

Reforms to GCSEs in England from 2015

Summary



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Introduction

From September 2015, in England, new GCSEs in English language, English literature and maths will be available to be taught in schools and colleges. New GCSEs in other subjects will be introduced from the following year.

The new GCSEs will have new content and will be structured, assessed and graded differently from current GCSEs. The changes are being introduced after consultations earlier this year by the Government, on the subject content of some core subjects, and by us, on the design of the new qualifications.

Details about the changes we will make and the reasons for them are set out in this document. The changes relate to GCSEs taken by students in England. Ministers in Northern Ireland and Wales will take decisions on the future of GCSEs in those countries.

In parallel, the Department for Education is publishing details of the subject content for English literature, English language and maths.

The Department has also consulted on the content of chemistry, biology, physics, combined double science, geography, history, modern languages and ancient languages. These are the subjects that we are to look at the design of next, ready to be taught from September 2016.

There is a range of other GCSE subjects for which the Department for Education are not specifying the content. This does not mean these subjects will not be available at GCSE. As we said in our Corporate Plan¹, we will be consulting in the new year on the range of subjects that should carry the GCSE title. It is not our aim to stop important, established subjects, but we will be looking at the principles that enable everyone to be clear on what a GCSE is.

For now, our focus is on English language, English literature and maths GCSEs.

These three subjects account for around a third of GCSE achievements in England each year. In 2011/12 there were more than 1.6 million achievements in English literature, English language and maths, and overall there were more than five million GCSE certificates awarded in England in almost 50 subject areas.

We recognise that we are changing the subjects most commonly studied in England. We have looked at the potential cost and delivery impacts of these reforms, not just

¹ Ofqual (2013) *Corporate Plan 2013-16*: www.ofqual.gov.uk/files/2013-08-09-corporate-plan-2013-16.pdf

to schools and colleges, but also to exam boards, who will deliver the changes, and to users of qualifications including employers.

These considerations are explained in our regulatory impact assessment,² which we are publishing alongside this document. We are also publishing the responses to our June 2013 consultation³ and our equality analysis for these reforms.⁴

Background

We know that if qualifications do not command respect, or equip students in the right way, and if there is any unfairness in the way that they are assessed, then students' achievements are diminished.

We saw in 2012 that GCSE English could not withstand the pressures placed on it; 60 per cent of the marks for the qualification were for controlled assessment, marked by teachers, whose schools were being judged to a significant extent by the results of those qualifications.⁵ We have already taken action to relieve the pressure on GCSE English.

We have strengthened other GCSEs too; introducing marks for spelling, punctuation and the correct use of grammar in some subjects, requiring that assessment takes place at the end of the course of study and limiting re-sits. We have also required exam boards to address specific concerns in some subjects such as geography and history, where changes were made to make clear the full course of study required, and in science GCSEs where more challenging syllabuses have been introduced.

The new reforms we are announcing now bring in the further changes that are needed if GCSEs are to become more engaging and worthwhile to teach and study, as well as more resilient and respected.

As well as being better qualifications from a standards point of view, they will meet Ministers' policy ambitions,⁶ to prepare young people better for the next steps in their education or employment in years to come.

² www.ofqual.gov.uk/documents/regulatory-impact-assessment-on-reforms-to-gcse-from-2015

³ www.ofqual.gov.uk/documents/yougov-analysis-of-responses-to-the-2013-gcse-reform-consultation

⁴ www.ofqual.gov.uk/documents/equality-analysis-report-on-reforms-to-gcse-from-2015

⁵ www.ofqual.gov.uk/news/poor-design-gcse-english-exam-grade-variations

⁶ www.ofqual.gov.uk/news/gcse-reform-6th-february-2013

We want to make sure that employers, colleges and universities, who use GCSEs when making selection decisions, can have confidence in the value of the qualifications they are using.

We also want to make sure that the changes that are made take into account the pressures placed on qualifications when they provide a basis for schools to be held accountable for the performance of their students.

