

GCSE Consultation Response Analysis



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Background

In the White Paper 2010, *The Importance of Teaching*, the Secretary of State for Education in England asked the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) for advice on the introduction of linear assessment, the restriction of re-sit opportunities and greater account being taken of the importance of spelling, punctuation and grammar in GCSE qualifications. Our advice, and the positive response received, is captured in the correspondence between Glenys Stacey and Michael Gove (dated 11th May, 22nd June and 27th June 2011), which is available on the our website.¹

Implementing the changes to meet the policy requirements set out in the White Paper would mean making changes to the current GCSE Qualification Criteria, GCSE, GCE, Principal Learning and Project Code of Practice, and to the GCSE Subject Criteria for English literature, geography, history and religious studies. Therefore, we consulted on the proposed changes.

Aims of the consultation

The consultation document set out the policy requirements from the Department for Education's White Paper and asked specific questions about our implementation proposals, including the specific changes required to the regulatory documents. It set out the timescales for the introduction of the changes and clarified the reasons for a consultation period of six weeks, shorter than usual. It noted that a longer consultation period would lead to a delay in announcing the way in which these reforms are to be implemented and a potential risk for the first cohort of students, if they and their teachers did not have sufficient time to prepare for the changes. In saying this, it also noted that we had 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 the consultation.

¹ www.ofqual.gov.uk/news-and-announcements/83-news-and-announcements-news/482-correspondence-regarding-the-governments-white-paper

Methodology

The public consultation was open from 26th September to 4th November 2011. The public and stakeholders were invited to study the consultation document and provide comments using web-based, email or paper methods on the following proposals.

- The introduction of linear assessment in the current GCSEs. The proposals included reviewing the number of examination series, arrangements for carrying forward results from controlled assessment and possible exceptions.
- The implementation of the assessment of accurate spelling, punctuation and use of grammar.
- The proposed changes to regulatory documents.

A list of the questions asked in the consultation is provided in the Appendix to this report.

Responses received

We received a total of 1,261 responses. Stakeholders and the public were invited to comment, and the results show that some responded in part while others answered all the questions and provided additional comments on some or all of them. Some respondents provided a single response addressed to some or all of the questions.

To ensure that our analysis is robust we have treated the comments made on the consultation discussion boards (90) separately, because respondents could have been influenced by previous posts.

There was a total of 1,175 responses to the quantitative consultation questions (questions 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 9, 10 and 11), which asked whether respondents agreed or disagreed with a given statement. The responses were from:

- 884 centres or teachers who worked in a school or college
- 29 awarding organisations or examiners who worked for an awarding organisation
- 82 who were from a different category, for example higher education, parents, trades union, or special interest or subject organisation (these responses were gathered together because each individual group was too small to report)
- 180 for whom there was insufficient information for the respondent to be categorised accurately.

In addition, to the 1,175 responses there were 86 responses via email or post that did not respond individually to the specific consultation questions and so have not been included in the quantitative data below. However, the comments have been included in the qualitative analysis of responses.

These 86 responses were from:

- 56 centres or teachers who worked in a school or college
- 2 awarding organisations or examiners who worked for an awarding organisation
- 24 who were from a different category, for example higher education, parents, trades union, or special interest or subject organisation
- 3 for whom there was no information to categorise the respondent.

As a public consultation the sample was self-selecting and this has to be borne in mind when drawing conclusions from the outcomes. For example, within one school 55 different teachers gave a response, each of which was counted as an individual response. In contrast, most other schools only gave a single viewpoint (the next largest number of responses from a single school was 12). Percentages of respondents should therefore be considered alongside the comments and other evidence to provide a balanced view of the public response.

The table below lists the consultation questions and presents a breakdown of responses received for both the qualitative and quantitative questions.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Number of responses	No response (number)	Total number of qualitative responses
Question 1²								
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?	4%	6%	8%	18%	64%	1,157	18	350
Question 2								
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?	2%	2%	7%	27%	62%	1,157	18	212
Question 3								
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?	4%	4%	19%	28%	45%	1,144	31	123

² www.ofqual.gov.uk/news-and-announcements/83-news-and-announcements-news/482-correspondence-regarding-the-governments-white-paper

Question 4								
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	28%	22%	23%	15%	12%	1151	24	167
Question 5								
Do you agree that, subject to the considerations detailed in paragraph 28, pilots should be considered as exceptions?	4%	5%	39%	31%	22%	1,136	39	90
Question 6 What, if any, other exceptions should we consider to the proposal to make GCSEs linear, as set out in paragraphs 18 to 28?	N/A							406
Question 7 Do you have comments on any potential equality impacts, as detailed in the Equality Analysis form, of the proposed move to linear assessment in all GCSE qualifications, as set out in paragraphs 18 to 28?	N/A							356

