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# 'We are examining pupils too much'

Feb 11, 2008 09:11 By WalesOnline

THE head of Britain's most famous public school has called for a dramatic overhaul of the exams system.

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THE head of Britain's most famous public school has called for a dramatic overhaul of the exams system.

Tony Little, headmaster of Eton College, said the number of GCSEs teenagers take should be slashed by half to no more than five or six.

He condemned the prevailing culture of assessment that dominates education and argued for more room to be given to broader courses that are not externally examined.

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Mr Little said, "There is a very good case to look again and ask the question, 'are we examining too much?' I think we are.

"We have got into a habit of assessing everything that young people do. It is seen often by young people themselves as a virtue that they have 11 or 12 GCSEs.

"Not so long ago it would be quite normal for young people to take five or six O-levels and a range of other courses that were not examined."

He suggested limiting the number of GCSEs that pupils can take.

"We can reduce the assumption that there has to be a whole raft of GCSEs with grades at the end," he said. "If we had an expectation that there would be a smaller number – say four, five or six – that had to be achieved", students would have more time to study other courses.

Last week, the [Qualifications and Curriculum Authority \(QCA\)](#) exams watchdog announced an investigation into marking amid concerns that pupils have been given the wrong grades.

Eton, which charges annual fees of £26,490, was one of the schools that complained to the [QCA](#) after sending hundreds of papers back to exam boards for re-marking last summer.

Mr Little said, "We are asking our exam boards, the way they are currently constituted, to do too much.

"Understandably, they find it very difficult to deliver effectively right across the board."

He also criticised the dominance of "Sats" tests – which must be taken in all state schools in England. The Government uses the tests to take a "snapshot" of standards across the country for seven, 11 and 14-year-olds.

But Mr Little said: "I personally believe more can be devolved to teachers."

Eton was the top independent school in the country for A-level results last year.

The historic boarding school, favoured by Royals and founded by Henry VI in 1440, saw its boys notch up an average of more than four As each in their exams.

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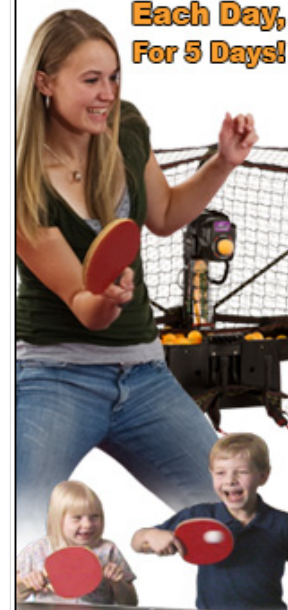


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A spokeswoman for the Department for Children, Schools and Families said: "We want pupils to get a minimum of five A\*-C GCSE, including English and maths, as well as getting the broader range of skills they need to enjoy and achieve.

"This is the standard which allows them to progress on to further study, work and training.

"Beyond this it's a choice for teachers, parents and pupils how many exams they want to take."

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