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## Secondary School Examinations: a historical perspective

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**ABSTRACT** Michael Gove has made examination reform a marked feature of his period as Education Secretary in the coalition government, although he has not always found it easy to bring about the changes he feels so strongly about, in the face of widespread opposition from teachers and educationists. This article seeks to analyse the Education Secretary's recent proposals and set them in a historical context.

### Introduction

Back in 1986, I collaborated with Jo and Peter Mortimore on the preparation of a second edition of a Bedford Way paper, 'Secondary School Examinations', which had first been published by the Institute of Education two years earlier (Mortimore et al, 1986). A new edition was now necessary, largely on account of the Thatcher government's rather surprising decision to introduce a single system of examining at 16-plus. The actual announcement had been made by Secretary of State Sir Keith Joseph (1981-86) in the House of Commons on 30 June 1984. It had been decided that students would begin studying for the new examination, to be known as the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), in the autumn of 1986, and that the first papers would be taken in the summer of 1988.

For many years, there had been sustained criticism of the dual O-level/CSE system, which had had a determining influence on the way upper-school examination classes were organised in the majority of secondary schools over a period of 20 years. O levels dated from 1951 when the General Certificate of Education (GCE) was introduced, with examination at two main levels: Ordinary (O) and Advanced (A). Both O and A levels were single-subject examinations and were clearly designed for those considered to be at the top of the so-called ability range. Because of the flawed nature of the 11-plus selection process, large numbers of secondary modern school students soon proved themselves capable of securing a range of O-level passes, and alternative examinations also proliferated. Students could not normally take O levels until they were 16, but increasing numbers were staying on past the statutory school-leaving age (which was then 15) in order to do so. In 1955 a Ministry of Education circular (Circular 289) relaxed the age restriction for entrance to O

level, but warned that teachers in secondary modern schools should beware of developing GCE courses merely for the sake of prestige (Ministry of Education, 1955). The idea that large numbers of non-grammar-school students might actually be capable of passing external examinations was clearly radical and rather subversive!

CSE (Certificate of Secondary Education) examination courses dated from 1963, when, as part of the implementation of the Beloe Committee's 1960 recommendations, the CSE was established, with the first examinations being held in the summer of 1965. Beloe attached considerable importance to a major role for classroom teachers in shaping and operating the new examination, and consequently the regional boards responsible for the new CSE were to be controlled by serving teachers. In addition, there were to be three types or 'modes' of examining: a traditional type of external examination based on a syllabus drawn up by a regional board; an external examination based on the school's own syllabus; or an examination also based on the school's own syllabus, but *internally* marked and *externally* moderated. In succeeding years, Mode 3 courses, as they came to be known, were to prove very popular in a large number of the country's comprehensive schools, but they attracted the hostility of those who saw them as a means of awarding qualifications to students who did not really deserve them. The CSE was to have, officially at least, no pass/fail distinction (though a student's performance below grade 5 was not classified), and the standard of grade 1 was deemed to be the equivalent of an O-level pass.

Whereas the O-level examination was intended for the 'top' 20% of the ability range, the CSE was supposedly aimed at the next 40%. Members of the Beloe Committee accepted the view, common at the time, that, for at least 40% of students, external examinations should be avoided, since, apart from any other considerations, they had a distorting effect on the curriculum. Students in the 'lower' half of the ability range would have to be content with local or regional leaving certificates, awarded at the age of 15. In reality, it was soon the case that around 90% of school students were being entered for at least one subject at GCE O level or CSE level (Nuttall, 1982, p. 61), thereby effectively rejecting the concept of a 60% target group.

### **The GCSE and its Critics**

Broadly speaking, the GCSE examination system introduced in 1988 was initially designed to have *five* main features. (1) It would be administered by five groups of GCE and CSE boards, four in England and one in Wales, and would be monitored by the Secondary Examinations Council. (2) All syllabuses and assessment and grading procedures would follow nationally agreed guidelines, to be known as the 'national criteria'. (3) These 'national criteria' would be extended as soon as practicable to embrace a new and more 'objective' system of 'criteria-related' grading in which the grades awarded to candidates would depend on the extent to which they had clearly demonstrated particular levels

of attainment defined in 'grade criteria'. (4) The 'national criteria' would make provision for differentiated assessment, by means of differentiated papers, or differentiated questions *within* common papers, in each subject, and for relating the coursework tasks to candidates' individual abilities. (5) GCSE grades would be awarded on a single, 7-point scale (A to G), the GCE boards bearing special responsibility within the groups for maintaining the standards of Grades A to C, and the CSE boards bearing a similar responsibility for Grades D to G. Grades A to C would be considered the equivalent of O-level Grades A to C and a CSE Grade 1 (Department of Education and Science, 1985).

