



Qualifications and
Curriculum Authority

A level general studies

Review of standards 1980-2000

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Contents

Introduction	3
Examination demand	4
Syllabus content and assessment	5
Findings	6
Standards of performance at grade A and grade E	7
Findings	7
Conclusions	8

Introduction

In 2000, only two awarding bodies, the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA) and Oxford Cambridge and RSA Examinations (OCR), offered A levels in general studies. This review therefore considered only those two syllabuses and their predecessors.

Over the period of the review there were few external factors driving changes in general studies syllabuses other than changes to the general regulatory framework.

Examination demand

The reviewers used syllabuses, question papers, mark schemes and examiners' reports from AQA and OCR for the years 1980, 1990, 1995 and 2000, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Materials considered for examination demand

Year	Awarding body	Syllabus	Question papers	Mark scheme	Examiners' report
1980	AQA	✓	✓		✓
	OCR	✓	✓		✓
1990	AQA	✓	✓		✓
	OCR	✓	✓		✓
1995	AQA	✓	✓	✓	✓
	OCR	✓	✓		✓
2000	AQA	✓	✓	✓	✓
	OCR	✓	✓	✓	✓

The overall structure of the AQA syllabus remained essentially the same between 1980 and 2000, apart from a change in the coursework weighting and very minor changes in the way content was described between 1995 and 2000.

The OCR syllabuses of 1990, 1995 and 2000 were also essentially the same, except for significant changes in the coursework weighting and very minor changes in the description of the syllabus content.

However, the syllabuses of both awarding bodies became much more detailed in their description of the requirement over the period. The AQA syllabus, for example, grew from four pages in 1980 to 61 pages in 2000.

For ease of reference, the changes in syllabuses are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Changes in syllabuses summarised

	1980	1990	1995	2000
AQA	Syllabus content essentially the same 1980–2000			
	Alternative coursework 30%	Alternative coursework 30%	Alternative coursework 30%	Alternative coursework 20%
OCR	Syllabus content essentially the same 1990–2000			
	Coursework compulsory 50%	Coursework bonus marks only	Alternative coursework 25%	Alternative coursework 20%

Syllabus content and assessment

AQA

The AQA syllabus contained six domains:

- the arts
- science and technology
- social sciences
- mathematics
- spatial and mechanical relations
- foreign and community languages.

It had two three-hour examination papers, each with five questions. Each question carried 10 per cent of the total marks.

Paper 1	
Question 1	arts essay
Question 2	social science essay
Question 3	science comprehension objective test
Question 4	mathematical objective test
Question 5	general knowledge objective test
Paper 2	
Question 1	science and technology essay
Question 2	case study objective test
Question 3	arts/social science comprehension objective test
Question 4	spatial and mechanical relations objective test
Question 5	foreign language comprehension objective test

Essay questions therefore accounted for 30 per cent of the marks, objective tests for 70 per cent. In 1980, 1990 and 1995 candidates could replace the three essay questions with coursework that represented 30 per cent of the marks. In 2000, candidates could replace two examination essays with coursework worth 20 per cent of the marks.

OCR

The OCR syllabus in 1980 contained three domains, together with the skills of comprehension, numeracy and logical reasoning. The domains might be described as:

- social (historical, social, economic, political and philosophical topics)
- science (including maths and geography)
- the arts.

It was assessed by examinations worth 50 per cent of the marks: the domains were assessed by essay questions, the skills by short-answer questions. Compulsory coursework accounted for the remaining 50 per cent of the marks.

From 1990, the OCR syllabus had two broad domains – humanities and culture, and science and technology – together with skills of comprehension and data-response, and general

knowledge of many disciplines. As in 1980, the domains were assessed by examination essay questions, and the skills and general knowledge by short-answer questions. However, all the marks came from the examinations, while coursework, if submitted, could boost – but not reduce – marks by up to two grades.

The 1995 and 2000 syllabuses were effectively the same, except that optional coursework (in place of examination essay questions) accounted for 25 per cent of the marks in 1995 and 20 per cent in 2000.

