

Briefing Paper: Examinations

Examinations have always served a dual purpose, representing a record of school attainment but also determining access to future opportunity by bestowing credentials. Over the course of the twentieth century fraught debates flared-up over who should have access to these opportunities and what the place of public examinations should be in a system of democratic mass education. The muddled system that evolved in England and Wales reveals much about wider tensions surrounding the role of the state in regulating secondary education and competing interpretations of what the purpose of mass secondary education should be. This paper examines the UK and Northern Ireland's evolving examination system across the twentieth century. While it raises wide ranging themes concerning pupils' experiences and outcomes in school, its principal focus is on the structure of the examination system and the wider debates around reform. For more on the broader themes raised by this topic please see our briefing papers on gender, school leavers, grammar schools, secondary moderns, comprehensives, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. Although it does not address recent controversies over examination reform, these are reflective of the intensity of debate throughout the previous century.¹

Examinations in schools before 1944

External examinations first appeared in English and Welsh schools in the mid-19th century. From the outset, they were intended to distinguish and reward those who had successfully acquired an academic education or specific technical knowledge and thus entrench the principle of appointment on merit rather than through patronage. In response to the introduction of entry examinations for universities, the professions, and public services, schools began to adapt their curriculums to meet these new demands. Early examinations in schools were largely ad-hoc in nature and free from state control. Expanded access to secondary education under the 1902 Education Act led to some standardization, with many schools (public, grammar, and maintained) setting university matriculation examinations (particularly those of Oxford, Cambridge, and London) as a leaving examination for all pupils, regardless of whether or not they intended to proceed to university; however, there was no formal, centrally recognized or regulated system before 1917. Access to examinations tended to be limited to those attending grammar or public schools, meaning that relatively few pupils from poorer backgrounds (unless they were scholarship boys) had the opportunity to obtain such qualifications.²

A standardized leaving certificate was introduced in Scotland in 1888, however. This required pupils to master a broad range of subjects, with success securing access to university or the professions. Its introduction proved controversial, nonetheless. By creating a clear distinction between those at academies working towards the leaving certificate and their counterparts at parish, elementary, or even Higher Grade schools who tended to take more vocational courses, the introduction of the Higher Certificate exposed tensions that would become more obvious in England and Wales after 1945 [for more on the distinctions within the Scottish system, see our Scotland Briefing Paper].³ The mid-nineteenth century saw a similar proliferation of examinations in Ireland, albeit often segregated along religious lines. Payment by results (whereby public funds were given to schools on the basis of exam success) followed the 1878 Intermediate Education (Ireland) Bill, administered by a mixed-denominational board of seven commissioners. Candidates were examined across seven divisions (English, Greek, Latin, Mathematics, Modern Languages, Natural Sciences, Music, and Drawing) at one of three levels (junior, middle, and senior), with successful individuals winning scholarships to

¹ Ken Jones, 'Conservatism and educational crisis: the case of England', *Educational Enquiry*, 5:1 (2014), 89-108.

² John Roach, *Public examinations in England 1850-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971)

³ Lindsay Paterson, 'Mass education, 1872-present', in Michael Lynch (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Scottish History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

university. While the Act did ensure public funds for senior school education twenty-four years before they became available in England and Wales, it did little to broaden the reach of educational opportunity in Ireland or raise standards within schools. By the turn of the twentieth century complaints grew that the curriculum was dominated by the examination, often to the detriment of the majority of pupils who were not even entered. Controversy continued to dog the examination system before 1914 as the government tried to find an alternative funding model that did not depend upon success in competitive leaving examinations.⁴ Following partition in 1920, Northern Ireland established separate Intermediate Examinations and in 1923 decoupled the allocation of funds from examination results.⁵

Although English schools rejected attempts to create a state administered commission to regulate examinations in 1868, over the following decades several bodies came into existence intended to bring some standardization to the field, e.g. the Oxford and Cambridge Schools Examinations Board (1873, girls admitted 1879), while the Central Welsh Board (1896) took responsibility for regulating examinations in Wales. The late-19th century also saw the introduction of examinations by various professional, commercial, and craft institutes whose members had rarely attained formal qualifications at school, e.g. City and Guilds of London Institute and London Chamber of Commerce. As more pupils continued to secondary level such tests became increasingly popular amongst school leavers, even those not wanting to stay beyond the age of 15 or to enter university. By the 1910s, these organizations were largely responsible for setting exams at a variety of levels within schools. For example, the universities' 'local examinations' could be taken at preliminary, junior, and senior levels. Although the exam boards offered tests in a series of common, compulsory subjects, each maintained individual idiosyncrasies.

Reporting in 1911, the Consultative Committee on Examinations in Secondary Schools described the examination field as a 'state of chaos' with a 'bewildering' array of choice. Its recommendation for greater standardization led to the introduction of the School Certificate in England and Wales (1917). This simplified the system by establishing two formally recognised examinations in secondary schools: the School Certificate, taken at 16, and the Higher School Certificate for 18 year olds. For the first time, the Board of Education took-on the role of co-ordinating authority to ensure equivalence of standards across all schools and established the Secondary School Examinations Council as a permanent advisory body to regulate the various examination boards. In England, the university examining boards retained their influence in setting papers, whilst the Central Welsh Board and University of Wales assumed responsibility in Wales. For John Roach, the interwar secondary school came to be 'dominated by the examination system with its twin peaks of the School and Higher School Certificates'.⁶ North of the border the 1918 Education (Scotland) Act established the principle of mass secondary education a generation earlier than in England and Wales and extended access to the Leaving Certificate to those studying in the Higher Grade Schools. In 1923 the Scottish Education Department introduced the Day School Certificate, intended to expand access for those not working towards the Leaving Certificate. This could be taken at Higher (after three years of study) or Lower Level (two years of study), with the former set by the SED at a national level and the latter left in the hands of LEAs. Ultimately, these changes did little to assuage parents and teachers' demands for greater equality of access to leaving qualifications and led to the introduction in 1936 of a new Leaving Certificate open to all secondary pupils. Divided into Senior and Junior levels, the former lasting for five years and the latter for three, the Certificate was academic rather than vocational in nature and placed heavy emphasis on English and the sciences as key to educating a modern democratic citizenship.⁷ All these leaving qualifications