Support for Sir Keith Joseph's emphasis on the need for a greater degree of criterion-referencing, and a move away from norm-referencing, in 16-plus examining had already come from both the Conservative and the Labour benches in the House of Commons. In a debate held in January 1984, Conservative MP Harry Greenway said that a criterion-based system of assessment would be one of the GCSE's 'great strengths' and was therefore to be 'warmly welcomed'. And Opposition Education Spokesperson Giles Radice acknowledged the part which criterion-referenced examinations could play in an assessment system designed to foster 'self-confidence and achievement', but also recognised that 'the pressure of examinations on our secondary schools often limits and narrows the curriculum, to the detriment of pupils of all levels of ability'. Echoing one of the main conclusions of the 1959 Crowther Report (Ministry of Education, 1959), Radice added: 'Examinations should be the helpful *servants*, not the dominating *master* of the curriculum' (Hansard, House of Commons, Col. 591, 20 January 1984).

The introduction of the GCSE, with all the provisions designed to ensure differentiation at all levels, did *not* meet with universal approval. Even before the new examination was announced, Professor Desmond Nuttall had voiced his concerns in a 1982 article in *FORUM*, where his view was that many of the original proposals for a common system of examining had been watered down to such an extent that 'they began to look more like a common grading scheme for *two* examinations, rather than a common system of examining'. He was unequivocal in his hostility to the government's proposals:

I am convinced that the promise of a comprehensive and liberating examination system to match a comprehensive education system has been lost, and that the system we are going to get, after years of stultifying bureaucratic and political manoeuvring within the DES, is divisive, retrogressive, incapable of developing, obsolescent in that it is not likely to meet today's curricular needs, let alone tomorrow's, and anti-educational, in that it will not be at all sensitive to the needs of pupils, teachers, classrooms, schools, and even society itself. ... We need a group of hard-working individuals to show how national criteria can be phrased positively rather than negatively, and a national campaign to fight for what was good in the original concept of a common system of examining. (Nuttall, 1982, p. 61)

It was also pointed out, in an article published in the *Guardian* in May 1986, that the new system did not even solve the problem of having more than one examination to choose from:

Many months before the examination, pupils will be segregated into those who will be expected to answer the hard papers and questions, and those who will be able to answer the easy ones. To reinforce this segregation, the GCE boards will be responsible for the standard of the top grades, and the CSE boards for the standard of the bottom ones. This is little different from the GCE/CSE dual system, except that the segregation will be hidden, all certificates being headed GCSE. (Mathews, 1986)

Moreover, there was no guarantee that the element of coursework provided for in the subject-specific criteria would prove to be particularly significant. It could, in fact, be argued that the old CSE Mode 3 option afforded far more scope for meaningful school-based curriculum development (Mathews, 1986).

It soon became clear that Grades D to G were regarded as having very little value, and that *only* students who gained Grades A (or A\*) to C were to be regarded as having 'passed' the examination. With the publication of league tables, schools themselves were to be judged by the percentage of their Year 11 students who were able to achieve five or more 'passes' at Grades A (or A\*) to C. At the same time, there were very real questions concerning the rationale for the GCSE examination in the light of decisions to raise the school-leaving age beyond 16, and an increasing tendency to view provision for the 14-to-19 age range in terms of a 'continuum'. Was it actually necessary to have any sort of leaving examination at the age of 16?

In a research project involving two secondary schools, and undertaken over the course of six terms between the autumn of 1995 and the summer of 1997, David Gillborn and Deborah Youdell, two academics working in the field of policy studies at the Institute of Education in London, investigated the effects on teachers and their students of a situation where higher-grade GCSE passes had become *the* dominant criterion for measuring success or failure in the British educational system (Gillborn & Youdell, 1999, 2000). Using an economic metaphor, they queried the extent to which the A-to-C economy had been accepted as a fact of life by most members of staff and, specifically, what happened when the teachers were encouraged to concentrate all their efforts on a very small part of the cohort at the C/D borderline.

The teachers interviewed at the two schools made it quite clear that they felt under incredible pressure to 'ration' the education they offered, thereby widening the attainment gap. Typical of their comments were:

A school now lives or dies on its results.

