

Inequalities and the curriculum:  
young people's views on choice and  
fairness through their experiences of  
curriculum as examination  
specifications at GCSE

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## Abstract

This paper presents data that considers ways in which young people experience the curriculum through the lens of subject examination syllabuses (for GCSEs), their associated assessment techniques and structures and educational policies at national and school level concerning subject choice. Drawing upon an original qualitative dataset from a mixed-methods study of students' views and experiences of GCSE from Northern Ireland (NI) and Wales, the paper explores students' perceptions of choice and fairness in relation to studying various subjects at GCSE and the freedoms they feel they have to make valid and relevant choices of what to study. The paper considers the importance of choice to young people across a wide range of factors in relation to their experiences of GCSEs and how these de facto become their experience of curriculum at this age. Factors of importance are the subjects available to them through subject option selections at the school level and the ways in which GCSE courses are then administered. In relation to notions of choice and fairness, the paper considers how students see access to the curriculum moderated by national and school level decisions regarding the assessment of GCSEs; the extent to which assessment techniques such as tiering, controlled assessment and modularity, as well as school-level policy decisions about timing of entry to GCSEs (known as early entry) all combine to restrict students' access to the full range of subjects and influence the ways in which they experience these subjects as curricula within their particular school settings. Overall the paper highlights students' concerns about the ways in which curriculum and assessment decisions, influenced by national policies as well as local context priorities, are made within their schools and the consequences of these decisions for their final outcomes and future educational opportunities.

## Non-technical summary

GCSEs are the main school-leaving examinations taken by 16 year olds in England, Northern Ireland and Wales. For many students in these jurisdictions, the curriculum they experience between 14-16 years is effectively made up of GCSE syllabuses across a number of subjects that they have chosen to study. This paper considers the ways in which young people experience GCSEs through the lenses of subject examination syllabuses, associated assessment techniques and structures and educational policies at national and school level concerning subject choice. The different ways in which they experience GCSEs brings about considerations of inequalities in the curriculum at both the national and local levels.

Drawing upon an original qualitative dataset from a mixed-methods study of students' views and experiences of GCSE from Northern Ireland (NI) and Wales, the paper explores students' perceptions of choice and fairness in relation to studying various subjects at GCSE and the freedoms they feel they have to make valid and relevant choices of what to study, and what kind of course to undertake. From gathering students' perspectives about these issues, there emerged clear messages about their experience of curriculum differentiation as well as valuable insights, through their roles as key stakeholders in their own educational experiences, as to how GCSEs differentially impact on their educational successes

The paper approaches the issue of inequalities in the curriculum in a number of ways: (i) by accepting that GCSE subject specifications act as the curriculum and the out workings of this for understanding choice and fairness in curriculum access and exposure; (ii) by considering student views and experiences of subject choice through their choice of GCSE courses, and the pressures and influences which are at play in making such decisions; and (iii) by reflecting on curriculum differentiation as being broader than just those factors that impact on choice of course or subject, but which extends into students' experiences of the curriculum and the use of varied assessment techniques. The data shows that curriculum differentiation emerges even when students are taking the same courses, as these can be experienced in very different ways in various contexts, depending on the assessment techniques and structures used.

The paper concludes that such issues are increasingly pertinent in the context of recent reforms to GCSEs, which has resulted in a growing divergence between the ways that GCSEs are assessed across the UK as a result of devolution of education policy responsibility. GCSEs, while labelled as the same examination, are very different entities across the jurisdictions of the UK; students are obtaining the same qualification even though they reflect very different curriculum and assessment systems. Issues of inequalities arise for students in their clear articulation of the differential value of the same examination across the devolved jurisdictions of the UK.

## Introduction

Across many settings curriculum is formed, and informed, by social and cultural values, knowledge and skills that are deemed necessary for young people to know to prepare them for future work and life. Thus the curriculum then is not a fixed 'thing' but a 'dynamic identity' (Ridell, 1992, p. 1) that is continuously influenced by the ideological positions of politicians and policymakers, the changes in economies and societies as well as the beliefs, traditions and values of those who teach and of those who learn. In the UK, the main way in which young people experience the curriculum in schools is through subjects. Furthermore, by the time they reach the age of 14, students go through a process of subject option choices that begin to align the subjects they study very closely with examination specifications (syllabuses).

This paper draws primarily upon the qualitative data from a larger mixed-methods study of students' views and experiences of GCSE examinations in Northern Ireland (NI) and Wales. From gathering students' perspectives about these issues, there emerged clear messages about their experience of what Weeden (2011, p.402) has termed 'curriculum differentiation' as well as valuable insights, through their roles as pertinent stakeholders in their own educational experiences, as to how GCSEs differentially impact on their educational successes (Elwood, 2012). It approaches the issue of inequalities in the curriculum in a number of ways: (i) by accepting the notion of GCSE subject specifications as curriculum and the out workings of such a position for understanding choice and fairness in curriculum access and exposure; (ii) by considering student views and experiences of subject choice through the mechanisms for choosing GCSE courses, and the pressures and influences which are at play in making such decisions; and (iii) by reflecting on curriculum differentiation as being broader than just those factors that impact on choice of course or subject, but which extends into students' experiences of the curriculum as mediated by the use of assessment techniques. The data shows that curriculum differentiation can emerge even when students are taking the same courses, as these can be experienced in very different ways in various contexts, depending on the assessment techniques and structures used.

The paper will conclude that such issues are increasingly pertinent in the context of recent reforms to GCSEs, which has resulted in a growing divergence between the ways that GCSEs are assessed across the UK, raising important questions of choice and fairness. Devolution of education policy responsibility across the UK is resulting in increasing differences in the experiences of students across Northern Ireland, England and Wales of the curricula they encounter as well as the examinations they engage in. It will highlight that GCSEs, while labelled as the same examination, are very different entities across the nations of the UK and that students are obtaining the same qualification even though they reflect very different assessment systems with significant variations in the aligned subject specifications or curriculum. Issues of inequalities arise for students in their clear articulation of the differential value of the same examination across the devolved nations of the UK.

