

# Sociology Factsheet



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## Higher Standards in Education?

The last few British governments have focused their attention on improving standards in British schools.

Tony Blair in 2001 stated “Our top priority was, is and always will be education, education, education. To overcome decades of neglect and make Britain a learning society, we need to develop the talents and raise the ambitions of all our young people.”



Since then, governments have continued to look at ways of improving the standards of education. How successful have the policies been?

There is a lot of information available on the changes within the education system but this Factsheet will look at the recent changes within education – changes which have been introduced with the intention of improving standards.

**Exam Hint:** Using up-to-date information in the exam shows the examiner that you are aware of current issues and policies. This is important when showing that you are aware of how changes within society affect education and the individuals within the education system

Since the 1944 education act there have been many changes to improve the education system in Britain.

**Activity:** Make sure you know the key changes within education over the past 30 years. Make a list of the changes that have occurred within education starting with the changes introduced by the 1988 Education Reform Act.

This Factsheet will focus on the Education policies since 2010 when the coalition government was formed by the Conservative government and the Liberal Democrat Party.

Two key changes brought into education at this time were:

1. The structure and grading of GCSEs.
2. The structure of A levels.

### 1. The Structure and Grading of GCSEs Changed

#### GCSE Grades

GCSE stands for General Certificate of Secondary Education. GCSEs were introduced in 1986, replacing the previous O level and CSE systems by merging them together.

GCSE examinations are taken by most pupils at the end of Key Stage 4 (Year 11) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. GCSEs provide a form of assessment, with pupils being awarded a grade based on how well they have performed in each subject. GCSEs have changed and evolved over the years.

Up until 2017, candidates were graded in all subjects A\*– G (with U being the result given to those whose papers were ‘ungraded’). From 2017, the grades awarded for GCSEs taken by Year 11 pupils in England started to change to grades 9–1. English and Maths were the first subjects to change to the new grading system, followed by other subjects in 2018 and 2019.

The grades awarded to pupils taking GCSEs in Wales (state schools) and Northern Ireland will continue to be graded A\*–G, but whether this will continue or change in light of the revisions made in England is still being debated.



#### GCSE Expectations

GCSE also became more demanding, with pupils in England spending more class time studying each subject, especially English and Maths. Prior to these changes, secondary schools in England spend on average 116 hours per year teaching mathematics, which international studies show is far less time than others, e.g. Australia teaches 143 hours of mathematics and Singapore teach 138 hours a year of mathematics.

The new English language course has increased the proportion of marks awarded for accurate use of spelling, punctuation, and grammar. It will award 20% of exam marks for spelling, punctuation, and grammar, compared with 12% under the current requirements.

The physical education (PE) GCSE will now emphasise the use of data to evaluate physical activity.



The drama GCSE will now require students to understand texts and performance in their social, cultural, and historical context.

The food preparation and nutrition GCSE will teach students about the scientific and nutritional properties of ingredients



These few examples show that there are higher expectations in the new GCSEs. They demand more from all students and provide further challenge for those aiming to achieve top grades.

**Activity:** Do some research on some GCSEs offered in your school and find out what the new specifications expect from students.

#### GCSE Structure

The exams themselves are also changing. The government planned to make them more ‘rigorous’. Michael Gove, Education Minister, commented in 2013:

“The people in this country deserve an education system that can compete with the best in the world, a system which sets and achieves high expectations. These reforms are essential to achieve this goal.

By making GCSEs more demanding, more fulfilling, and more stretching we can give our young people the broad, deep and balanced education which will equip them to win in the global race.”

GCSE qualifications in England will now test students on final written examinations, which replace modular courses and classroom assessments.

**Activity:** In the statement above, Michael Gove believed that the new GCSEs would increase standards in education.

Some politicians and educationalists believe that the new structure will enable the brightest students to reach the very top grades as well as giving the lower achieving students more to aim for. Others feel that making GCSEs more demanding will affect the achievements of lower ability students.

Add some more positive and negative points to the table below.

Positive aspects of the change	Negative aspects of the change
Enables the brightest students to achieve top grades	Too demanding for lower ability students

Using the information you have added to the table, write a conclusion about whether standards in education will improve as a result of these changes to GCSEs.

## 2. The Structure of GCE (Advanced) Levels Changed

The A-level system was changed and two-year A-level courses were reintroduced.

A-levels are the traditional qualifications that are offered by schools and colleges for students aged between 16 and 19.

The structure of A-levels has changed in recent years. In 1989, Advanced Supplementary (AS) awards were introduced; they were intended to broaden the subjects a pupil studied post-16, and were to complement rather than be part of a pupil's A level studies. Initially, a pupil would study four subjects at AS level and three subjects at A-level.

A-levels evolved gradually from a two-year linear course with an examination at the end, to a modular course between the late 1980s and 2000. By the year 2000, there was a strong educational reason to standardise the examination and offer greater breadth to pupils through modules.

Curriculum 2000 was introduced in September 2000, with the first new examinations taken in January and June of the following year.

The latest reforms for A-level (2015) involved the qualification being divided into two – AS and A-level.

The main features of the new qualifications are:

- Assessment will be mainly by exam, with other types of assessment used only where they are needed to test essential skills.
- AS and A-levels will be assessed at the end of the course. AS assessments will typically take place after 1 year's study and A-levels after 2. The courses will no longer be divided into modules and there will be no exams in January.
- AS and A-levels will be decoupled – this means that AS results will no longer count towards an A-level.
- The content for the new A-levels has been reviewed and updated. Universities played a greater role in this for the new qualifications than they did previously.

The first results for the new AS levels were in 2016 for some subjects, and for the A-levels in 2017. Other subjects will follow this pattern in 2017 and 2018.

These changes have been implemented by the government in a bid to make A-levels a better preparation for university.



The most radical change is the abolition of the 'cram and forget' modular exam system introduced in 2000. Instead of taking standalone exams every six months, students will sit one set of papers at the end of their course, enabling them to draw on their whole two years of study. The new format is designed to improve analytical and argumentation skills, and better develop students for higher education. It should lead to a better understanding of the subject, rather than students simply learning for exam purposes.

However, some concerns have been raised that because students are required to study subjects in more depth, students may have a much narrower curriculum and may only study three A-level subjects rather than the four subjects studied previously.

### Activity:

Some politicians and educationalists believe that the new structure will enable the brightest students to develop analytical and argumentative skills to prepare them better for universities. Others feel that making A-levels more demanding will reduce the breadth of study for students.

Add some more positive and negative points to the table below:

Positive aspects of the change	Negative aspects of the change
Helps to develop analytical skills	Reduces the breadth of subjects students can study

Using the information that you have added to the table, write a conclusion about, in your opinion, whether standards in education will improve as a result of these changes to A levels.

It is too early to know at this stage whether these changes to the GCSE and A-level exams will improve standards. Data over the next few years will need to be gathered and analysed to come to a conclusion about whether standards have improved or not.

**Exam Hint:** Information in this Factsheet will be useful when answering questions on changes to the education system, for example:

Assess the claim that the main aim of education policies in recent years is to improve standards.

This question is asking you to assess/evaluate the statement, so it is important to look at both sides of the argument in your answer. Use the evidence in this Factsheet to assist your answer.

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