EXAM SYSTEM REFORM – THE MOVE FROM MODULAR TO LINEAR

Earlier this year, following radical plans for GCSE reform, the DfE released similar proposals for a shake-up of the A-level examination system. Mr Gove instructed the examination authorities that he wanted to see A-levels returned to a linear structure with all examinations to be taken at the end of a two year programme of study. New courses were to be prepared incorporating more open ended questions in their assessment and AS levels were to become a separate qualification so that they no longer contributed towards full A-levels. The first of these proposals was for there to be an immediate reduction in the number of assessment points during A-level courses. Currently, students studying for their A-levels follow a modular pathway with exams in the majority of subjects. These are taken in four separate series over the course of two years, with AS levels taken in Year 12 contributing 50% towards the A2. Mr Gove’s plans represent a profound change in direction for the whole A-level examination system.

Although the route now appears to be set, the debate continues. Proponents of these reforms argue that the modular approach promotes ‘bite-size’ learning and contributes to grade inflation through a resit culture. Final linear assessment in Year 13, they believe, encourages deeper learning and better prepares students for university. Those in favour of the current method believe that modular exams lead to incremental learning throughout the course and that the opportunity to re-take allows students to identify and improve areas where they have difficulty. Linear assessment would lead to a last minute ‘learn and churn’ revision culture and an all-or-nothing terminal exam that will give no allowance for students having a single off-day. Whatever the merits of the arguments, it is interesting to note that the universities, who Mr Gove suggests find current students to be under prepared, rely on continuous assessment across all years of a student’s study in making their degree awards.

Although Mr Gove has responded to representations and put his timescale back by a year, the initial tranche of new A-levels, which include the majority of the popular subjects, are to be developed for first teaching in September 2015. This means that students who are in our current Year 9 will be the first year group to follow this route. Even though this year group will have completed their GCSE courses in a similar linear way, we will nevertheless be thinking very carefully how we can best support and prepare these future sixth form students for this new world of fully linear examinations.

The one element in the announcements that has perhaps caused less comment was the removal of the January series of exams. Although it is fair to say that many teachers have welcomed this move, suggesting that it will give them considerably more teaching time, the speed of its implementation did surprise some. The immediate removal of these exams for 2013/14 will mean that current Year 12 students, who embarked on a course with four assessment points, now find it reduced to three. Given the speed of this change, any educational benefit would, I feel, be outweighed by the increase in exam pressure on students in the final examination series in Year 13. It would seem that Mr Gove has changed the rules of the game midway through and, in my view, this is not entirely fair on our Year 12 students.

Mr T Smith

Deputy Headteacher