



Qualifications and  
Curriculum Authority

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# **A level art and design**

*Review of standards 1978–98*

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## **Introduction**

Between 1978 and 1998, changes in A level art and design were influenced by changing attitudes to both the study and assessment of the subject. The aim of the study of art was seen increasingly as the development of knowledge and understanding of both processes and product, rather than as an emphasis on the acquisition of technical skills. The assessment of the subject became more about candidates' achievements throughout a course of study, rather than a test of their ability within a specified time period.

Other key changes to A level art and design between 1978 and 1998 were influenced by the introduction in the 1980s of an agreed common core outlining the key features expected in an A level examination in art and design.

About 31,500 candidates took A level art and design in 1998. The syllabuses included in this study accounted for more than 80 per cent.

## **Examination demand**

### ***Materials available***

The reviewers considered syllabuses, question papers, mark schemes and examiners' reports from 1978, 1988, 1993 and 1998. Not all of these materials were available for the earlier years – see Annex A for details.

### ***Syllabus changes***

The amount of detail in syllabuses increased over the period under review. In 1978, syllabuses were often no more than one page, outlining what could be expected in the examination papers for various options. In 1998, by contrast, syllabuses were generally well constructed and offered coherent and detailed information and advice on all aspects of the examination, including assessment objectives and criteria.

All 1998 syllabuses were entitled 'art & design', whereas some of the 1978 syllabuses were called 'art and craft' or simply 'art'. The title appears to have had little bearing on the syllabus content.

### ***Syllabus content***

In the 1988 syllabuses there was an emphasis across all awarding bodies on painting and drawing and on direct observation. Any theoretical element was limited to written history and appreciation examination papers, whether optional or compulsory. There was no evidence of any relationship between theoretical and practical examination papers.

In 1993, AQA took a more conceptual approach, integrating theory and practice in three components:

- coursework (45 per cent)
- externally assessed assignment (25 per cent)
- extended essay (30 per cent).

OCR required:

- a controlled test (30 per cent)
- coursework (40 per cent)
- a personal study (30 per cent).

WJEC required:

- a controlled test (50 per cent)
- a written examination or an independent study (25 per cent)
- coursework (25 per cent).

Edexcel, however, appeared more flexible than the other awarding bodies: in the interests of adopting a holistic approach to assessment, it had three unweighted components, where a strong performance in one component could compensate for a weaker performance in another.

In 1998, there were still clear differences across syllabuses, in terms of requirements as well as presentational style and supporting commentaries. The WJEC syllabus, for example, appeared to be the most prescriptive. Edexcel did not prescribe content: centres were encouraged to develop their

own courses of study within a framework of basic elements, processes and procedures, and practices. Details of the assessment schemes for each syllabus are given in the table below.

AQA	CCEA	Edexcel	OCR	WJEC
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Coursework 45%</li> <li>Personal study 30%</li> <li>Externally assessed assignment 25%</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Coursework: fine art activity 20%; design activity 20%; dissertation 20%</li> <li>Externally assessed assignment: visual workbook plus response to an externally set theme or externally set context 40%</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Coursework: three units plus a critical/historical study (sketchbook, dissertation, slide/cassette presentation or video)</li> <li>Preparatory/supporting work for externally set paper</li> <li>Externally set paper or written paper on history of art and design</li> <li>No weightings given: candidates are assessed holistically</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Coursework 40%</li> <li>Personal Study 30%</li> <li>Controlled study 30%</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Coursework 25%</li> <li>Critical studies (written examination or investigative study) 25%</li> <li>Controlled test: drawing and painting 25% plus design and practice 25%</li> </ul>

The reviewers judged that the 1998 examinations placed different levels of demand on candidates. For example:

- only AQA required a *written* personal study and did not give the option of presenting critical and contextual studies work in some other form. This would have placed considerable extra demand on some candidates
- WJEC had an optional written history paper or an investigative study that ‘may follow a suggested format’; in addition, its coursework requirement included a compulsory ‘personal record’ that the reviewers judged potentially more demanding for candidates
- both WJEC and CCEA required work from different disciplines in the controlled test, for example drawing and painting (or fine art), and design
- Edexcel subsumed a critical and contextual studies component into its overall coursework requirements but did not prescribe how this might be presented.

