

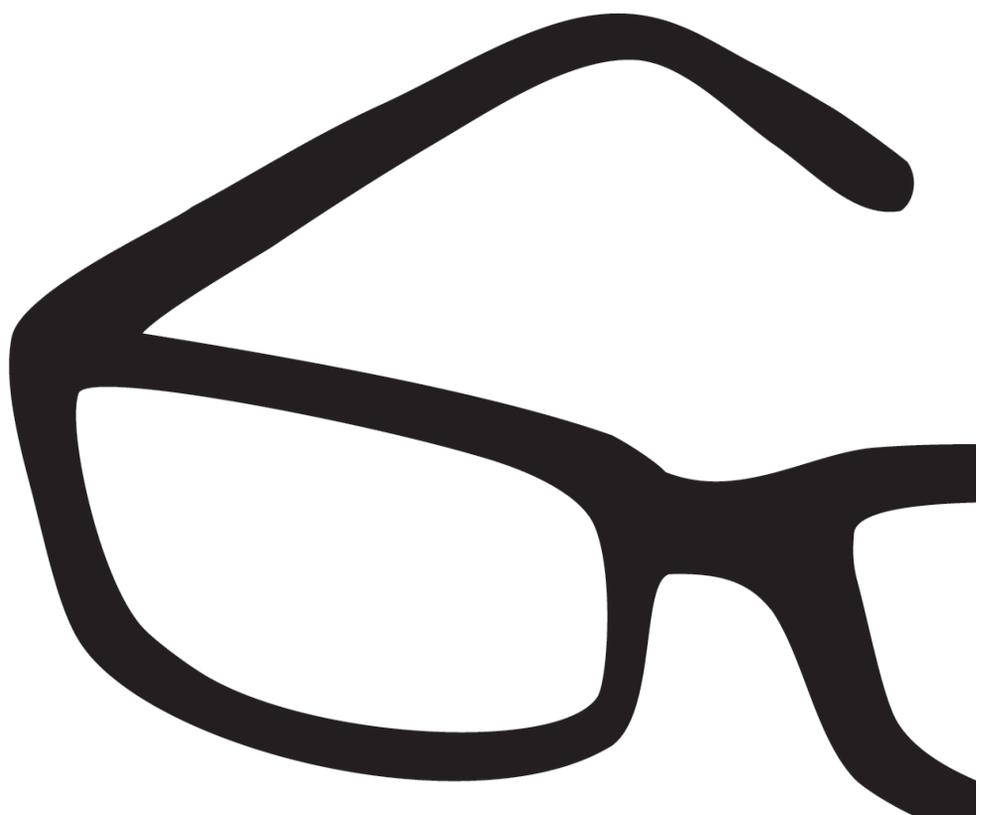


The new KS3 curriculum

Teachers' responses

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Introduction

The final version of the national curriculum was announced in September 2013. Schoolzone convened focus groups of English, maths, science, geography and history teachers (30 teachers in total), most of whom were subject leaders and department heads, to discuss the implications for change.

We also considered the recently announced reforms to GCSE and the implications these might have on decisions relating to the KS3 curriculum.

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Executive summary

Need for change

The current KS3 curriculum is seen as being largely out of date and most schools have already moved away from it. Since the last revision it has lacked detail, requiring schools to create much of the content of their schemes of work for themselves anyway.

The spread of the academies program, meaning that more and more schools can opt out, does not mean that schools are not interested in it however: they still want some guidance about what to teach, partly so that performance of their students can be compared with those from other schools.

For that reason, the removal of national curriculum levels is seen as the biggest challenge arising out of the changes. Many departments think that they will carry on using them because they cannot currently see any other way to identify progress.

Preparing for change

Teachers are concerned about the amount of time they have to introduce the new KS3 curriculum: a year doesn't give them long to find or make new resources and to adapt schemes of work and assessment schemes (especially if moving away from NC levels), but the main issue is that the changes are being introduced simultaneously across most of KS1 - 3 at the same time, followed closely by changes to GCSE. Concerns are for the impact on students as well as on teachers' workload.

Likely impact of change

Changes to the primary curriculum are expected to have a positive impact on KS3, though there are concerns about primary teachers' ability to deliver the new, more difficult concepts, especially in maths. Secondary teachers do not anticipate having time to help their primary colleagues.