⁴ John Coolahan, *Irish education: its history and structure* (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 1981), pp. 61-69.

⁵ Donald Akenson, *Education and enmity: the control of schooling in Northern Ireland 1920-50* (Exeter: David & Charles Ltd., 1973).

⁶ John Roach, 'Examinations and the Secondary Schools 1900-1945', *History of Education*, 8:1 (1979), 45-58, p. 46.

⁷ Lindsay Paterson, *Scottish education in the twentieth century* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), pp. 66-70.

became key markers of academic success and individual capability, carrying significant currency with schools, universities, and employers alike.

While standardization across schools improved and access to external examinations expanded during the interwar period, fears proliferated that teaching had become increasingly geared towards exam preparation, thereby creating a ‘backwash effect’ that cemented exams as the ‘high stakes’ outcome of schooling.⁸ This was stressed in the Spens Report (1938) and formed a central component of the Norwood Committee’s deliberations on curriculum reform (1941-43).⁹ The Norwood Report condemned the existing system of examinations, recommending that the School Certificate be replaced by internal examinations under the control of individual schools. It articulated a fear that teachers had become beholden to the demands of external examinations to the detriment of general education, something that would be repeated throughout the post-1945 period. Norwood envisaged a new subject specific system, which would allow pupils to pick the subjects they wished to study, and without a predictive function in terms of future trajectory. For 18-plus school leavers wanting to attend university, a separate examination was recommended that would measure their aptitude in chosen subjects rather than as evidence of general progression.¹⁰ Ultimately, the Butler Act fudged the Norwood Report’s recommendations, incorporating the principle of internal assessment in secondary moderns but rejecting it for grammars. For Brooks, this distinction became the sharpest mark of the myth behind parity of esteem.¹¹

In the decades before 1939, competitive examinations played an equally important role in determining access to secondary education. Known variously as the ‘free place examination’, ‘qualifying examination’, or ‘scholarship examination’ this test, sat as pupils transitioned from primary to secondary education in all parts of the UK, was used to measure an individual’s academic ability and potential to study towards the School Certificate. Although differing between LEA and region, the exam tended to test written English, arithmetic, and general intelligence. By the interwar period Wales dedicated more funding to local scholarships and sent a higher proportion to grammar school than in England. Although Scotland made the move towards mass secondary education earlier than in England, the Scottish ‘qualifying exam’, sat at age-12, still determined which pupils moved from elementary schools to an academy or Higher School, and those who remained or attended a Junior Secondary with the expectation that they would leave at 14 to enter the workforce. Northern Ireland’s religious divisions played a more significant role in shaping educational trajectories, but access to the leading grammar schools on both sides of the sectarian divide still depended upon competitive examination. These tests would become templates for the post-1945 11-plus.

Post-1944

In sorting pupils according to the 11-plus, the tripartite system incorporated core assumptions that shaped who should be able to succeed through the examination system; the Norwood Committee’s recommendations that not all pupils were suited to examination work meant that access to external qualifications and the subsequent career paths they made possible would largely be limited to grammar school pupils. Few Secondary Modern students were expected to take examinations. As competition for grammar school places increased under the tripartite system ‘allocation’ through the 11-plus

⁸ Val Brooks, ‘The role of external examinations in the making of Secondary Modern Schools in England 1945–65’, *History of Education*, 37:3 (2008), 447-467, p. 451.

⁹ Board of Education, *Secondary education with special reference to Grammar and Technical High Schools* [Spens Report] (London: H.M.S.O., 1938): www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/spens/spens1938.html

¹⁰ Board of Education, *Curriculum and examinations in secondary schools* [Norwood Report] (London: H.M.S.O., 1943): <http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/norwood/norwood1943.html>

¹¹ Brooks, p. 460.

‘degenerated into pass or failure’.¹² In 1947, the Secondary School Examinations Council proposed a new qualification in England and Wales, the General Certificate of Education Ordinary level examination [GCE O-level], to be taken by pupils upon completing five-years education of a selective type at the age of 16. Even so, rather than democratizing access to reflect increased secondary level participation the pass standard was set at the equivalent of a credit at School Certificate, which was expected to be beyond the ability of almost all but grammar school pupils. For the rest, internal examinations and school reports would serve as credentials upon leaving school. This represented a compromise suited to the university examination boards and Headmasters’ Association, which had both lobbied for the continuation of the School Certificate. The former for fear that they would be excluded from the examining process and the latter in the name of standards.

