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**Attainment, Aspirations, and School Lives After the
Introduction of GCSEs in British Secondary Schools,
1988-2003**

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List of Abbreviations

BTEC: Business and Technical/Technology Education Council.

CSE: Certificate of Secondary Education.

EAL: English as an Additional Language.

FE: Further Education.

FSM: Free School Meals.

GCSE: General Certificate of Secondary Education.

GNVQ: General National Vocational Qualification.

HE: Higher Education.

HMI: Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education.

KS2: Key Stage Two.

KS3: Key Stage Three.

NVQ: National Vocational Qualification.

ROSLA: Raising of the School Leaving Age.

SEN: Special Educational Needs.

TES: *Times Educational Supplement*.

Introduction

In September 1986, hundreds of thousands of fifteen-and-sixteen-year-olds across England, Wales, and Northern Ireland began studying for the new General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) in a range of subjects. These qualifications, which were first sat in summer 1988 and continue today, provided a unitary qualification for ‘nearly all’ school leavers to take for the first time.¹ The previous system had included divisions between Certificates of Secondary Education (CSEs), courses aimed at ‘lower achievers’, and O-Levels, which provided the opportunity to progress to further and higher education.² For Sir Keith Joseph, the Conservative Secretary of State for Education and Science from September 1981 to May 1986, GCSEs were a means of ‘stretching’ eighty to ninety per cent of pupils and making secondary education courses ‘more relevant and interesting for the middle grades’.³

This new policy was part of the Conservative government’s agenda to raise standards across secondary education and increase parental choice. Two years later, the administration introduced the 1988 Education Reform Act, a piece of legislation that has been considered a key moment in ‘creeping privatisation’ in British education policy.⁴ For example, schools could opt out of local authority control and receive funding from external sources. The Act also established the publication of GCSE results and league tables of secondary schools, as well as a National Curriculum which all pupils would be taught until age sixteen. This

¹ Peter Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy: Britain’s Transition to Mass Education since the Second World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 133.

² Ibid.

³ The National Archives of the United Kingdom, Kew, Prime Minister’s Office, PREM 19/1722. Keith Joseph letter to Margaret Thatcher, 6 March 1987; Prime Minister’s Office, PREM 19/1722. Brian Griffiths letter to Margaret Thatcher, 7 March 1986.

⁴ Geoff Whitty and Ian Menter, ‘Lessons of Thatcherism: Education Policy in England and Wales 1979-88’, *Journal of Law and Society* 16 (1988), p. 44.

encouraged competition between schools, as part of a broader package which John Furlong has characterised as a move towards 'neoliberalism'.⁵ GCSEs were used to measure the performance of pupils and schools, providing standardised figures for league tables, to provide direct comparison and aid accountability. They also replaced norm referencing with criterion referencing, to facilitate differentiation in what grades pupils could achieve, while simultaneously lifting standards and reducing inequality from the bottom.

However, standardised certification had also been advocated for by the political Left and parts of the education sector in the 1960s and 1970s.⁶ For them, GCSEs would mean the end of the binary divide between those who took CSEs and O-levels, creating a more equal means of assessment and fairer opportunity for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. Teaching unions, for example, had criticised this divide, arguing that providing an opportunity to take a uniform qualification would help more pupils gain confidence and allow for families to 'feel that [their] children are pupils at a school for successes instead of at a school for failures'.⁷ Although GCSEs were ultimately introduced, there had even been disagreement within the Conservative government. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and policy adviser Brian Griffiths had voiced hesitation about the policy, alarmed that it would

⁵ John Furlong, 'New Labour and Teacher Education: The End of an Era', *Oxford Review of Education* 31 (2005), p. 124.

⁶ Clyde Chitty, 'Secondary School Examinations: A Historical Perspective', *FORUM* 55 (2013), pp. 355-7; Bethan Marshall, who argued that the introduction of a new and unitary system of assessment was a long process that came from the 'bottom up' in 'The Politics of Testing', *English in Education* 51 (2016), pp. 28-30; and 'GCSE results in 1988: How the first pupils taking the exams 30 years ago coped', *BBC Bitesize*, 1988, last accessed 10 June 2025, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/teach/articles/zb4gqp3>.

⁷ The Warwick Records Centre, University of Warwick, MSS. 639/11/65/6. 'The Average Child: A Memorandum of evidence submitted to the Newsom Committee', March 1962, p. 10. Also see MSS.179/CEA/5/5. Reports on Education: Education under Social Handicap, Department of Education and Science, December 1964. Teachers were also generally supportive of the policy. See, for example, Tim Oates, 'What have GCSEs ever done for us', *Cambridge Assessment*, 28 October 2021, last accessed 20 May 2025, <https://www.cambridgeassessment.org.uk/blogs/what-have-gcses-ever-done-for-us/>; Carol White, 'The story so far', *Times Educational Supplement*, 9 December 1988; David Lambert, 'The good, the bad, and the future: an evaluation of the first GCSE experience', *Times Educational Supplement*, 2 December 1988.

‘lead to a fall in standards’ as it would be ‘an exam nobody will fail’.⁸ With the policy having different explanations and purposes, then, what have the impacts of GCSEs in schools been?

Besides its substantive importance, this is worth studying for three reasons. Firstly, as Peter Mandler has discussed, it is rare that policy makes a larger impact than demographic or compositional factors, which historians have often understated.⁹ Tom Woodin and Susannah Wright have argued similarly, that historians of education in the twenty-first century should produce fewer ‘policy-based narratives’, and instead place more emphasis on lived experiences in schools and childhood more broadly.¹⁰ This study explores the introduction of GCSEs as a policy which has been under-studied by scholars, but does so by investigating how this played out on the ground in schools. It draws on the existing sociology but argues that this largely quantitative literature cannot illuminate more qualitative questions, as this study does.

Secondly, GCSE qualifications were a mechanism within a broader package of ‘neoliberal’ policies brought in under Thatcher’s governments. Neoliberalism, though a highly contested term, is often understood as a ‘set of ideas’ that emphasise the role of the ‘market mechanism’, and in opposition to the welfare state and social democracy.¹¹ This study raises questions about ideology, since GCSEs were reflective of tensions among conservatives,

⁸ Prime Minister’s Office, PREM 19/1722. Brian Griffiths letter to Margaret Thatcher, 7 March 1986. Edward Malnick, ‘Margaret Thatcher feared GCSEs would lower school standards’, *The Telegraph*, 29 December 2014.

⁹ Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy*, pp. 143-4.

¹⁰ Tom Woodin and Susannah Wright, ‘The history of education in Britain and Ireland: changing perspectives and continuing themes’, *Journal of the History of Education Society* 52 (2023), p. 437.

¹¹ David Edgerton, ‘What came between new liberalism and neoliberalism? Rethinking Keynesianism, the welfare state and social democracy’ in Davies, Aled, Ben Jackson, and Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite (eds.) *The Neoliberal Age? Britain since the 1970s* (London: UCL Press, 2021), p. 42.

prompting debates over the benefits and drawbacks of ‘differentiation’ across a wider ability range of pupils.¹² GCSEs can also be considered a neoliberal and non-neoliberal measure: neoliberal because it was a standardised measurement tool used for schools to compete against each other (as GCSE results appeared on results tables, for example); non-neoliberal due to the tension between its centralised nature and the emphasis on local parental choice.¹³ This study also examines the implementation of government policies, where tensions among decision-makers and different political agendas have led to debates over the coherency of Thatcherism and neoliberalism.¹⁴ Exploring the lived impacts can also contribute to debates over the idea that New Labour was an ‘accommodation’ of Thatcher’s legacy in education policy.¹⁵

Thirdly, and finally, it provides a theatre in which to assess evolving meta-narratives of post-war British history, especially in the context of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. David Edgerton has argued that the conventional, and prevailing, narrative that

¹² Prime Minister’s Office, PREM 19/1722. Keith Joseph letter to Margaret Thatcher, 6 March 1987

¹³ Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy*, p. 145.

¹⁴ See, for example, Aled Davies, James Freeman and Hugh Pemberton, ‘Thatcher’s Policy Unit and the “Neoliberal Vision”’, *Journal of British Studies* 62 (2022), 77-103; Peter Dorey, ‘Thatcherism: Intellectual Origins and Ideological Framework’ in Dorey, *Thatcherism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024), pp. 23-50; Andrew Gamble, *The Free Economy and the Strong State: the Politics of Thatcherism* (London: Macmillan Education UK, 1994); Stephen Farrall and Colin Hay (eds.) *The Legacy of Thatcherism: Assessing and Exploring Thatcherite Social and Economic Policies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

¹⁵ Many scholars have assessed the extent to which New Labour advanced a similar agenda to that of Thatcher and Major’s Conservative governments. This is not just in education but also more general analyses of policies and ideology. For more general debates, see, for example: Marc Lenormand, ‘Interpreting Thatcherism: The British Labour movement and the political legacy of the period of Conservative rule’, *Observatoire de la société britannique* 17 (2015), 163-179; Richard Heffernan, *New Labour and Thatcherism: Political Change in Britain* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 2000); John Gray, ‘Blair’s Project in Retrospect’, *Royal Institute of International Affairs* 80 (2004), 39-48. For comparisons in education policy, see: Furlong, ‘New Labour and Teacher Education’ and Trevor Fisher, ‘The Era of Centralisation’.

‘neoliberalism’ defined Britain since the late 1970s should be replaced, for example.¹⁶ He suggested that the term was insufficiently precise to capture ‘key elements of [the] radical changes that have been visited on the UK since the 1980s’.¹⁷ Emily Robinson, Camilla Schofield, Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, and Natalie Thomlinson have proposed an alternative framework, arguing that rising ‘popular individualism’ defined the history of Britons from the mid-twentieth-century.¹⁸ By centring the experiences of fourteen-to-sixteen-year-olds embarking on GCSE courses, this study allows for a new insight which could complicate or add to such narratives.

Literature Review

Historians have increasingly written contemporary histories that focus on the everyday lives of Britons, in a move away from the initial dominance of political histories. Eve Worth, for example, has explored how employment in the welfare state, especially as secondary school teachers, was important to the identity of British women born between the late 1930s and early 1950s.¹⁹ Worth has also explored how many women, primarily those born in the late 1930s, were upwardly socially mobile after returning to further education in the 1970s.²⁰ This work was important in challenging narratives of the 1970s as a decade of decline,

¹⁶ Edgerton, ‘What came between new liberalism and neoliberalism?’ in Davies, Aled, Ben Jackson, and Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite (eds.) *The Neoliberal Age? Britain since the 1970s* (London: UCL Press, 2021), pp. 30-51.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

¹⁸ Emily Robinson, Camilla Schofield, Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, and Natalie Thomlinson, ‘Telling Stories about Post-war Britain: Popular Individualism and the “Crisis” of the 1970s’, *Twentieth Century British History* 28 (2017), 268-304.

¹⁹ Eve Worth, *The Welfare State Generation: Women, Agency, and Class in Britain since 1945* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), p. 70.

²⁰ Eve Worth, ‘Gender, Education and Social Mobility in Britain during the Long 1970s’, *Cultural and Social History* 16 (2019), p. 67. Also see Eve Worth, ‘A Tale of Female Liberation? The Long Shadow of De-Professionalisation on the Lives of Post-War Women’, *French Journal of British Studies* XXIII (2018), 1-18, for an assessment of how de-professionalisation impacted women who were teachers.

especially in terms of the welfare state, demonstrating how studies of lived experiences can shed valuable light onto existing historical assumptions.

Other studies include Peter Mandler, Laura Carter, and Chris Jeppesen's ongoing 'Secondary Education and Social Change in the United Kingdom since 1945' project, which explores how children experienced school over this long period of time.²¹ Carter has also argued that women who attended secondary modern schools in the late 1950s and early 1960s suffered from the 'hairdresser blues', meaning they did not feel they were able to attain 'clean, creative, and autonomous paid work' due to gender expectations and their schooling in less academic institutions than grammar schools.²² Building on this body of work, this study examines the similarities and differences between schools following the introduction of GCSEs and those in earlier periods of post-war Britain. It will include asking if the aspirations and realities of groups such as those that Carter discusses, changed and, if so, how.

Historians have written about education from the late 1980s but have tended to focus on the decision-making of elites and governments, their policies, and to account for how they fit into a move towards a 'neoliberal' Britain. Educationalists Geoff Whitty and Ian Menter, for example, have claimed that James Callaghan's speech about having a 'Great Debate' on education in 1976 represented the 'educational manifestation of the crisis in social democracy'.²³ Whitty and Menter have similarly argued that the 1988 Act aimed to create a

²¹ Peter Mandler, Chris Jeppesen, and Laura Carter, 'Secondary Education and Social Change in the United Kingdom since 1945', *University of Cambridge*, last accessed 25 April 2025, <https://sesc.hist.cam.ac.uk/>.

²² Laura Carter, 'The Hairdresser Blues: British Women and the Secondary Modern School, 1947-72', *Modern British History* 34 (2023), p. 726.

²³ Whitty and Menter, 'Lessons of Thatcherism', p. 42. However, James Silverwood and Peter Wolstencroft, 'The Ruskin Speech and Great Debate in English education, 1976-1979: A study of motivation', *British Educational Research Journal* 49 (2023), p. 766 has challenged this, indicating there were different motivations to Callaghan's speech.

‘quasi-market’ in order ‘to discipline poor schools by putting them out of business’.²⁴ They also suggested that the reforms of the New Right were ‘about giving private individuals a sense of control over their own lives’, a departure from the greater priority previously given to equality and universalism.²⁵ Trevor Fisher, too, has indicated that the reforms of the late 1980s ‘established a new educational consensus’ and had a longer-term legacy.²⁶

There has been some analysis of GCSEs since their introduction, which has typically been sociological and quantitative in nature. Scholars have revealed that more advantaged pupils have typically attained higher grades.²⁷ This has been attributed to factors such as ‘inequalities in cultural capital’, where encouragement and time to read at home, for example, benefitted more affluent children.²⁸ Quantitative studies have also revealed that there were significant regional disparities in outcomes, with students in London receiving higher grades than students in any other area of the country, especially the North East.²⁹ Such studies and trends have been covered in the national press each year on ‘results day’, which has become an annual fixture in the educational calendar and attracts considerable political and public attention.³⁰ These discrepancies have been deemed important in light of the idea that school attainment is linked to not just future earnings, but also physical health

²⁴ Whitty and Menter, ‘Lessons of Thatcherism’, p. 48.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 49.

²⁶ Trevor Fisher, ‘The Era of Centralisation: the 1988 Education Reform Act and its consequences’, *FORUM* 50 (2008), p. 258.

²⁷ Sarah Stopforth and Vernon Gayle, ‘Parental social class and GCSE attainment: Re-reading the role of “cultural capital”’, *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 43 (2022), p. 680.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Louis Hodge, Jon Andrews, Oana Gavriloiu and Jenna Fowler, ‘Analysis: GCSE Results Day 2024’, *Education Policy Institute*, 22 August 2024, last accessed 15 November 2025, <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/analysis-gcse-results-day-2024/>.

³⁰ See, for example, Hazel Shearing and Judith Burns, ‘GCSE gap between south and rest of England widens’, *BBC News*, 21 August 2024; Richard Adams and Alex Clark, ‘England’s GCSE results show ingrained social and regional inequality post-Covid’, *The Guardian*, 22 August 2024.

and mental wellbeing.³¹ These have tended to argue that GCSEs were important for teenagers and young adults in determining their future careers and lives, but there has been too much focus on the social and economic inequalities that manifested in school attainment. Too little emphasis has been placed on if introducing GCSEs has exacerbated or relieved inequality in comparison to the system it replaced.

Some historians have focused on the role of GCSEs more specifically, though these are limited. Mandler, for example, has discussed how the introduction of GCSEs helped to undermine the inequalities between lower and higher achievers in secondary schools, in particular the 'entrenched divide' between those who took either no qualifications or CSE at sixteen and those who took O-Levels and subsequently A-Levels.³² He suggested that this resulted in a 'much improved supply of qualified leavers'.³³ Clyde Chitty, on the other hand, has documented the development of secondary school examinations in England and Wales, and has argued that GCSEs had little value for those who left school at sixteen.³⁴ Despite this, neither of these histories focus on GCSEs as the centre of their studies.

It is worth noting that many of these commentators have been shaped by their personal experiences of the education system in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Clyde Chitty was a former teacher, for example, and, while he never taught GCSE students, he was highly involved in schools and shaping the educational landscape in Britain in the later twentieth century. Eric Hobsbawm has argued that personal experience can impact the

³¹ Christine Farquharson, Sandra McNally and Imran Tahir, 'Education inequalities', *Oxford Open Economics* 3 (2024), p. i760.

³² Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy*, p. 133.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

³⁴ Chitty, 'Secondary School Examinations', p. 359.

production of history, arguing that those writing about 'one's own lifetime' must be careful not to assume a 'collective experience' in line with their own memories.³⁵ I was born in 2003, meaning I have no personal memories of the period, though this does not make me an entirely detached writer. I grew up in Britain and experienced state education, including taking GCSE examinations, meaning my own perspectives may be unconsciously shaped by potentially similar educational experiences to the accounts in this dissertation.

Methodology

An important facet of this study is an analysis of newspaper articles in the *Times Educational Supplement (TES)* from 1988 to 2003, which produced weekly editions focusing on schools and educational matters. These provide perspectives from teachers and pupils, thereby giving an insight into how those in schools, not in government, experienced these years. Specialist subject magazines are also assessed, because they advised secondary school teachers in a range of subjects. *Teaching History*, for example, has been regularly published since 1976 and adds insight into how the GCSE reforms impacted schools from the late 1980s. Books and blogs are also drawn upon, often written by teachers, such as Sammy Wright's *Exam Nation*, to bring out the essence of everyday lives in secondary schools during the period.

Contemporary sociological research is central to the dissertation as well, bringing together studies that have assessed the nature of GCSEs from a social science perspective. This includes how attainment patterns changed over time and inequalities developed, as well as differences in the rates of pupils choosing certain subjects. The ASPIRES project, for

³⁵ Eric Hobsbawm, 'The present as history: writing the history of one's own time' in Jennifer Wallis and Jane Winters (eds.), *The Creighton Century, 1907-2007* (London: University of London Press, 2009), pp. 273-4.

example, was a research study into approximately 50,000 young people born between September 1998 and August 1999, and sought to ‘understand the factors shaping their trajectories’, including ‘educational and employment aspirations, choice, experiences, and outcomes’ from ages four to twenty-two.³⁶ This will be used to assess how the aspiration of different pupils changed over time. This material will be applied to the qualitative findings from *TES* articles, enabling a more comprehensive historical account. Lise Butler has reflected on the ‘social scientific’ turn in modern British history, where historians increasingly used social science ‘as source bases for understanding lived experiences’.³⁷ She does, however, acknowledge John Goldthorpe’s warning that this leaves historians open to ‘selection of material in order to sustain a favoured line of argument’, which this study is careful to avoid.³⁸

This dissertation also draws on archival material, including the records from the National Union of Teachers held at the Warwick Records Centre. These provide accounts for how schools responded to government policies, most notably the decision to limit use of coursework in GCSE assessment in 1991. Finally, documents from the Prime Minister’s Office and Department for Education are also used to judge how patterns of inequality and experiences in schools matched what governments had tried to implement.

