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# **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. 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.

**Key words:** curriculum, inequalities, examinations, students' views, GCSEs

## **Biographical information**

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## **Introduction**

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 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, (for a detailed discussion see also Pring, (this issue)). In the UK, the main way in which young people experience the curriculum in schools is through subjects. By the time they reach the age of 14, students go through a process of subject option choices that align those subjects 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 as to how GCSEs differentially impact their educational experiences (Elwood, 2012). It approaches the issue of inequalities in the curriculum in a number of ways: (i) by accepting the notion of ‘*curriculum as GCSE subject specifications*’ 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, with schools taking a key role in influencing students choices, as can be seen in other contexts (Smyth, this issue; Anders et al., this issue); 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. Devolution of education policy responsibility across the UK has resulted in increasing differences in the experiences of students across NI, England and Wales of the curricula they encounter and the examinations they engage in. GCSEs, while labelled as the same examination, are very different entities across the nations of the UK so that students are obtaining the same qualification even though they reflect very different assessment systems and subject specifications. 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.

### **Subject Choice and Education Qualifications**

In recent years, both NI and Wales have taken measures to widen the range of subjects available to students at Key Stage 4 (KS4; 14-16 year olds). In NI, 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 student entitlements 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 that assesses school performance according to students' results in English, mathematics, history or geography, the sciences and a language (Long, 2016). This new 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, contrasting sharply with NI'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 are aligned to GCSE specifications then how these examinations are structured, assessed and administered within schools has a significant impact on how young people experience these subjects and by association, the curriculum.

In recent years major differences between the qualification policies of England, NI 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 2013, GCSEs were regulated on a three-country basis with collaboration between the three qualifications regulators for each jurisdiction (the Welsh Government; Ofqual, [England] and CCEA [NI]). However following disagreements regarding the fundamental purposes of GCSEs there was collapse of three-country regulation (Gove, 2013). This has resulted in major reforms to GCSEs being implemented in England, many of which have not been adopted in NI 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 course structure. Until 2012, modular courses (specifications divided into different units with students assessed at the end of each module) were available across all three regions. However, in England, GCSEs can no longer be assessed through modules, and linear courses, (students assessed by terminal examinations at the end of two years), have been implemented across the board. In Wales decisions about whether GCSEs are modular or linear is on subject-by-subject basis (Welsh Government, 2012). This model, while delivering some choice, tends to differentiate how students experience their GCSE studies with the more flexible modular courses allowed only in some subjects. NI has made the decision to allow schools and teachers to choose between modular and linear qualifications in all subjects when it introduces its new specifications for first teaching 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 the new GCSE specifications is the use (or not) of controlled assessment that is internal to the school. Students are given the task in advance, are permitted time to prepare, and the assessment typically takes place in class over several lessons and requires in-depth engagement with the task given. Therefore, 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 GCSEs being solely assessed through examinations (exceptions are within the more practical subjects such as design and technology and art). In both NI 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 variation in the inclusion of tiering; an assessment structure that provides different levels of examination papers aimed at appropriate levels of challenge for all

candidates. For most subjects there are two tiers of exam papers – the higher tier, which provides students with access to A\*-D grades, and the foundation tier, which allows students to achieve C-G grades, with no access to the higher grades. Students’ experiences of the curriculum and the subject then varies between the two tiers (which are often synonymous with teaching set), with the most challenging content, knowledge and skills omitted from lower tier papers. Whereas tiering was widely used in all three regions prior to the current reviews of the GCSE, it 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, NI and Wales:

Table 1 about here

These changes across regions in the structures of GCSEs, of modular and/or linear courses, tiering and controlled assessment as well as the limited availability of resits, are beginning to show variations in the level of control that schools 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 NI and Wales, subject teachers still have a degree of choice over the GCSE courses they choose to best suit their students. Therefore, 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 with regard to the real 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). The prevailing way in which the ‘culture of society’ is selected for curriculum purposes is through a set of subjects emanating from across the domains of science, the arts and humanities, with their content and form usually decided upon by those in authority for determining what is taught in schools (policy makers, subject experts and learned societies). 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. At this stage of schooling, the subjects also begin to align substantially with examination specifications for GCSEs which *de facto* become the curriculum (Madaus, 1988). 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, valid and rigorous ways in which to assess them. Thus it is within the selections of content and knowledge that make up these specifications and the structures and techniques chosen to assess young people where curriculum and assessment start to interplay with notions of inequality. The divergence of ways in which subjects are defined and assessed across the GCSE evidences differential notions of what constitutes appropriate knowledge, and the examining of that knowledge, for young people at KS4 which ultimately interacts with students’ subject choices.

