

# **Constructing Thresholds for ‘Success’ and ‘Failure’: A Critical Policy History of Examinations for 16-Year-Olds in England**

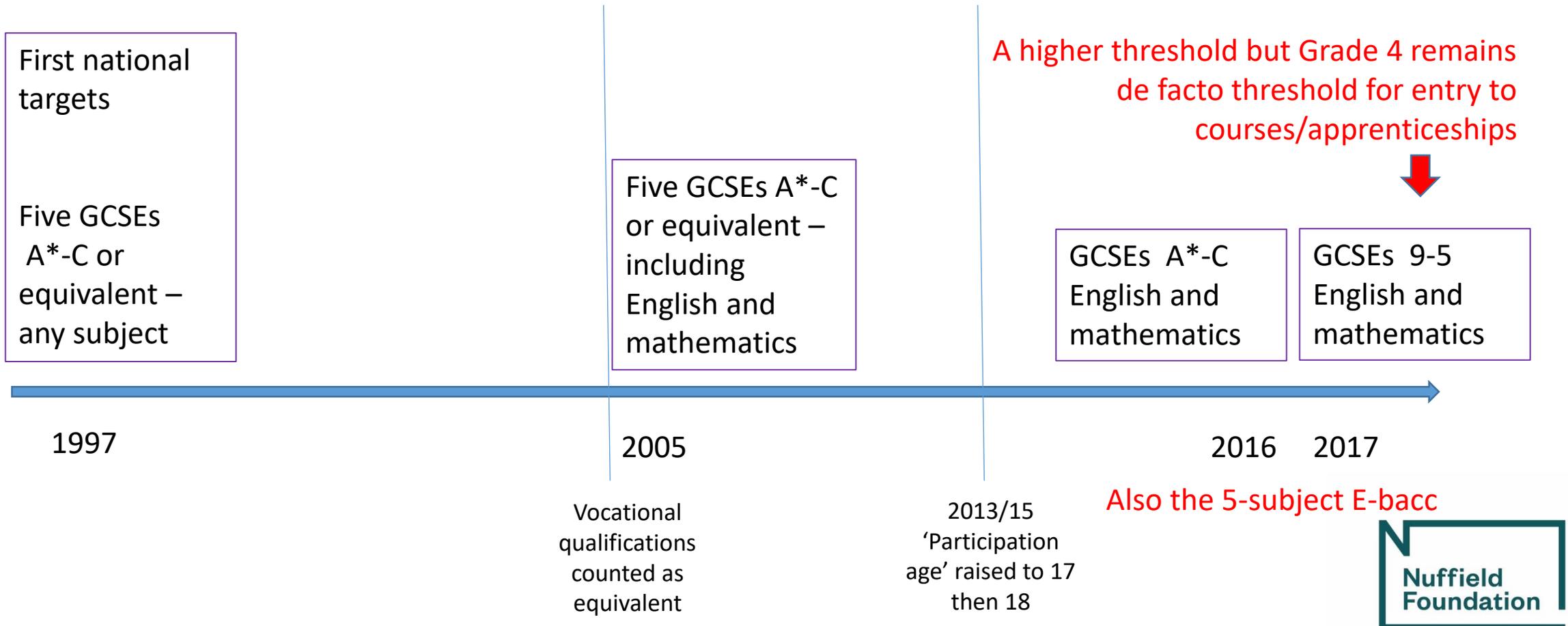
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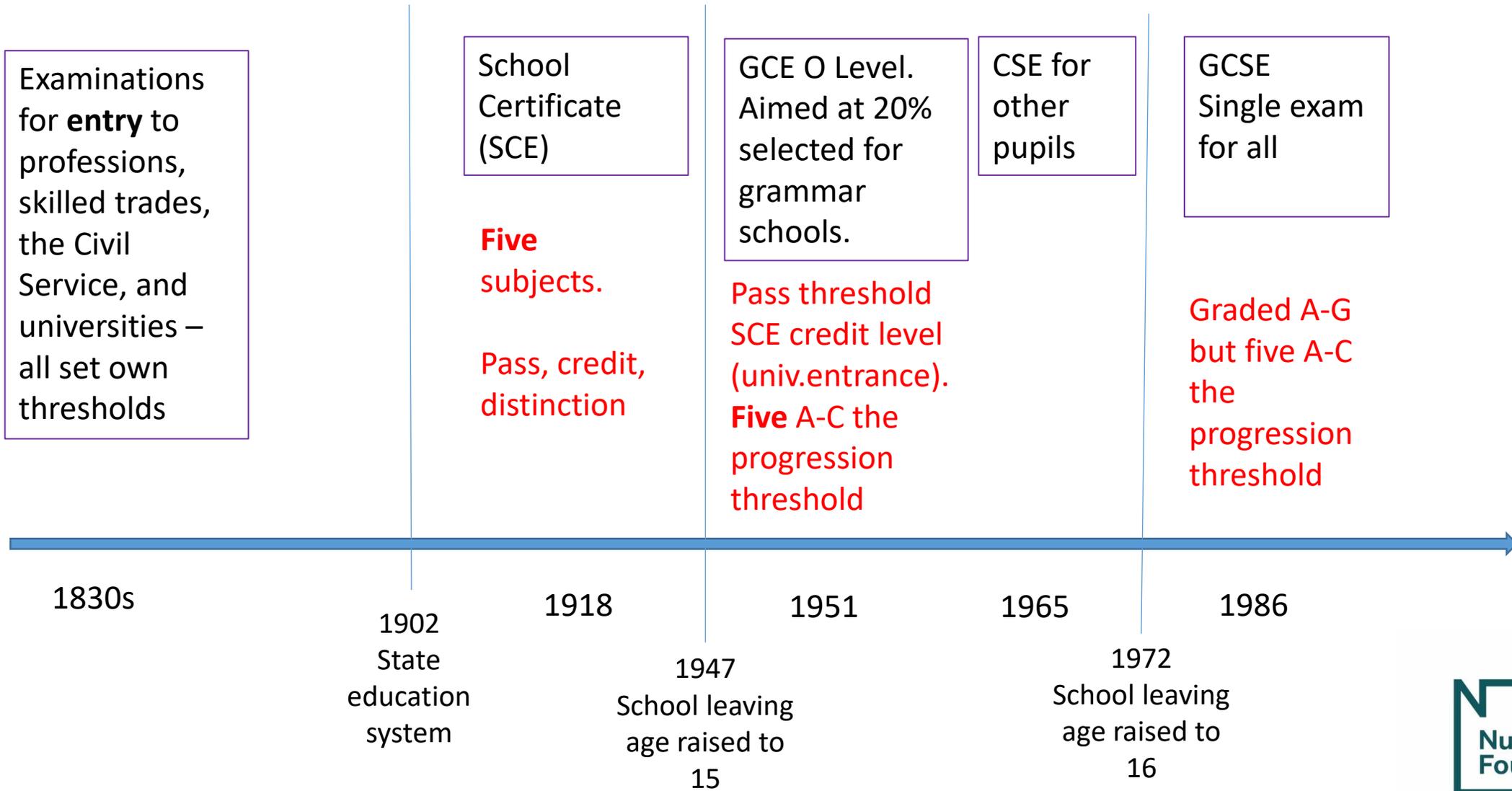
International Centre for Historical Research in Education (UCL)