Edexcel allowed up to 20 hours for completing the externally set element; in contrast, AQA and CCEA both allowed 15 hours, and WJEC allowed three hours ‘in the first instance’. The open nature of the Edexcel content did not necessarily imply a lessening of demand but could be open to dilution and an associated lack of rigour. When all components were taken into account, OCR was judged to present the most equitable balance between prescription, guidance, centre/candidate ownership of content and demand.

### ***Scheme of assessment***

Over the period under review there were marked changes in the method of assessment and type of examination paper set. These changes were most notable between 1988 and 1993. The early syllabuses were all set and assessed externally. By the 1993, some components were being assessed internally. Essentially, the early syllabuses assessed candidates on what they could produce under examination conditions within a specified time; strong emphasis was placed on the acquisition of technical skills and on accurate observation. The 1993 and 1998 syllabuses focused less on drawing or craft skills, but placed a higher value on knowledge and understanding where both process and product were assessed. These syllabuses allowed candidates to provide evidence of their achievement throughout a course of study, rather than testing their ability to perform within very

short time limits. It was possible, therefore, that the 1998 syllabuses generally provided more demanding – although potentially more rewarding – opportunities for both candidates and their teachers.

Another notable change over the period under review was a move away from a written history and appreciation component, whether compulsory or optional, to a critical and contextual studies component, often in the form of a personal study. The content of the written history and appreciation component could be broad, while the focus of the critical and contextual studies component could be narrow but required candidates to study in greater depth. The reviewers judged that while the nature of the demand on candidates had changed in this respect, there was no corresponding change in the level of demand.

### ***Assessment objectives***

No assessment objectives or criteria were specified in the 1978 syllabuses.

By 1988, nascent assessment objectives appeared, although in general these were not weighted. OCR specified different objectives for different components. Generally across the awarding bodies, objectives did not relate closely to assessment criteria, where these existed.

In the 1993 syllabuses, assessment objectives were broadly comparable across awarding bodies and addressed critical and contextual studies, formal qualities, research, media and techniques, and personal expression.

The assessment objectives in the 1998 syllabuses were based on the common core, variously interpreted and grouped across awarding bodies, with the number of objectives varying from 10 (WJEC) to seven (CCEA). The objectives were broadly comparable in scope but were not weighted, although AQA listed the objectives in a different order of importance for each component.

### ***Options within syllabuses***

The 1978 syllabuses were notable for the extensive range of optional routes offered. There was a vast difference in the breadth and depth of content covered by candidates choosing different options both within and across the different awarding bodies. Edexcel, for example, provided a choice of five main and seven subsidiary examination papers, effectively allowing candidates to choose one of the following courses of study: 2-D fine art; 2-D and 3-D fine art; fine art plus a craft; art and design; design and craft; or two different crafts.

In 1988 syllabuses, there was little parity between optional routes and much inconsistency both within and across awarding bodies.

By 1993, all syllabuses offered broadly comparable optional routes, although each awarding body presented these differently. The 1998 Edexcel, AQA, WJEC and OCR syllabuses were essentially the same in this regard. The CCEA syllabuses, however, differed most between 1993 and 1998. In 1993, CCEA offered a choice of two syllabuses (A and B). In the syllabuses under review, five papers were available, of which candidates chose three. In 1998, the CCEA syllabus consisted of four components – three units of coursework (a fine art activity, a design activity plus a dissertation) and an externally set assignment. The reviewers considered that, in 1998, CCEA was the most demanding awarding body in terms of the range that was required.