## Context: Subject Choice and Education Qualifications

In recent years, both Northern Ireland and Wales have taken measures to widen the range of subjects available to students at Key Stage 4 (KS4; 14-16 year olds). In Northern Ireland a new Entitlement Framework has been introduced, to ensure that all students have a full range of both academic and vocational courses to choose from at KS4 (DENI, 2011). Underpinning this notion of entitlement was an encouragement for partnerships between schools (either grammar or non-grammar or rural/urban) so that the entitlement framework could be achieved. Thus from the 2015/2016 school year, the expectation was that 24 courses should be made available to all students commencing KS4, irrespective of type of school or geographical location. In Wales, changes have also been made to learners' entitlements. The Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure (2009) mandates that all students have access to a minimum of 25 courses (both academic and vocational), and that at least three of these courses must be vocational (Welsh Government, 2009). In England, no such plans for an entitlement framework have been unveiled. Indeed an opposite approach has been adopted with students' freedom to choose subjects being restricted by the English Baccalaureate (EBacc), a measure which assesses school performance according to students' results in English, mathematics, history or geography, the sciences and a language (Long, 2016). This accountability measure seems to be influencing schools' subject option systems so that students are 'encouraged' to take these subjects (Weeden, 2011). In June 2015 it was announced that the subjects within the EBacc would become compulsory at GCSE for all students from 2020 (Morgan, 2015), thus further restricting students' subject choices in England and contrasting sharply with Northern Ireland's and Wales's attempts to extend choice.

### Moderation of curriculum by assessment

Having the freedom to choose subjects at 14 remains one of the most important ways in which students exercise a sense of control and influence over the curriculum available to them. However, it is clear that if curricula is aligned to GCSE subject specifications then how these examinations are structured, assessed and indeed administered within schools has a significant impact on how young people experience these subjects. This includes whether courses are modular or linear, whether there are controlled assessments or coursework and the timing of entry of students into the component parts of the examination (termed early entry).

In recent years major differences between the qualification policies of England, Northern Ireland and Wales on the assessment structures of GCSEs have emerged, leading to a degree of variation in the choices available to teachers (and hence students) across the various regions. Until recently (2013) GCSEs were regulated on a three country basis: there was collaboration between the Welsh Government; Ofqual, the regulatory body for England; and the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), the qualifications regulator for Northern

Ireland. However, since 2010, disagreements regarding the fundamental purposes of GCSEs intensified, culminating in the collapse of three country regulation in 2013 (Gove, 2013). Since then, major reforms to GCSEs have been implemented in England, many of which have not been adopted in Northern Ireland nor in Wales. The consequence is that for the first time there are differences in the ways that students can achieve a GCSE in the three regions.

One of the key ways in which the curriculum is moderated by assessment is through the course structure used. Until 2012, modular courses, in which the course is divided into different units and students are assessed either at the end of each module, or later if they are not yet ready to take the assessment, were available across all three regions. However, the GCSE assessment system in England has been revised considerably so that linear courses, in which students are assessed by terminal examinations at the end of two years, have been imposed across the board. Wales has made decisions about whether GCSEs will be modular or linear on a subject-by-subject basis (Welsh Government, 2012), therefore restricting the amount of choice available to students and schools, but allowing the more flexible modular courses in some cases, thus differentiating students' experiences of the curriculum depending on which subjects they take. Northern Ireland took the position that 'it is in the interests of young people to maintain as wide a choice of GCSE assessment and timing as possible so that GCSEs remain fit for purpose and enable schools to make the most appropriate choice on behalf of their pupils' (DENI, 2012: 4). It has therefore made the decision to allow schools and teachers to choose between modular and linear qualifications when it introduces its new specifications in 2017. The aim of this decision was to ensure that schools would not be restricted to GCSE providers in NI (CCEA) or Wales (WJEC) but could continue to use GCSE providers in England if they so wish. (O'Dowd, 2014).

Another key difference between England, Northern Ireland and Wales relates to whether controlled assessment is used within the specification. Controlled assessment is internal to the school, students are given the task in advance, and are permitted time to prepare. While various levels of control are allocated to each subject, the assessment typically takes place in class over several lessons and requires an in-depth engagement with a specific task or question. Thus, students' experiences of the curriculum are likely to vary considerably depending on whether controlled assessments are part of their assessment regime or not. In England, controlled assessment has been removed from all major specifications, with the GCSE being solely assessed through examinations (exceptions are within the more practical subjects such as design and technology and art). In both Northern Ireland and Wales, controlled assessment will be used when there is a case for this and dependent on the subject (DENI, 2014; Welsh Government, 2012).

Similarly, there is a difference across the regions in their approaches to tiering, which is a form of differentiation that is used to provide examination papers of appropriate levels of challenge for all candidates. For most subjects that are tiered at GCSE level, there are two tiers of exam paper – the higher tier, which provides students



with access to A\*-D grades, and the foundation tier, which is designed to be less difficult than the higher paper but only allows students to achieve grades in the ranges of C-G. Students' experiences of the curriculum and the subject varies between the two tiers (which are often synonymous with teaching set), with the most challenging material omitted from lower tier papers.

Whereas tiering was widely used prior to the review of qualifications in all the three regions, the use of tiering has now been limited for all GCSEs in England, NI and Wales. Table 1 below summarises the above detail showing the variety of ways that core subjects in the new GCSEs are/will be assessed in England, Northern Ireland and Wales:

**Table 1: Assessment of new GCSEs in the UK**

Region	English Language			English Literature			Mathematics		
	Tiers	Course structure	CA*	Tiers	Course structure	CA*	Tiers	Course structure	CA*
<b>England</b> (Ofqual, 2013)	Untiered	Linear	No	Untiered	Linear	No	Two tiers	Linear	No
<b>NI</b> (CCEA, 2016)	Two tiers	Modular	Yes	Untiered	Modular	Yes	Two tiers	Modular	No
<b>Wales</b> (WJEC, 2014)	Untiered	Linear	Yes	Two tiers	Modular	Yes	Three tiers	Linear	No

*\*Controlled assessment*

From the research presented in this paper, these changes in the availability across regions of modular and/or linear courses, tiering, controlled assessment and resits are beginning to show variations in the level of control that schools in NI and Wales have over how these qualifications are administered, ultimately impacting on the KS4 curriculum. Whereas in England, schools and teachers have little choice over the assessment techniques used within GCSEs, the data emerging from this study shows that in Northern Ireland and Wales, subject teachers still have a degree of choice over the GCSE courses they choose to best suit their students. Thus, local as well as national contexts seem to be impacting significantly on the curriculum offered to students; a situation, we argue, that will have major implications for issues of equality and fairness surrounding the choices available to students across these regions in what are effectively the same qualifications.

