

## NATIONAL ASSESSMENT REFORM—WHERE ARE WE NOW?

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## ABSTRACT

Over the next three years English schools will have to introduce new assessments at every level in education; from baseline checks to be taken during the first half term of reception class, through new National Curriculum Tests in years 2 and 6 and GCSEs, to new A-levels.

These changes are complex, have already been subject to many modifications, and are taking place at the same time as many other policy changes in education. The purpose of this report is to provide a concise and current summary of the pending national assessment reforms, key concerns about them and the most likely and pressing calls for changes to them.

Three likely imminent calls for modifications to pending national assessment policy are:

- Delay the introduction of the new baseline checks until key concerns are addressed.
- Delay the introduction of the new National Curriculum Tests in mathematics and English until key concerns are addressed.
- Remove the ban on AS counting towards A-level.

The three calls highlighted are most likely to come gather momentum soon because they are straight forward to understand and to action. Other issues described in this report, most notably concerns regarding reforms to mathematics and English GCSEs and A-levels, are also extremely serious but it appears less likely that clear consensus will be reached imminently regarding what can be done to address them.

This report has been created through could not have been written without the commitment of dedicated volunteers and representatives from unions, awarding organisations and subject associations who contributed to discussions and who offered comments and advice. I would like to offer my sincere thanks to all who have helped.

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### 1. *Baseline checks age 4–5*

**What?** Tests to be taken by children entering reception class from September 2015.

**Why?** The floor standard for the end of KS2 is being increased from 65% to 85% unless schools can demonstrate very high levels of progress from their baseline checks assessment data.

#### **What's the problem?**

- Administration of a one-to-one test will be costly in terms of the time and attention of reception class teachers. No cost/benefit analysis has been completed to assess this impact.
- No data has been shared to prove it is possible to reliably test four-year-olds on entry to school.
- The only tests which have been substantially developed for this age-group are formative assessments of the acquisition of comprehension and pre-reading skills in English. This means that, at best, students from poorly stimulated backgrounds, some with special needs and those who have English as a second language will be grouped together. There has been no research or trialling to find out if this is reasonable for predictive purposes.
- In practice the performance of one child will often define whether an extra 20% of the children at a school have to meet the national standard or not due to the 'cliff edge' nature of the 65% and 85% floor standards.
- Concerns about cohort stability (will the students taking the test be the students present at the end of year 6?) have not been addressed.
- As there is to be no national test, schools have to choose their own tests. They will be required to judge which test is likely to prove to be predictive.
- It is likely that many or all of the tests available will not have predictive value or will not meet other criteria for validity (such as achieving a 10% of schools in England using them), hence many schools may end up without a valid test and will therefore be held to account against the 85% baseline despite this being an inappropriate measure for them.

**Context:** Some believe this approach will raise standards. Others are seriously concerned regarding the validity of any results of tests for four-year-olds who are notoriously difficult to assess. Most say more work is needed to know what is reasonable and possible. Some who were initially supportive of this initiative are now opposed to it because their concerns are not being addressed. The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) Profile will no longer be statutory.

#### **Likely requests:**

1. Delay the introduction of baseline tests for high stakes accountability measures until there has been further trialling and development to address the concerns listed above.

## 2. *New National Curriculum Assessment Framework (6/7 and 10/11)*

**What?** New National Curriculum tests from 2016. Tests to be taken in year 2 (mathematics and English) and year 6 (mathematics, English and a sample for science). Tests to be taken in all schools including free schools and academies.

**Why?** To assess students' understanding of the new primary curriculum. To hold schools to account.

### **What's the problem?**

- The tests will be at a new standard and there is no clarity around what that will be, other than that it will not be comparable with existing tests. In English, there is a substantial shift in focus to spelling and more sophisticated grammar at the expense of understanding and interpretation.
- The most serious concerns are in mathematics. KS1 tests will include abstract content in contrast to the content of curriculums for 6–7 year olds in high achieving nations. Concerns raised by the Advisory Committee for Mathematics Education (ACME) regarding KS2 content have not been addressed.
- Given the high stakes nature of the tests there is likely to be an even greater focus on mathematics and English and test preparation at the expense of a rich, broad and balanced curriculum.
- There is insufficient time for teacher professional development on the new curriculum and tests.
- All schools, including free schools and academies, will need to teach the new national curriculum for mathematics and English at KS1 and KS2 despite previous claims.

