

# 'Nobody told George Orwell to hurry up': Student views on the evolution of GCSE assessment

Aletia Daly, Kevin Woods & Tee McCaldin

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*Assessments for the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) are typically taken at the end of compulsory secondary education. They are considered high-stakes examinations because access to further education and employment is often dependent on performance at GCSE. Despite this significance, GCSE students have historically not been given opportunity to share their views on assessments. This UK-based research reports findings from part of a survey that explored the changes students would wish to make to the assessment of GCSE English, Mathematics, and Science. Areas of focus were informed by the researcher's preliminary research involving a focus group with GCSE students. Three-hundred-and-fifty-one Year 11 students completed an online survey. Open-ended questions were analysed using content analysis. Descriptive statistical analyses were completed on Likert-scale item data. Participants indicated different changes for GCSE English, Mathematics, and Science. The most prevalent desired change was for GCSE English examinations to be open book. The largest proportion of respondents indicated for Mathematics to stay as it is. For GCSE Science, the most prevalent responses were for several 'smaller' exams throughout the year and a combination of assessment types (e.g. exams with coursework and 'controlled assessments'). Frequency and length of survey responses demonstrates students' motivation to contribute to this area. Grounded in the student experience, this study offers valuable insights that contribute to broader discussions across schools, examination boards, and educational policy.*

**Keywords:** GCSEs; examination; assessment; experience; student feedback; student voice.

## Introduction

THE EDUCATION Reform Act 1988 saw the inception of the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, which aimed to be an inclusive award recognising all attainment levels (Barrance & Elwood, 2018a; Brown & Woods, 2022). Typically taken at aged 16 to mark the end of compulsory education, GCSE examinations are 'high stakes' as performance determines access to further education and employment (Denscombe, 2000). Despite their potential significance, students

are seldom asked to share their views or experiences of GCSEs (Barrance & Elwood, 2018a; Woods et al., 2018). Notably, the national regulator Ofqual's annual 'Perceptions' survey typically captures a very limited sample of students. For example, in the 2023 Ofqual survey, 267 students studying GCSEs, A-levels, technical and vocational qualifications were sampled (Ofqual, 2024). While this offered breadth of assessment levels, the depth of insight that could be drawn from one student group is limited. Further to this, the survey focuses

on Ofqual/commissioner-identified topics (i.e. confidence in qualifications) rather than student-identified priorities (Brown & Woods, 2022; YouGov, 2021).

### **Students as stakeholders**

Ramsden (1998) identifies that insight may come from understanding the student experience. Hall (2017) highlights social/assessment validity benefits to students seeing their experiences being valued. The omission of student views in assessment policy debate is considered problematic because it positions students as passive receivers of new policy instead of actively contributing towards it (Barrance & Elwood, 2018a; Elwood, 2012). Barrance and Elwood's (2018b) research findings indicate that students are both capable and motivated to provide nuanced and considered perspectives on curriculum and assessment. Moreover, children have a right to share their perspectives and experiences on all matters pertaining to them and for these views to be acknowledged and taken seriously (United Nations, 1989; Woods et al., 2018).

### **Examination changes**

From their systematic review, Brown and Woods (2022) identified some research where some, but not all, GCSE students had expressed assessment preferences. These included modular courses (Barrance & Elwood, 2018b; Elwood, 2012; Putwain, 2009) and coursework (Barrance & Elwood, 2018b; Elwood, 2012), as a safety-net in the event of poor performance on examination day. Similarly, Elwood (2018) found that most students welcomed increased choice of assessment formats. The present research aims to provide a more comprehensive exploration of student assessment preferences.

In the preliminary research, a focus group with eight, mixed-attainment Year 10 GCSE students discussed their experiences of GCSE examinations to date and what they felt should be addressed in a student survey (Daly et al., 2022). This ensured that survey items that were pertinent to students' experi-

ence of GCSEs. The focus group yielded ten identified topics, one of which was desired changes to GCSE assessment of Mathematics, English, and Science and which constitutes the focus of the research reported here.