The staff are under considerable pressure to get As-to-Cs. I mean pressure like, you know, that's never existed before.

The hard fact is that Cs are worth very much more than anything below a C.

The importance of league table success had led the two schools to develop new ways of identifying and encouraging those students who might, with additional support, manage a C grade in a number of key subjects. These students at the borderline between Grades C and D could benefit from a range of strategies, including one-to-one mentoring and extra teacher support.

The two main groups of students who 'suffered' as a result of the schools' policies were those who were thought to be 'safe bets' for the higher grades, and those who were thought to stand no chance of ever reaching a C. This latter group filled the 'bottom' streams and sets, to be taught by the less-experienced teachers. Moreover, this group included a disproportionately high number of children from working-class homes, students with special educational needs, and African Caribbean young people. The students who took part in the project were well aware of the strategies that the schools were adopting. Typical of their observations were:

They say they believe in equal opportunities, but they don't.  
You have to get a C; otherwise it's a fail and you're a failure.

Gillborn and Youdell suggested suspending publication of league tables for a year or two to ease the pressure on schools (Gillborn & Youdell, 1999; 2000, pp. 43, 44, 174, 192).

In an article I wrote for *FORUM* at the beginning of 2000, I argued that a far more *radical* and *sensible* solution would be to abolish the GCSE altogether. It was pointless for that growing proportion of students who moved on to A-level courses and then some form of higher education, and it served little purpose for those who left school at 16. It was surely time to move towards a situation where 18 became the effective school-leaving age (Chitty, 2000, p. 30). And this perspective echoed the conclusion of an *Independent* editorial dating from the summer of 1999:

An academic exam at the end of compulsory schooling which fails to give half its pupils a proper qualification is worthless. And an exam at 16 is the last thing we need, at a time when we are trying to encourage everyone to stay longer in education and training to help both themselves and the whole economy. For pupils in America and in most of Europe, there is no big pupil exam at 16: the first big hurdle comes at 18. In this country, the idea of a school-leaving certificate at 16 persists among parents, employers and the general public. The end of the GCSE would help to bolster the belief that, for the vast majority, secondary education should end at the age of 18. (*Independent*, 26 August 1999)

## The Tomlinson Report

A 2003 14-to-19 discussion document '14-19: opportunity and excellence' (DfES, 2003), published during Charles Clarke's period as Education Secretary (October 2002 to December 2004), emphasised the idea of a 14-to-19 'continuum', where the GCSE should be seen as but a staging post in young people's lives. It also announced that the government would be appointing a new working group for 14-to-19 reform, headed by former Chief Inspector Mike Tomlinson, which would be expected to look at ways of introducing an English Baccalaureate, designed to recognise both academic and vocational achievements, as well as activities outside the classroom, and encompassing students across the so-called ability spectrum. In the words of the discussion document:

Baccalaureate-style qualifications of this type work well in other countries, and we believe that this model, designed to suit English circumstances, could tackle long-standing English problems, giving greater emphasis to completing course of study (and training as appropriate) through to the age of 18 or 19 without a heavier burden of examination and assessment. (DfES, 2003, p. 13)

After an 18-month review of 14-to-19 qualifications, the final report of Mike Tomlinson's working group, entitled '14-19 Curriculum and Qualifications Reform', was published in October 2004 (DfES, 2004). In the *Observer* (17 October 2004), it was confidently asserted that the government's acceptance of the Tomlinson reforms would represent 'the biggest shake-up of the examinations system in England in over half a century'. And on the following day, in the *Guardian* (18 October 2004), it was predicted that the main proposals in the report would definitely feature in the New Labour manifesto for the 2005 general election.

The main reform advocated in the 116-page document was that the existing GCSE and A level should be subsumed in a new diploma for *all* school leavers. This new diploma would consist of *four* levels: two of them below GCSE; an intermediate diploma at GCSE pass level; and an advanced diploma for A-level-standard students. Most coursework would be scrapped, but a large proportion of assessment at intermediate level – the equivalent of GCSE – would be carried out *internally* by classroom teachers. Under the proposals, students could receive their diploma only after passing tests in three 'core' skills needed for the workplace: in literacy; in numeracy; and in information and communications technology. In the words of the report, the proposed reforms would ensure 'rigour', while at the same time equipping all young people with 'the knowledge, skills and attributes needed for Higher Education, employment and adult life' (DfES, 2004, p. 1).

