

What Works at Key Stage 4 in Terms of Improving GCSE Outcomes, Two or Three Years of Study?

Introduction and background

The structure of the national curriculum for secondary schools in England is that Key Stage 3 (KS3) runs from Year 7 to Year 9 and KS4 from Year 10 to Year 11. While the national curriculum is compulsory for maintained schools, academy schools (around three-quarters of secondary schools in England) may choose whether or not to follow it. Therefore, some schools have opted to change their curriculum, including its length.

This study was funded through the Education Endowment Foundation's (EEF) 2019 'School Choices' project. This was one of the first School Choices studies, which considers whether and how the different choices which schools make lead to different outcomes. They examine variation in practice within the education system, rather than evaluating a specific intervention, and typically use quasi-experimental designs (QEDs) to estimate the impact of the different approaches. This study investigated the extent of, and rationale for, offering a 2- or 3-year KS4 in England and explored how the length of KS4 affected pupil outcomes at GCSE.

Key points and findings

Previous research

- Previous research about the impact of different models of KS4 is limited. There is some evidence available from an evaluation of the then Department for Children, Schools, and Families' 2-Year Key Stage 3 project, which launched in 2003. This project aimed to increase the pace of learning in KS3 and open up curricular flexibility, for example, by beginning the KS4/GCSE curricula earlier through the time saved. The evaluation focused on performance in Year 7 and Year 8 (in the then QCA Optional Tests) finding that a shortened KS3 was associated with an increased pace of learning in maths.
- The 'Key Stage 3: The Wasted Years?' report by Ofsted in 2015 found that around a third of the schools that participated were delivering KS3 over two years (and, by implication, KS4 over three years). More recent evidence suggests that a longer KS4 has become more common.
- Fifty-six per cent of respondents in NFER's February 2019 Teacher Voice representative omnibus survey (NFER, 2019) started teaching the GCSE curriculum for most/all subjects in Year 9 compared to 40 per cent that started in Year 10.
- Curriculum research by Ofsted in 2017 revealed that 10 of 23 secondary schools visited in 2017 were reducing KS3 to 2 years and around a quarter of 171 school websites reviewed indicated that pupils were selecting GCSE options at the end of Year 8.
- schools from the 2-year KS4 arm which were similar in terms of their observable baseline characteristics. The primary outcome was GCSE mathematics. Secondary outcomes were GCSE English literature, 5 A* to C GCSEs, and curriculum breadth.
- A total of 405 schools responded to a survey sent to all secondary schools in England exploring KS3 and KS4 length for their Year 9, 10, and 11 students. In almost all cases, the survey was completed by the headteacher or a senior leader (91%) and in most cases by someone who had been at the school for at least three years (83%).
- The first set of questions were mandatory closed questions. The second half of the survey asked schools more open questions about their reasons for adopting a 2 or 3-year KS4.
- All respondents, whether they completed the whole survey or opted to leave at the mid-point, were invited to take part in a case study (later changed to telephone or video interviews due to COVID-19 restrictions). By the end of the project, interviews with 40 individuals across 3 schools had been completed (3 schools requested pair interviews involving the headteacher and a senior leader with responsibility for the curriculum).
- The impact analysis included 104 of the 405 schools (170,675 pupils). For these schools data was matched to the National Pupil Database so that pupils' outcomes could be examined. This group of 104 includes schools that first converted to a 3-year KS4 for maths for exam years between 2014 and 2018 and their matched 2-year schools.

Methodology

- This study used a matched approach to investigate the differences in outcomes at GCSE for pupils in schools offering a 3-year KS4 compared to a 2-year KS4. Schools from the 3-year KS4 arm (those starting KS4 maths in Year 9 rather than Year 10) were matched to



Key findings

- Almost two-thirds of the 405 schools that responded to the survey (65%) operated a 3-year KS4 for at least some subjects, while around a third (35%) of responding schools had a two-year KS4. There was a wide variety in the way in which schools organised their KS3/KS4.
- Schools running a 3-year KS4 were motivated to do so by requirements of the new GCSEs and, to a lesser extent, to improve pupil engagement in Year 9.
- In contrast, schools which had kept a 2-year KS4 described their primary motivation as the importance of maintaining a strong curriculum and breadth of experience at KS3 when delivered over 3 years. Schools did not support a one-size-fits-all approach to KS3 and KS4 delivery and the participating schools had tailored their curriculum with the aim of best-serving their pupils.
- Schools were offering - and pupils were taking - fewer qualifications at the end of KS4; this was the case in both shorter and longer KS4 schools. Exam entries had declined from a peak in 2011-2012 to the time of the survey in 2019-20. The analysis indicated that this shift was driven by policy changes relating to school-level performance measures, such as the EBacc, and changes to the way vocational qualifications contribute to school tables.
- The research is unable to conclude that any differences in observed outcomes are due to the length of KS4. This is because there was a high level of imbalance in almost all observable characteristics between the groups of 2 and 3 year Key Stage 4 schools at baseline. There was a lack of parallel trends before the 2 year Key Stage 4 schools changed the length of their GCSE courses.
- It cannot therefore be concluded that any differences in attainment are due to the policy change. They may be due to other factors instead of, or in addition to, changing the length of KS4.
- The recommendation is that schools should not make a decision about the length of their KS4 on the basis of the impact evaluation findings reported in this study.

The full documents can be downloaded from:

<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk>