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Publisher: Routledge

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Cambridge Journal of Education

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ccje20>

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Version of record first published: 20 Nov 2012.

To cite this article: Jannette Elwood (2012): Qualifications, examinations and assessment: views and perspectives of students in the 14-19 phase on policy and practice, Cambridge Journal of Education, 42:4, 497-512

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2012.733347>

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Qualifications, examinations and assessment: views and perspectives of students in the 14–19 phase on policy and practice

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(Received 16 August 2011; final version received 28 February 2012)

This paper brings to the forefront students' views on one of the most significant aspects of educational reform in the 14–19 phase in England, specifically qualifications, examinations and assessment reform. In this respect, the paper foregrounds students as 'policy actors', they are significant players in the mediation of national qualification systems rather than just subjects in their implementation. Data from a national dataset of focus groups with 243 students are presented. Key themes are highlighted relating to young people's experiences of qualifications, examinations and assessment at this stage of education in a context of continuous initiatives and change as well as the impact on students of qualifications reform *in situ* which can be confusing, unsettling and ultimately detrimental to future success.

Keywords: qualifications; examinations; assessment; student views; policy

Introduction

Between 2005 and 2010, a major educational reform programme for the 14–19 phase in England was implemented by the then Labour government. Key aims of this programme were to transform educational and training provision and experiences for all young people to raise aspirations, quality and standards at this phase. While emphasising national as well as wider goals for young people to operate and contribute successfully to European and global employment and education, these aims also reflected deeper aspirations for England to be 'the best place in the world for children and young people to grow up' (Department of Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), 2008, p. 4). The centrepiece of the reform programme was the creation of a new national curriculum and qualification entitlement. This entitlement was structured into four learning pathways (or routes to qualifications) that students could choose to pursue from age 14 onwards (for detail, see DCSF 2008). Aligned to the implementation of this reform programme was the introduction of an unprecedented raft of policy changes and initiatives, all of which were visited upon schools, colleges and students at approximately the same time with extensive ramifications for 14–19 provision. While some of these policy changes concerned the well-being and individual development of students through a concentration on individual advice and guidance, the main thrust of the reforms was around assessment and qualifications development. This was not the first attempt, however, by the

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Labour government, at a major reform initiative that prioritised qualifications and assessment development. The 14–19 reform programme emerged from earlier, significant changes to academic and vocational qualifications for 16–19 year olds (*Curriculum 2000*) that were, at the same time, bedding down into the national educational landscape but which had been problematic and controversial during implementation (for detail, see Hodgson & Spours, 2003).

May 2010 saw the establishment of a new coalition government between the Conservative and Liberal Democratic parties. Priorities of this new government meant that the 14–19 educational reform programme was reversed overnight. A new Education Act (Department for Education, 2011) sets out the coalition's direction and focus for policy reform in this phase of education. Again at the centre of their agenda is a concentration on reforming qualifications and educational pathways to make sure that 'existing qualifications are rigorous, challenging and properly prepare our young people for life, work and study' (Gibb, 2010). To achieve this goal more change has ensued in relation to qualifications structures and provision. Such changes have introduced a very different policy landscape. There are preferences for more distance between vocational and academic pathways, curriculum structures that promote a view of education aligned to particular subject combinations as well as linear qualifications (taken wholly at the end of courses) as opposed to modular qualifications (taken in stages during the course). Such preferences reflect more traditional approaches and ideas to the maintaining of, and ensuring standards.

The many changes that have occurred within the 14–19 phase of education in England and indeed elsewhere continue to assume a role centre stage for policy makers and researchers (Lumby & Foskett, 2005). A significant focus in current research within this area aims to take a broad view of the effects of mass policy changes upon educational institutions as well as a focus on what Braun, Maguire, and Ball (2010, p. 547) refer to as policy enactments – looking at how policies are interpreted and 'translated by diverse policy actors in the school environment, rather than simply implemented'. Much research that has looked into 14–19 educational reform does indeed consider the impact of 'endless policy changes' for key actors in educational institutions (Ecclestone, 2007; Hodgson & Spours, 2008; Lumby & Foskett, 2005; Pring et al., 2009) and the 'wearing and distorting effects of "initiativitis"' (Raffe & Spours, 2007). More specifically, recent research with relation to qualifications awarding bodies, regulators and policy makers (Baird, 2011; Baird & Lee-Kelly, 2009) has detailed the policy proliferation in this area and the impact of continuous change on the qualifications on offer.