³⁶ Louise Archer, Jennifer DeWitt, S. Godec, M. Henderson, H. Holmegaard, Q. Liu, E. MacLeod, H. Mendick, Julie Moote, E. Watson, ‘ASPIRES 3 Main Report: Young People’s STEM Trajectories, Age 10-22’, *University College London*, 2023, p. 4.

³⁷ Lise Butler, ‘The Social Scientific Turn in Modern British History’, *Twentieth Century British History* 33 (2022), pp. 445-6.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 448-9.

To my knowledge, this work is the first to historicise the introduction of GCSEs and their impact on education and children more broadly in Britain from the late 1980s. A detailed understanding of this provides essential context for contemporary debate, at a time when there have been recent criticisms of a culture of over-testing, together with recent reforms to Ofsted and the ongoing Assessment and Curriculum Review.³⁹ It also allows for a further insight into the motivations and rationale of both Conservative and Labour Party policies, alongside how this informed the everyday lives of the nation's children.

This dissertation is structured in four chapters. The first explores how GCSEs have re-shaped patterns of attainment among pupils, including how inequalities have changed, in terms of gender, region, social and economic class, and ethnicity. It also considers the impact of most fifteen-and-sixteen-year-olds completing the same qualifications at the end of their compulsory schooling for the first time. The second interrogates how the policy has impacted the aspiration of pupils and informed social mobility. This includes exploring the rise of participation in further and higher education, suggesting that GCSEs enabled the realisation of these aspirations, which were high across all backgrounds. The third chapter assesses how the policy altered the purpose of schooling. Greater stress induced by the qualifications was a defining experience for many pupils and teachers alike, and it also looks to how the evolving education and economic landscapes informed the importance placed on such qualifications. Finally, the fourth chapter investigates how the introduction of GCSEs influenced the subjects that pupils chose. Disparities in those who choose, for example, Double or Triple Science will be examined, as well as the increase in vocational routes. The conclusion reflects on this, suggesting that GCSEs must be understood in various ways,

³⁹ See, for example, Kenneth Baker, 'I introduced GCSEs in the 1980s – but now it's time to scrap them', *Independent*, 11 February 2019.

including raising the attainment and aspirations of many pupils. This was especially amidst the changing labour market.

Chapter One: Attainment at Sixteen

Patterns of attainment at sixteen changed from the introduction of GCSEs, including the proportion of fifteen-and sixteen-year-olds gaining qualifications. This chapter demonstrates how GCSEs allowed thousands more pupils to take a school leaving examination and led to new variations in attainment by social and economic class, gender, ethnicity, and regions across the UK. Girls, for example, extended their lead over boys in attainment from 1988.

Who Sat Exams at Sixteen?

Prior to 1986, there was no single examination system for all sixteen-year-olds or school leavers. Rather, there were three common routes: taking O-levels, which were aimed at the 'top twenty per cent' of students and were more academic; taking CSEs, which were aimed at the 'middle forty per cent' from their introduction in 1965; or leaving school with zero qualifications.⁴⁰ A grade 1 in CSE, the highest achievable, were supposed to be the equivalent to a pass at O-level, though these qualifications never achieved 'parity of esteem'.⁴¹ Students in grammar schools were expected to study for their O-levels, and follow a path into a middle-class profession, whereas secondary modern pupils were more likely to study for CSEs or no qualifications.⁴²

⁴⁰ Chitty, 'Secondary School Examinations', p. 356; Laura Carter, *Histories of Everyday Life: The Making of Popular Social History in Britain, 1918-1979* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), p. 213.

⁴¹ Val Brooks, 'The Role of External Examinations in the Making of Secondary Modern Schools in England 1945-65', *History of Education* 37 (2008), p. 466.

⁴² Peter Mandler, 'Educating the Nation: I. Schools', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 24 (2014), p. 14, 17.

This began to change, especially after the reorganisation of secondary schools along comprehensive lines. Comprehensive reform meant the end of selection at eleven-plus for many schools, except in Northern Ireland and a minority of local authorities in England, with the number of grammar schools in England falling from 1,300 in the mid-1960s to just 261 by 1979.⁴³ As demand for education increased, the importance of qualifications was valued by growing numbers of pupils and their families, as evidenced by an increasing number of secondary modern pupils being entered for O-levels. In 1954, over 5,500 pupils from secondary modern schools were entered for these more prestigious qualifications, and this had risen to 8,500 by 1956 (out of approximately 1,250,000 secondary modern pupils).⁴⁴ By 1960, as many as 39.4 per cent of pupils who attended secondary modern schools were entered for O-level assessment (approximately 500,000 pupils when using 1956 enrolment figures).⁴⁵ This followed a similar trajectory in Scotland, where sixty-six per cent of students were taking Ordinary Grades by the late 1970s, even though they had been introduced in 1962 to cater for the ‘most able third’ of students.⁴⁶

These changing attitudes were followed in 1972 by the raising of the school leaving age (ROSLA) to sixteen, meaning more pupils than ever before were staying in secondary schools, and everyone was in school until the exam-taking age. Many students were confused as to why they were ‘detained for a further year’, but the increasing experience of

⁴³ Shadi Danechi, ‘Briefing Paper: Grammar School Statistics’, *House of Commons Library* No. 1398, 3 January 2020, p. 4. By 1997, this number dropped to 164.

⁴⁴ Brooks, ‘The Role of External Examinations’, p. 453; Commons sitting of Thursday 26 April 1957. House of Commons *Hansard*, Volume 551, Sixth Series, cc1959-60 (online: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/1956-04-26/debates/dbac8d2b-2d15-434e-a9d8-1ead39beab9b/SecondarySchoolPopulation>).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Lindsay Paterson, *Scottish Education and Society since 1945* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), p. 6.

secondary education among families and rising expectations for children to be educated was an essential context for GCSE reform.⁴⁷

In June 1984, Joseph announced the introduction of GCSEs, as a single ‘system of examinations’ aimed to ‘do more than O-levels to stretch the ablest pupils’, but also ‘do more than CSE to motivate other pupils’.⁴⁸ They were, therefore, intended to cater for a ‘wide range of abilities’, and aimed to mark candidates for ‘positive achievement’, meaning they were marked on what pupils knew, not what they did not.⁴⁹ GCSEs assessed a wider range of skills than CSEs, extending beyond being memory tests, and grades were assessed against ‘defined yardsticks’, rather than a ranking system.⁵⁰ The government also outlined that the grades A-C at GCSE were to have the same standards as grades A-C at O-level, and that grades D-G at GCSE were to be equivalent to grades two to five at CSE.⁵¹ This was before an additional A* grade was added from 1994. In Scotland, too, Standard Grades (S-Grades) were introduced from 1986. They had similar consequences, being available to a ‘greater diversity of pupils’ and leading ‘to a widening of the social basis of access to English, Mathematics and Science considered as individual subjects’.⁵² They also paved the way for

⁴⁷ Ken Roberts, ‘Opportunity structures then and now’, *Journal of Education and Work* 22 (2009), p. 356.

⁴⁸ Commons sitting of Wednesday 20 June 1984. House of Commons *Hansard*, Sixth Series, Volume 62, cc303-313 (online: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/1984-06-20/debates/5324e1f1-555d-498a-a0f8-9e553a855c7a/16-PlusExaminations>). Also see ‘1984: O-levels to be replaced by GCSEs’, *BBC News*, 20 June 1984.

⁴⁹ The National Archives of the United Kingdom, Kew, Department for Education and Science, ED 183/392. Review of GCSE, 28 August 1992; Prime Minister’s Office, PREM 19/1724. Letter to Ms Jill Rutter, the Private Secretary to the Chief Secretary of the Treasury from R. L. Smith detailing material for Mr Baker to use for a speech on the Education Bill, 10 June 1986.

⁵⁰ Prime Minister’s Office, PREM 19/1724. Government leaflet, ‘GCSE: the new exam system at 16-plus’, 1986.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Paterson, *Scottish Education and Society*, p. 8, 75.

more pupils to progress to Higher Grades, typically taken at seventeen, after they had left secondary school.⁵³

Mandler has reflected on the introduction of GCSEs as a significant policy change, since it was 'extended to nearly all students' and therefore helped to 'lower the barrier [Britain's] divided school system had previously erected at sixteen'.⁵⁴ It 'provided a bridge' that allowed for more pupils to move on to further and higher education, and GCSEs proved to be 'the single most important supplier of new entrants to higher education'.⁵⁵ While there had been a 'steady' trajectory towards more pupils taking O-levels and staying on in school, GCSE provided 'easier access to the non-traditional, quasi-vocational routes to higher education such as BTEC', contributing to narrowing the 'gaps between each year of attainment from fourteen to eighteen'.⁵⁶ Providing opportunities to 'lower attainers who had less success with O-level', therefore, was its 'principal effect'.⁵⁷

At the same time, there were changing expectations of how long pupils would stay in education for and how their careers would develop. Previously, most teenagers had moved directly into employment from leaving school at ages fifteen or sixteen. This began to change, especially after the ROSLA in 1972, since young people were increasingly being offered opportunities to stay in education. Vocational opportunities, such as Business and Technical/Technology Education Council (BTEC) qualifications or National Vocational

⁵³ Ibid., p. 75.

⁵⁴ Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy*, p. 133.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 134.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., pp. 134-35.

Qualifications (NVQs), provided effective routes into careers, which more teenagers were qualified to do (because they did GCSEs).⁵⁸ Employers were also demanding more of their recruits, with GCSE grades lower than a C being labelled 'worthless' in the labour market.⁵⁹ This added an additional dimension to the GCSE examinations: they were an opportunity for more pupils than ever to gain the same qualifications, but they were also high-stake assessments. As Ken Roberts has argued, many fourteen-to-sixteen-year-olds were working towards examinations which may 'prove that they [were] failures'.⁶⁰

This was in the context of increasing staying-on rates after sixteen, which rose rapidly in the first five years of pupils completing their GCSEs, as in Figure One.⁶¹ The rate had been rising from the 1950s, with a downturn in the early 1980s, but the introduction of GCSEs worked in combination with other factors, such as the ROSLA, to sustain and accelerate this increase. GCSEs contributed by providing a value for staying on, since pupils would have the opportunity to obtain useful qualifications, and there were higher expectations of achievement at this age. Rising staying-on rates meant that more teenagers were completing Level 3 courses, whether A-levels or BTEC courses, which were important as they enabled progression to university. For example, 300,000 took A-level examinations in 1988, before the impact of GCSEs came into effect.⁶² By 1993, the number of A-level students had grown

⁵⁸ Ken Roberts, 'Opportunity structures then and now', p. 361; Kate Hoskins, 'Unleashing the "undergraduate monster"? The second-order policy effects of the 1988 Education Reform Act for higher education in England', *Journal of Educational Administration and History* 55 (2023), p. 167; Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy*, p. 134.

⁵⁹ Roberts, 'Opportunity structures then and now', p. 359.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Paul Bolton, 'Education: Historical Statistics', *House of Commons Library*, 27 November 2012, p. 10.

⁶² Alan Smithers, 'A -Levels 1951-2014', *Centre for Education and Employment Research, University of Buckingham*, August 2014, p. 1.

rapidly to 500,000, and further to 700,000 by 2000.⁶³ Enabling teenagers to get onto these Level 3 courses, then, was one of the most defining impacts of the introduction of GCSEs. This supports the work of Steven McIntosh, who has argued that GCSEs were the ‘key determinant’ in ‘improved participation rates in post-compulsory education’ from 1988.⁶⁴

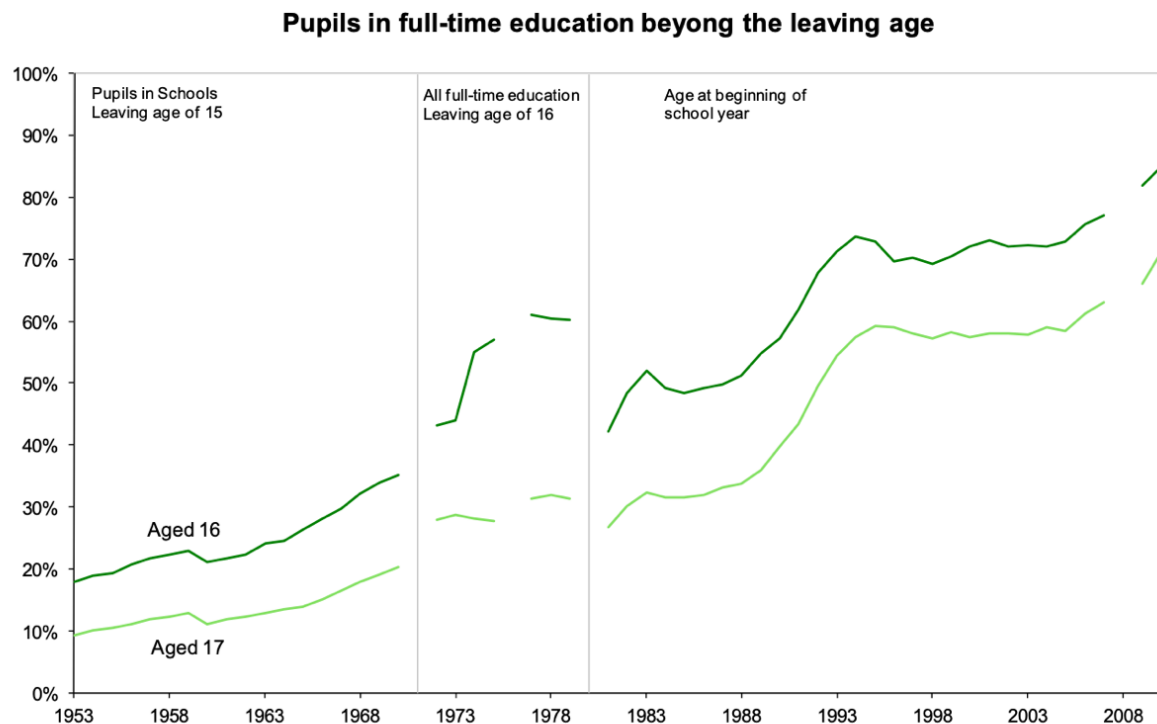


Figure One: Proportion of Pupils Staying in Full-Time Education Beyond the Leaving Age, 1953-2008.⁶⁵

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Steven McIntosh, 'The Demand for Post-Compulsory Education in Four European Countries', *Education Economics* 9 (2001), p. 80.

⁶⁵ Paul Bolton, 'Education: Historical Statistics', *House of Commons Library*, 27 November 2012, p. 10. Original title [sic].

Social and Economic Class

Large swathes of sociological research have focused on how pupils from lower social and economic classes perform less well than pupils from higher classes. This has been the case throughout the twentieth century and was often defined by who were able to take examinations and, of those, who had access to O-levels. Entry into grammar schools, for example, was largely the preserve of the middle-class and, because these were aimed at 'academic-minded' children, most children at grammar schools were entered for O-levels (though a sizeable minority also left school at fifteen before their O-levels).⁶⁶ Fewer pupils in secondary modern schools were entered for O-levels, and they were less likely to come from families which perceived traditional schooling to be as important, perhaps due to a lack of schooling experience and the notion that an academic education would not prepare them for manual employment.

However, the introduction of GCSEs has narrowed the attainment gap, since more pupils from a more diverse range of backgrounds were able to sit these assessments.⁶⁷ Ninety-five per cent of all fifteen-to-sixteen-year-olds sat their GCSEs from 1988, which was an increase from the CSE/O-level system (in 1974/5, nearly twenty per cent of pupils did not attain a single CSE or O-level).⁶⁸ Roberts has also acknowledged that over half of the cohort would attain five grades A-C in grades (which became known as the 'benchmark' of GCSEs), something that would previously have been expected only of the twenty-five per cent who attended grammar schools.⁶⁹ From 1988, attainment, measured by the benchmark of pupils obtaining five GCSEs at grades A-C, had broadly risen. From 1987 to 1988, results improved

⁶⁶ Mandler, 'Educating the Nation: I, pp. 13-15, 21.

⁶⁷ Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy*, p. 134.

⁶⁸ 'Seasonal stillness', *Times Educational Supplement*, 22 August 1997, p. 12

⁶⁹ Roberts, 'Opportunity structures then and now', p. 359.

by 3.2 per cent across schools in England, for example.⁷⁰ They continued to improve year-on-year, with the proportion of pupils awarded five GCSEs at grades A-C rising to 46.1 per cent in 1989, a rise of 3.6 per cent.⁷¹ More pupils than ever were taking the same system of qualifications and attainment had risen to higher levels than before, eclipsing the cumulative attainment of former O-level and CSE cohorts. The sharp rise from the first GCSE results in 1988, which consistently rose until 2012, is displayed in Figure Two.⁷²

⁷⁰ Leon Gore, 'The Impact of the Introduction of GCSE English on Pupil Performance', *British Educational Research Journal* 19 (1993), p. 137.

⁷¹ Jeremy Sutcliffe, 'Examiners impressed by GCSE results', *Times Educational Supplement*, 25 August 1989, p. 1. This continued from 1989, as reported in Paul McGill, 'Results reflect stress on high achievers', *Times Educational Supplement*, 2 February 1996, p. 9; Gore, 'Impact of GCSE English', p. 137; Vernon Gayle, Susan Murray and Roxanne Connelly, 'Young people and school General Certificate of Secondary Education attainment: Looking for the "missing middle"', *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 37 (2016), p. 352.

⁷² 'First fall in GCSE grades in exam's history', *BBC News*, 23 August 2012.

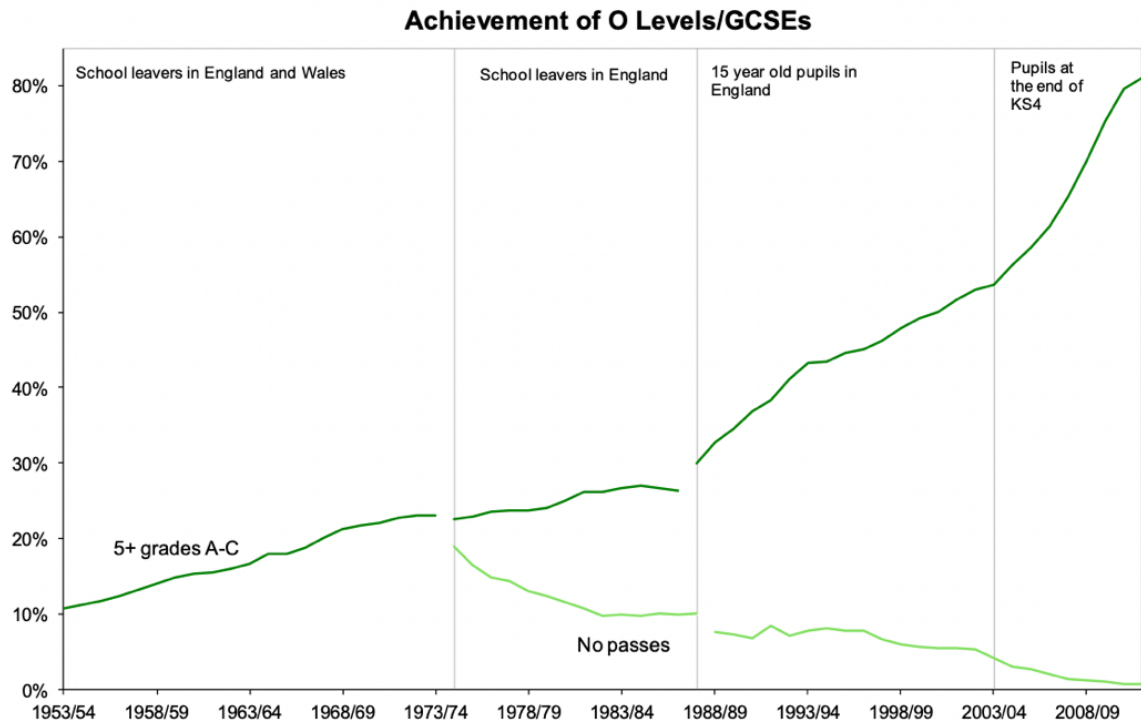


Figure Two: Proportion of pupils achieving the 'benchmark' of GCSE or equivalent qualifications, 1953-2009.⁷³

Considerable attention has been paid to social and economic inequalities, which existed both before and after the introduction of GCSEs.⁷⁴ The most commonly discussed metric was parental occupation, which Christopher Playford and Vernon Gayle have considered 'the most important predictor' of GCSE results.⁷⁵ They discovered, for example, that pupils with parents in 'lower supervisory and technical', 'semi-routine', and 'routine' occupations, were

⁷³ Bolton, 'Education: Historical Statistics', p. 12.

