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**Warwick Mansell, education journalist and author of *Education by numbers, the tyranny of testing***

## The unquestioned rise of the exam empire

Twenty years ago children in most of the UK rarely encountered an external test. Now they shoulder the heaviest burden in the world. Is this what people want? And what is the impact on pupils’ experience of learning? **Warwick Mansell** searches for answers

This September, hundreds of thousands of Year 10 pupils will embark upon education’s equivalent of the Grand National.

The steeplechase* that lies between the more academic of them and university will feature many barriers, in the form of what may come to feel like an endless succession of exams. Those studying the new modular GCSEs, followed by A-levels, could be, at a very conservative estimate, sitting down in the exam hall 40 times between the age of 14 and 18. Even those not taking A-levels could experience 20 exams as part of their GCSEs alone, with these assessments spread

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throughout their two-year course.

Those parts of the UK operating the GCSE and A-level system – England, Wales and Northern Ireland – are, as far as I know, unique in the world in putting pupils through this much formal testing in the latter years of secondary school. But is it something that we, as a country, that teachers as a profession and that parents and our young people, as the ones experiencing it, actually want? Has it even been properly debated?

What astonishes me most, as an outsider to our education system – I am not a teacher or a parent – is that it seems to have developed in ways which can have a huge influence on the learning experience for pupils, but almost without meaningful discussion of what we want for them, or what the aims of the education system as a whole should be. A politicised process, in which proper discussion of these matters struggles to happen in the face of other considerations – what will improve exam results, what might produce the right headlines in advance of a general election or how policies fit with a particular ideology for how the public sector should be managed, for example – seems to dominate. I find this disturbing. Why does it happen this way? A more detailed look at recent reforms to the exams mechanism may provide some clues.

The GCSE and A-level system has changed dramatically since 2000, from a structure in which young people took exams in two batches, in the summer of Year 11 and Year 13, to the modern arrangements in which examining can now be almost continuous, throughout the final four years. Going further back, we have moved, in 20 years, from a structure in which children encountered few external exams to one in which their school horizons are dominated by national testing, followed by exams in Years 10 to 13.

The Curriculum 2000 changes, introduced from 2001, saw all A-levels moving from a ‘linear’ set of exams, in which assessment took place at the end of the two-year course, to a modular structure, with six papers. Three tended to be taken at the end of Year 12, and three at the end of Year 13, although it was also possible to be tested in the January of either year, with resits allowed.

Less discussed has been the change at GCSE. The picture is less uniform than at A-level, as some ‘linear’ versions do still exist, but essentially GCSE became a mainly modular qualification with the introduction of a new version of it in most subjects in September last year. This transition will be complete this September, with changes to English, maths and ICT GCSEs.

Most courses will now be modular, with pupils able to take papers throughout Years 10 and 11, or even earlier for some schools wanting to begin their GCSE work in Year 9. There are now exam sittings in November, January, March and May/June. On top of this, a new system of ‘controlled assessment’, which is replacing coursework at GCSE, will see pupils write up planned assignments under supervised, timed conditions at least once for most subjects, on top of their exams.

Some of these trends may be positive or negative, depending on your point of view. My surprise, though, is that the overall learning experience which follows has been so little discussed. In fact, the change from GCSE being a mainly linear to a mainly modular qualification was not even the subject of any meaningful consultation. I remember what happened vividly, having covered this subject as a reporter.

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, which oversaw the design of the new exams, never stated explicitly in consultation that it was preparing to usher in modular GCSEs. Instead, its consultation in 2007

included a question stating only that modular qualifications could 'enhance flexibility and choice', before asking whether any problems could arise from this. A further question asked whether it was a good idea that at least half of all GCSE courses should be linear. That was it. Yet this change is the biggest to have happened to this exam, taken by almost all pupils, in at least 15 years.

And it would appear to be the final act in creating an education system, at least for those in their latter years of secondary school, which is now completely dominated by exams. Pupils' time is spent preparing for them and taking them. Their textbooks and other learning resources are devoted to them (to the extent that one sixth-former recently told me at a conference that he had opted not to take French A-level because he wanted to learn French, not learn how to take an exam in French). And, crucially, teachers' and schools' achievements have become a function of them.

Many teachers and pupils may be in favour of, for example, a modular exam in particular subjects. But I think it is, at the very least, debatable whether, if asked, they would say that the best education system is one in which exams dominate pupils' educational experiences, in almost all subjects, for four years.

So why has it happened? Part of the answer might be revealed through a consideration of the arguments in favour and against modular exams.