What tends to be less centre stage in this research is a focus on students' perspectives and the impact of such policy proliferation on their experiences and outcomes. This is surprising given how assessment at this stage 'becomes most intense and is most critical in its impact on lives' (Lumby & Foskett, 2005, p. 89). One significant study that drew heavily on students' views about major policy change aligned to qualifications pathways was that which investigated the implementation of *Curriculum 2000* in England (Hodgson & Spours, 2002, 2003, 2005). Here students' views were seen as key in determining the course of the reforms. However, over intervening years there has been limited, further attention within the qualifications arena given to the views of young people who are directly affected by continuous change. This is significant given government priorities with respect to the inclusion of 'student voice' in understanding the development and implementation

of 14–19 educational reforms (DCSF, 2008). The qualifications arena, therefore, seems to be one of the last bastions of education that has embraced good practice of involving students in policy formation and in consultation around decisions that affect them (Elwood & Lundy, 2010). This paper, therefore, aims to bring attention to students' views on this most important phase of education, in particular on the qualifications, examinations and assessment they experience. In this respect the paper foregrounds students as policy actors, shows what is of value to them, what is relevant and how they appear to be policy victims in relation to the myriad of changes undertaken in their interest.

Context

Qualifications: proliferation of policy reform

Hodgson and Spours (2008) outline the significant role of qualifications in young peoples' lives; the types of qualifications available and more recently, with the proliferation of different types, the value and worth of the qualifications available. Young peoples' experiences of education from 14 onwards are contextualised within different pathways or routes of qualifications classified as academic, vocational or a mixture of the two. The upper secondary curriculum is dominated by these qualifications that, while being end-of-school qualifications in their own right, are pre-requisites for moving on to further or higher education or the world of work. Furthermore, the specifications for these qualifications become *de facto* the curriculum taught and their associated assessment dictates how students are evaluated. Thus these qualifications determine students' experiences of the nature and structure of subject knowledge, how they learn, how they are assessed and, ultimately, how they are taught (Ecclestone, 2007). Their impact and significance are immense and the qualifications sector has become a major policy arena in the drive to raise standards and to improve the education of all young people.

Baird (2011) outlines the increased political involvement in the qualifications arena. She considers that a once, relatively anonymous, area of education, contextualised by independent awarding bodies in close relationships with schools and colleges, has morphed into a policy battleground with continuous movement and proliferation of policy change. The qualifications sector (especially awarding bodies) are perpetually devising ways to interpret policy demands within existing frameworks. For example, while we still have A levels and GCSEs,¹ the impact of policy initiatives around these qualifications means that present-day versions look very different to their counterparts of 10 or 20 years ago. Thus, in a relatively short space of time we have seen, at both levels, the introduction of: (1) modular structures which allow for re-sits if outcomes are not as expected; (2) A* grades which allow for excellence in performance to be acknowledged; and (3) coursework components which allow for the assessment of more process skills not easily assessed in examination conditions. These main changes were accompanied by a raft of other initiatives under the 14–19 reform programme² as well as the introduction of new qualifications aimed at bridging the academic/vocational divide (Diplomas) and offering a coherent pathway for underachievers (Foundation learning).

Such policy proliferation around qualifications has continued apace under the new coalition government. While some qualifications have not survived the fall-out of the new government's drive to redress the lack of quality, rigour and challenge

in the qualifications on offer (e.g. the Diploma), others have been introduced to the marketplace with speed (e.g. access to iGCSEs for state schools), established courses have been changed without recourse to systematic review (the dropping of modularity at GCSE) and the English Baccalaureate (EBacc),³ a new performance target, has been introduced. The EBacc focuses on achieving top grades at GCSE across particular combinations of subjects that extend beyond what were previously designated as core. Thus while no new qualifications have been introduced, *per se*, there has been, yet again, the specific use of qualifications to drive educational policy with particular political and philosophical positions in relation to curriculum, learning, assessment and accountability. So, for example, the EBacc will become a significant benchmark by which educational institutions will be measured and its associated models of assessment and learning will demand a more academic configuration of what young people will learn and achieve in school.