<p>Question 8</p> <p>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?</p>	N/A							582
<p>Question 9</p>								
<p>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?</p>	7%	10%	32%	40%	11%	1,110	65	259
<p>Question 10</p>								
<p>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?</p>	7%	11%	12%	25%	45%	1,128	47	246
<p>Question 11</p>								
<p>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?</p>	13%	13%	20%	37%	18%	1,115	60	345

<p>Question 12</p> <p>Do you have comments on any potential equality impacts, as detailed in the equality analysis form, 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?</p>	N/A	260
<p>Question 13</p> <p>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?</p>	N/A	174

Consultation response outcomes

There was broad agreement to the approach we set out in the consultation for implementing the changes to GCSEs.

Introducing linear assessment to GCSEs

Here, respondents were asked to comment on:

- the number of assessment series
- arrangements for carrying forward controlled assessment marks
- arrangements for short courses
- single and double awards
- possible exceptions to the proposals.

Examination series (question 1)

82 per cent agreed with the proposal to allow a November re-take for linear specifications for English, English language and mathematics, suggesting this would provide the opportunity for learners to re-take while they pursue further learning, for example A level pathways, and thus it would not affect learners' progression or future plans. Some respondents suggested that a November window would also enable more able students to take examinations earlier.

A number of respondents suggested that the November re-take opportunity should apply to other subjects, for example the sciences. 36 per cent of the 350 respondents who provided a comment suggested that a January re-take should also be offered, citing the same reasons as for November re-takes.

Carrying forward controlled assessment marks (question 2)

The majority of respondents (89 per cent) agreed with the proposal that the results of controlled assessments should be able to be carried forward for students re-taking the qualification. In relation to controlled assessment, 28 of the 212 respondents would like to see this form of assessment reviewed to ensure it is fit for purpose in the proposed linear system.

Using single award results for a double award (question 3)

There was a general consensus among the respondents for the proposal to allow students to use unit results from a single GCSE to aggregate a double award GCSE in the same subject (73 per cent agreed or strongly agreed). Reasons provided included the fact that it may not be feasible for students who have already completed units to re-sit them. Allowing unit results to be used in this way may also encourage students to progress to a double award.

Preventing the use of short course results for a full GCSE (question 4)

The only area where there was a split in opinion was the proposal that candidates should not be permitted to carry forward the units from a short course to a full GCSE award. 50 per cent of the respondents from centres disagreed and 26 per cent agreed with the proposal, whereas responses from awarding organisations and examiners were more mixed – with 45 per cent in favour and 45 per cent against the proposal. Overall, 27 per cent of the respondents agreed with the proposal, 23 per cent were neutral and 50 per cent disagreed.

Some respondents commented that there are benefits to carrying forward results from short courses in supporting progression, rewarding achievement and motivating learners. Religious studies was specifically mentioned as a subject that would be particularly affected by this proposal. In contrast, some of the comments agreeing with the proposal expressed the concern that the carrying forward of short course units would reintroduce modularisation to a linear system, as demonstrated by one comment from a respondent from a centre that: ‘this would be unitisation by the back door!’

Exceptions for pilots (question 5)

More than half the respondents (53 per cent) agreed with the proposal that pilots should be considered as exceptions. Some respondents questioned the impact that these proposed changes would have on the mathematics linked pair pilot, and more generally the impact that the proposed changes might have on learners and on centre involvement with future pilots.

Exceptions (question 6)

Respondents were also asked whether any other exceptions should be considered. Of the 592 qualitative comments received, 92 respondents felt that no other exceptions were required. Where exceptions were put forward, some respondents suggested retaining the unitised structure in mathematics and the sciences. There were also comments asking us to consider a suitable transition period to allow candidates currently on three-year GCSE courses to complete their courses in a unitised way and to allow those specifications that have been running for less than three years to continue with a unitised structure.

