

Consultation on GCSE Reform



September 2011

Ofqual/11/5038

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Introduction

1. The Government set out its policy aims in the White Paper, *The Importance of Teaching* (2010). Some of these aims focused on changes to the current GCSE qualifications, namely:
 - i. to ensure that GCSE examinations are taken at the end of the course
 - ii. to remove the potential for the re-sitting of units
 - iii. to ensure that greater account is taken of spelling, punctuation and grammar in GCSE qualifications.
2. We have a statutory duty to consult on any changes to the criteria for accreditation of qualifications. This consultation is therefore being undertaken in advance of any revisions. Three changes are proposed:
 - i. a change to paragraph 7 of the *GCSE Qualification Criteria* to make GCSEs linear (see paragraphs 13 to 15 of this consultation)
 - ii. an additional statement in Appendices 2 and 3 of the *GCSE, GCE, Principal Learning and Project Code of Practice* to restrict the availability of assessments to summer only, with a re-take opportunity for GCSE English, English language and mathematics qualifications (see paragraphs 18 to 20 of this consultation)
 - iii. a change to the GCSE subject criteria for English literature, geography, history and religious studies, and the addition of an appendix to the *Guidance for Awarding Bodies on Assessment of Quality of Written Communication*, to impose a requirement to award additional marks for spelling, punctuation and grammar (see paragraphs 31 to 35 of this consultation).
3. Section 128 of the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009 sets out our statutory objectives. The proposed changes link directly to two of these objectives.
 - (2) The qualifications standards objective is to secure that regulated qualifications –
 - (a) give a reliable indication of knowledge, skills and understanding, and
 - (b) indicate a consistent level of attainment (including over time) between comparable regulated qualifications.
 - (4) The public confidence objective is to promote public confidence in regulated qualifications and regulated assessment arrangements.

4. The consultation is open from 26th September 2011 to 4th November 2011. A longer consultation period would lead to a delay in announcing the way in which these reforms are to be implemented and there is a potential risk for the first cohort of students if they and their teachers do not have sufficient time to prepare for these changes. We have already met with key stakeholders, including awarding organisations and representatives of both teaching associations and groups representing disabled learners to discuss these changes ahead of this consultation.
5. We have undertaken equality analysis to assess the potential impact of the proposed changes. Review of equalities issues is, and will continue to be, ongoing and we invite respondents to make any comments on equalities issues in answer to questions 7 and 12.

Background to the changes

6. In the White Paper, *The Importance of Teaching* (2010), the Secretary of State for Education asked us how best to reform GCSEs to achieve a number of the Government's policy aims.

4.48 The current GCSE and A level system allows for re-sits of modules, which can be seen as undermining the qualifications and educationally inappropriate. In 2008, QCDA collected information from a sample of A levels and found that between two thirds and three quarters of students re-sat at least one unit. It is our view that this is a cause for concern. We will ask Ofqual to change the rules on re-sits to prevent students from re-sitting large numbers of units. We will consider with Ofqual in the light of evaluation evidence whether this and other recent changes are sufficient to address concerns with A levels.

4.49 We believe that it was a mistake to allow GCSEs to be fully modularised, because GCSEs are too small as qualifications to be taken sensibly in small chunks across two years. We also believe that it is creating too much examination entry in secondary schools – with many schools entering pupils for units in years 9 and 10 as well as years 11, 12 and 13. We will therefore ask Ofqual to consider how best to reform GCSEs so that exams are typically taken only at the end of the course.

4.50 When young people compete for jobs and enter the workplace, they will be expected to communicate precisely and effectively so we think that changes in the last decade to remove the separate assessment of spelling, punctuation and grammar from GCSE mark schemes were a mistake. We have asked Ofqual to advise on how mark schemes could take greater account of the importance of spelling, punctuation and grammar for examinations in all subjects.