Alongside the focus on academic qualifications and aligning these to school accountability measures, a ministerial review of vocational qualifications (Wolf, 2011) was a stated attempt to systematically revise and standardise much of the vocational qualifications available to young people. This review was the most extensive exploration of the state of vocational qualifications in England for some time and re-asserted that 'conventional academic study encompasses only part of what the labour market values and demands' (Wolf, 2011, p. 7) with good vocational qualifications being as much a respected part of the post-16 programme of qualifications as academic ones. However, the review set out a desolate picture, in some respects, of a 'diet' of sub-standard vocational qualifications, with little or no labour market value. Wolf (2011) recommended that any 14–19 educational programme needs to be robust and have value for those who take it as well as for those who use it to select and recruit. However, an underlying message suggested that parity of esteem of vocational and academic qualifications is a myth that has been peddled for years in our system and is unlikely to be progressed any further by current arrangements. Thus as a consequence, to fit with current government policy and to survive within the qualifications marketplace, successful general vocational qualifications, such as BTEC awards,⁴ have had to adjust their structures of assessment and implement external examination components into once coursework-only specifications.

Qualifications programmes, therefore, continue to reside within a persistent state of policy flux. Educational institutions have to manage this flux in order to deliver coherent and relevant educational pathways as well as provide opportunities for students to take qualifications that are appropriate and of value. In the delivery of qualifications policies, it is perhaps too often assumed that the process follows a classical top-down model (Hill & Hupe, 2009); that what is mandated will be implemented in a linear way. However, as Braun et al. (2010, p. 549) have suggested, 'putting policies into practice is a creative, sophisticated and complex process that is always located in a particular context and place'. In this regard they suggest that policies are 'enacted and translated' by a range of stakeholders who are foregrounded as 'key actors rather than merely as subjects in the policy process' (2010, p. 549). However, even within this more inclusive notion of policy implementation, students are rarely represented as key actors in policy enactment in the way that their teachers and other educational workers are. Their perspectives on issues that are pertinent to them and impact on them directly are generally invisible. Yet the fall out of changes in educational qualifications on students is considerable

and, as Osler (2010, p. 11) has argued, ‘some of the apparent tensions between goals such as excellence and equity, or flexibility and accountability are likely to be more readily addressed when young people’s perspectives are built into policy making processes’.

A place for students’ perspectives

There has been a growing acceptance in policy formation that it is good practice to have students more involved in decision-making that affects them (Sinclair, 2004). Lundy (2007) suggests that consulting young people in general should be seen as more than just good practice in policy formation and development. She reminds us that it is a legally binding obligation on government to consult children on all matters that affect them, including educational provision. The promotion of the inclusion of students’ voices in decision-making has also filtered down into educational practice of consulting young people more generally about their schooling (Flutter & Rudduck, 2004; Lumby, 2011, Osler, 2010). Such research shows that while consultation and participation are complex and problematic in many ways, much can be learnt about students’ perspectives on their own lives, their experiences of schooling and how the two interconnect. Exploring with students their perspectives on experiences that make a significant impact on them can become a valuable tool for educational institutions and policy makers in identifying and addressing key issues affecting progress. It can also be immensely effective in bringing about significant changes to students’ environment, learning and well-being.

While there has been a significant academic, and growing policy, interest in the concept of ‘pupil voice’ and in practices that enable students to participate in, and be consulted about, their learning, studies within the field of assessment policy formation, qualifications and examination development that have considered students’ involvement as critical stakeholders have been more limited in number (Elwood & Lundy, 2010). Given the raft of changes to assessment policy and practice that have taken place over recent years, it is surprising that only a few studies have taken this omission seriously (Hodgson & Spours, 2003, Leitch et al., 2008; Murphy, Kerr Lundy, & McEvoy 2010; Reay & Wiliam, 1999). These studies have considered the impact of significant assessment reforms on students’ lives, identities and learning.

The research outlined in this paper aims to contribute to the small number of studies outlined above that have prioritised young peoples’ perspectives on large-scale policy reform in the assessment arena. It does so by presenting a series of key issues and concerns for students around qualifications specifically and the impact on students’ aspirations, their views of success and their value for the next stage of education and/or work. The data emerged from asking students directly their perspectives on significant policy reforms around qualifications, examinations and assessment, as well as their opinions on the educational pathways they encounter, the contexts which surround their experiences and how qualifications systems might be improved. The position of the present research develops earlier studies by being aspirational in listening attentively to young people without evaluation or judgement but makes a further contribution by being intentional in its focus on creating spaces for them in which their views could be heard with a direct link back into the policy process (Lundy, 2007).

Methodology

This article draws on a student dataset from a national study,⁵ which investigated the impact of 14–19 educational reforms on schools and colleges in England (Baird et al., 2011). Phase 1 of the research consisted of two base-line studies that set out to map the circumstances and context of a sample of 52 educational institutions (mainstream and special provision) prior to the beginning of the Labour government's reform programme (Gorard et al., 2008; Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency, 2009). Phase 2 was the main longitudinal research programme, to track the impact of policy reform and change within these 52 educational institutions across England between 2009 and 2014 (Baird et al., 2011).⁶ The study's focus was the complementary and competing effects of mass policy changes upon educational institutions and their stakeholders.