Quality of language

There were differences in the way the two syllabuses assessed the candidates' use of English, or 'quality of language' in essay questions in 1995 and 2000:

- OCR essay questions had 20 marks for the answer and a separate 5 marks for the candidate's English
- AQA essay questions did not have separate marks, but instead included English as one of several criteria to be considered in awarding a single overall mark for the answer.

Findings

There were no significant differences in the content of the syllabuses and examinations. The boards were consistent in setting essay questions on domains covering the arts, sciences and social sciences, and in setting multiple-choice or short-answer questions to test a range of skills such as comprehension, numeracy and logical reasoning. The absence of foreign language questions in the OCR examinations was not judged to be significant.

However, there was a slight difference in the demand of the examinations: the OCR essay questions tended to be less 'structured' than AQA's. OCR questions simply gave the candidate a topic or an issue to discuss and offered no suggestions on how it might be approached, whereas AQA questions gave examples of different aspects of the topic that the candidate could, or should, explore. The reviewers were generally of the view that structured questions could benefit weaker candidates, who might be short of ideas on how to discuss a given topic, but could constrain stronger candidates, who might want to discuss aspects not mentioned in the question.

There were differences over time and between boards in the proportion of marks to be obtained from coursework, but coursework was not assumed to be intrinsically more or less demanding than examinations. The demand of coursework depended on the nature of coursework tasks set, and this did not vary over time or between the two boards.

The reviewers considered that the different approaches of the boards to the assessment of the candidates' use of English could, in principle, lead to differences in the demand of the examinations, and this issue was considered again when candidates' scripts were reviewed (see below).

Standards of performance at grade A and grade E

The reviewers used 60 scripts from the year 2000 examinations, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Materials available for script review

AQA 2000	Grade A	15 scripts
	Grade E	15 scripts
OCR 2000	Grade A	15 scripts
	Grade E	15 scripts

Findings

The reviewers judged that generally the work of grade A candidates from AQA and OCR was of an equal standard. In some cases, the OCR candidates were considered to have produced work of a higher standard than the AQA candidates, but on further investigation this was explained by the fact that some OCR grade A candidates were not borderline grade A, with a few well within the grade A range.

At grade E, the reviewers concluded that scripts from the two boards were generally of the same standard, slightly more AQA scripts were judged to be of a higher standard.

The reviewers considered that there were three issues affecting grades that would explain the slight differences in candidates' performances:

- the extent to which essay questions were 'structured', as discussed above
- the method of awarding marks for the candidate's use of English or 'quality of language', as noted above
- the degree of scientific knowledge expected of candidates.

Separate marks for the use of English – the method used by OCR – could benefit E grade candidates. For an A grade candidate scoring well in the content marks, the use of English marks would be small in proportion to the content marks. An E grade candidate whose essay was short on content but reasonably well written, would receive a significantly higher proportion of their total marks from the use of English marks.

By contrast, the AQA system of awarding a single mark was likely to mean that an E grade candidate's essay was likely to receive credit for the use of English in proportion to the quality of the content. The effect of this different method of marking might be manifested in AQA candidates' work being of a slightly higher standard than OCR's candidates at the E grade.

The reviewers considered that AQA expected a greater amount of technical knowledge from candidates answering science essay questions than did OCR and that this expectation would affect grade A candidates particularly. It was noted that six out of the 15 AQA grade A candidates received their lowest mark for the science essay.

Conclusions

There was no significant difference in the demand of the examination over time or between the two awarding bodies. The AQA examination was possibly slightly less demanding for weak candidates but more demanding for strong candidates than the OCR examination, because AQA's essay questions were more structured than OCR's.

There were no significant differences between the two awarding bodies in candidate performance, but only very slight differences as follows:

- at grade A – in scientific essay answers, AQA candidates produced higher standards of performance for similar numbers of marks
- at grade E – AQA's candidates' work was sometimes of a slightly higher standard than OCR's, probably because AQA's candidates were assisted by the more structured essay questions and did not benefit from the potentially more generous marking system employed by OCR for the use of English.