

3. The following article by Graeme Paton, the Education Editor of the Daily Telegraph appeared in the paper on Tuesday 12th May 2011 and deals with concerns about the effectiveness of some vocational courses.

'Dead end' vocational courses to be barred from exam league tables

By Graeme Paton, Education Editor

UP to a third of vocational courses could effectively be cut under a government overhaul of qualifications for teenagers.

Ministers will step in to prevent pupils opting for "dead end" courses that fail to prepare them for higher education or the world of work.

The Coalition will today outline plans to ban many of these qualifications from official school or college league tables – stopping heads pushing pupils on to courses simply to inflate their ranking.

Qualifications such as a Certificate in Personal Effectiveness, which has previously been criticised by ministers, can be worth the same as a GCSE.

One sample paper asked pupils to "show that you can obtain information on a topic you are interested in" using telephones, the internet, radio or television and newspapers.

Ofqual, the exams regulator, will also be told to take a tougher stance towards exam standards to ensure many poor-quality courses fail to win state accreditation. It will enable more money to be spent on higher level apprenticeships.

Under Labour, the number of vocational courses on offer to teenagers more

Unequal Maths damaged by early GCSE pupils

Maths education is being damaged because increasing numbers of schools are entering pupils for their GCSE up to two years early, experts said today.

Head teachers adapting to a target-driven culture are putting the interests of their school's above those of youngsters, the Advisory Committee on Mathematics Education said. It is calling for the Government to ensure all pupils have maths lessons up to the age of 16.

The number of pupils taking a maths GCSE early has risen from 5 per cent in 2008 to nearly 11 per cent last year.

Many of the pupils resit the exams to gain a C grade then stop studying maths, hindering their university prospects.

than doubled. In 1996-97, some 2,254 different qualifications could be taken, but by 2009-10 the total had risen to 5,620.

A report earlier this year by Alison Wolf, professor of public sector management at King's College London, estimated that between a quarter and a third of teenagers were stuck on vocational courses that

added little or nothing to their future career. Today, ministers are set to formally accept many of her findings as they announce a shake-up of vocational qualifications for 14 to 19-year-olds.

It is not yet known how many courses the Government will "blacklist" but up to a third could be barred from league tables or lose vital funding. A Key Skills course in Improving Own Learning and Performance, worth three-quarters of a GCSE, is likely to face questions.

It shows students how to plan and run their own education. They are told to identify learning styles that suit them best, including using pictures and diagrams, reading, or "doing something practical".

The Coalition will also:

□ Announce that all students should continue studying English and maths up to the age of 18 if they fail to get a decent GCSE in the subjects at 16;

□ Reform GCSE league tables to stop schools focusing on "borderline" pupils who are just missing out on C grades.

Last night, a government source said: "Under Labour millions of children left school with inadequate English and maths. The Coalition will ensure all children have the skills they need and businesses value."

4. Below is an extract from an article which appeared in the Daily Telegraph on Friday 13th May 2011 about examination standards in England and Wales.

By Graeme Paton, Education Editor

THE exams standards watchdog is to address fears that GCSEs and A-levels "aren't what they used to be".

Ofqual will announce an investigation into claims that the tests taken by hundreds of thousands of youngsters every year are too easy.

The inquiry, the largest the watchdog has carried out, is expected to cover annual rises in grades, the perceived difficulty of qualifications, the range of courses and commercial competition between exam boards.

The regulator has already been asked to look into the issue of exam trails and how tests compare with those carried out overseas. Gloria Stacey, the regulator's new chief executive, told *The Daily Telegraph* that "an objective and constructive debate" on the state of the exam and qualifications system was needed.

The comments come as up to 800,000 pupils across England, Wales and Northern Ireland prepare to start GCSE and A-level exams next week.

Last year, the number of A* and A grades awarded at GCSE increased by almost 23 per cent – the 22nd annual rise and a new tripling in the number of top marks awarded since 1988.

A record 27 per cent of A-level students gained A* or As.

The year-on-year rise has prompted claims that tests are less demanding and schools are playing the system to maximise pupils' scores.

Michael Gove, the Education Secretary, delivered a fresh warning yesterday over the exams system, saying "slumping down has got to stop".

The comment came in response to a report that suggested that up to a third of teenagers are taking worthless vocational qualifications that fail to lead to a good job or higher education.

In her first interview since taking over at Ofqual, Ms Stacey said she wanted to hold a review of exam and qualification standards.

This would coincide with government plans to give the watchdog extra powers to raise the standards of qualifications next year.

It is expected to start after the summer exam season.

"We do a lot of work here to maintain standards on all the key qualifica-

tions; across the board on subject matters and subject levels," she said. "But still there is a public concern over standards and a feeling that things aren't what they used to be."

"Well, I would like to understand that better and actually bring some evidence to the debate as well. I want an objective and constructive debate."

"We need to be firm and fair and we really want to focus on the big ticket items; things people are truly concerned about and where regulatory action could actually make a difference to public confidence."

The exams system has faced repeated criticism in recent years over claims of a fall in the standard of questions and the content of courses.

Research by Durham University has suggested that A-levels – the gold standard exam taken by some 250,000 teenagers each year – are two grades easier than they were 20 years ago.

Concerns over standards have been fuelled by the new Government. Mr Gove has already criticised the number of resits taken by pupils, warning that it risks devaluing the exams system.

He asked Ofqual to conduct a separate inquiry into the issue as well as analysing the value of vocational qualifications and setting a benchmark for English exams against those elsewhere in the world.

The latest inquiry will look into the standard of exams and qualifications over time alongside other issues, such as the commercial competition between exam boards and the use of modular GCSEs – breaking qualifications down into bite-sized units that students can retake to boost their scores.

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Alarm over falling standards of A-levels and GCSEs

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