## Curriculum, subject choice and examinations

### Curriculum as examination syllabuses

Lawton (1975) defines curriculum as “essentially a selection from the culture of society...certain aspects of our way of life, certain kinds of knowledge, certain attitudes and values are regarded as so important that their transmission to the next generation is not left to chance” (p.6). Where curriculum starts to interplay with notions of inequality is in the ‘*selection* from the culture of society’ (our emphasis); the selection from the culture is not neutral and is dominated by ideological and political factors that give power to those who select *what* should be taught, decide *how* it should be taught and then *how* it should be assessed. Thus the curriculum in its broadest sense (knowledge, skills, and assessment) is socially constructed and interacts in profound ways with teachers and students as they navigate through prevailing messages about how and what young people should learn.

One prevailing message is that there is a reified set of subjects that make up the curriculum, predominantly selected from across the sciences, arts and humanities. This subject-based curriculum commonly reflects the main received knowledge in these spheres decided upon by those in authority for determining what is taught in schools (policy makers, subject experts and learned societies). However, this subject-based curriculum, like Lawton’s ‘selection from the culture’, assumes an agreed consensus of what these subjects mean. However, the form and content of subjects are perpetually contested, and continually struggled over as to what constitutes valuable knowledge. By the time young people in the UK reach the age of 14 they will have gone through a process at school level that has directed them into selecting from this reified set of subjects. Moreover, the subjects chosen by students at 14 in England, Wales and Northern Ireland also begin to align substantially with examination specifications (syllabuses) for GCSEs which *de facto* become the curriculum (Madaus, 1988). These specifications are designed to be taught over two years and culminate with students taking the GCSE examination in the particular subject either through a modular or linear structure. Thus these specifications influence how young people experience subjects and how they are positioned by them (Murphy, 2008). Within these specifications we see reflected not only the received knowledge domains as to what is deemed appropriate for young people to know, but also what is considered appropriate ways in which to assess them. Moreover, the examination structures chosen by policy makers and then implemented by the regulator and the awarding organisations, also reflect ideological positions as to what counts as rigorous and valid ways of assessing. We have outlined above the divergence of ways in which governments across England, Northern Ireland and Wales have decided to assess and structure core subjects at GCSE. What emerges from this divergence in practice are differential notions of what constitutes an appropriate level and type of examining for young people at KS4 which ultimately still ends up restricting individuals’ freedom of choice.

## Subject choice

Simply increasing the options available to students does not necessarily enable students to make different choices, as choice can be restricted by a range of additional influences and pressures (Higham & Yeomans, 2007). For example, Ridell (1992, p.8) suggested that the 'cafeteria style' selection of subjects shows gendered patterns of choice that become polarized for particular groups of students. Furthermore, Sullivan, Zimdars and Heath (2010, p.18) suggested that 'horizontal inequalities' emerge through this practice of subject option choices, as the choices made (or directed) may impact differentially on future access to prestigious universities or employment opportunities. The notion of 'facilitating subjects' is pertinent here, with the most selective universities within the UK denoting those subjects that are deemed acceptable ('facilitating') as core entry requirements to their courses (Elwood, 2012). Thus there are a number of complexities around choice, not least the extent to which students have real freedom to make choices about the subjects they study as well as their involvement in decisions regarding the assessment structures used to evaluate their performance in the subjects chosen.

Butterfield (1998) points out that students do not have equal access to different courses at GCSE: the range of subjects offered by each school varies, meaning that choice is restricted as soon as students enrol in secondary school, long before they make decisions about KS4 options. Moreover, even when choices are nominally available to students, several factors have been identified which influence their choices: subjects being placed in separate columns configuring (and limiting) the combination of subjects available; limitations on the size of teaching groups meaning not all students' choices can be accommodated; and students' choices constrained by what teachers consider appropriate for them based on notions of academic ability and behaviour (Ball, 1981; Ridell, 1992). Furthermore, Weeden (2011) suggests that students' socio-economic background, their attainment thus far, and their school type all influence how likely they are to study certain subjects. Sullivan et al. (2010) emphasise that while the discourse on choice is pervasive in educational policy, there are significant restrictions on students' abilities to make their own choices. The significant consequences of decisions taken by schools as to what choice of subjects and qualifications is made available to students may not be fully understood by them or their parents at the time they are made (Oates, 2013). Lumby and Foskett (2005) present such dilemmas as an equity issue, arguing that students' 'cultural capital' can influence their decisions as well as open up choices to them: those from more advantaged backgrounds have more access to support at home to help them make choices and influence what is available. They may also find it easier to resist pressure to follow courses imposed upon them by teachers. Thus, it is argued that those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds have fewer resources and less access to assistance when making difficult decisions with repercussions for their life trajectories (Lumby & Foskett, 2005).

## Choice and examination syllabuses

While research into subject choice is well-embedded in the literature, there has been less of a focus on the interaction between choice and examination syllabuses and ultimately how students then access and experience educational qualifications. One specific area that has received more attention is the impact of tiering on choice and performance and how students' freedom to choose tiers of entry is often restricted. Key research studies into tiering have shown that: teachers are influenced by course structure (modular or linear) when choosing tiers for their students (Wilson & Dhawan, 2014); tiers are often decided by teachers based on ability groupings which are allocated several years before students sit GCSE assessments (Baird et al., 2001; Boaler, William & Brown, 2000); students often do not have the information to make informed choices about suitable tiers (Gilborn & Youdell, 2000); restricted curricula are taught to the lower tiers thus not exposing students to the full subject domain (Ireson, Clark & Hallam, 2002); and that once allocated it is extremely difficult, even rare for students to change tier during their courses (Elwood & Murphy, 2002). A further influence on teacher decisions are their perceptions and expectations of different groups of students (Elwood & Murphy, 2002; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000). As these researchers emphasise, there are considerable implications for the fairness of the qualifications, since capping of grades on tiered papers means that students' performances are constrained before they even enter the exam room.