(DfE White Paper 2010, *The Importance of Teaching*)

7. Our advice to the Secretary of State and his reply are available on our website.¹
8. Our advice to the Secretary of State was accepted in full. As a result, we propose to implement reforms so that, for two-year GCSE courses starting in September 2012, all examinations will be sat at the end of the course. (This also affects three-year courses starting in September 2011.) Re-sitting of units will then no longer be possible. Likewise, assessments from September 2012 in English literature, geography, history and religious studies will need to include additional marks to reward candidates' abilities in accurate spelling, punctuation and the use of grammar. (This also affects the assessments for candidates starting two-year courses starting in September 2011.)
9. There will be a full reform of GCSEs following the current review of the National Curriculum in England. Decisions on the timescale for the introduction of the new curriculum will be made early next year. However, we are starting initial work with the Department for Education and awarding organisations now to ensure that, should the National Curriculum review conclude that the new Key Stage 4 curriculum in English, mathematics and science ought to be introduced from September 2014, the new GCSEs can be ready for teaching at the same time. The changes proposed in this consultation are to be made ahead of that full reform.
10. The focus of this consultation is the implementation of the reforms: making the current GCSEs linear, and taking greater account of spelling, punctuation and grammar (SPaG). Both changes will take effect from September 2012. However, the changes will have an impact at different times, and themselves have implications for the need for additional exam series in January and March.

This is set out in the table below.

¹ www.ofqual.gov.uk/news-and-announcements/83/660

| Exam series | Impact on students |
|---------------|---|
| November 2012 | <p>Subjects where SPaG is being separately assessed are not offered</p> <p>Entry to GCSE units will be restricted to students (primarily Year 11s) entering for subject awards no later than summer 2013</p> |
| January 2013 | <p>SPaG will be separately assessed in externally assessed units in English literature, geography, history and religious studies</p> <p>Entry to GCSE units will be restricted to students (primarily Year 11s) entering for subject awards in summer 2013</p> |
| March 2013 | <p>SPaG will be separately assessed in externally assessed units in English literature, geography, history and religious studies (if available)</p> <p>Entry to GCSE units will be restricted to students (primarily Year 11s) entering for subject awards in summer 2013</p> |
| June 2013 | <p>SPaG will be separately assessed in externally assessed units in English literature, geography, history and religious studies</p> <p>Entry to GCSE units will be restricted to students (primarily Year 11s) entering for subject awards in summer 2013</p> |
| November 2013 | <p>GCSE English, English language and mathematics available as linear qualifications (with provision to carry forward a controlled assessment result)</p> |
| January 2014 | <p>Series no longer used for GCSE examinations</p> |
| March 2014 | <p>Series no longer used for GCSE examinations</p> |

| | |
|----------------------|---|
| <p>June 2014</p> | <p>SPaG will be separately assessed in externally assessed units in English literature, geography, history and religious studies</p> <p>GCSEs offered as linear qualifications only for subject awards in summer 2014</p> |
| <p>November 2014</p> | <p>GCSE English, English language and mathematics available as linear qualifications (with provision to carry forward a controlled assessment result)</p> |
| <p>June 2015</p> | <p>SPaG will be separately assessed in externally assessed units in English literature, geography, history and religious studies</p> <p>GCSEs offered as linear qualifications only for subject awards in summer 2014</p> |

11. We are mindful of the impact on schools and learners of these reforms, and the importance of stability and comparability from one year to the next. Therefore we will not propose to make further changes to the requirements for GCSEs before the redevelopment arising from decisions on Phase 1 of the National Curriculum review in England, due to be published early in 2012. We are not proposing to change the regulations for controlled assessment.
12. This document considers each of the reforms in turn, in relation to the following:
 - i. how we intend to implement the changes and proposed changes to regulatory documents
 - ii. the implications of the changes
 - iii. the timing of these changes.

Making the current GCSEs linear

How we intend to implement the changes and proposed changes to regulatory documents

13. The *GCSE Qualification Criteria* set out the requirements that all GCSEs must meet in order to be accredited by us and remain regulated. The current *GCSE Qualification Criteria (2007)*² specify that unitised specifications must allow only one re-sit of an assessment unit, and must allocate a weighting of at least 40 per cent to terminal assessment.