### **Methodology**

#### ***Study design and data collection***

Data were collected through an online survey using Qualtrics ([qualtrics.com](https://www.qualtrics.com)). Participants were a voluntary sample of Year 11 students, aged 16, attending school in England, who were due to sit final GCSE examinations during summer 2023. The researchers drew on well-regarded educational research textbooks to support their understanding of the utility of surveys within research (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). The study advertisement was shared on several popular social media sites, as recently used in a similar study with Year 11 GCSE students (McCaldin et al., 2023; Woods et al., 2024). Research information and instructions for survey distribution were also emailed to all secondary schools in England (GIAS/DfE, 2023).

A prototype survey was piloted with students to identify confusing/irrelevant questions, following which, student feedback confirmed appropriateness of all survey items. The survey was designed to minimise missing data through forced response options. The final survey comprised four student-identified foci through twelve items of various formats including multiple-part questions, Likert scales, dichotomous, and open-ended questions prompting for explanation (survey can be made available on reasonable request). Participants were able to choose as many options as they wished in response to the survey question about their preferred changes to the assessment of GCSEs. The findings reported in this paper relate to one focus of the survey which collected students' views about desired changes to the assessment of English, Mathematics, and Science GCSE. Note that findings from the other three survey parts are reported elsewhere (Daly et al., 2023).

### **Participants**

A total of 351 Year 11 GCSE students completed the online survey. Demographic data including gender, ethnicity, school type, and extra examination arrangements eligibility, were gathered to characterise the sample of respondents. The level of missing data varied below 6% and was higher on the Likert scale questions. There were no assumed significant differences between the participants with complete and missing data (Mack et al., 2018). Pairwise deletion was used to prevent data-loss by only removing data on an analysis-by-analysis basis as opposed to deleting complete cases with any missing data (Allison, 2002).

### **Data analysis**

Descriptive statistical analyses of the quantitative data were completed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 29). Conventional content analysis of qualitative data was used to understand the reasons offered in response to each previous 'closed' question (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). NVivo12 facilitated content analysis through a process of coding, labelling, and categorisation of data extracts. In the absence of pre-existing theory/data, content categories were derived directly from the data through a process of immersion and familiarisation, creating codes to capture key concepts, without the use of a pre-determined coding framework (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Kondracki & Wellman, 2002). Categories were then created by sorting and grouping codes logically and meaningfully. Appropriateness of coding and categorisation was determined through detailed discussions between the three researchers (Patton, 2002).

### **Ethical approval**

The Research Ethics Committee of the host University granted ethical approval for the research (reference number: 2023-15356-26982). Following provision of research project information, participants confirmed consent by confirming their age (16 years

or above) and that they had read/understood the research information. Since there was a very low risk that engagement with discussion of the examination experience could evoke mildly distressing feelings, information signposting support sources was provided at the end of the survey. All data were anonymous and no personally identifiable information was collected.

### **Findings**

The 12 most commonly suggested changes to GCSE assessment, organised by subject, are presented in Table 1.

#### **GCSE English**

##### *Exam formats*

Only 15% of respondents indicated that they wanted GCSE English to stay as it is. Due to memorisations and writing demands, over a quarter of respondents (29.3%) would prefer modular ('smaller') examinations throughout the year.

Nearly half (47.8%) of respondents wanted English to have open book examinations (OBE), which was the highest selected option out of all three subjects and responses.

Students considered that: English closed book examinations (CBE) tested memory: *'it's not about your level of analysis, it's about your level of recall'* (P348). The CBE format was felt to have low relevance to employment: *'we will never be asked to remember lengthy stuff like that in a workplace'* (P133). Few skills were felt to be gained through the *'arduous process of memorising quotes to churn out in a timed exam'* (P341). Content amount to be memorised is *'unfair'* (P271), *'too demanding'* and hindered answer quality and performance: *'the only reason why I don't do as well in English as I could is because I struggle to remember quotes and learning 15 poems'* (P89). However, two respondents opposed OBE and believed testing through memory was the only way to measure knowledge of a text.