There is less research on students' freedom to choose between modular and linear courses, and consideration of how the choice of modular or linear course moderates their experience of the curriculum. Modular courses tend to enhance flexibility and to allow pupils to be entered for exams when they are ready, making qualifications more 'fair and accessible to all' (Heinrich & Stringer, 2012, p. 23). Retaining the option of both modular and linear courses would allow teachers to enter pupils into different courses in the way that is most beneficial to them and enables their learning to develop in ways that suit them best. However, the problem is how this can be operated in practice and how feasible is it to offer choice on a case-by-case basis. The practice at present is to deal with entire cohorts rather than specific sets of students as this makes teaching and curriculum provision easier to manage and more straightforward (Ofsted, 2013).

Very little research, however, has directly asked students themselves about issues of choice and fairness relating to course structure. One significant study (Baird et al., 2010) asked students directly about a range of issues relating to qualifications, their structure and reform. Students in this study were positive about the choice offered by modular qualifications, which included both examinations and controlled assessment. They considered this choice to be a matter of fairness, as such structures gave all students the opportunity to perform to their best (Elwood 2012). This current paper discusses research that compares and aligns with the Baird et al. (2010) study. It represents students' views on the issues of choice and fairness in relation to GCSEs in the emerging examination contexts of Northern Ireland and Wales at a time of significant change and upheaval.

## Why consider students' views and experiences on these matters?

Over several years there has been a growing movement that promotes the inclusion of students' voices in reflecting on educational policy and practice and of consulting young people more generally about their schooling (Cook-Sather, 2002; Flutter & Rudduck, 2004; Lumby, 2011). Such research acknowledges that the participation of young people in educational decision-making is complex in many ways and not unproblematic. However much can be learnt about students' perspectives on their own lives, their experiences of schooling and how the two interconnect if we engage with them in meaningful and significant ways. Exploring with students their perspectives on educational experiences that make a significant impact on them can become a valuable tool for identifying and addressing key issues affecting progress.

Many research studies have shown particular areas of educational activity keenly adopting the concept of 'pupil voice' and advocating for the mandatory participation of students in the evaluation of teaching and learning within both local and national contexts (Osler, 2008). However, research has shown that the area of assessment policy formation, qualifications and examination development seems less engaged in considering students' involvement as critical stakeholders (Elwood & Lundy, 2010). This paper presents original data, from students in Northern Ireland and Wales, that takes the position that students' views and experiences on GCSEs and their reform and how this relates to curriculum inequalities and subject choices, are immensely valuable and can contribute a great deal to our understanding of the ways that education policies are enacted in practice (Braun et al., 2011).

## Methodology

This paper draws upon qualitative data gathered from a mixed-methods research study on the views and experiences of students in Northern Ireland and Wales on GCSEs. In total, 38 schools participated; 20 in Northern Ireland and 18 in Wales. Ten focus groups were conducted in each region, with between 5-10 students in each group. In addition, 1600 students across NI (n=699) and Wales (n=901) aged 15-16 years completed a questionnaire survey. For the purposes of this paper, the qualitative data from the twenty focus groups and from three open-ended questions on the survey are discussed. This is data from the study that links to issues influencing inequalities in the curriculum aligned to subject choice. Where appropriate, quantitative data from the survey may be referred to but it is not the focus of this current paper. For more detail on the quantitative data see Barrance (2017).

## Research Instruments

Research instruments (a focus group schedule and a questionnaire survey) were designed which covered a range of questions, asking students about their views on a number of topics relating to GCSEs. They were asked about their views and experiences of assessment techniques such as controlled assessment, modular and linear courses, early entry and tiering. The questionnaire was a semi-structured, self-completing survey containing both closed and open-ended questions that took on average 30 minutes to complete. Focus groups were conducted on school premises, followed a semi-structured set of questions and took on average 45 minutes to complete.

## Sample

A stratified random sample of schools were selected from each jurisdiction. In Northern Ireland the sample was stratified by school-type, i.e. grammar and non-grammar schools. Final school numbers were six grammar schools and eight non-grammars recruited for the survey and one grammar and five non-grammars for the focus groups. In Wales, the sample was stratified by proportions of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM), either above or below the Welsh average. Final school numbers were five schools with below average FSM, and six above average FSM for the survey. For the focus groups, two schools with above average FSM, and four below were recruited. One youth forum was also recruited to meet target numbers of students involved.

## Data analysis

The quantitative data was analysed using SPSS. Tests of statistical significance were conducted, and effect sizes were calculated to understand the relationship between variables (again the reader is referred to Barrance (2017) for detailed exploration of the quantitative data). The qualitative data emerged from the oral recordings of focus group discussions. These were transcribed and coded using MaxQDA before being thematically analysed. Responses to the three open ended questions on the survey were collated and thematically analysed in line with the focus group data. General codes relating to topics identified in the research, such as assessment types (i.e. controlled assessment, tiering, and modular/linear) were inputted into the coding system at the beginning and additional codes were inserted throughout the process. A code map was then produced and an initial thematic map created by scanning the code map and identifying main codes that arose repeatedly in relation to different assessment features.

The overarching themes to emerge from the data analysis were choice, fairness and consequences. This paper will present the qualitative data particularly aligned to the themes of choice and fairness as it relates to subject choice and impact on curriculum accessibility and experience. It is noted that the overarching themes are

inter-dependent and inter-related and the theme of consequences is entangled with considerations of fairness and choice. As they are derived from the qualitative strand of the research, all quotes are illustrative of major emerging themes, rather than representative of participants views overall.

## Presentation of the data

In the presentation of the data below, all extracts will be labelled to indicate the school or youth group students attend, the data source, e.g. focus group (FG) or open ended question on the survey and the region, e.g. Northern Ireland (NI) or Wales. Labels specify the gender for each survey participant and for focus group participants if only one student is quoted. All labels for schools or youth group are pseudonyms.