**Context:** In science a strong and independent subject association which is supported by the learned societies has been able to substantially influence both the new curriculum and its assessment. For a variety of reasons beyond the control of respected representative organisations, similar progress in mathematics and English has not been realised and key concerns have not been addressed.

### **Likely requests:**

1. Delay introduction pending thorough review.
2. Make the results of trials publicly available.
3. Provide clarity regarding how the new standards will be set.
4. Provide time and effective resources for staff training.
5. Make specimen tests available.

### 3. GCSEs

**What?** New linear GCSEs with numerical grades. Mathematics and English to be taught from 2015 for first examination in 2017. Most other new GCSEs to be taught from 2016 (2018 exam). All new GCSEs to be ready for teaching by 2017 for examination in 2019. Students examined in 2017 and 2018 will take a mixture of old and new GCSEs using both numerical and letter grades.

**Why?** “To address the grade inflation, loss of rigour and the dumbing down in the current GCSEs.”

**What’s the problem?**

- Development and consultation regarding the new exams has been, at best, very rushed.
- There appear to be particularly serious concerns regarding the content of the mathematics and English GCSEs.
- Previous attempts to raise the bar’ in external examinations have proved disastrous.
- The increased academic content for low and middle attainers is likely to cause disaffection and disengagement and to disadvantage vulnerable groups. GCSEs will be implemented without students having been taught previous required content as they build from content at lower Key Stages which is has not yet been implemented.
- The exams will be at a new standard using a different grading system and there is no clarity around comparability with existing grades.
- The new GCSEs and the change in grading have not been trialled.
- There is insufficient time and resource for teacher professional development.
- Employers want students to learn more relevant content and skills.
- These reforms contradict respected calls for moves towards a coherent 14–19 curriculum.

**Context:** Recently modular GCSEs have been abolished and most coursework has gone. Early entry has been greatly reduced. The speaking and listening element of the English Language exam has been removed. IGCSEs will be excluded from league tables from 2017. Tech Awards at level 1 (GCSE G-D) and level 2 (GCSE C-A\*) can count for up to 3 subjects in Progress 8 but many schools seem unaware of this and seem to be struggling to understand the details of the new accountability measures. By 2017 all non-GCSEs will be Tech Awards which must be externally assessed from 2015.

**Likely requests:** Teacher representatives are reluctant to call for modifications because:

- (a) Schools are already implementing these reforms and instability will create more stress.
- (b) Lack of confidence in policy makers raises concerns that modifications may lead to worse rather than better reforms.

- (c) Individuals and organisations are concerned regarding reprisals for criticising policy.

Hence:

1. It may be difficult to establish a clear mandate to modify the reforms, however objective, transparent and inclusive risk assessment is needed, especially in mathematics and English.
2. If the reforms are to be pushed through on the current timescales it is essential to monitor their effects closely using impartial evidence and to modify policy according to that evidence.

#### 4. *A-levels*

**What?** New A-levels.

No more modular A-levels hence there is a much greater focus on terminal exams. AS-level is to be decoupled from A-level meaning that AS-levels cannot count towards A-levels. Coursework will be virtually eliminated. Most new A-levels (13 largest subjects excluding mathematics and languages) to be taught from 2015 (2017 exam). Mathematics, further mathematics and all A-levels to be taught from 2016 (2018 exam). Level 3 Advanced General and Tech Levels will have A-level equivalence and will count in league tables from 2016.

**Why?** “To make sure they properly equip students for higher education.”

**What’s the problem?**

- Development and consultation has been, at best, extremely rushed.
- There has been no trialling of the impact of decoupling AS from A level. This will clearly have a substantial impact on A-level uptake as many student attempt A levels in subjects such as mathematics because AS exists as a realistic and valuable fall-back position.
- There has been no trialling of the impact of linear assessment, which is of particular concern as many teachers have only experienced a modular system themselves. Discontinuity between the introduction of the new GCSEs and the new A-levels means that students taking the new A-levels will not initially have studied required previous content.
- The loss of coursework is likely to have a negative impact on attainment, as the process of completing coursework is an important mechanism for developing students’ subject skills.

