



**REVIEW OF GCE AND GCSE
QUALIFICATIONS IN MEDIA AND
FILM STUDIES**

**CONDUCTED FOR THE MEDIA
EDUCATION ASSOCIATION, JUNE
2014**

By Professor David Buckingham

REVIEW OF GCE AND GCSE QUALIFICATIONS IN MEDIA AND FILM STUDIES

CONDUCTED FOR THE MEDIA EDUCATION ASSOCIATION, JUNE 2014

INTRODUCTION

This brief review was prompted by the publication of Ofqual's consultation document *Completing GCSE, AS and A Level Reform* in June 2014. The Media Education Association, the professional subject association for teachers of Media and Film Studies, commissioned Professor David Buckingham of Loughborough University to conduct an independent, small-scale review of existing GCSE and GCE (AS and A2) qualifications in these areas. MEA regards the reform of these qualifications as an important opportunity to address concerns and issues in the field. This report is therefore intended to feed into ongoing discussions about the future direction of Media and Film Studies curricula. Responsibility for the content remains with the author, and is not to be regarded as an indication of MEA policy.

The review is primarily based on an analysis of the most recent specification documents and examination papers published by the three awarding bodies (examination boards). These are as follows:

GCE Media: AQA, OCR, WJEC
GCE Film: OCR, WJEC
GCSE Media: AQA, OCR, WJEC
GCSE Film: WJEC

In addition, the review has taken account of Ofqual's subject criteria for GCSE and GCE Media Studies (first published in 2007). These documents provide broad definitions of aims and outcomes, subject content and assessment objectives, which are mirrored very closely in all the specifications.

The key questions addressed here are two-fold. Firstly, there is a focus on *subject content*. How do the specifications define the content of these subjects – for example, in terms of concepts, topics, areas of media or texts to be covered? How do these definitions relate to different academic or disciplinary 'versions' of the subject/s in higher education? How effectively do the specifications reflect ongoing changes in the media landscape, and in students' experiences of media? How is the need for flexibility in content balanced against the need for comparability between qualifications?

The second key focus is on *learning and assessment*. How is learning about film and media identified and assessed? What different modes of assessment are used, and for what purposes? How are 'theoretical' and 'practical' (or analysis and production) elements related to each other? How demanding and fulfilling is the learning likely to be for students? How effectively do the qualifications support progression to further study or to employment?

The review aims to provide a brief critical account of current qualifications. It cannot adequately address how these various documents are interpreted and used by teachers, examiners and others 'on the ground', and how they shape and inform classroom practice. This is obviously a vital part of the picture, but it will need to be a focus of further investigation and discussion. Nor is it intended that the review should identify core content for the future, as the process of reform proceeds: this is something that will require detailed discussion among teachers, examiners and other stakeholders. Nevertheless, the report does aim to feed into these discussions; and to this end, the conclusion identifies some broad questions and issues that are among those that will need to be addressed.

This report begins with a very brief overview of the growth and current take-up of the subjects at this level, and in higher education. This is followed by a summary of the main positive findings identified, and an indication of some areas for further development, in light of the aims of the Ofqual review. The report then moves on to a more detailed review of the specifications: this begins with GCE Media, and subsequent comparisons (with GCE Film and subsequently with GCSE Media and Film) proceed in turn from that point. The conclusion identifies some outstanding issues that, in the author's view, are in need of further consideration as the review of qualifications proceeds.

STATE OF THE FIELD

Until the past few years, Media and Film Studies were steadily expanding at GCE and GCSE levels. Numbers of students taking AS and A2 examinations grew four-fold between 1995 and 2010, albeit from a very low base, although growth at GCSE was rather less marked. More recently, examination board statistics showed a continuing increase at AS and A2 levels of 15% between 2007 and 2010 – although this was less marked than in some other subjects. In the last four years, however, there has been a decline of approximately 10% in entries for all three examinations. In 2013, entries for both subjects across all awarding bodies were 59,114 at GCSE, 43,319 at AS and 29,112 at A2. Of the two areas, Film Studies is significantly smaller: 2012 entries were 5,335 at GCSE, 10,256 at AS and 6,882 at A2. Film and Media Studies (which are combined in JCQ statistics) remains the tenth most popular subject at A Level and the second most popular 'new' subject (after Psychology). It is larger than almost all of the other subjects that are already under review by Ofqual.

Meanwhile, Media Studies in universities has expanded dramatically over the past twenty years. A 2013 report by the Higher Education Policy Institute found that the number of universities offering Media Studies courses had tripled between 1996 and 2009, and that the number of applications for such courses had doubled (well outstripping general expansion in the sector as a whole). On the other hand, a 2011 report by Universities UK found that student numbers in 'mass communications and documentation' had grown by just under 19% since 2003 - not much more than the average across the sector, and significantly less than in STEM subjects. Within that category,

numbers for Media Studies and Journalism had grown faster than other areas; although the proportion of the overall undergraduate student cohort has remained constant at just over 3%.

