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Policy paper

# 2010 to 2015 government policy: school and college qualifications and curriculum

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This is a copy of a document that stated a policy of the 2010 to 2015 Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government.

The previous URL of this page was

<https://www.gov.uk/government/policies/reforming-qualifications-and-the-curriculum-to-better-prepare-pupils-for-life-after-school>.

Current policies can be found at the GOV.UK [policies list](#).

## Issue

Employers, universities and colleges are often dissatisfied with school leavers' literacy and numeracy even though the proportion of young people achieving good grades has gone up in recent years. Around 42% of employers need to organise additional training for young people joining them from school or college.

We believe making GCSEs and A levels more rigorous will prepare students properly for life after school. It is also necessary to introduce a curriculum that gives individual schools and teachers greater freedom to teach in the way they know works and that ensures that all pupils acquire a core of essential knowledge in English, mathematics and sciences.

Finally, we need to address literacy standards in schools and make sure pupils develop good reading skills early.

## Actions

## National curriculum

To give teachers more freedom over their teaching, we are:

- introducing a slimmed-down [national curriculum](#) for 5- to 16-year-olds to be taught in maintained schools from 2014

## National curriculum assessment

To improve literacy standards early so all pupils develop their enjoyment of reading and are able to access the rest of the curriculum, we will:

- make sure all pupils take a [statutory phonics screening check](#) at the end of year 1 to identify those that need additional support
- from 2013, introduce a second phonics screening check in year 2 for pupils whose results were below the level expected in the year 1 check

To raise standards for all children, we will:

- introduce [grammar, punctuation and spelling tests](#) from 2013 for all pupils at the end of key stage 2

To give schools greater freedom, we will:

- remove the current system of national curriculum levels so that schools have the freedom to design their own assessments against the new national curriculum

## Key stage 4 (GCSE) and key stage 5 (A level)

## qualifications

To make sure school leavers are better prepared for life after school, we will:

- [reform GCSEs](#) so they provide a strong foundation for further academic and vocational study
- [reform A and AS levels](#) to better prepare students for higher education
- encourage more 16- to 18-year-olds to take up mathematics and science subjects

## Background

### National curriculum

On 20 January 2011, Education Secretary Michael Gove announced a review of the national curriculum in England. In December 2011 we published [‘The framework for the national curriculum: a report by the expert panel’](#), which made recommendations to the review. The government’s response to this report was published in June 2012.

The draft national curriculum was subject to a public consultation between February and April 2013, and a [revised version](#) was published on 8 July 2013. It was subject to a final public [consultation](#) in July and August 2013. We published the new [national curriculum](#) on 11 September 2013, and it will be taught from September 2014. The new curriculum for all subjects contains the essential knowledge that all children should learn, but will not dictate how teachers should teach.

## Phonics screening check

The phonics screening check was developed by phonics experts with headteachers, teachers and other interested specialists. It was piloted in around 300 schools during 2011 and was [independently evaluated](#).

The first statutory phonics screening check for all year 1 pupils took place in June 2012. From 2013, pupils who have not reached the required standard at the end of year 1 should receive extra support from their school so their phonic decoding skills can improve. They will then retake the screening check in year 2.

## Key stage 2 national curriculum assessment

In 2010, the Secretary of State commissioned Lord Bew to undertake an independent review of testing, assessment and accountability at key stage 2. Lord Bew published [the final report](#) of his review in June 2011.

Following Lord Bew's recommendation, from 2013 there will be no externally marked test of English writing. Pupils' ability in the composition element of writing will be subject to teacher assessment only. The new grammar, punctuation and spelling test will assess pupils' ability in these skills.

## Key stage 4 qualifications (GCSEs)

Following a public consultation, the Education Secretary announced proposals for comprehensive [reform of GCSEs](#) on 7 February 2013.



In November 2013, we published the subject content for reformed GCSEs in:

- [English language](#)
- [English literature](#)
- [mathematics](#)

These GCSEs will be taught in schools from September 2015.

In April 2014, we published the subject content for reformed GCSEs in:

- [biology, chemistry and physics \(single science\)](#)
- [combined science](#)
- [ancient languages](#)
- [geography](#)
- [history](#)
- [modern foreign languages](#)

These GCSEs will be taught in schools from September 2016.

In January 2015, we published the subject content for reformed GCSEs in:

- [art and design](#)
- [computer science](#)
- [dance](#)
- [music](#)
- [physical education \(PE\)](#)

These GCSEs will also be taught in schools from September 2016.

In February 2015, we published the subject content for reformed GCSEs in:

- [citizenship studies](#)
- [drama](#)
- [food preparation and nutrition](#)
- [religious studies](#)

These GCSEs will also be taught in schools from September 2016.

