



Anya Waddington chats to school heads and education consultants and considers whether Common Entrance is still the best way to assess children leaving prep school.

Illustration by Charlotte Cleveland

For more than a century Common Entrance (CE) has determined the fate of thousands of 13-year-old boys and girls hoping to win places in academically selective independent senior schools. But times are changing.

An increasing number of senior schools are shifting their main entry point from 13+ to 11+ (particularly in London), and the majority of 13+ schools now require children to sit pre-tests up to three years in advance of entry, moving the real test to Year 6. Unsurprisingly some prep school heads have started to question whether the traditional CE exam is still the best way to test a 13-year-old.

Common Entrance is sat in the final term of prep school (June of Year 8). Unlike the 11+, you only sit it for ONE school. It is a *qualifying*, rather than a *competitive* exam. Pupils follow a common syllabus and papers are set by the Independent Schools Examination Board (ISEB) in Maths, English, three Sciences, French, Latin, History,

Geography, RS and sometimes Greek. The exams are sat at their prep schools but marked by the senior school where the child is hoping to gain a place. Each senior school requires different pass marks and has varying grade boundaries. In addition, some subjects offer different levels of

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papers and the senior school will have selected its own level requirement. There are exceptions, such as Winchester, who set their own entrance papers in similar subjects to CE. The majority of senior schools set their own scholarship exam papers which can be taken instead of CE, usually earlier in the summer term, although many senior schools have adopted the scholarship papers set by ISEB known as CASE (Common Academic Scholarship Examinations), also sat slightly earlier than CE.

There is plenty to commend CE: a common syllabus in a broad range of subjects that serves as a great foundation for GCSEs, catering for differing abilities with its different tiers. And there’s an argument that an academic hurdle is a good end to prep school. Jeremy Edwards, Schools Consultant

at Mavor Associates and former Headmaster of Westminster Under School and Eaton House The Manor, believes ISEB have responded well to criticism that the exam emphasises knowledge over skills, and have adjusted the syllabus. However, he appeals to senior schools to “take away the idea that it is a pass or fail exam” and make the initial offer after a pre-test unconditional. Christian Heinrich, Headmaster of Cumnor House, goes further and says that it is “immoral to fail a child at 13+ after testing them at 11+”.

Senior schools have been changing the way they think about learning. There are now Cambridge Pre-U and International Baccalaureate (IB) alternatives to A Levels in many schools. IB maintains breadth of education and Cambridge Pre-U aims to develop open minded and independent thinkers more ready for university.

In a similar vein, the Prep School Baccalaureate (PSB) was launched in 2011 as an alternative to CE. PSB is a model that tracks progress and achievements in all areas (not just academic). It recognises the need for development of skills crucial in the twenty first century (notably, communication, collaboration and leadership) alongside knowledge. It is hard to say yet if it will be fully embraced but its principles are something that an increasing number of prep schools are fostering. Adrian Floyd, Headmaster at The Hawthorns School, has introduced a new Compass Curriculum for Years 7 and 8, precisely because the majority of his pupils will not have to pass Common Entrance exams to enter their senior schools. The Hawthorns continue to prepare pupils for academic and other scholarships but Floyd is convinced everyone benefits from an increased focus on “transferable skills and the development of critical thinking”.

Having consulted senior schools, a growing number of Prep Schools have reduced the number of Common Entrance papers they take to only the core subjects (English, Maths, Sciences, French and Latin) and no longer prepare for CE in the humanities (History, Geography and RS). Eddy Newton, Principal of the Cothill Trust and a former Head of Chafyn Grove, explains that at Chafyn they did exactly this. They maintained the same number of lessons in Geography, RS and History but, with more flexibility, they could harness important skills for “independent thinkers” and prep them in different skills (for example debating or extended essays) that are so important in preparation for senior school. He still sees CE as “a good rigorous end of prep school test” and indeed Ashdown House and Cothill, both Trust schools, will continue to offer a full CE programme for the traditional schools they feed. Helen Bryce, Deputy Head Academic, at Eagle House, says it was the creative International Primary Curriculum (IPC) that was so successful in junior years that opened their eyes to what they could do with the curriculum. But they like the balance. She sees huge merit in taking the core CE subjects. For her, the external exams are a good focus (“some pressure is not a bad thing”) and the exam week remains a challenge even with just the core subjects. Clearly, reducing the subjects significantly reduces the revision load and the intensity of exam week. Their humanities

teaching is much broader now, with an assessed piece of coursework at the end incorporating all three subjects.

Similarly, Mark Hartley, Headmaster at Forres Sandle Manor, describes their exciting inquiry-based humanities syllabus as one that fosters “independent research and study”. In his view, “Transferable skills are essential to take them on to senior schools and beyond.” Phillip Hoyland, Headmaster at Pinewood School, points out that as well as a humanities programme that encourages “engagement, breadth, cross curricular involvement, and develops skills of research, filtering, independent study, team work and objectivity”, by freeing up the children from examinations and prep in History, Geography and RS they have more free time to spend on current affairs, cultural appreciation, philosophy, PHSE and wellbeing. But above all it will reduce stress and calm potential pressure for constant preparation for exams.

The senior school Registrars I spoke to acknowledge the need to be flexible. They point out that they’d never turn a child down based on poor grades in humanities. At this stage, a child who gets a good score in English is clearly capable of similar in History even if

they had a bad day in that exam. Also, where a child has not been prepared for CE (for example they have come from abroad or from a state primary) a senior school’s own alternative exams are only set in the core subjects anyway.

Is CE outdated? There has certainly been a natural decline in the numbers taking it due to an increased number of day schools moving their main entry point to 11+. Nathaniel McCullagh, MD of Simply Learning Tuition, says he has noticed a definite shift in the stage at which people are asking for help. Last year 13+ requests for tutoring dropped by a third and 11+ requests were up by a third. And CE’s purpose has shifted. In the main, it is now a tool for setting. I’m inclined to agree with Christian Heinrich of Cumnor: it should be renamed “Common Exit” rather than “Common Entrance”.

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KEY DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

YEAR 5 Check registration deadlines for 13+ entry – with the advent of pre-tests they are getting earlier.

YEARS 6/7

Autumn Y6 13+ ISEB common pre-tests (usually taken at pupil’s own school).

Spring Y6–Aut Y7 (following pre-tests): School interviews and assessments; 13+ entry offers (conditional on CE/own exam success).

YEAR 8 School scholarship exams (often early Summer Term and certainly before CE). **May** CASE (Common Academic Scholarship) **June** CE Exams.

PLEASE USE THIS TIMELINE FOR GUIDANCE ONLY.

DATES CHANGE AND SCHOOLS WORK TO INDIVIDUAL SCHEDULES.