Undergraduate and postgraduate courses in Media and/or Film Studies (or courses with closely related titles) are offered by the large majority of UK universities, including almost all the Russell Group universities. UK-based research in this area is seen as world-leading, as measured for example in citation figures and international league tables of esteem. This work has had a profound and lasting influence on other disciplines such as Sociology, Art History, Geography and English. The continuing success of Media and Film Studies in the UK is reflected in the high numbers of international students who want to come here to study in this field.

Similar observations apply to British approaches to media education at a school level. The British model of media education – the ‘key concepts’ approach developed in the 80s and 90s – has informed practice in media education worldwide. While there is equivalent provision in some other English-speaking countries (most notably Canada and Australia), the UK is still generally regarded as the world leader. Provision in the United States, for example, is limited and very uneven by comparison. Although many European countries are developing qualifications in the field – and significant advances have been made, for example, in Norway, Finland and Hungary – the UK has a much longer history, and a much more developed body of publications, research and professional expertise, than any other European country.

OVERALL FINDINGS

On the basis of this review, it is possible to identify several positive aspects of current provision at GCE and GCSE level. These would include the following.

Media and Film Studies are indisputably relevant to the contemporary world. They address major industries, dominant forms of public communication, and significant aspects of personal identity that should self-evidently be the focus of attention within the curriculum; and they do so in ways that are not currently covered in other subject areas. This aligns with the emphasis in Ofqual’s subject criteria on the need to address ‘issues that are important, real and relevant to learners and to the world in which they live’.

The specifications are extensive and broad-ranging in their content, although this is obviously more the case with Media Studies than Film Studies. Media Studies in particular has a very clear conceptual framework that identifies key areas of understanding and provides a common structure. These key areas are also identified in Ofqual’s subject criteria at both GCE and GCSE levels. While the content of these subjects is bound to change as these media evolve, the key concepts are generally seen to provide flexibility, rigour and coherence. As such, they have enabled the qualifications to keep pace with current changes in the media landscape, not least as these affect young

people. In all these respects, these are qualifications that are (in Ofqual's terms) 'fit for purpose'.

Both subjects include 'theoretical' and 'practical' elements – that is, aspects of critical analysis and debate, alongside opportunities for creative production. They seek to combine these in ways that make for productive learning – that is, in-depth consideration of general issues, and a reflective approach to creative practice. Production activities, for example, entail systematic research, planning and evaluation, and the documentation of these processes, often in the form of discursive writing. The specifications explicitly identify key skills in both areas, and require that these should be taught and assessed in systematic and rigorous ways. Again, this is very much in line with Ofqual's criteria, which emphasise aspects such as enquiry, critical thinking and practical skills, alongside the use of key concepts in analysis and interpretation of media.

Broadly speaking, the specifications reflect current state-of-the-art academic work in their respective areas at university level. However, it should be noted that university courses in Media Studies are quite diverse, and none of them currently require students to have a specialist A-level – which is quite different from more established subjects like History or Geography, for example. This can result in significant challenges at undergraduate level, as incoming students may well have very different levels of prior experience (an issue that was addressed in a Higher Education Academy seminar in 2012).

Neither of these subjects is 'new'. The current specifications emerge from a history of practice and of specialist public examinations in these fields that goes back approximately 40 years. They are actually quite similar in aims and structure to the specifications first developed in the 1980s (for GCSE) and 1990s (for A Level) – even if the suggested content is somewhat different. One consequence of this is that teacher handbooks, student textbooks and teaching materials will also reflect this well-established history of practice.

While this review cannot definitively prove this, there is significant evidence from the published specifications that the examination process in Media and Film Studies is being conducted and managed effectively. The documents clearly specify how quality control requirements are to be met; they explicitly reflect national criteria, both subject-specific and more general (for instance, relating to 'stretch and challenge' and to areas such as disability); and procedures for assessment are clearly specified and appear to be rigorously defined. Examination questions are mostly extremely straightforward, allowing candidates ample opportunities to demonstrate their learning; although there are some specific concerns about the use of 'unseen' texts, discussed below.

