

GCSEs: The grading controversy and proposals for reform

INTRODUCTION

This position statement sets out the perspectives of the NASUWT on:

- the controversy surrounding the grading of GCSE English in the Summer of 2012; and
- proposed reform to post-14 qualifications policy in England.

THE GRADING OF GCSE ENGLISH IN SUMMER 2012

The NASUWT is clear that ensuring that effective, fair and transparent arrangements are in place for the grading of GCSEs is critical to the maintenance of public and professional confidence in the qualifications system.

The Union is therefore extremely concerned by the ongoing serious alarm and distress to teachers, school leaders and learners in some schools generated by the ongoing controversy over the grading of GCSE English and GCSE English Language qualifications awarded in the Summer of 2012. It is apparent that the circumstances surrounding the grading of GCSE English qualifications are continuing to have a profound and negative impact on levels of public confidence in the qualifications system.

It has become clear that many of the issues raised in respect of the grading of GCSE English and GCSE English Language qualifications have related to the movement in grade boundaries for controlled assessment modules between January and June of 2012, although issues have also been identified in respect of the movement of examination grade boundaries during the same period. Concerns with regard to this qualification have also focused on the fact that significant changes were introduced to the specifications that regulate its content and structure and the impact that this may have had on eventual pupil outcomes.

While the NASUWT recognises that the overall fall in the proportion of candidates in English gaining a GCSE at grades A*-C between 2011 and 2012 of 1.5% was statistically very small and that much of this decline can be explained by changes in pupil cohort entry patterns over the period, it remains the case that some schools have reported significantly lower outcomes in GCSE English this Summer than they had anticipated originally. The decision to raise controlled assessment boundaries has been reported by these schools as a key potential reason for these lower-than-expected results.



Feedback from NASUWT members suggests that teachers and school leaders are especially concerned that effective measures are put in place to confirm that all candidates who have taken GCSE English and English Language qualifications this Summer have had their work graded fairly. In particular, teachers and school leaders continue to seek reassurance that arrangements for the grading of GCSE English qualifications in 2012 have ensured that the grades awarded to candidates reflect those that candidates of comparable ability would have secured in previous years. The NASUWT has therefore continued to press the statutory qualifications regulator, Ofqual, and the relevant awarding bodies to investigate these issues thoroughly, to take any remedial action they identify as necessary and, in doing so, act to reinforce confidence in the GCSE as a robust and reliable qualification that provides an accurate reflection of the skills, knowledge and understanding of learners.

The NASUWT is also concerned by the differences in approach to the grading of GCSE English qualifications being adopted by regulatory authorities in England and Wales, particularly in light of the Welsh Government's unilateral decision to order the lowering of grade boundaries in GCSE English for awards made to candidates in Wales by the WJEC awarding body. Notwithstanding the merits or otherwise of this decision in specific relation to the accuracy of grade boundaries, highly problematic circumstances have now been created in which comparable levels of performance by candidates in England and Wales in GCSE English have been graded differently, thereby undermining the coherence of the qualifications system across both countries. It is essential that the development and implementation of policy and the regulation of awarding bodies is undertaken in a way that prevents unacceptable degrees of divergence between the qualifications systems in place in England and Wales.

The debate about the grading of GCSE English has also served to draw attention to the regressive nature of the current high-stakes school accountability regime in respect of its use of pupil outcomes in key general qualifications, including GCSE English. The NASUWT is clear that much of the concern about this issue within the education system is driven by the pressure school leaders and teachers are under to meet the crude performance targets imposed on them by the Department for Education (DfE) and Ofsted. This pressure has intensified significantly as a result of the decision of the Secretary of State for Education to raise arbitrarily the floor target of performance below which schools are placed at serious risk of being forced to become an academy, regardless of the lack of evidence that adoption of academy status works to raise standards of educational achievement.

It is evident that no other country that is recognised as high performing subjects its schools to such a punitive and crude system of school accountability. The GCSE English grading controversy therefore serves to provide further evidence that the approach in this country to holding schools to public account for their work with pupils is no longer fit for purpose and should be reformed to reflect more closely the principles that guide best international school accountability practice.

THE COALITION GOVERNMENT'S PROPOSALS FOR GCSE REFORM

On 17 September 2012, the Coalition Government announced its proposals for reform of the GCSE qualification. These proposals include pupils sitting English Baccalaureate Certificates (EBCs) instead of GCSEs in English, mathematics, sciences, geography, history and languages. Ministers have also made clear their intention to franchise a single awarding body to offer each EBC subject, move to arrangements in which candidates would take examinations at the end of their courses, end the use of controlled assessment in academic subjects and discontinue the current tiering of general qualification assessments into foundation and higher levels.

The NASUWT has made clear its view that it is entirely legitimate for all those with a stake in the qualifications system to debate its aims, objectives and purposes and how it might continue to evolve in future. However, the Union has continued to note with disappointment that discussion of this critical issue has been characterised to a disproportionate extent by assertions that the current system is dysfunctional and that the standards associated with GCSE qualifications have declined over time. It is a matter of particular concern that the controversy over GCSE grading referenced above has been used entirely unjustifiably to lend support to these assertions.

It is apparent that little credible evidence has been advanced to substantiate these claims and it is therefore essential that the Coalition Government's proposals are tested robustly against the evidence of the effectiveness of the current system and the extent to which its proposals will secure meaningful and sustainable improvements that will support the work of teachers and school leaders in meeting the needs and aspirations of all pupils.

In engaging with the process of qualifications reform initiated by the Coalition Government, the NASUWT has identified a series of key principles that must apply to assessment of the merits of the proposals put forward by Ministers, which it will use to evaluate these proposals and, where appropriate, develop alternative policy options. The NASUWT maintains that qualifications policy and practice must:

- recognise the critical role played by the school and college workforce and workforce unions in securing high-quality provision through meaningful and genuine participation in the development of policy;
- be based on effective collaboration between schools and colleges rather than on competition and marketisation providers, thereby securing an equitable and collegial approach to qualifications delivery in which schools and colleges are able to work together to provide the widest possible range of high-quality learning pathways;
- take into effective account the negative impact on the school and college workforce and learners of excessive workload and organisational bureaucracy;
- ensure that qualification design reflects rather than dictates the content of the curriculum;

- tackle the causes of learner disaffection and disengagement from education;
- secure parity of esteem between vocational and academic learning pathways;
- involve effective employer contributions through support and funding for work-based and work-related education and training; and
- be supported by appropriate levels of public investment.

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