### ***Subject choice***

Sullivan, Zimdars and Heath (2010, p.18) suggested that ‘horizontal inequalities’ emerge through the practice of subject option choices, as the choices made (or directed) may impact differentially on future access to prestigious universities or employment opportunities. Furthermore, they argue that while the discourse of choice is all-pervasive in educational

policy, there are considerable restrictions on students to make their own choices. 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.

Students do not all have equal access to different courses at GCSE (Butterfield, 1998): the range of subjects offered by each school varies, meaning that choice is restricted as soon as students enrol in secondary school. 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). When choices are nominally available to students, several influencing factors have been identified: 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). Weeden (2011) suggested that students' socio-economic background, their attainment thus far, and their school type all influence how likely they are to study certain subjects. It is argued that students 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); 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 some 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. For example, 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 considers notions of inequalities and the curriculum through students' views on the issue of fairness and choice in relation to GCSEs in the emerging and changing examination contexts of NI and Wales.

## **Methodology**

This paper draws upon qualitative data gathered from a mixed-methods research study on the views and experiences of students in NI and Wales on GCSEs. In total, 38 schools participated; 20 in NI 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 38 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). A focus group schedule and a questionnaire survey were used to ask students a range of questions about their views on a number of topics relating to GCSEs: their views and experiences of assessment techniques such as controlled assessment; modular and linear courses; early entry and tiering. Focus groups were conducted on school premises, followed a

semi-structured set of questions and took on average 45 minutes to complete. The questionnaire was a semi-structured, self-completing survey containing both closed and open-ended questions that took on average 30 minutes to complete.

### ***Sample***

A stratified random sample of schools were selected from each jurisdiction. In NI the sample was stratified by school-type, i.e. grammar and non-grammar schools. Final school numbers were one grammar and five non-grammars for the focus groups and six grammar schools and eight non-grammars recruited for the survey. In Wales, the sample was stratified by proportions of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM), either above or below the Welsh average. 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. Final school numbers for the survey were five schools with below average FSM, and six above average FSM for the survey.

### ***Data analysis***

The qualitative data emerged from the oral recordings of focus group discussions and the capture of data from three open-ended questions on the survey. The focus group data were transcribed and coded using MaxQDA and then 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 that arose repeatedly in relation to different assessment features were inserted throughout the process. This paper will present the qualitative data particularly aligned to themes of choice and fairness as it relates to subject choice and impact on curriculum accessibility and experience. Quotes used are illustrative of major emerging themes, rather than representative of participants views overall.

In the presentation of the data below, all extracts are labelled to indicate the data source, e.g. focus group (FG) or open-ended question on the survey (SS) and the region (NI or Wales). In NI and Wales the school years are numbered differently: the first year of secondary school is Year 8 in NI 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.

## **GCSEs and Subject choice**

As highlighted earlier, both NI 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 their preferred subjects. Students in both regions called for ‘*a wider range of options to choose from*’ (Male, SS1, Wales) with some arguing that ‘*pupils should be able to choose a smaller amount of subjects*’ (Female, SS3, 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 NI, and Welsh language in Wales. Students recognised the need for some subjects to be compulsory, but suggested that these be limited to traditional core subjects such as mathematics and science:

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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).

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, SS2, 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. 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

S2: yeah they don't even do a survey to see which ones are more popular to spread them out (FG4 , NI)

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 with regard to option blocks 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, FG2, Wales). They suggested that this pressure was not always in their best interests, but that their schools were driven by accountability measures in pushing students to take particular options, resonating with the research of Weeden (2011).

### **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 the earlier years of secondary schooling. 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 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:



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 in NI] ...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. (FG2 , 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, SS3, 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, FG3, Wales).

This finding reflects that of Boaler et al. (2000), who found that the difference in subject material covered within foundation and higher tiers in mathematics meant that it was difficult for students to move up to the higher tier. 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. 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 used tiering 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 students could be substantial, significantly affecting their experiences of the curriculum and subsequent outcomes.