Overall, the changes to content of the curriculum at KS1-3 seems to find favour with teachers: the current KS3 seems to have become very weak as a preparation for GCSE and teachers welcome the possibility of receiving Y7 students whose subject knowledge prepares them better for secondary school.

The notion of primary schools measured on the percentage of children who are "secondary ready" sounds interesting to secondary subject leaders, but they treat this with some scepticism as the suggested basis for this (achieving a certain threshold in English and maths SATs) is likely to be relatively arbitrary and is unlikely to offer anything that the NC levels didn't.

Resource needs

The kinds of resources which will be most in demand at KS3 are those which help clarify the issue of measuring progress without levels: either assessment materials or exemplars which help develop a new idea of “levelness”. Teachers aren’t so concerned about the changes to the curriculum content - they hope to fill the gaps in their resources gradually.

A bigger impact on resource requirements (at KS3 and 4) is the change to assessment at GCSE, in particular the move to terminal exams and the removal (or reduction) of the assessment of practical skills.

Assessment needs

The changes at GCSE, coupled with the removal of NC levels, present the biggest challenges to secondary schools. They need to be able to monitor progress: to support the students, to report to parents and to satisfy Ofsted. At present they can see no obvious way forward; the suggestions in the primary assessment consultation offer little encouragement either, as they imply that Ofsted will accept whatever system the school adopts as long as they can justify it. Secondary teachers want some form of national comparison model.

The notion that schools will collectively develop their own schemes does not seem likely to be widely welcomed: teachers say that schools are not good at collaborating and would prefer to adopt some form of national scheme which they can adapt and localise.

GCSE reform

This is likely to have a bigger impact than KS3 and the lag between the introduction of the two reforms is likely to create a drag on the development of KS3. Much of the planning of current KS3 schemes of work has been led by the need to prepare for GCSE, rather than by the KS3 curriculum itself, which is often too vague to offer much support anyway and has become devalued in the absence of SATs.

While schools are keen to press on with changes across Y7 to Y9, and many anticipate doing so from September 2013, it seems unlikely that the new KS3 will have become embedded before the end of 2014-15.

Budgets

There is no good news on the financial status of departments: they have little to spend, anticipate continued cuts and don’t anticipate any additional help in introducing the new curriculum.

Responses to the new curriculum

Was the curriculum due for a change?

The general consensus is that the curriculum is due for a change, though schools do not follow the KS3 curriculum very closely anyway, and are continuously developing it in any case. While not all think that the curriculum needed a complete change, most consider that aspects needed changing.

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Change is always useful if it is change for the better

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Aside from a few specific instances in individual subjects, the change is in itself seen as potentially beneficial in forcing schools to evaluate their offerings and in stimulating innovation.

Some teachers also think that a revision was necessary in order to ensure consistency between key stages: KS3 content tends to overlap with GCSE specifications and material is often re-visited between KS2 and KS3.

The way in which the new curriculum has been developed is a cause for concern: teachers generally think that there has been too little consultation and that the process has been kept secret.

The biggest issue mentioned is the lack of the NC levels; teachers are concerned about what will replace these. Many say that the school will not want to “let go of all structures” and so will replace them with something else.

Impacts of changes to the primary curriculum

Many English teachers are concerned that the new primary curriculum is going to focus too much on accuracy and grammar and “doesn’t focus on flair or creativity enough”. Some teachers think that primary schools have previously had something of a monopoly on creative English, necessitating secondary schools to redress the balance with more grammar teaching.

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I would question KS2 teachers' ability to teach the grammar

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Teachers are keen for more grammar to be taught so that pupils are better prepared for secondary English and the eventual demands of GCSE.

Some English teachers are concerned that the changes are too challenging for primary pupils and teachers alike, suggesting that primary schools may need support from their linked secondaries, ASTs, or other sources, although one English teacher claims that their ‘feeder schools

aren't very willing to engage with teachers from their school' so support is difficult to achieve.

The general consensus with the MFL teachers is that primary teachers will need a lot of training in MFL so that the quality of teaching is high enough to equip pupils for secondary languages. They observe that primary schools need a more structured approach in their language teaching. Like their English colleagues, MFL teachers see a value in working closely with primary feeders.