In Northern Ireland and Wales the school years are numbered differently: for example, the first year of secondary school is Year 8 in Northern Ireland and Year 7 in Wales. Thus, the secondary school years will be referred to as to as 'first', 'second', 'third' and so on starting from the year of entry into secondary school. We turn next to the emerging themes from the data exemplifying issues around curriculum inequalities.

## GCSEs and Subject choice

As highlighted earlier, both Northern Ireland and Wales have recently put in place measures to ensure that students have a greater number of subjects to choose from at KS4. The survey data from this research however, shows that despite these efforts, subject choice remains a contentious issue for young people, with students suggesting that national policies and school practices regarding subject choice did not always allow them to choose the subjects they wanted. Students in both regions called for '*a wider range of options to choose from*' (Male, Clarke High, Survey, Wales). They expressed mixed views about compulsory subjects, with some arguing that '*pupils should be able to choose a smaller amount of subjects*' (Female, Roberts High, Survey, Wales). Students suggested that the third year of secondary school was too early to make important choices about their futures, and that decisions made at this age meant that they restricted their future career options.

In general, complaints related to specific compulsory subjects, such as Learning for Life and Work<sup>1</sup> in Northern Ireland, and Welsh language in Wales. Students

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<sup>1</sup>Learning for Life and Work is a compulsory GCSE in Northern Ireland. The course content covers a range of different topics, including human rights, democracy, citizenship, relationships and employment. It is designed to 'provide students with the skills they require to think independently, make informed decisions, and take appropriate action when faced with personal, social, economic and employment issues' (CCEA, 2016).



recognised the need for some subjects to be compulsory, but suggested that these be limited to traditional core subjects such as mathematics and science:

*They would be more useful if I had more say in which ones I am enrolled in/ have to complete. I think that if the only compulsory GCSEs were English, Maths and Science and you could take more options instead of doing compulsory RE, PE etc. GCSEs would be more useful to me (Male, Francis High, Survey, Wales).*

As their governments had made such a broad range subjects compulsory, students felt they had fewer options available to them and thus their ability to pursue their own preferred subjects was restricted. On the whole, however, the main concerns expressed by students related not to governmental policies but to school practices that they saw as limiting their freedom to choose the options they wanted. In particular, there was frustration over schools' use of subject columns or 'blocks':

*S1: you can only pick out of the blocks one from each block but sometimes they'll put two of the ones that you want to do in the same block but you can only pick one*

*Interviewer: oh ok so that's, that's been a problem [...]*

*S2: yeah they don't even do like a survey like to see which ones are more popular to spread them out (Longley High, FG 2, NI)*

While recognising that not all subject combinations could be accommodated, students felt that their choices had been limited as they were not consulted before the option columns were constructed. This is a perennial issue with regards to subject choice, and findings from this study resonate with those from Ball (1981) and Bleniskop, McCrone, Wade and Morris (2006) which suggest little progress has been made over the last three decades and measures which simply mandate a certain number of choices are insufficient.

What was also clear from this research was that the restrictions on students' ability to choose took two different forms: (i) schools restricting students' choices passively through subject selection procedures; and (ii) schools taking a more active role in influencing students' choices, by either pressurising students to take certain subjects or navigating them away from others. The latter was not only a problem for less able students who were prevented from taking more prestigious subjects: students suggested that those who were more able were often pressurised because schools *'want their pass rates up and if you're good at something and you've shown promise in a subject you've got no choice'* (Female, Elfyn Youth Group, FG, Wales). They suggested that this pressure was not always in the best interests of their peers, but that their schools were driven by accountability measures in pushing students to take particular options, resonating with the research of Weeden (2011). The data indicates that students still encounter difficulties in choosing subjects even after the introduction of measures mandating a minimum number of subjects for students to



choose. Thus it appears that it is not the range of subjects that is a problem but further limitations impacting on their freedom to choose subjects for themselves.

## Assessment techniques

As well as direct restrictions on their ability to choose subjects, students also commented on the ways that assessment techniques such as tiering and specification structure moderated their access to subject curricula. One concern raised by this research is how students' exposure to the full curriculum and subsequent attainment is affected by decisions about how subjects are assessed. These structures then impact considerably on students' experiences of the subject and the curriculum before they undertake any formal GCSE assessment, filtering down into earlier years and curriculum from first to third year. Essentially, assessment practices have a major influence upon the curriculum that students are exposed to. This is problematic as there are major differences between the ways in which GCSEs are administered in schools, and students report that they are given very little choice over many aspects of how GCSEs are assessed, structured and administered.

## Tiering

A key influence on the curricula followed by students at GCSE is the tier they will take in the final examination. Tiering introduces different levels of assessment that are aligned to specific sections of the subject specification and which are aligned to varying grade ranges. Normally, the foundation tier offers a narrower, less challenging curriculum and a lower range of grades; the higher tier is aligned to the full subject specification and higher grades. One issue for students was the way that decisions were made by their teachers as to which tiers and curricula are appropriate for particular students. Some participants expressed frustration about how decisions regarding tiering were made in their school:

*S1: in some classes I don't think some people are given opportunities...like for some classes you just enter the foundation [tier] and I don't think that's fair because they could be capable of doing higher... [...]*

*S2: yeah...because I just think everyone's put in classes... on their English and mathematics in P7 [last year of primary school in NI] or something...and then you're just kept in that and you might... be good at science and you're put in foundation for it because of your class so it's not really fair. (Devlin High, FG 2, NI)*

For students this problem was compounded because they considered it very difficult to move between tiers, particularly from foundation to higher tier. They suggested that this was partly a result of the differences between the foundation and higher

curricula. One noted that, *'it is unfair on students who are sitting a lower tier because if they are not taught the work then there is no possible way that they would be able to sit the higher tier exam'* (Male, Roberts High, Survey, Wales). Students reported that tiers were aligned to sets and that students were allocated sets early on in their secondary school careers:

*you get tiered on your sets... so if you're in the wrong set in year 8 [second year] or year 7 [first year] when they come to secondary school it's difficult to push your way up* (Female, Herbert High, FG, Wales).

