



Department
for Education

Reformed GCSE subject content consultation

June 2013

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To: schools; organisations representing school teachers; subject associations; parents; young people; higher education; further education; academies; employers/business sector; local authorities; teachers; awarding organisations.

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Enquiries to: If your enquiry is related to the policy content of the consultation you can contact the Department on 0370 000 2288.

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Contact details (about consultation process):

If your enquiry is related to the DfE e-consultation website or the consultation process in general, you can contact the Consultation Unit by e-mail: consultation.unit@education.gsi.gov.uk or by telephone: 0370 000 2288 or via the Department's 'Contact Us' page.

1. Summary

- 1.1 In February, the Secretary of State announced that, following the evidence gathered through the Government's public consultation on reforming Key Stage 4 qualifications, GCSEs will be comprehensively reformed so that young people have access to qualifications which match and exceed those of the highest performing jurisdictions. The Secretary of State also wrote to Ofqual, the examinations regulator, setting out his policy for the development of new GCSEs. The letter asked Ofqual to develop revised regulatory requirements for the new qualifications with regard to that policy. The Secretary of State's letter can be found at: [Ofqual letter](#). The Department for Education is now seeking views on proposed **subject content and assessment objectives for new GCSEs**.
- 1.2 This consultation asks general and subject-specific questions concerning whether the proposed content for GCSEs represents a demanding and fulfilling course of study for students who will take the qualifications. In particular, the consultation seeks views on:
- the appropriateness of subject content and assessment objectives
 - the relative weighting of assessment objectives
 - progression of subject content from earlier key stages
 - progression to further academic and vocational study
 - the impact on specific pupil groups, including 'protected characteristic groups'
 - literacy and numeracy coverage.

2. Coverage of the consultation

- 2.1 This Department for Education consultation seeks views on the proposed **subject content and assessment objectives** for reformed GCSE qualifications to be introduced for first teaching from September 2015 (English language, English literature, mathematics, biology, chemistry, physics, combined science double award, geography and history). It also seeks views on a draft content framework for modern and ancient languages, qualifications which will be introduced for first teaching from September 2016.
- 2.2 Whilst responsibility for specifying the subject content of GCSEs lies with the Department for Education, responsibility for their regulation lies with Ofqual. The regulator will be putting in place new regulatory requirements for reformed GCSEs. It is therefore consulting in parallel on the key characteristics of the qualifications; for example, particular aspects of GCSE assessment arrangements. Many respondents will want to formulate their views in light of the proposals across both the Department for Education and Ofqual consultations. The Ofqual consultation can be found

at: <http://comment.ofqual.gov.uk/gcse-reform-june-2013/>. Please indicate in your response if you will be responding to both consultations.

3. Background

- 3.1 The Secretary of State wrote to Glenys Stacey, the Chief Regulator for England, on 6 February asking Ofqual to revise the regulatory requirements for GCSEs with regard to the Department for Education's vision for the qualifications.
- 3.2 The Government's consultation on [reforming key stage 4 qualifications](#) in autumn 2012 confirmed that there is broad agreement among stakeholders that GCSEs as currently constituted are not giving our students the best chance to succeed and that change is required.
- 3.3 GCSEs were introduced with good intentions, in particular introducing the concept of an almost universal qualification that would allow students of all abilities to sit examinations in core subjects, and would provide them with a grade which recognised the progress they had made. That principle of universality is one that we are determined to maintain.
- 3.4 However, there is clear evidence that the standards of our examinations have fallen over time and that the expectations they set for our students are now below those of our international competitors. The evidence for this was set out by the Department for Education in the context of the 2012 consultation, and can be revisited at: [key stage 4 qualifications consultation](#).
- 3.5 Having considered the evidence and arguments, the Secretary of State concluded that GCSEs can, with comprehensive reform, once again be highly respected qualifications in which students, employers and further and higher education institutions can have faith. New GCSEs will set expectations that match and exceed those in the highest performing jurisdictions.
- 3.6 The Department for Education has carried out extensive international research into the curricula of high performing jurisdictions. The Department has also consulted widely with subject experts, education experts, and schools and teachers in the UK. Drawing on this evidence, the Department has drafted subject content and assessment objectives which reflect the high standards expected of 16-year old students in high performing jurisdictions around the world. These drafts are the subject of this current Department for Education consultation.
- 3.7 The Department for Education does not intend to publish subject content

requirements for subjects beyond those covered by this consultation.

4. Using the consultation documents

- 4.1** In responding to this consultation, respondents should refer to the GCSE subject content and assessment objectives for the subject suites in English language and literature, mathematics, sciences, geography, history, and modern and ancient languages. These can be found via links on the consultation website.