In terms of the Ofqual consultation, two further points should be made:

Firstly, there are few grounds here for regarding Media Studies as a primarily 'vocational' subject (and even fewer for Film Studies). While specifications at both GCSE and GCE levels do include practical components, these are not primarily focused on the teaching of technical skills (although this is more

apparent in the OCR GCE than it is elsewhere). Production work is always combined with research, planning and subsequent evaluation, and the primary criteria for assessment are to do with conceptual understanding and knowledge of the subject. In this respect, the subject is no more vocational than Music or Art or English: it teaches skills that may eventually prove relevant to employment for some students (probably a minority), but it is not in any sense conceived as a form of training for specific work roles. The presence of strong practical component does not mean that the subject has primarily vocational aims.

Secondly, while Media and Film Studies overlap in limited ways with other subjects – for instance, Sociology, English, Art and Drama – this is also the case at university level. Media Studies has a distinctive conceptual framework and a body of content that is only very partially addressed in these other subjects. It also adopts a particular pedagogical approach (the combination of ‘theory’ and ‘practice’) that is more explicit than in subjects such as Art or Drama.

At the same time, there are some *areas for further development*, some of which are discussed in more detail in the comments below. These emerge particularly from the comparison between Media Studies and Film Studies, and they include the following.

Media Studies at this level is comparatively lacking in a historical perspective, and in a global perspective. This is not the case in Film Studies, nor is it generally the case with the subject at university level. These aspects are identified as a possible focus of study in some cases, but they are rarely explicitly required. While coverage of these aspects does pose significant challenges in terms of pedagogy and available teaching resources, their importance is self-evident.

A second concern is to do with breadth versus depth. The Media Studies specifications in particular are exceptionally broad in terms of the range of media covered, and the diversity of media forms and genres that are included. Film Studies, by contrast, seems in some cases to be quite narrowly focused – rather more narrowly than is the case in this field in Higher Education. Conversely, while the conceptual framework of Media Studies is clearly delineated and defined, that of Film Studies is rather less so.

In terms of assessment, there is an impressive level of detail in the specification of criteria (especially in the OCR and AQA specifications). However, there is a broader problem with the occasionally imprecise language and the use of rather vague comparisons, especially when it comes to identifying theoretical or conceptual learning. There are also questions that might be raised about specific assessment practices, especially the use of ‘unseen’ texts in written examinations.

These and other issues for further consideration are drawn together in the final section of this report.

GCE MEDIA STUDIES

COMPARABILITY BETWEEN THE SPECIFICATIONS

In general, the available qualifications appear to be highly consistent in terms of overall aims, definition of the subject, core content, modes of assessment, and so on. This suggests a fairly settled consensus as regards what Media Studies is all about. The stated aims are almost identical across all the specifications, and closely reflect Ofqual's national subject criteria.

Thus, all the specifications explicitly address Media Studies 'key concepts' – reflecting a long-term consensus about the basic definition of the field dating back to the early 1980s. These are sometimes variously named, but all the specifications make explicit mention of media language (a.k.a. textual analysis, codes and conventions), representation (a.k.a. values, messages, ideology), audience, and institution/industry.

The structure of the specifications is more or less identical. All specifications contain two 'theory' (or analysis) units assessed through written examination and two 'production' units assessed through coursework, one of each in each year. These are sometimes identically named, and cover very similar areas. The balance is thus effectively 50/50, although there are some differences in terms of the weighting of marks within the units (see below).

All therefore contain a substantial production requirement – generally requiring creative production in at least two media, involving research and subsequent critical self-evaluation, in some cases with an option of individual or group projects. All involve independent in-depth research – in some cases mainly tied to the practical production. While there is variation across the specifications (see below), both these elements are vital in terms of preparation for university courses: they help to develop skills that cannot be effectively assessed by means of a terminal examination alone.

The specifications are extremely broad-ranging in terms of the types of media that are covered (including print, digital/online media, games, advertising and popular music as well as film, television and radio), and the diversity of media forms and genres identified as potential areas or topics. There are no 'set texts': specifications will typically provide examples, but there is no compulsory element. The only exception here is OCR's AS unit focusing specifically on the genre of TV or radio drama, although again there are no specific texts identified here. There is generally a strong focus on *contemporary* media – see below for further discussion.

In addition to conventional methods of written assessment (essay or short-answer questions), the examinations all use 'unseen' texts at some stage; and in addition to production coursework, all require reflective writing or some other form of self-evaluation. Level descriptors are inevitably somewhat vague, but the lists in the AQA and OCR specifications are fairly detailed, suggesting that there is a fair consensus about what learning looks like.

All the specifications address more general stipulations for assessment at this level: OCR and AQA are generally more explicit in this respect. These include:

1. 'whole curriculum' requirements to address moral, ethical, social, economic and cultural (and other) issues – achieved especially through addressing key concepts such as representation and industry/institutions;
2. requirements to provide 'stretch and challenge' – typically achieved through in-depth research-based coursework and production activities;
3. a requirement for synoptic learning: all specifications emphasise the need for learning of key concepts to cut across 'theory' and 'practice' components, and to be apparent in in-depth case studies and responses to unseen texts;
4. key skills are addressed in all the specifications, in greatest detail by OCR.