**Context:** ASs and EPQs (Extended Project Qualifications) were introduced prior to 2010 in preparation for an English equivalent to the Welsh Baccalaureate. Calls are still being made for this kind of reform (see for example the recent Royal Society Vision for Science and Mathematics Education report). Sixth form funding is changing. All students will be required to study mathematics to 18 and Core Maths’ will be taught from September 2014 in early adopter schools. The Technical Baccalaureate is being introduced for teaching from September 2014. Substantial Vocational Qualifications (SVQs) will provide oc-

cupationally focused Level 2 (GCSE A\*-C standard) qualifications post 16 and will count in league tables from 2017. The National Union of Students survey in spring 2014 showed considerable opposition to key aspects of the reforms.

### Likely requests:

- 1 The advice in the likely requests for GCSE' must also be considered here however there are some emerging calls which could be rapidly progressed including
  - 1.1. Suspend the decoupling of A-level and AS-level.
  - 1.2. Ensure the recommendations of ALCAB (A-Level Content Advisory Board) are implemented.
  - 1.3. Delay the implementation of reforms to A-level mathematics by one year to allow continuity from the new GCSE in mathematics.

## 5. References

### Baseline Checks

DfE – Reforming Assessment and Accountability for Primary Schools: March 2014

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/297595/Primary\\_Accountability\\_and\\_Assessment\\_Consultation\\_Response.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/297595/Primary_Accountability_and_Assessment_Consultation_Response.pdf)

DfE – Reception baseline: criteria for potential assessments: September 2013

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-outcomes>

The New National Curriculum Assessment Framework

DfE – Guidance for the New National Curriculum Assessment Framework: 31 March 2014:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/national-curriculum-assessments-test-frameworks>:

A report which contradicts claims that the primary curriculum to be assessed resembles that of Singapore or of other high achieving nations: Hanson (2014)

<http://authenticmaths.co.uk/2014pnc/>

Serious concerns expressed by the Advisory Committee for Maths Education (ACME):

<http://www.acme-uk.org/media/13502/aug2013ncreviewletter.pdf>

### GCSEs

Michael Gove on his rationale for reforming GCSEs:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/curriculum-exam-and-accountability-reform>

DfE information on GCSE reforms and the exclusion of IGCSEs from performance measures:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/qualifications-counting-in-future-performance-tables>

A report on issues which should have been considered when reforming a secondary mathematics curriculum: Gardiner (2014):

[http://education.lms.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/DMG\\_6\\_no\\_1\\_2014.pdf](http://education.lms.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/DMG_6_no_1_2014.pdf)

## A-Levels

The rationale for A-level reform:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/policies/reforming-qualifications-and-the-curriculum-to-better-prepare-pupils-for-life-after-school/supporting-pages/a-and-as-level-reform>

ALCAB (A-level content advisory board) reports and correspondence regarding detailed recommendations for A-level reforms for mathematics, modern and foreign languages and geography:

<http://alcab.org.uk/>

ATM letter to the new Secretary of State (25/7/2014):

<http://www.atm.org.uk/News/atm-welcomes-the-new-secretary-of-state>

Ofqual study on international comparability of A levels:

<http://ofqual.gov.uk/standards/research/international-comparability/>

NUS survey on A level reform: May 2014:

<http://www.nus.org.uk/en/news/press-releases/nus-publishes-first-survey-that-shows-student-opposition-to-a-level-reform/>

Royal Society Vision for Science and Mathematics Education report (2014):

<https://royalsociety.org/~media/education/policy/vision/reports/vision-full-report-20140625.pdf>

Many more articles about the current exams reforms, including information about the failure of attempts to raise the bar' in 2000 and the subsequent DfES warning can be found in the booklet 'Exam Reform—Unresolved issues' published by the Symposium on Sustainable Schools in Spring 2014.

## *About the Author*

Rebecca Hanson MA (cantab.), MEd is teacher, a lecturer in education and an education adviser.

She is also an FRSA Digital Champion specialising in mass online discussion and a Liberal Democrat policy activist.

Those who wish to probe the rationale and evidence behind issues raised in this report are warmly invited to contact her using a contact form at <http://authenticmaths.co.uk/contact/>.