⁷⁴ See, for example, John White, *Who Needs Examinations: A Story of Climbing Ladders and Dodging Snakes* (London: Institute of Education Press, 2014); Christopher Playford and Vernon Gayle, 'The concealed middle? An exploration of ordinary young people and school GCSE subject area attainment', *Journal of Youth Studies* 19 (2016), 149-168; Paul Connolly, 'The effects of social class and ethnicity on gender differences in GCSE attainment: a secondary analysis of the Youth Cohort Study of England and Wales 1997-2001', *British Educational Research Journal* 32 (2013), 3-21; Gayle, Murray and Connolly, 'Looking for the "missing middle"', p. 358; Sean Demack, David Drew and Mike Grimsley, 'Minding the Gap: ethnic, gender and social class differences in attainment at 16, 1988-95', *Race Ethnicity and Education* 3 (2000), p. 117; Steve Strand, 'Ethnicity, gender, social class and achievement gaps at age 16: intersectionality and "getting it" for the white working class', *Research Papers in Education* 29 (2014), p. 131.

⁷⁵ Playford and Gayle, 'The concealed middle?', p. 159.

the least likely to reach the benchmark of five GCSEs at grades A-C.⁷⁶ Commentators have also increasingly focused on children who were eligible for free school meals (FSM), who were less likely to achieve high GCSE grades.⁷⁷ Richard Webber and Tim Butler, too, have argued that ‘the type of neighbourhood in which a pupil lives in’ was an important predictor of GCSE performance, with higher performers living in more affluent areas.⁷⁸

The introduction of GCSEs did not fundamentally transform these inequalities, but scholars have understated the policy’s contribution to narrowing the attainment gap. Webber and Butler, for instance, have outlined how the lowest-performing neighbourhoods often included those who lived in large cities in the North of England, with low incomes and high reliance on councils for housing and transport.⁷⁹ From 1986, though, those in the lowest-performing neighbourhoods were far more likely to have the opportunity to obtain qualifications that were attractive to further education institutions and employers. More schools in poorer neighbourhoods had been entering students for O-levels, but the policy meant that nearly all secondary school leavers entered GCSEs. This meant that there could be a direct comparison in grades between a pupil from a deprived school in the North West, for example, with a pupil who attended a grammar school in the South East. GCSEs, in conjunction with the ROSLA, raised the expectations of schools, pupils, and families, empowering them to have the opportunity to obtain qualifications when they would not have previously done so.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ian Shuttleworth, ‘The Relationship between Social Deprivation, as Measured by Individual Free School Meal Eligibility, and Educational Attainment at GCSE in Northern Ireland: a preliminary investigation’, *British Educational Research Journal* 21 (1995), p. 494.

⁷⁸ Richard Webber and Tim Butler, ‘Classifying Pupils by Where They Live: How Well Does This Predict Variations in Their GCSE Results?’, *Urban Studies* 44 (2007), p. 1229.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

The case is similar for those who were eligible for FSM. Ian Shuttleworth has identified that, for each one per cent rise in how many pupils in a school were eligible for FSM, there was a one per cent rise in the percentage of pupils not gaining a grade C in any single GCSE.⁸⁰ This pattern was broadly true prior to 1986: those on FSM were less likely to be entered for O-levels and, if they were, were less likely to perform well. Shuttleworth has also suggested that pupils receiving FSM were lower performers because they are more likely to come from larger families, perhaps leading to less space in their house and a smaller share of resources allocated to them, as well as having a family history of unemployment and attending secondary modern schools.⁸¹ GCSEs, however, began to change the expectations. Unlike under the previous system, each student receiving FSMs was entered for a qualification, the same ones that those from affluent backgrounds took.

Another measurement of social inequalities was the type of school a pupil attended. Grammar and private schools, largely the preserve of those from advantaged class backgrounds, initially dominated the GCSE league tables.⁸² However, research has revealed that grammar schools provided limited additional academic value when controlling for social and economic class.⁸³ In fact, one study has displayed how the grades of pupils in grammar schools did not improve more than grades in many comprehensive schools from the end of

⁸⁰ Shuttleworth, 'The Relationship between Social Deprivation, as Measured by Individual Free School Meal Eligibility, and Educational Attainment', p. 494.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 494.

⁸² Clare Dean and Estelle Maxwell, 'Fee-payers face up to exam scrutiny', *Times Educational Supplement*, 19 November 1993, p. 4; Geraldine Hackett, 'DfE acts on "covert selection"', *Times Educational Supplement*, 16 December 1994, p. 1.

⁸³ Binwei Lu, Jake Anders, Nadia Siddiqui and Xin Shao, 'How do academic selection systems affect pupils' educational attainment? New evidence from an analysis of large-scale data on England', *Educational Review* 76 (2024), 1285-1306; Simon Burgess, Claire Crawford and Lindsey Macmillan, 'Access to grammar schools by socio-economic status', *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 50 (2018), 1381-1385.

Key Stage Three (KS3) to GCSE.⁸⁴ The dominance of such schools should, therefore, be attributed to their more middle-class intake, with pupils having more resources and higher expectations at home.

It is also worth noting that there was always a proportion of school-age children who did not sit any school leaving qualification or examination. In the 1996-7 academic year, for example, at least 46,000 teenagers left secondary school with no GCSEs.⁸⁵ Between fifty and seventy-five per cent of these teenagers did not obtain any other formal qualifications and forty-three per cent of them had not even been entered for GCSEs.⁸⁶ Over the 1980s, though, the numbers of those who achieved zero qualifications at sixteen had fallen from twenty per cent to under ten per cent, aided by the introduction of GCSEs.⁸⁷

Cultural Capital

Commentators have also explored the role of 'cultural capital', the 'accumulation of a set of skills, knowledge, attitudes or behaviours which have been sanctioned by the 'dominant classes in society', as another factor which impacted attainment at secondary school.⁸⁸ Sarah Stopforth and Gayle, for example, have suggested that those with higher cultural capital

⁸⁴ Clare Dean, 'Grammars "add less value"', *Times Educational Supplement*, 3 March 2000, p. 3.

⁸⁵ Josephine Gardiner, 'Danger of the new exclusion zone', *Times Educational Supplement*, 22 August 1997, p. 8; Jo Sparkes, 'Schools, Education and Social Exclusion', *Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion*, November 1999 p. 8.

⁸⁶ Gardiner, 'Danger of the new exclusion zone'.

⁸⁷ Jeremy Sutcliffe, 'The success story no one talks about', *Times Educational Supplement*, 1 April 1988, p. 8.

⁸⁸ Stopforth and Gayle, 'Parental social class and GCSE attainment', pp. 680-1.

obtain higher results than those with less cultural capital.⁸⁹ Roxanne Connelly, Stopforth, and Gayle have also posited that much of this was a product of a family's income, savings, and ownership of property influencing how much time a family has to read to their children or how much they prioritised schooling.⁹⁰ These arguments are valuable, but the role GCSEs played in relieving the pressure on cultural capital has been insufficiently studied.

Sammy Wright, a GCSE teacher in Sunderland, has provided a more qualitative basis for the cultural capital argument. He presents the image of a boy who has less cultural capital and is less likely to attain at sixteen because he is less familiar with the education system. The child has parents who 'work shifts', meaning he has the initiative to get his own dinner and 'sit with it in front of the TV', while also waking himself up each morning.⁹¹ His parents are less likely to be able to help with their homework, as the parents did not attend school to age sixteen, meaning he has less support and less emphasis on the value of education.⁹² The child is able to accumulate a vast amount of knowledge, but this is self-directed and, as a result, he has an 'encyclopaedic knowledge of Sunderland AFC, dogs, and fishing', rather than the more culturally 'relevant' aspects, which are more likely to be discussed in GCSE papers and school.⁹³

The boy outlined by Wright was more likely to obtain qualifications when he left school from 1986 than before. Even though his parents had little experience of secondary education at

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Roxanne Connelly, Vernon Gayle and Chris Playford, 'Social class inequalities in educational attainment: measuring social class using capitals, assets and resources', *Contemporary Social Science* 16 (2021), p. 285.

⁹¹ Sammy Wright, *Exam Nation* (London: Penguin, 2024), p. 70.

⁹² Ibid., p. 70.

⁹³ Ibid.

this level, schools emphasised the importance of GCSEs and all of his friends would have entered the assessments, even if they took the qualifications less seriously. The greater role of coursework, that could be tailored by each student, meant that there was more scope for the content to be more engaging and relevant to his interests. Wright outlined how the boy had also never visited London and speaks in the 'local dialect', something that added a distance to the curriculum, which, in Geography, for example, was skewed to studying regions in the South.⁹⁴ From 1986, though, there was greater scope for conducting local studies through coursework, which teachers often facilitated and encouraged.

However, it is also worth noting that 'exam-ification' likely exacerbated some of the pressure of cultural capital, especially when the emphasis on coursework was constrained from 1991. Exams were highly intense and proved to be 'fateful moments' in the lives of young people, as they assigned a certain 'value' to the individuals as they progressed to further education or the labour market.⁹⁵ As Wright also argued, there was a changing 'school contract', which had become 'transactional': the message was to 'do well at school [and] get good grades', since this will 'get you a good life'.⁹⁶ Despite this, many sixteen-year-olds were labelled as failures, if they did not reach the benchmark of GCSEs, when they previously 'were not regarded as, nor saw themselves as, failures'.⁹⁷ Some groups were less responsive to being assessed via examinations, yet this moment remained decisive for the identity and future of these young people. Pupils with less cultural capital were more vulnerable to this. This

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Denscombe, 'Social Conditions for Stress', p. 359.

⁹⁶ Wright, *Exam Nation*, p. 70.

⁹⁷ Roberts, 'Opportunity structures then and now', p. 358.

feeling was limited, though, as a result of grade inflation and the high, and rising, proportion of teenagers achieving five 'good' GCSEs, as in Figure Two.⁹⁸

Gender

Another important change to the patterns of attainment came in terms of gender. In 1975-6, for example, 23.1 per cent of girls, just higher than the 22.6 per cent of boys, achieved the contemporary benchmark of five higher grades at O-level or grade 1 CSE.⁹⁹ From the introduction of GCSEs, though, the gap between girls and boys widened where, by 1996, eight per cent more girls than boys achieved five or more A*-C grades at GCSE.¹⁰⁰ This continued across the 1990s, with forty-nine per cent of girls, as opposed to forty per cent of boys, achieving the same in 1997.¹⁰¹

Commentators have suggested various reasons for this, the most common being related to the changing social context and higher expectations for women in education and employment, amidst second-wave feminism. More women than ever were entering full-time employment and aspirations to higher education were rising.¹⁰² Education was perceived to be important to achieve this, which led to more young women completing and seeing value in their GCSE examinations and, while there were strongly gendered patterns in subject

⁹⁸ Also see the coverage of the first time GCSE grades declined year-on-year in 2012: 'First fall in GCSE grades in exam's history'.

⁹⁹ Kate Myers, 'Are girls now really on top?', *Times Educational Supplement*, 21 January 2000, p. 32.

¹⁰⁰ Alan Smithers, 'New myths of the gender gap', *Times Educational Supplement*, 3 May 1996, p. 18.

¹⁰¹ Sparkes, 'Schools', p. 11.

¹⁰² Carol Dyhouse, *Students: A Gendered History* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 204-5.

choice, less women took exclusively practical qualifications aimed at female-oriented employment, such as in factories.¹⁰³

Another reason is more closely tied to the introduction of GCSEs. The new qualifications brought a renewed emphasis on coursework as a means of assessment, rather than examinations. In English, for example, many pupils had been assessed on one hundred per cent coursework, which was thought to be beneficial for girls as offering a more holistic approach to individual subjects.¹⁰⁴ There is also evidence that gender consciousness has meant that girls as a collective are disadvantaged in examinations.¹⁰⁵ David William Putwain, similarly, has revealed how girls, especially those from disadvantaged class backgrounds, experienced 'higher levels of test anxiety' when it comes to examinations, which is linked to worse performance.¹⁰⁶ In November 1990, however, the government restricted the amount of coursework that could be used in each GCSE subject, including limiting it to thirty per cent in English literature.¹⁰⁷ The gap between girls and boys continued throughout the decade and therefore this pedagogical theory about girls' achievement being related to non-examined assessment can only explain so much.

¹⁰³ Laura Carter, 'The Hairdresser Blues: British Women and the Secondary Modern School, 1947-72', *Modern British History* 34 (2023), p. 727.

¹⁰⁴ Linda Blackburne, 'Exam board tries to duck GCSE hurdle', *Times Educational Supplement*, 15 May 1992, p. 7; Gore, 'Impact of GCSE English', p. 143. Frances Rafferty, 'Why don't we hear it for the girls?', *Times Educational Supplement*, 17 April 1992, p. 6.

¹⁰⁵ Kevin Namiro Kuteesa, Chidiogo Uzoamaka Akpuokwe and Chioma Ann Udeh, 'Gender Equity in Education: Addressing Challenges and Promoting Opportunities for Social Empowerment', *International Journal of Applied Research in Social Sciences* 6 (2024), 631-641.

¹⁰⁶ David William Putwain, 'Test anxiety and GCSE performance: the effect of gender and socio-economic background', *Educational Psychology in Practice* 24 (2008), p. 329. Other theories have also pointed to the menstrual cycle and the potential concentration of exams as a further explanation, as in Andrew Dickson, 'Exam boards must not ignore periods', *Times Educational Supplement*, 17 April 1992, p. 14.

¹⁰⁷ Linda Blackburne, 'Exam board tries to duck GCSE hurdle', *Times Educational Supplement*, 15 May 1992, p. 7. Also see Marshall, 'The Politics of Testing', pp. 29-30; Gore, 'Impact of GCSE English', pp. 143-4.

Gender inequalities must also be understood in the context of social and economic class. Paul Connolly, for instance, has indicated that social class as a 'far greater influence' than gender on attainment, pointing to the fact that, in 1997, 71.7 per cent of boys whose parents had 'higher professional backgrounds' obtained the GCSE benchmark, as opposed to just 36.1 per cent of girls from 'routine occupational backgrounds'.¹⁰⁸ This runs contrary to the dominance of girls in GCSEs without considering class. Judith Glaesser and Barry Cooper, though, have pointed to how boys who do not have highly educated parents still trail girls who have parents of a similar background.¹⁰⁹ Gender contributed to attainment, and can be linked to debates over masculine culture and how much it aligns with expectations in schools, but social class remained an essential facet of how attainment was distributed.¹¹⁰

Ethnic Minorities

Ethnic minorities broadly benefitted from GCSEs, but they varied in attainment at sixteen. A study published in 1991 revealed that pupils from India and Pakistan performed better than their white British counterparts at O-level, and this gap widened even further at GCSE.¹¹¹ In 1987, pupils from Pakistan achieved an average of 4.9 points higher than white pupils and, in 1988, this extended to 7.1 points.¹¹² Pupils from Bangladesh and the Caribbean, on the other hand, attained less than white pupils before GCSE, but this disparity widened even

¹⁰⁸ Connolly, 'The effects of social class and ethnicity on gender differences', p. 3. 9.

¹⁰⁹ Judith Glaesser and Barry Cooper, 'Gender, parental education, and ability: their interacting roles in predicting GCSE success', *Cambridge Journal of Education* 42 (2012), p. 463.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 464.

¹¹¹ Fran Abrams, 'GCSE fails to eliminate inequality', *Times Educational Supplement*, 15 February 1991, p. 1.

¹¹² Ibid.

further from the late 1980s.¹¹³ In 1987, pupils from the Caribbean trailed by 1.4 points and pupils from Bangladesh by 5.8 points, before these figures rose to 2 and 7.8 points respectively from 1988.¹¹⁴

During the previous system, the Rampton Report of 1981 revealed how Afro-Caribbean children were 'disproportionately channelled' into a trajectory of taking CSEs rather than O-levels.¹¹⁵ The subsequent Swann Report of 1985 asserted that very few of these pupils reached the benchmark of O-level grades, and there had been a steep decline in attainment among this group across the 1970s.¹¹⁶ As Carter has argued, the O-level system was a 'preserve of whiteness'.¹¹⁷

From 1988, the attainment gap between Black and Asian pupils also widened. Despite Black students achieving 6.1 per cent higher in 1988 than they had in 1987, six times more Asian than Black pupils achieved the benchmark of higher grades.¹¹⁸ This disparity widened further in the late 1980s and 1990s.¹¹⁹ This has been attributed to more disillusionment in the education system, and they were also more likely to be in poorer neighbourhoods and taught by less experienced teachers.¹²⁰ It is also worth noting that there had been greater mobility among Asian families, where they tended to place significant emphasis on

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Carter, *Histories of Everyday Life*, p. 230; Gore, 'Impact of GCSE English', p. 134.

¹¹⁶ Carter, *Histories of Everyday Life*, p. 231.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Gore, 'Impact of GCSE English', p. 141, 134.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p. 140.

¹²⁰ Philip Kirby and Carl Cullinane, 'Class differences: Ethnicity and disadvantage', *The Sutton Trust*, November 2016, p. 5.

education as a means of social mobility, especially by encouraging their children to study ‘subjects allied to medicine’.¹²¹

After the introduction of GCSEs, attainment rose among most groups. Leon Gore, for example, has explored how GCSE English influenced attainment for ethnic minorities in Brent in London.¹²² Gore posited that coursework contributed to improving the familiarity and accessibility of texts to minorities, for example teachers having more scope to include literature written by Black writers from 1986.¹²³ This role of coursework made the exam at sixteen ‘less disadvantageous’, especially for Afro-Caribbean boys.¹²⁴ However, Gore acknowledges that, while there was an increase in the attainment of Afro-Caribbean children at GCSE in 1988, the gap between themselves and their white and Asian counterparts grew.¹²⁵ There is also evidence of schools refusing to admit refugees in the late 1990s, on the basis that they would be less likely to perform well and therefore risk reducing the school’s place in the GCSE league tables, highlighting a failure of accommodating minority backgrounds.¹²⁶

¹²¹ Peter Mandler, ‘The Swing to Science: Retrospects and Prospects’, *Higher Education Policy Institute Report* 187, 6 March 2025, p. 13.

¹²² Gore, ‘Impact of GCSE English’.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 137-40.

