

GCSE Teachers Feel Pupils Performed Worse Than Expected; A Quarter Feel Less Secure In Role

Contributed by VoicED

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VoicED Education Community, recently published market research findings which suggest that more than a third (36%) of secondary school GCSE and IGCSE teachers feel the pupils they were responsible for teaching did worse than expected in the 2013 GCSE results. Of which, almost a tenth (8%) felt that their students did “much worse”™ than expected.

The survey, which gathered responses from 145 teachers who had direct responsibility for teaching or overseeing GCSE or IGCSE education within their schools, also found that two thirds (66%) agreed that students should be penalised for poor spelling in exams. This rule was introduced in to a number of exams for this year, having only been a feature of English Language examinations previously.

In addition, the VoicED research also asked teachers whether or not they felt GCSE-level exams were getting easier. Almost a fifth (17%) felt that they were, although almost exactly the same proportion (18%) felt they were getting more difficult. Just over a quarter (28%) felt they were neither getting easier nor more difficult. However, a third (34%) of teachers felt that GCSEs varied in difficulty each year “ with some commenting:

“This year there has been a change in the grading boundaries and more pressure from the exam board to mark strictly. We achieved outstanding results for two years with many A's and A*s. This year the profile of our group was different both in performance and academic response, but they struggled to access the written grades this year and for the first time in four years we have had written work challenged. However, this has not made a difference to the overall assessment of our pupils. They received more or less with the exception of 1 surprise D , A*-C across the board, as we assessed them to be. What I worry about is the pressure to mark against the pupil and the need to justify their grades so much.”

“The greatest concern is not knowing how exams are going to be marked from one year to the next. What is acceptable one year is not acceptable one or more years later. The exam questions, specifically in Science subjects, are not harder it is the expectations of moderators and markers that change as they are given new direction in changing the standards. The volatility of the grade boundaries are of huge concern.”

“In discussion with other teachers, both in my department, other departments and from other schools, it is evident that exam boards have moved the goalposts without informing the teachers. Formats of coursework submitted last year were praised, but the same formats this year were penalised e.g. the used of certain types of map in Geography. Specific feedback has not yet been received. Pupils are penalised for taking the exams this year when they would have fared better last year and, in the media, teachers will be blamed.”

Female teachers were statistically more likely to state that exams were getting more difficult, with almost a quarter (24%) agreeing with that assessment “ compared to only around a tenth (11%) of males. Subject-specific issues seem to have been felt most in English, where almost 2 in 5 teachers (39%) felt that GCSEs were getting more difficult. This is a statistically significant difference to both Science and Mathematics (13%) and Humanities (6%). English teachers also spoke out in the research:

“We feel that we have let our students down having achieved 78% with the WJEC last year for English Language - the same team of teachers in the same school with a similar intake - and yet we find ourselves at 60% with Ofsted and HMI looming.”

“Years ago as a teacher you knew where you stood on results day. There were few surprises and generally the students got what they deserved. In the last two or three years in English that has not been the case.”

“The grades in English are terrible - moderation and grade changes have prevented many students getting into sixth form or going onto AS levels. I have seen more devastated students and parents over the last 2 days than at any other point. The exams are hard - students are under pressure and then they change the boundaries. It is unacceptable.”

Having spoken to teachers about the results they achieved, the research went on to understand how this would affect educators in terms of their perceived job security. On an overall level, the majority (52%) felt that the GCSE results they achieved would make them neither more nor less secure in their current position. Around 1 in 5 (22%) felt that their position was either much, or slightly more secure, whilst a quarter felt that their job was slightly or much less secure. Women (32%) were more likely to feel insecure than men (19%) “ although not to a statistically significant degree based on this sample. Those teaching in academies or independent schools generally felt more secure in their role than those teaching at state comprehensives “ where 43% felt that their job was less secure following results day, including 19% who felt their role was “much less secure”™.

Following on from this, the VoicED research asked teachersâ€™™ opinions about the proposed introduction of performance related pay for teachers. Respondents were asked to say to what extent they agreed, using a scale from 1-10, that â€œpaying teachers based on performance in exams would result in a better education system based on producing students who are prepared for further study or for the workplace.â€™™

Fifty per cent of teachers indicated a level of agreement of 1 out of 10 â€œ where one indicates total disagreement. Indeed, less than a tenth of respondents (9%) selected numbers which indicate any level of agreement (i.e. 7-10, with 5-6 being neither for nor against, and 1-4 being disagreement).

In response to the question about performance related pay, teachersâ€™™ qualitative comments reflected the generally negative attitude to the quantitative question:

â€œWho will teach the difficult; the dysfunctional and those needing motivation? Who will work with the aggressive SEN; the teen mum and the emotionally sensitive? Who will see the child and not the percentage for performance management? Pay by results was tried 100 years ago: it didn't work then.â€•

â€œI agree that performance related pay should exist to some extent - if you get terrible results year on year (and poor observations and show no willingness to improve) then why should you be on ups3!? However it is not just these people who are penalised but all hard working teachers, particularly English teachers who work more hours than anyone else.â€•

â€œI think teacher related pay is nonsense and is just another way of penalising teachers and increasing the amount of pressure based upon them. Teacher pay is entirely mismatched to the amount of pressure and work that is involved with this role. There should be other ways of removing teachers who are not performing well without severe consequences for the teacher body as a whole.â€•

â€œPerformance-related pay would be a less flawed idea if it didn't depend on human individuals whose changing circumstances are out of a teacher's control. Looking at grades is so flawed it isn't even worth thinking about. Looking at value-added is no better a solution; students expected to get A*s who do get A*s show zero value added when they have actually achieved as highly as they could. Some measure of how much support a teacher has given pupils would be far better, but how on earth you would do this I don't know.â€•

Finally, teachers were asked about the levels of competition that GCSE results engendered within the education sector at both a local and national level. The research asked teachers how much pressure they faced to ensure that the GCSE results they achieved were better than other teachers at the same school, other teachers within their local authority, and other teachers nationally.

At an overall level, teachers felt there was more pressure to perform better on a regional and national level, with only a quarter stating they were under a lot of pressure to outperform teachers at their own schools, compared to around two fifths under a lot of pressure to perform well compared on a local authority level (41%) and on a national level (44%). The results did suggest that teaching is a competitive arena - with only 14% saying they were under no pressure at all to compete against teachers at their school, and less than one in twenty (3%) feeling no pressure to do well on a national level.

Among those subjects from which there were enough responses to be statistically valid, English was the only one with no teachers feeling that they were not under some amount of pressure to outdo their peers at their own institution. English teachers were also statistically more likely to feel under a lot of pressure to perform within their Local Authority than were Mathematics and Science teachers. Nationally, there was little difference in terms of subject taught.

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