14. Paragraph 7 of the *GCSE Qualification Criteria* currently states:

Unitised specifications must:

- i. contain a maximum of four assessment units in a single award
- ii. allocate a weighting of at least 20% to each assessment unit
- iii. allow only one re-sit of an assessment unit with the better result counting towards the qualification
- iv. allocate a weighting of at least 40% to terminal assessment
- v. ensure results for a unit have a shelf-life limited only by the shelf-life of the relevant specification.

15. We are proposing to change this to the following.

For subject awards up to and including summer 2013, unitised specifications must:

- i. contain a maximum of four assessment units in a single award
- ii. allocate a weighting of at least 20% to each assessment unit
- iii. allow only one re-sit of an assessment unit with the better result counting towards the qualification
- iv. allocate a weighting of at least 40% to terminal assessment
- v. ensure results for a unit have a shelf-life limited only by the shelf-life of the relevant specification.

For subject awards after summer 2013, unitised specifications must:

- i. contain a maximum of four assessment units in a single award
- ii. allocate a weighting of at least 20% to each assessment unit

² www.ofqual.gov.uk/downloads/category/179-gcse-qualification-criteria

- iii. require that 100% of the assessment is terminal
- iv. not permit unit results to be carried forward from one examination series to another, except in the following cases:
 - (a) where those units have already been used to aggregate to a GCSE single award and a candidate wishes to re-use the unit result to aggregate to a double award in the same subject, or
 - (b) where a candidate wishes to carry forward the result from one or more controlled assessment units which have already been used to aggregate to a GCSE single or double award in order to re-take a whole qualification.

The implications of the changes

- 16. These changes will apply to all GCSEs. However, we are conscious that awarding organisations might have designed their current specifications differently if they had been required to develop linear specifications. Therefore, we want to understand the ways in which schools and colleges use these qualifications, in order to make arrangements that are manageable and do not adversely affect teaching and learning.
- 17. In most cases, the proposed changes will mean that candidates will have to enter all the assessment units at the end of the course, at the same time as they enter for the subject award.

Examination series

- 18. Currently GCSE units can be taken in November, January and March examination series, in addition to the main examination series in May/June. If students are sitting all their examinations at the same time as entering for the subject award, there will be no need for units to be available in the November, January and March series. We are proposing to put in place regulations to restrict GCSE sitting to May/June in order to minimise the impact on teaching and learning time in centres and to ensure that students can spend the full two years on their studies for a particular subject.
- 19. However, we are mindful of the importance of English and mathematics GCSEs as requirements for further study and employment. Our advice to the Secretary of State recommended a November re-take opportunity for English and mathematics, so that students who need these qualifications do not have to wait 12 months for another opportunity. Therefore we are proposing that the November series should remain for English, English language and mathematics linear GCSE qualifications.

20. We are proposing to add the following statement to Appendices 2 and 3 of the *GCSE, GCE, Principal Learning and Project Code of Practice*.

Awarding organisations must offer GCSE assessments (external assessment and moderation of controlled assessment) once a year (summer). The only exception to this is for GCSE English, English language and mathematics qualifications, where assessments may also be offered in November.

Questions

- Q1. Do you agree that there is a need for a November re-take opportunity for English, English language and mathematics, as set out in paragraphs 18 to 20?