### ***Question papers***

In 1978 and 1988, the awarding bodies varied in terms of the demand placed on candidates. The duration of the controlled test, the amount of preparation time, the quantity of preparatory work (if required) and the number of examination components all varied. Question papers were often confusing, with many choices of specialism and with many variables within each option; for example, in 1978 Edexcel offered five options within its main examination paper and seven within its subsidiary examination paper. More generally, questions varied from one-word starting points to being very prescriptive. Consistency between different options within the same awarding body appeared rarely to have been considered. The history and appreciation papers were the most variable in demand.

Of the question papers from 1993, WJEC allowed 15 hours for the externally assessed component while Edexcel allowed 15–20 hours. The rubric and layout of the WJEC critical studies question paper offered greater clarity and support, and candidates were provided with a folder of illustrations for use with the questions. Overall, WJEC required more of a balance between ‘art’, ‘design’ and ‘critical studies’ than Edexcel. The WJEC examination paper also had noticeably more parity of demand across the various endorsements than Edexcel. For example, the options within the WJEC graphics, textiles and 3-D studies examination papers all offered an even choice of three questions. Levels of choice were much more variable in the Edexcel papers.

In 1998, significant variations in approach remained. For example:

- AQA did not set a question paper
- OCR offered a choice of open-ended starting points and detailed project or design briefs
- CCEA’s externally set assignment allowed candidates to respond to a choice of a prescribed theme or a prescribed context
- Edexcel’s externally set paper was more traditional, with separate question papers for each of the suite of eight art and design options. Questions generally took the form of short briefs with a variable number of choices between options and sections.

### **Coursework**

There was no coursework in 1978.

By 1988, OCR allowed an element of coursework but offered no guidance on how it should be assessed.

By 1993, coursework was a requirement of all syllabuses, although there were variations between awarding bodies in terms of what candidates were expected to produce. For example:

- WJEC required a personal record and two units
- Edexcel required a minimum of three pieces of practical work plus a critical/historical study
- AQA did not specify coursework requirements other than to state that coursework should be sufficient to meet the aims of the syllabus.

Similar variations existed in the 1998 syllabuses.

The reviewers judged that the introduction of coursework represented an increase in the level of demand.

### **Mark schemes**

The lack of mark schemes from earlier years, together with the lack of detail in those that were provided, meant that few conclusions could be reached about the expectations of performance over the period.

OCR itself suggested a need for accurate observation and good technical skills, and the Edexcel chief examiner's report made similar general points and included vague references to 'awakened aesthetic appreciation'.

### **Summary**

During the period under review there had been considerable changes to the nature of assessment in art and design. Most of these could be explained by changes to traditions and established practices. One of the key changes had been the introduction of coursework, which had, for example, allowed for the assessment of critical and contextual knowledge through a personal study rather than through an external written paper. Whether this represented a change in demand was felt likely to depend on the level of ability of the candidates.

Throughout the period there were also variations in the demands made both within and across the awarding bodies. In 1998, there were significant differences between awarding bodies in terms of the different weightings placed on components such as coursework and the critical and contextual studies element.

Throughout the period there were marked differences in the approach to question papers and how these should be structured, presented and related to coursework, experiences and practices. Overall, presentation and clarity of question papers improved over the period and there were less obvious differences in demand between the various components within the same examinations. The distinctive approaches of the different awarding bodies were inextricably linked to syllabus content and emphases. On the basis of the documentary evidence it was not possible to conclude whether one approach was necessarily any more or less demanding than another.

There were concerns about a reduction in the rigour and demand of examinations where a holistic approach to assessment and grading was employed, for example where there was no set requirement for the amount of coursework. What constituted a 'unit' of coursework was rarely defined. While it would be inappropriate to prescribe coursework too closely, more guidance for teachers and candidates would be useful and would help to establish comparability of demands on candidates.

At the same time, the reviewers recognised that making requirements explicit carried an element of risk. In particular, the existence of assessment criteria would tend to constrain possible outcomes and encourage candidates to make orthodox responses. The reviewers thought it was important that assessment criteria were interpreted flexibly to accommodate different genres of work. Assessment criteria also need to be kept under constant review, to ensure that they permit the diversity of response and form of outcome advocated in the philosophy of the awarding bodies.