This finding reflects that of Boaler et al. (2000), who found that the difference in subject material covered by foundation and higher tiers in mathematics meant that it was difficult for students to move up to the higher tier. Similarly, Ireson et al. (2002), showed that students rarely changed tiers during the course of their GCSE study. The consequences for students who are taking foundation tier but who have the potential to study higher tier is profound: while it is technically possible to change tiers, the lack of flexibility in the taught curriculum means that for most students this is unlikely. This means that the system of tiering not only places a cap on the grades available to foundation tier candidates, but also caps their learning: those taking a foundation tier paper will find it difficult to improve their ability in the subject and so will be restricted to the foundation curriculum (Elwood & Murphy, 2002).

In addition, the ways in which schools developed strategies to maximise student outcomes emerged as an equity issue. For example, students discussed how in one school they were being entered into the mathematics specifications of two different awarding bodies, one at foundation level and another at higher. If such practices are being carried out with students considered to be on borderline grades, the workload and burden of assessment that these sorts of practices generate for these students could be substantial, significantly affecting their experience of the subject curriculum.

The repercussions for students of these decisions around tiering are significant, as they affect their future life trajectories and ability to take subjects at a higher level:

*there are some people that they want to do certain things, like for someone who wants to do forensic science at A-Level but they need a higher tier GCSE qualification but they've been put in foundation by the teacher and then they're just not able to do that and I think that that's wrong in a way because if they feel they're able to pursue that and they're able to get that qualification they should be allowed to* (Male, Pullman High, FG, Wales).

Access to information on tiering was identified as a key factor in enabling students to make choices in their own best interests. However, while the vast majority of students were aware of which tiers they had been entered into, there was a mixed

level of understanding about the grade ranges for tiers. Students from five out of the ten Northern Ireland focus groups were unaware of the grade ranges available on the different tiers, with some expressing surprise when they were presented with a sheet which broke down the grade ranges attached to higher papers (A\*- E) and foundation papers (C-G):

Female: *so F is a pass*

Interviewer: *on the foundation paper yeah*

Female: *are you serious?*

Female: *so if you do a higher paper and get an E you pass*

Interviewer: *in most subjects – check your individual subject and check*

Female: *because we keep getting told Cs*

(Longley High, FG 2, NI).

This indicates that students believed that the lowest grade available on the higher tier was a C, whereas, in most cases it is an E. In Wales, students from four out of the ten Welsh focus groups were unaware of the grade ranges, with the most common source of misunderstanding being over the lowest grade available on the higher tier.

It is extremely concerning that there were actual misconceptions – not just a lack of awareness – about the grade boundaries attached to GCSEs. Several students were in fact shocked to discover that an E grade was available on the higher tier. This is particularly problematic, as those who believe that a C is the lowest grade possible on the higher tier might be more likely to choose the foundation tier if they think their performance may be poor on the day. Researchers have emphasised that students should have a good understanding of how tiers work. It is impossible to make informed decisions without this information, which will have repercussions for their final achievements overall (Elwood & Murphy, 2002).

While previous research has emphasised the extent to which tiering forces teachers to make judgements about students' abilities which has the potential to restrict their attainment well before any formal assessment has taken place (Ibid.), we know much less about how the modularisation of GCSEs interacts with teachers' decisions about entry; a whole new set of decisions are demanded of teachers regarding the management of learning. As a result, attention must be paid to the question of whether or not any of these new decisions limit students' abilities to perform to their potential. The results of this study indicate that many of the issues around fairness and choice relating to tiering are also relevant to modular courses.

### GCSE structures: modularity vs. linearity

The findings on students' views and experiences of different GCSE course structures (i.e. modular or linear) suggest that it can significantly affect the ways that they experience their curriculum. One aspect of modularity that has impacted significantly in recent years is the early entry of students into modules in order for schools to gauge performance and optimise outcomes. Data from this research has indicated

that the practice of early entry in Wales was widespread as it has been reported to be in England prior to the most recent reforms (Taylor, 2016). In one example in Wales, a school's widespread use of early entry meant that core subjects were usually completed by the end of fourth year, so that there was time to either resit core subjects or take additional subjects in fifth year. Student responses suggested that some schools are using early entry to maximise the number of qualifications students take, therefore ensuring that they perform to their best on at least some of them. Students noted that they then did not have the freedom to choose what other subjects they did in fifth year:

Interviewer:... *then you do other courses?*

S1: *yeah but they're really not the best ones*

S2: *not voluntary though*

S3: *terrible [...]*

S1: *they just fill your timetable basically*

(Thomas High, FG 1, Wales)

For students who entered early, the entire course curriculum was condensed into a year, sometimes as early as the third year of secondary school. Some students indicated that this caused problems in comprehending the subject material, as different modules had to be studied alongside each other, resulting in confusion between different elements of the course:

S1: *I think history should be over 2 years though cause there's a lot in history*

S2: *it was a lot [...]*

S3: *You were getting confused* (Thomas High, FG 2, Wales)

Students also talked of difficulty coping with this kind of workload and the struggle of having to stay after school to finish their courses on time. Moreover, as argued by mathematics organisations (ACME, 2011; The Mathematics Association, 2010), schools that make use of early entry may not deliver the full GCSE curriculum and focus only on those sections of the specification that are most likely to help students achieve their target grade. Students have an entitlement to study the entire curriculum, yet with early entry, students who achieve a C grade in the first year of GCSE may not continue with the subject, thus missing out on a year of further instruction. Such concerns have driven the decision in England to only allow the first performance to count towards the grade for a subject. This has led to a significant reduction in the number of 15 year olds sitting GCSEs in England (JCQ, 2016), while one resit opportunity is allowed to students in Northern Ireland and Wales, and so the practice remains more common in these regions.

