

# The Impact of GCSE Reforms: Policy, Impact, and Implications

## Background

The General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) is the main form of academic qualification taken by most 15–16 year-olds in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Over the past decade, policy has pushed for higher academic rigour [1], a return to linear exams in many subjects [2], and performance measures such as the English Baccalaureate (Ebacc) and Progress 8 [3], which influence curriculum choices.

The last few years have seen several notable policy shifts, including a national focus on improving numeracy and literacy [4], the reintroduction of more demanding specifications [3], and closer alignment with progression to A-Levels or employment [5]. However, this has caused widespread debate about the balance between challenging assessments and student well-being [6], equitable access [7], and teacher workload [8].

The most recent exam cycle has reinforced headline concerns, with weak resit outcomes in Maths and English [9], persistent socio-economic and regional attainment gaps [10], evidence of subject reductions in schools due to cost and teacher shortages [11], and continuing divergence in attainment between the private and state sectors [10].

## Key Issues

**Resits:** Compulsory resits for students who do not achieve grade 4 in English and Maths have low pass rates for many [9], with many students retaking exams without any grade improvements, raising questions about the resit policy's impact on learner progression.

**Staff Shortages:** Shortages of specialist staff, notably in physics [12], languages [13], and computer science [14], are driving schools to narrow GCSE choices and ration practical elements of courses [11], limiting students' access to a broad and balanced curriculum.

**Financial Barriers:** Costs, such as field trips, associated with some subjects discourage uptake by low-income pupils [15] and can shrink GCSE choice, creating entry barriers in subjects like geography and music, where additional expenses can be unavoidable [16].

## Overview

- ◆ GCSE reforms are under scrutiny due to poor outcomes from compulsory resits, growing equity concerns, and teacher shortages.
- ◆ Financial barriers and budget pressures are narrowing subject choice and disproportionately affecting disadvantaged students.
- ◆ International evidence points to the benefits of diversified pathways, teacher investment, and reduced reliance on single high-stakes exams.
- ◆ Policy debate centres on balancing rigour, fairness, and flexibility to support learner progression while maintaining high standards.

**Attainment Gaps:** Socio-economic, regional, and school-type attainment gaps are sizable [10], with prominent variation in average pass rates [17], reflecting persistent inequalities in access to resources, teaching quality, and wider opportunities for learning [18].

**Exam Pressures:** Reliance on terminal, exam-based assessments [1], combined with heavy timetables and extensive content coverage [2], places pressure on students and teachers and has prompted calls for assessment reform [19] and a review of the EBacc's role [20] [21].

**SEN Fairness:** Robust, timely statistics on access arrangements and accommodations are needed to monitor fairness and SEN provision [22]; however, some official datasets have been delayed or re-published [23].

**Recent Reforms:** Recent changes, such as the introduction of formula sheets in STEM [24], signal a move to reduce procedural load in exams, although implementation details and their impact are still under review [25].

## International Comparisons

**Finland:** Finland emphasises fewer high-stakes external exams, strong teacher autonomy and robust initial teacher education. Outcomes suggest high baseline literacy and numeracy [26] with lower testing intensity [27].

**Germany:** Many German states operate a tracked secondary school system [28], combined with strong vocational pathways such as apprenticeships; this structure reduces reliance on a single terminal qualification to determine students' future education and career opportunities.

# The Impact of GCSE Reforms: Policy, Impact, and Implications

*Various:* Several jurisdictions, such as Queensland (Australia) [29] and Hong Kong [30], blend school-based assessment with external moderation and offer multiple pathways, supporting flexible progression and reducing the stakes of a single set of exams.

## Stakeholder Perspectives

*Teachers and School Leaders:* School staff report concerns about workload [8], marking pressure [31], and high-stakes accountability tied to narrow performance outcomes [32], with many reporting constrained curriculum choices due to staffing and budget pressures [11]. There is support among this group for more formative assessment and reduced exam burden [33], with calls for targeted recruitment and retention incentives in shortage subjects, alongside additional professional development for teachers adapting to new specifications.

*Exam Boards:* Exam boards emphasise the need for clear, consistent specifications and rigorous standards, with support for measured changes that reduce unnecessary memorisation while protecting comparability across assessments [34]. Boards caution against frequent or large-scale qualification changes without piloting and evaluation [35].

*Students and Parents:* Students and parents broadly support reforms that focus on fairness and reduce repeated high-stakes failure, with many resenting compulsory resits [9]. Concerns are raised around the narrowing of subject choice and financial barriers [16]. Views on assessment change are mixed, with some wanting alternatives to terminal exams, while others value national comparability for university and employer signalling.