Impact on equality (question 7)

A large number of respondents (118 of 356 qualitative responses) felt that the move to linear assessment in GCSEs could affect learners sharing protected characteristics identified in the 2010 Equality Act. Of these responses, there was no direct focus on a single characteristic; instead a series of more general concerns were outlined, including additional pressure being put on learners receiving extra time for completing assessments, those for whom English is not their first language, and the impact on learners suffering from short- or long-term medical conditions. There were mixed views in relation to gender (though many responses did not focus on the issue in isolation), with respondents divided as to whether a move to linear assessment would favour boys or girls more directly. Concerns were also raised by teachers of learners aged 17+ that the removal of the chance to stage the assessment of parts of a GCSE qualification over a longer period of time could have a negative impact on those studying part time. Respondents (35) were concerned about the impact this could have on students with lower ability.

Implementation of changes to the assessment of spelling, punctuation and the accurate use of grammar

Here respondents were asked to comment on:

- the proposed performance descriptions to assess spelling, punctuation and the accurate use of grammar
- whether question papers should indicate the questions where these skills will be assessed
- whether allocating 5 per cent of the marks for spelling, punctuation and the accurate use of grammar is an appropriate weighting.

Overall, the quantitative responses indicated that respondents supported the proposals. However, there were some concerns highlighted, which are outlined below.

Performance descriptions (question 9)

51 per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the performance descriptions provide a sound basis for assessing candidates' ability to spell, punctuate and use grammar correctly. 59 of the 259 qualitative comments on this question indicated that the proposed performance descriptions required more detail before being put into practice. Some respondents noted that in certain subjects high standards of spelling, punctuation and grammar are less important than sound subject knowledge; mathematics was specifically mentioned in this regard. However, respondents would like to see these skills explicitly assessed in English/English language GCSEs but not in other subjects. (It should be noted that the proposal to assess spelling, punctuation and the accurate use of grammar applies only to English literature, geography, history and religious studies. These skills are already specifically identified and assessed in GCSE English and GCSE English language.)

Responses that were supportive of the change were often strongly in favour of the introduction of the specific assessment of spelling, punctuation and accurate use of grammar because they felt that these skills were important throughout life and therefore should be taught directly in schools and assessed across all subjects.

Question papers indicating which questions would assess spelling, punctuation and grammar (question 10)

70 per cent of the respondents were in favour of indicating in the question papers the questions where markers would assess responses for accurate spelling, punctuation and use of grammar. While these respondents felt this would be fair to the learners, those who were less positive about this proposal felt that the application of these skills should be assessed across the entire examination, not limited to specific questions.

The appropriateness of allocating 5 per cent to spelling, punctuation and grammar (question 11)

55 per cent of respondents agreed that a weighting of 5 per cent for accurate spelling, punctuation and use of grammar was appropriate as it would not assign so much value to these skills that they overshadow subject knowledge. In a number of qualitative comments respondents accepted the proposed 5 per cent in principle, but

questioned its need to be tested at all and noted concerns that learners would potentially lose 5 per cent of marks in each of the GCSE subjects where this was to be introduced (English literature, geography, history and religious studies). 39 out of the 345 qualitative comments expressed concerns that the 5 per cent weighting was too high and that learners with dyslexia and other protected characteristics would be disproportionately affected by the change.

Impact on learners with protected characteristics (question 12)

The key issue raised by respondents was the need to provide further guidance on the accommodation of learners with protected characteristics and their specific requirements, particularly with regard to learners with English as an Additional Language and those with dyslexia.

Additional comments

Some respondents raised additional issues, such as:

- the speed of the implementation of these changes
- the fact that some current specifications are fairly new and have not had the time to 'bed in'
- the need to consider the impact of these changes on centres and awarding organisations.

Questions 8 and 13

Questions 8 and 13 asked the public to provide any additional comments on the proposals to introduce linear assessment to GCSEs and the implementation of changes to the assessment of accurate spelling, punctuation and use of grammar. The qualitative responses received have been recorded appropriately under the relevant questions and additional comments section above.

Appendix

Consultation questions³

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. Do you agree that, subject to the considerations detailed in paragraph 28, pilots should be considered as exceptions?
6. What, if any, other exceptions should we consider to the proposal to make GCSEs linear, as set out in paragraphs 18 to 28?
7. Do you have comments on any potential equality impacts, as detailed in the Equality Analysis form, of the proposed move to linear assessment in all GCSE qualifications, as set out in Paragraphs 18 – 28?
8. 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?
9. 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 correctly?
10. 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?
11. 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?

³ <http://comment.ofqual.gov.uk/gcse-reform/>

12. Do you have comments on any potential equality impacts, as detailed in the Equality Analysis form, 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?
13. Do you have comments on any other aspects of the proposed assessment of spelling, punctuation and grammar, as set out in paragraphs 31– 40?

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