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Removing the calculators from KS2 means they become a novelty at KS3

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When asked about what support they will be giving to primary schools, both English and MFL teachers expressed concern that there is not going to be enough time, money or room in the new curriculum. However, one MFL teacher explains that they have two teachers whose only purpose is to work in feeder primary schools.

Some MFL teachers are negative about the idea of languages being taught in primary schools because they believe the “teaching will be poor and even incorrect” which will lead to extra work for secondary teachers.

Maths and science teachers are positive about changes to the primary curriculum as, if taught well, the new curriculum will provide a good grounding for KS3. In maths the idea of rote learning times tables will be of use at KS3.

Maths teachers argue that the transition from KS2-KS3 is difficult and therefore creating a curriculum from Y5-8 may help. They are concerned though, at the suggested restrictions on the use of calculators (to the end of KS2, for more complex operations) and the knock on effect of this at KS3.

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There may be more misconceptions coming through for us at ks3

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Across all secondary subject teachers taking part there is feeling that primary teachers do not necessarily always do a particularly good job of teaching these subjects so there is some ambivalence about the changes: positive if they make primary schools tighten up their teaching, negative if the added challenge is not met.

Preparing for change

Overall, it appears that teachers of core subjects argue that there is not enough time for the changes suggested to be made, “especially with all the changes to A-level, GCSE, vocational qualifications and everything else”. As a result many say that they will probably be tweaking the old curriculum or have to turn to a pre-prepared scheme as they won't have enough time to make a new one.

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A year is never enough but then no time is long enough. But it at least gives us something to start working on.

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Geography teachers seem largely unconcerned about preparing for changes at KS3 because there isn't much of a change: their KS3 also seems to be led more by GCSE content as they are more concerned to avoid overlap of content than are teachers of other subjects.

Many teachers thought that the new curriculum should be phased in, with primaries starting first and change following the year group, so that no particular year group is at a disadvantage. Schools are likely to adopt a wide range of approaches within KS3, though none of these teachers anticipate a sudden change to anything - they will change gradually, starting in September 2013.

Both maths and science teachers say that their time will be taken up with introducing changes to GCSEs and A-levels, needing more differentiation and resources. It also appears that a large proportion of time will be spent on matching KS3 and KS4 to make the transition to GCSE easier. A few teachers also mentioned trying to make the curriculum "Ofsted proof".

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There is an issue with time considering that there is also going to be a new GCSE in 2015

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New GCSEs will be introduced in 2015 - a year later - for all the subjects represented by participants in these discussions. Virtually all these teachers thought that this was not a sufficiently long interval after the KS3 changes, since it means that Y10 students will not have been taught the new KS3 for anything more than, at most (since many schools operate a two year KS3) one year. Many are also concerned about the impact on their workload and the repeated need for change, for example science teachers complain that they have only just come to terms with the changes to controlled assessment in 2011 and now have to change again.

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We would want a full blown scheme with full differentiation, pushing the more able students. Schemes with independent learning, books, resources.

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Changes to the methods for assessing skills at GCSE, as suggested in recent announcements, gave most teachers some cause for comment - they generally welcome the removal of the admin burden but worry about how the skills can be fairly assessed. Assessment of skills at KS3 will also be led by the methods used at GCSE, so teachers are as yet uncertain about how this will work.

Many of the science and maths teachers explain that they are not planning on getting rid of levels as they help with planning and are used (not least, currently by Ofsted) to monitor progress and performance. However they are concerned that this could lead to some confusion with the new GCSE levels and it's not clear how levels will fit with changed components of the curriculum.

When asked what sort of resources they would need in order to help make these changes, many teachers from both English and MFL departments appear to be keen for whiteboard and especially online resources, but would prefer for the current ones to be updated rather than have new ones completely. Teachers commented that KS4 is always going to be prioritised over KS3 and

therefore a lot of what is taught during KS3 is simply building up to what will be taught further up the school. A lot of what is taught is “focused on embedding KS3 with KS4 skills”.

One maths teacher also mentioned the idea of just being provided with ‘small inserts to add to their already good resources....as we cannot afford new stuff altogether’. Other ways in which they would like to be supported is something to be delivered online in the same sort of way as this discussion - science teachers were particularly keen for this. Both maths and science teachers expressed an interest in online resources/etexts.