There is a strong case to be made for Media Studies GCE as a relevant preparation, not just for further study in this field, but also for a range of Social Sciences and Humanities disciplines. This is obviously the case in relation to content: undergraduate degrees in areas such as Sociology, Psychology, English and Art (to name just a few) are likely to have significant components focusing on media. However, the theoretical or conceptual dimensions of Media Studies and some of the practical production skills that it develops are also likely to be of use in further study in a wide range of areas.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE SPECIFICATIONS

As noted above, there is considerable common ground across the specifications in terms of aims, structure, mode of assessment, and so on. All the specifications also relate very closely to Ofqual's subject criteria in terms of aims and learning outcomes, subject content, assessment objectives and grade descriptions. The differences between them are more differences of emphasis than in any fundamental conceptualization of the subject.

OCR is generally angled more towards practice and less towards theory than the other specifications. This is especially apparent in the weighting of marks. For example, other specifications (especially WJEC) allocate more marks for research and evaluative writing in the A2 production units, where OCR allows more for the production itself; OCR includes the critical evaluation of production in its analysis unit at A2; OCR requires 'digital' evaluation in a visual or audio-visual form as an alternative to writing (as does AQA), whereas WJEC specifies a word limit, even if the report can be 'illustrated' or come in the form of a blog.

This practical emphasis also seems to be more in line with OCR's rather 'technical' approach to 'media language': for example, OCR focuses on editing, sound and mise-en-scene, where WJEC focuses on narrative and

genre at A2. In general, OCR seems more appropriate for students aiming to go on directly to employment in media industries, or to a more practice-focused Media Studies degree, whereas WJEC in particular seems closer to a more theory-focused degree. (It should be noted that there are significant differences of emphasis in this respect at degree level: some university courses are very predominantly practice-focused while others are almost entirely theory-focused, although most include both elements.)

AQA and WJEC are more explicitly oriented towards theory, although the nature of that theory is not always clearly identified. While WJEC's approach seems fairly conventional and quite broadly defined, AQA's approach is rather more diffuse: theories and areas of study are listed, in a very inclusive and apparently flexible way, but the overall effect is of a kind of 'wish list'. It is not clear how this connects with the claim to be 'synoptic', and it is unlikely to be very helpful to teachers who do not have higher degrees in the field. AQA includes 'audiences', but generally conceives of this in terms of 'effects': real audiences, and the concept of active audiences, only appear in relation to new media. This raises some significant questions about what the 'body of theory' might be in such a rapidly changing field. While the qualifications have broadly kept pace with changing academic perspectives, in some cases – especially AQA – it is not clear which theories are regarded as essential or foundational for the field.

In terms of content, OCR and to some extent AQA seem very strongly focused on *contemporary* media. Both define 'contemporary' as produced within the last five years, although this fits rather oddly with OCR's specification of 'postmodern' media – a term that enjoyed its heyday in the early 1990s. The positive aspect of this is the ability to connect to students' experiences – although it should be remembered that, according to Ofcom's Media Literacy Audit reports, most young people still spend most of their media time watching television and film, and not with online or mobile media. The danger, however, is that there can be a lack of historical perspective: the OCR specification appears to address this (page 42), although it is not clear how this fits with the exclusive emphasis on the 'contemporary'. Again, this poses a challenge for students who move on to university-level courses, many of which will have a strong historical dimension. At the same time (as noted above), OCR specifies one area of media (the relatively traditional one of TV or radio drama) for its exam unit at AS, where the others do not.

There is an issue of breadth and depth in terms of coverage of media content (forms and genres). All the specifications seem to favour breadth: WJEC, for instance, requires students to research three different media industries for its theory paper at A2 (others have two), while all the specifications require students to undertake production work in at least two media or what WJEC calls 'media forms'. The requirement to address a minimum of three different media is also specified in Ofqual's subject criteria. Even so, this is a particular point of comparison with Film Studies (see below), and with subjects like Art or Music. For example, Music students are not required to play two or three different instruments, or to play a concerto, a rumba and a blues piece; although Art does tend to require a broader range of art forms and genres. In

general, WJEC offers much less detail on subject content, whereas AQA seems to err on the side of inclusiveness. Broadly speaking, however, there are limited opportunities here for students to engage in depth with any particular medium.