¹²⁶ Nadene Ghouri, ‘Refugees spurned “to improve tables”’, *Times Educational Supplement*, 10 April 1998, p. 3.

Regional Disparities

In the twenty-first century, it has become common for newspapers and commentators to identify the dominance of London in GCSE results.¹²⁷ However, the gap was not always as stark, and it began to pull away from the rest of the country in the early 1990s. In November, 1994, for example, a study revealed that GCSE results in the capital had improved by forty per cent over six years.¹²⁸ It demonstrated that some schools' results had doubled from 1991, a rate of progress that was not matched elsewhere.¹²⁹ There were inequalities within the capital, with inner London experiencing higher levels of attainment than outer London, but Ellen Greaves, Lindsey Macmillan and Luke Sibieta have also revealed how those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds were more likely to perform well in London than in anywhere else in the country.¹³⁰

Commentators have proposed various explanations for this. One of the strongest is the improvement to the primary schools, since prior attainment at KS2 and KS3 was one of the most valuable predictors of GCSE attainment.¹³¹ Policies such as the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies, rolled out from 1998, have attracted attention, together with the London Challenge, which aimed to improve secondary schools from 2003.¹³² As Greaves, Macmillan and Sibieta have indicated, the 'London effect' had its genesis in primary, rather

¹²⁷ See, for example, Ellen Greaves, Lindsey Macmillan and Luke Sibieta, 'Lessons from London schools for attainment gaps and social mobility', *Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission*, June 2014, p. 6; Hodge, Andrews, Gavriloiu and Fowler, 'Analysis: GCSE Results Day 2024'.

¹²⁸ Clare Dean, 'Capital sees exam results improve by 40 per cent', *Times Educational Supplement*, 14 November 1997, p. 5.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Greaves, Macmillan and Sibieta, 'Lessons from London schools', p. 10.

¹³¹ Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy*, p. 139.

¹³² Greaves, Macmillan and Sibieta, 'Lessons from London schools', p. 35.

than secondary, schools.¹³³ The bulk of these, though, influenced GCSE attainment later into the 2000s, where we see a spike in results from 2004, indicating that other factors shaped this inequality in the 1990s.

Others have also pointed to demographic changes in London, especially with the rise of multiculturalism. Even though there were wide disparities in the patterns of attainment among ethnic minorities, children from ethnic minority backgrounds were improving at a faster rate than white Britons.¹³⁴ Inner London's population included the most acute concentration of ethnic minorities, including of those who had English as an Additional Language (EAL), contributing to a change in results. Attainment in other multicultural cities, most notably Birmingham and Manchester, were not proportionate with this, though, therefore it should not be considered the sole factor.

Research has also indicated that pupils who lived closer to Sure Start Centres obtained 'up to three [GCSE] grades better' than those who did not.¹³⁵ Sure Start Centres were introduced in 1998 and provided various services (such as health support) for children under five years old, especially those from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. This study, conducted by the Institute for Fiscal Studies, argued that this trend was more acute for those who were eligible for FSM, came from ethnic minority backgrounds, or had Special Educational Needs (SEN).¹³⁶ If a child on FSM lived near a Sure Start Centre as a younger child, for example, they would be more likely to obtain three grade Cs, as opposed to three

¹³³ Ibid., p. 20.

¹³⁴ Ibid., p. 16.

¹³⁵ Nathan Standley, 'Children living near Sure Start centres did better at GCSEs, study suggests', *BBC News*, 9 April 2024.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

grade Ds if they did not.¹³⁷ This continued through the 2000s and beyond into the early 2010s.

By 1986, then, the educational landscape had changed. Pupils no longer completed different assessments depending on their social and economic class or type of school they attended, and rather inequalities manifested in *what* scores they achieved in the *same* qualifications. GCSEs, then, reduced inequalities, though they continued to manifest in who obtained the benchmark of GCSE results. Those of lower social, economic, and cultural classes tended to score lower. Girls extended their lead over boys, though this was influenced by class background, especially when coursework was central to assessment. Children from ethnic minority backgrounds made progress, though Afro-Caribbeans were unable to keep pace with other minority backgrounds and white pupils. This, alongside an improvement in primary schools and prior attainment, contributed to the rapid improvement of results in London, too, as opposed to the rest of the country.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

Chapter Two: Aspirations, Higher Education, and Social Mobility

This chapter examines how students perceived GCSEs in relation to their futures, including progression to further and higher education. It interrogates how students had differing aspirations and how these were shaped and re-shaped over the course of their educational careers. While there were discrepancies in this, especially between the ‘winners’ of examinations and those who were ‘left behind’, it argues that pupils from all backgrounds had high aspirations, and that this policy enabled teenagers to realise these. It also inspired teenagers who had not previously believed they could study at Level 3 after they had left secondary school to do so.

Did GCSEs Matter?

Secondary school examinations, namely O-levels, were increasingly perceived as important to those who were able to do them.¹³⁸ Initially, these were dominated by the middle classes and pupils whose parents had received an education, though, as more pupils who attended secondary modern schools took O-levels, more families began to have this experience of assessments. It became recognised that qualifications were rewarded in future educational chances and job opportunities.

Carter has explored the attitudes and aspirations of girls who attended secondary modern schools between 1957 and 1963, and ‘diagnosed’ them with the ‘hairdresser blues’.¹³⁹ This meant that they had the ‘cumulative realisation that a secondary modern education might

¹³⁸ Brooks, ‘The Role of External Examinations’, p. 453.

¹³⁹ Carter, ‘The Hairdresser Blues’, p. 726.

not even be able to make you into a hairdresser'.¹⁴⁰ Hairdressing was representative of 'clean, creative, and autonomous paid work', which was desired, but instead most girls from secondary modern schools, who were primarily unqualified, went on to work in retail, office, factory jobs, or housewifery.¹⁴¹

Carter draws on the example of Angela, a thirteen-year-old girl from Lancashire. In May 1959, Angela claimed that she wanted to be a hairdresser, as it was something that she 'will always know and will be capable of doing'.¹⁴² When asked if she would change this job aspiration, 'supposing you could be anybody, go anywhere, or do anything', she remained convinced.¹⁴³ However, after leaving school at fifteen with zero qualifications, as her parents did, she went into a job in retail.¹⁴⁴ While there were more opportunities for boys who left secondary modern schools, mostly in apprenticeships, the lack of expectation in these schools remained defining of their pupils' approach to school and employment. GCSEs changed this, though, when everyone had the opportunity to gain qualifications, in the context of increasing opportunities for either further education or employment at sixteen.¹⁴⁵

The middle classes had a history of perceiving education as important to maintaining their social and economic standing, and saw GCSEs as a replacement for O-levels – both of which were considered important. Fiona Devine has explored how the middle classes used 'economic' and 'cultural' resources to directly and indirectly influence the educational, and

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 727.

¹⁴² Ibid., p. 726.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Roberts, 'Opportunity structures then and now', p. 356.

therefore employment, chances of their children. For middle-class parents, she argued that they found it 'imperative' to 'avoid a secondary modern school education', and instead move them into 'the best state grammar schools possible'.¹⁴⁶ They had 'high expectations' for 'exam success' and helping their children access higher education, which would help them to secure a 'good job' and solidify their class position.¹⁴⁷ This created a landscape where the middle classes 'monopolised' the supposed choice of the education system 'for the advantage of their children', and working-class families were less accustomed to this.¹⁴⁸

As access to O-levels increased, however, the working-classes became more likely to view qualifications as important, especially as they became directly relevant to which jobs they could go into when they left school. Working-class families may have had less experience and fewer resources to do this in a way that the middle-classes did, but there was a growing emphasis on the value of doing well at school. This became a more transactional relationship where school gave you the qualifications to enter certain employment, as a passport into the workforce. Wright explored this in his interviews of children across the country, and the theme of future employment was the prevailing answer to his questions of what school was 'for'.¹⁴⁹ GCSE students answered with the idea that 'if you get good grades, it'll help you get a job' and 'I need the grades to get into sixth-form', for example.¹⁵⁰ Other, younger pupils shared a similar sentiment, suggesting that doing well at school means 'you can get a good job and not be on the streets, or something, begging for money', and for

¹⁴⁶ Fiona Devine, *Class Practices: How Parents Help Their Children Get Good Jobs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 175.

¹⁴⁷ Devine, *Class Practices*, p. 16.

¹⁴⁸ Webber and Butler, 'Classifying Pupils by Where They Live', p. 1247.

¹⁴⁹ Wright, *Exam Nation*, pp. 15-26, 27-36, 37-58, 59-84.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

‘your future’ more generally.¹⁵¹ Exams, for Wright, were the ‘checks and balances’ of what children gained from school.¹⁵² Sociological research has reinforced this, too, where Adrian Heath and Sin Yi Cheung have argued that the need for qualifications, called ‘credentialism’, ‘replaced school type as the basic principle of educational stratification in the comprehensive era’.¹⁵³

It has been increasingly recognised that GCSEs are important for someone’s future education and employment. Playford and Gayle, for example, have identified GCSEs as ‘the first branching point’ for a child in their educational career, and that they have a ‘critical role in determining post-compulsory education and employment pathways’.¹⁵⁴ Patricia Rice, too, has demonstrated the link between poor GCSE performance and higher rates of unemployment, and Jerry Jones, Michael Joyce, and Jonathon Thomas Jones have revealed the strong and detrimental impact this had on people’s long-term futures.¹⁵⁵ A study has also revealed a link between higher GCSE grades and higher levels of wellbeing at twenty-three years old, for those who completed their GCSEs between 1994 and 1996.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵¹ Ibid., p. 17.

¹⁵² Ibid., p. 24.

¹⁵³ Adrian Heath and Sin Yi Cheung, ‘Education and Occupation in Britain’ in Yossi Shavit and Walter Müller (eds.) *From School to Work: A Comparative Study of Educational Qualifications and Occupational Destinations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 73.

¹⁵⁴ Playford and Gayle, ‘The concealed middle?’, p. 149.

¹⁵⁵ Patricia Rice, ‘The impact of local labour markets on investment in further education: Evidence from the England and Wales youth cohort studies’, *Journal of Population Economics* 12 (1999), p. 302; Jerry Jones, Michael Joyce and Jonathon Thomas, ‘Non-employment and labour availability’, *Bank of England*, Autumn 2003, p. 298.

¹⁵⁶ Alexandra Starr, Zainab F. Haider and Sophie von Stumm, ‘Do School Grades Matter for Growing Up? Testing the Predictive Validity of School Performance for Outcomes in Emerging Adulthood’, *Developmental Psychology* 60 (2024), p. 674; Richard Adams, ‘GCSE grades a good predictor of life chances and wellbeing, research shows’, *The Guardian*, 22 February 2024; ‘Research reveals GCSE results may have far-reaching impact on adult life’, *University of York*, 22 February 2024.

These narratives have permeated into schools and led to a cultural recognition of the value of GCSEs. Lindsay Paterson, for example, has revealed how school attainment became more important to teenagers in the transition to the workforce, especially for girls and those from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds.¹⁵⁷ This was in part due to the changing economy and ‘growth in youth unemployment’, where the demands of accessing a ‘good’ job had changed.¹⁵⁸ In the 1950s, over ninety per cent of school leavers opted for employment rather than further education, and completing training for their job often ‘successfully compensated for low attainment at school’.¹⁵⁹ However, by the late 1980s, this was no longer the case, and instead there were fewer options for training in service sector jobs, which had overtaken manufacturing jobs, and qualifications from school were now essential for entering employment.¹⁶⁰

This was within the context of changing expectations from employers. As Bowe and Whitty have identified, employers recognised that adults were increasingly moving between jobs over the course of their careers, so the emphasis moved from having specific technical and practical skills, towards being flexible workers with a broad range of skills.¹⁶¹ Employers also had higher expectations of teenagers and young adults holding school qualifications, expecting them to spend longer at school yet come out with more than they had asked for in the mid-twentieth century.¹⁶² Conservative and Labour governments furthered this narrative

¹⁵⁷ Lindsay Paterson, ‘School leavers and educational reform in Scotland in the second half of the twentieth century’, *Journal of Education and Work* 35 (2022), p. 32.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 39, 45.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹⁶¹ Bowe and Whitty, ‘Reopening of the GCSE “settlement”’, p. 411.

¹⁶² Roberts, ‘Opportunity structures then and now’, p. 359; Martyn Denscombe, ‘Social Conditions for Stress: Young people’s experiences of doing GCSEs’, *British Educational Research Journal* 26 (2013), p. 371.

by, for example, constraining the proportion of coursework used in GCSE assessments to increase the value of the qualifications to employers.¹⁶³ GCSEs, then, mattered to working and middle class children alike, and had been wrapped up in a language of transitioning to ‘good’ employment. Not only were these significant moments in the future lives of teenagers, their importance was also recognised by contemporaries.

Rising Aspirations?

Commentators suggested that teenagers had a ‘poverty of aspiration’ in the mid-twentieth-century, where they were said to have not taken the opportunities presented to them, but it was more common that their aspirations were frustrated by a lack of opportunity.¹⁶⁴ In the 1950s, mothers of the 1946 cohort increasingly wanted their children to progress to higher education.¹⁶⁵ By 1968, approximately seventy-five per cent of parents of children in their last year of secondary education wanted them to participate in further education.¹⁶⁶ This did not translate into participation levels, however, where many, predominantly working-class, teenagers were unable to progress to higher education, often due to a lack of qualifications.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶³ Department of Education and Science, ED 289/109. Briefing for Press Conference on GCSE and KS4 for Assessment for the Secretary of State in relation to the reduction of coursework, 20 November 1991.

¹⁶⁴ Roberts, ‘Opportunity structures then and now’, p. 355, 358; Louise Archer, Jennifer DeWitt and Billy Wong, ‘Spheres of influence: what shapes young people’s aspirations at age 12/13 and what are the implications for education policy?’, *Journal of Education Policy* 29 (2014), p. 59.

¹⁶⁵ ‘Summary of data collected’, National Survey of Health and Development, *Medical Research Council*, last accessed 23 May 2025, <https://nshd.mrc.ac.uk/about-us/summary-of-data-collected/>; Chris Millward, ‘White students who are left behind: the importance of place’, *Office for Students*, 26 January 2021.

¹⁶⁶ Peter Mandler, ‘Educating the Nation: II. Universities’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 25 (2015), p. 8.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

However, there was little evidence of teenagers having lower aspirations than their parents. In fact, an ASPIRES report has found that pupils of all backgrounds had aspirations to higher education and ‘professional careers’.¹⁶⁸ The introduction of GCSEs meant that more pupils than before were able to progress to further and higher education, as they were more qualified to do so and higher demand led to increased places. As Roberts has demonstrated, GCSE grades improved, and represented an overall improvement in attainment when taking into account both CSEs and O-levels, and that over half of fourteen-year-olds in the ‘most deprived neighbourhoods’ aspired – and were more likely to progress – to higher education in the early 2000s.¹⁶⁹ Instead of aspirations changing, the aspirations of the mothers of the 1946 cohort became more realistic, as their children got closer to the school-leaving age.

Even though GCSEs provided a new platform for nearly all school leaving age children to obtain the same qualifications, they did not create a completely level playing field. Tiering was used from their introduction, for example, which reflected the emphasis on differentiation in grades. It involved placing certain students into different levels of examination, for example a ‘higher’ tier where a candidate could obtain grades A*-D, an intermediate tier that allowed candidates to achieve grades B-E, and a foundation tier which offered a less complicated examination, but only the chance to achieve the grades C-G.¹⁷⁰ This meant that, for a student whose teacher had placed them in the foundation paper, they

¹⁶⁸ Archer, DeWitt, Godec, Henderson, Holmegaard, Liu, MacLeod, Mendick, Moote and Watson, ‘ASPIRES 3 Main Report’, p. 14.

¹⁶⁹ Roberts, ‘Opportunity structures then and now’, p. 364.

¹⁷⁰ Rhian Barrance, ‘Tiering in the GCSE: A children’s rights perspective’, *British Educational Research Journal* 46 (2020), pp. 1210-11.

experienced a pressure to obtain the top grade, a C, which was the only 'pass' grade available to them. This has been criticised for exacerbating inequalities in attainment.¹⁷¹

Some families also struggled to understand the tiering system.¹⁷² There was debate between pupils, for example, about whether it was easier to get a C in a foundation rather than higher paper, with some expressing alarm that you had to 'literally get like full marks'.¹⁷³ More girls were entered for the intermediate tier, especially in mathematics, perhaps as a product of lower expectations from teachers or girls' own lack of confidence in a traditionally masculine subject.¹⁷⁴ This capped aspiration and attainment, especially as a grade B limited a pupil's chances of studying the subject at A-level or beyond. Issues of self-confidence also emerged, with some pupils reporting concern that their peers would look down on them if they were to take a foundation tier paper.¹⁷⁵

While children of all backgrounds had high aspirations, there were additional barriers for some. For example, a child's relationship with school influenced the extent to which they thought education was 'for them', and research identified that twelve per cent of those in year seven, the first year of secondary school for most children, were 'hostile' to school, an issue that tended to worsen throughout their secondary schooling career.¹⁷⁶ This was

¹⁷¹ Ian Nash, 'A new divide emerges: GCSEs are perceived to be "less appropriate" for low ability children', 27 September 1991, *Times Educational Supplement*, p. 3; Department for Education and Science, ED 289/109. John Clare, 'Streaming to return with new O-levels', *The Telegraph*, 21 November 1991.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 1210.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 1222.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1214.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1218.

¹⁷⁶ Caroline St John-Brooks, 'Pupils pushed into early disaffection', *Times Educational Supplement*, 29 January 1993, p. 8.

influenced by a variety of factors, and parental support has been attributed to ‘about ten to thirteen per cent of variation in student attitudes’.¹⁷⁷ Those who had part-time jobs, especially if a pupil worked over fifteen hours per week, were also linked to worse performance at GCSE, solidifying the relationship between attainment and class.¹⁷⁸

Similarly, the perceptions of a child’s race and ethnicity also impacted a child’s relationship with school and where they thought GCSEs added value to their lives. For example, a study in 2000 discovered that children of Afro-Caribbean descent who began school at the same time as everyone else would be more likely to be behind by the age of ten.¹⁷⁹ Research has also suggested that expectations and aspirations were lower among Muslim girls, because they had not often experienced schools ‘as empowering institutions’, and instead sites of discrimination.¹⁸⁰ One interviewee, for example, claimed that her teachers put her in the bottom set for English, despite claiming her English was ‘quite good’, and that she had to complain in order to ‘take exams’ and therefore ‘do something with my life’.¹⁸¹ Despite their experiences of marginalisation, Asian girls became higher performers and appeared to benefit from GCSE qualifications.¹⁸² Similar issues have been identified for Black pupils, who experienced a ‘cluster of disadvantages’ such as poverty, family breakdown, and poor local schools, but they often held high aspirations for their personal development and a sense of local pride.¹⁸³

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Karen Thornton, ‘Warning: jobs can damage A-levels’, *Times Educational Supplement*, 5 June 1998, p. 11.

¹⁷⁹ Robert Boylands, ‘Race inequality starts at five’, *Times Educational Supplement*, 13 October 2000, p. 8.

¹⁸⁰ Susan Young, ‘Pupils from whom so little is expected’, *Times Educational Supplement*, 27 August 1993, p. 4.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² ‘GCSE English and maths’, *Department for Education*, 7 November 2024, last accessed 24 May 2025, <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/education-skills-and-training/11-to-16-years-old/a-to-c-in-english-and-maths-gcse-attainment-for-children-aged-14-to-16-key-stage-4/latest/#by-ethnicity-and-gender>.