On 16 January 2015 we announced that [first teaching of design and technology would be delayed to 2017](#).

We will develop subject content for GCSEs in the remaining subjects for teaching from 2017.

## **Key stage 5 qualifications (A levels)**

On 22 January 2013, the [Education Secretary wrote to Ofqual](#) to confirm that A levels would be reformed and that universities would be more closely involved in their development. He also announced that AS levels would become standalone qualifications.

Between April and July 2013, Professor Mark E. Smith, Vice-Chancellor of Lancaster University, led an independent review of A level subject content. Following a public consultation, Professor Smith submitted his [final recommendations](#) on subject content in a report to the Secretary of State, who accepted them.

In April 2014 we published content for revised A and AS levels in:

- [English language](#)
- [English literature](#)
- [English literature and language](#)
- [science \(biology, chemistry, physics and psychology\)](#)
- [art and design](#)
- [business](#)
- [computer science](#)
- [economics](#)

- [history](#)
- [sociology](#)

These A levels will be taught in schools and colleges from September 2015.

We are working with universities to reform the content of remaining A levels.

The [Russell Group of universities](#) set up the [A Level Content Advisory Board \(ALCAB\)](#) to review subject content for ancient and modern languages, maths, further maths and geography. We accepted [ALCAB's final recommendations](#) in December 2014.

As a result, in December 2014 we published content for revised AS and A levels in:

- [ancient languages](#)
- [geography](#)
- [modern foreign languages](#)

These A levels will be taught in schools and colleges from September 2016.

In January 2015 we published content for revised A and AS levels in:

- [dance](#)
- [music](#)
- [physical education \(PE\)](#)

These A levels will also be taught in schools and colleges from September 2016.

In February 2015 we published content for revised A and AS levels in:

- [drama and theatre](#)
- [religious studies](#)



These A levels will also be taught in schools and colleges from September 2016.

In December 2014 we also published content for revised AS and A levels in:

- [mathematics](#)
- [further mathematics](#)

These will be taught in schools and colleges from September 2017.

## Who we've consulted

### National curriculum

The ['National curriculum review: call for evidence'](#) ran from 20 January to 14 April 2011. The call for evidence received 5,763 responses.

On 7 February 2013, we launched the formal ['Consultation on reform of the national curriculum in England'](#). It sought views on the draft national curriculum, including proposals to give teachers greater flexibility with the current curriculum to prepare for the new one. The consultation closed on 16 April 2013 and received over 17,000 responses.

On 8 July 2013 we published our response to that consultation and a [revised version](#) which is subject to a short further [consultation](#). The consultation ended on 8 August 2013. We published the [summary of responses](#) on 11 September 2013.



## National curriculum assessment


The consultation '[Year 1 phonics screening check](#)' ran from 22 November 2010 to 14 February 2011. It was aimed at all those with an interest in literacy teaching and learning and received 1,071 responses. We used the consultation responses to develop the pilot and the final phonics screening check.

On 17 July 2013 we launched a [consultation on primary assessment and accountability](#). We are seeking views on the best way to measure pupils' progress through primary school, including the possibility of introducing a test in reception year. This consultation runs until 11 October 2013.

## Key stage 4 qualifications (GCSEs)

The consultation '[Reforming key stage 4 qualifications](#)' ran from 17 September to 10 December 2012. We sought the views of schools, further and higher education institutions, employers, awarding organisations, curriculum and assessment experts, and the general public. We published our [response to the consultation](#) on 7 February 2013.

On 11 June 2013 we launched a [consultation on subject content and assessment objectives of the new GCSEs](#). The consultation closed on 20 August 2013.

In parallel with our consultation, Ofqual ran a consultation on the regulatory requirements for the reformed GCSEs which closed on 3 September 2013. Ofqual published its [response to the consultation](#)  on 1 November 2013.

On 16 July 2014 we launched a [consultation on GCSE content](#)  for:

- art and design
- computer science
- dance
- music
- PE

The consultation runs until 19 September 2014.

## Key stage 5 qualifications (A levels)

Ofqual ran the '[A level reform consultation](#)' from July to September 2012 and received over 1,000 responses from parents, students, schools, colleges, higher education institutions and employers. Ofqual published a [report on the consultation](#) in November 2012.

Following the Mark Smith review, we ran a [consultation on the content of reformed A levels](#) between October and December 2013. We published the consultation response on 9 April 2014.

