



MAKING *the* SWITCH

Could Britain's traditional GCSE exams be replaced? Some schools prefer alternative courses for students, discovers *Sally Jones*

King's High School, Warwick. An excited throng of festively dressed Year 11 girls and their parents walk along the red carpet into the school theatre, many nibbling popcorn, en route to a special performance. It may look like the premiere of some Hollywood blockbuster or a Prom night treat; it is in fact the school's gala showcase for one of its newly introduced alternatives to GCSEs. The audience watches, rapt, as several lively, thought-provoking films on different aspects of global citizenship, social justice or climate change are screened. All have been crafted by different students as part of their school-assessed qualification known as the Global Changemaker Programme.

The young film-makers' vivid faces tell their own story. The project has clearly sparked their imaginations, providing a welcome antidote to stressful hours spent imbibing and then regurgitating facts in an exam hall.

'It's brilliant,' enthuses 16-year-old Bethany. 'Making these films, we've had to research the stories behind real global issues on a deeper level than we've done ever before. It's been a massive eye-opener, discovering the

depth of problems some people are facing around the world – and exploring possible solutions to them.'

King's High is one of the growing number of independent schools questioning the value of GCSEs as an effective assessment tool and designing radical replacements. This was a trend pioneered by the progressive Hampshire school Bedales which since 2006 has cut back on the number of GCSEs its pupils take, replacing them with its own assessed courses. Both schools are members of the influential School Directed Courses Consortium, a group of state and independent schools united in trying to create a richer curriculum for their Year 10 and 11 pupils.

Unsurprisingly, this radical move has drawn stinging criticism from some traditionalists including London super-head Katharine Birbalsingh, who claims that the move allows elite schools to 'mark their own homework' and avoid comparisons with the stellar GCSE results of some outstanding state schools. However, the initiative has proved so popular with pupils and parents that Bedales recently announced that it intends to go further,

with students taking just English and Maths at GCSE, since for some employers, these are non-negotiable. The youngsters will take around eight other courses, some in traditional subjects, others in unique ones devised by the school, such as 'Outdoor Work' which combines agricultural skills and science. These, as at present, will be assessed via a mixture of coursework, vivas, exams, project work and teamwork, earning grades on a 1-9 scale, like GCSEs, with the results moderated by external examiners.

Latymer Upper in West London, likewise an early convert to school-directed studies such as their externally accredited World Perspectives course, is following suit, believing that GCSEs reward rote learning rather than deep or original thinking. The current Year 7s will be the first to sit just two GCSEs in four years' time, alongside long courses to replace the GCSEs, supplemented by short interdisciplinary courses in 10-week blocks, covering several new areas including AI, coding, climate change, indigenous cultures and literature in translation. These will be assessed not just by written exams but where appropriate, presentations, vivas, open-book assessments or group activities.

'Teaching to a test or jumping through hoops and mark schemes stifles creativity and original thought,' says Latymer Upper's deputy head Ian Emerson, 'and it certainly does not stretch the most able. By their very nature, GCSEs do not prepare pupils for the more rigorous A-level syllabus or style of learning so by creating our long courses, encouraging research, independent learning and original thinking we think they will be much better served. They'll also be far stronger in the core skills that employers in the modern workplace need.'

Emerson points to the success of the school's Global Goals course for

their Year 9s, designed to produce 'citizens of the world' capable of working collaboratively and thinking 'outside the box'.

'Students who are shy or less confident learn to speak out and thrive in the group setting,' he explains. 'They run with ideas and present them in their marketplace at the end of the course. One Year 9 student presented a recycling solution to a parent working in that sector who said that the answer they proposed was not something he had previously considered. She was thrilled with the immediate feedback from this sector expert who went on to praise the Latymer marketplace and was deeply impressed with the students' enthusiasm and outcomes.'

Will Goldsmith, now head of Bedales, laid much of the groundwork for the move away from GCSEs when Director of Teaching and Learning at Latymer Upper. One of his main objections has always been the sheer amount of time spent on preparing for the exams.

