

News

EXAM QUESTIONS

Ofqual finds 'predictable' GCSE and A level papers

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Exam questions in GCSEs and A levels are becoming too predictable with questions in some papers repeated "almost word for word from one year to the next", a new report found.

Researchers also discovered that teachers were teaching to tests, as candidates from the same schools produced similar answers.

The Predictability Studies report from Ofqual analysed a series of questions in nine different subjects. It showed that GCSE media studies had an "entirely predictable" content. Teachers and students could also guess with some accuracy which topics would come up in the speaking exams in GCSE French and German.

A levels also came in for criticism. In A level law it was "relatively straightforward to predict which topics would be covered in which examination". The study found that students needed to have covered only about a third of the syllabus to pass. A psychology paper also "permitted significant selection of the intended content and questions which were severely limited in range."



But the report also makes the point that predictability is not automatically a bad thing. "Rather, it is important to distinguish between desirable and undesirable predictability".

Kathleen Tattersall, the Ofqual chairman, said the vast majority of GCSEs and A levels were not predictable and remedial action had been taken. "In the small number of cases where the study reported concerns, the examinations have either been revised or are in the process of revision," she said.

Leading educationalist, Professor Alan Smithers, from the University of Buckingham, said he was not surprised by the findings.

"So much effort has been made to make examinations more accessible that it seems they are not as much of a challenge as they should be," he said. "It is not surprising that many independent schools are now doing the IGCSE, which is more like the old O level, and is seen as better preparation for A level."

This year's results yielded another record year, with the GCSE pass rates rising to 98 per cent, with more than a fifth of entries achieving A* or A. At A level students recorded a rise in the pass rate for the 26th consecutive year, from 96.9 per cent last year to 97.2 per cent.

The number of A grades at A level rose slightly from 25.3 per cent to 25.9 per cent. This year saw a rise in the number of students opting to study maths, science and modern foreign languages at A level, while subjects dismissed as being 'easier', such as communication studies and performing arts, saw a decline.

The report on examination questions follows a separate study from Durham University, published in August, which showed that A levels were now two grades easier than 20 years ago.

MEDIA

TV report on result success

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Assessment practices at a Lancashire school have been highlighted on TV following a dramatic improvement in examinations results within seven years.

Hodgson School in Poulton-le-Fylde saw the proportion of pupils achieving A* to C grades in GCSE science jump from 38 per cent to 98 per cent last year.

A Teachers TV programme about improving GCSE results in science explained how better use of data to track pupil progress and fostering a sense of

achievement among pupils were key strategies behind the turnaround. The initial spur for change was an Ofsted report highlighting a mismatch between the difficulty of science work set and the ability of pupils.

Deputy head Toni Roethling said a rigorous regime of target setting and progress tracking of each pupil spread throughout the school.

"The 'road to Damascus' moment was when teachers started to share information with students; it turned our teaching on its head. The pupils knew where they were, knew where they had to get to and, most importantly, knew how to get there."

Paul Ashton, commissioning editor for

Teachers TV, said a decision to focus on improving GCSE results was made because the subject had received scant coverage since the channel launch in 2005.

"The results at Hodgson were the biggest increase I have ever come across. It was a 'must have' story. The improvements at that school can't be achieved in the classroom alone. You need senior management of the school to create systems that are bigger than any teacher or department."

The programme can be downloaded at www.teachers.tv/video/25573. Similar programmes on history and foreign languages are to be broadcast this autumn.

14-19 REFORMS

Ofqual sets the pace for Diplomas

More than 20,000 teenagers have started studying for the new Diplomas in the first five subjects. Initially, students will be able to take Diplomas in: construction and the built environment; information technology; creative and media, engineering; and society, health and development.

As the first students began their studies, the Office of the Qualifications and Examinations Regulator (Ofqual) announced it was accrediting a further five Diplomas. They will be taught for the first time from 2009 in: business; administration and finance; environmental and land-based studies; hair and beauty studies; hospitality and manufacturing and product design.