Ofqual ran a consultation in parallel on the proposed changes to the assessment objectives and assessment arrangements for each of the subjects covered in this consultation and on the regulatory aspects of the reformed A levels. Ofqual published the [consultation results](#) on 9 April 2014.



On 16 July 2014 we launched a [consultation on A level content](#) for:



- ancient languages
- modern languages
- geography
- mathematics
- further mathematics

- dance
- music
- PE

The consultation runs until 19 September 2014.

## Impact

There is evidence on the potential of phonics to help a large proportion of disadvantaged pupils, including boys and pupils with special educational needs or disabilities.

In April 2014 we published impact assessments looking into the possible negative impacts the [reformed GCSEs](#) and [reformed A and AS levels](#) might have on students because of their age, religion or belief, pregnancy or maternity, sexual orientation or as a result of gender reassignment.

## Bills and legislation

Legislation for the phonics screening check forms part of the [Education \(National Curriculum\) \(Key Stage 1 Assessment Arrangements\) \(England\) Order 2004 \(SI 2004/2783\)](#) made under the [Education Act 2002](#).

The National Curriculum review is working within existing legislation, within the Education Act 2002, part 6.

## Who we're working with

We will be working closely with the independent regulators [Ofqual](#) and with exam boards in the reform of GCSEs and A level examinations. Ofqual will be considering the arrangements to regulate the new qualifications effectively.

We are also working with the [A level Content Advisory Board \(ALCAB\)](#), set up by The Russell Group of universities, who will advise us on the content of reformed A levels in mathematics, further mathematics, geography and languages.

## Appendix 1: curriculum

This was a supporting detail page of the main policy document.

Every state school must offer a broad and balanced curriculum.



Maintained schools (ie those that are paid for by central government through local authorities) in England are legally required to follow the national curriculum. All maintained schools must also teach religious education to pupils at every key stage and sex education to pupils in secondary education.

Academies and free schools are not required to follow the national curriculum but they must teach a curriculum that includes English, mathematics, science and religious education.

Also, all schools must publish their school curriculum by subject and academic year on their website.



## Appendix 2: statutory phonics screening check

This was a supporting detail page of the main policy document.

The [phonics screening check](#) is a short, simple assessment to make sure that all pupils have learned phonic decoding to an appropriate standard by the age of 6. All year 1 pupils in maintained schools, academies and free schools must complete the check.

The phonics check will help teachers identify the children who need extra help so they can receive the support they need to improve their reading skills. These children will then be able to retake the check in year 2.

The check comprises a list of 40 words and non-words which the child will read one-to-one with a teacher.

## Appendix 3: key stage 2 grammar, punctuation and spelling tests

This was a supporting detail page of the main policy document.

The key stage 2 grammar, punctuation and spelling tests are made up of a 45-minute grammar test and a separate 15-minute spelling test of 20 words. Children will be tested on whether they can:

- spell some of the most commonly misspelt words - including 'separate', 'preferred' and 'necessary'

- punctuate sentences properly - including the use of colons, ellipses and apostrophes
- use grammar correctly - including the use of subordinate clauses and a range of connectives

The tests were taken in May 2013 for the first time by around 600,000 11-year-olds.

## Appendix 4: GCSE reform

This was a supporting detail page of the main policy document.

We are reforming the content of GCSEs to make them more challenging so pupils are better prepared for further academic or vocational study, or for work.

The changes we are introducing are:

- the [English language GCSE](#) will require better reading skills and good written English
- the [English literature GCSE](#) will encourage students to read, write and think critically; it will assess students on challenging and substantial whole texts and on shorter unseen texts
- the [mathematics GCSE](#) will provide greater coverage of areas such as ratio, proportion and rates of change; it will require all students to master the basics, and will be more challenging for those aiming to achieve top grades
- [science GCSEs](#) will cover new content, including the human genome, life cycle analysis and space physics, and they will be more mathematically

challenging

- the [history GCSE](#) will require students to study more historical periods; it will cover 3 eras - medieval, early modern and modern - and will concentrate more on British history
- the [geography GCSE](#) will require pupils to use maths and statistics, and will concentrate more on UK geography; it will also require students to carry out at least 2 pieces of fieldwork
- [languages GCSEs](#) will be more demanding and most exam questions in modern languages will be asked in the respective foreign language
- the [art and design GCSE](#) will emphasise creativity and drawing; we will remove the concept of 'endorsed' and 'unendorsed' courses and replace it with a series of separate art and design titles
- the [computer science GCSE](#) will require students to understand mathematical principles and concepts such as data representation, Boolean logic and different data types; students will also have to understand the components of computer systems, and write and refine programs
- the [dance GCSE](#) will include new theory and will require students to appreciate and analyse professional works
- the [music GCSE](#) will require students to read and write staff notation, understand chord symbols and analyse unfamiliar music
- the [physical education \(PE\) GCSE](#) will emphasise the use of data to evaluate physical activity; students will be assessed in 3 different activities, including at least 1 team sport - a [list of sports and activities that schools can offer as part of the new GCSEs](#) is available
- the [citizenship studies GCSE](#) includes 3 new citizenship concepts; it will require students to carry out at least 1 in-depth investigation into a citizenship issue
- the [drama GCSE](#) will require students to understand texts and performance in their social, cultural and historical context; students must study at least 1 performance text in depth and at least 2 extracts
- the [food preparation and nutrition GCSE](#) will teach students about the scientific and nutritional properties of ingredients - this knowledge will help them prepare and cook healthy meals