The differences between the experiences of students who sat modular and/or linear courses were also notable. Students were generally positive about modular courses in which individual modules were assessed soon after they had been taught and the assessment load was spread over two years. With modular courses:

*You can focus on one module and get a strong understanding of it whereas linear exams have a lot of information crammed in at once (Male, Boyle Grammar, Survey, NI)*

Moreover, modular courses tend to include controlled assessment, which students noted tended to go into 'more depth' (Female, Caldwell High, FG, NI) than examinations, as they focused on a particular topic or question, while for an examination a whole range of information had to be memorised. They argued that linear courses were 'a memory test' (Female, Herbert High, FG 1, Wales).

Those who were positive about linear courses argued that all topics contribute to a larger body of knowledge and understanding, and so to perform to their full potential, it is useful to wait until the entire course has been taught before being assessed:

S1: *I'm happy with linear [...]*

S2: *yeah because like after all that, after doing more and more you get like a better comprehension of your subjects*

S3: *you get a good idea of your whole subject (Sheers High, FG, Wales)*

In line with the research of Hayward and McNicholl (2007) and Vidal Rodeiro and Nádas (2012), these students argued that linear courses were more cohesive than modular courses, allowing students to make connections between different aspects of their subjects.

While there were differences of opinion regarding which course structure was best, students who were given the opportunity to take modular courses were perceived to be advantaged. However, a clear theme that emerged from the data was that students wanted 'to have a choice' (Male, Waters High, FG, Wales) over whether they sat modular or linear courses. In fact, students believed that course structure had a substantial impact on their performances, to the extent that they asserted that the course structure available would dictate their choice of subject. For example, students at a school in Wales complained that they had signed up to GCSE Geography on the understanding that the course would be modular, and were then told that a decision had been made to change the course to linear when they began it:

*I definitely wouldn't have picked geography had I known that we were supposed to sit two exams at the end of this year because now we've got twice the workload at the end with things that have been started last year (Female, Elfyn Youth Group, FG, Wales).*

Similarly, students at a school in Northern Ireland noted that some students in their school were following a modular history course whereas another group was completing a linear one, and that 'doesn't really seem fair' (Male, Heaney Grammar,

FG 2, NI). Others suggested that the type of course structure available might affect their choice of school, and stated that schools should offer different options so that students could choose what suited them best:

*Even if different schools offered different things cause then you could kind of choose a school to go to cause you know what way you learn in it (Male, Heaney Grammar, FG 1, NI)*

Students suggested that *'choice is always good - it gives people the option of doing whatever they think is better'* (Male, Morrissey High, FG, Wales). Choice then in terms of modularity or linearity was also considered a matter of fairness. Students should be given the choice to enable them to decide which mode of learning and assessment would suit them best. The prevalent view in the data was that a fair assessment was one with a number of options that allowed all students to fulfil their potential. This view accords with research that has called for multiple assessment opportunities to be available to allow all students to perform to their best (Gipps, 1995; Jones, 2007).

## GCSEs in NI and Wales: Inequalities across jurisdictions

Participants were also concerned about regional differences in qualifications and the impact of these upon their future employment opportunities in other regions of the United Kingdom:

*yeah it's kind of a problem though because they're not necessarily like a similar qualification then in that sense so like someone that got a GCSE in one subject in England and some that got it here could have a completely different skill set and have used them differently to get the same qualification which is quite problematic (Female, Heaney Grammar, FG 2, NI)*

Here, curriculum differentiation was considered a matter of fairness, with assessment techniques leading to different skills and content being assessed. There was also a sense that English students were being unfairly disadvantaged by their government's decisions, as *'if they're doing the modular courses in Northern Ireland and not in England it's not very fair on the English students'* (Female, Morrissey High, FG, NI). However, the repercussions of the decisions to retain modularity for Northern Irish and Welsh students were also considered concerning. There was a perception that modular qualifications in these regions might not be perceived by employers and universities to be rigorous enough. Students expressed anxiety about the perceived difference in standards between England, Northern Ireland and Wales, with one student asking: *'it's a GCSE so if the three nations are all taking the GCSE why isn't it the same standard?'* (Male, Herbert High, FG 3, Wales). Students did not understand why joint regulation had ceased and they expressed anxiety about the repercussions of this. There was also a consideration of inter-cohort inequalities, as *'when we're all in our twenties we'll all be considered for the same jobs so it'll all be looked at as one they won't take any of this into account'* (Male, Heaney Grammar, FG 1, NI). For students, differences between regions and generations were highly problematic. This issue shows just another way in which students experience

different curriculum and assessment contexts under the overall banner of GCSE that further raises problems of comparability.

## Discussion

This research brings original insights to the field of curriculum differentiation, by highlighting the centrality of assessment techniques to discussions of curriculum inequalities and subject choice. The study found that GCSE subject curricula are moderated for students by assessment techniques such as tiering, controlled assessment and course structure. These techniques can affect both the content of courses and breadth and depth of study. In addition, the ways in which GCSE subjects are assessed appears to influence students' subject preferences, with students indicating that the course structure would be a determining factor in their decision. Three important factors emerged from the data in relation to curriculum inequalities and subject choice and we discuss these in relation to the main findings below.

### Subject option choices and links to GCSE specifications

The data has shown very clearly that curriculum within schools at KS4 is dominated by GCSE specifications; students' experiences of curriculum at this phase is very closely aligned with the subjects they have chosen for GCSE examinations and the ways in which these subjects are then defined within syllabuses. This formation of '*curriculum as GCSE specifications*' has major implications for the outworking of how we understand subject choice as well as fairness in terms of access to the full curriculum in each subject and the exposure of students to a range of subjects within their local contexts. Crucially, the data has shown that policy measures within Northern Ireland and Wales to extend the number of courses available to students at GCSE are not sufficient to secure students' access to the courses that they want to take, and that a greater focus upon *the conditions* for choice is needed (Butterfield, 1998). It has also shown the pressures and structures which limit students' choices by providing new perspectives on students' reasons for selecting courses, with associated assessment techniques also coming into play in these decisions.