Ofqual has also accredited 181 GCSE specifications, covering 60 subjects. The qualifications have been reviewed to ensure that content supports the revised secondary curriculum, and assessment continues to stimulate good teaching and learning.

Ofqual has published a report outlining the arrangements for awarding and setting standards in the Diploma and the regulatory arrangements for component and awarding bodies. This details how fair and consistent standards in the qualification will be applied and maintained, given the component nature of the Diploma.

Kathleen Tattersall, the chair of Ofqual, said: "Ofqual is committed to ensuring that the qualifications available to learners are of the highest quality and deserve to command the confidence of employers and higher education. We shall monitor them closely as they are delivered to make sure that learners get a fair deal."

"The documents will play a key role in ensuring that Diplomas are introduced fairly and rigorously by all awarding bodies."

● For details on setting Diploma standards go to: www.ofqual.gov.uk/files/ofqual-08-3865_DASG_report.pdf

QCA organises new aggregation service

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority has set up the Diploma Aggregation Service to help schools and centres manage the recording process required for the new qualification.

Students will have to take a number of components, the aggregated marks of which will go towards their final grade.

The Diploma Aggregation Service will give administrators access to a database through a web browser or their existing information management system, where they can store learners' achievements in each of the constituent parts of the Diploma, including work experiences and the achievement of personal and thinking skills.

These results will then be electronically aggregated using rules of combination that allow for the award of a Diploma.

Teresa Bergin, the QCA's head of diploma programme, said: "These rules of combination are automatically checked for compliance, thereby reducing the possibility of any human error in the calculations and speeding up the awarding process."

HEADER

Task approach for KS3

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New optional tests to help schools assess students' ICT capabilities at key stage 3 will be released in full to schools later this year by the National Assessment Agency.

The materials have been compiled following a ministers' decision in January 2007 to abandon a planned statutory ICT testing programme for all 14-year-olds. The QCA had advised that those tests would present an "unnecessary burden" to schools.

The task-based materials are intended to support formative assessment and help children build up their understanding of the subject. Three sets – on modelling, data handling, and presenting and handling information – have been rolled out already. The final batch, on sequencing instructions, will be released in November.



FORMATIVE METHOD

Tasks are carried out on computer using software supplied by NAA and designed by RM, education IT specialists. On completion, the system generates an on-screen report on each child's performance. The report is linked to a progression grid which helps the teacher to pinpoint what the child needs to do to progress to the next level.

Lessons from the research for the statutory testing programme have been taken on board in the new format.

"We have built in the things that schools liked about the original pilot tests, such as the task-based approach designed to be completed comfortably within a lesson," said Sue Walton, project director for the NAA.

Support materials are available on the NAA website at www.naa.org.uk/ks3ict. They include detailed explanations of how the tasks are marked – a response to criticism from some teachers about the lack of transparency in the original tests.

Roger Higton head of ICT at Lord Williams's School in Thame, Oxfordshire has trialled the materials. "We have used them as summative tests but we found it much more useful to use them in a formative way. Children can go back to the tests, revise what they do and then move to different levels of task," he said.

VOX POP: QUALIFICATIONS

Have A levels outlived their usefulness?

As more universities move to introduce pre-entrance tests and the number of students gaining top grade at A level rises, is the qualification suitable any longer?

Nigel Akers, vice-principal of Djanogly City Academy, Nottingham:



"At Djanogly, we continue to offer A levels alongside NVQs, Btecs and the Diploma, so we can provide students with a broad mixture. Whether A levels should be retained depends on what you want young people to achieve. If you want kids to end up in meaningful employment after university, they may not be the best route – employers say that young people are coming out of university ill-prepared for work. Getting three good A levels shows you are good at passing exams but employers want to know if you will fit into the workplace."