The GCE quickly became, in the words of Bonney Rust and Harris, ‘the pride of pupils, and mecca of mothers throughout the land. It provides a passport to the university, opens the door to the professions, and offers an easy run-in to the technical college. Without appropriate passes in GCE even money can scarcely buy admission to a middle-class career.’¹³ To critics, this suggested that the principal ambition behind the GCE lay in a desire to improve standards in grammar schools and to encourage greater continuity in elite education from 11 to 18 rather than to benefit the majority of pupils. Indeed, during the A-level’s first sitting in 1951, 134,000 candidates were entered for examination but this still only constituted around 3% of the age-cohort.¹⁴ A year later the Ministry of Education issued a circular that made clear its intent to use the GCE as means to differentiate between different types of pupils’ basic capacities, describing it as an examination that ‘looked forward and not back’ by demonstrating a candidate’s mastery in a particular subject as testament to their future prospects. It was not intended to stand as a record of attendance through a period of secondary education. Nonetheless, despite grammar schools’ entering almost all pupils for the GCE, a significant number continued to leave school without any qualifications having failed the examination.¹⁵

The effect in many Secondary Moderns was even more damaging. With neither teachers nor pupils having a clear idea of what they were supposed to be working towards on a daily basis, Brooks argues this sense of ‘aimlessness and uncertainty’ often led to ill-conceived experimentation, something that only further undermined the reputation of Secondary Moderns amongst parents and commentators.¹⁶ Nonetheless, external accreditation through examination qualifications remained crucial for school leavers to be able to access attractive jobs in both white and blue-collar roles, with few employers crediting the value of an internal leaving certificate.¹⁷ Frustrations amongst parents and teachers over limited access to the GCE fuelled the emergence of a range of other local examinations.¹⁸ These were produced by LEAs and professional bodies to provide a leaving certificate but were not recognised by the state.¹⁹ By the late-1950s only 11 LEAs entered candidates for the GCE alone, with most entering

¹² R. J. Montgomery, *Examinations: an account of their evolution as administrative devices in England* (London: Longmans, 1965), p. 119.

¹³ W. Bonney Rust & H. F. P. Harris, *Examinations: pass or failure? A critical survey* (London: Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons Ltd., 1967), p. 37.

¹⁴ Barend Vlaardingerbroek & Neil Taylor, *Secondary School External Examination Systems: Reliability, Robustness and Resilience* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2009), p. 34.

¹⁵ Caroline Benn & Brian Simon, *Halfway there: report on the British comprehensive-school reform*, 2nd edition (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 131.

¹⁶ Brooks, p. 458; Laura Tisdall, Inside the ‘blackboard jungle’, *Cultural and Social History*, 12:4 (2015), 489-507.

¹⁷ Ministry of Education, *15 to 18 [Crowther Report]* (London: H.M.S.O, 1959), p. 80:

<http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/crowther/crowther1959-1.html>

¹⁸ Banks, *Parity and prestige in English secondary education* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1955), pp. 217-19; Bonney Rust & Harris, pp. 26-27.

¹⁹ Brooks, p. 459.

students for a wide range of other external qualifications.²⁰ But this meant that parents were increasingly forced to pay for their children to enter external examinations not recognised or funded by the state, many of which were run by the same bodies that had organized examinations since the 19th century.

Numbers staying on in education beyond the minimum leaving age, both in grammars and secondary moderns, rose throughout the 1950s and with it calls for more equal access to external qualifications. Scotland abandoned group certificates, in favour of individual passes, in the Leaving Certificate from 1950, with the effect of doubling the number of exam candidates from 8,444 in 1949 to 18,562 in 1961.²¹ In England and Wales, as the GCE O-level gained in prestige to become the benchmark by which school leavers were judged, so demand grew amongst teachers, parents, and pupils for the introduction of an external examination that offered a formal qualification to those studying non-selective courses. There was similar growing disquiet amongst grammar school parents that the O-level pass mark was set too high and led to many pupils leaving school labelled as ‘failures’; in 1956 around 60% of O-level entrants gained one pass, 20% passed in all subjects, and 12.5% failed in all.²² In response, the Ministry of Education issued Circular 289 in 1955, which clarified the government’s position on examinations but showed little enthusiasm to disrupt the GCE system. It stated that the GCE at A-level and O-level would be maintained but that pupils in all kinds of secondary school suited to the GCE should be given the opportunity to take them (even if this wasn’t possible at their original school). Schools would be allowed to organize into groups to set their own local examinations, providing each school retained control of their syllabus. At this point, the Secretary of State did not favour the creation of any new national examination, preferring instead to encourage closer links between employers and schools, and with it the more general use of school records and confidential references as a mark of a pupil’s progress. This satisfied few in the Secondary Modern sector and did little to change the prevailing pattern. As more pupils from Secondary Moderns gained O-level passes, so the underlying logic of academic selection that informed the GCE examination, and the tripartite system more broadly, began to unravel. Within a couple of years, the SSEC recommended further action, laying the ground for the appointment of the Beloe Committee in 1959. It started by asking: ‘could an examination devised to meet the needs of the children attending selective academic courses, even in the new form (that is, a subject not a group examination) proposed by the Norwood Report, be regarded as appropriate for the needs of these other pupils, most of them in non-selective schools and streams? If not, what was the alternative? Should these children, with the exception perhaps of a small minority who might aim for the "selective" examination, be denied altogether an external examination in which their abilities and aptitudes could be recorded? Or should another examination be devised, separate from and different from the traditional examination, and more suited to the needs and outlook of these pupils?’²³