Detailed requirements as regards practical production are quite variable across the specifications. AQA and OCR provide defined briefs, although OCR appears to allow greater flexibility for the teacher, while AQA offers a bigger choice from a long list of options. In general, OCR seems to have given most thought to what is required from students in terms in allocating individual marks for group productions, especially if the evaluation is a key determining factor in this respect. In an apparent attempt to avoid low-level 'cut and paste' projects, AQA specifies a (low) maximum limit for 'found' material, while OCR requires all material to be produced by candidates, and for any 'non-original' material to be acknowledged and used 'in a limited way' in video and radio work only. OCR also suggests that students seek permission from artists for the inclusion of music tracks, although it does not require them to actually obtain it – a practice that might at least encourage students to develop a broader understanding of copyright.

There are also some differences in terms of modes of assessment. AQA includes 'unseen' texts in the examination at both AS and A2, where the others only have it at AS. This practice is designed to allow opportunities for application of a range of key concepts (and a 'synoptic' approach), and the accompanying examination questions tend to require this specifically; although the 'matching' of concepts to texts occasionally appears somewhat arbitrary or strained. However, this practice also favours students who happen to be more familiar with the texts chosen, or with the genres or platforms from which they derive. For instance, the choice of an extract from a televised rugby match (in one WJEC paper sampled) is clearly likely to favour some candidates over others who may be unlikely ever to have watched such a programme. In some instances, such as the OCR AS paper, no explanation or contextual information about the extracts is provided whatsoever. This and other issues considered here are addressed in more detail in the final section of the report.

GCE FILM STUDIES

COMPARABILITY BETWEEN THE SPECIFICATIONS

The two Film Studies specifications have a very similar structure, which is also comparable with the GCE Media Studies specifications: essentially, there are two theory/analysis units and two more practical/creative ones (one of each at AS level). Both focus primarily on British and US film (or English-language film, in the case of OCR) at AS level, with global cinema mainly appearing at A2. In each case, the practical/creative unit at AS is focused on what are called 'micro' level elements of film language (and this entails textual

analysis alongside the production of a short sequence); while at A2, the practical/creative unit includes an extended research investigation.

In terms of theory, both specifications combine elements of textual analysis ('micro features' or 'micro-technical features') with a broader sociological analysis of production, exhibition and reception. To some extent, the four 'key concepts' of Media Studies are all apparent here, although representation is much more evident in OCR than in WJEC (OCR repeatedly uses the term 'ideology', which does not appear in its Media Studies spec). However, these concepts jostle with others for attention, sometimes resulting in a less coherent 'shopping list': for instance, OCR offers an extensive list of 'micro-technical' elements, alongside seven 'macro'-level 'frameworks for analysis', followed by a further three 'contextual areas of study'. These all seem to derive from rather different disciplines and paradigms (e.g. 'authorship' and 'theme' alongside 'representation' and 'messages and values'). In some respects, this seems to reflect the rather hybrid nature of Film Studies as an academic discipline. While Media Studies is equally hybrid (if not more so), the need to establish it as a legitimate subject for study at school level has arguably led to a greater degree of coherence about its conceptual structure.

The inclusion of creative production projects (short film sequences, scripts, storyboards, etc.) is significant. This was not an element in the earliest Film Studies A-level specifications, and it is not an element of most Film Studies degree courses, which tend to focus primarily on analysis and academic theory. Indeed, WJEC appears to allow a heavier weighting for the production component (as distinct from the accompanying writing) here than in its equivalent Media Studies units. The OCR production task is also less 'technically' focused than the equivalent in its Media Studies syllabus: OCR claim that this is a clearly differentiating factor, although this is not especially convincing. It is also notable that (as with OCR Media Studies in particular), there is recognition of the possibility of students responding to film and evaluating their own work using media other than (or in addition to) writing, such as a DVD commentary.

As with its Media Studies spec, OCR has very detailed and comprehensive guidance when it comes to assessment (level descriptors etc.). WJEC tends to be stronger on identifying subject content (see below).

COMPARABILITY BETWEEN FILM STUDIES AND MEDIA STUDIES

Some of the most obvious differences between Film Studies and Media Studies are simply about specialization. Media Studies incorporates film, whereas Film Studies is inevitably more specific. There is little recognition in the Film Studies specifications of 'cinematic' elements in other media. Are the shorts people upload to YouTube or circulate on their mobile phones 'films', for example? Is there much logic in excluding 'long form' television from consideration in the context of Film Studies? Might there be a rationale for including 'cut scenes' in computer games, or more 'filmic' games more generally? It is worth noting that most university Film Studies courses include

several modules on television, and several universities offer combined courses in Film and Television Studies. Equally, most Media Studies courses include specialized modules on film. Recognising media convergence obviously has significant implications for Film Studies as a separate discipline. Meanwhile, there would seem to be no way in which Media Studies could legitimately *exclude* film. The challenge here – implicitly identified in the Ofqual review – is to identify the distinctive characteristics of the two areas, and to find clear and persuasive ways of differentiating between them.