*Professional Bodies (e.g., The British Academy, National Education Association):* Professional bodies are advocating for subject-specific protections, such as practical assessments, and are calling for investment in teacher supply and for assessments that test disciplinary thinking, not memorisation skills, recommending careful evaluation of the resit policy [36].

## Policy Considerations

Based on stakeholder and expert input, the following policy options are highlighted:

*Reform Resit Policy:* Options to reform the resit policy include replacing compulsory full resits with modular or competency-based pathways, introducing a targeted post-16 bridging qualification, or providing assessment points earlier in subjects. These approaches could better align assessment with students' learning needs, reduce demoralisation, and support higher long-term progression; however, they may introduce complexity, involve transitional costs, and create design challenges.

*Secure Teacher Supply:* Ensuring sufficient teachers in shortage subjects requires targeted bursaries, managed overseas recruitment, return-to-teaching incentives, and long-term investment in initial teacher education. Progress can be measured through vacancy rates by subject, retention at regular intervals, and regional coverage of specialist provision.

*Remove Financial Barriers:* Financial barriers can be addressed through ring-fenced funding for essential subject costs within the pupil premium, statutory limits on voluntary contributions, and centrally funded bursaries for subject resources. Uptake rates among disadvantaged pupils in previously costly subjects provide a key indicator of success.

*Adjust Assessment Balance:* Policies to adjust assessment balance include piloting increased teacher-assessed components, reducing exam volume, redistributing assessment points across Key Stage 4, and continuing the evidence-based roll-out of support materials. Effectiveness can be evaluated via comparability studies, student well-being surveys, and post-16 transition outcomes.

*Expand Pathways:* Expanding high-quality technical qualifications and vocational routes ensures that GCSE performance is not the sole determinant of post-16 progression. These pathways should be linked to employer engagement and apprenticeships. Success can be tracked through progression to Level 3, apprenticeships, and employer satisfaction.

*Prioritise Equity Funding:* Targeted funding should be allocated to underperforming regions and schools. Progress can be assessed through narrowing of attainment gaps and improved regional progress scores.

# The Impact of GCSE Reforms: Policy, Impact, and Implications

## References

- [1] M. Gove, "GCSE and A level reform," 9 April 2014. [Online]. Available: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/gcse-and-a-level-reform>. [Accessed 05 September 2025].
- [2] Ofqual, "Get the facts: GCSE reform," 26 January 2018. [Online]. Available: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/get-the-facts-gcse-and-a-level-reform/get-the-facts-gcse-reform>. [Accessed 05 September 2025].
- [3] S. Burgess and D. Thomson, "Making The Grade," Sutton Trust, London, 2019.
- [4] Department for Education, "Our focus on literacy and numeracy – what it means in practice," G, 16 February 2022. [Online]. Available: <https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2022/02/our-focus-on-literacy-and-numeracy-what-it-means-in-practice/>. [Accessed 05 September 2025].
- [5] M. Gove, *Ofqual policy steer letter: reforming Key Stage 4 qualifications*, London: Gov.UK, 2013.
- [6] S. Weale, "Stress and serious anxiety: how the new GCSE is affecting mental health," *The Guardian*, pp. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/may/17/stress-and-serious-anxiety-how-the-new-gcse-is-affecting-mental-health>, 17 May 2018.
- [7] J. McArthur, "GCSE results 2023: how the qualification is failing disadvantaged young people," *The Conversation*, pp. <https://theconversation.com/gcse-results-2023-how-the-qualification-is-failing-disadvantaged-young-people-211804>, 23 August 2023.
- [8] R. Adams, "Teachers in England and Wales facing 'unmanageable' workload, survey finds," *The Guardian*, pp. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2023/apr/03/teachers-stress-workload-survey-national-education-union>, 3 April 2023.
- [9] A. Nagesh, "Record numbers of GCSE results were resits - are we in a 'resit crisis'?", *BBC News*, p. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cpdj5y98302o>, 21 August 2025.
- [10] The Sutton Trust, "Sutton Trust response to GCSE Results Day 2025," 21 August 2025. [Online]. Available: <https://www.suttontrust.com/news-opinion/all-news-opinion/sutton-trust-response-to-gcse-results-day-2025>. [Accessed 5 September 2025].
- [11] S. Weale, "Half of England's state secondaries forced to cut staff in budget squeeze, poll finds," *The Guardian*, pp. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2025/apr/10/england-secondary-schools-staff-budget-cuts>, 10 April 2025.
- [12] Institute of Physics, "The physics teacher shortage and addressing it through the 3Rs: Retention, Recruitment and Retraining (England)," Institute of Physics, London, 2025.
- [13] M. Bowler, "The Languages Crisis: Arresting decline," Higher Education Policy Institute, Oxford, 2025.
- [14] Teach First, "Teacher shortages deny nearly a third of poorer pupils' access to computer science A-level," 8 May 2025. [Online]. Available: <https://www.teachfirst.org.uk/press-release/missing-teachers>. [Accessed 5 September 2025].
- [15] Child Poverty Action Group, "Priced out of school: how lack of money prevents young people from attending school," Child Poverty Action Group, London, 2025.
- [16] S. Weale, "Pupils in England from low-income families 'bounced out' of costlier GCSEs," *The Guardian*, pp. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2025/sep/01/pupils-in-england-from-low-income-families-bounced-out-of-costlier-gcsees>, 1 September 2025.
- [17] Ofqual, "Qualification results in England: summer 2025," 21 August 2025. [Online]. Available: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/qualification-results-in-england-summer-2025/qualification-results-in-england-summer-2025-accessible>. [Accessed 5 September 2025].
- [18] Department for Education, "Improving educational outcomes for disadvantaged children," National Audit Office, London, 2025.
- [19] S. Weale, "'They are making young people ill': is it time to scrap GCSEs?," *The Guardian*, pp. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2025/jun/11/they-are-making-young-people-ill-is-it-time-to-scrap-gcsees>, 11 June 2025.