The Tomlinson proposals received broad support from teachers, union leaders and universities, but failed to convince members of the business community that any long-term benefits would be worth the cost and disruption of reform. What was even more worrying was that the Blair government was

terrified of committing itself to a radical restructuring of provision for older students in the run-up to a general election. In particular, it was thought to be electoral suicide to interfere with A levels as the 'gold standard'. Consequently, both Charles Clarke and Tony Blair were determined to undermine the whole spirit of Mike Tomlinson's diploma system by stopping far short of giving it their unequivocal endorsement. Somewhat paradoxically, in presenting the report to the House of Commons on 18 October 2004, the Education Secretary made a speech extolling the virtues of the system it was meant to replace. In his words:

I am determined that any evolution of the 14-19 system must increase public confidence in it. My approach will be to build on all that is good in the current system, including the real and great strengths of 'A' Levels and GCSEs. They will stay as the building blocks of any new system. (Reported in the *Guardian*, 19 October 2004)

The Prime Minister was not present for the debate, but in a speech that evening to the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) meeting in Birmingham, he made his position very clear:

The purpose of reform will be to improve upon the existing system, and not replace it. ... GCSEs and the 'A' Level will stay, so will all existing externally marked exams. Reform will serve to strengthen the existing system where it is inadequate, and there will be greater challenge for those of top ability on track to Higher Education. (*Guardian*, 19 October 2004)

When the white paper on the 14-to-19 curriculum, '14-19 Education and Skills', was published by new Education Secretary Ruth Kelly in February 2003, it was quite obvious that Mike Tomlinson's working group had wasted its time. The Education Secretary tried to create the impression that the government was taking its proposals seriously, but it was an impossible task. In her foreword to the white paper, Ms Kelly claimed that she was setting out details of a reform programme 'building from the excellent work of Sir Mike Tomlinson and his Working Group on 14-19 Reform' (DfES, 2005, p. 3), while the document itself rejected the vast majority of Tomlinson's key recommendations. Specifically, it rejected the idea of a four-tier overarching diploma, embracing all existing academic and vocational qualifications, and opted instead to retain GCSEs and A levels largely in their present form. What it did accept was the need for a major rationalisation of all vocational qualifications, with the proposed replacement of the existing 'alphabet soup' of 3500 or more qualifications by a three-tier system of 'specialised diplomas' in 14 occupational areas (DfES, 2005, p. 53).

The Tomlinson Report had a number of shortcomings – it tried, for example, to appease would-be critics by making the highest level of the diploma especially forbidding and discriminatory – but it represented a genuine

attempt to reform an archaic system. And its rejection by Blair and his colleagues caused dismay in the education world. Mike Tomlinson himself warned that the white paper's short-sighted decision to envisage diplomas only for *vocational* courses – while keeping the existing 'gold standard' exams for *academic* students – could soon 'backfire on the government, by prolonging and reinforcing the traditional snobbery towards work-related education'. He went on: 'What is now being proposed risks emphasising yet again the distinction between the vocational and the academic. It further fails fully to deal with the needs of those students for whom the possession of Grades A (or A\*) to C at GCSE level is simply not attainable' (reported in the *Guardian*, 24 February 2005). And writing in the *Times Educational Supplement* in February 2005, education journalist Warwick Mansell argued that 'all the attention given to the 14 to 19 age group, including the £1 million Tomlinson Inquiry, appears to have been negated because the Government does not want to go into the 2005 General Election being accused by the Tories and the right-wing media of scrapping 'A' Levels' (Mansell, 2005, p. 13). More recently, in an interview with Peter Wilby, published in the *Guardian* on 15 January 2013, Shadow Education Secretary Stephen Twigg was clear about his 'greatest mistake' during New Labour's period in office: agreeing to the rejection of the main proposals in the 2004 Tomlinson Report. 'We lost an opportunity,' said Twigg, 'to get a set of qualifications that were fit for purpose – especially in technical and practical areas of the curriculum'.

### **The Gove Agenda**

It should have been obvious to teachers right from the outset that, in making Michael Gove his new Education Secretary, David Cameron was signalling his intention to preside over a revolution in the way the education system in England was organised. Gove was known to have very strong views about both standards and structures; and examination reform was to occupy a prominent place on the Gove agenda. The coalition government's 2010 white paper 'The Importance of Teaching' outlined proposals for a new English Baccalaureate, comprising 'a wide range of traditional subjects', and designed to serve as 'a new basis for school performance tables' (DfE, 2010, p. 44). Then, in a characteristic display of arrogance and lack of concern for the effect of his actions, Michael Gove announced in January 2011 that, as from the start of that academic year (2010/11), secondary schools were to be judged by the percentage of their 16-year-old students obtaining GCSE Grades A\* to C in the subjects now making up the new Baccalaureate (EBac or EBacc): mathematics, English, two sciences, a modern or ancient foreign language, and either history or geography.