**Table 1: Twelve most frequently reported desired changes to GCSE assessment by subject.**

Twelve most frequently reported desired changes to GCSE assessment by subject	English (%, N=351)	Mathematics (%, N=351)	Science (%, N=351)
Stay as they are	15.6	39	21.3
Open-book exam	47.8	22.5	27.9
100% examination assessed	-	27	14.5
One long examination at the end of the year	-	10.5	-
Controlled assessment*	12.2	-	12.2
Coursework	-	-	12.3
Several smaller examinations throughout the year	29.3	31.6	34.4
Examinations (with extra time for anyone who wants it)	39.3	29.6	27.1
100% examinations (with extra time for anyone who wants it)	-	9.9	-
Examinations (with extra time for anyone who wants it), open-book exam	26.2	11.9	14.5
Examinations (with extra time for anyone who wants it) several smaller examinations throughout the year	17.3	15.9	15.6
Examinations (with extra time for anyone who wants it) (open-book), several smaller examinations throughout the year	14.5	-	-
Combinded assessment types			
Examinations and controlled-assessment	-	9.4	19.3
Examinations (with extra time for anyone who wants it) and open-book exam	-	11.9	-
Examinations (with extra time for anyone who wants it) and coursework	13.3	-	-
Examinations (open book) and coursework	15.3	-	-
Open-book exam, several smaller examinations throughout the year	20.5	12.2	14.5
Examinations and coursework	32.2	10.8	19.9

Notes: Only figures for the 12 most frequently reported desired changes are included. Where a cell says '-' this means this response option was not within the top 12 for that subject.

\*Controlled assessments are defined in the MyGCSE survey as pieces of work completed over several lessons, in class, under exam conditions.

### *Extra time*

The second most popular change was extra time for those who want it (39.3%). Respondents often ran out of time: *'this examination has the hardest time limit to fit in all the questions'* and writing speed impacted completion: *'the speed at which you write isn't really any indication of your ability'*

(P267). Considered views on time limit extensions were expressed, for example, *'we should have 15 minutes longer... to read, annotate, answer'* (P75). Extra time would *'allow for more coherently structured, detailed, knowledgeable responses'* (P231).

### *Coursework*

Related to *extra time* was coursework to allow students to complete work at their own pace: *‘English is ultimately a much more nuanced, and sophisticated subject that you can’t rush, there should be coursework too. Nobody told George Orwell to hurry up!’* Coursework alongside examinations was preferred by 32.2% of respondents. Coursework better represented *‘what students are capable of’* (P194), reduced examination-stress, promoted creativity and enabled more detailed answers.

### *Controlled assessment*

Controlled assessment was felt to better lend itself to writing long essays, allowing *‘more time to plan your work’* (P118). Completing controlled assessments in class would be *‘calmer and easier’* (P20).

### *Combined assessment types*

Respondents wanted a *‘wider range of assessments... [to measure] all aspects of students’ abilities’* (P257), and a combination of assessment types (e.g. coursework/examinations) would reduce risk of grade being based on one exam.

### **GCSE Mathematics**

#### *Stay as it is*

GCSE Mathematics had the largest proportion of respondents (39%) indicating that they wanted it to *‘stay as it is’*; similar responses included *‘100% examination assessed’* (27%) and *‘100% examination assessed, stay as they are’* (11.9%), bringing the total to 78% of participants who wanted the current system to remain in place. Assessment for GCSE Mathematics was described as *‘appropriate’* (P3), *‘fair’* (P268), with examinations as the *‘best way to test mathematical ability’* (P7) because it is *‘relies on thinking skill’* (P340), not recall. Other assessment formats, (e.g. coursework) were described as *‘not relevant’* (P288).