The Beloe Commission’s findings, published in 1960, made explicitly clear that the existing system was ill-suited to the needs of tripartite education (although did not challenge this underlying structure). It worried most that the multiplicity of local and unrecognised examinations lacked sufficient rigour or equivalence, and that proliferation had undermined teachers’ ability to structure their own curriculums. However, it also recognised that demand for access to external qualifications went far beyond grammar schools. Between 1953 and 1959 the number of pupils sitting GCE examinations quadrupled (with the highest rate of growth seen in SMS).²⁴ Around 15,600 candidates from nearly 1,000 secondary modern and all-age schools in England and Wales took the GCE O level in 1959 (compared to 10,500 in 1958). Around 1/3 of all students entered for O-level in 1959 came from schools other than grammars, although many had already left school and took the examination at colleges of further education and most

²⁰ Ministry of Education, *Secondary School examinations other than the GCE* [Beloe Report] (London: H.M.S.O., 1960), pp. 29-66: <http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/beloe/beloe.html>

²¹ Paterson, *Scottish education*, p. 133.

²² Bonney Rust & Harris, p. 38.

²³ Beloe Report, p. 6.

²⁴ Stephen Wiseman (ed.), *Examinations and English education* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1961), p. xi.

candidates at Secondary Moderns sat fewer than 4 subjects (often seen as the expected minimum). Nonetheless, Secondary Moderns that had introduced GCE streams frequently reported the wider benefits this brought to the atmosphere within the school and pupils' sense of purpose.²⁵ Scotland moved to reform its examination system while these debates were ongoing. The Ordinary Grade was introduced in 1962, when the Lower Grade was abolished, to be taken at 16 and aimed at pupils of 'moderate ability'. By 1974 around 75% of the age group were being entered for at least one Ordinary Grade and 60% passing at least one.²⁶

Beloe echoed growing criticism from educationists that in failing to offer clear direction to Secondary Moderns – on the grounds that individual schools should be able to pursue whichever approach best suited their specific needs – the government had facilitated a chaotic examination system that failed to serve the interests and needs of all pupils. It recommended the introduction of a new level of qualification, the Certificate of School Education – which would be 'the servant of the schools and not their master' – but retained faith in a graded examination system based on the assumption that not all pupils were capable of succeeding in formal testing. In this new model, the top 20% of pupils would work towards O-levels, the next 40% to the CSE (within this group it was expected that the top 20% could achieve 4 or more passes and the rest who could be expected to achieve a pass in individual subjects) and the bottom 40% of pupils would take no formal examinations. Yet, by the time the Beloe Report's recommendations came into effect in England and Wales the expansion of comprehensivization meant that new exams often only entrenched academic selection and segregation within multilateral schools by forcing comprehensives to incorporate three separate streams of pupils each working towards different and often presubscribed final qualifications (O-level, CSE, or nothing). The first pupils to sit the new examinations did so in 1965, which, as Brian Simon points out, created the anomalous situation that just at the moment comprehensive schooling was being dramatically expanded the new examination structure imposed a fresh tripartite divide within schools.²⁷

While the CSE expanded access to qualifications it did little to address the problems of exam administration and inconsistency between examining boards, which by the mid-1960s were coming under intense scrutiny. In a much-publicised case in 1965, one headmaster of a Yorkshire school entered 28 pupils to sit O-level English language under two separate boards. One board gave 27 passes and 1 fail, the other 3 passes and 25 fails.²⁸ Successive governments' reluctance to centralize exam administration in England by taking it out of the hands of the eight examining bodies (7 of which were affiliated to universities), made it almost impossible to achieve the consistency found in Scotland and Northern Ireland, as well as limiting the ability of the Ministry of Education to direct the underlying goals of examinations. By giving university boards responsibility for setting and marking examination scripts more weight tended to be placed on academic outcomes rather than progress, often explicitly oriented towards university entrance. This meant that despite low (although rising) rates of university attendance, which in the mid-1960s saw only 20% of grammar school pupils proceed to university, school curriculums were frequently designed from the third-form onwards to teach towards the leaving qualification based upon a pass/fail binary. Educationists and parents in the 1960s attacked the way in which this forced pupils to specialise too early in subjects that had little relevance to future career trajectories, often only to be condemned as failures for not passing an exam intended for another purpose. Why was it not possible, they asked, to introduce a mark scheme that measured attainment on a spectrum that could be interpreted by employers rather than graded in such zero-sum terms? The expansion of the comprehensive sector contributed significantly both to growing demand and dissatisfaction, with these schools often determined to open access to examinations to as many pupils as possible. From 1968 to 1970, each exam cycle saw a year-on-year increase of around 10,000 pupils

²⁵ Brooks, p. 463.

²⁶ Paterson, *Scottish education*, pp. 133-34.

²⁷ Brian Simon, *Education & social order, 1940-1990*, 2nd edition (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1999), p. 304.

²⁸ Bonney Rust & Harris, p. 41.

from comprehensives sitting for the GCE and even larger growth in the numbers sitting for the CSE or both.²⁹ By this time many on the left, including the NUT, were demanding the merger of GCE and CSE as a necessary means to redress enduring inequalities of opportunity.³⁰

The mid-1960s also saw a significant change to the administration of the national examination system. Established in 1964, the Schools Council for the Curriculum and Examinations replaced the Secondary Schools Examinations Council as the administrative body responsible for overseeing the exam boards. It comprised a mix of civil servants, NUT representatives, LEA officials, educationists, and teachers and was independent of Whitehall. It was committed to expanding empirical research into curriculum and exam provision, and fiercely defended teachers' independence from political interference.³¹ Over the next twenty years it advised successive governments on reform of the system.³² In 1971, the Schools Council undertook a feasibility study into the question and four years later reported to Callaghan's government that this change should be made.³³ The Council also recommended reform of the A-level system to reduce over-specialisation too earlier and make more room for practical application within exam syllabuses. It recommended replacing A-levels with Normal (N) and Further (F) levels. Candidates would take 5 subjects (studying 2 to F-level), with each examined individually. The report stressed that the expansion of sixth forms following ROSLA and comprehensivization meant the nature of post-16 study also had to evolve; A-levels were simply no longer fit for purpose.