Controlled assessment

21. The proposed changes will **not** mean that controlled assessment tasks must be undertaken at the end of the course. Controlled assessment in many subjects takes place over several weeks and months. Centres will have to enter candidates for any controlled assessment units at the same time as they enter the candidates for the written papers (that is, at the end of the course) but the controlled assessment tasks will still be scheduled at the discretion of the centre (as far as this is permitted by the specification).
22. Controlled assessment unit results will be able to be carried forward if students wish to re-take the qualification. This is because students re-taking qualifications may be taking examinations at a different centre that cannot supervise the controlled assessment task(s). It is also the case that students wishing to re-take qualifications in November will not have sufficient time to repeat the required controlled assessment tasks.
23. As a consequence of the move to linear assessment, students will be permitted to carry forward their controlled assessment unit result(s) following the initial aggregation. Paragraph 5.35 of the *GCSE, GCE, Principal Learning and Project Code of Practice (2011)* will apply.

5.35 Where candidates repeat non-modular qualifications, moderated marks for their internally assessed work may be carried forward during the lifetime of the specification.

Questions

- Q2. Do you agree that we should permit controlled assessment results to be carried forward for students re-taking a qualification, as set out in paragraphs 21 to 23?

Possible exceptions

24. In some cases the specifications have been designed so that candidates can enter for a single award and then a double award.
25. In order to minimise the need for changes to existing specifications where this occurs, we are proposing to make an exception for some specifications that include such shared units. Candidates will be permitted to carry forward unit results, where those units have already been used to aggregate to a GCSE single award and a candidate wishes to re-use the unit result to aggregate to a double award in the same subject (but **not** where the units have already been used in a short course). This will avoid the need for candidates to re-take units they have already entered. The following example illustrates where this would be possible.

Example

26. A candidate enters all units for GCSE business in summer 2014 and in summer 2015 wishes to enter for GCSE business (double award) which shares some units with the single award GCSE business. The candidate's unit results from summer 2014 can be carried forward and used to generate the double award grade in summer 2015.
27. We are **not** proposing to make exceptions to allow students to carry forward unit results from a short course, in order to aggregate to a full course GCSE. This would undermine the Government's policy objective that a student should sit the GCSE qualification at a single sitting.
28. We are considering making exceptions for pilot qualifications already being delivered in centres. We will consider these on a case-by-case basis, taking into account relevant factors such as the length of time the pilot has still to run, and whether or not there is evidence that a change to linear entry would affect the objectives of the pilot.

Questions

Q3. Do you agree that students should be allowed to use unit results from a single GCSE to aggregate to a double award GCSE in the same subject, as identified in paragraphs 25 and 26?

Q4. Do you agree that students should **not** be allowed to carry forward units from a short course to a full course award, as set out in paragraph 27?

Q5. Do you agree that, subject to the considerations detailed in paragraph 28, pilots should be considered as exceptions?

Q6. What, if any, other exceptions should we consider to the proposal to make GCSEs linear, as set out in paragraphs 18 to 28?

Q7. Do you have comments on any potential equality impacts, as detailed in the Equality Analysis form³, of the proposed move to linear assessment in all GCSE qualifications, as set out in paragraphs 18 to 28?

Q8. Do you have comments on any other aspects of the proposed move to linear assessment in all GCSE qualifications, as set out in paragraphs 18 to 28?

Timing of the changes

29. The changes affect two-year courses starting in September 2012 and they apply from the summer 2014 examinations. However, we do know that many schools teach GCSEs over three years. It will be the case, therefore, that there are some candidates who started their courses in September 2011 who will be required to sit all their examinations at the end of the course (in summer 2014). There is therefore an urgent need for us to be able to provide schools with clear information about how the rules will change and any exceptions that might be made.
30. We will need to accredit revised specifications from the awarding organisations, against the revised *Qualification Criteria (2007)*. Once the criteria are published, awarding organisations will be able to submit revised specifications to the regulators.