'GCSEs cause vast interference and get in the way of proper teaching,' he says. 'If you add up all the time spent on revision and sitting the actual exams, it's the equivalent of two whole terms of learning. That's a third of the entire GCSE course, a huge percentage

of time in secondary school – and it's time that's not being taken up with learning but simply with drilling for these exams.'

'I also think it's important to limit the number of hours that students are allowed to be assessed for, both for their mental health and to enable us to take stock of what we're putting on 16-year-olds.'

With GCSEs currently playing a crucial role in university admissions, with potentially life-changing offers made or withheld mainly on the basis of a string of results, Goldsmith describes the exams as 'the tail that wags

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Pupils performing at St Pauls' Girls' School

PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES



Halter training cattle at Bedales



Creative class at Latymer Upper School

Alistair McConville, a former teacher at Bedales, is now leading the switch away from GCSEs at King Alfred School in north London. He, together with Sarah Fletcher, is one of the leaders of Rethinking Assessment, a consortium of educators from the independent and state sectors, employers, researchers and policy-makers. The group aims to break the stranglehold that the volume of high stakes public exams exerts on education, citing mental stress as a major drawback as the system means that a third of candidates fail. McConville relishes the positive reactions to his school's new internal English Literature course which 70 percent of the cohort have opted to take, with just 15 percent choosing the traditional GCSE.

'The difference is the choice of ways students get to express their understanding of the texts,' he explains. 'One of the books we've chosen is Meera Syal's 'Anita and Me' which is fascinating on multicultural life. Syal is also a parent at our school which gives the opportunity for engagements with her in person, and a deeper understanding of her methods. Our students can choose to write a recreative response to sections of text rather than a timed essay, for example taking a character and writing a piece in their voice.'

'All this encourages them to exercise imagination and write in literary style. Some even choose to respond orally – explaining their understanding of part of text to teacher as a recorded submission rather than typing it out. It's still at an early stage but it's great to see the teachers' excitement too. They feel liberated to shape the course and assessment and they've gone from scepticism and anxiety to exhilaration at being freed up to ply their trade to a high level.'

Rethinking Assessment believes that moving from a system based entirely on 8-10 GCSEs at 16 is an idea whose time has come. Although relatively few schools have yet to stick their heads above the parapet publicly, the group suggests that around 60 independent and state schools are seriously considering taking the plunge. For Philip Seal, deputy head (academic) of King's High School, Warwick, as for Alistair McConville, the greatest benefit is the intellectual excitement generated by flexible, imaginative courses designed to boost pupils' creativity and enjoyment.

'The effect on our students' wellbeing is a wonderful by-product of what we do, he said. 'But best of all, our kids are learning rich, wonderful, useful things that will genuinely equip them for their future lives, not just get the grades that will be used to siphon them off efficiently into different 'boxes'. If teaching is a moral imperative, not just a career, it's inspiring to think that we are teaching them things that enrich their lives.' ■

the educational dog.' Like many of his fellow-heads, he advocates a change to candidates being selected after A-level results, rather than before, thus making any exam at Year 11 far less high-stakes than at present.

St Paul's Girls' School in west London provides its own school-based courses in music, art, drama, art history, computing and creative technologies. Instead of taking GCSEs in those subjects, students complete a home-grown qualification that is externally moderated. The school's High Mistress Sarah Fletcher is outspoken about the shortcomings of the present public exam system and last January staged a cross-sector conference 'Next Generation Assessment – Planning for the Future', with ASCL [the Association of School and College Leaders], Edge Foundation, HMC and the campaigning group Rethinking Assessment, which resoundingly endorsed the importance of reform. Miss Fletcher is passionate about the need for stimulating topics and teaching to stretch even the brightest students, prepare them for the challenges of the modern world and restore a sense of joy in learning.

'Flexible content and rigorous, externally validated assessment enable us to adapt our teaching in response to the needs and interests of our students and to the challenges posed by a changing world,' she explains. 'Individual and group project work provide vehicles for complex problem solving and invite interdisciplinary thinking. Opportunities for collaborative activities, presentation, research and reflection enable a more personalised, nuanced learning journey.'

'So much is lost at KS4 [Years 10/11] that is creative, playful, stretching and engaging. It behoves us to do what we can to use these two precious and exciting teenage years to best pedagogical advantage.'