Amongst less sympathetic observers, the introduction of the CSE and its uptake in comprehensive schools, as well as the rising threat to A-levels, fuelled a discourse of falling standards. Contributors to the Black Papers, for example, continually picked upon examination results as evidence for the inadequacies of comprehensive schooling.³⁴ Set against a backdrop of rising youth unemployment, concerns over the number of pupils leaving school without qualifications grew during the 1970s. Partly in response to this pressure O-levels started to be graded on an A-E (and U) scale from 1975; however, this offered little incentive for those deemed not academically capable enough to pass at CSE level to remain at school beyond 16 even after the minimum leaving age was raised. With the number of comprehensives growing, schools and LEAs, once again, began to take the initiative themselves. For example, The GCE Joint Matriculation Board, which covered the north of England, began collaborating with CSE Boards to offer joint examination papers called the 16+. Reform of the examination system remained a core issue for comprehensivization campaigners, who saw it as perpetuating the inequalities of the tripartite system by forcing comprehensives to stream pupils according to the requirements of externally set examinations. In 1978, Shirley Williams instructed the Waddell Committee to consider proposals to replace O-levels and the CSE with a common system of examination across all pupils, although, cautious of inflaming debates around standards, did not abandon the principle that pupils of different abilities should sit different papers.³⁵ Waddell concurred, stressing that such a system was feasible but needed to maintain standards and national comparability, something that would require alternative papers being offered for less able students. Although Thatcher's government initially proved reluctant to overhaul the examination system, favouring instead increased differentiation within schools, and delayed introducing reforms until 1984, the committee's recommendations ultimately

²⁹ Benn & Simon, *Halfway there*, pp. 130-37.

³⁰ CCCS, *Unpopular education: schooling and social democracy in England since 1944* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1981), pp. 124-25.

³¹ Denis Lawton, *The politics of the school curriculum, volume 22* (London: Routledge, 1980) pp. 67-83.

³² Clyde Chitty, *Education policy in Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 143.

³³ Ron Brooks, *Contemporary debates in education: an historical perspective*, 2nd edition (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), p. 21.

³⁴ See for example, C. B. Cox & Rhodes Boyson (eds.), *Black Paper 1977* (London: Temple-Smith, 1977), p. 8.

³⁵ Department of Education and Science, *Secondary school examinations: a single system at 16-plus* (London: H.M.S.O., 1978): <http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/wp1978/single-system.html>

formed the basis for the new General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), which began being taught in schools in 1986 and was first sat in 1988.

The GCSE strove for greater standardization and consistency in terms of coverage and assessment; however, this did not mean that all candidates in a subject sat a single exam. Instead, it introduced a single system of differentiated assessment that applied across England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Examinations would be open to all pupils and not limit outcomes based upon ‘pre-ordained percentage of candidates’. Nonetheless, pupils of differing abilities would continue to study different syllabuses and sit different papers, which would limit the grades they could achieve. Even though schools retained the power to decide which pupils sat which papers, often making these decisions as early as 14, the introduction of the GCSE drew criticism from the left for the way it shifted power away from LEAs to Whitehall.³⁶ Around the same time, the Schools Council was abolished in 1984, because the government feared it was too pro-teacher, and replaced with the newly constituted Secondary Examinations Council, which came under far closer control from the DoE.³⁷ The numerous regional exam boards were rationalised into 6 national boards to administer, set, and assess the curriculum and examinations (four in England, 1 in Wales, 1 in Northern Ireland), which were ultimately answerable to the Secretary of State. This meant individual LEAs and schools lost the ability to shape exam curriculums and set tests, even though, teachers would continue to play the central role in the setting and marking of coursework.

In the following years the GCSE drew criticism from both sides of the political divide. For Brian Simon, and others on the left, the move to supplant control over examinations to central government was a necessary precursor to the introduction of the national curriculum and just another move in the marketization of education.³⁸ In contrast, those like Rhodes Boyson decried the new exam as a further assault on standards. Rather than seeing rising pass rates as evidence of an improved system, he dismissed them as a sign that the exams were becoming easier, forgoing the more challenging elements of the O-level in favour of coursework.³⁹ More recent assessments have been more positive, however.⁴⁰ Bill Brown observes that ‘it is of major importance that the GCSE recognized and formalized, in a way that previous examinations had failed to do, the essential interrelationship of assessment, the curriculum and teaching’.⁴¹ Steadily rising levels of attainment amongst all candidates suggest it has had a positive effect on outcomes (by 2010 only 1% of pupils left school without any qualifications compared to around 40% at its introduction), which in turn has led to more pupils staying on beyond 16 and has contributed to the expansion of the university sector.