Other differences seem to reflect differences in the historical evolution of the disciplines. For example, the Film Studies specifications tend to talk about ‘spectatorship’ more than ‘audience’ (especially WJEC), reflecting a rather different conceptualization of the area. They also say more about aesthetics and about the emotional, sensory dimensions of the medium – issues that are largely ignored in the Media Studies specifications. Indeed, there is a focus on issues of meaning and response in Film Studies that appears strangely absent from Media Studies.

The Film specifications (especially WJEC) identify compulsory topics of study, along with suggested texts, while the Media Studies specifications consistently avoid this (with the single exception of OCR’s television/radio drama unit). The WJEC specification is particularly explicit in the case of British film at AS, identifying prescribed topics, but strangely much less so in relation to American film. The topics here are in the form of particular stars, production companies and genres; although in its A2 paper on the critical study of a single film, a list of prescribed texts is provided. Although this might appear to imply a ‘canonical’ approach – in the mode of traditional English Literature courses – the texts proposed are reasonably diverse and broad ranging.

A very significant difference is that the Film Studies specifications explicitly address the history of the medium, something that the Media Studies specifications largely eschew. There is a good deal of contemporary content here – both in terms of areas of study and approaches to study – but there is also a longer view. OCR has one section explicitly labeled ‘contemporary’ film (here defined as less than ten years old, as opposed to five in its Media Studies specification), but it also explicitly requires a historical approach in its ‘Cinema in Context’ section. This throws into relief the a-historical approach of Media Studies. Although film is obviously older as a medium, broadcast television is almost 70 years old, and commercial computer games are around 40 years old; yet the Media Studies specifications largely focus on the last five years, or on some imagined future.

The Film Studies specifications also explicitly address global film, albeit primarily in the A2 year. While the Media Studies specifications do mention global media (a suggested but not compulsory topic in OCR) and ‘the effects of globalization’ (AQA – not quite the same thing), this is a much less prominent aspect. It would be possible to take any of the available Media Studies courses without ever encountering any non-English-speaking media.

In some respects, it could be argued that the Film Studies specifications are closer to those for English Literature GCE, at least in terms of their approach to text rather than their actual content. However, there are some significant differences. English Literature specifications do not generally include the more sociological aspects of production and consumption, nor do they typically include a creative production element.

In general, there is more opportunity for in-depth study in the Film Studies specifications than in Media Studies: while they lack breadth, they make up for this in depth. There are more opportunities for close textual analysis, for individual research projects, and for a sustained focus on specific topics or films. These are obviously particularly important in terms of preparing students for further study. While Media Studies does require in-depth research in particular areas of media, this is often in relation to production activities; and this quite possibly constrains the kinds of topics that students might want to address in individual research.

Finally, there seem to be some differences between the written examination papers in Film Studies. The WJEC Film paper appears significantly more demanding than OCR Film in terms of requiring a more explicit and reflexive approach to aspects of theory. The WJEC A2 Film paper in particular is also considerably more demanding than any of the Media Studies examination papers (including the WJEC A2 Media Studies paper), and appears to take a more strongly text-based approach, raising questions about comparability of assessment between the two subjects.

GCSE MEDIA STUDIES AND FILM STUDIES

As one would expect, there are significant similarities between the GCSE and GCE specifications. The aims are similar (and again reflect Ofqual's national criteria at this level), as are the broad headings of the assessment objectives. The conceptual basis of the subject is also apparent in all the GCSE specifications, although this is a little more diffuse in some cases (see below). The courses have a similar structure, although the 'theory' and 'practice' aspects seem to be more integrated than is the case at GCE (see below). In these respects, all the observations made above in relation to GCE also apply here.

In principle, this provides a good basis for continuity in student progression from GCSE to GCE level. Students should be encountering the same concepts, and applying these in greater depth and detail, as they progress. Likewise, they should have opportunities to develop their production skills as they gain wider and repeated experience of creative practice in a range of media. However, it should be said that these expected differences are not always apparent in examination papers, especially in the selection and use of 'unseen' texts: in some instances, there appears to be relatively little differentiation – and hence opportunity for students to display higher-level understanding – when comparing the GCE with the GCSE papers.

At the same time, this degree of continuity raises questions about breadth and depth, and about assessment. Is there a risk that students will be tackling too many similar topics at GCSE and GCE levels? How clear are the specifications as regards the kinds of production skill or conceptual understanding that are required at these different levels? And while one would expect a much more explicit address to theory at A Level, which theories in particular are to be addressed, and how is learning about theory to be identified?