# The Impact of GCSE Reforms: Policy, Impact, and Implications

- [20] L. Lees, "Curriculum Review: The case for broadening - not abolishing - EBacc," *The British Academy*, pp. <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/news/curriculum-review-ebacc-shape>, 21 March 2025.
- [21] J. Roberts, "Number of GCSE students taking 3 non-EBacc subjects halves," *tes magazine*, pp. <https://www.tes.com/magazine/news/general/number-gcse-students-taking-3-non-ebacc-subjects-halves>, 21 March 2025.
- [22] C. V. Rodeiro and S. Macinska, "Equity or unfair advantage? Impact of access arrangements on students' performance," Cambridge University Press & Assessment, Cambridge, 2021.
- [23] Ofqual, "Ofqual withdraws access arrangements statistics," 17 July 2025. [Online]. Available: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/ofqual-withdraws-access-arrangements-statistics>. [Accessed 5 September 2025].
- [24] Ofqual, "Proposed changes to the assessment of mathematics, physics and combined science GCSEs in 2025, 2026 and 2027," 13 November 2024. [Online]. Available: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/proposed-changes-to-the-assessment-of-mathematics-physics-and-combined-science-gcse-in-2025-2026-and-2027>. [Accessed 5 September 2025].
- [25] F. Whittaker, "GCSEs: Exam aids to remain for three more years," *Schools Week*, pp. <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/gcse-exam-aids-to-remain-for-three-more-years/>, 3 October 2024.
- [26] OECD, "Do Adults Have the Skills They Need to Thrive in a Changing World?," OECD Publishing, Paris, 2023.
- [27] Career Teachers, "What the UK Education System Can Learn From Finland," 5 September 2025. [Online]. Available: <https://careerteachers.co.uk/what-the-uk-education-system-can-learn-from-finland>. [Accessed 5 September 2025].
- [28] M. Henniges, C. Traini and C. Kleinert, "Tracking and Sorting in the German Educational System," Leibniz Institute for Educational Trajectories, Bamberg, 2019.
- [29] Queensland Curriculum & Assessment Authority, "Externally moderated school-based assessment," Queensland Curriculum & Assessment Authority, South Brisbane, 2018.
- [30] Wikipedia, "Independent enquiry study," 5 September 2025. [Online]. Available: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Independent\\_enquiry\\_study](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Independent_enquiry_study). [Accessed 5 September 2025].
- [31] T. Rogers, "We must end this obsession with marking," *tes magazine*, pp. <https://www.tes.com/magazine/archive/we-must-end-obsession-marking>, 2 November 2018.
- [32] S. Booth, "'Stressful and exhausting': Ofqual report exposes teacher grade woes," *Schools Week*, pp. <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/stressful-and-exhausting-ofqual-report-exposes-teacher-grade-woes/>, 12 July 2022.
- [33] S. Earle, "We need formative assessment now more than ever," 5 September 2025. [Online]. Available: <https://my.chartered.college/research-hub/we-need-formative-assessment-now-more-than-ever/>. [Accessed 5 September 2025].
- [34] C. Jadhav, "How do we achieve fairness in exams?," 26 April 2019. [Online]. Available: <https://ofqual.blog.gov.uk/2019/04/26/how-do-we-achieve-fairness-in-exams>. [Accessed 5 September 2025].
- [35] P. E. Newton, "Maintaining Standards," Ofqual, Coventry, 2020.
- [36] The British Academy, "British Academy response to the Department for Education's Curriculum and Assessment Review Call for Evidence: General response," The British Academy, London, 2024.