Spelling, punctuation and grammar

How we intend to implement the changes and proposed changes to regulatory documents

31. The GCSE Qualification Criteria set out the requirements that GCSEs must meet in order to be accredited by us. The current GCSE Qualification Criteria specify that qualifications must assess candidates' quality of written communication in accordance with the guidance documentation produced by the regulators.
32. Within the guidance document available on our website⁴ three strands are identified which together comprise the expectations of quality of written

³ www.ofqual.gov.uk/downloads/category/149-equality-analyses

⁴ www.ofqual.gov.uk/downloads/category/131-guidance?download=694%3Aguidance-for-awarding-bodies-on-the-assessment-of-quality-of-written-communication

communication. The first of these strands relates to spelling, punctuation and grammar:

- i. ensure that text is legible and that spelling, punctuation and grammar are accurate so that meaning is clear.
33. There is no requirement for separate marks to be identified for quality of written communication in GCSE qualifications in either the Qualification Criteria or the subject criteria relevant to each of the individual subject areas.
34. We are proposing to add a paragraph to the section entitled 'Scheme of assessment' in each of the GCSE subject criteria for English literature, geography, history and religious studies to read as follows:

Marks must be awarded for candidates' ability to spell, punctuate and use grammar accurately in accordance with the requirements in Appendix A of the regulations for Quality of Written Communication

35. We will add Appendix A to the *Guidance for Awarding Bodies on Assessment of Written Communication* to read as follows:

Where the subject criteria require marks to be allocated for accuracy in spelling, punctuation and the use of grammar the following rules apply.

- i. Performance descriptions

Threshold performance

Candidates spell, punctuate and use the rules of grammar with reasonable accuracy in the context of the demands of the question. Any errors do not hinder meaning in the response. Where required, they use a limited range of specialist terms appropriately.

Intermediate performance

Candidates spell, punctuate and use the rules of grammar with considerable accuracy and general control of meaning in the context of the demands of the question. Where required, they use a good range of specialist terms with facility.

High performance

Candidates spell, punctuate and use the rules of grammar with consistent accuracy and effective control of meaning in the context of the demands of the question. Where required, they use a wide range of specialist terms adeptly and with precision.

- ii. Marks for spelling, punctuation and the accurate use of grammar must be allocated to written and externally assessed units where there is a requirement for sufficient extended writing to enable the

accurate application of the Performance descriptions. The marks allocated must achieve a total weighting of 5% of the total marks for the qualification.

iii. Marks for spelling, punctuation and the accurate use of grammar will be allocated to individual questions. These marks must be identified to candidates on the question papers.

iv. No fewer than three marks for spelling, punctuation and grammar should be allocated to any single question.

36. These additional requirements will ensure that separate marks are allocated to the assessment of candidates' abilities to spell, punctuate and use grammar accurately, thereby emphasising their importance.

The scope of this requirement

37. This requirement will be applied to GCSE qualifications in English literature, geography, history (including ancient history) and religious studies only as part of these short-term reforms.
38. A separate piece of research work is ongoing to evaluate previous approaches to assessing spelling, punctuation and grammar.
39. The changes required will impact on the mark schemes and raw mark totals for the affected units. It will not change the number of questions or question types used.
40. Awarding organisations will identify the units where there is a requirement for sufficient extended writing to enable the accurate application of the Performance descriptions. We are proposing that awarding organisations should also indicate to candidates which questions will involve the assessment of accurate spelling, punctuation and use of grammar.

Questions

Q9. Do you agree that the Performance descriptions, as set out in paragraph 35, provide a sound basis for assessing candidates' abilities to spell, punctuate and use grammar accurately?

Q10. Do you think that question papers should indicate to candidates which questions will involve the assessment of accurate spelling, punctuation and use of grammar, as set out in paragraph 40?

Q11. Do you agree that allocating 5 per cent of the total marks available for the qualification, as set out in paragraph 35, gives sufficient emphasis to the importance of accurate spelling, punctuation and use of grammar?

Q12. Do you have comments on any potential equality impacts, as detailed in the Equality Analysis form⁵, of the proposal to assess spelling, punctuation and grammar separately and directly in externally assessed units in English literature, history, geography and religious studies, as set out in paragraphs 31 to 40?

Q13. Do you have comments on any other aspects of the proposed assessment of spelling, punctuation and grammar, as set out in paragraphs 31 to 40?