¹⁸³ Wendy Wallace, ‘Boys to men’, *Times Educational Supplement* ‘You and Your Job’, 21 January 2000, pp. 14-5.

Wright outlines how young people whose parents had little experience of obtaining secondary school qualifications were less likely to view them as important and therefore put effort in to do well. He says that, even if pupils are told (as they have been) that ‘they need to get their GCSEs in order to become worth anything’, they will look to their own ‘social world’ to assess this.¹⁸⁴ However, when their social circle includes their parents, who do not have GCSEs or equivalents, their friends who ‘don’t care about their GCSEs’, and their aunts, uncles, and grandparents, who do not have any similar qualifications’, the argument for the value of their assessments holds less purchase.¹⁸⁵ This means that they are being asked to choose between the idea that ‘GCSEs are important for your worth’ and ‘the worth they find in all of these people who don’t have GCSEs’, meaning their vision of success is different to that of a middle-class child whose family have all experienced higher levels of education.¹⁸⁶ There was no ‘poverty of aspiration’, rather a burgeoning of opportunities with some lingering doubts about how realistic progression to higher education was.

Further Education (FE) and A-Levels

For those who did not ‘pass’ their GCSEs in English Language and Mathematics, FE colleges offered a ‘second chance’ for pupils to obtain these qualifications.¹⁸⁷ These settings offered

¹⁸⁴ Wright, *Exam Nation*, p. 109.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Nadia Anderson and Sheine Peart, ‘Back on track: exploring how a further education college re-motivates learners to re-sit previously failed qualifications at GCSE’, *Research in Post-Compulsory Education* 21 (2015), p. 196.

different academic environments to secondary schools, with smaller class sizes and more personal teacher-pupil relationships.¹⁸⁸ Nadia Anderson and Sheine Peart, for example, have explored how many of these colleges catered to teenagers who previously attended schools which did not tend to produce high GCSE results, in areas of low motivation, high deprivation, and a ‘negative perception of education’.¹⁸⁹

Aspiration was curbed among those who had not passed their GCSEs, as evidenced by the attitudes of pupils at FE colleges. Many of these had been considered low achievers and that education was not ‘for them’ throughout their secondary school careers, whether by being placed in lower sets or on lower examination tiers. This meant that many of them felt ‘less confident’ about their studies and general futures, leading to many not making much progress in further education.¹⁹⁰ They were also more often from deprived families and neighbourhoods, and often internalised the idea of not being up to the expected standard, especially if they were not labelled ‘gifted and talented’ from a young age.¹⁹¹ This was not a new experience introduced from GCSEs, but they formalised and ensured everyone was judged by this academic standard at sixteen.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 196.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., pp. 196-7.

¹⁹⁰ Ruth Lupton, Stephanie Thomson, Sanne Velthuis and Lorna Unwin, ‘Moving on from initial GCSE “failure”: Post-16 transitions for “lower attainers” and why the English education system must do better’, *Nuffield Foundation*, February 2021, pp. 107-8.

¹⁹¹ Archer, DeWitt, Godec, Henderson, Holmegaard, Liu, MacLeod, Mendick, Moote and Watson, ‘ASPIRES 3 Main Report’, p. 5. For additional details on how children are sorted into those who are gifted and talented and those who are not, and how this impacts their outcomes from a young age, see Jennifer Crane, *Gifted Children in Britain and the World: Elitism and Equality since 1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2025) and Julie Henry, ‘Talent-spotting begins at four’, *Times Educational Supplement*, 8 November 2002, p. 8.

However, lower achievers remained convinced of the importance of GCSEs for their futures. Anderson and Peart's study revealed that teenagers in FE colleges were more likely to have positive relationships with their teachers, with one respondent, for example, claiming that 'they know that this is probably your last chance to get a good GCSE', meaning 'they wanna help you more'.¹⁹² Many pupils worked hard and enjoyed a more 'positive' strategy of reinforcing standards by rewarding small successes.¹⁹³

FE was also used to progress to Level 3 qualifications and higher education. More pupils than ever before were achieving the benchmark of GCSEs, increasing from 45.1 per cent to 56.8 per cent between 1997 and 2005, meaning more were qualified to take Level 3 courses.¹⁹⁴ The number of students on such courses rose. In 1989, before the impacts of GCSE were clear, just fourteen per cent of school leavers obtained two or more A-levels, which was necessary to attend university.¹⁹⁵ From 1988 to 1998, though, the staying-on rates of those from the 'lowest income group[s]' rose from twenty-one to sixty-one per cent.¹⁹⁶ By 1993, over seventy per cent of sixteen-year-olds were staying on past the school leaving age.¹⁹⁷ GCSEs, then, allowed teenagers who were previously unable to do A-levels or other Level 3 qualifications to realise their aspirations to do so.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹² Anderson and Peart, 'Back on track', p. 204.

¹⁹³ Ian Aveyard, 'The Impact of GCSE History on Further Education', *Teaching History* 57 (1989), p. 14; Anderson and Peart, 'Back on track', p. 210.

¹⁹⁴ Lupton, Thomson, Velthuis and Unwin, 'Moving on from initial GCSE "failure"', p. 3.

¹⁹⁵ "'No social justice" in high failure rates', *Times Educational Supplement*, 13 October 1989, p. 4.

¹⁹⁶ Mandler, 'Educating the Nation: II', p. 24.

¹⁹⁷ Bolton, 'Education: Historical Statistics', p. 10.

¹⁹⁸ Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy*, p. 133.

Mandler also highlighted how GCSE provided ‘easier access to the non-traditional, quasi-vocational routes to higher education’.¹⁹⁹ This meant that GCSEs gave access to Level 3 qualifications for those who would never have achieved them under the previous system, and this became acknowledged by employers and higher education institutions. These qualifications never overtook the number completing A-levels, but teenagers increasingly saw qualifications as necessary and accessible.²⁰⁰ There were limits to this, though, as girls were less likely to participate in Level 3 study (though the girls who did attained higher grades than boys, as at GCSE).²⁰¹

Higher Education (HE)

From the late 1980s, there was a boom in the number of pupils who were participating in HE. This was driven in part by the legacy of the Robbins Principle, which argued that higher education courses should be available to those who ‘are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and those who wish to do so’, and indicated that demand would continue to rise.²⁰² In 1967, twelve per cent of school leavers participated in degree-level study but, by the early 2000s, approximately forty-three per cent of seventeen-to-thirty-year-olds moved on to degree-level study.²⁰³ More pupils were aspiring to HE, and more pupils were realising these ambitions.

¹⁹⁹ Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy*, p. 134; Ian Nash, ‘GNVQS “not fulfilling” objectives’, *Times Educational Supplement*, 9 December 1994, p. 6.

²⁰⁰ Roberts, ‘Opportunity structures then and now’, p. 359.

²⁰¹ For insights into girls’ participation in FE, see Elizabeth Monck, ‘Equal opportunities: give girls a chance’, *Times Educational Supplement*, 28 April 1989. For boys’ underachievement, see ‘What is it with boys?’, *Times Educational Supplement* ‘Achievement Gap’, 15 November 2002, pp. 15-16.

²⁰² ‘The Robbins Report: Report of the Committee appointed by the Prime Minister under the Chairmanship of Lord Robbins’, *Her Majesty’s Stationery Office*, 1963, p. 8, last accessed 6 May 2025, <https://education-uk.org/documents/robbins/robbins1963.html>.

²⁰³ Mandler, ‘Educating the Nation: II’, p. 8; Hoskins, ‘Unleashing the “undergraduate monster”’, p. 167.

While Robbins was right to outline an upwards trajectory of teenagers and young adults participating in higher education, Mandler has attributed the sustained demand for university places to the introduction of GCSEs.²⁰⁴ It contributed to a 'much improved supply of qualified leavers' and made possible, and more familiar, entry routes to higher education.²⁰⁵ There were also more places available to qualified leavers, which had not been the case in the 1970s and early 1980s, and these were ready to be taken up by those who were achieving higher grades in more qualifications (GCSEs and A-levels).²⁰⁶ More people aspired to university than ever before. Their parents increasingly supported this aspiration, where, in a study of mothers who had children in 2000, approximately ninety-six per cent of them expressed an aspiration for their child(ren) to go to university.²⁰⁷

However, categorising GCSE candidates according to their ability level limited how many pupils realised their aspirations of HE study, especially in the sciences and of those from disadvantaged backgrounds.²⁰⁸ An ASPIRES study draws on the example of a working-class woman, Danielle, who completed a Double Award in science rather than the more academic option of obtaining GCSEs in the three separate sciences, inhibiting her aspirations to become a scientist.²⁰⁹ Danielle, who saw herself as a 'glamorous' and 'girly' girl, had aspired

²⁰⁴ Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy*, p. 134; Mandler, 'Educating the Nation: II', p. 21.

²⁰⁵ Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy*, p. 153.

²⁰⁶ Sutcliffe, 'The success story no one talks about'; Mandler, 'Educating the Nation: II', p. 22.

²⁰⁷ Mandler, 'Educating the Nation: II', p. 24.

²⁰⁸ For insights into inequalities in who participated in higher education, in terms of family history of higher education and ethnicity, see: 'Experts struggle to explain rush into higher education', *Times Educational Supplement*, 8 February 1991, p. 10; Ian McCallum, 'Ethnic groups "fail to reach" HE', *Times Educational Supplement*, 15 July 1994, p. 24.

²⁰⁹ Archer, DeWitt, Godec, Henderson, Holmegaard, Liu, MacLeod, Mendick, Moote and Watson, 'ASPIRES 3 Main Report', p. 24.

to be a scientist until her mid-teenage years, especially after enjoying ‘informal science learning activities and experiences’ away from school.²¹⁰ Despite this, she said that her feminine identity led to ‘everyone think[ing] I’m really dumb’ and being placed in the ‘bottom attainment sets’.²¹¹ Even though she worked hard, she did not take three separate sciences, as she thought it was ‘too hard’, and achieved a grade B, a higher achievement than anyone in her immediate family.²¹² This led to her school ‘discourag[ing]’ her from doing A-level physics, and led to her completing a degree in the social sciences.²¹³ Tiering and streaming within the framework of GCSEs constrained the aspirations of many from unconventional backgrounds, and reflected social expectations. Danielle, though, had aspirations to HE, in a way that, if she had been one of the women who attended secondary modern schools in the late 1950s and early 1960s, she would not likely have considered this a possibility. Ultimately, GCSEs made higher education a realistic ambition for young people.

Social Mobility and Into the Workforce

By the late 1980s, the labour market had changed substantially from the mid-twentieth century. Jim Tomlinson, for example, has explored how ‘deindustrialisation’, rather than ‘decline’, offers a more convincing meta-narrative for the period.²¹⁴ Governments and employers began to emphasise different skills in line with this. From the election of the New Labour governments in 1997 and 2001, for example, ministers emphasised the role of ‘education and training’ as the ‘commanding heights’ of the economy, as opposed to

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Jim Tomlinson, ‘De-industrialisation Not Decline: A New Meta-Narrative for Post-War British History’, *Twentieth Century British History* 27 (2016), p. 76.

‘industrial capital’.²¹⁵ Pupils responded to this evolving labour market, with more pupils choosing A-levels that were directly linked to service sector employment, as evidenced with the growth of business studies.²¹⁶ The study of Economics continued to grow, too, but the less academic students who did not view economics as ‘for them’ saw business as a viable and vocational alternative. Vocational university degrees, such as in the creative arts, also become more common, as a ‘necessary prerequisite’ before employment in many instances.²¹⁷

Social mobility had also changed in this evolving economy. In the period up to the early 1990s, immediately after the implementation of GCSEs, a degree was not essential to being upwardly mobile. As Mandler has discussed, those who had degrees were not necessarily more likely to be upwardly mobile, but ‘they *are* more likely to be mobile *because* of their degree’.²¹⁸ In fact, while ninety per cent of those from the salariat (service) class who had degrees remained in their same class position throughout their career, eighty-nine per cent of those from the working-classes with degrees reached the salariat by the end of their careers.²¹⁹ For those from working class backgrounds who did not have a degree, however, they were much less likely to end up in the salariat than those with salariat backgrounds who also did not have degrees.²²⁰ This was in part because of the boom in service jobs in the late twentieth century.

²¹⁵ Colm Murphy, *Futures of Socialism: “Modernisation”, the Labour Party, and the British Left, 1973-1997* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), p. 230.

²¹⁶ Susan Young, ‘More pick A-levels that link up to jobs’, *Times Educational Supplement*, 19 August 1994, p. 4.

²¹⁷ Young, ‘More pick A-levels’; Nicholas Pyke, ‘“Waste” of talent post-16’, *Times Educational Supplement*, 6 December 1991, p. 2.

²¹⁸ Peter Mandler, ‘Educating the Nation: III. Social Mobility’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 26 (2016), p. 13.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²²⁰ *Ibid.*

Gender was another key facet in the changing shape of the occupational structure, with greater numbers of women entering full-time employment than earlier decades. Women also had more scope to achieve qualifications and aspire to higher education, something that had an influence on their upward mobility and enabling their offspring to remain in the salariat.²²¹ Their pay and status in the occupational hierarchy, however, did not reflect their dominance in attainment at all levels of education.²²² By contrast to the girls who attended secondary modern schools in the 1950s and 1960s, girls and young women were now able to gain qualifications and aspire to further education and upward mobility in the late 1980s and 1990s. GCSEs were an enabling tool in this changing trajectory for young girls.

Ultimately, GCSEs prompted teenagers to have higher aspirations, as it brought in the assumption and expectation that fifteen-and sixteen-year-olds would obtain five 'good' GCSEs, rather than the patchwork expectations of the CSE/O-level system. Pupils and families recognised the importance of such qualifications to their futures, and this increased over time. More young people were able to move on to further education, in studying for A-levels or other Level 3 qualifications, and higher education, which had higher participation than before. This facilitated individuals participating in the evolving service economy, where qualifications beyond GCSEs were often demanded for jobs in the salariat class. At the same time, though, more students confronted a feeling of failure when sitting their GCSEs, which tested skills they had not previously been assessed on. Aspiration had always existed, but

²²¹ Ibid., p. 16.

²²² Mandler, 'Educating the Nation: III', p. 15; Monck, 'Equal opportunities', which points to how women make up just twenty-five per cent of qualifying doctors and thirteen per cent of consultants.

there were now increasing opportunities to progress to higher education, made possible through GCSE.

Chapter Three: High-Stakes Assessment

1988 saw the introduction of the Education Reform Act, where there was an emphasis on raising standards and increasing parental choice. Schools and teachers became judged by examination results and (later) Ofsted inspections, which were published publicly. Chapter three examines how the development of GCSEs fit into this evolving landscape, asking to what extent this period altered the purpose of schooling and everyday lives of students and teachers.

GCSEs in a 'Neoliberal' Education Policy Framework

Two years after the first GCSE candidates began their courses, the 1988 Education Reform Act introduced a plethora of reforms that have been branded 'neoliberal'.²²³ These formed the main manifestation of over-turning progressive 'excess[es]' in education, which had been a key criticism of secondary education from the New Right from the late 1960s.²²⁴ Brian Cox and Anthony Dyson, who published the Black Papers between March 1969 and March 1977, outlined these criticisms and argued that teachers had moved away from traditional teaching methods and contributed to a reduction in academic standards across the country, especially in the context of comprehensivisation.²²⁵ Under the Act, schools were funded according to their pupil numbers, meaning schools competed to have higher numbers of enrolments and therefore more money, and they allowed for schools to opt out

²²³ Furlong, 'New Labour and Teacher Education', p. 124.

²²⁴ Geoffrey Walford, 'The 1988 Education Reform Act for England and Wales: Paths to Privatisation', *Educational Policy* 4 (1990), p. 130; Sandra Taylor, '"Equal Opportunities" Policies and the 1988 Education Reform Act in Britain: Equity issues in cultural and political context', *Discourse* 14 (1993), p. 34.

²²⁵ James Robert Wood, 'Upward mobility, betrayal, and the Black Papers on education', *Critical Quarterly* 62 (2020), pp. 99-100.

of local control to gain more 'autonomy' over their budgets.²²⁶ The Conservative government also proclaimed to offer 'parental choice', by enabling parents to choose which schools their children went to within the state sector. This was premised on the idea that schools were judged according to a variety of metrics, and parents used this public knowledge to identify which school was best suited to their child/ren. The bulk of scholarly literature on education has explored this policy direction and its relationship with neoliberalism, though how this influenced the experience in schools has been insufficiently studied.

The standardisation of GCSE examinations provided a 'fixed standard' that allowed schools to be 'measured' by the same metric as each other, despite, as explored in the introduction, the tension with the more overtly neoliberal parental choice.²²⁷ This measurement tool was an essential component of the Conservative government's project, as it provided a quantifiable value for their main mission to raise standards.²²⁸ It was also a measure used to punish under-performing schools, as they became under-selected and under-funded. The introduction of the National Curriculum for children below the age of fourteen played a similar role and encapsulated an increasing culture of examination. This impacted the dynamics of how schools operated and the relationship that students and families had with schools.

²²⁶ 'Education Reform Act 1988', *Department for Education and Science*, July 1988, last accessed 12 May 2025, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1988/40/contents>.

²²⁷ Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy*, p. 145.

²²⁸ Ibid.

The 1988 Act also formalised an 'audit culture', where the state measured the success of individual pupils and schools, in order to reward the settings that obtained higher results, at the expense of the schools which produced worse results at GCSE and were deemed lower quality in the rest of their provision. Ofsted, an inspectorate that came into operation in 1992 and continues today, was built on the 1988 foundations and judged schools on various factors, including the provision of pastoral care and teaching quality, categorising them into four categories: 'inadequate', 'requires improvement', 'good', or 'outstanding'.²²⁹ These reports were available to the public, enabling parents to judge whether they wanted to apply to the school for their child, and were intended to contribute to accountability. As Graham has argued, children and families became 'consumers' of education, which was 'produced' by the schools and teachers, meaning pupils extracted knowledge and ultimately qualifications from these institutions.²³⁰

Before the introduction of Ofsted, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education (HMI) was the body which held schools and education policy accountable. HMI was intended to scrutinise local and national education policy, and to inspect schools on the basis of, for example, their teaching and the budgeting of the local authority.²³¹ However, it did not have the capacity to inspect each school every four years, and it was also not until 1983 that inspection reports were published and accessible to the public.²³² From the mid-1980s, HMI became more noticeable in the public domain, but political disagreements with the Conservative

²²⁹ Adrian Elliott, 'Twenty years inspecting English schools – Ofsted 1992-2012', *RISE Review*, November 2012, p. 1.

²³⁰ Graham, 'Consumer Choice', p. 31. Also see Stephen Gord, Chris Taylor and John Fitz, 'Markets in Public Policy: the case of the United Kingdom Education Reform Act 1988', *International Studies in Sociology of Education* 12 (2002), p. 23.

²³¹ R. F. Goodings and J. E. Dunford, 'Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Schools, 1839-1989: the Question of Independence', *Journal of Educational Administration and History* 22 (1990), p. 6.