The evidence presented here suggests that as well as mandating that a minimum number and range of subjects are offered, students want schools to consider how their choices are constricted by in-school processes such as having to select subjects out of option columns, without prior consultation regarding what subject combinations they would prefer. Thus the data reinforces the notion of 'horizontal inequalities' (Sullivan et al., 2010) with the subjects offered by schools, in particular combinations, affecting students' later opportunities with regard to entry into higher education. Similarly, the data reinforces Butterfield (1998)'s conditions for choice in that restrictions enforced by schools in students' ability to choose or select certain subjects can have unequal impact; some students can select subjects for themselves with others having subjects selected for them. Therefore, in terms of improving

equality of choice, it would seem pertinent for schools and teachers to consider the degree to which students really are 'free' to make decisions about subject choices and to what extent schools are doing the choosing for them and enviably differentiating curriculum access through the alignment of subjects with GCSE specifications.

### Access to subjects and curriculum: mediated by national and school level assessment policy decisions

Earlier research on curriculum differentiation has predominantly investigated the views and experiences of students in England (Weeden, 2011). This is the first study to have considered the issue from the perspectives of students in Northern Ireland and Wales at an important time, where increasing variations between assessment practices across the United Kingdom may well impact differentially on students at this stage. Not only has this study shown that there are variations in the experiences of students depending on the assessment techniques used to assess their courses, but also that students themselves are concerned about curriculum differentiation between them and their peers across the three regions as a result of current reforms. The data showed very clearly that students' access to the full curriculum was influenced not only by decisions regarding the assessment of GCSEs at the national level but also how schools mediate these decisions in their own contexts.

Decisions are made at a national level regarding the validity of particular assessment techniques for certain subjects, the ways in which young people should be assessed and the structure of courses; whether or not there is the availability of modular or linear courses: whether or not resits are to be permitted; and whether or not, controlled assessment and/or tiering are to be permitted. The decisions made on a national level define the options available to teachers at school level. This study has highlighted a substantial range of ways in which GCSE assessments are decided upon at the national level and then administered at the local school level, all of which affect students' experience of the curriculum.

Depending on the options available within their jurisdiction, school leaders and teachers will then decide what subjects will be available to students; which specification they will study; which awarding organisation's course they will take (and in some cases, how many different examination boards they will take across subjects); which tiers they will be entered into (more than one in some instances); and the timing of some elements of the course and when students should do these. Students themselves asserted that the ways that courses are administered can have a major impact upon their experience of subject curriculums.

This study brings into stark relief the curriculum inequalities students experience even amongst their peers in the same institution, depending on what teacher they have or course they study. The data indicates that these institutional inequalities



around curriculum, subject choice and assessment are as significant as the structural inequalities they experience through those decisions made by regulators and awarding bodies as to what counts as valid assessment techniques at age 16.

### Students' concerns about the ways in which curriculum and assessment decisions are made

Students' conceptions of choice are distinguished from those prevalent in the market-based discourse pervasive in education policy (Exley, 2014) which relates primarily to issues of parental choice over their child's school (Allen, Burgess & McKenna, 2014). Under this prevalent market-based model, the curriculum is not a matter of choice and a national standardised assessment system leaves little room for individual preferences (Adnett & Davies, 2005). The only aspects of qualifications over which students are seen to have any degree of individual choice are the subjects they choose but, as we have argued, this is not without its problems. From this study students were not satisfied with the level of choice afforded to them even on this issue and indicated that they wanted to be given more personal control over those aspects of schooling that have not been considered matters of individual choice in the past.

Students suggested that a key barrier to exercising choice in relation to curriculum subjects and associated GCSE specifications was the lack of information available to them about some aspects of their assessment. As mentioned above, the allocation of students to different tiers was not only highlighted as a major concern with regard to this assessment technique, but the lack of information about available grades on different tiers was also considered highly problematic for students. As the data has shown, restricted grade ranges aligned with early educational decisions about tier of entry meant that higher grades were unobtainable for some students before even sitting the examinations. Moreover, the lack of information shared with them about course structure (modular or linear), and whether controlled assessment was involved also created tensions in relation to real freedom of choice and the impact of these structures on final outcomes. Students asserted that such information might help them in the choices they then make. They recognised the potential impact of all these factors upon their learning and performance, and the repercussions for their future educational chances. The problem was not so much the variations available in course structure, but the fact that individuals were not always given opportunities to make decisions about the type of assessment and curriculum that suited them best. Students argued that they should have a choice of which specification they followed, with its associated assessment techniques, because they understood how they learned best and what kind of course structure would elicit their best performance.

The idea of student involvement in choosing subject specifications based on a preference for modular or linear delivery, with or without tiering, etc. may seem antithetical to a view of qualifications suited to all students and implemented in a uniform manner to assess in a fair and just way. However, as this research has shown, GCSE syllabuses and examinations are not implemented uniformly as

assumed; they are enacted in a multitude of ways across the varying contexts in which schools operate. As a result, it may well be possible to find space for consultation with students within departmental decision-making about specification choice and subject availability and for this to be seen as a constructive way for teachers to then redefine their relationships with examination boards; teachers and students together choosing what specification (and indeed what board) to study.

## Concluding thoughts

The findings of this study suggest students have sophisticated perspectives on curriculum inequalities, subject choice and assessment. These findings challenge the view that students should not be consulted on 'higher-level' school, local or national policies about subject availability, curriculum structures and resultant assessment techniques. Research, such as that presented here, shows students have the capacity to make considered judgements and do not automatically opt for what they perceive as the easiest option. It suggests that perhaps many of the arguments made against consulting young people are based on unfair assumptions about what young people will say. With regard to subject choice, curriculum and assessment, students wish to be consulted within three different contexts: national, school and individual. Students argued that they should be involved in national decisions about specification development as they are most affected by changes and they were not confident that decisions were always made by those responsible with their best interests in mind. They also wanted to be involved in decisions about the choice of subject specifications and the administration of GCSEs in their schools, such as decisions about whether their courses will be modular or linear. Moreover, they wanted choice over individual level decisions about their assessment. Thus issues surrounding curriculum inequalities and subject choice might be considered differently if students were given more freedom to choose in the ways specified above. This will only be possible in a flexible system where, if subjects continue to be aligned to GCSE subject specifications, then examination systems provide options for the assessment techniques available. These choices must be taken in settings where students are respected and given opportunities to make decisions themselves or in dialogue with their teachers regarding their GCSEs and subject choices.

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