

# GCSE Computer Science: Decisions on Conditions and Guidance



In February 2015 we published a consultation about the rules and guidance we proposed to put in place for reformed GCSEs (graded 9 to 1) in computer science.

We have reviewed the responses to the consultation and are now announcing our decisions. We are also publishing a more detailed analysis of the responses alongside this document.<sup>1</sup>

## Conditions and requirements

### Content requirements

We proposed that all reformed GCSEs in computer science should comply with the subject content requirements published by the Department for Education,<sup>2</sup> and with our assessment objectives.

Most respondents did not comment on this proposal, but those who did supported it, noting that it was consistent with our rules for other reformed GCSEs. No respondents raised any significant concerns with this aspect of our proposals.

We have therefore decided to confirm our proposals in this area.

### Assessment requirements and statistical moderation

We have previously confirmed that reformed GCSEs in computer science will be assessed through a mixture of 80 per cent exams and 20 per cent non-exam assessment.

In our consultation, we proposed that:

- the non-exam assessment would test students' programming skills in a single 20-hour project, using tasks set by teachers within schools;
- exam boards should have flexibility to mark the non-exam assessment themselves, or to moderate marks awarded by teachers; and

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<sup>1</sup> [www.gov.uk/government/consultations/gcse-reform-regulations-for-computer-science](http://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/gcse-reform-regulations-for-computer-science)

<sup>2</sup> [www.gov.uk/government/publications/gcse-computer-science](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/gcse-computer-science)

- exam boards should use statistical moderation to promote reliable and accurate marking.

Although a small number of respondents agreed with our proposals, most did not. Respondents raised a number of concerns with our proposed approach, particularly around the setting and marking of non-exam assessment, and the use of statistical moderation. Respondents felt that:

- having teachers set non-exam assessment tasks placed too great a burden on teachers (many of whom are non-specialists), and would make it difficult to ensure that tasks were set at a consistent and appropriate level of difficulty;
- having exam boards mark non-exam assessment would help ensure that marks were reliable; and
- statistical moderation was an unproven approach that could unfairly penalise students with strong programming skills, devalue the non-exam assessment, and drive undesirable behaviours in schools.

We recognise that there are legitimate concerns here and find respondents' arguments persuasive. We have therefore made changes to our proposals in response.

First, we have changed our approach to setting non-exam assessment tasks.

As the consultation responses have highlighted, both approaches to task setting – by teachers and by exam boards – have strengths and weaknesses. Tasks set by teachers can be better tailored to individual students, but also place a significant burden on teachers and can lead to inconsistent assessments. Tasks set by exam boards, on the other hand, should be more consistent, but can constrain the curriculum and create increased opportunity for malpractice.

Taking account of the consultation feedback, our view is that neither approach is demonstrably better – both have limitations, but both could also be made to work with the right controls and support for teachers in place. We have therefore decided to permit tasks set both by teachers and by exam boards, and we require exam boards to demonstrate that whichever approach is used they have implemented sufficient controls and are providing appropriate support to teachers.

We have also taken a step back from our proposals around the use of statistical moderation. Respondents raised legitimate concerns about the validity of this approach in the context of GCSE computer science, the risk of devaluing the non-exam assessment, and the scope to drive undesirable behaviour in schools. We have therefore decided that we will not require exam boards to use statistical moderation at this time.

Nevertheless, the non-exam assessment in GCSE computer science needs to provide a reliable indication of students' programming abilities, and students' marks should not be distorted by external pressures (such as secondary school accountability measures).

We have decided to retain the proposed requirement that allows exam boards to mark non-exam assessment themselves, or to moderate teachers' marks – provided that they put in place appropriate controls and support for teachers.

We are carrying out further work to determine what controls and support might be needed, and will consult at a later date on more detailed proposals.

## **Guidance**

### **Guidance on assessment objectives**

We proposed to introduce guidance clarifying the interpretation of our assessment objectives.

Respondents who commented on our proposed guidance generally supported it, although some suggested opportunities to improve the wording.

In response to these comments, we have made changes to the drafting where necessary to clarify our expectations.

## **Next steps**

We have now published final *Subject Level Conditions and Requirements*<sup>3</sup> and *Subject Level Guidance*<sup>4</sup> for GCSE computer science.

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<sup>3</sup> [www.gov.uk/government/publications/gcse-9-to-1-subject-level-conditions-and-requirements-for-computer-science](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/gcse-9-to-1-subject-level-conditions-and-requirements-for-computer-science)

<sup>4</sup> [www.gov.uk/government/publications/gcse-9-to-1-subject-level-guidance-for-computer-science](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/gcse-9-to-1-subject-level-guidance-for-computer-science)