

An Update on the Reforms Being Made to GCSEs

April 2014

Ofqual/14/5404

Contents

Reforms to GCSEs to be taught in England from 2016	2
Introduction.....	2
Background	4
What's happening now?	5
Geography – to be taught from 2016	5
History – to be taught from 2016.....	5
Sciences (biology, chemistry, physics and double award science) – to be taught from 2016.....	5
Modern foreign languages – to be taught from 2016	6
Ancient languages – to be taught from 2016.....	6
Religious studies, design & technology, art and design, drama, dance, music, physical education, computer science, citizenship studies – to be taught from 2016	6
The remaining subjects – to be taught from 2017	6
Timing of exams.....	7
Summary of key decisions taken so far	7
Next steps.....	9
We will reform the remaining GCSE subjects for 2017	9
When will the new GCSE qualifications be taught?	9
Further information	10

Reforms to GCSEs to be taught in England from 2016

Introduction

New GCSEs in English language, English literature and maths will be taught in England from September 2015. We set out the key features of these qualifications in our announcement on 1st November 2013.¹

New GCSEs in other subjects will first be taught from the following year.

This announcement is about the GCSEs that will be taught from 2016 and 2017.

We are announcing the key features of:

- Geography
- History.

We are announcing some of the key features and our decision to consult further on:

- Biology
- Chemistry
- Physics
- Double award science.

We are now consulting on the key features of:

- Modern foreign languages
- Ancient languages.

We are explaining how and when the content and key features will be developed for:

- Religious studies
- Design and technology
- Art and design
- Drama

¹ www.ofqual.gov.uk/news/design-details-of-new-gcses-in-england

- Dance
- Music
- Physical education
- Computer science
- Citizenship studies.

We are also explaining what will happen to GCSEs in other subjects that are not listed above.

Background

The primary purpose of new GCSEs is to provide evidence of students' achievements against demanding and fulfilling content, a strong foundation for further academic and vocational study and for employment. If required, they should be able to provide a basis for schools and colleges to be held accountable for the performance of all their students. The qualifications must be designed to reflect this purpose.

Following consultation, we have previously announced² that new GCSEs will:

- be assessed mainly by exams. Other forms of assessment will be used for essential subject-specific skills that cannot be assessed by exam
- only be tiered where one set of assessments cannot in a manageable and valid way assess students across the full ability range
- be graded 9 to 1.

We are consulting on the way the grade standards of new GCSEs will be set.³

That consultation is open until 30th June 2014 and we hope you will respond.

² www.ofqual.gov.uk/news/design-details-of-new-gcses-in-england

³ <http://comment.ofqual.gov.uk/setting-the-grade-standards-of-new-gcses-april-2014>

What's happening now?

Geography – to be taught from 2016

Geography will be an untiered GCSE. Fieldwork is an important aspect of the subject. Schools and colleges entering students for the new qualification will have to confirm to their exam board that the students have completed two pieces of fieldwork. The new geography GCSE will be assessed by exam only, and some questions will assess the knowledge and skills students learn from fieldwork. Five per cent of the marks in the exam will be allocated to spelling, punctuation and grammar. The content on which the qualification will be based is published by the Department for Education (DfE).

History – to be taught from 2016

History will be an untiered GCSE, assessed entirely by exam. Five per cent of the marks will be allocated to spelling, punctuation and grammar. The content on which the qualification will be based is published by the DfE.

Sciences (biology, chemistry, physics and double award science) – to be taught from 2016

Science GCSEs will be tiered. As far as possible, we will apply the same approach to tiering we are introducing for GCSE maths, whereby students who take foundation tier assessments will be able to be awarded grades 5 to 1 (or be unclassified). Students who take the higher tier assessments will be able to be awarded grades 9 to 4 (or exceptionally, a 3) or be unclassified.

When we consulted on how science GCSEs should be assessed we proposed that exams should count for 90 per cent of the marks and a practical assessment for 10 per cent.

In response to the consultation, a number of people said that if only 10 per cent of the marks were allocated to practical assessments the importance of practical skills would be devalued. As GCSEs are compensatory (a high mark in one area compensates for a poor mark in another area) qualifications students with very few practical skills would still be able to achieve a good grade overall.