Thatcher’s governments proved more reticent when it came to reforming A-levels, quickly announcing in 1979 that due to opposition from universities there would be no change. In one of its final contributions the Schools Council was asked to propose an alternative to A-levels that did not fundamentally alter the established two-year linear course, as N and F-levels would have done. It suggested incorporating a two-year Intermediate [I] Level, alongside the A-level that would encourage candidates towards greater diversification of subject choice. Yet, this proposal offered little for those students who wanted to remain at school for an extra year but not for the full Sixth Form. Then in 1987, the Higginson Committee was charged with reviewing A-levels, which they found to be too inflexible, passive, and poorly designed to test higher level skills. It recommended the streamlining of A-level

³⁶ Brian Simon, ‘The battle of the blackboard’, *Marxism Today*, June 1986, pp. 20-26.

³⁷ Derek Gillard, *Education in England: a history* (2018): www.educationengland.org.uk/history

³⁸ Clyde Chitty, *Towards a new education system: the victory of the New Right?* (London: Falmer Press, 1989).

³⁹ R. Brooks, p. 23.

⁴⁰ Peter Mandler, ‘Educating the Nation I: schools’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 24 (2014), 5-28, p. 23.

⁴¹ Bill Brown, ‘The administration of GCSE: an outline’, in Susan Butterfield & Richard Riding (eds.), *Assessment and examination in the secondary school: a practical guide for teachers and trainers* (London: Routledge, 2003), 75-100, p. 77.

courses and a greater focus on analytical skills over factual recall.⁴² Wary, however, of undermining standards the Conservative government rejected these suggestions because they undermined the A-level's two-year timeline. Although AS-levels came in 1989, which allowed students to study a streamlined syllabus alongside other A-level choices they followed the same timeline and carried similar academic expectations. Even though the A-level largely escaped unchanged, the post-16 educational landscape did start to fragment with the introduction of a range of shorter, vocational qualifications aimed at the 'new sixth former'.⁴³ These often lasted a single year and aimed at teaching a broader range of practical skills. Even though they drew criticism on the grounds of standards on the one hand, and an incoherent and ineffective response to rising youth unemployment, on the other, they did prove popular with pupils.

⁴² R. Brooks, p. 27.

⁴³ Chitty, *Towards a new education system*, pp. 162-63.

Glossary of school level examinations, 1917-2000

England & Wales

- School Certificate (1917-51)

Intended to test a pupil's progress after a four-year course of general education from 11 to 15. In England, the curriculum was divided into three groups of subjects deemed to constitute the essentials of a liberal education: English subjects, foreign languages, and science and mathematics. Little provision was made for subjects of a 'non-academic character' and although a fourth group consisting of music, drawing, manual work and house-craft was approved, its incorporation as part of the assessment was left to the discretion of individual examining bodies. By the late 1920s, pressure from schools, teachers, and parents meant that candidates were able to offer 2 Group 4 subjects for examination.

Schools normally decided entry on the basis of a whole form rather than individual pupils, which invariably favoured those at grammar schools. Success depended on a candidate's ability to pass the group not an individual subject, meaning that to receive the School Certificate a candidate needed to pass each subject group (graded as pass, credit, or distinction). These gradations were incorporated to satisfy university and professional bodies' demand for differentiation between candidates, who would previously have been sorted through specialist entrance examinations.

In Wales subjects were divided into five groups, with each candidate entered for five subjects, four of which had to be selected from groups 1, 2 & 3, including one from each group. They could then be entered for a fifth subject from any group. To achieve the school certificate they had to pass each subject from groups 1-3. Those who passed all five subjects were deemed to have matriculated. If they failed to attain a pass in each subject group they left school without formal qualifications.

Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5
Scripture	Latin	Mathematics	Music theory	Woodwork
English Language & Literature	Greek	Mechanics	Music Practical	Metalwork
Welsh Language & Literature	Welsh	Chemistry	Drama	Woodwork & Metalwork
History	French	Physics 1 (mechanics, heat & light)		Needlework & garment construction
Geography	German	Physics 2 (mechanics, magnetism & electricity)		Cookery
	Italian	Geography		Laundry work
	Spanish	Botany		Book keeping
		Biology		Shorthand
		Geology		
		Agriculture		
		Metallurgy		
		Domestic Science		

** In 1926 group 3 was split to create a sixth group consisting of agriculture, metallurgy, & domestic science.*

Matriculation standard was introduced to provide a comparator to the old university matriculation exams. This was set at passes in four (Oxford) or five (London) subject groups and marked out particularly high performing candidates. During the interwar period employers frequently stipulated that applicants should have achieved matriculation standard rather than simply passing the School Certificate. Although many argued that matriculation should be abolished and university entry judged instead on the basis of the Higher School Certificate, the University of London proved particularly resistant as it relied more heavily on applicants who left school before 18/19.

- **Higher School Certificate**

Taken by those who had done well in the School Certificate and able to remain at school until 18. Pupils studied three groups of subjects to gain the qualification: classics and ancient history, modern humanities, mathematics and science. Within each group a candidate could specialise in certain subjects; however, the certificate was awarded based on group passes, not subject, meaning it did not allow for the specialisation offered by A-levels. It did not offer automatic entry to university but by the mid-1930s was increasingly accepted as evidence of a candidate's ability to undertake a degree. Nonetheless, even into the 1940s employers (particularly for white collar jobs) and many universities saw the School Certificate rather than the HSC as the basic entry requirement.