In the first year of Phase 2 (2009/10), 18 case studies, from among the 52 educational institutions, were carried out. The sample included: 11–16 schools (five), 11–19 schools (one), 13–19 schools (one), 16–19 sixth form colleges (three), academies (one), Further Education (FE) colleges (two), independent schools (one), special education centres (three) and specialist colleges (one). These centres were located across England and were situated equally within urban/city, suburban/small town and rural locations. The case visits were carried out over three days in which interviews and focus groups were conducted with a number of key stakeholders: principals (or deputies), curriculum managers, governors, students, teachers and parents.

Students were considered equal stakeholders in the educational institutions and as such were a main focus of data collection. Across the 18 cases, 45 student focus groups were conducted; 17 with Year 11 (Y11) students, 18 with Y13 students and 10 with Y10 and Y12 students if the institution was either an 11–16 school or post-16/FE college. A total of 243 young people were involved. Centres were responsible for participant recruitment to student focus groups with guidelines from the researchers. This type of negotiated approach to recruitment aimed to account, in a transparent manner, for the differences and variation which existed across the individual centres. Students were engaged in a range of topics for discussion: their experiences of the 14–19 reforms, whether their schools consulted them on institutional-level policy reforms and what they thought was the most important thing about schooling at this age. They were also asked about their opportunities within their institutions to choose qualifications and educational pathways and their experience of teaching and learning. The qualitative data from the student focus groups were transcribed and coded using the structures of focus group schedules as well as emerging issues from the students. The primary data were analysed both deductively, driven by theory/concepts of policy reform and student engagement within each individual case, and then, inductively, driven by ideas emerging from the data across all 18 centres. Computer software (NVIVO 8) was used in both the management of the data and in relation to analytical procedures.

The resultant dataset is a large and rich collection of students' views, perspectives and opinions on a range of areas that impact on their experience of 14–19 education. To reflect the complexities of consultation and participation with students, a deliberate and intentional, three-fold methodological stance was taken: (1) to ascertain to what degree students are consulted by their institutions and, if so, what aspects of their educational experiences are they consulted about; (2) to ask students

about particular aspects of their educational experience that are rarely discussed with young people – views on curriculum, assessment, qualifications, examinations, etc.; and (3) to specifically consult with young people on 14–19 reforms. For the purposes of this paper, four from the 23 primary-level codes derived were selected and analysed across the range of focus groups, notably: ‘voice, participation and consultation’; ‘curricular and assessment changes and pressures’; ‘views on 14–19 reforms’ and ‘philosophy of education and values’. Key themes relating to young people’s experiences of qualifications, examinations and assessment at this phase of education were extracted from these four codes. These themes are explored below.

Qualifications, examinations and assessment: students’ views and perspectives

Doing qualifications: what is good and what is not

Students suggested that examinations and qualifications were one of the most important aspects of being in education. Responses suggested that at 16 and 18, qualifications, of whatever type, tended to dominate their lives in school/college, for good or ill, that getting good grades was a significant aim for many and that they would not get far without the right grades. Students were very clear how results would affect their goals and personal aspirations. They linked these attitudes to future aspirations for university places, jobs and/or training with employment. Obtaining good grades was also contextualised within a climate of recession, cuts and fewer opportunities for employment and university places, as well as the implementation of higher offers to deal with increased competition. They considered these particular economic and policy circumstances would make it even more significant to be successful in their choice of qualifications and outcomes. There were strong opinions expressed both in seeing what was good about present qualification systems as well as their limitations. In support of external qualifications and examinations, students acknowledged that they would always be needed. They understood that any government would not really ‘take exams away for good’ as they provide fair and just mechanisms for selection into different aspects of education and work:

The thing is, you can’t take exams away because then what do you have to assess you and test you about it? I would love for them [the government] to say ‘Yeah, no exams’ and then take it away but then what will they do? (S, Y13 Focus Group)

Furthermore, students considered that, to a certain degree, examinations were enjoyable if one was well prepared and confident. Students talked of examinations having an influence on their learning in a positive way; they demanded the ‘paying [of] keener attention’ in class and individuals could be the makers of their own success. Exams were key in showing how young people can deal successfully with high-stakes situations and were designed to ‘push you to the limit’. Students were confident that increased effort would be reflected in improved results (and vice versa); the better the grades obtained then the better one’s opportunities for accessing further or higher education and/or employment. This point was elaborated on specifically in relation to the modularisation of qualifications. In line with students’ perceptions from previous research (Hodgson & Spours, 2003), participants generally welcomed the modular structure of qualifications, as modules ‘take the stress off’, giving students an indication of progress and where effort should be placed in order to improve:

Yeah, I like having two exam dates ... with January you don't put in 100% effort, it's like a half arsed attempt, or you don't revise specifically for something, and then you get your grade and it's like, oh right, that's what I got with not doing much work, I'll retake that and I'll work really hard and I know what kind of grade I can get. (S, Y13 Focus Group)

One concern, voiced by students in relation to modular structures, was how they had noticed GCSEs beginning to start in Year 9 within some of their institutions. Students were intrigued as to why GCSEs were starting earlier for their younger peers. They suggested that such practice would increase the amount of assessment even more across Years 9–11. Evidence from the case studies suggested that the void created by no formal testing at 14 has been filled by the trickling down of Key Stage 4 into the end of Key Stage 3. This, aligned with the introduction of modular GCSEs, seems to have created instances where modules are taken as early as possible for some students. Ball, Maguire, Braun, Perryman, and Hoskins might suggest that such practices are an example of the 'new meta-narrative of *schooling as performances*' (2011, p. 3, original emphasis), where targets for performance influence policy enactment in schools. Data from other stakeholders suggested that the maximising of results through re-sits practices may have led to some schools entering students earlier for modules to gauge possible outcomes in the longer term.

When considering more negative aspects of qualifications, participants suggested that they were one of the most 'daunting' things that they had to do in school. It was suggested that examinations and assessments 'take over your life' and that 'doing well' was constantly 'hammered' into students, by teachers and others, from a very early stage:

S1: Our whole life seems to be dictated by exams. You have to get this grade to get into this school—

S2: Otherwise you'll live in a gutter.

S3: And otherwise you know it's just not good enough ... our whole life is around these exams... (Y11 Focus Group)

Furthermore, they suggested that the amount of testing and assessment that they encounter had increased significantly since the beginning of their secondary education, with them constantly taking examinations and submitting coursework, with no respite over the totality of their upper secondary schooling; the amount of assessment and examinations dictated everything that they did:

Also especially with a lot of GCSE subjects becoming modular, from about year 10 you're doing exams January, June, January, June, January, June. — we're doing exams for four years straight from the age of 14. (S, Y13 Focus Group)

The UK has been criticised as having some of the most assessed children in Europe (House of Commons – Children, Schools and Families Committee, 2008). So while the students from this study can see the value of qualifications, there is also a level of concern about the degree of assessment that takes place, how they are constantly preparing for some aspect of formal assessment, and how the rest of their school and life activities suffer as a consequence. Moreover, there was real tension between

the focus on exams conflicting with the notion of higher education institutions looking for ‘balanced individuals’; students being required to provide evidence of being ‘involved citizens’ but yet too much focus on examinations meant that extra-curricular activities, such as sport, music, community work, drama and the arts, etc., were put on hold.

The structure of qualifications and assessment

Students welcomed having different assessment structures. They reported that some of their peers like doing examinations, some preferred coursework-only qualifications and some liked having a mixture of both:

I think there should be more opportunity within subjects for you to choose whether you want part of it to be coursework or exam or both, because some people work better with coursework, some work better with exams ... So I think there should be more opportunity for that. (S, Y13 Focus Group)

Examinations were, therefore, seen as a good way of showing ones’ abilities as well as offering neutral opportunities for students to show these without being assessed by their teachers. In contrast, coursework let students express themselves with it assessing more of what students had learnt through their courses, rather than the more limited amount of knowledge covered by tests. Having coursework marks ‘in the bank’ was helpful and reduced some of the pressure to perform on the day. Overall, choice in these matters was important; such choice was seen in terms of fairness, that all students should have equal opportunities to show themselves to good effect and that a one-size examination system (either exams or coursework) would not suit everyone.

A further issue raised was the interaction of students’ assessment outcomes with their relationships with teachers and how their success could be affected by these relationships. Students felt that their teachers had a lot of power over their assessment results with certain factors within teacher–student relationships implicitly affecting coursework grades. They suggested that teachers’ input into final grades was not totally without bias. External examinations provide opportunities for students to be assessed by external (i.e. neutral) examiners and not to be wholly assessed by their teachers if their relationships were not constructive. There was a sense that teachers had ‘set thoughts on people’ in terms of what they could or could not achieve and that this influenced their grading.

