

Inspired to learn – not forced: towards project-based learning

GCSE English and Maths in further education

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There are a number of reasons why the government resit programme will not achieve its desired aim of raising the English and Maths attainment of 16-18 year olds. Compulsion lies at the heart of the reason why the resit policy won't work.

The government's ambition for every 16-18-year-old to reach at least grade C in GCSE English and Maths is an admirable one. However, making this compulsory for every student and to require students to keep resitting if they do not achieve a grade C, is a disaster. Rather than this ambition becoming a reality it is failing our young people and has the potential to make the learning of English and Maths something that is alien and uninspiring.

As a result of the government's policy change an unprecedented number of 16-18 year olds have had to resit their GCSE English and Maths exam. Over a quarter of a million 16-18 year olds resat their GSCE English and Maths this year; 128,201 resat English (32% increase) whilst 173,628 re-sat Maths (32% increase). Three quarters of these were taken in colleges (40% increase).¹

This has had a disastrous logistical and resource impact on colleges. Timetabling, class sizes, finding enough qualified teachers and finding suitable venues for exams have all proven to be one 'challenge' too far for colleges. Some colleges have had to suspend the whole curriculum for the day to accommodate GCSE exams. At Norwich College they had to hire a show ground arena and hire a fleet of double decker buses to take their 1,100 student to the exam!

Not surprisingly this state of affairs has had a negative impact on attainment rates; English 26.9% A-C, and Maths 29.5%.

Whilst this problem has been caused by government policy, the leadership of the sector also share responsibility for this fiasco. Rather than telling the government in no uncertain terms that their policy is not working for students or staff, instead they attempted to implement it. Proud of the tag they have given themselves as being the 'can-do' sector they have pushed ahead, no matter how inappropriate or detrimental these government initiatives are on our students' learning.

INSPIRED TO LEARN – NOT FORCED

There are a number of reasons why the government resit programme will not achieve its desired aim of raising the English and Maths attainment of 16-18 year olds. Compulsion lies at the heart of the reason why the resit policy won't work.

Compulsion is an admission by educators and government that they have failed to convince young people of the importance of English and Maths. Forcing someone to learn is a short cut away from a sometimes longer and more patient but ultimately more effective process of learning. Inspiration and conviction is the key to bringing out the most in our students' desire to learn.

It also misunderstands the type of students who attend FE. Many have not achieved as much as they were capable of at school. Their school experience has made them fearful of education. Many leave school believing that they are failures. Class size, increase in the micro-management of teachers and the obsession with student outcomes has sucked dry many young people's creativity and energy to learn. English and Maths can be seen by these students as just another class to attend rather than being the foundation to learning.

FE offers a different route for these young people to access education. In the sector, student after student, if asked, tell their stories about the way FE college has encouraged them to enjoy learning. They describe how being able to follow different pathways and courses, such as art and design or events management, has allowed them to reconnect with learning and, in turn, given them the confidence to reapproach their English and Maths skills.

ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL

Simply getting students to resit their GCSE exams again and again until they achieve a good grade clearly is not sound educational practice. There are those who believe that some students are not capable of achieving a good grade in GCSE English/Maths. Functional Skills (FS) is the default qualification for this cohort of students.

However, FS has been roundly condemned by staff and students alike as one of the least successful attempts to replace GCSE English/Maths with a more suitable qualification for the less 'academic'. The narrow, decontextualised and utilitarian approach to the teaching of Maths and English, pursued in Functional Skills, has helped to reinforce cynicism amongst those learners who had struggled with Maths and English at school in the first instance.

Next year all students will have to sit the new linear GCSE exam that replaces A-C grading with 1-9 (9 being the highest) and includes the scrapping of controlled assessment (40% of the mark in the legacy GCSE English exam). It is accepted (even by government) that attainment rates will drop substantially.

