dyslexia and Autism. Barriers to success would develop for those who find difficulty in learning facts and figures by 'rote' and in demonstrating knowledge and understanding in purely written form, under timed exam conditions.

Additionally, creative and design subject areas would no longer be offered, therefore an area of study in which those with Dyslexia so often excel would no longer be available to them. In many ways, the EBC proposals were a 'double whammy' for those with Dyslexia and other Specific Learning Difficulties; the proposals would take no account of learning needs or of subject interests.

The situation now

Following a public consultation, and after much criticism from educationalists, creative and design industries and fellow politicians, Michael Gove made a spectacular 'U-Turn' and decided to abandon the EBC proposals. GCSEs will remain, including the creative and arts subjects. However, does this mean that the situation will be better for students with Dyslexia and other SpLDs?

Unfortunately it seems not. Although the EBCs have been abandoned, GCSEs will still be overhauled. The following proposals remain in place, but simply transferred to the GCSEs:

1. Linear courses (no modules).
2. Core modules to include English, Maths, Sciences, Humanities and Language
3. Exams at the end of the two year GCSE subject courses
4. Emphasis on essay-style exam questions (fewer structured questions)
5. Internal assessment kept to a minimum
6. Exam aids kept to minimum & only used in exceptional circumstances
7. Higher threshold to achieve Grade C

A summary of the implications is shown in the tables below:

Old GCSEs	Implications
Modules	Learn step by step. Assessment done after each module. Modular system more likely to flag up learning difficulties (e.g. repeated exam failure, struggles managing time etc).
Coursework	Enables learners to demonstrate research & IT skills, develop report-writing & be creative. Outcomes are less dependent on performance 'on the day'.
Exams throughout 2 year course	Revising smaller amounts of information (for each module). Opportunities to re-take module exam (2nd chance).
Exam Aids	Calculators, text books etc often available to students in the exam. Enabled students to refer to source material and focus on 'application' of knowledge.
Tiered Papers	Students allocated to 'foundation' and 'higher' papers for subject courses. Lower ability students restricted to maximum Grade C.

New GCSEs	Implications
Linear courses	No modules. Learning done continuously throughout 2 years. Fewer opportunities for difficulties to be 'flagged up'.
Little coursework	Few opportunities to demonstrate research & report writing skills. Less creativity.
End of course, essay-style exams	Large amounts of 'facts and figures' to revise across most subjects (2 years-worth of information for each subject). Dependent on good written and organisational skills under time pressure. Outcomes dependent on performance 'on the day' (problematic for those with Dyslexia & other SpLD who have 'good days' & 'bad days').
Removal of Exam Aids	Increased reliance on memory, mental arithmetic ability, retention of even greater amounts of facts & figures etc.
Removal of tiered papers	All students follow the same curriculum. All students take the same exam paper. Exam grades not restricted for 'lower ability'.

Impacts on students with Dyslexia and other SpLDs

As the above tables suggest, the proposals may have a mixed impact on students with Dyslexia and other SpLD.

Removal of tiered papers may be welcome, in that curriculum and final exam grades will no longer be restricted for those considered 'low achievers'. This may be good news for those whose difficulties may have previously gone undiagnosed. The right support may consequently enable such students to go on to achieve better grades. However, thought must be given to supporting students who continue to find it hard to 'keep up'.

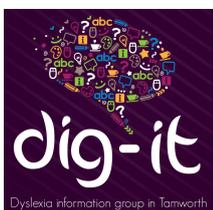
However, the proposals may lead to further challenges which play to the weaknesses of students with Dyslexia and other SpLDs, but few of the strengths e.g.

1. Reliance on working memory skills (e.g. no calculators)
2. Reliance on rote learning (facts, figures, dates, formulas etc.)
3. Reliance on written and organisational skills (extended essay writing in exams).
4. Assessment of knowledge and understanding based on written expression, under time pressure (which further increases difficulties arising from dyslexic traits).
5. Little (if any) assessments using creative, visual and auditory methods.

It remains to be seen whether the teaching for the revised GCSEs will encompass multi-sensory methods that play to the strengths of those with Dyslexia and other SpLDs.

If you have continued concerns about the proposals to revise the GCSEs in England, please contact your local MP to arrange an appointment to tell them about it (easier than writing a long letter!).

Michael Gove's speech to Houses of Parliament can be found here:
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/democracylive/house-of-commons-21366115>



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