Interestingly, one science teacher mentioned that they will be using their old 2006 spec, presumably because it has gone full circle so some of the curriculum covered then is now in the new curriculum.

One of the biggest issues mentioned is that teachers will be blind to the new exam format. When asked what extra help they would like over the next year to help prepare them for the change, teachers expressed a need for lots of specimen tests: realistic ones (they often aren’t).

There is a concern among teachers who anticipate a bigger need for new resources, that funding will be the biggest issue as they will not be able to buy any more resources to help prepare for the changes, thus increasing their workload as they prepare their own.

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We have been here a number of times before and experience tells me that we don't panic and adapt rather than throw out what we are already doing.

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Benefits of the new curriculum

Maths teachers are very keen on the idea of more calculations because these will link up with maths higher up the school and other subjects such as physics and other sciences when using data sheets in KS4. Some areas of maths such as set theory and Venn diagrams are welcomed as the pupils will enjoy learning it, some teachers thought.

Science teachers argue that the changes are beneficial because the new curriculum links well to GCSE and even A-level and is more stretching.

English teachers are broadly in favour of the increased grammar content, but are otherwise hard pressed to think of any particular benefits of the new curriculum overall.

MFL teachers are similarly unenthusiastic, though one teacher said: “there should be more focus on speaking, sounds, phonetics - and spontaneity is a really good thing - makes it more enjoyable and relevant, with transferrable language skills”.

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I will have to sharpen up on my grammar!

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I like the freedom of it - to do overview and depth, still

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Geography teachers appear to be generally happy with the new content

as it is interesting and relevant, with “some more old fashioned geography”.

History teachers appear to be happy with the freedom of it as “there is the flexibility to draw up a course that is engaging and relevant to students”. They are also relieved that draft version of the history curriculum was dramatically revised.

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Students really enjoy the levels and push themselves to get a higher level.

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When asked about whether they thought abolishing the national curriculum levels would be beneficial in anyway, the majority were very negative. Teachers are concerned about how they will measure progress below GCSE and because it means they will no longer be able to compare themselves to other schools and this is an issue. Furthermore, levels have become a central component of schools’ target-setting regimes and students have spent a long time gaining familiarity with them (or at least schools’ student-friendly interpretations of them) as assessment criteria which can provide a focus for improvement.

An additional concern raised about the removal of levels was the likelihood of reduced reliability of teacher assessed levels at KS2, especially given the increased levels of difficulty at KS2 in the core subjects.

Challenges of the new curriculum

For most subject teachers, the content of the new curriculum presents no real challenge: the main issues highlighted are time to prepare and money for resources. They do not seem to have identified any particular need for additional training yet, though teachers in most subjects anticipate that they will need some; also the new assessment regimes may stimulate a greater demand. The additional time requirement is mostly related to the need to update schemes of work and resources.

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Training for new staff on areas they may not have taught before

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One maths teacher is concerned that one of the main challenges is going to be ‘getting all staff to collaborate and work harder towards targets’. The idea that performance management would be changing as well was brought into the discussion: there appears to be a great deal of scepticism surrounding this. The majority feeling that this is going to be an issue as it means that there’s no accurate measure of progress.

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I think the removal of speaking and listening at KS4 will lead to less teaching time at KS3 for S&L.

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progress”.

One of the biggest concerns expressed by English teachers is that the new specification is very focused on grammar and that this will lead to a lack of creativity. Knock-on effects of changes to assessment of practical skills at GCSE will also have a detrimental impact.

For this reason both English and MFL teachers explain that they are planning on trying to make the grammar enjoyable and interesting and will look for or create new resources to achieve this end.

One of the main issues for both geography and history teachers is how the new curriculum will impact upon non-specialist teachers (of whom there are more in these subjects in Y9). Another issue, especially expressed by geography teachers, is having the time to plan and develop ”interesting ways to teach places”. There is also concern that the new curriculum lacks flexibility and this is will lead to more boring lessons.