Timing of the changes

41. The changes affect written and externally assessed units available from September 2012. They will **not** apply to controlled assessment tasks. Candidates who at that point are in the second year of a two-year course of study will have their ability to spell, punctuate and use grammar accurately assessed on at least some of their units.
42. We intend to review the responses to the consultation and announce details of the changes to schools by the end of 2011. At the same time we intend to publish revised versions of the GCSE subject criteria for English literature, geography, history and religious studies and revised *Guidance for Awarding Bodies on Assessment of Quality of Written Communication*.
43. Once the revised documents are published, awarding organisations will be able to submit revised specifications and sample assessment materials to us.

⁵ www.ofqual.gov.uk/downloads/category/149-equality-analyses

Appendix 1: Proposed timeline for implementation

| | |
|-----------------------------|--|
| Early December 2011 onwards | Formal announcement and publication of revised regulatory documents |
| January 2013 | Question papers (and mark schemes) in English literature, geography, history (including ancient history) and religious studies to include additional, specific marks for spelling, punctuation and grammar |
| August 2013 | Final aggregation of specifications entered in a unitised way |
| November 2013 | Re-take opportunity (linear entry only) for English, English language and mathematics |
| May/June 2014 | First series in which all examinations will be taken in a linear way |

Questions

- Q1. Do you agree that there is a need for a November re-take opportunity for English, English language and mathematics, as set out in paragraphs 18 to 20?
- Q2. Do you agree that we should permit controlled assessment results to be carried forward for students re-taking a qualification, as set out in paragraphs 21 to 23?
- Q3. Do you agree that students should be allowed to use unit results from a single GCSE to aggregate to a double award GCSE in the same subject, as identified in paragraphs 25 and 26?
- Q4. Do you agree that students should **not** be allowed to carry forward units from a short course to a full course award, as set out in paragraph 27?
- Q5. Do you agree that, subject to the considerations detailed in paragraph 28, pilots should be considered as exceptions?
- Q6. What, if any, other exceptions should we consider to the proposal to make GCSEs linear, as set out in paragraphs 18 to 28?
- Q7. Do you have comments on any potential equality impacts, as detailed in the Equality Analysis form⁶, of the proposed move to linear assessment in all GCSE qualifications, as set out in paragraphs 18 to 28?
- Q8. Do you have comments on any other aspects of the proposed move to linear assessment in all GCSE qualifications, as set out in paragraphs 18 to 28?
- Q9. Do you agree that the Performance descriptions, as set out in paragraph 35, provide a sound basis for assessing candidates' abilities to spell, punctuate and use grammar accurately?
- Q10. Do you think that question papers should indicate to candidates which questions will involve the assessment of accurate spelling, punctuation and use of grammar, as set out in paragraph 40?
- Q11. Do you agree that allocating 5 per cent of the total marks available for the qualification, as set out in paragraph 35, gives sufficient emphasis to the importance of accurate spelling, punctuation and use of grammar?

⁶ www.ofqual.gov.uk/downloads/category/149-equality-analyses

Q12. Do you have comments on any potential equality impacts, as detailed in the Equality Analysis form⁷, of the proposal to assess spelling, punctuation and grammar separately and directly in externally assessed units in English literature, history, geography and religious studies, as set out in paragraphs 31 to 40?

Q13. Do you have comments on any other aspects of the proposed assessment of spelling, punctuation and grammar, as set out in paragraphs 31 to 40?

How to respond

Please respond to the questions we have asked using one of the following methods:

- completing the online response form at <http://comment.ofqual.gov.uk/gcse-reform/respond>
- emailing your response to consultations@ofqual.gov.uk, please include the consultation title in the subject line
- posting your response to Consultation on GCSE Reform 14-19 Team, Ofqual, Spring Place, Coventry Business Park, Herald Avenue, Coventry, CV5 6UB

Responses should be received by us no later than 4th November 2011.

⁷ www.ofqual.gov.uk/downloads/category/149-equality-analyses

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