I think exams are good because it’s kind of like you’re the only one who can influence it ... the problem would be if a teacher didn’t like you and they gave you a bad grade, when you’re actually good at the subject. (S, Y11 Focus Group)

Such concerns provide a cautionary note to placing trust in any one form of assessment. The impact of any assessment system or practice has always been central to questions of equity in assessment (Gipps & Murphy, 1994). As Gibbons and Chevalier (2008, p. 122) acknowledge, ‘using tests alone is problematic as is any suggestion that [systems] be shifted to just teacher assessment.’ The practice of assessment is not a wholly neutral one: there is bias in teachers’ judgements of students’ work, just as there is in examiners’ marking and judgements of examination responses (Gipps & Murphy, 1994). It is in this respect that students can see the

fairness in having different types of assessment structures; to provide an outlet to succeed if relationships with teachers falter, as well as offering alternative settings to those who do not fare well in examinations.

Qualification equivalences: currency and confusion

Participants welcomed the greater variety of opportunities that the 14–19 phase of education gave them; choice and a diverse range of qualifications were seen as ‘pathways to the future’. Students were, however, somewhat confused about all the different titles of qualifications available (GCSEs, A levels, functional skills, BTECs, diplomas, extended projects, etc.) and their value with employers and higher education selectors. This confusion led into a more general concern about the ‘currency’ of all these qualifications, their ‘worth’ in the higher education or job market, their equivalencies and what were the best ones to take to optimise opportunities:

S1: I think with all the different titles – you get a bit confused ... because people are used to the traditional A levels, it’s easy to understand and easier for colleges, but when you’re applying, it might say, ‘GCSE grade B required, but BTEC grade C’ or something ... what’s the difference?

S2: Some jobs might carry on looking at just A levels and GCSEs and not BTECs, because that’s what I’ve been told ... employers prefer those. (Y11 Focus Group)

Vocational qualifications were seen as providing students with more learning opportunities and ‘a different way of doing things’. However, concerns were voiced about how these were understood by employers – some students felt that they were not understood well enough, whereas others thought they were becoming more recognisable, especially if more schools and colleges were using them.

Discussion about the currency of A levels and GCSEs tended to focus on the value of individual grades and the impact of the introduction of the A* grade at A level (summer 2010). A level students reported that they had no knowledge as to how these A* grades were going to work in practice with regard to university access in particular; what would be the consequences for the majority if only a few students were supposed to achieve these top grades? It was suggested that the new grade might not, in the long term, be a good thing as it was putting them under even more pressure to achieve it.

I’ve been asked for an A* and 2 A’s for the offer. There’s so few places at uni this year for the amount of applicants – we are under pressure to get the grades anyway and I think that A* is starting to freak me out big style, because it’s totally new and no-one really knows how it’s going to work. (S, Y13 Focus Group)

Thus students are, to a certain degree, confused about the equivalence of many of the qualifications on offer. Newer qualifications seem less well understood outside the world of school as perhaps students are led to believe and they are therefore, nervous about their worth. As the *Wolf Report* (Wolf, 2011) concluded, many qualifications on offer to young people are of little use to them and of little value in the marketplace, yet young people are being offered them as viable alternatives to an academic pathway. The concerns of these students are, therefore, not without

foundation. The notion of ‘real’ choice for students to enable them to take the best qualifications is debateable, given the tensions around qualification equivalences, accountability measures and the quality of some qualifications on offer. While policy focus over recent years has been choice, diversity and entitlement (Hodgson & Spours, 2003, 2008), real aspects of these concepts have yet to materialise for a range of young people in terms of qualifications and curriculum experience post 16.

Qualifications: getting easier and devalued?

Students were further exercised about media debates suggesting that examinations are too easy, that standards are falling because pass rates are rising and that examinations generally need to get harder. There was general disagreement with these views and students suggested that obtaining good grades in whatever qualifications they were doing was tough and getting tougher. Participants considered it insulting that their achievements were downgraded by the ‘standards are falling’ rhetoric. Yet, their experience was not of examinations being easy; neither in the preparation for, nor the participating in. They expressed concern that perhaps they were the victims of ‘grade inflation’; students considered it unfair to have to work even harder than previous students to obtain similar goals:

S1: Because when more people get the A, it seems they just want to make it harder so now there’s A star. So if you get A star, what will happen, A star star?