Impact on resource requirements

When asked what resources teachers think may help with these challenges, teachers referred to the idea of levelled resources (as an alternative to the current levels) as a way to assess students, especially in subjects which are also losing SATs. A number of science teachers mention that they would like more, shorter, possibly assessed, activities to replace investigations, which are targeted to fill in the gaps created by the new curriculum.

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Measuring levelness when students arrive from KS2, and how they make progress through KS3

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Many teachers express an interest in more revision guides - this applies to both maths and science teachers at KS3, but across subjects at GCSE level and, in preparation for this, at KS3. This need arises partly because of the removal of levels but also because of the move to terminal assessment at GCSE.

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Just make it early so that we have time to start working with it

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A number of teachers also suggested that apps for revision would be useful. When asked if they would like to have resources targeting the new curriculum to use via PowerPoint, teachers are very negative, all of them saying (regardless of the subject they teach) that they would not use PowerPoint resources, although science teachers do express an interest in animations on slides and English teachers say they would like resources for interactive whiteboards in order to make certain elements of the course, such as grammar, more interesting to the pupils.

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Ideally, textbooks would be entirely online so that they were continually updated by the publishers

MFL teachers would like resources that help with speaking and exam support. A number of MFL teachers would like resources that are

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kept up to date with new stories etc but not too contemporary: “celebrities who are in vogue at time of publication and out of fashion by the time students are using the books”.

Teachers mention in particular that their resources are currently mostly differentiated on the basis of NC levels, so they will need some way to convert these. These can have particular significance for resources which cross the KS3/4 transition. MFL teachers appear to be particularly concerned about grammar resources in this regard.

When asked if they would be buying new textbooks for the new curriculum, teachers all replied saying they would not anticipate buying full year groups sets, though one or two class sets may be purchased in some departments. The main reasons for this are that they are expensive, rapidly become outdated and can be “a straightjacket for teaching”.

Teacher guides and banks or packs of activities are a more popular idea, as are any resources available online.

There is concern over the idea of using iPads as resources as not all schools have these: while a growing number do, others would like them and the rest believe that they will never have enough money to buy them. However, there is more support for the idea of an app for use on the students’ phones or at home. Electronic resources, including e-texts appear to be popular, where available.

One geography teacher suggested having the option to network with other practitioners and having an exemplar portfolio of student work to help with any new equivalent of levelling: ideas which were very popular amongst other geography and history teachers.

Living without levels

At the time of the discussion, no proposal for secondary assessment and accountability had been made, though teachers were aware that the national curriculum levels were to be abolished - indeed many had raised the issue in the earlier parts of the discussions, mostly in a negative context.

Core subjects currently use the levels more than the foundation subjects do, and in the main, departments which do use them seem to think that they will carry on doing so, in the absence of anything better. These departments like levels because they are useful for monitoring progress at both local and national levels. It seems unlikely that anything will arise to replace this, in the absence of a DfE scheme, and teachers do not want to see a return to percentage based reporting or position-in-class.

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In history the levels tested skills not content, so therefore they can still be applied

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One maths teacher points out that some students may easily be left behind in the absence of levels, because it's difficult to see what else could provide the same level of reliable diagnosis.

There is also concern for special needs schools, or those with low performing intakes: they will always be below the average so without levels there is no way to show progress.

It seems that departments wishing to maintain the use of levels will have an additional burden through having to modify their assessments schemes, but they prefer this, at present at least, to developing a new assessment system as the GCSE levels are about to change as well.

When asked how these fit in with the new curriculum many claimed it was simply open to interpretation and "depends on how it will be inspected". Others claim that they are too rigid for the new national curriculum which appears to allow more freedom.

There is some consideration that an alternative national, standardised test could be used for each subject. Teachers would prefer an awarding body to set these - preferably subjects could use the same awarding body as they chose for GCSE, in order to ensure continuity.

Potential new assessment schemes

Most teachers simply want end of topic, term or year tests in order to assess progress, with some ad-hoc teacher assessment of skills, rather than a KS3 version of controlled assessment or APP. One maths teacher suggests that progression charts may be of use as you can see how far they have come without putting a level on it.

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You just say what the kids can do, doesn't matter what the level is really

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The loss of levels in reporting to parents does not appear to cause any particular concern - they didn't necessarily mean much to most parents anyway, teachers say - the important thing is that parents know whether their child is making sufficient progress. Loss of levels may even lead to broader reporting, which will be more relevant and personal, some teachers say.

