

ASSOCIATION OF TEACHERS AND LECTURERS

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GCSE Reform – an Ofqual consultation
Submission from the Association of Teachers and Lecturers
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ATL, the education union, is an independent, registered trade union and professional association, representing approximately 160,000 teachers, head teachers, lecturers and support staff in maintained and independent nurseries, schools, sixth form, tertiary and further education colleges in the United Kingdom. AMiE is the trade union and professional association for leaders and managers in colleges and schools, and is a distinct section of ATL. We recognise the link between education policy and members' conditions of service.

ATL exists to help members, as their careers develop, through first rate research, advice, information and legal advice. Our evidence-based policy making enables us to campaign and negotiate locally and nationally.

ATL is affiliated to the Trades Union Congress (TUC), Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) and Education International (EI). ATL is not affiliated to any political party and seeks to work constructively with all the main political parties.

ATL policy

ATL believes that teachers as professionals must be recognised for their knowledge, expertise and judgment, at the level of the individual pupil and in articulating the role of education in increasing social justice. Within light national parameters, development of the education system should take place at a local level: the curriculum should be developed in partnership with local stakeholders; assessment should be carried out through local professional networks. Schools and colleges should be encouraged to work collaboratively to offer excellent teaching and learning, and to support pupils' well-being, across a local area. Accountability mechanisms should be developed so that there is a proper balance of accountability to national government and the local community, which supports collaboration rather than competition.

ATL response

ATL was dismayed by the short period for consultation for what amounts to very significant changes to GCSEs (again) – it appears as though Ofqual is merely presenting government's *fait accompli*. We question whether our views are really sought and what influence over this policy can realistically be had.

Nonetheless, we offer here our concerns about the changes being proposed and the effect they may have on young people's education. If the government intends to plough ahead with making these changes, we suggest that it should slow down and instead reconsider them when full GCSE reform is taking place, once the outcomes of the curriculum review

are known. There is a genuine debate to be had about what system of learning and assessment best serves GCSE students, and ATL would support some moves towards reducing levels of external assessment and heading in a direction which ensures better learning and stronger skills development. Yet the most important factor must be whether GCSEs allow all young people a chance to succeed in education and in life.

Constant change

Teachers require stability in the education system, and particularly in the qualifications that they teach, in order to do their job to the best of their ability. Instead, change has become the normality. For those teaching GCSEs the prospect of the next few years looks extremely difficult to deal with – changes to be implemented now seem only to be half of the job, with full reform only a couple of years away too. This will affect children's education.

We question whether these changes actually answer the perceived problems which the Secretary of State is attempting to solve. If it is the number of resits which sits so uncomfortably with his experience and politics, then why not change just the rules around limiting the number of times a GCSE module can be retaken? Yet if his priority is moving away from teaching in 'bitesize chunks', why not wait until the wider reforms to the curriculum are introduced?

Is this about assessment patterns or teaching and learning?

The obvious problem emerging from this proposed disruption to GCSEs is that the 'bitesize chunks' will not disappear until the specifications change. Having to take unit assessment at the same time (terminally) does not alter the fact that in some subjects these units will not be closely linked together. Describing GCSEs as linear says more about learning, and teaching, than it does about assessment.

To a certain extent ATL is sympathetic to the concern that bitesize modules may not deliver the best educational outcomes. Learning should involve building up knowledge that sits on top of what one already understands rather than merely existing alongside something else one had learnt previously. But crucially, skills development – which young people so desperately crave in twenty-first century Britain – should not exist in isolated compartments. There is an unspoken culture that serves rational pupils and rational schools that the best way through secondary education is by teaching to the test. This is not how ATL's members want their jobs and their impact on young people to be. Modular assessment undoubtedly feeds that culture. It is not clear though how terminal assessment, in the high stakes environment the government maintains for both school and student, will prevent teaching to the test being a reality – the proposed system will surely crank up the pressure cooker culture.

Too many exams, not enough time for teaching

We believe firmly that across the whole of the education system there is too much national assessment. Exams and, critically, the accountability system that sits around them, take up too much time. Professionals in education strive to inspire their pupils, to cultivate a love of learning, and to develop young people. Preparing for exam after exam detracts from this desire and is not what our members look for from a career in teaching, and is not what should dominate a pupil's time in the classroom.