Since we consulted on GCSE science we have proposed and developed an approach to assessing practical skills in science A levels that would increase the range of practical skills on which A level science students are assessed. The importance of practical skills will be recognised through compulsory practical work, for which students will receive a “pass” or “fail” outcome, separate from their grade for the written exams.

In light of the concerns about our initial proposal for GCSE science skills and the developments in A level science, we have decided to do further work and consult again before deciding how practical science skills should be assessed in GCSEs. As new science GCSEs will not be taught until September 2016 there is time for this. Once we have decided on the approach to assessing practical skills DfE will finalise the content on which the qualifications will be based.

Modern foreign languages – to be taught from 2016

We are consulting on our proposals for modern foreign language GCSEs.

Ancient languages – to be taught from 2016

We are consulting on our proposals for ancient language GCSEs.

The consultation document for these subjects can now be found [here](#).⁴ The closing date for responses is Friday 23rd May 2014.

The DfE will finalise the content for these subjects once we have decided, following the consultation, how the qualifications will be structured and assessed.

Religious studies, design & technology, art and design, drama, dance, music, physical education, computer science, citizenship studies – to be taught from 2016

The Government has announced that new GCSEs in these subjects should be available for first teaching from September 2016. The letters between the Secretary of State for Education and Ofqual on subject to be taught from 2016 and 2017 are on our website.

The DfE will lead the consultation on the content of these subjects. We will consult on their structure and how they will be assessed. These consultations will start during the summer of 2014.

The remaining subjects – to be taught from 2017

This spring, we will consult on our plans for reform of the remaining GCSEs, in particular how content will be developed for subjects for which the Government is not developing content.

Our proposal is that all GCSEs taught from 2017 will be new qualifications. GCSEs that are not replaced with new GCSEs will be withdrawn, so they will be awarded for the last time in 2018. We will publish updates on progress towards this aim.

⁴ <http://comment.ofqual.gov.uk/modern-foreign-and-ancient-languages>

Timing of exams

We have already announced that students will be able to take their GCSE exams in the summer (May or June) and that students who were at least 16 on the preceding 31st August will be able to take their exams in maths and English language in November too. A student will have to take all of their exams in one period – summer or November. They will not be able to carry units over from one sitting to the next, although an exception has been made to allow the English language speaking assessment to be carried over in some cases.

We have considered whether November sittings should be available in other subjects. We have decided that November sittings should be limited to English language and maths. These subjects are often crucial to a student’s progression to further education and employment. In coming to this decision we took into account concerns that some disabled students, in particular, might find the return to qualifications in which all exams are taken at the same period of a year difficult to manage. We have decided that we should keep the impact of the policy on disabled students under review. We also took into account the difficulties that arise when setting standards for a qualification taken by a small number of students only who are not representative of the typical cohort and the costs of providing exams for a small number of students.

Summary of key decisions taken so far

Subject	When will the new qualifications first be taught?	Will there be non-exam assessment?	Which will be tiered	Marks allocated to spelling, punctuation and grammar
Maths	2015	No	Tiered	None
English literature	2015	No	Untiered	5%
English language	2015	Speaking skills will be assessed and reported as a separate grade	Untiered	20%
Geography	2016	No – but schools must confirm students have carried out two pieces of fieldwork	Untiered	5%
History	2016	No	Untiered	5%
Biology	2016	TBC	Tiered	None

Chemistry	2016	TBC	Tiered	None
Physics	2016	TBC	Tiered	None
Double award science	2016	TBC	Tiered	None

Next steps

We will reform the remaining GCSE subjects for 2017

This spring, we will consult on our plans for the reform of the remaining GCSEs (and A levels). When we have finished the consultation, we will set out the process exam boards will have to follow if they want to develop and award a GCSE in a subject for which DfE has not published content.

