

Scrap GCSEs says the man who invented them

[D theday.co.uk/scrap-the-gcse-system-i-invented-now-4](https://www.theday.co.uk/scrap-the-gcse-system-i-invented-now-4) 21 August 2024



A wider movement: Students celebrate GCSE results (above) while across Western education many argue that all-or-nothing exams are a misguided way of assessing a child's overall ability.

Is the exam system fit for purpose? As this year's results are announced, a growing number of critics think we should replace the current tests with something completely different.

What's happening?

Every year the groups of teenagers gathers outside schools, each one clutching an envelope. As they open their envelopes, their faces fill with delight or disbelief.

But what if GCSEs were scrapped? That is the proposal made by Lord Baker of Dorking who, four decades ago, created the current exams for 16 year olds in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Now he has called the level of testing "absolutely absurd".

He is not the only critic of GCSEs. A **think tank** founded by the former prime minister **Tony Blair** has made the same suggestion. GCSEs, it claims fail to "meet the needs of the modern world".

Find out more

Few European countries have so many exams for 16 year olds. Critics claim that GCSEs are **obsolete**.

Those in favour of them argue that GCSEs are widely recognised and considered reliable by colleges, universities and employers. Continuous assessment and coursework are often less accurate and less fair.

Opponents argue that exams at 16 do not prepare young people for the modern economy, while the number of tests is too high and the range of subjects too narrow.

Employment has certainly changed in the four decades since GCSEs were introduced. Now **automation** and **AI** are transforming the world of work. Most teachers recognise the education system has to prepare young people for the challenges this brings.

Given the pace of change, students may have to reskill and upskill many times during their lives. Perhaps the most important lesson exams can teach is the habit of learning new things.

Is the exam system fit for purpose?

Some say

Yes! GCSEs are a rigorous and widely recognised exam system. Coursework and continuous assessment are less fair.

Others say

No: There are too many tests in Britain and they fail to prepare students adequately for the modern economy.

FOR YOUR SUMMER READING CHALLENGE CLUE GO TO STEP SIX IN THE SIX STEPS TO DISCOVERY BELOW.

Some people say

“You have to stay in school [...] Because the one thing people can't take away from you is your education. And it is worth the investment.”

Michelle Obama (1964 –), American former First Lady

What do you think?

Six steps to discovery

1. Connect

How do you feel about this story? - Did you have to sit exams this summer? Describe how you felt before receiving the results.

2. Wonder

What questions do you have? - For example: What methods do other countries use for assessing students at 16? How many subjects do European students study at the same stage?

3. Investigate

What are the facts? - Pick out one thing we know for certain and one thing we cannot say for sure.

4. Construct

What is your point of view? - Write a letter to the current minister in charge of education, arguing whether you think it's a good idea or bad one to test students at 16.

5. Express

What do others believe? - In groups, come up with a new list of subjects every pupil should study to prepare for the modern economy.

6. Reflect

What might happen next? - Summer Reading Challenge Day 24 clue: What “o” means that something is outdated or irrelevant? Download your challenge entry form [here](#) and fill in the answers to the clues.

Glossary

GCSEs - National exams taken by 15 and 16-year-olds in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Absurd - Ridiculous.

Think tank - A research organisation focusing on a certain topic, such as climate policy or education. They often produce information used by businesses, governments and big organisations.

Tony Blair - Tony Blair was the leader of the Labour party. He was British prime minister from 1997 to 2007.

Obsolete - Outdated and no longer useful.

AI - A computer programme that has been designed to think.