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

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 ...I think that that's wrong in a way because if they feel they're able to get that qualification they should be allowed to (Male, FG5, 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 available on tiers. Students from five out of the ten NI 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 - are you serious?

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

Female: because we keep getting told Cs

(FG4 , 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. This is 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 fear their performance may be poor on the day.. It is impossible to make informed decisions without this information, decisions 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 (Taylor, 2016). 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. 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. 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

(FG7 , 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: You were getting confused (FG7 , 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, 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 (ACME, 2011; The Mathematics Association, 2010). 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.

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, SS1, NI)

Moreover, modular courses tend to include controlled assessment, which students noted tended to go into '*more depth*' (Female, FG1, 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. Thus, linear courses were considered by some students to be '*a memory test*' (Female, FG3, 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 as then 'you get a good idea of your whole subject' (FG6, Wales). In line with the research of Hayward and McNicholl (2007) and Vidal Rodeiro and Nádás (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, a clear theme that emerged from the data was that students wanted '*to have a choice*' (Male, ,

FG8, 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:

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 (Female, FG2, Wales).

Similarly, students at a school in NI 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, FG3, 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, FG3, NI)

Students argued that '*choice is always good - it gives people the option of doing whatever they think is better*' (Male, FG4, Wales). Choice then in terms of modularity or linearity was also considered a matter of fairness. 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:

they're not necessarily like a similar qualification .... so 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, FG3 , 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, FG4, 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 as rigorous enough by employers and universities. Students expressed anxiety about the perceived difference in standards between England, NI 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, FG3, 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, FG3, 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 that can affect both the content of courses and breadth and depth of study. In addition, the ways in which GCSE subjects are assessed could influence students' subject preferences, with students indicating that the course structure would be a determinant in their decision. Three important factors emerged from the data in relation to curriculum inequalities and subject choice which are discussed below.

### ***Subject choices and GCSE specifications***

The data has shown that curriculum within schools at KS4 is dominated by GCSE specifications; students' experiences of curriculum at this phase is closely aligned with the subjects they have chosen for GCSE examinations and the ways in which these subjects are assessed. This notion of '*curriculum as GCSE specifications*' has major implications for 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 local contexts. Crucially, the data has shown that policy measures within NI and Wales to extend the number of courses available to students at GCSE are not sufficient to secure students' access to the courses 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 that limit students' choices by providing new perspectives on students' reasons for selecting courses, with associated assessment techniques also influencing these decisions.



The evidence presented 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 selecting subjects out of option columns, without prior consultation regarding what subject combinations they would prefer. 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. This evidence confers with that detailed in this special issue about young people’s choices within Irish schools (Smyth, this issue) and English schools (Anders et al., this issue). Thus our research, alongside the other studies presented in this special issue, supports Butterfield (1998)’s conditions for choice, in that restrictions enforced by schools in students’ ability to choose 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.

***Access to subjects and curriculum: national and school 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 perspectives of students in NI and Wales, and it does so at an important time, where increasing variations between assessment practices across the United Kingdom may well impact differentially on students at GCSE. 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. The data showed 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 local 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. These national-level decisions define the options available to teachers at school level. 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 use across subjects); which tiers they will be entered into (more than one in some instances); and the timing of some course units.

This study also 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 curriculum and assessment decisions***

Students' conceptions of choice are distinguished from those prevalent in the market-based discourse pervasive in education policy (Exley, 2014) that relates primarily to issues of parental choice over their child's school (Allen et al. 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. Within this study students were not satisfied with the level of choice afforded to them and indicated that they wanted to be given more control over those aspects of schooling that have not been considered matters of individual choice in the past.

A key barrier to exercising choice in relation to curriculum subjects and associated GCSE specifications was the lack of information available to students about some aspects of their assessment. The data has shown that 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/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 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’ policies about subject availability, curriculum structures and resultant assessment techniques. Our research shows that students have the capacity to make considered judgements with regard to subject choice, curriculum and assessment and wished to be consulted on such matters 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 school and individual level decisions regarding choice of specifications and assessment structures. The research suggests that 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 specifications, then examination systems provide options for the assessment techniques available and students are given opportunities to make decisions themselves or in dialogue with their teachers regarding their GCSEs and subject choices.

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