²³² Elliott, 'Twenty years inspecting English schools', p. 1.

government led to its reform.²³³ Exam results at O-levels had not been made publicly available, nor used as a measure of schools. A new culture of public accountability had been established, meaning schools and teachers felt a pressure to perform to preserve or advance the reputation of the local school. They knew that performing well would lead to higher pupil rolls and therefore more funding. As John Lee and John Fitz have argued, the defining feature of Ofsted was its 'openness' and publication of inspections and results, which was a relatively new feature of the 1990s.²³⁴ This is important since it created a new environment that influenced how GCSEs played out on the ground in schools.

Similarly, and importantly, league tables were published, ranking schools on their GCSE results at the end of each academic year. These evolved over time, with the Labour government introducing a 'value-added' measure in 2002 to contextualise individual schools' results, and they were another mechanism to measure how effective individual schools were.²³⁵ Families and parents had been encouraged to use these tables to determine which school would be best for their child.²³⁶ However, there is varying evidence on how parents interpreted league tables; while many took them seriously and viewed them as important evidence that their child would score highly when they left, twenty-per cent of parents claimed they were 'misleading'.²³⁷ There were various impacts of this. Making results and inspection reports publicly available drew attention to the shortcomings of

²³³ John Lee and John Fitz, 'HMI and Ofsted: Evolution or Revolution in School Inspection', *British Journal of Educational Studies* 45 (1997), pp. 45-46.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

²³⁵ George Leckie and Harvey Goldstein, 'The evolution of school league tables in England 1992-2016: "Contextual value-added", "expected progress" and "progress 8"', *British Educational Research Journal* 43 (2017), p. 193.

²³⁶ Clare Dean and Mark Whitehead, 'Parents unite against tests and league tables', *Times Educational Supplement*, 30 April 1993, p. 1.

²³⁷ Dore, 'Parents reject exam tables'.

individual schools, which parents would not have seen previously. However, it damaged schools with poorer and SEN pupils, as their results were often worse than schools in more privileged neighbourhoods, meaning they were deemed less effective and not receiving the funding rewards, despite having different contexts.

Embedded in the new system, therefore, was a climate of competition and individualism. Competition for places had existed in the 1950s and 1960s, where primary school pupils competed for entry into a limited number of grammar school places and working-class families increasingly frustrated at not being able to gain a place.²³⁸ In comprehensive areas, too, there were criticisms of ‘selection by mortgage’, where more affluent areas tended to have better resources and higher performing schools.²³⁹ Most parents continued to send their child to the local school after the 1988 Act, but there was greater inequality in which children went to which schools.²⁴⁰ Sparkes has explored this, arguing that it was much more likely that children from middle-class families and educated parents would secure places at their first-choice school, but this depended on the performance and reputation of the local schools.²⁴¹ Ellen Greaves has explored how the introduction of ‘implicit’ parental choice from 1988 ‘exacerbate[d] rather than reduces school segregation arising from residential segregation’.²⁴² Fifteen per cent of families were not given their first-choice school and, in areas where schools had higher demand, house prices began to rise and lead to a

²³⁸ Mandler, ‘Educating the Nation: I’, p. 14.

²³⁹ Gord, Taylor and Fitz, ‘Markets in Public Policy’, p. 24.

²⁴⁰ See, for example, John Fitz, David Halpin and Sally Power, *Grant Maintained Schools: Education in the Market Place* (London: Kogan Page, 1993).

²⁴¹ Sparkes, ‘Schools’, p. 26.

²⁴² Ellen Greaves, ‘Segregation by choice? School choice and segregation in England’, *Education Economics* 32 (2024), p. 10.

concentration of middle-class families in the local area and dominating places at those schools.²⁴³

The increased emphasis on choice and the series of measures to better inform parents – GCSEs, league tables, and Ofsted reports – were especially important as school qualifications became more significant to the futures of young people. Employers demanded different skills as a result, asking for ‘flexibility’ among other skills including literacy, problem solving, and critical thinking.²⁴⁴ This stood in contrast to what employers wanted from schools in the earlier twentieth century, when there had been ‘less of a distinction’ between ‘education and training’, and an emphasis on gaining vocational skills.²⁴⁵ As government papers reveal, many employers did not value CSE qualifications, meaning that they had been seen as less useful for pupils, incentivising different routes to obtaining the appropriate skills for employment.²⁴⁶ Getting a good set of GCSEs became more important than ever, and parents wanted to maximise the chances of their children being able to perform. Due to this changing landscape, secondary schools became aware of their need to sell themselves as the ‘producer’. This ultimately changed the daily operation and broader strategies of schools, especially in the context of limited funding.

²⁴³ Ibid., p. 2.

²⁴⁴ Bowe and Whitty, ‘Reopening of the GCSE settlement’, p. 411.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 410.

²⁴⁶ Department for Education and Science, ED 183/392. HM Interim Report on GCSE: Press Briefing, August 1992.

A Passport into the Workforce: Purpose of School and Qualifications

GCSEs were introduced within the context of a 'different set of priorities in the labour market', which included shifting patterns of employment to the service sector.²⁴⁷ This contributed to parents, schools, and pupils viewing GCSEs as the first step towards their 'future careers', and a passport to either further education or employment.²⁴⁸ As Denscombe has suggested, GCSEs were 'seen as a means to an end – as an entry ticket for the next level of competition', a product of 'the changes that have occurred in transitions from school to work'.²⁴⁹ This meant that the assessments were not just an opportunity, but also a high-stakes moment in their lives: young people needed to prove they had the skills demanded of them by the evolving labour market. In the late 1980s, too, they were faced with poorer job prospects, higher rates of unemployment than most of their parents had endured, and greater difficulty getting onto the property ladder (though not thereafter).²⁵⁰ If they were to compete in this market, they had to do well in their GCSEs.

A study of GCSE students in the East Midlands in 1997 reveals how this introduced additional pressure to teenagers, which was a 'new and distinct source of stress in the already stressful lives of young people'.²⁵¹ One GCSE candidate, in 1998, outlined how 'getting a good result' was 'very important', claiming that 'I've got to do incredibly well here or I'm not going to do what I want' (though he did admit that some placed more importance on the assessments than others).²⁵² However, he argued that it was not just middle-class

²⁴⁷ Bowe and Whitty, 'Reopening of the GCSE settlement', p. 409.

²⁴⁸ Denscombe, 'Social Conditions for Stress', p. 365.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 371.

²⁵⁰ John Coleman and Leo Hendry, *The Nature of Adolescence* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 20.

²⁵¹ Denscombe, 'Social Conditions for Stress', p. 359.

²⁵² Ibid., p. 366.

pupils with a family history of gaining valuable qualifications who viewed GCSEs as important and, rather, it affected nearly every student.²⁵³ Helen, for example, claimed that she was alarmed that, if she did not perform well, she ‘won’t get anywhere’ in life and, similarly, Samantha expressed alarm that, if she did not pass her GCSEs, she would become ‘unemployed’ for a long time.²⁵⁴ Both of these students were aspiring to A-levels, and Samantha described the pathway as ‘getting your predicted grades [at GCSE], getting on to college, getting a career, getting a job and everything’.²⁵⁵

Wright has also illuminated the increasing pressure felt by teenagers leaving school, with children consistently referring to their need to have GCSEs to have a chance of getting a job and, ultimately, having a ‘good life’.²⁵⁶ Tyler, in his last year of GCSEs, reflected these ‘big picture’ concerns, claiming that he needed GCSEs ‘so like you can get a good job and not be on the streets’.²⁵⁷ For him, this was especially important, since he believed that ‘nowadays people don’t give money to people who are just on the streets, because sometimes they’re not poor, they just make money off begging on the streets’.²⁵⁸ Wright reflected on this sentiment by indicating that the ‘explicit [...] language of pass or fail’ epitomised these feelings, where pupils were raised in a system that told them that ‘the cleverer you are, the better you are’.²⁵⁹ Passing examinations at the end of secondary school was not just tied to

²⁵³ Ibid., p. 366.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

²⁵⁶ Wright, *Exam Nation*, p. 81.

²⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 17.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 7.

moving on to further education and employment, but also one's identity and status in society.

This stands in contrast to how most students experienced secondary school before 1986. At O-level and CSE, pupils took less subjects on average and had fewer hours of exams.²⁶⁰ O-levels and CSEs were less important for pupils in reaching their career aspirations. Even in grammar schools, for example, many fifteen-year-olds left school, choosing to not take their O-levels. This was before the 1972 ROSLA, and O-levels were not an essential school-leaving qualification in the same way that GCSEs were. Qualifications became increasingly common, but, even by 1986, just under fifty per cent of sixteen-year-olds stayed on beyond the compulsory leaving age, as opposed to over seventy per cent by 1993.²⁶¹ The most similar high-stakes examination experienced by teenagers in the twentieth century was the eleven-plus, which determined whether a ten or eleven-year-old was able to go to a grammar or secondary modern school, but this was largely discontinued from the 1960s and 1970s. GCSEs, by contrast, were a 'fateful moment in the life trajectory of the young people' from the late 1980s.²⁶² Teenagers knew this as they were completing their examinations, and felt the pressure from themselves and their families, for their futures, and from teachers and schools, for their performance and funding.

²⁶⁰ Ian Nash, 'Exam passes the popularity test', *Times Educational Supplement*, 20 May 1988, A. 5.

²⁶¹ Bolton, 'Education: Historical Statistics', p. 10.

²⁶² Denscombe, 'Social Conditions for Stress', p. 359.

Greater Stress?

GCSEs had been recognised as important, including by shaping the identity and emotional cultures of young people. These grades were ‘a measure affecting all and recognised by all as saying something about who you are and how intelligent you are’.²⁶³ This meant that these results were not just important for transitioning to the workforce, but also for one’s own sense of self, meaning that there was a culture of comparison and an additional ‘pressure to succeed’.²⁶⁴ ‘Results Day’ became an annual fixture, where each pupil who completed GCSEs would receive their grades on the same day, with these results released publicly and most pupils going into school to find out their ‘fate’ together.²⁶⁵ In fact, Tim Roome and C. A. Soan have revealed that many pupils were ‘negatively affected by’ the stress of assessment, and part of this was due to the ‘audit culture’ introduced in the late 1980s.²⁶⁶

Beyond their importance, though, GCSEs also demanded more of pupils than O-levels or CSEs had. Roome and Soan have identified that, as well as their results being public and external pressure, pupils had to contend with ‘high revision workloads’, ‘exam congestion’, and the ‘time pressures of writing fast’.²⁶⁷ There was evidence that the amount of homework has been a ‘considerable increase’ on O-levels and even led to many pupils finding ‘it necessary to withdraw from worthwhile activities’, such as sports and other extra-curriculars, ‘in order to meet coursework deadlines’.²⁶⁸ The report showed that homework

²⁶³ Ibid., p. 369.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ Reflections on the introduction of ‘GCSE Result’s Day’ in Mandler, Jeppesen and Carter, ‘Timeline’ in ‘Secondary Education and Social Change’, last accessed 12 May 2025, <https://sesc.hist.cam.ac.uk/timeline/>; Denscombe, ‘Social Conditions for Stress’, p. 359.

²⁶⁶ Tim Roome and C. A. Soan, ‘GCSE exam stress: student perceptions of the effects on wellbeing and performance’, *Pastoral Care in Education* 37 (2019), p. 297.

²⁶⁷ Ibid., pp. 300-01.

²⁶⁸ Diane Hofkins, ‘Homework overload damages sport’, *Times Educational Supplement*, 9 June 1995, p. 14.

for GCSE students increased pupils' working weeks by up to fifty per cent, with pupils now working for up to three hours each evening and at the weekend.²⁶⁹ Previously, an hour-and-a-half of homework per week had been allocated for each subject outside of school hours.²⁷⁰

There was debate over the use of coursework in GCSEs, and Denscombe has argued that it 'eased some pressure', especially as opposed to examinations congested at the end of the year in a period of approximately a month and a half.²⁷¹ As has been explored, coursework contributing to preventing attainment gaps from widening, where there was more scope for, for instance, ethnic minorities, to study material that was more 'relevant' material to them, and girls, who benefitted from continuous assessment rather than a concentrated series of examinations.²⁷²

However, teachers and pupils experienced greater stress than before, even with coursework. Continuous assessment meant that teachers had more marking to do where, for example, modern languages GCSEs required seventy-nine hours of recordings.²⁷³ Some suggested that they were now working sixty hour weeks and that their workload had risen by 150 per cent, in part due to a lack of training and funding in the first years of the qualification, plus 'over-loaded syllabuses'.²⁷⁴ Many suggested that this went above the 1,265 hours of teaching work per year, as outlined in the 1987 Teachers' Pay and Conditions Act, and they were not paid

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

²⁷¹ Denscombe, 'Social Conditions for Stress', p. 364.

²⁷² Gore, 'Impact of GCSE English', p. 144; Putwain, 'Test anxiety and GCSE performance', p. 329.

²⁷³ Susannah Kirkman, 'On your marks', *Times Educational Supplement*, 29 January 1988, p. 23.

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

for additional hours.²⁷⁵ Pupils, too, became overwhelmed, with parents reporting that their children were doing ‘between 15 and 20 hours a week homework’, making them ‘a bit worried that [they don’t] get much fun’.²⁷⁶

From 1991, John Major’s Conservative government set a limit on the proportion of coursework that could be used in GCSE assessment. Rather than a response to concerns of workload and marking, the government argued that there was evidence that coursework ‘undermined the value’ of GCSEs, including criticisms that some teachers and families gave an unfair advantage to some pupils’ coursework.²⁷⁷ This led to a greater emphasis on GCSE pupils taking examinations, which were often taken at the end of each course. One study in 1995 argued that having children sit still and write for three hours was akin to ‘asking somebody used to walking down the street to run a marathon’.²⁷⁸ On top of this, it claimed that this intensity was exacerbated by being told that performing poorly would ‘consign them to the dole queue’.²⁷⁹ Putwain, similarly, has posited that the anxiety induced by examinations can explain approximately seven per cent of variation in performance.²⁸⁰ For example, Tracey, a GCSE student, claimed that she worried that ‘I won’t get into college’ and

²⁷⁵ Sue Surkes, ‘Unions want to ease the GCSE load’, *Times Educational Supplement*, 27 May 1988; Graham Alexander, ‘Monsieur, change the train’, *Times Educational Supplement*, 13 May 1988, A. 24; Department for Education and Science, ‘The Education (School Teachers’ Pay and Conditions of Employment) Order 1987’, 30 April 1987, last accessed 12 May 2025, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uk/si/1987/650/made>.

²⁷⁶ Alan Coombes, ‘Sentenced to 15 hours homework: GCSE pupils have lost their “precious moments” to be teenagers’, *Times Educational Supplement*, 18 January 1991, p. 24.

²⁷⁷ Department of Education and Science, ED 289/109. Briefing for Press Conference on GCSE, 20 November 1991; Sue Surkes and Barry Hugill, ‘Assessment mars exam’s success, says inspectors’, *Times Educational Supplement*, 12 August 1988, p. 3.

²⁷⁸ Biddy Passmore, ‘Marathon task for GCSE candidates’, *Times Educational Supplement*, 16 June 1995, p. 11.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁰ Putwain, ‘Test anxiety and GCSE performance’, p. 326.

became ‘really stressed’ as the teachers were ‘running round me, going “You’ve got your mocks! You’ve got your mocks!”’.²⁸¹

The nature of the stress experienced by pupils was also a product of their own individual circumstances, and many were concerned about balancing their schoolwork with a social life.²⁸² Samantha suggested that it is almost impossible to ‘actually keep up’, ‘as good as your intentions are’.²⁸³ There was a theme of recognising the importance of the qualifications, but also a sense of guilt when doing anything but revising, with Helen expressing concerns about feeling that she ‘should be working’.²⁸⁴ She reflected on her life in the cadets, but how engaging in extra-curricular activities came with the pressure of having to work at ‘night’.²⁸⁵

Evolving Teacher-Pupil Relationships

Students, teachers, and all staff had high workloads, especially as they were now expected to provide an education that allowed teenagers to enter the workforce. This re-shaped the relationship between students and teachers, including the expectations of what they were to provide each other. Pupils increasingly demanded high quality teaching which would maximise their grades, as did their families, with the increasing cultural and economic recognition of GCSEs. Teachers, in response to the focus on grades and quantified outcomes, set more homework and found themselves under more pressure to teach to the test.²⁸⁶

²⁸¹ Denscombe, ‘Social Conditions for Stress’, p. 365.

²⁸² See, for example, Jillian Aston, ‘GCSE: a Pupil’s View’, *Times Educational Supplement*, 2 September 1988.

²⁸³ Denscombe, ‘Social Conditions for Stress’, p. 365.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁶ Kirkman, ‘On Your Marks’, p. 23.

Many sociological studies have indicated that pupils felt that teachers added considerable pressure to their lives, yet also saw the relationship as transactional, where teachers would help them achieve the grades they required. As Denscombe has explored, for example, pupils increasingly emphasised that teachers acted as 'stress amplifiers' who added 'largely unnecessary' pressure, since pupils already understood the gravity of the assessments in the context of their lives.²⁸⁷ Grant, a GCSE candidate in 1998, argued that teachers placed considerable pressure on pupils, by consistently 'preaching' that 'you got to get A-Cs' and 'you got to do your coursework'.²⁸⁸ He acknowledged that this was because they were 'under pressure' from their department and more senior staff, but suggested that the message felt as if they had to 'save [the teacher's] skin', rather than it being for their own good.²⁸⁹ Many teachers, even, expressed reservations with the system of 'auditing rather than education', which some called 'incompatible'.²⁹⁰

However, it also re-shaped the relationship between pupils and teachers by reducing issues of discipline in the classroom. In the 1970s, there was a strain in the relationship as pupils were more likely to misbehave and receive harsher discipline than later in the century. John Gray, Andrew McPherson, and David Raffe have also revealed how truancy was 'most frequent' among teenagers who 'were excluded from work for certification', meaning they did not see school as important to their lives and futures.²⁹¹ As Paterson has displayed,

²⁸⁷ Denscombe, 'Social Conditions for Stress', p. 365.

²⁸⁸ Ibid.

²⁸⁹ Ibid.

²⁹⁰ Shona MacGregor, 'Test results may limit aspirations', *Times Educational Supplement*, 16 April 1993, p. 14.

²⁹¹ John Gray, Andrew McPherson, and David Raffe, *Reconstructions of Secondary Education: Theory, Myth and Practice Since the War* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), p. 174.

‘hostility to school among low-attaining students was widespread’ in the mid-1970s, but this improved in the 1980s, especially due to increasing recognition of the importance of school.²⁹² By the 2000s, evidence showed that behaviour had improved across primary and secondary schools, especially from the mid-1980s.²⁹³ In a similar way to the ROSLA, GCSEs contributed to the ‘new seriousness about education’, which meant students saw examinations and school as important.²⁹⁴ More students having this outlook relieved the pressure on teachers in this way.

Teachers, though, had experienced greater stress after the introduction of GCSEs, which had ‘considerably increased [their] workload’.²⁹⁵ It also altered their priorities in teaching pupils, a similar experience to that of primary teachers. Soo Sturrock, for example, claimed that primary school teachers experienced neoliberal education reforms ‘in relation to accountability and managerialism’.²⁹⁶ She argued that there was a sense that ‘nothing is ever good enough’, meaning that, regardless of the results they produced, they could never satisfy school leaders, who increasingly demanded higher numbers to propel themselves up the league tables.²⁹⁷ This argument holds for secondary school teachers in the period, whose performances were judged by the results of their students.²⁹⁸ This was despite

²⁹² Lindsay Paterson, ‘The experience of schools in Scotland’, *British Educational Research Journal* 46 (2020), p. 1173.