S2: People work so hard to get to a B, and now there’s going to be a shift in grade boundaries, so they’re going to go back to a C. (Y12 Focus Group)

Ultimately, students were concerned about the things they could not control and would affect what happened to them whether they had good grades or not. This concern was especially raised with regard to funding cuts and how these would affect young people and their futures. Funding cuts were not a specific area of focus for the research but they emerged as a significant issue for young people given the political context in which the focus groups took place (just before the 2010 general election). Students suggested that, in the current climate, they would have to work harder than earlier cohorts, do even better than their predecessors, all of which creates an uneven playing field. There is tension too, as they see it, with policy makers and awarding bodies seeking to make examinations and assessments harder but students finding the present demands hard enough.

Qualification policy changes: why us and why in situ?

A final area of interest was the issue of new examinations being introduced ‘live’ and the impact of this on students’ success. Participants suggested that they ultimately bore the brunt of policy changes within ‘live’ examinations and that future successes could be ‘messed up’ because of failures to prepare correctly or that ‘some testing level in between writing and finishing the exams doesn’t get done’. Students speculated that the awarding bodies ‘did not seem to care’. Yet the impact of such changes on individuals and their final grades could be considerable and mean the difference between a grade or two impacting negatively on gaining highly sought-after university places and/or jobs.

It's like the biology paper that was released in the January exams ... it was because it was a new exam specification, and friends sat that paper and they came away ... with Ds and Es. It's really messed up their whole future now. Because of those exams, they now can't become a doctor or whatever it is they wanted to do. So the exams need to be tested before they're put out. (S, Y13 Focus Group)

A very clear message emerged for awarding bodies and policy makers – examinations need to be piloted and tested before they are rolled out live to students. As Baird and Lee-Kelly (2009) have shown, the lack of piloting of large-scale changes to examination systems can have disastrous effects. The non-piloting of qualifications, the changing of examination structures and the assessment demand within questions ultimately becomes a question of ethical practice and whether such changes place learners at risk and commits national systems to unstable arrangements (Oates, 2007).

Discussion and reflections

The goal of the research was to consult with young people directly on policies and practices that dominate their lives significantly but yet on which they are less commonly asked to express their views. In this way students within the case studies were considered key actors in the implementation and enactment of national policies and practices with regard to qualifications and examinations. How these national systems are mediated within schools and colleges, but specifically how they are negotiated by students, in relationship with their teachers and significant others, is fundamental to students' ultimate success. It is of interest to reflect on what students suggested was significant and what might be the consequences for them of a fluctuating qualifications landscape.

From the data there emerged clear tensions as students experience the reality of qualifications. One seemed to exist around the structures of qualifications and how these interact with notions of fair assessment, the amount of assessment experienced and students' relationships with their teachers with regard to internal and external assessment. Students were very clear that the structures (i.e. the assessed components) should reflect ways in which students wish to learn and be assessed. Thus the use of different assessment components such as examination papers and coursework, as well as the modularisation of courses aligned with re-sits, were welcomed for providing different assessment opportunities for students. However, certain structures within qualifications have fallen foul of agendas around improving standards and enhanced rigour. Over the years we have seen the re-configuration of coursework (internally set and assessed by teachers) into controlled assessment (coursework done under controlled conditions) and are now seeing a major retreat on the modularisation of courses and the removal of re-sits during the course; all carried out to restore confidence in these examinations (Ofqual, 2011). While modular structures were welcomed by the students as a formal way of indicating progress, there was definite tension between their advocacy of modular structures and students' wider views on how much assessment they had to go through during their school career. Yet, even given this tension and the amount of assessment activity that such a range of assessment techniques can generate, the data reinforced earlier findings on this issue (Hodgson & Spours, 2003) but specifically did not show any advocacy for the return of linear examination systems; having some degree of choice in the range of assessment structures available was seen as essential and as a point of fairness.

A further justification for choice and diversity in relation to assessment components was the issue of potential bias from teachers in internal assessment. Debates around the subjectivity and reliability of teacher judgement continue to impact on the integration of teacher assessment in national assessment systems (Stobart, 2008). Students' articulation that their assessments are affected by teachers' 'set views' is significant, especially if they are formed early on in their encounters and remain fixed to the point of affecting final outcomes in internal assessments. The presence of external assessments and examiners allow for 'teacher-free' neutral judgements to be made about students' abilities.

Such reflections on the data provide a cautionary note of relying on any one assessment technique, component or practice. Research into equity and assessment has argued for the inclusion of different component types within qualifications systems and a range of assessment practice to provide the best, and equal, opportunities for all students to maximise their outcomes (Elwood, 2005). Policy changes within qualifications structures seem, too often, to be made in response to 'perceptions' about rigour, challenge, demand and public confidence in the system. Rather they should be based on empirical evidence that might indicate where change is fundamentally needed or whether there is any true threat to the validity and/or reliability of examinations.