We're proposing:

- **All 'legacy' GCSEs will be withdrawn or reformed**
If they are withdrawn, this will be from 2017 (meaning the last award will be 2018). If they're reformed, they will be for first teaching in 2017 (meaning the first award will be in 2019). This limits how long the old and new qualifications will run in parallel.
- **Future GCSEs will have pre-determined core content**
We will publish minimum content requirements for each subject which exam boards will have to use when developing their qualifications.
- **A collaborative regulatory framework**
This will enable exam boards to work together to develop core content.
- **How we will decide what subjects can be GCSEs in future**

GCSEs will only be developed in subjects which are capable of being assessed in a valid and reliable way against the full grade range and meeting our other regulatory requirements.

When will the new GCSE qualifications be taught?

- From **2015** – English language, English literature and maths.
- From **2016** – geography, history, biology, chemistry, physics and double award science, modern foreign languages and ancient languages, religious studies, design & technology, art and design, drama, dance, music, physical education, computer science, citizenship studies.
- From **2017** – remaining subjects for which new GCSEs are developed

Further information

Government policy

The Secretary of State set out on 6th February 2013 in a letter to Ofqual the Government's policy intentions for new GCSEs.⁵

In summary, the intention is that new GCSEs in England should remain accessible, with good teaching, to the same proportion of students who currently take them; there must be an increase in demand at the level of what is widely considered to be a pass (currently indicated by a grade C) to reflect that of high-performing jurisdictions; there was a strong case for the new GCSEs to have a new grading scale.

Controlled assessment

In June 2013 we published a report on the use of controlled assessments in GCSEs. The report was largely informed by feedback from teachers. It highlighted a number of weaknesses with the current controlled assessment arrangements.⁶

Consultation on new GCSEs

In June 2013 we published a consultation on the design features that should apply to all new GCSEs and on proposals for the new qualifications in English language, English literature, maths, geography, history and the sciences.⁷

YouGov report on responses to the consultation

In November 2013 we published a summary of responses to the consultation.⁸

Our equality impact assessment

In November 2013 we published our equality analysis of the impact of the reforms on students who share protected characteristics.⁹

November 2013 announcement

On 1 November we published our decisions on the features of all GCSEs and on specific arrangements for English language, English literature and maths.¹⁰ We

⁵ www.ofqual.gov.uk/files/2013-02-07-letter-from-michael-gove-reform-of-ks4-qualifications.pdf

⁶ www.ofqual.gov.uk/files/2013-06-11-review-of-controlled-assessment-in-GCSEs.pdf

⁷ <http://comment.ofqual.gov.uk/gcse-reform-june-2013>

⁸ www.ofqual.gov.uk/documents/yougov-analysis-of-responses-to-the-2013-gcse-reform-consultation

⁹ www.ofqual.gov.uk/documents/equality-analysis-report-on-reforms-to-gcses-from-2015

¹⁰ www.ofqual.gov.uk/news/design-details-of-new-gcses-in-england

confirmed GCSEs should be assessed mainly by exam, tiered only when manageable and valid assessments suitable for the full ability range cannot be designed and graded 9 to 1.

Grading consultation

On 2 April 2014 we published a consultation on setting the grade standards for new GCSEs.¹¹

Subject content

The Government has published the content for a number of new GCSEs.¹²

¹¹ <http://comment.ofqual.gov.uk/setting-the-grade-standards-of-new-gcse-april-2014>

¹² Maths: www.gov.uk/government/publications/gcse-mathematics-subject-content-and-assessment-objectives; English language and English literature: www.gov.uk/government/publications/gcse-english-language-and-gcse-english-literature-new-content

We wish to make our publications widely accessible. Please contact us if you have any specific accessibility requirements.

Published by the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation in 2014

© Crown copyright 2014

You may re-use this publication (not including logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the [Open Government Licence](#). To view this licence, visit [The National Archives](#); or write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, Richmond, Surrey, TW9 4DU; or email: psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk

This publication is also available on our website at www.ofqual.gov.uk

Any enquiries regarding this publication should be sent to us at:

Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation	
Spring Place	2nd Floor
Coventry Business Park	Glendinning House
Herald Avenue	6 Murray Street
Coventry CV5 6UB	Belfast BT1 6DN

Telephone 0300 303 3344

Textphone 0300 303 3345

Helpline 0300 303 3346