



TESTING TIMES

MR GOVE MAY HAVE LEFT THE BUILDING – BUT HIS GCSE REFORMS ARE LIKELY TO STAY THE DISTANCE. MICHAEL MCGARVEY EXAMINES WHAT THIS WILL MEAN FOR SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHERS...

The forthcoming DfE reform of GCSEs is blowing winds of change in secondary education – the like of which schools haven't seen since the demise of O Levels back in the mid 1980s. First teaching of new, more demanding courses in English language, English literature and mathematics begins in September 2015 and will be followed a year later by sciences, humanities and modern languages.

The general qualifications (GQ) reform was instigated by former Education Secretary Michael Gove who, speaking at the world's first Education Reform Summit, held in London just before he left office this summer, expounded on his vision for the UK to have a world-class education system.

Hosted jointly by the Department for Education and independent think tank The Education Foundation, and sponsored by Cambridge University Press, the summit brought together leading education reformers from England and around the world. Gove's successor Nicky Morgan has pledged to carry on with the exam reform, which covers both what is studied and how it is assessed and involves higher standards and higher expectations from every school in England.

I was not surprised to hear that this reform will endure, largely because there does appear to be a broad acceptance that standards have slipped and general agreement that raising the bar is no bad thing. Much of the media coverage around this reform, perhaps understandably, has centred on key features of the exams themselves, including the introduction of a new grading scale, the moving from modular to linear courses and fewer 'tiered' examination papers.

But I believe the major impact of the changes – and the main issue of concern to secondary school leaders – will be around



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accountability, particularly following the introduction of Progress 8, the new school accountability measure, which will apply from September 2016, and is optional from the next academic year [see p.67 of this issue for more details].

Aside from these accountability issues, however, senior leaders must be mindful of the other challenges the new-style GCSEs will bring for their staff and pupils.

The key changes, at a glance:

- A new grading system from 1 to 9, with 9 being the highest.
- A fully linear structure, with assessment at the end of the course, replacing the existing modular approach.
- Exams as the preferred method of assessment.
- The disappearance of tiered exams for English Literature, English Language, geography and history.
- Tiering remaining only for maths and sciences – because untiered papers would not allow students at the lower end of the ability range to demonstrate their knowledge and skills, nor stretch the most able.
- The replacement of GCSE English by separate English Literature and English Language exams.
- New requirements in both new English GCSEs for pupils to use more diverse and

challenging writing skills, such as narration and argument.

- Grammar, punctuation and spelling contributing to the final mark for all subjects, except for maths and biology.
- 20 per cent of the marks for the new English Language GCSE will be awarded for writing clearly using accurate spelling, punctuation and grammar. Speaking and listening will be assessed through a teacher, but will not contribute to the overall grade.
- 5 per cent of the overall marks for GCSE English Literature, geography and history will also be awarded for writing clearly with accurate spelling, punctuation and grammar.
- In mathematics GCSE some material formerly found in the higher tier is being moved down into foundation and there will also be a greater emphasis on problem-solving skills especially at the higher tier. The new GCSE will include enhanced content in areas such as calculation, ratio and proportion. There is at least 30 per cent more content in the new GCSE and it will probably require greater teaching time.

With course work and controlled assessment largely replaced with a 'high-stakes' exam at the end of two years, teachers will adjust their courses accordingly – for many, this will free them up to focus on teaching over a longer period without termly exams.

It's a major volume of change coming hot on the heels of the introduction of the new National Curriculum 2014 and there's no doubt that schools face some adjustments as a result of new entry patterns, heavy restriction on early entry, very limited re-sit opportunities and the phasing in of a new grading system.

But it's not the first reform schools have coped with and it's unlikely to be the last – the next two years promise to be an exciting period for everyone involved in UK education.