On the positive side, it is argued that spreading modules throughout a course tends to help pupils, reducing pressure because they do not face one all-or-nothing assessment at the end. It gives them, potentially, several

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'goes' at each paper. It also gives them and their schools a better idea, earlier in the course, whether they are at risk of missing a grade. Less positively, there is the risk, in some subjects, that modular exams may break up the learning experience; make it more difficult to assess a pupil's synoptic understanding of a subject; and, crucially, that revising for and taking exams takes curriculum time away from teaching.

Both of these sets of arguments are coherent. Simplifying hugely, the first set could be summed up as advocating modular exams because they give pupils, and schools, more control over the process of achieving better results. The second set relate to reservations about the educational implications.

However, in the current educational climate, at least in England, I believe that improving the results is seen as what matters when decisions of this type are taken. Schools, the customers of exam boards which design courses to the regulator's outlines, are judged by results. The regulator itself is overseen by politicians whose policies are judged by the results they generate. In this scenario, purely educational considerations – and I am aware that modular exams can be defended on purely educational terms – struggle for a hearing.

There are other ways in which our education system has been manoeuvred, subtly, into becoming an examinations system, geared overwhelmingly to the production of rising grade statistics.

The effects of league tables and targets which centre on national test and exam results are well-known. Perhaps less so, to outsiders to education, is the role that Ofsted inspections can play. These are now very data-orientated. Guidance to inspectors, published last year, said: 'No school can be judged to be good unless learners are judged to make good progress.' This means, of course, that no school can fare well unless its test and exam results, on the Government's published indicators, show the children making good progress.

Maximisation of exam results has become the *raison d'être* of England's schools system largely without any meaningful debate. To be clear, the notion that education has become too exams-orientated is often discussed.

But rarely does anyone with power to change matters stand back, when important decisions are taken affecting the schooling of millions of pupils, and ask fundamental questions such as: is this helping create the right kind of educational experience for young people? That question, of course, can only be answered if one has arrived at an idea of what education is for.

Other questions need to be considered, too. Is education's sole aim the generation of good grades? Is it only about the qualities and attributes young people emerge with at the end of the process, or do their experiences along the way matter, too? Does education matter mainly in helping young people of all backgrounds go on and earn well in the future, thus, perhaps, helping to create an economically fairer society? Or is the understanding fostered by education of value in itself?

I suspect that many teachers would have quite enlightened answers to these questions, along the lines that education matters in ways not always captured by the grades at the end of the process. Yet the system does not work to give these ideals expression.

There are, of course, reasons why the more reductive approach to schools policy has won out. The first is that politicians, and to an extent many parents, do see education in terms of the material gains it can create later in life. Grades are seen as important, for people from poorer homes for reasons of social justice, and for everyone, potentially, in terms of obtaining a good job. Against this background, the ideal of education as having value as an end in itself can struggle for attention.

Second is the dogmatic view that measurable 'outcomes', of which, in education, exam results are the most obvious, are what matter when assessing the success or failure of public services of all kinds. There is not space to discuss this here, but it has undoubtedly been influential in shaping schools policy. Yet it is highly questionable, clearly, if one believes that the purpose of schooling is not simply what emerges at the end, but the process and the experiences along the way.

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Third is the fact that education policy is now run by national politicians, and hence steered according to their needs. Politics and thorough, open-minded deliberations as to the aims of education might go together, in an ideal world. But not in this world, it seems.

Recently, two impressive inquiries have considered at great depth the purposes of education. Both the Cambridge Primary Review and the Nuffield 14-19 inquiry took place outside the political process and both have, to put it mildly, struggled for a hearing with ministers.

Arguably one has to go back more than five years, to the Tomlinson review of secondary qualifications, for the last time a government-sanctioned inquiry took place which sought to take a holistic look at the educative process from the pupil's point of view. But Sir Mike Tomlinson's central recommendation was rejected by a government concerned about the electoral impact of being seen to be abandoning GCSEs and A-levels.

One could argue that decision-makers have taken seriously, in recent years, the criticism that schools have become too exams-focused. The demise of the key stage 3 tests; the investigation of replacing exam-only league tables with a ranking system reflecting wider school achievements; and the reduction in the number of A-level modules from six to four might be evidence.

However, this is piecemeal change. What is so desperately lacking is a proper inquiry, from first principles, into what the goals of our education system should be, and how to achieve them. The Cambridge and Nuffield reviews offered a persuasive glimpse of just such an approach. The great pity is that, with politicians rather than philosophers or educators in charge, it is unlikely to happen.

**or 'low hurdles race' for those who are not convinced by the difficulty of individual exams.*