- the [religious studies GCSE](#) requires pupils to study 2 religions; it also gives them the opportunity to study the philosophy and ethics of religion, including learning about non-religious beliefs

More information on the [content of revised GCSEs](#) is available.

For the regulatory aspects of the new GCSEs, Ofqual has introduced:

- a new grading scale that uses the numbers 1 to 9 to identify levels of performance, with 9 being the top grade
- a structure where all assessment happens at the end of the course and content is not divided into modules
- exams as the default method of assessment, except where they cannot provide valid assessment of the skills required
- new rules on tiering which will only apply for subjects where untiered papers:
  - do not allow all students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills
  - will not stretch the most able students

Tiering is a system where students take different exams based on their ability (eg, students who sit a higher tier exam might have access to grades A\* to E, while students who sit a lower tier exam can get grades C to G).

Details of [Ofqual's consultation on the regulatory aspects of proposed changes to GCSEs](#) are available from the Ofqual website.

More information about the [GCSE reform](#), including a [timeline](#) and a [factsheet for the GCSE reforms](#), is available.

## Appendix 5: A and AS level reform

This was a supporting detail page of the main policy document.

We are reforming A and AS levels to make sure they properly equip students for higher education. We will also make them linear, with the exam at the end of 2 years.

The changes we are introducing are:

- the [English literature A level](#) will require students to study 8 texts which will include 3 pre-1900 works (including a Shakespeare play) and 1 post-2000 work; it will include an unseen text to encourage students to read more widely
- the [science A level](#) will be more mathematically challenging and will require students to carry out a minimum of 12 practical activities
- the [history A level](#) will require pupils to study topics from a chronological range of 200 years so they study history from more than 1 century; the proportion of British history will decrease to provide students with a more comparative understanding of history
- the [computer science A level](#) will concentrate more on programming, algorithms and problem solving
- the [ancient languages A level](#) will require students to read and understand literary texts in the original language
- the [modern foreign languages A level](#) will be more stimulating, and will require students to appreciate and analyse literary works and films; it will require students to use spoken and written language spontaneously, and to carry out independent research
- the [geography A level](#) content will provide a better balance between physical and human geography; it will include topical geographical themes, and it will emphasise fieldwork
- the [mathematics A level](#) subject content will be 100% compulsory; it will require students to learn both mechanics and statistics and there will be more emphasis on problem solving, interpretation and mathematical

modelling

- the [further mathematics A level](#) will build on the mathematics A level and 50% of the content will be compulsory; the AS level will require students to work with matrices and complex numbers, and 30% of its content will be compulsory
- the [dance A level](#) will require students to demonstrate physical skills and to understand the technical principles of dance; it will also require students to understand the development of dance in its historical context as well as the work of professional choreographers
- the [music A level](#) will require students to understand musical concepts such as tonality, texture and dynamics, as well as staff notation and musical vocabulary; students will be able to specialise in either performing or composing
- the [physical education \(PE\) A level](#) will emphasise the use of data to evaluate physical activity - a [list of sports and activities that schools can offer as part of the new A level](#) is available
- the [drama and theatre A level](#) will concentrate on students' understanding of performance texts in their social, cultural and historical context; students will also have to use the working methods of performers they study in their own work
- the [religious studies A level](#) will concentrate on students' understanding of religion; students will study at least 1 religion in depth and they will have the opportunity to study the philosophy and ethics of religion, including learning about non-religious beliefs

More information on the [content of revised A and AS levels](#) is available.

More information about the [A and AS level reform](#), including a [timeline](#) and a [factsheet for the reforms](#), is available.

The Association of Colleges has published [guidance for schools and colleges on implementing the A level reforms](#)\_\_\_.

The Skills Funding Agency has published [guidance on recording reformed](#)

## [AS and A levels on the individualised learner record \(ILR\).](#)

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