A suggestion that student progress might be labelled (as in the EYFS framework, but mooted to be a suggested for KS1 and 2 as well) as *expected*, *emerging* or *exceeding* was not broadly well received: parents need more than this at KS3 and certainly at GCSE.

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If developing your own assessment how do you achieve consistency?

The government expect national teaching schools (and other organisations) to take a lead on developing new assessment schemes. Most teachers think, however, that they will be left to develop their own: "there's little time for collaboration with other schools".

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Teachers are concerned about the need to develop their own assessment schemes however: they won't have time or expertise, they don't know what will be acceptable to Ofsted and they are worried about the reliability of the assessment as a standardisation tool.

Maths teachers appear keen for the idea of looking at what other schools (especially outstanding ones) are doing in terms of an assessment system, and basing theirs on other schools'. It is perhaps easier for maths teachers to use systems created in other schools because of the transferable, granular nature of the content.

Teachers whose subject associations are strong and proactive may also look to them to develop an appropriate assessment tool. History and geography teachers mention this preference in particular, perhaps because, as foundation subjects, the associations have been more active, in the absence of SATs, in this area previously.

The majority of teachers are in favour of publishers creating a standardised test to be used. Some pointed to Exampro as an excellent example of the kind of resource they would want: standardised questions in a customisable format. They also express a preference for assessment schemes at KS3 which are developed by awarding bodies, because they expect them to be more reliable and more comprehensively tested. Ideally, they would be able to buy one from the body which supplies their GCSE.

However, many teachers comment that they are unlikely to have the funds to buy into new systems and those who use commercial assessment offerings at present are worried that these will become obsolete and that they will not be able to afford replacements. This fear is compounded by the fact that GCSEs will face similar problems in a few years' time.

Anticipating GSE reform

In the week leading up to these discussions with teachers there had been some announcements, in broad terms, about the likely changes to GCSEs. As schools will need to see revised specifications before they make any decisions about how they will respond to the reforms, we discussed instead the appetite for change and the impact of the suggested reforms on plans for KS3.

There appears to be a high degree of satisfaction with the awarding bodies being used: none of the teachers anticipated that the reforms were likely to stimulate a switch and none said that they were wanting to change but waiting for the revised specifications before doing so.

An aspect which is receiving a lot of focus from schools at present is the literacy demands of GCSE papers - several teachers think that if they do switch it will be because they are concerned about the wording used.

Departments spend a considerable amount of time preparing their students, from Y9 onwards, to understand command words, for example.

The biggest cause for concern, arising from the recently suggested changes, was the plan to all but remove assessment of practical skills. Much of the current Y9 GCSE preparation has previously been targeted on controlled assessment/coursework, so the removal or diminution of this component of GCSEs will have consequences for KS3 schemes of work.

Science teachers are not too troubled about the changes to practical skills assessment, other than that it is currently unclear how it will actually work in practice: they seem reasonably assured that this will still contribute a sufficient percentage of the marks. Some teachers think that this will make the marking fairer and less open to cheating. There is more of a concern for lower attaining students however, as the current 40% allocation allowed them to boost their performance compared to the written exam.

English teachers are unhappy, as the current suggestions for speaking and listening seem unsatisfactory and there are concerns that the reduced emphasis on these skills will make the course, including at KS3, less interesting.

In geography, the possible removal of fieldwork assessment could have serious implications for uptake at A-level. Teachers all agree that it is this element of the GCSE course that tends to inspire future geographers and that without it, the subject seriously loses its relevance. While it's still obviously possible to conduct fieldwork without assessing it, teachers fear that it will be more difficult to persuade their senior leadership teams to allow time out of school.

Budget?

The prospects are bleak for schools wanting to buy new resources to support the introduction of the new curriculum. None of these teachers expects any additional budget to introduce it and many say that they are facing cuts in departmental allocations next year as well.

Teachers who do anticipate having some budget say that they will, as always, prioritise GCSE, so they will wait to see what's required there, before spending on KS3 resources.

In the absence of budget, all teachers taking part anticipate that they will fill any gaps in their resource provision by creating their own resources or finding free resources on line. They also hope for help from teacher networks and subject associations.



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