EXAMS: THERE IS A BETTER WAY OF MEASURING ABILITY

The move away from course work to exam-only based qualifications is set to become the norm. The advocates of exam-only qualifications argue that they are more rigorous. However, no evidence has been provided to prove that exam-only qualifications are more rigorous than ones based on projects or course work. It is quite clear that those who can afford private tuition alongside their schooling will be in a better position to do well in exam-only qualifications.

But a bigger question must be asked. In the twenty-first century why is it that the education system is even more firmly based on exams as the main way of measuring educational success?

Exams do not measure intelligence, they measure memory. Increasingly, end of term exams look more like pub quizzes than 'rigorous' methods of assessment. Exams have more to do with instilling a competitive approach to learning rather than a collaborative one.

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Exams also have a negative impact on young people's well-being. There has been a significant decline over the past decade in young people's mental health. An article in the Times Education Supplement reports on a survey that shows that mental health problems amongst young people are at an all-time high. The article found that:

'In a 2015 survey by the AoC, two-thirds of colleges reported serious mental health problems among students, with one in five saying they were on the increase.'²

Another recent survey has shown that a shocking 26% of young women between the age of 16-24 have serious mental health problems.³

There are many complex reasons why young people suffer from mental disorders. Rigorous exam-based education is among one of the most prominent reasons. Professor Merryn Hutchings in a recent study for the NUT into the impact of exam-based schooling found that:

'Children and young people are suffering from increasingly high levels of school-related anxiety and stress, disaffection and mental health problems. This is caused by increased pressure from tests/exams; greater awareness at younger ages of their own "failure".'⁴

The study went on to find that:

'Increasingly, children and young people see the main purpose of schooling as gaining qualifications, because this is what schools focus on. This trend has been widely deplored, including by universities and employers, who have argued that the current exam system does not prepare children for life beyond school. They have highlighted a range of other desirable outcomes of schooling, such as independent, creative and divergent thinking; ability to collaborate...'⁵

One of the study's recommendations is:

*'There should be a renewed focus on a broadly based curriculum which fosters creativity, curiosity, and enthusiasm to learn. Collaboration should be encouraged, rather than competition.'*⁶

This means in the FE sector we need to move towards project or coursework based qualifications. These are a far better way of assessing the educational abilities of students. They can provide the space and time for students to develop their skills in a more thorough and systematic manner. Students can explore in more depth and over a longer period of time the subject that they are studying. This allows the practitioner to develop teaching resources that are far more imaginative than those required to drill students to pass an exam.

Surely this is far more rigorous than shutting students in a room at the end of the year where they rush to beat the clock?

ENGLISH AND MATHS QUALIFICATIONS: TOWARDS PROJECT-BASED LEARNING

For the sake of students and staff the government must bring to an end its forced resit programme. All students must be encouraged to develop their English and Maths skills. Government must provide independent funding for those students who wish to resit English and Maths GCSE and give colleges the resources to be able to effectively and imaginatively promote a voluntary resit programme.

However, if we are to bring the development of English and Maths into the twenty-first century we must drag it out of the nineteenth and away from the Mr Gradgrind approach to learning.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- ▶ Should GCSE English, Maths and Functional Skills qualifications be replaced with a new project-based qualification and should this qualification be assessed through 100% coursework?
- ▶ Should there be a contextualised syllabus firmly rooted in a wider learning experience?
- ▶ Should the assessment criteria be based on pass, merit and distinction?

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NOTES

- ¹ <https://www.tes.com/news/further-education/breaking-news/gcse-pass-rates-plummet-following-rise-college-english-maths-resits>
 - ² <https://www.tes.com/news/further-education/breaking-news/aoc-president-launches-year-mental-health-support-college>
 - ³ <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/sep/29/self-harm-ptsd-and-mental-illness-soaring-among-young-women-in-england-survey>
 - ⁴ Exam factories? The impact of accountability measures on children and young people
<https://www.teachers.org.uk/files/exam-factories.pdf>
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