- **Eleven-plus**

Origins lie in the 'scholarship' or 'qualifying' exams that emerged as a result of the 1907 Education (Administrative Provisions) Act. This required maintained grammar schools to accept 25% LEA scholarship candidates and promised dedicated funding to secondary schools to support these pupils. This necessitated establishing a system that could facilitate the transfer of a set number of pupils from elementary to secondary school. The 11-plus was initially intended as a qualifying exam but, as demand grew, soon transformed into an intense selection competition. By the 1920s most children were given the opportunity to take an exam aged 10/11 that would determine their educational trajectory; however, the substance and outcome of the exam varied considerably depending upon LEA. In London, for example, all candidates would sit a single exam that determined whether they would attend a grammar, central school, or remain at an elementary school. Overall, before 1939, around 80% of pupils nationally remained at elementary school after the scholarship exam.

This lack of uniformity continued after 1944, despite the universalist assumptions that underpinned many understandings of the 11-plus; there was never a common exam sat by all 11-year olds and success rates varied greatly depending upon LEA. There were some broad similarities in the test across LEAs. Most consisted of written papers in English and Arithmetic, while some LEAs also introduced a general knowledge paper and oral test. In larger LEAs, children would often sit a qualifying test in their school to determine who went forward to sit the final examination. Headmasters and teachers wielded significant, if not total control, over who was entered for the 11-plus, often basing this decision upon a perception of who was likely to pass. It was not uncommon for primary schools to start streaming pupils from the age of 7 in order to prepare for the 11-plus.

By the 1950s, mounting parental dissatisfaction with the 11-plus combined with expanding amounts of research that highlighted the wastage of talent, as well as gender and class inequalities under the tripartite system, led to several LEAs abandoning the test for alternative

forms of selection. Many that chose this option did so in order to preserve their grammar schools, which were seen to be under threat from structural reform. In place of the written test, LEAs instead decide grammar school entrance through internal school tests, teacher references, and interviews; however, as research in Hertfordshire showed, rather than solving the problems of the 11-plus tended to exacerbate them by favouring even more middle class pupils.

While the issuing of circular 10/65 led to many LEAs drawing up plans to abandon selective education, the subsequent battles over comprehensivization meant that the 11-plus remained in place in most LEAs well into the 1970s and continues today in authorities that retain the bipartite system (164 grammars remain in England and 69 in Northern Ireland). Continued in Northern Ireland until 2008.

- **General certificate of education (GCE) (examined at O-level, A-level, and Scholarship/Special level) (1951-86)**

Introduced in England and Wales in 1951, and until 1965 was the sole state recognised external examination qualification. Originally the GCE was examined by eight examining bodies either directly affiliated or closely connected with the universities. In 1953, a new examination body, the Associated Examining Board, independent of the universities was created. This set of examinations was designed for technical students. All were overseen by the SSEC.

o Ordinary Level

Sat at age 16 (as stipulated by law, although with room for possible exception based on discretion of individual headmasters). Graded on a pass/fail basis and was roughly equivalent to a credit at School Certificate. O-level passes were thus seen as slightly higher than a Pass at School Certificate. Sat on a subject (not group) basis, with individual passes awarded. Originally intended to be an academic examination, principally for grammar school pupils, which would secure an exemption from university entry exams or preliminary professional examinations. Taken by most grammar school pupils in the fifth form and a growing number of Secondary Modern pupils. A successful candidate was judged as having passed 4 O-level subjects. The minimum pass mark was around 36%. After 1975 an A-E (and U for unclassified) grading system was introduced to provide greater differentiation between candidates.

o Advanced Level (A-level)

Roughly equivalent to Higher School certificate. Initially, candidates working towards A-levels were not expected to sit O-levels. Candidates would normally study for three subjects, each sat at subject level and students achieved individual passes. This meant that candidates could enter for as many or few course as they wished, although three remained the normal number. By the mid-1950s, A-levels became the basic qualifying measure for university, with specific courses often stipulating specific A-level combinations. Oxford and Cambridge, however, continued to rely on internal examinations (Responsions and Previous Examination) to decide entry, access to which was based on O-level results. In 1955 a distinction level was added to the basic pass/fail standard, and in 1960 the now familiar grading system (A-E) was introduced. Candidates were required to attain 40% to achieve the minimum pass mark. Taken in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland.

- Scholarship/Special level

Introduced in 1960 and sat at age 18 by those competing for university awards, expected to be around 15% of A-level candidates. The syllabus was broadly the same as respective A-level syllabus but intended to mark out high ability candidates. Graded on a distinction/merit/fail basis.

- **Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE)**

Introduced as a result of the Beloe Committee's report (1960) and first sat in 1965. It came following growing pressure from schools and parents for an examination that could provide a formal, standardized leaving qualification for those not at grammar schools. The CSE replaced the various unrecognised examinations that secondary modern schools had increasingly employed (see below). Administered by 14 regional exam boards and it was expected that teachers would play a far greater role in setting the curriculum and papers. The boards were regulated by the reformed SSEC, now renamed the Schools Council for Curriculum and Examinations.

Intended for the 40% below those who took O-levels (20% of school pupils). It would be sat at 16 and assumed that a candidate had completed a five years of secondary school course, although schools were under no obligation to offer it. Passes were awarded on an individual subject basis and graded at levels 1-5. The CSE introduced coursework for the first time and made it possible for the teacher also to be the assessor, with scripts then moderated by an external marker. Mode 3 offered the radical opportunity for schools to set their own curriculums and examinations. The SSEC stipulated that a Grade I pass at CSE should be regarded as the equivalent of a pass at O-level, although the CSE struggled to attain parity of esteem in the eyes of many pupils, parents, and employers.