The main changes to the structure, assessment and grading of GCSEs

Assessment

In new GCSEs, assessments in most subjects will be by exam only. This will reduce the disruption to teaching and learning caused when students take controlled assessments in the classroom when they could otherwise be learning. Our review of controlled assessments⁷ sets out some of the difficulties with the current arrangements.

The new arrangements will make it easier to ensure exams are conducted fairly. Assessments will mostly be marked by examiners employed by exam boards rather than by teachers. This will free teachers' time so they can concentrate on teaching and lift the pressures placed on them by marking their own students' assessments, whose results affect the way the teachers themselves, and the schools in which they work, are judged.

In some subjects, not all skills that are intrinsic to the subject can be assessed by exam, so non-exam assessment will continue where necessary. Decisions will be taken on a subject-by-subject basis.

We will not prescribe the minimum total time that should be spent on exams in each subject. Exam boards will be required to develop assessment strategies for their new GCSEs. These strategies will have to show that the assessments they will use will be valid, reliable, manageable, minimise bias and be comparable with others. Each Exam board will have to consider the amount of examination time necessary when they develop their strategies. They will also have to show that their assessments are suitably demanding, using questions and tasks appropriate to the qualifications' demanding and fulfilling content.

We have finalised how English language, English literature and maths will be assessed, because the new qualifications in these subjects are to be introduced first

⁷ Ofqual (2013) *Review of Controlled Assessment in GCSEs*: www.ofqual.gov.uk/documents/review-of-controlled-assessment-in-gcse

(for teaching from September 2015). We will finalise how GCSEs in other subjects will be assessed as we consider the details of those subjects.

English language

This will be assessed by exam. Students' speaking skills will be assessed but, as with current GCSEs, will not contribute to the overall grade. The assessment will be marked by teachers and reported separately, alongside the qualification grade on the certificate. Twenty per cent of the marks for the written exams will be allocated to accurate spelling, punctuation and grammar.

English literature

This will be assessed wholly by exam. Five per cent of the marks will be allocated to accurate spelling, punctuation and grammar.

Maths

This will be assessed wholly by exam, as now.

Structure

All exams for a subject will normally be taken in **May** and **June** of the same year. This means that students should normally have completed the full two-year course of study before they take their exams, giving them the best opportunity to develop their knowledge and understanding of a subject before the assessment. This fully linear structure should avoid the disruption to teaching and learning caused by repeated assessment and allow standards to be set fairly and consistently.

The only exception to this is that students who were at least 16 on the preceding 31st August will be able to take the exams (whether or not for the first time) in **English language** and **maths** in **November**, as success in these subjects can be required for progression to further study or work. A student who decides to take the exams again will have to take **all** of the exams in that subject again. We are considering whether November exams should be available in other subjects for students of this age.

Tiering

Students of all abilities take GCSEs. Some GCSEs are currently tiered, so that some students take the easier foundation tier (giving access to grades C-G) and some the higher tier (grades A*-E). Schools have to decide for which tier they enter a student.

Students who are wrongly entered for the foundation tier cannot usually be awarded more than a grade C, however well they do in their assessments. In the future, wherever possible, qualifications will be untiered, so all students will take the same exams. This means all students will have the opportunity to be awarded the highest grades, if their performance in the assessments merits this. We will require qualifications to be tiered only where one exam cannot assess students across the

full ability range in a way that enables them all to demonstrate their knowledge, understanding and skills in the subject.

English language and **English literature** GCSEs will be **untiered**. Currently GCSEs in both subjects are tiered.

Maths GCSE will continue to be **tiered**. This is because of the nature of the subject. It is not possible to design one assessment that could properly assess students of all abilities. An untiered maths GCSE would either be too easy for the most able students or demotivate less able students who would not be able to tackle the most challenging questions.

In the new tiered maths GCSE the higher tier will include questions that will stretch the most able, and the foundation tier will focus on core mathematical understanding and skills that all students should aim to master.

We considered different models of tiering in the light of expert advice⁸ and responses to the consultation. We have concluded that we should continue with a model where the tiers overlap, as they do now, but the size and the position of the overlap will be different. In the new maths GCSE, the foundation tier will cover grades 1-5 and the higher tier will cover grades 4-9.