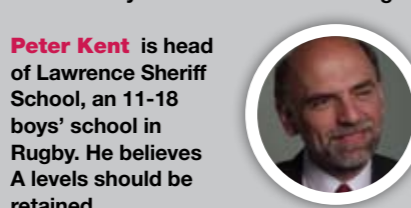
Don Lillistone, principal of St Mary's College, Middlesbrough, is a fan of the French

baccalauréat:

"The beauty of the baccalauréat, whatever its faults, is that everyone knows what it is. It sanctions the end of secondary education and entitles the holder to access higher education. With A level, there is no such understanding."

At the heart of my preference for some sort of 'baccalauréat' is the breadth of academic experience it engenders. Without ignoring the high quality of work achieved by some students at A level, it is possible to be a 'straight A' student within a very narrow field of knowledge."

Peter Kent is head of Lawrence Sheriff School, an 11-18 boys' school in Rugby. He believes A levels should be retained.



"Diplomas are unproven and seem to be based upon aspiration rather than any hard evidence that they will succeed. Compared to National Curriculum Tests, A levels (and GCSEs)

have far more credibility and offer a more accurate assessment. We would be crazy to ditch A levels before we assess the alternatives. Universities' own pre-entrance exams are a retrograde step as they place more barriers in the way of students. I believe that universities do have enough information to distinguish between students already."

Robert Coe, director of secondary projects in the Curriculum, Evaluation and Management (CEM) Centre at Durham University:

"A levels still provide a robust, valued qualification that relates to the knowledge that teachers, students, higher education and employers value. They have become significantly easier, which means they are no longer a good way to distinguish bright from outstanding candidates. But I think universities using pre-entrance exams is a bad thing because it puts more pressure on students and advantages those who are best supported in preparing for those specific tests."

EXTENDED PROJECTS

Effective research is a key criteria for the new EP

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority has praised the efforts of schools involved in pilots for the new Extended Projects, and says teachers have a crucial role in its success.

The EP, which is a stand-alone qualification worth half an A level, but which forms a compulsory part of the new Diploma, is being rolled out across all schools this term after trials lasting two years. 1,500 students from 80 schools have been piloting the projects, which can be submitted as a dissertation, investigation, artefact or performance.

David Mackay, the QCA's programme leader for 14-19 qualification, who has responsibility for the EP, said the role of teachers was important in ensuring that students remained on task and maintained their discipline in completing the projects.

"Teachers will have to help students to

evaluate the reliability of the sources they are using, and ensure that they access the right sources," he said.

"We are generally very pleased with the outcome of the pilot, and there has been some good work done," he added. "The projects this year looked more like we expected. However, one of the issues that remains is ensuring that students produce the full range of evidence rather than lots of incoherent or unnecessary information, and we will be producing guidance to help schools with this."

"We also found that some students showed little justification of what they did or how they arrived at their conclusions."

Candidates can choose the topic they wish to study for the project, which should take the form of a question that they can discuss and answer. They are marked on the thoroughness of their research and their methods, and a justification of how they arrived at their conclusions, as well as the finished product. They will also be expected to make a presentation of their work, which will be subject to questions from examiners.

The EP is intended to stretch and challenge the most able students, and prepare them for the demands of further study at degree level and beyond.



IN-DEPTH STUDY

ICT assessment

Christopher Trinick has been appointed as Chair of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority.



The appointment, which takes effect from 1 November for three years, was announced as *Make the Grade* was going to press. It means he will become the first Chair of the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCDA), which, subject to Parliamentary approval, will be established when the qualifications regulator is put onto a statutory footing.

Trinick will play a pivotal role in leading the QCA through this major change.

"I look forward to working with both the officials and the board members at a key point in the development of the QCA as it evolves into a development agency providing the key source of expertise on curriculum, assessment and qualifications," he said.

"The QCA will have a renewed task, a new location in Coventry and a new name – the QCDA – to reflect its important role."

Trinick is a former teacher who went on to a career as a public administrator. He recently retired from his post as Chief Executive of Lancashire County Council.

● Meet chief executive of Ofqual Isabel Nisbet – page 25