²⁹³ Sean Coughlan, ‘Pupils “behave better than 1970s”’, *BBC News*, 24 November 2008; Graeme Paton, ‘Children “better behaved than in 1970s”’, *The Telegraph*, 24 November 2008.

²⁹⁴ Peter Mandler, Laura Carter and Chris Jeppesen, ‘Briefing Paper: ROSLA’, *University of Cambridge*, October 2017, p. 3.

²⁹⁵ Kirkman, ‘On Your Marks’, p. 23.

²⁹⁶ Soo Sturrock, ‘Primary teachers’ experiences of neo-liberal education reform in England: “Nothing is ever good enough”’, *Research Papers in Education* 37 (2022), p. 1214.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁸ Thomas Rogers, ‘Teachers can only ever have a small impact in their students’ results – yet they are judged as if they are 100% responsible’, *Tes Magazine*, 9 December 2017.

increasing demands, where GCSEs were not 'staggered' across the year, as CSE and O-level assessments were, leading to them working an average of 15.25 additional hours per week in 1988 than teachers in 1978.²⁹⁹ This manifested in pupils feeling a pressure to perform for themselves, their families, and also their teachers. Grant continued by claiming that 'if [the teachers] eased back a little, I think there'd be less stress'.³⁰⁰ He emphasised that year eleveens understood the importance of GCSEs.³⁰¹

As Roome and Soan claimed, too, parents added pressure to this relationship, since they expected their children to leave school with good GCSEs, and saw teachers as one of the means to this end.³⁰² Many parents recognised the 'strain' that children were under, though many furthered the pressure on doing well, especially if there was a family history of higher performance.³⁰³ For one student, Michael, there was a strong degree of 'competition' within his family, since his siblings and parents had obtained higher education degrees, including one PhD.³⁰⁴ For him, GCSEs were the first step in 'compet[ing]' within his 'fairly clever family', where he 'will be expected to' go on to further and higher education.³⁰⁵ There was a strong sense of academic success in Michael's interview where, ultimately, he felt that he could not 'be the one at the bottom'.³⁰⁶

²⁹⁹ Kirkman, 'On Your Marks', p. 23; Sue Surkes, 'Union wants to ease the GCSE load', *Times Educational Supplement*, 27 May 1988; Diane Spencer, 'Working hours expand', *Times Educational Supplement*, 5 April 1991, p. 3.

³⁰⁰ Denscombe, 'Social Conditions for Stress', p. 365.

³⁰¹ Ibid.

³⁰² Roome and Soan, 'GCSE exam stress', p. 306.

³⁰³ Kirkman, 'On Your Marks', p. 23; Martyn Offord, 'Exam stress for teachers', *Times Educational Supplement*, 22 July 1988, p. 14.

³⁰⁴ Denscombe, 'Social Conditions for Stress', p. 368.

³⁰⁵ Ibid.

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

Overall, GCSEs were experienced in a dramatically changing educational landscape. There was a greater emphasis on performance and standards, where schools, teachers and pupils were all publicly measured according to the results they produced when pupils left school. This 'audit culture' and neoliberal policy framework, with a culture of competition at the heart of it, informed how GCSEs were a 'new and distinct' stress for young people, as a 'fateful moment' which defined not only their transition into the workforce, but also their personal identity.³⁰⁷ It was also a greater stress in terms of the work they had to produce, especially from (but not limited to) the emphasis on examinations from 1991, where work took up a higher proportion of their lives. This altered the relationship between teachers, pupils, and families, in a way that was not as pronounced before 1986, especially where acquiring qualifications was perceived as less consequential.

³⁰⁷ Denscombe, 'Social Conditions for Stress', p. 359.

Chapter Four: Subject Choice

This chapter explores how the introduction of GCSEs and the evolving educational landscape influenced which subjects pupils studied. It asks how the patterns of subject choice changed from the O-level and CSE system to GCSE, together with assessing how hierarchies of subject choice changed, because of GCSE and other factors such as the demographics of students. It also explores the inequalities in access to science courses, especially from the greater uptake of Double, as opposed to Triple, Science from the late 1980s. It argues that GCSEs enabled pupils to take a more diverse range of subjects and particularly facilitated a move away from the traditional sciences.

Trends in Subject Choice

The introduction of GCSEs led to pupils studying more subjects than ever before. From 1986, GCSE candidates studied an average of seven subjects, which they would be assessed in, whereas O-level and CSE candidates studied an average of four in 1985.³⁰⁸ The equalising effect of GCSE also meant that candidates came from less traditional backgrounds, and a high proportion of these had aspirations to further and higher education. This new demographic influenced which subjects were chosen, in combination with the evolving labour market and increased opportunities to participate in further and higher education. Choices were also informed by pupils' growing aspirations to further study, where GCSEs had caused a 'dramatic expansion' of A-levels.³⁰⁹

³⁰⁸ Ian Nash, 'Exam passes the popularity test', *Times Educational Supplement*, 20 May 1988, A. 5.

³⁰⁹ Peter Mandler, 'The Swing to Science: Retrospects and Prospects', *Higher Education Policy Institute Report* 187, 6 March 2025, p. 13.

Most students were required to take English, Mathematics, and an iteration of the Sciences at GCSE. These were the dominant GCSE subjects, with Mathematics having the most entrants from 1995 to 2005.³¹⁰ This was followed by English, which only became a 'compulsory examined subject' when GCSEs were introduced (despite being popular across the twentieth century).³¹¹ The English GCSE was different to the English Literature GCSE, which was taken by approximately seventy-five per cent of students, and almost all GCSE candidates took English.³¹² Those who did not take English Literature tended to be the 'less able students', who were often on the foundation tier of GCSE English, meaning they could not achieve a grade higher than a C.³¹³ This changed with the introduction of a separate English Language GCSE from 2010. Science followed Mathematics and English, though it became more likely for students to take a double, rather than triple. There was a growth in the individual sciences from 1995 to 2005, but it is important to note that the uptake of individual sciences had fallen dramatically from 1988 to 1995. Biology, Chemistry, and Physics fell by fifty-four, thirty-eight, and forty-seven per cent respectively, something that can be explained by the shift away from triple science.³¹⁴ Many of the entrants to the individual sciences were taken up by private schools, since they did not have to strictly follow the National Curriculum.³¹⁵

³¹⁰ Alan Smithers, 'GCSE Trends 1988-2016', Centre for Education and Employment Research, *University of Buckingham*, August 2015, p. 11.

³¹¹ Peter Mandler, 'Educating the Nation: IV. Subject Choice', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 27 (2017), p. 21.

³¹² Tina Isaacs, 'Curriculum and assessment reform gone wrong: the perfect storm of GCSE English', *The Curriculum Journal* 25 (2014), p. 133.

³¹³ Ibid.

³¹⁴ Smithers, 'GCSE Trends', p. 12.

³¹⁵ Ibid.

In 1995, the most popular subject beyond these three was Design and Technology, which continued its dominance until 2005, because it was often compulsory.³¹⁶ This was followed by French, though this had a fifty-three per cent decline between 1995 and 2005, and Geography, which experienced a more steady decline.³¹⁷ Home Economics declined by thirty-seven per cent from 1995 to 2005, and Art also experienced a decline of twenty-two per cent.³¹⁸ The modern languages had risen to 2000, but these fell from the turn of the century, except for Spanish which broadly plateaued.³¹⁹ Over time, too, there was a growth in the GCSE subjects on offer, which led to a steady rise in Business Studies, for example.³²⁰

Most of these followed the trends that were emerging at O-level and CSE in the 1970s and 1980s. From the 1960s, there had been a shift away from the sciences, which had previously dominated subject choice at secondary school.³²¹ English and Geography became dominant in the early 1970s, and the rising participation of girls in further and higher education also contributed to a rise in Biology.³²² Art had been introduced as a new subject, and became more popular than History by the 1980s.³²³ The majority of new subjects, however, were the 'social studies', such as Economics, Sociology, and Business, which also overtook the traditional humanities subjects.³²⁴ English had not always been a compulsory examination topic, so this rise was accelerated by GCSE, but many of these trends had been longstanding.

³¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 11-12.

³¹⁷ Ibid.

³¹⁸ Ibid.

³¹⁹ Ibid., p. 13.

³²⁰ Smithers, 'GCSE Trends', p. 12.

³²¹ Mandler, 'Educating the Nation: IV: Subject Choice', p. 4.

³²² Ibid., p. 11.

³²³ Ibid., p. 17.

³²⁴ Ibid.

The influence of GCSE, then, was to enable a more diverse range of pupils than ever before to choose examination subjects in the first place – and to do more than an O-level or CSE candidate would have done before 1986.

An important factor that explains these trends was the increasing aspiration and progression of young people to further education and university. More people stayed on beyond the leaving age than before and saw O-levels and GCSEs as useful qualifications to advance their educational careers, in a way that students in the 1960s and 1970s were less likely to. While they were not always tied to their later aspirations, especially as subject choices were made as early as fourteen-years-old, it is possible to tie pupil choices at GCSE to what they studied at A-level and beyond. At A-level, there was a ‘boom’ in the social studies, for example, which can be traced to the rise in Business Studies at GCSE.³²⁵ There was also a decline in science uptake at A-level and university, with a fall in the number of Physics A-levels since 1965.³²⁶ There had also been a fall in the proportion of those doing STEM degrees in the UK, which had fallen from fifty-four per cent in 1967 to forty-three per cent in the mid-1990s, and continued to fall until the late 2000s.³²⁷ This was especially significant considering there was rapid growth in the number of A-levels that were being taken.³²⁸ The introduction of GCSEs, then, enabled a more diverse range of students to take a more diverse range of subjects, especially as there were more students in higher education, and the new entrants tended to take non-STEM degrees.

³²⁵ Mandler, ‘The Swing to Science’, p. 19.

³²⁶ Ibid., p. 6.

³²⁷ Ibid., p. 3.

³²⁸ Ibid., p. 6, 9-10.

Hierarchies of Subject Choice

Students began to take subjects for more different reasons than before, which complicated pre-existing hierarchies of subject choice. GCSEs enabled the diversification of subjects that were taken by a less academically traditional cohort, but this factor worked in tandem with other factors that had been emerging across the 1970s and 1980s. More broadly, it was the ‘democratisation’ of education across the twentieth century, which involved those from ‘less academic backgrounds’ participating in greater numbers, in part due to GCSE, that led to changing subject choices.³²⁹

One longstanding change was what employers demanded of young people and the type of employment young people entered. This changed what qualifications were the most important to gain from school and therefore which subjects were the most valuable. Employers were increasingly looking for ‘general qualities of mind or behaviour’, as opposed to specific training.³³⁰ This was different to the earlier twentieth century where, for example, in the 1960s, most sixteen-year-old grammar school leavers went into an engineering apprenticeship, which meant that they would either specialise in a Science or Maths at A-level or go immediately into similar employment.³³¹ By the late 1980s and early 1990s, however, the average grammar school leaver would have been expected to remain in education until the end of their university course, often at twenty-one. Across the twentieth century, various governments had encouraged young people to do science degrees, as they were ‘more useful’, and the graduate premium was thought to be higher for science

³²⁹ Mandler, ‘Educating the Nation: IV: Subject Choice’, p. 22.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

³³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

graduates.³³² By 1988, though, there were more opportunities to take social studies and other subjects while retaining aspirations to higher education and a high salary job.

Another reason for this was changing gender roles in British society across the twentieth century. More women than ever before were entering full-time employment and university and, by 1996, there were more women completing their first degrees than men.³³³ In the 1950s and 1960s, the women who went to university were primarily in teacher training, a reflection of women's 'traditional aspirations to social service'.³³⁴ However, in the 1970s and 1980s, cuts to teacher training worked in combination with a growing range of careers available to women (such as social work and local government), provoked a change in what they studied at university and, as a result, what they did at secondary school.³³⁵ This meant that they chose different subjects, moving towards the social studies which offered them a stable foundation for relevant Level 3 qualifications that would allow them to progress to university. This was also taken up by more women than ever before, rather than the majority who did teacher training in the earlier twentieth century. There was increasing intake in the sciences, though this was primarily limited to Biology, and the uptake in Physics did not change much because of the changing subject choices of girls.³³⁶

³³² Emma Smith, 'Science for All? School Science Education Policy and STEM Skills Shortages', *British Journal of Educational Studies* 72 (2024), pp. 397-98.

³³³ Mandler, 'Educating the Nation: IV. Subject Choice', p. 20.

³³⁴ Mandler, 'The Swing to Science', p. 15.

³³⁵ Mandler, 'Educating the Nation: IV. Subject Choice', p. 18.

³³⁶ Mandler, 'The Swing to Science', p. 13.

Black students were also more likely to take social studies subjects, driving their rise at GCSE level.³³⁷ This was in part due to the increasing popularity of social studies, and ideas that subjects such as Business and Law led to higher salaries, and an increasing social awareness.³³⁸ Science had become less central to secondary education, because they were no longer the only necessary qualifications for the jobs that predominantly young men would enter at sixteen or beyond, and had not appealed to the more diverse range of pupils, including Black and female students. It did continue to have a prominence, however, especially with a rise in primarily Asian students taking the 'subjects allied to medicine' or girls taking Psychology.³³⁹ While the number of subjects proliferated, Double Science remained the third most taken GCSE from 1995 to 2005.³⁴⁰

There were limits to the diversifying impact of GCSEs. Jessie Abrahams, for example, has argued that 'differential access to subjects' at GCSE was significant in determining which subjects pupils could take.³⁴¹ This meant that deprived schools were less likely to be able to offer a diverse range of subjects and were more likely to offer more vocational GCSEs as opposed to more 'respected' academic ones.³⁴² It also meant that schools varied in the 'option blocks' they offered, and poorer schools with less specialist staff were less likely to be able to offer a broader range of subjects, and with their classes not clashing with others.³⁴³ Many students wanted more options to choose from and ended up with their

³³⁷ Ibid.

³³⁸ Ibid., p. 15.

³³⁹ Ibid., p. 8.

³⁴⁰ Smithers, 'GCSE Trends', p. 11.

³⁴¹ Jessie Abrahams, 'Option blocks that block options: exploring inequalities in GCSE and A level options in England', *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 39 (2018), p. 1143.

³⁴² Rhian Barrance and Jannette Elwood, 'Young people's views on choice and fairness through their experiences of curriculum as examination specifications at GCSE', *Oxford Review of Education* 44 (2018), p. 23.

³⁴³ Ibid., pp. 26-27.

third or fourth choice subjects.³⁴⁴ This displays the limits to the diversification introduced by GCSE, as some schools were able to offer more choice than others, based on cultural and financial capital. However, even in constrained circumstances, GCSEs provided more options than the O-level/CSE system and were suited to a job market that demanded different skills. This was reflected in a changing hierarchy of disciplines which, while the sciences remained key, fewer GCSE candidates studied individual sciences, meaning they were less likely to study them at university.

STEM and the Sciences

The majority of the literature on subject choice has focused on science education, but these texts have not tended to focus on the influence that GCSEs had.³⁴⁵ Crucially, there was a shift away from triple science at O-level to double at GCSE.³⁴⁶ This was because the National Curriculum demanded students to take ‘a balanced science curriculum’, meaning they had to cover parts of Biology, Physics, and Chemistry, rather than just one.³⁴⁷ Double Science covered less content and fewer examinations than Triple Science (studying three individual sciences), and meant pupils received two GCSEs rather than three. In 1983, for example, twelve per cent of boys and ten per cent of girls took three sciences, and this had dropped to seven per cent of boys and four per cent of girls by 1997.³⁴⁸ Before the introduction of

³⁴⁴ Ibid.

³⁴⁵ See, for example, Mandler, ‘The Swing to Science’; John F. Bell, ‘Science subject uptake for year 11 pupils (1974-1997)’, *University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate*, 2002, last accessed 29 May 2025, <https://www.cambridgeassessment.org.uk/Images/109667-science-subject-uptake-for-year-11-pupils-1974-1997-.pdf>; Emma Smith, ‘Science for All? School Science Education Policy and STEM Skills Shortages’, *British Journal of Educational Studies* 72 (2024), 397-424; Louise Archer, Julie Moote, Becky Francis, Jennifer DeWitt and Lucy Yeomans, ‘Stratifying science: a Bourdieusian analysis of student views and experiences of school selective practices in relation to “Triple Science” at KS4 in England’, *Research Papers in Education* 32 (2017), 296-315.

³⁴⁶ Mandler, ‘The Swing to Science’, p. 9; Bell, ‘Science subject uptake’, p. 4; Julie Henry and Cherry Canovan, ‘Doubts about the value of three-into-one GCSE’, *Times Educational Supplement*, 13 September 2002, p. 18.

³⁴⁷ Bell, ‘Science subject uptake’, p. 1, 5.

³⁴⁸ Bell, ‘Science subject uptake’, p. 5.

GCSEs, most O-level students chose to study two individual sciences, with the option of selecting three reserved for the 'most able'.³⁴⁹ In 1983, thirty-one per cent of schools prevented students taking fewer than six O-levels from taking each science, and thirteen per cent of schools, typically those in more deprived areas, even prevented any pupil from taking more than two sciences.³⁵⁰ By 1992, however, the majority of students in secondary schools took science at GCSE.³⁵¹ This was a Double Award, a change that displays a move to prioritising a breadth, rather than depth, of science study.

This was important because, in order to study a science A-level, it was considered best practice to have completed Triple Science, meaning three GCSEs, and the Double Award was viewed as insufficient preparation for any of the individual science A-levels.³⁵² The small proportion of pupils who did Triple Science tended to attend a private school, as they were not obliged to follow the National Curriculum.³⁵³ State school students increasingly took three sciences but, as late as 2004, fewer than forty per cent of secondary schools offered three separate sciences at GCSE for their highest attaining students.³⁵⁴

Studying Double Sciences often inhibited the science aspirations of teenagers, who were prevented from studying science at A-level and therefore beyond. One example was Georgia, a GCSE student who had aspired to a 'science career', but she had to do a Double

³⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 3.

³⁵⁰ Ibid.

³⁵¹ Ibid.

³⁵² Mandler, 'The Swing to Science', pp. 9-10

³⁵³ Bell, 'Science subject uptake', p. 1, 5.

³⁵⁴ Commons sitting of Tuesday 24 March 2015. House of Commons *Hansard*, Sixth Series, Volume 594, cc1324-1329 (online: [https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2015-03-24/debates/15032473000002/Schools\(OpportunityToStudyForQualifications\)](https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2015-03-24/debates/15032473000002/Schools(OpportunityToStudyForQualifications))).