These new rankings meant that just 15.6% of students had achieved the English Bac in the summer of 2010, and at the same time, schools which had previously been judged to be 'successful – to come up to standard – were now to be regarded as 'failing' schools. The National Association of Head Teachers



(NAHT) criticised the government for introducing the English Bac measure retrospectively. But while the Education Secretary acknowledged that it was indeed 'retrospective', he said he hoped it would 'illuminate the current state of the system and spark off a debate about which subjects secondary schools should focus on' (reported in the *Guardian*, 13 January 2011).

Gove was determined to promote traditional 'academic' GCSEs and downgrade vocational diplomas and qualifications. At the end of January 2012, it was announced that the number of such qualifications to be treated as the equivalent of GCSEs in the league tables would be cut from 3175 to 125, with just 70 counting towards the performance measure of five A\* to C Grades. Many schools and colleges, including some newly created academies, had faced accusations of using fairly 'undemanding' vocational qualifications in order to enhance their league table rankings. Now courses in horse care, nail technology and fish husbandry were among the subjects to be dropped, while the relatively new engineering diploma for 14-to-16-year-olds was to be downgraded from its current value of five GCSEs to just one. This last decision was attacked by business leaders from companies such as JCB, Toshiba, Siemens, Sony and Boeing, who argued that it would exacerbate Britain's skills shortage and deter young people from studying engineering. In the view of Adrian Prandle, Education Policy Adviser at the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL), 'It is sad but true that League Tables determine what secondary schools do. In saying that some of our vocational qualifications will not be included in the Tables, the Government is effectively signing their death warrant.' And Christine Blower, General Secretary of the National Union of Teachers (NUT), added: 'It should not be up to Michael Gove and the Government to decide which examinations are of more merit than others' (quoted in the *Independent*, 1 February 2012).

The GCSE grade crisis of 2012 gave Michael Gove the excuse he needed to press ahead with his plans to shake up the secondary exams system. This 'crisis' involved the raising of the boundaries between C and D grades in English language and English literature between January and June 2012. It seems clear that students were 'marked down' to curb grade inflation, in line with the wishes, if not the instructions, of ministers; and Gove himself was able to claim that the awarding of fewer C grades in the June showed that standards in the past had not been high enough.

In June 2012, it was revealed to the *Daily Mail* that the Education Secretary intended to abolish GCSEs and bring back O levels and CSEs. The front-page story which appeared in the newspaper on 21 June 2012 was headlined: 'Return of the "O" Level', and began with the eye-catching sentence: 'The most radical shake-up in our school exams for 30 years will see dumbed-down GCSEs scrapped, and rigorous "O" Levels brought back.' Leaked documents seen by the *Daily Mail* apparently showed that Michael Gove had drawn up a blueprint which would 'tear up the current exam system as well as abolish the existing National Curriculum'. Those starting GCSEs in 2013 would be the last students who would have to sit them; and in the summer of 2016,

the first students would sit the new O levels in English, maths and science – and possibly also in history, geography and modern languages.

This remarkable news was welcomed by large sections of the right-wing press, with many newspapers hailing Michael Gove as one of the few ‘successes’ of David Cameron’s coalition government. An editorial which appeared in *The Sunday Times* headed ‘Michael Gove is right over “O” Levels’ (24 June 2012) argued that there was enormous potential in the Education Secretary’s plans to ‘shake up the system of secondary exams, replacing the discredited GCSEs, initially in English, maths and science, with something very similar to the more academic “O” Levels, scrapped in the mid-1980s’. It quoted Sir Chris Woodhead, the former highly controversial Chief Inspector of Schools, as saying that ‘in a cabinet of political pygmies, Mr Gove has the intellect and the courage to challenge an educational and political establishment, which has betrayed generations of young people. If he can abolish the GCSE examination and restore the traditional “O” Level, he will have achieved more than any other Education Secretary in the last quarter of a century.’