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# Our starting point: in recent history thresholds for success have been getting higher and also more focused on English and mathematics



# A longer history

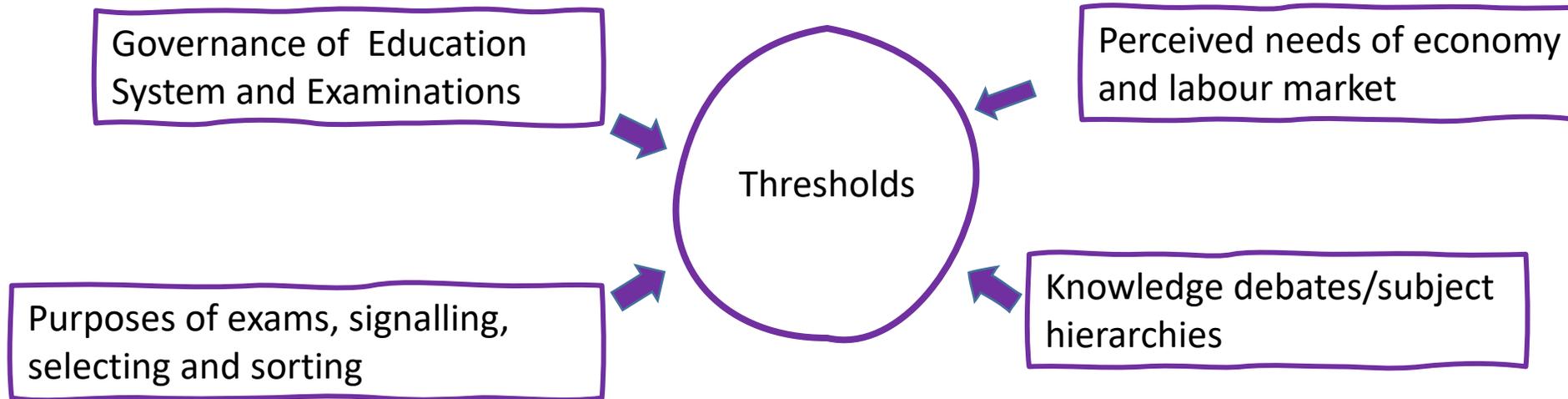


## Three key points

- shift (with SCE in 1918) from exams being **independently set** to determine **entry** to being **qualifications in their own right**
- dominance throughout of the idea of **five subjects** as a broad general education. The current narrow focus on English and maths and its impact on school curriculum is an outlier in historical terms
- the threshold for success being **increased over time**, so that as participation increases exams continue to sort higher and lower attainers in roughly the same proportions

# Policy as 'temporary settlement' between different interests and ideologies (Gale 1999)

Four areas of tension/dispute/settlement that interact to influence thresholds



Gale, T. (1999). Policy Trajectories: Treading the discursive path of policy analysis. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 20(3), 393–407.

## Concluding remarks

The historical lens helps us to problematise current policy constructions of success and failure which may be taken for granted

Perhaps particularly useful in 2020 as we consider how success should be assessed for students who have not taken exams, and indeed whether standard public exams are needed at all.

A work-in-progress! Comments and questions please!