- **Local & Technical examinations**

Despite the expansion of secondary education after 1945, little provision was made for the majority of pupils (especially those at SMS) to obtain formal leaving qualifications. This created frustrations within schools, which struggled to formulate a coherent curriculum for their pupils to work through [see SMS briefing paper], and amongst parents, frustrated that their children were being denied the full benefits of secondary education [see Parents BP]. As a result, by the mid-1950s many SMS entered their pupils for a wide array of local or professional qualifications. Although not formally recognised by the state, these were popular for offering pupils some form of credentialization upon leaving school, even if quality and standards varied significantly.

On the one hand, LEAs started to produce their own leaving examinations for schools in their area or else might group together to produce regional examinations. For example, Reading LEA created the 'Reading Education Committee Certificate of Education' in 1955 for pupils in local SMS; Swansea LEA created a similar leaving certificate in 1956 that was sat by around 40% of school leavers; and the following year Southend LEA produced a scheme intended for all pupils who had completed four-years of secondary school, with those passing in English, Mathematics, and two further subjects gaining admission to a fulltime course at a local technical college of further education [Bonney Rust & Harris, 26].

At the same time, schools also started to request that professional and technical bodies to produce leaving examinations for them. Many used tests created by Regional Examining

Unions, The College of Preceptors, The Royal Society of Arts, or the City and Guilds of London Institute as a means of providing pupils with leaving credentials. The Ministry of Education worried over the fragmentation of the examining system and wide variation in quality. These concerns sat at the heart of the Beloe Committee's deliberations in the early 1960s and led to the recommendation for the introduction of the CSE.

- **General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE)**

GCSEs were established in 1984 and first introduced in schools in 1986. They were intended to address the long-standing demand that CSEs and O-Levels be integrated into a single qualification. The GCSE was intended to provide uniformity and standardization across Age-16 qualifications. Candidates studied a set syllabus for a number of subjects, which they sat individually. Examinations were graded on an A-G spectrum, with a Grade C being seen as roughly equivalent to an O-Level Grade C or CSE Grade 1. Internal differentiation continued with candidates of different abilities following different syllabuses and sitting different exams. This meant that the highest grades were never attainable for those studying foundation papers. In 1994 the A* grade was introduced to differentiate the best candidates and in the 2000s modules were introduced for certain subjects and coursework expanded.

Taken in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Examinations set and administered by a variety of regional exam boards, now overseen by Ofqual in England, Qualifications Wales, and the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) in Northern Ireland. Since the 1980s the number of exam boards has shrunk, so that there are now five: AQA, OCR, Edexcel in England, WJEC in Wales, and CCEA in Northern Ireland.

Scotland

- **Scottish Leaving Certificate**

Established in 1888 and intended to raise standards and achieve greater consistency across Scotland. Stood as a measure of attainment for pupils who had completed a five or three year course of secondary education. Examined at Higher and Intermediate levels and was initially examined on a group basis. Focus was academic rather than vocational and had support from the universities and professional bodies, which agreed to recognise it as a base entry standard in place of their own exams. The certificate examined English, a modern language, a science, ancient languages, and mathematics. Those taking the Higher Level normally proceeded to university and the Intermediate into the professions. It was replaced in 1962 by the Scottish Certificate of Education.

- **Day School Certificate (Higher/Lower)**

Introduced in 1925 to replace the Intermediate and Merit Certificates. Originally called the Day School Certificate but soon became known as Highers. Pupils were awarded the Higher qualification upon completing a two or three year advanced division course, normally leaving school at 15 or 16. Success normally ensured access to university or the professions. It was tested on a group, rather than individual subject, basis. The Lower Certificate was awarded to pupils who had completed not less than one year further study beyond elementary education.

After the introduction of the Ordinary Grade, the Higher Certificate became the senior leaving exam for most pupils, with success often leading to entry to university or professional careers. In terms of university admissions a Higher carries the same value as an AS level. Represents the higher level of the Scottish Certificate of Education (Standard Grade the lower).

- **Certificate of Sixth Year Studies**

Became the highest level of qualification open to school pupils after its introduction in 1968. Taken by pupils in the sixth year after they had completed Highers and intended as preparation for university. It is not part of the Scottish Certificate of Education and thus not mandatory. It has recently been replaced the Advanced Higher.

- **Ordinary Level**

Introduced in 1962 to replace the Lower School Certificate. Intended for students of 'moderate ability' and examined on an individual subject basis. Courses were studied for two years from 13 to 16, with examinations taken at the end. If pupils achieved a high pass they would be eligible to study for Highers, although many left school after Ordinary level.

- **Standard Grade**

Replaced the Ordinary Level in the 1980s. Studied for over the same timeframe but examined at three levels (Credit, General, Foundation), with the highest intended to be harder than the Ordinary Level but the lowest aimed at pupils who would not have taken Ordinary Levels and left school without entering any examination. The new syllabus placed far more emphasis on course work. Students typically studied 8 subjects, with English and Maths compulsory

Northern Ireland

Exams in Northern Ireland are set by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA). Schools in Northern Ireland follow the Northern Ireland curriculum, which is based on the National Curriculum in England and Wales albeit with important differences. In addition to English and Maths, Religious Education remains compulsory. GCSEs are taken at 16 and A-levels at 18. The 11-plus remained in place until the 2008, when it was abolished by Sinn Fein in the face of sustained opposition from the DUP. Subsequently, many grammar schools continue to set their own entrance qualification.

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