5. Subject content and assessment objectives, and standards of achievement

- 5.1** The primary purpose of GCSEs is to evidence students' achievement against demanding and fulfilling subject content. The expectations set out in GCSE subject content must match and exceed those of high performing international jurisdictions. Taken together, subject content and assessment objectives should cover all the essential knowledge and understanding for the subject at an appropriate level for key stage 4 qualifications. The assessment objectives should be appropriately weighted relative to each other.

- 5.2** Where subjects require controlled assessment of practical skills, those skills are set out in the subject content. Ofqual is consulting upon the approach to assessing and reporting achievement. The details can be found in the Ofqual consultation at <http://comment.ofqual.gov.uk/gcse-reform-june-2013/>.

5.3 English language and English literature

English Language GCSE should ensure that students can read fluently and write effectively. The content for English language has a greater focus upon the breadth of study of a range of texts including high quality written texts from a range of centuries. The content also aims to ensure that students demonstrate literacy to support them in future employment, as well as building the key skills and knowledge to enable students to study English at a higher level. Spoken language is included in the content in recognition of the importance of a student's ability to present his or her ideas effectively and respond to spoken language. Ofqual is consulting on a proposal that spoken language does not contribute to the GCSE grade but is separately reported on the qualification certificate.

A large proportion of students also sit a GCSE in English literature, which additionally requires them to develop knowledge and skills in reading, writing and critical thinking. It gives them the opportunity to develop

culturally and acquire knowledge of high quality literature. The content emphasises the role of GCSE English literature in encouraging students to read for pleasure and draw upon a wide range of reading when they are assessed.

5.4 Mathematics

The revised subject content and assessment objectives for mathematics have a clear focus on teaching both fluency and mathematical reasoning so that students can solve problems effectively. Students will need to apply their mathematical knowledge to familiar and unfamiliar problems in both real-world and mathematical contexts. The content is also designed to prepare students for future study in mathematics and to give them the numeracy skills they need in life and work.

The content is intended to cover the full range of student capability, with the content for higher achieving students identified in bold type. This includes those higher achievers who intend to progress to A levels in science, technology, engineering and/or mathematics (STEM). Ofqual is consulting on options for differentiated assessment, including overlapping tiers and 'core plus extension' models. If some form of differentiated assessment is adopted for GCSE mathematics, the content for higher achievers will be confirmed as part of the final GCSE Mathematics requirements.

5.5 Sciences

The science suite includes subject content and assessment objectives for separate GCSEs in biology, chemistry and physics as well as a combined science double award. The combined science double award contains an appropriate spread of essential subject content across biology, chemistry and physics, and is consistent with proposed key stage 4 national curriculum requirements. It is intended to support progression to A levels in any of the three sciences. The sciences all contain explicit requirements for application of mathematical understanding and, in physics, new expectations for the recall and application of key formulae.

5.6 Geography

The revised subject content and assessment objectives for geography focus on essential subject knowledge in: human and physical geography (including people and environment); location and place knowledge; and geographical skills and fieldwork. Students will need to apply their geographical knowledge, skills and understanding to real world contexts, including fieldwork, and to contemporary situations and issues; and develop well-evidenced geographical argument drawing on their deeper knowledge

and understanding of geographical issues. The headings outlined in the draft GCSE content and assessment objectives document reflect those in the national curriculum programmes of study for geography, and should therefore ensure seamless transition and appropriate progression from key stage 3, as well as offering possibilities for development into A level.

We recognise that fieldwork is an essential aspect of geography which ensures that students are given the opportunity to consolidate and extend their achievement by relating learning to real experiences of the world. Students must carry out fieldwork studies in at least two contrasting environments beyond the classroom and school grounds. Assessment of fieldwork will be by means of an externally marked examination.

5.7 History

The content of the History GCSE is intended to support students in learning more about the history of Britain and the wider world. It should inspire students to deepen their historical understanding, think critically, weigh evidence, sift arguments, make informed decisions, and develop perspective and judgement. We are not consulting on the content of Ancient History GCSE at this stage, as this particular GCSE will not be reformed for first teaching until 2016.

In developing subject content and assessment objectives for history, a key consideration has been how best to ensure that the GCSE prepares students for further study by having opportunities to hone essential skills, knowledge and understanding in areas which do not lend themselves to assessment through written examinations. For example, one option we have considered but have not included in the proposed content is to include in the new subject content and assessment objectives a requirement that students undertake a historical investigation that gives them the opportunity to conduct independent research into a historical issue, event or process of their choosing resulting in an extended essay. The intention would be that such an investigation would allow students to demonstrate their ability to research and critically evaluate sources and deploy relevant evidence to support a structured analysis and argument. While we would not envisage that such an investigation would form part of the overall assessment or awarding of GCSE Grade, its successful completion would be reported. We recognise that there are regulatory and assessment issues as well as curriculum matters to consider in taking this option forward and we wish to explore this further through the consultation and in discussion with Ofqual.