Although these 'halfway house' proposals can offer no guarantees for aiding learning they hold attraction in the move to reduce the number of external assessments in a pupil's education. But the practice lags the policy and this will only happen if GCSE courses become genuinely linear with singular terminal assessment rather than simply compulsion in when modular examinations can be sat.

But it is important to remember the benefits modular learning and assessment can bring young people

ATL consistently advocates that education should serve all young people. It should be accessible to everyone and offer opportunities for success to pupils with different backgrounds, needs, interests and experiences. The existing system for assessing GCSEs offers schools a choice between terminal and modular assessment that they can make based upon what will best serve the pupils they teach.

Modular GCSEs and multiple resits best serve those young people with difficult lives. It is right that we think about the most disadvantaged when constructing qualifications and a broader system of education. Those young people dealing with complexities such as long-term illness or disability, sudden or seasonal illness, being a carer for a parent or sibling, violence in the family – and so on – who are forced into missing periods of schools through no choice of their own, undoubtedly benefit from GCSEs that are easier to pick up again after absence or in which they can return to something without sequence being essential.

So whilst there are arguments in favour of linear structures and assessment, we must be careful not to diminish the life chances of those most unfortunate pupils.

What are exams for? Who are they for?

We suspect that at the heart of these changes is a desire from the Secretary of State for success in qualifications to be more difficult. We note though that Ofqual had not raised any concerns over GCSE standards prior to the policy intervention.

It is worth making clear that exams should not be used for political ends. Nor should their construction be based purely on the needs of businesses or universities. School education is for young people, and their varied needs should always be central to decisions made at a policy level. Assessment of all kinds should have a clear purpose and should as far as possible aid the learning process.

Equalities impact analysis of the proposal for terminal-only exams

ATL is very concerned that the equalities impact of the proposed changes has not been taken seriously. Ofqual does not provide any evidence in support of their claim that equality of opportunity is achieved through 'levelling', and fails to take into consideration the different starting points that young people will have. The glossing over of the protected characteristics is of concern when only cursory thought throws up some problems. With some reluctance the analysis form brings up disability. We disagree that a disability is less likely to impact upon when an assessment can be appropriately taken than access to the assessment in the round. It would seem obvious that prior to assessment, disability affects how a learner accesses the curriculum and their education in the first place.

For Ofqual to suggest that there are no potential adverse impacts on protected characteristics could be interpreted as naive or wilfully irresponsible. As has been said, many young people have very complex lives – it is arguably these children that need the most support in their education, and not to be ignored. Further examples might be gender inequality from the impact of teenage pregnancy on learning, or the protected characteristics of race, sexual orientation and gender identity, where prejudice-related bullying can lead to truancy.

We urge Ofqual to engage in a full and proper equality impact analysis of this policy change.

Spelling, punctuation and grammar

ATL does not believe that intervention on spelling, punctuation, and grammar is a role for politicians. We do not think it is fair to say, amidst disappointing trends in levels of inequality, that this is the most pressing issue for social or education reform.

We recognise Ofqual's attempt to consider the equalities impact of the spelling, punctuation and grammar proposals and particularly welcome the thought given to SEN, disability and gender. Noting that the impact analysis concludes that 'the current policy recommendation will raise serious equality issues', ATL believes that it would be wrong to continue implementing the policy.

The equalities issues raised in the analysis are not all that needs further consideration. The impact upon speakers of English as an additional language needs looking at, as does the question of how to mark a student sitting a GCSE exam with a broken arm and requiring the use of an amanuensis.

Conclusion

It is young people that should be consideration number one when changes are being made in education. ATL is concerned that the government is putting fairness in education at risk, with the knock-on effects throughout life potentially tragic. Furthermore, the proposals are near to pointless if they will be closely followed by more widescale change within the next couple of years, placing more demand on teachers to adapt yet again to a new way of doing things at the whim of politicians. The reforms to GCSEs that are proposed are worthy of some discussion but we do not think they either serve the right 'stakeholders' (that is, young people) nor meet the unquestioned aims of the secretary of state.