We will not necessarily require exactly the same approach for those other subjects where tiering is necessary, and will consider options on a subject-by-subject basis.

Grading

New GCSEs will be graded. Students will be awarded one of nine grades (rather than one of eight as now) or they will be unclassified (U), in which case they will not be awarded the qualification. The grades will be described using numbers (1-9) rather than letters.⁹ **Grade 9 will represent the highest level of attainment.**

We are changing the number of grades and the way they are described. This will:

- Provide more differentiation between students achieving the middle and higher grades. Currently there is a “bunching” of grades as most students are awarded grades B, C and D. Adding in an extra grade will improve the spread of grades in this area. In our consultation we proposed increasing the number of grades at the middle and top end, to improve differentiation, and reducing the number at the lower end, since relatively few students are currently awarded the lower

⁸ Ofqual (2013) *Technical Paper on Tiering* www.ofqual.gov.uk/files/2013-06-11-annex-4-technical-paper-on-tiering.pdf

⁹ Current GCSEs use eight grades, A* to G.

grades. In response to feedback to our consultation, we have moved from the eight grades we proposed to nine grades. In part this was to avoid the risk of people assuming that eight new grades would map onto the current eight grades. We also want to avoid the risk of reducing the opportunity for less able students to demonstrate the progress they have made and have their achievements recognised.

- Signal that new GCSEs are new qualifications. This would be less apparent if we continued to describe grades as we do now. If we retained the current grades, users would reasonably, but wrongly, assume that any given grade awarded for a current GCSE and a new GCSE indicated the same level of achievement.
- Differentiate between the new GCSEs awarded to students in England and GCSEs awarded to students in Wales and Northern Ireland.

We surveyed a number of employers to ask their views on how GCSEs are graded and to establish how they use grades when they recruit employees. They told us they would want to understand how any new grades compared with the current ones.¹⁰

We are developing more detailed proposals on setting and maintaining standards in the new GCSEs, including comparability with the current standards, and will be launching a consultation in December. As we get closer to the introduction of the new GCSEs, we will help employers and others understand what the new grades mean.

Outcome of our consultation

Before we decided how new GCSEs should be structured, assessed and graded we consulted. We commissioned YouGov to prepare a summary of the responses, which we have published.¹¹ We considered the feedback given before we took our decisions and we are grateful to all who responded.

Equality issues

We considered very carefully the potential impact of our proposed changes, and alternative options, on students who share the protected characteristics defined in the Equality Act 2010. We also sought views in our consultation. We have published our equality analysis.¹²

¹⁰ www.ofqual.gov.uk/documents/bmg-research-with-employers-on-new-gcse-grades

¹¹ www.ofqual.gov.uk/documents/yougov-analysis-of-responses-to-the-2013-gcse-reform-consultation

¹² www.ofqual.gov.uk/documents/equality-analysis-report-on-reforms-to-gcse-from-2015

As a result of the feedback we received, we undertook further work, for example into the language used in tiered and untiered papers, and we reviewed our proposed approach to grading. We will, in response to feedback, consider whether November exams should be available in subjects other than English language and maths. We are grateful to all who provided information and who participated in our discussions on equality-related issues before and during the consultation.

What happens next?

- We will consult later this year on the technical rules that we will impose on exam boards that develop, deliver and award the qualifications.
- Exam boards that are recognised to award the new qualifications will start developing them with a view to us accrediting them (if they meet our requirements) from the summer of 2014.
- Schools will then be able to decide which of the accredited qualifications they wish to teach. We expect to have taken most accreditation decisions by the end of 2014.
- We will consult in December on how standards should be maintained in the new qualifications.
- We will decide how new GCSEs in the other subjects on which the Department for Education consulted should be structured and assessed.¹³
- We will also consult in 2014 on the structure and assessment of new GCSEs in other subjects, including modern foreign languages (for which the Department for Education has already consulted on content) and subjects for which Ministers are not specifying the curriculum content. We will be consulting in the new year on the principles for allowing subjects to be included as GCSEs.

¹³ Chemistry, biology, physics, combined double science award, geography, history, modern languages and ancient languages.

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