In the event, Gove seems to have been forced to conclude that his plans were far too ambitious, and in the wake of opposition from the teaching unions, and from Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg, he abandoned the idea of resurrecting O levels and CSEs, and announced instead that GCSEs would steadily be replaced by new English Baccalaureate Certificates (to be known, somewhat confusingly, as EBCs), with students following syllabuses in English, maths and the sciences from 2015, and new syllabuses to follow in history, geography and modern languages (reported in the *Guardian*, 18 September 2012).

But even here the Education Secretary was to pay the price for acting *before* embarking on an appropriate period of consultation with interested parties: on 7 February 2013, it was announced that plans to scrap GCSEs and replace them with EBCs had themselves been abandoned. There would, however, be significant changes to GCSEs, designed to inject greater ‘rigour’ into the system, and meaning that, in future, all examinations would have to be taken at the end of a full *two* years, rather than in stages. There would be a focus on longer essay-style questions, a reduced role for coursework, and ‘extension papers’ for the ‘brightest students’ in maths and science. Secondary schools would henceforth be judged on a new 8-subject measure, including English, maths, science, language and arts subjects, and this would be a points system, based on a student’s best eight results. It was hoped that this would stop secondary schools concentrating all their energies on students at the C/D borderline. At the same time, important changes would be made to the A level. Sixth-formers would now be expected to take their papers at the end of a two-year course, effectively returning to the arrangement of the 1990s. AS, or Advanced Supplementary levels, taken after one year, would no longer contribute to final A-level grades.

In April 2013, Michael Gove unveiled proposals for a new structure for vocational education for older students – a sort of vocational alternative to A

levels – which would bring together new and existing qualifications, to form a ‘Tech Bacc’, or ‘Technical Baccalaureate’, aimed at the more than 50% of English school-leavers who did not go on to university. This new ‘Tech Bacc’ would exist in name only, not itself being a qualification, but rather ‘a performance measure’, marking achievement by young people aged 16 to 19. This new measure, to be counted in school and college league tables from 2017, would combine *three* main strands: an approved vocational qualification, equivalent to a Level 3 national vocational qualification; a ‘core maths’ qualification; and an ‘extended project’ designed to test a student’s skills in communication, research and motivation. The Department for Education said that it would be consulting widely on the list of vocational qualifications that would qualify for inclusion in the ‘Tech Bacc’-approved list, but added that it was clear there would have to be a significant reduction in the 4000 or so courses currently counted in the school and college league tables.

A front-page story which appeared in *The Times* on 4 June 2013 – ‘Gove ready to replace GCSEs with new I Levels’ – revealed that, after many abortive attempts at radical examination reform, Michael Gove was now planning to replace GCSEs with new ‘I Levels’, or ‘Intermediate Levels’, that had a simple grading system between 1 and 8. Ofqual, England’s exams regulator, apparently believed that a new title was needed because the Labour-led Welsh Assembly was insisting on retaining the name ‘GCSE’ for its own unreformed exams at 16, as well as all the features of the old discredited system. Many students currently awarded As or A\*s would be expected to achieve grades 6, 7 or 8 in the ‘I Level’, and while the regulator was not recommending a ‘pass’ grade, it was confidently predicted that this would be Grade 4. Under the new system, coursework would disappear in all core exams except science, where teachers could allocate 10% of the marks for practical experiments. The modular structure of some courses would have to be abandoned, and opportunities to re-sit the qualification would be curtailed, with 16-year-olds able to re-sit most exams only a full year later, aged 17. Students would begin studying for the new ‘I Levels’ in 2015, and the first papers would be taken in the summer of 2017.

Making a statement in the House of Commons a week later (on 11 June), Gove confirmed that the plans leaked to *The Times* were indeed to be implemented, although he did also reveal that the name ‘GCSE’ would not, after all, be dropped. And, to accompany this announcement, he wrote a special article for *The Times* in which he predicted that his proposed reforms would make the GCSE ‘more rigorous and demanding’. The challenge now, he wrote, was for all those teachers and Labour ministers who had held children back in the past; did they want to ‘continue as the enemies of promise’ or to ‘cultivate higher expectations for every child?’ (Gove, 2013).

### Conclusion

Where examination reform is concerned, the last three years have been a confusing story of weird initiatives, revised initiatives and cancelled initiatives. It

remains to be seen whether we have now reached the final chapter in Gove's project to rewrite the exam structure for older students in England's secondary schools. Not surprisingly, it has all been viewed with much alarm by teachers and union leaders, not least because its early implementation will coincide with the introduction of a new national curriculum, another of Gove's top-down initiatives, which has been forced through against a background of near-universal condemnation.

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