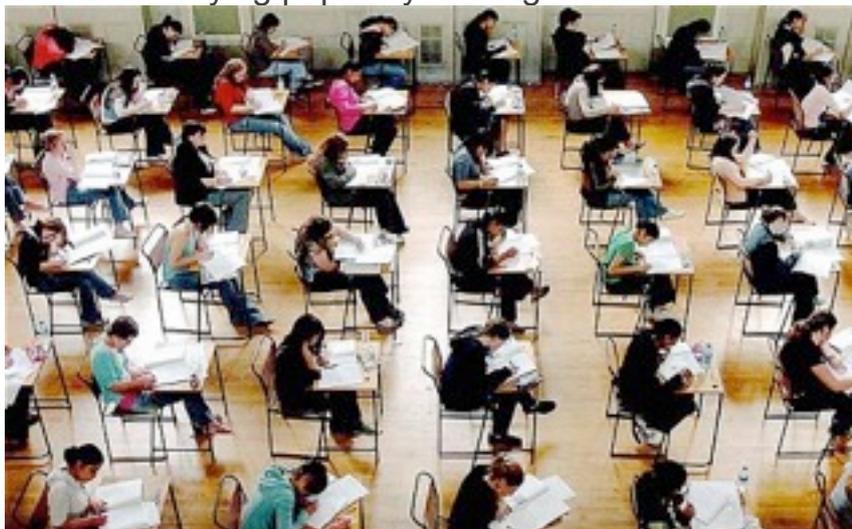


## Our children deserve better than the worthless GCSE

We are betraying pupils by making them work so hard for such a boring exam.



Proposed reforms will only make the exam system slightly less bad Photo: PA

**By Martin Stephen**

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For a quarter of a century, I have been living a lie. Every August, on GCSE results day, I bit my tongue. Like every other head teacher, I told my students that the qualifications they had worked so hard towards were actually worth something – congratulated them on their successes, commiserated with them on their failures, encouraged them to get the best possible grades they could.

How could I tell the expectant faces looking up at me for the start-of-year assembly that the exams they would be working so hard for – ones taken by every child in the country, ones vital to their future – were probably the worst of their kind in the world? I would have been the officer telling them that the war in which they were expected to fight heroically was a sham.

This September, there will be no expectant faces, no cohort of young people who look to me as the spokesman for their school. So I can at long last state the obvious truth: that our young people deserve far, far better than the GCSE.

Why am I so opposed to these exams? The most obvious answer is that they are stultifyingly boring. Most GCSEs contain very little to stir, stimulate or challenge not only the most able, but any child who likes to think. They are inherently dull.

We were warned, years ago, when one of the earliest specimen GCSE papers contained a rather beautiful drawing of a winged insect. The first question asked the candidates to state the purpose of the wings. Not unreasonably, the correct answer was that they allowed the insect to fly. But intelligent and imaginative candidates, used to the rigours of O-level, immediately smelt a rat. Surely it couldn't be that simple? Some spent hours working on detailed explanations of chaos theory, whereby such an insect flapping its wings in Hong Kong might cause a hurricane in King's Lynn.

Good teachers – and there are many of them – can bypass a boring specification (education-speak for “syllabus”) by enriching the curriculum. But there is no reward for doing so. Instead, results at GCSE are used to judge not just the pupils, but the

schools, having been adopted as one of the main Key Performance Indicators. A teacher may be in love with his subject, and have an overwhelming concern for his pupils' welfare. His natural instinct will be to be passionate about that subject, and excite his students' interest in it. Yet both parties will suffer if a sufficient number of grades A\* to C are not racked up at the end of the year.

The result? Huge pressure to teach to the test. I realised how serious the problem was when I observed a lesson that was scheduled to be about photosynthesis. Two minutes in, a boy put his hand up and asked the teacher – as part of the discussion – whether it would be possible, in his lifetime, for a would-be parent to walk into a clinic and specify the physical and mental characteristics of his child. The teacher immediately moved on to talk about DNA, gene-mapping and a host of things not touched on by the syllabus. It was a brilliant lesson. Then, 10 minutes before the end, the teacher said: “Well, that was fun. Now let's get you your GCSE.” And for that 10 minutes, the utterly tedious material on photosynthesis was drummed into the class's heads, a process made bearable only by the fun they'd just had.

Our main national exam should not make teachers have to do this. And the problem is not just that it eliminates any opportunity for spontaneity or creativity in the classroom. In its one-size-fits-all approach, it discriminates against both ends of the ability spectrum. Since schools are judged on their ability to get children to at least a C grade at GCSE – which affects not just their position in the league tables, but the pupils' eligibility to take A-levels, and even go to university – there is irresistible bureaucratic pressure to teach to, and for, that benchmark. This has meant neglecting both the brightest children and those less academically gifted, in particular the shockingly large number of pupils who fail to meet the requirements of the so-called English Baccalaureate, an umbrella qualification that involves achieving a C or better in maths, English, two sciences, a language and history or geography.

The truth is that in trying to do everything, the GCSE succeeds in doing nothing. It's as if everyone who went to buy a car came away not with a family-friendly 4x4, or the jazzy little sports car Dad had been lusting after since he was a teenager, but a mid-range saloon.

To my mind, the worst offender is the English syllabus. The so-called English Language GCSE is no such thing: it ignores the structure of language (you have to take Latin for that, which is an opportunity denied to most of our young people) and instead looks only at its impact, ignoring the fact that the impact of language depends on how it is structured. You might think it's important to know that using English correctly helps you to be understood, or that learning to summarise someone else's argument, with no reference to your own emotional response to that argument, is a basic life skill. Forget it.

As for literature – forget that, too. The current examination is not about understanding an author's work. It is about finding out how much an author supports your view of life, taking any intellectual rigour out of reading. One of the more interesting moments in my life as a head teacher was receiving the chief examiners' report on a cohort of boys who had achieved record GCSE results, despite near-disastrous marks in English Literature. The reason for our boys' relative failure, we were told, was that their answers had been “too logical”. By the same token, Aristotle would probably be marked down for his shameful lack of empathetic skills.

There has, admittedly, been some recognition of the GCSE's flaws. Its defenders claim that the move to ban coursework, now widely recognised as a cheats' charter, will make things better, by putting greater weight on the rather unfortunately named "terminal exam". Yet such reforms will simply make the system slightly less bad. After all, if the core material is rotten, how it is examined – or marked – is of secondary importance.

How do we fix the system? The answer is that our education system needs to do two separate things for 16-year-olds. The first is to make sure that they have the basic literacy and numeracy skills that are needed if they want to enter the workforce. The second is to make sure that, if they want to remain in full-time education, and proceed to university, they have the intellectual discipline and appetite to prosper. So we need two separate qualifications: a "school leaving certificate" that guarantees those core skills that employers demand, and a second qualification that measures aptitude for further academic study. Our current system attempts to fit every child in the country into the same framework. By doing so, it betrays them all.

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