Concern and confusion were expressed around qualifications changing in demand and expectation *in situ*, especially changes occurring while examinations were on-going (i.e. modules sat earlier in the cycle), or students used as a 'live test-bed' without systematic piloting in advance. Ultimately, such practices must be seen in light of ethical considerations with regard to examination practice. The lack of piloting in national systems generally has been positioned as an ethical issue (Oates, 2007), but the data show many other challenges to ethical assessment practice. One such challenge emerges from students' concerns about the equivalences of various qualifications. Brown, Lauder, and Ashton (2011, pp. 135, 139) suggest that the 'social congestion' in the increased competition for university places, employment and future careers has created a trap of the devaluation of the currency and worth of students' qualifications while producing 'credential inflation'. Thus a spiral is formed where more and more young people are successful in obtaining qualifications yet subsequent hurdles are increased to differentiate between large numbers of applicants. This is further aligned to wider concerns that certain young people are being encouraged into qualification pathways that are deemed to be sub-standard and worth very little (Wolf, 2011). Further ethical challenges surround the litany of factors presented within the student data that seem to create an 'uneven playing field' within which to succeed. For example, young people's education becomes restricted into rubrics of qualifications and higher grade acquisition in order to get through to the next stage. Interventions, like the introduction of A* at A level, start to become part of the rubric approach; the getting of such grades becomes part of the norm rather than the exception with the subsequent devaluing of grades directly below. Such an approach is in tension with students having to present themselves as 'balanced individuals' when applying for the next stage. So not only do students have to deal with the pressures of obtaining the best grades, but to stand out, they face demands to be rounded people with diverse interests and hobbies. The students in this study talked constantly of 'running just to stand still', of striving just to remain at a level common to many students, to present themselves as accomplished, independent and exceptional to those doing the

selecting. Many, however, knew that this would not be enough to secure their own immediate goals.

It is in the ways outlined above that students become policy victims in the qualifications arena. They are caught up in the continuous drive to meet qualifications rubrics with implicit promises of future rewards, where anything less than top grades has become tantamount to failure. While those responsible for national systems of examinations are forming, breaking and changing policy commitments in a pursuit of robust qualifications, students are suffering all the indignities of the fallout that such policy proliferation creates. Furthermore, they are not ignorant of the impact it has on them directly. The qualifications arena is a very challenging place to be and in such contexts we may well see a backlash from students (and indeed parents) if they see themselves as being disadvantaged compared to other earlier cohorts as they pursue even more competitive opportunities. The significance of such a backlash should not be underestimated. Students, while trying to pursue their educational and training goals, find themselves stymied by the consequences of multiple policy changes that they cannot control but which impact on them considerably; the implicit promises within recent social and educational policy agendas of education, jobs and rewards are fast becoming false promises.

What is clear from this study is that young people are navigating and responding to the turbulent qualifications policy landscape, not directly with policy makers, but through highly visible social media platforms. They are vociferous, about what is done to them in the name of qualifications reform and the negative impact of continuous initiatives and change which can be confusing, unsettling and ultimately detrimental to future success. Thus a key message for policy makers, educators and researchers must be to accept formally that policy enactment includes students and to be cognisant of the degree to which students are not buffeted from policy turbulence by their teachers or educational institutions as old top-down models of policy implementation might suggest (Hill and Hupe, 2009). They are affected directly, yet they continue to be the least powerful group of those who experience the interference of qualifications reform.

Notes

1. These are the main examinations taken by 16 and 18 year olds, respectively, in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.
2. Stretch and challenge at A level; extended projects; functional skills; vocational GCSEs; international GCSEs
3. The EBacc is a combination of specific GCSEs [English, mathematics, two sciences or double-award science, a humanities subject (history or geography) and a language (classical or modern)] that children are expected to achieve at grade C or above. It represents a new performance target against which schools will have to report.
4. BTEC awards are taken at age 16 and 18 and are provided in a range of subjects with more vocational emphases (business studies, health and social care, etc.)
5. The study was funded by the DCSF through the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCDA).
6. The implementation of the Education Bill (2011) saw the dissolution of a large number of educational advisory bodies. QCDA was the biggest and most significant body to be closed under this action. As a consequence, QCDA terminated a number of research contracts – the project being reported on here was one of them. As a consequence, one year of a five-year study was completed and reported on to QCDA in January 2011.

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