#### *Several smaller examinations throughout the year*

The second most frequent desired change

was for several smaller examinations throughout the year (31.6%). Respondents felt assessment *‘shouldn’t just depend on one exam’* (P306); several smaller examinations throughout the year would be *‘less stressful’* (P108) and promote *‘better performance’* (P107). Contrary views were for one terminal examination (10.5%) because the content *‘builds on itself’* (P133).

### *Combined assessment types*

The two most frequently preferred changes included examinations and coursework (10.8%) and examinations and controlled assessment (9.4%), which would *‘show a more accurate grade’* (P152).

### *Extra time*

Nearly a third (29.6%) of respondents selected extra time for anyone who wants it. Extra time would be *‘less stressful’* (P110) and was described as *‘just common sense’* (P267).

### *Open book*

OBE for GCSE Mathematics (22.5%) highlighted access to equation sheets because assessment should measure the *‘ability to use them, not remember them’* (P116), and that no Mathematics-related job would require *‘trigonometry without any notes’* (P231).

### **GCSE Science**

#### *Several smaller examinations throughout the year*

The most popular changes for GCSE Science were for several smaller examinations throughout the year (34.4%) because of the content amount: *‘so much to remember it’s impossible’* (P26). Examinations should be split by topic, *‘since most units are separate to one another – the examinations should be too’* (P325).

### *Combined assessment types*

Nearly 40% wanted a combination of assessments, either examinations and coursework (19.9%) or examinations and controlled assessment (19.3%), which would *‘take pres-*

sure off' (P107), reduce memory demands, and make the assessment feel 'more manageable' (P127).

#### *Assessment formats*

13% of participants wanted Science to be assessed through controlled assessment and 13% wanted coursework only, to break up 'draining' examinations (P169; P217).

In open responses, students revealed they wanted a practical element of assessment to benefit 'visual learners' (P19) and provide opportunity to 'learn through experience' (P271), 'measure practical skills' (P120) and assess lab safety. Writing about, rather than demonstrating, practical experiments was perceived to be 'counterintuitive' (P267).

#### *Open book exams*

Just over a quarter (27.92%) wanted GCSE Science to be assessed by OBE because it should test 'how to apply knowledge' (P98) rather than to 'regurgitate' it. Respondents also wanted access to equation and formula sheets.

#### *Extra time*

Just over a quarter (27.06%) also wanted extra time to 'make examinations less stressful' (P110), reduce pressure, and account for individual abilities.

#### *Stay as they are*

About a fifth of respondents (21.36%) wanted the assessment of GCSE Science to stay as is, describing it as 'fair' (P268) and the best way to 'fully test knowledge' (P259).

### **Discussion**

The current findings contribute to the growing field of student voice research that continues to demonstrate both the usefulness and the rightfulness of student perspectives on educational assessment experiences. Children have the right to be asked their opinions and for these to be listened to and heeded (United Nations, 1989). Furthermore, student feedback can reveal insights

of which educators, policymakers, and examination boards are unaware, potentially supporting improved assessment validity. For example, Hipkiss et al. (2021) found a valid need for extra time, even for those students who were currently not eligible. In the present study, students specified legitimate changes to the assessment of GCSE English, Mathematics, and Science. The most frequently identified change across all three subjects was for OBE for GCSE English. Notably, English teachers have found that the 2017 move from OBE to CBE hindered student creativity (Marsh, 2018). GCSE Mathematics saw the largest proportion of respondents indicate that they wanted the current assessment format to remain the same, suggesting either a level of satisfaction, or lack of vision for plausible alternatives. Inter-subject differentiation highlights the careful considerations that students gave to assessment in the context of subject content. Desired changes to Science returned the most varied combination of responses. This suggests wider variability in the experiences of GCSE Science between students; respondents felt a practical element better reflected scientific enquiry.