Predictably, the GCSE specifications are more prescriptive than the GCEs. In general, there is less opportunity for choice on the part of teachers and students: topics for study are more likely to be pre-defined, there are more set assignments, and 'unseen' extracts play a greater role – although in some instances (notably AQA) there are nevertheless a great many options available. There are fewer opportunities for in-depth research and sustained creative production activities; and production also tends to be conducted under 'controlled' conditions. Some of the simulated production tasks included in the written examination papers (most notably AQA's) are frankly rather superficial and unlikely to challenge more academically able students or allow them opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge and skills.

None of this is especially surprising, although the threatened removal of coursework would clearly result in further restrictions. It should be emphasised that 'coursework' – independent, in-depth study – is a key dimension of all higher education courses, and students need to be adequately prepared for this; and the same is true of extended production activities, which are a feature of a great many university courses in this field as well. It is impossible to see how creative production skills can be assessed in the absence of coursework: simulated activities conducted under examination conditions simply will not assess the same things.

Having said this, there seems to be a stronger degree of integration between 'theory' and 'practice' elements at GCSE than is the case at GCE. With the exception of OCR, even units examined by controlled test include some kind of simulated production or pre-production activity. Most of the set assignments explicitly combine analysis and production, and it is sometimes hard to differentiate between them. However, this might simply be a consequence of having fewer units and a greater degree of prescription.

Significant differences between the GCSE Media Studies specifications are somewhat less evident than at GCE level, but they would include the following.

In terms of the range of media, OCR requires a clear choice between moving image and print, which is not the case with the other specifications. However, it also requires students to cover three media areas across the overall qualification, in line with Ofqual subject criteria. AQA requires three media in coursework, while WJEC requires two media in coursework and three 'media forms' across the whole qualification. Again, there is a breadth versus depth

issue here: it is doubtful whether students who are required to study three media will have the opportunity to explore any one of them in great depth – although this partly depends upon how the different media are defined.

In terms of concepts, WJEC includes ‘genre’ and ‘narrative’ in preference to ‘media language’, while OCR also adds ‘genre’ to the list. WJEC Film Studies includes representation under the heading ‘how and what films communicate’. There seems to be little rationale for these differences.

When it comes to assessment, OCR appears somewhat more supportive than the other specifications in terms of offering focused assignments, as compared with the rather less detailed approach of the others. By comparison with its approach at GCE, OCR appears to award fewer marks for production *per se* than the other specifications (in both its coursework and its controlled test), although (as noted above) analysis and production activities are generally more integrated in any case.

Historical and global aspects are again largely invisible. There is some brief mention of historical dimensions in WJEC and OCR, although this is by no means substantial; and film history is not addressed in the WJEC Film Studies either (by contrast with its GCE spec). As at GCE, there is no mention of global or non-Western media in any of the Media Studies specifications, although AQA and WJEC refer in passing to ‘global markets’. By contrast, the WJEC Film Studies specification specifically requires study of film produced outside Hollywood, and identifies ‘set texts’ for this purpose.

ISSUES FOR FURTHER CONSIDERATION

In the course of this review, several issues have emerged that should be a focus for discussion among teachers, examiners and other stakeholders as qualifications reform proceeds. In conclusion, these can be drawn together as a series of nine topics or questions, as follows.

Content. All the specifications stick quite closely to the established ‘key concepts’ of media education. These are also explicitly identified in Ofqual’s published subject criteria, along with more generic areas such as ‘technologies’ and ‘relevant critical debates’. This approach provides a degree of coherence and rigour, while also enabling teaching to be responsive to the changing media landscape and to students’ experiences: as such, it is significantly more useful than an approach that specifies particular topics or areas of media to be studied (such as soap opera or media regulation, for example). However, these concepts should not necessarily be regarded as tablets of stone. As qualifications reform proceeds, it is important to revisit this approach, and to consider whether it needs to be adapted or extended, perhaps especially in light of ongoing technological change.

Overlap. Media convergence is increasingly blurring the boundaries between film and other media – not only television, but also computer games and

online media. Film Studies undoubtedly includes some concerns and approaches that are distinct from those of Media Studies; and it provides important opportunities for in-depth study that are not always apparent in Media Studies. At the same time, it is hard to see how Media Studies can exclude film. In this context, it would seem to be vital to identify the integrity and distinctiveness of film as an object of study, and to explain the continuing logic for having two separate subjects, if we are to minimise any potential overlap between them.

Cross-fertilisation between Media Studies and Film Studies. This report has identified three particular dimensions that feature quite strongly in Film Studies that are comparatively lacking in Media Studies: the historical dimension, the global dimension and the dimension of subjective experience (the aesthetic and sensory dimensions of film). These elements are undoubtedly part of the broader field of Media Studies at university level, but they do not appear here as strongly as arguably they should. Equally, there may be aspects of Media Studies that might be addressed more centrally within Film Studies than is currently the case, perhaps especially those relating to digital technology. As the two subjects come into dialogue, it will be important to consider how Media Studies might learn from Film Studies, and vice-versa.