## **Standards of performance at grade A and grade E**

### ***Materials available***

The reviewers considered candidates' work at each of the key grade boundaries drawn mainly from the year 2000 entry from all awarding bodies with the exception of CCEA. No archive work was available to enable comparisons to be made with earlier years. Further details of the materials used are given in Annex B.

The descriptions of expected performance used in this review were developed from published grade descriptions, adjusted to take into account the fact that the work was from borderline candidates. The descriptions are provided at Appendix C.

### ***Performance at grade A and grade E***

At the grade A/B borderline there was a broad consensus that WJEC and OCR scripts consistently matched the grade descriptions. Candidates' performance from AQA was judged to be just below the expected standard. On the evidence of a very small sample, Edexcel scripts were also judged to be just below the grade descriptions.

At the grade E/N borderline, work was of a very variable standard. On the evidence available, Edexcel, AQA and OCR scripts were all judged to be well matched to the performance descriptions. There was insufficient WJEC work available to make a judgement.

### ***Summary***

Overall, the evidence available suggested that OCR scripts consistently matched the performance descriptions; this was not true of any other awarding body.

Work at grade E was characterised more by its inconsistency than by its closeness to the descriptions.

## Annex A: Materials used in the syllabus review

Material	Year	AQA	CCEA	Edexcel	OCR	WJEC
<b>Syllabuses</b>	1978	✓	n/a	✓	✓	✓
	1988	✓	n/a	✓	✓	✓
	1993	✓	n/a	✓	✓	✓
	1998	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<b>Mark schemes</b>	1978	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
	1988	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
	1993	n/a	n/a	n/a	✓	n/a
	1998	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<b>Question papers</b>	1978	✓	n/a	✓	✓	✓
	1988	✓	n/a	✓	✓	✓
	1993	n/a	n/a	✓	n/a	✓
	1998	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<b>Examiners' reports</b>	1978	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	✓
	1988	✓	n/a	n/a	✓	✓
	1993	✓	n/a	✓	n/a	✓
	1998	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

n/a = not available

## Annex B: Details of the scripts used in the script review

Year	AQA	CCEA	Edexcel	OCR	WJEC
1978	✓	n/a	✓	✓	✓
1988	✓	n/a	✓	✓	✓
1993	✓	n/a	✓	✓	✓
1998	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

## **Annex C: Performance descriptors used in the script review**

### ***Grade A***

Candidates combine their knowledge, skills and understanding in intelligent, discriminating and purposeful ways.

Candidates record confidently, in visual and other forms, their observations, experiences, ideas and insights within the context of thorough and sustained research and enquiry. Collection, organisation and presentation of information is considered and clearly focused. Candidates are discriminating in their selection and use of primary and other sources.

Candidates analyse and evaluate sources confidently and critically. They demonstrate understanding of meanings, purposes and contexts when articulating reactions and responses.

Candidates explore and develop ideas effectively. They sustain investigations in their chosen area of interest and make positive use of the resources, materials, processes and techniques that they employ. They consider the relationship between process and product and analyse and reflect on developments. Their integration of formal elements provides evidence of technical skill and an appreciation of the specific contexts in which they are applied.

Candidates present creative responses through which they realise personal intentions. They articulate connections with the work of others and explain how such engagement has informed and influenced their thinking and practice.

### ***Grade E***

Candidates demonstrate some ability to combine appropriately the knowledge, skills and understanding they have developed.

Candidates record their observations, ideas and insights in visual and other forms, through research and enquiry. They show that they can collect and organise information and make use of a variety of primary and other sources.

Candidates attempt to analyse and evaluate sources and, in their responses, provide evidence of some understanding of purposes, meanings and contexts.

Candidates explore and develop ideas and undertake relevant investigations. They select and employ resources, materials, processes and techniques and, to a certain extent, take account of the relationships between intentions and outcomes. The formal elements are applied with some control and understanding.

Candidates present a personal response and make connections between their own work and that of others.