As noted by Cook-Sather (2006), student voice has the potential to influence policy reform, educational research and cultural shifts. However, Fink and Stoll (1998) have considered historical and organisational factors that can prevent educational change and maintain outdated practices. Cain and Allan (2017) highlight an uncertain influence of educational research. This is notable in recent reforms to the UK GCSE system, which includes the addition of more complex content and the replacement of modular examinations with larger final exams (Burgess & Thomson, 2019). These changes were premised upon the then Education Minister's personal and atypical educational experiences, and his attribution of this to his subsequent opportunities (Gove, 2009; Holmes-Henderson et al., 2018). It has been noted that exami-

nation reform tends to replicate previous forms because those making the changes struggle to envisage beyond the system(s) they experienced (Holmes-Henderson et al., 2018; Mathews, 1985). This highlights the continued importance of student voice research to shed light on the full-range of student GCSE assessment experiences.

This research continues to develop the 'MyGCSEs' strand of student feedback that over time could impact both the field and our understanding of GCSE assessment (cf. McCaldin et al., 2023; Woods et al., 2024). While it is unlikely that this research alone will provoke an immediate reform of assessment systems, it does shed light on the student experience. It supports discussion around how assessments are approached at school, examination board and governance levels. Additionally, it informs the development of school-based support strategies grounded in first-hand experience of GCSE students. Furthermore, dissemination of findings could promote a sense of shared student experience and reassurance through a collective perspective on the experience of GCSE assessment.

This survey could not include all topics arising from the preliminary, student focus group study. Remaining topics included: student advocacy, revision; consequences of ability sets, subject choice limitations, and the judgement of grades (Daly, 2022). There is an opportunity for future research to survey student views on these remaining topics.

### ***Limitations and contributions***

Institutional ethical stipulation dictated that only respondents aged 16 or older could participate in this research. A discrepancy is noted, therefore, between some university research ethical approval processes and the common operation of 'Gillick Competence' that would permit any competent GCSE student (aged 13+) to provide consent to participate (AEP, 2022; Loades et al., 2025; Mathews, 2022). The survey was open before the commencement of the GCSE examina-

tion period. The researchers have considered the extent to which pre-examination stress and anxiety may have influenced students' experience during that time. Research has evidenced that pre-examination anxiety (Balaji et al., 2019) and negative test emotions (Collins, 2023; Spangler et al., 2002) are higher before an examination than afterwards. In light of this emotional trajectory, it could be that student views would differ after the GCSE examination period is over.

The researcher considers the uniqueness of this study to be one of the papers main contributions. of this research to be its uniqueness. To the researcher's knowledge, this is the first large-scale student perceptions survey which that has been developed and informed by student perspectives. This research, therefore, grounded in the student experience and explores topics which are most pertinent to students, rather than a researcher-led foci.

A further contribution of this paper is the value placed on student feedback. The length of survey responses on open-ended textbox items demonstrated students' motivation to share their views and experiences. Respondents indicated their consideration of the differences between each GCSE subject, the subject content and how this relates to the modality of assessment. By understanding students' perceptions of their learning and views on teaching and assessment methods, educational stakeholders can identify practical implications and broaden their understanding around where students may be struggling and need more support. Providing students with a voice over their education and assessment preferences promotes a sense of autonomy. This increased autonomy may lead to students feeling an increased sense of control over their learning and outcomes, and in turn, increase their motivation. By valuing and utilising the feedback they receive, educators may be able to demonstrate a level of care and interest in the student experience and its improvement.

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## Authors

**Aletia Daly**, School of Environment, Education and Development, The University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester, M139PL

**Kevin Woods**, School of Environment, Education and Development, The University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester, M139PL

**Tee McCaldin**, Manchester Institute of Education, The University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester, M139PL

## Correspondence

[Aletiadaly@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:Aletiadaly@hotmail.co.uk)

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