5.8 Modern and ancient languages

In modern foreign languages, the subject content will require students to

understand and respond to different types of language, both spoken and written, and to communicate and interact effectively, both in speech and writing, across a range of familiar and fresh contexts, appropriate to their age, interests and maturity levels. The assessment objectives for the four skills of listening, reading, speaking and writing will be weighted equally. Ofqual will consult separately on the assessment of the practical skills of speaking and listening at the point at which they prepare the regulatory requirements for that subject. This is not included in Ofqual's current consultation.

In ancient languages, the subject content will require students to understand the cultural legacy of the ancient world through its language and literature; read, understand and interpret the ancient language; and develop knowledge and understanding of the ideas, values, culture and practices of the classical/biblical world through reading and responding to literature and other primary sources. The assessment objectives for linguistic and cultural competence will be weighted equally.

We are consulting on the subject content for modern and ancient languages alongside other subjects, although these GCSEs will not be reformed until 2016. Ofqual will consult in due course on the specific requirements that will govern controlled assessment and tiering in these subjects.

Questions

Do the proposed subject content and assessment objectives cover the appropriate knowledge and understanding for GCSEs in these subjects?

Is the relative weighting of the assessment objectives right?

English language: Has the right practical content for English language been identified to allow students to gain the skills to progress in the subject, beyond the content which can be examined externally and reliably included in the GCSE grade?

Mathematics: Has the right content for mathematics been identified for high achievers, including those going on to study A levels in science, technology, engineering and/or mathematics (STEM)?

Science: Has the right practical content for science been identified to allow students to gain the skills to progress in the subject?

Geography: We are working on options to ensure that fieldwork takes place. One option might be a letter, submitted to awarding organisations and signed by the head teacher and head of geography, which states that fieldwork has taken place beyond the classroom and school grounds. Do you think this would

be an effective measure to demonstrate that such fieldwork has taken place? Do you have any other suggestions to verify that fieldwork has taken place beyond the classroom and school grounds?

History: Should students be encouraged, as part of their GCSE history studies, to undertake a historical investigation that gives them the opportunity to conduct independent research into a historical issue, event or process of their choosing resulting in an extended essay? If so, how can this be achieved best?

6. Progression between stages of study

6.1 GCSE qualifications represent a record of students' achievement as they reach the end of the secondary phase of their compulsory education. Whilst the focus of the assessment is mainly on attainment at the end of key stage 4, the qualifications should also provide assurance that students have retained and consolidated their understanding of essential subject content covered during earlier key stages. GCSEs also provide students with a solid basic grounding in the subject to underpin progression to further academic or vocational study. In the sciences, where students may take the combined award or three separate sciences, the combined award must support onward progression to A level study in each of biology, chemistry and physics, so as not to limit students' options unduly.

Questions

Do the proposed subject content and assessment objectives provide assurance that essential knowledge taught at the earlier key stages is built upon and represented adequately?

Will the proposed qualifications secure sound progression for the purposes of further academic and vocational study?

Science: Will the combined science double award provide students with a sufficiently secure basis for progression to A level study in each of biology, chemistry and physics?

7. Literacy and numeracy

7.1 Employers, universities and colleges are dissatisfied with school leavers' literacy and numeracy, with 42% of employers needing to organise additional training for at least some young people joining them from school or college (CBI survey, 2012). The GCSE is, and will remain, the primary qualification taken by young people and used by them as evidence of their literacy and numeracy. Young people who do not achieve a pass at 16 in English language and mathematics will be expected to continue to study those subjects post-16. Employers, including the CBI, have pressed for the

qualifications taken by young people to provide greater assurance of young people's literacy and numeracy than is currently the case. GCSEs in English language and mathematics should provide a reasonably accurate signal regarding a young person's level of literacy and numeracy.

Questions

Does the English language content cover the key elements of literacy needed for employment or further study?

Does the mathematics content cover the key elements of numeracy needed for employment or further study?

8. Equalities

8.1 In accordance with the Equality Act 2010, Ministers must have "due regard", when making decisions, to the need to eliminate unlawful discrimination; advance equality of opportunity; and foster good relations, in relation to protected characteristics. The Department for Education has been taking this requirement into account in developing draft subject content and assessment objectives.

Question

Do any of the proposals have potential to have a disproportionate impact, positive or negative, on specific pupil groups, in particular the 'protected characteristic' groups? (The relevant protected characteristics are disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation); if they have potential for an adverse impact, how can this be reduced?



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