Theory. As this report has indicated, Media Studies specifications are based upon a clearly defined and well-established conceptual framework. This is also largely the case with Film Studies, although in some instances the conceptual framework appears rather more confused. However, 'key concepts' are not the same thing as *theory*; and while both subjects require students to engage with the broad field of cultural and media theory, it is generally not clear which theories are seen as foundational or essential. This may reflect a lack of disciplinary coherence at university level as well, although university courses arguably would require familiarity with a commonly shared body of theory. Comparing Media and Film Studies with Sociology or Psychology A Level in this respect is quite striking, as the latter do require an explicit consideration of particular theories and named theorists. Examiners and teachers might be well advised to avoid a 'canonical' approach to theory, or the reduction of theory to a prescribed body of factual knowledge. However, there is arguably a need for greater specification of *which* theoretical paradigms, if not specific theorists, we should expect to be taught at this level.

Breadth and depth. As Ofqual's consultation document makes clear, content can be made more or less demanding by increasing or decreasing both breadth and depth. There are clearly compromises to be reached here; but this report has suggested that, at present, Media Studies specifications may be inappropriately broad and somewhat lacking in opportunities for in-depth study. There is again a contrast with Film Studies here; although some would argue that Film Studies, especially at A2 level, is unduly narrow in focus. Especially in light of Ofqual's subject criteria, it is important to consider how effectively specifications in both areas balance these seemingly conflicting – and equally justified – requirements for breadth and depth.

Assessment practices: 'unseen' texts. The specifications employ a range of assessment practices, but one that particularly gives cause for concern is the reliance on 'unseen' texts in written examinations. These are mostly short extracts taken out of context; and in some cases, the rationale for the selection appears quite unclear. Examination papers may provide some background information about the chosen text, but this is generally fairly minimal, and there are few contextual materials of the kind that one might encounter when coming to a media text in everyday life (for example, publicity materials). In some cases, there is no contextual information or explanation whatsoever. This practice dates back to approaches to 'practical criticism' developed in literature teaching in the 1930s. It appears to imply that students will develop a free-ranging critical sensibility that can be applied regardless of context. Yet texts are never encountered in such decontextualised ways; and nor, arguably, are skills of critical reading developed in this way. There may be a value in this approach in terms of demonstrating 'synoptic' learning, but it certainly requires further debate and justification.

Defining levels. In several cases, the level descriptors contained in the specifications are quite detailed; but they also suffer from some familiar shortcomings. There are some problems with imprecise terminology (for example, 'flair and creativity' in production work) and the inevitable reliance on rather vague comparative terms ('effective', 'cogent' or simply 'excellent', 'good', 'basic', 'minimal', and so on). The specifications seem clearer in this respect when it comes to production work, perhaps because the basic skills are easier to specify. It would significantly enhance the rigour of the qualifications if they were more specific and precise about the nature of the theoretical or conceptual learning that is being sought, without this becoming merely mechanical.

Comparability and choice. This report has identified a high degree of similarity and consistency across the available specifications. In most cases, the differences between them are relatively small and superficial, although there are some differences of emphasis that will undoubtedly matter in some cases. On one level, this is as it should be: Ofqual makes it clear that it expects qualifications in a given area to be comparable, both in terms of core content and modes of assessment. However, if three examination boards are offering the same subject, one might well expect there to be greater differentiation between them, not least in order to provide genuine choice for teachers. How far should the differences between specifications be accentuated or made more apparent, without undermining the need for comparability?

Progression. The report suggests that there are significant continuities between GCSE and GCE courses, in terms of their shared conceptual framework, as well as content and skills. This should certainly be expected, but it also raises questions of breadth and depth: across four years of formal study, students should be expected to cover a range of new content, but they should also be able to develop their skills and understandings recursively as they have greater opportunities for more in-depth research and production activities. At the same time, there may be problems in terms of progression as

students move from GCE to university courses: incoming undergraduates will have quite uneven levels of preparation, but even those with a background in Media Studies may be unprepared for particular aspects of their courses. To date, there has been little dialogue on these matters between GCSE and GCE teachers and university lecturers. The process of qualifications reform should provide an opportunity to extend this dialogue, and bring about more coherent and systematic forms of learning progression between sectors.

While this list is by no means exhaustive, it is hoped that discussion of these issues should enable teachers and examiners to continue to improve the quality and rigour of the qualifications that are provided in this field.

Professor David Buckingham
19th June 2014