Award GCSE.³⁵⁵ The local sixth-form colleges discouraged Georgia from doing any A-level sciences since she had not studied three sciences and this was not deemed sufficient preparation. Instead, she studied media at university, meaning her science career aspirations were unlikely to be followed. This change at GCSE, where most students did two sciences, when they would have been more likely to do the more prestigious Triple Science at O-level, blended with other factors to limit aspiration and attainment in STEM. Traditional notions of science being ‘for’ middle-class boys, for example, meant that girls were less likely to aspire to science courses after GCSE.³⁵⁶

However, over the 1990s and 2000s, girls were increasingly participating in STEM subjects. There were general increases in the proportion of girls who took three individual sciences at GCSE, though this was also in line with a move towards doing three science subjects across all genders from 2000 to 2006.³⁵⁷ The increases for women largely came in Biology, and translated to rising participation at A-level.³⁵⁸ Physics grew much more slowly at GCSE and A-level, continuing a trend of being the least popular science among women from earlier in the decade.³⁵⁹ A gender divide continued to exist, too, where forty per cent of girls took three sciences in 2001, below the fifty-five per cent of boys.³⁶⁰ More ethnic minorities took science subjects, especially South Asian, Black, or ‘mixed ethnicity’ pupils.³⁶¹ GCSE had

³⁵⁵ Archer, Moote, MacLeod, Francis, and DeWitt, ‘ASPIRES 2 Report’, p. 21.

³⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 9.

³⁵⁷ Carmen Vidal Rodeiro, ‘Uptake of GCSE subjects 2000-2006’, *Cambridge Assessment*, August 2007, p. 13.

³⁵⁸ Archer, DeWitt, Godec, Henderson, Holmegaard, Liu, MacLeod, Mendick, Moote and Watson, ‘ASPIRES 3 Main Report’, p. 5.

³⁵⁹ Mandler, ‘The Swing to Science’, p. 13; Rafferty, ‘Why don’t we hear it for the girls’, p. 6.

³⁶⁰ Mandler, ‘The Swing to Science’, p. 12; Tom Bramley, Carmen Vidal Rodeiro, and Sylvia Vitello, ‘Gender differences in GCSE’, *Cambridge Assessment*, 20 October 2015, p. 36; John Bell, ‘Girls still lag behind boys in science’, *Times Educational Supplement*, 6 March 1998, p. 23.

³⁶¹ Mandler, ‘The Swing to Science’, p. 13.

meant a broader array of pupils were taking science subjects, but the increasing take-up of the Double Award prevented many from taking science A-levels.

Vocational Routes

GCSEs introduced a broader range of subjects that students could study, including more vocational options. This allowed and created a reason for more students to stay in education beyond the age of sixteen, something that was enabled by BTEC and other vocational options as well as A-level. More pupils did A-levels, reaching 800,000 pupils in 1998, but increasing numbers were taking different Level 3 qualifications.³⁶² 102,000 students also entered NVQ courses in 1997/98, a steep rise from 12,000 in 1991/2.³⁶³ The number taking BTEC Level 3s also rose, especially from the mid-2000s, when the figure tripled from 50,000 in 2006 to 150,000 by 2014.³⁶⁴ At the same time as the rise in overall numbers, there was also a rise in less conventional subjects as students were more able to take subjects that were closely linked with the careers they aspired to. For example, there was a rise in the uptake of film, media, and theatre studies from the early 1990s until 2000.³⁶⁵

Vocational routes had been incentivised in 1986 and 1993. In 1986, National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) were introduced, as the primary alternative for pupils who wished to study vocational subjects. They were offered at Level 2 and 3 and intended to prepare young people for specific jobs. In 1993, they were followed by General National Vocational

³⁶² Smithers, 'A-Levels 1951-2014', p. 1.

³⁶³ 'Vocational Qualifications in the UK 1997/98', *UCL Institute of Education Statistical Bulletin* Number 9/99 June 1999, p. 5.

³⁶⁴ Nicole Gicheva and Kathryn Petrie, 'Vocation, Vocation, Vocation: The role of vocational routes into higher education', *Social Market Foundation*, January 2018, p. 6.

³⁶⁵ Susan Young, 'More pick A-levels that link up to jobs', *Times Educational Supplement*, 19 August 1994, p. 4.

Qualifications (GNVQs), a ‘third route between academic system and traditional vocational education’.³⁶⁶ In the early 2000s, too, the Labour government allowed pupils to choose BTEC qualifications as part of their GCSE options, when they had previously only been available at Level 3 (though these were not taken up in large numbers).³⁶⁷ This allowed students to progress to vocational Level 3 qualifications, such as BTECs, which could be used to progress to higher education, especially in educationally disadvantaged regions.³⁶⁸ In 1990, as many as ten per cent of students used BTECs to go to university, and this number has increased to thirty-seven per cent by 2018.³⁶⁹ Essentially, this created an alternative route to higher education.

This stands in contrast to the idea that vocational routes after sixteen were not rewarded or recognised as success in the same way that academic routes were. This perception contributed to constraining which and how many pupils pursued vocational routes. For Fraser Nelson, Level 3 BTECs were ‘typically taken by those who fail to secure five good GCSEs’, as opposed to being a positive opportunity to gain a different set of skills.³⁷⁰ Ruth Lupton, Stephanie Thomson, Sanne Velthuis, and Lorna Unwin have also argued that there were often limited options for vocational routes, including apprenticeships after leaving school or college, that dissuaded pupils from taking up these options.³⁷¹ They suggested that

³⁶⁶ Mark Jackson, ‘On course for GCSE equality’, *Times Educational Supplement*, 18 October 1991, p. 9.

³⁶⁷ Abrahams, ‘Option blocks that block options’, p. 1144.

³⁶⁸ Gicheva and Petrie, ‘Vocation, Vocation, Vocation’, p. 6.

³⁶⁹ Commons sitting of Thursday 20 December 1990. House of Commons *Hansard*, Sixth Series, Volume 524, cc912-4 (online: <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/lords/1990/dec/20/btec#:~:text=My%20Lords%2C%20the%20latest%20available,so%20via%20the%20BTEC%20route>); Gicheva and Petrie, ‘Vocation, Vocation, Vocation’, p. 6.

³⁷⁰ Fraser Nelson, ‘The problem with Btecs – a response to Pearson Plc’, *The Spectator*, 21 September 2016.

³⁷¹ Ruth Lupton, Stephanie Thomson, Sanne Velthuis and Lorna Unwin, ‘Moving on from initial GCSE “failure”: Post-16 transitions for “lower attainers” and why the English education system must do better’, *Nuffield Foundation*, February 2021, p. 108.

the more disadvantaged were more likely to take vocational routes, perhaps because they were perceived as 'easier' and more 'relevant' to their future jobs.³⁷² Many pupils also perceived them as 'second-rate qualifications'.³⁷³

This cultural perception of vocational qualifications did not, however, take away from the increasing numbers of teenagers staying in education when they would not have previously done so. This, importantly, had been enabled by the introduction of GCSEs. Without GCSEs, the young people who would not previously have had the qualifications to progress to higher education, nor believe they were capable, were more likely to be able to do so. The attempts to make vocational qualifications relevant and accessible also contributed to the rising rate of school leavers staying on in education in the 1990s. Although they had been criticised for being 'just the qualifications of the unemployed and the less able' by some employers, acquiring a GNVQ was equivalent to four GCSEs and was an option predominantly taken by those from lower social and economic classes.³⁷⁴ Previously, they would have been more likely to gain zero qualifications, so this new emphasis on vocational routes was beneficial. They may have moved on to a Level 3 qualification and university.

Overall, GCSEs widened the subject choice available to pupils: more pupils were taking more subjects than ever before. The rise of participation in pupils from untraditional academic backgrounds, such as women and ethnic minorities, meant a more diverse range of subjects were being taken, including the social studies. There was a rise in science from the early

³⁷² Ibid., p. 9.

³⁷³ Ian Nash, 'Pupils shun GNVQ degree path', *Times Educational Supplement*, 10 May 1996, p. 3.

³⁷⁴ Nash, 'An award shrouded in ignorance', p. 13; Catherine Dilnot, Lindsey Macmillan and Gill Wyness, 'Educational Choices at 16-19 and University Outcomes', *Nuffield Foundation*, 12 January 2022, p. 11.

2000s, too, which often reflected the idea that these subjects led to 'better' jobs, and preceded a rapid increase in STEM subjects from 2007/8 and beyond.³⁷⁵ There were limits to what pupils could progress to, though, where more pupils took a double science GCSE, which constrained their choices to do science A-levels. Level 3 vocational routes were also increasingly pursued, an option in part provided by the widening access of secondary school qualifications, made possible through GCSE.

³⁷⁵ Mandler, 'The Swing to Science', p. 14.

Conclusion

The introduction of GCSEs was significant because, for the first time ever, most teenagers left school with a uniform, or, indeed, any, qualification. Attainment rose to unprecedented levels and students were studying a wider range of subjects than under the CSE/O-level system. This allowed for more young people to progress to further and higher education, and increasingly participation was by those from less traditional academic backgrounds. This happened in an evolving global economy and national labour market, with these qualifications being necessary for entry into service or knowledge sector employment. It predominantly raised the aspirations of those from disadvantaged backgrounds, especially as it increasingly became expected that sixteen-year-olds would hold valuable qualifications. At the same time, however, it introduced a new level of stress for candidates, who felt the importance and pressure of taking high-stakes assessments at sixteen. The qualifications were important for progression into further education, higher education, and future employment, in perception and reality, and meant that sixteen-year-olds were labelled according to their academic ability, in a similar way to how younger children were at eleven-plus from the 1940s. There are four key takeaways.

Firstly, the changing patterns of attainment mattered. Before 1986, there was a divide between those who completed CSEs and O-levels. Though more students were increasingly taking O-levels before the policy change, there remained a sorting of pupils by their academic ability, with a Level 1 CSE equivalent to an O-level pass. However, GCSEs meant that each pupil across England, Wales, and Northern Ireland had a more equal chance to demonstrate their ability within the standardised system of assessment. Inequalities in attainment changed in response. Girls, for example, extended their advantage over boys in

most subjects, except for Physics and Mathematics. Ethnic minorities also tended to do better than they had before and, although the gap between Afro-Caribbean pupils and white pupils widened, the attainment of each minority group increased on pre-1988 levels. The rising fortunes of girls and ethnic minorities has in part been attributed to the initial emphasis on coursework in GCSE assessment, though these trends continued when coursework was limited in 1991. GCSEs also narrowed the educational attainment gap based on social and economic class.

Secondly, the aspirations of teenagers rose. The opportunity to take GCSEs for all meant that they had a higher starting base than their parents, especially if their parents did not attend grammar schools, and having GCSEs became an expectation. The benchmark also contributed to this, with schools and many parents emphasising the importance of achieving five GCSE 'passes' for their teenagers' futures. More pupils aspired to and participated in further and higher education, which was increasingly beneficial in an evolving labour market that was moving towards service jobs, following increasing deindustrialisation. However, there remains the question of whether the labour market adjusted to educational qualifications, or vice-versa. There were also some constraints on aspiration. Inequalities in aspirations continued; for instance, pupils of lower socio-economic backgrounds still did not believe that more traditionally academic careers were 'for them'. But aspirations rose across all backgrounds. In some subjects, students were placed in different tiers, influencing which examination paper they took and capping the highest grade they could achieve. Before they sat their examinations, some pupils knew they could not attain an A or A*.

Thirdly, GCSEs were high-stakes exams, which had large consequences for the future careers and identities of sixteen-year-olds. They were often viewed as passports into the workforce, and increasingly gained cultural, as well as economic, recognition as an important milestone. CSEs never obtained this recognition, neither among employers nor the population-at-large. Teenagers were aware of this and often felt pressure from their parents and teachers. This changing landscape also involved greater stress, with more homework and coursework demands outside of school hours. In response, though, many pupils viewed their relationship with school as more transactional, where they attended school and were taught in exchange for being able to perform well in their GCSEs – a tool that allowed them to do ‘well’ after they left.

Finally, GCSEs meant pupils were able to do more subjects than they had previously been able to do. The framework encouraged studying a wider range of subjects, where pupils chose four additional subjects to those made compulsory by the National Curriculum. What pupils did in their GCSEs had a significant influence on their future lives and careers, too, as, if they did not study something at GCSE, it would be unlikely that they could study it after sixteen, ultimately meaning they could not break into a job in a related field. Many young people who had aspired to do science, for example, were prevented or discouraged from studying the sciences at A-level or beyond because they had done a Double Award, as most GCSE students did. This was as opposed to studying individual sciences in more depth, as was more likely at O-level. More students also pursued vocational routes which, while these qualifications never reached parity of esteem with A-levels, contributed to an unprecedented number of teenagers staying in education beyond sixteen.

GCSEs were introduced in a changing educational landscape where people in Britain were increasingly attending school for larger proportions of their lives. From 1972, the ROSLA to sixteen meant that more pupils stayed in school for longer, even if this was sometimes met with doubt from those who did not expect school to help them into employment or to improve their outcomes. More secondary modern schools had been entering their pupils for O-levels, which allowed them to gain qualifications deemed valuable by employers, opening the opportunity to either progress to further education or service occupations. Most pupils now attended comprehensive schools, which meant that most pupils were no longer separated into academic and non-academic schools when they left primary school, which meant, in theory, that seventy-five per cent of the population could not attend grammar schools.³⁷⁶ It is also worth noting that more parents than ever before had their own experience of secondary school, which had only become free for all children up to age fifteen from 1944. For those taking the first set of GCSEs, whose parents were likely to have been born from the late 1940s, it is likely that their parents had experienced secondary school until age fifteen.³⁷⁷ Their grandparents, on the other hand, would not have experienced compulsory secondary education and would have been less likely to view school as important or relevant to their lives. GCSEs boosted the number of children staying on beyond the leaving age of sixteen, which rose rapidly in the late 1980s.³⁷⁸ This was

³⁷⁶ The bipartite system intended for the 'top' twenty-five per cent of students to attend grammar schools based on the eleven-plus examination, but the number that attended grammar schools from the late 1940s was closer to forty per cent. See Peter Mandler, Chris Jeppesen and Laura Carter, 'Briefing paper: Grammar Schools', *University of Cambridge*, January 2018, p. 1.

³⁷⁷ Pupils taking the first set of GCSE assessments in summer 1988 would have most likely been born between September 1971 and August 1972. The average age of having a first-born child in the 1970s was twenty-three years, as in 'Milestones: journeying through modern life', *Office for National Statistics*, 8 April 2024, last accessed 18 May 2025, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/articles/milestonesjourneyingthroughmodernlife/2024-04-08#:~:text=Age%2029:%20Having%20a%20first,in%202020%2C%20it%20was%2029>. Using this average, the average mother of a child would have been born in 1948 or 1949, meaning they would have largely experienced free and compulsory secondary education.

³⁷⁸ Bolton, 'Education: Historical Statistics', p. 10.

because the qualifications were seen as more important than O-levels and CSEs were and, crucially, enabled teenagers to progress to further education. Many GCSE candidates would not have had this opportunity if they had been in school in the 1970s or early 1980s, so it shifted education imaginaries.

This study provides various original contributions to the literature. Firstly, it is the first archival study into the politics of examinations and, specifically, GCSEs. Historical studies have explored how schools were experienced in the earlier twentieth century, though generally end in the 1980s. Most pieces of the earlier period, too, have been written by contemporary actors such as teachers who had first-hand experiences of the policies, making these accounts more prone to their individual experiences. However, this study breaks from this trend and begins to offer a broader insight into how this policy change impacted pupils, teachers, and conceptions of education. It also adds new material from the *TES* archives, government papers, and teaching unions to the historiography, synthesising this with the existing sociological research. This is important for a wider understanding of education policy and how children and pupils responded to policy change.

Secondly, it identifies turning points after 1986 that impacted how GCSEs played out in secondary schools across Britain. These most notably include: the constraints placed on the proportion of assessment that could be done through coursework as opposed to examinations from 1991; the introduction of the A* grade in 1994; and the introduction of BTECs in secondary education from the early 2000s. It shows that GCSEs were strongly tied to employment prospects and how policy was shaped by industry, including how valuable the qualifications were in the eyes of employers. It also looked to where vocational

qualifications were integrated in this system of assessment. These intervene in debates over how educational reform should happen, the politics of aspirations, and the limits of meritocracy.

Thirdly, by analysing exam performance between 1986 and 2003, it adds to increasing efforts to understand change in a relatively new period of modern British history. For example, it explores an increasing culture of testing in education and the wider welfare state, including emphasis on notions of choice, standards, and accountability. This is coupled with how the relationship between academic evidence, on the ground experience of schools, and politics and policy merge and manifest in different experiences of secondary education. It also looks to how New Labour continued the policies of the preceding Conservative governments, perhaps indicating that the politics of testing was an area where New Labour proved to be an 'accommodation' of Thatcherism. Finally, it assesses how these government policies impacted the people it affected, giving voice to pupils and teachers, who have been under-represented in these debates.

However, this study is limited and should be built on. For example, the period ends in 2003, and there were considerable developments in secondary education beyond this point. The Coalition government, for example, introduced new policies such as the Ebacc, which emphasised 'core' subjects, and the move to a numerical grading system, 9-1 instead of A*-G, from 2017.³⁷⁹ Asking questions about how this influenced schools in the 2000s and 2010s would be insightful for contemporary policymaking, perhaps including the extent to which

³⁷⁹ For more on the 9-1 grading system, see: 'Guide to GCSE Results for England, 2017', *Ofqual*, 24 August 2017, last accessed 18 May 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/guide-to-gcse-results-for-england-2017>.

teaching became narrower and teachers taught ‘to the test’.³⁸⁰ There could also be a greater focus on specific facets of secondary schools, for instance teachers. This study has found that students took school more seriously and were in education for longer than ever before, and this could be built on to ask how this impacted the professional lives and identities of their teachers. Historians working on earlier periods, such as Peter Cunningham and Philip Gardner, have explored the working lives and classroom experiences of teachers, but these questions have been left largely unstudied for the later twentieth century.³⁸¹

Understanding the changing landscape of education and childhood in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries is important for policymakers today. In 2024, for example, 667,340 students took GCSE examinations.³⁸² This is also in the context of a Curriculum and Assessment Review, which aims to improve the relevance of the curriculum to young people’s lives and futures.³⁸³ Increasing reports have explored the impact of testing children at ages seven, eleven, fourteen, and sixteen, which has happened since 1988, and Kenneth Baker has even called for the abolition of GCSEs, despite being the Secretary of State to introduce them.³⁸⁴ The debate will continue into the mid-twenty-first century, so it is

³⁸⁰ Discussion of the idea of ‘teaching to the test’ has increased in the 2010s, as in: Katherine Sellgren, ‘Teaching to the test gives “hollow understanding”’, *BBC News*, 11 October 2017; Katherine Sellgren, ‘Ofsted admits adding to the “teach-to-the-test mentality”’, *BBC News*, 18 September 2018; Richard Vaughan, UK among world’s worst for “teaching to the test”, research finds’, *TES*, 18 December 2015.

³⁸¹ Peter Cunningham and Philip Gardner, *Becoming Teachers: Texts and Testimonies, 1907-1950* (London: Woburn Press, 2014).

³⁸² ‘Infographics for GCSE results, 2024’, *Ofqual*, 22 August 2024, last accessed 18 May 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/infographic-gcse-results-2024/infographics-for-gcse-results-2024-accessible>.

³⁸³ For a summary of the Curriculum and Assessment Review to date, see ‘Curriculum and Assessment Review: Interim Report’, *Department for Education*, 18 March 2025, accessed 18 May 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/curriculum-and-assessment-review-interim-report>.

³⁸⁴ Baker, ‘I introduced GCSEs in the 1980s – but now it’s time to scrap them’.

imperative to have an understanding of how GCSEs have been experienced since their conception.

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³⁸⁵ The distinction between primary and secondary sources is arbitrary in this study, so the bibliography has been organised according to: archival material; newspapers and magazines; printed sources; and digital sources.

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