

GUIDANCE

Functional skills English

April 2021

ofqual

Contents

Introduction.....	1
Revisions to this document.....	1
Guidance for Functional Skills qualifications in English.....	2
Guidance on interpretation of the subject content	2
Guidance on use of British Sign Language and Sign Supported English.....	5
Guidance on assessment availability	6
Guidance on Condition G3 Use of language and Stimulus Materials	7
Guidance on notifying Ofqual of proposal to make qualification available.....	8
Guidance on the Reading Component.....	9
Guidance on Centre monitoring	10
Guidance on standard setting for functional skills qualifications	12

Introduction

This document is part of a suite of documents which outlines our guidance for awarding organisations offering functional skills qualifications in English.

This guidance comes into effect at 00.01am on Friday 29 June 2018 and applies to the following functional skills qualifications in English –

- qualifications awarded to all learners registered on or after 1 September 2019
- all qualifications awarded on or after 1 August 2021

This guidance supports both the [General Conditions of Recognition](#) and the [Functional Skills Subject Level Conditions and Requirements for English](#).

This document constitutes guidance for the purposes of section 153 of the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009 (the ‘2009 Act’), Conditions FSE1.1(c), FSE4.2 and FSE5.2.

An awarding organisation has a legal obligation under the 2009 Act to have regard to this guidance in relation to each functional skills qualification in English that it makes available or proposes to make available. Conditions FSE 1.1(c), FSE4.2 and FSE5.2(b) impose the same obligation in respect of the guidance below which is issued under those conditions.

An awarding organisation should use the guidance in this document to help it understand how to comply with the General Conditions of Recognition, as they apply to functional skills qualifications in English, and the Subject Level Conditions and associated requirements for such qualifications.

An awarding organisation must also have regard to the [Guidance to the General Conditions of Recognition](#) which applies to all qualifications. However, in the event of any inconsistency between that guidance and the guidance contained in this document, an awarding organisation must have regard to the guidance in this document.

Revisions to this document

This document was republished in April 2021 to implement the outcome of our consultation on a change to the regulation end date for legacy Functional Skills qualifications from 31 August 2020 to 31 July 2021.

Guidance for Functional Skills qualifications in English

Guidance on interpretation of the subject content

The subject content for functional skills qualifications in English is set out in the Department for Education's ['Subject content functional skills: English'](#), document reference DFE-00047-2018 (the 'Content Document').

Condition FSE1.1(c) requires awarding organisations to interpret the Content Document in line with any requirements, and having regard to any guidance, published by Ofqual.

We set out our guidance for the purposes of Condition FSE1.1(c) below.

Assessing content statements at the appropriate level

We expect the Level of Demand of questions and tasks in relation to all content statements, and what they expect of Learners, to be appropriate to the level of the qualification.

In the Content Document, a small number of content statements are duplicated in relation to more than one level.

For example, the content statement 'Write text of an appropriate level of detail and of appropriate length (including where this is specified) to meet the needs of purpose and audience' appears in relation to the Writing Component at both Level 1 and Level 2.

Where the same content statement is used for more than one level this does not mean that the questions or assessment tasks in relation to that statement should be identical in terms of their Level of Demand, and what they require of Learners, across the relevant levels. Rather, in line with our overarching expectation above, the Level of Demand of the questions or tasks, and what they expect of Learners, should be appropriate to the level of the qualification.

Interpretation of lists within the subject content

Where the Content Document prefaces an item or list of items with the term 'e.g.' or 'for example', the items listed are to be interpreted as illustrative examples of the content statement which precedes them.

Therefore, in the following statement –

19. Communicate information, ideas and opinions clearly and in a logical sequence (e.g. chronologically, by task) [Entry level 1]

'chronologically' and 'by task' are examples of the type of logical sequencing that a Learner may use when being assessed in relation to the communication of information, ideas and opinions.

Where the Content Document prefaces a statement with 'including', the statement is to be interpreted as indicating a specific expectation within the broader expectation which precedes it. As such, the content in the specific expectation should be assessed.

Interpretation of 'scope of study' requirements

In all relation to all three Components, at each level the Content Document uses the term 'text' to explain what Learners should be expected to study. For example –

Text: this should include short, straightforward texts that instruct, inform, describe and narrate. [Entry level 2 reading]

[...]

Text: this should include straightforward texts such as narratives, instructions, explanations and reports. [Entry level 3 writing]

[...]

Text: this should include extended narratives and information (information may be on technical, concrete or abstract topics), discussions, detailed explanations and presentations, all of varying lengths. [Level 2 Speaking Listening and Communicating]

These statements in relation to the scope of study have implications for assessment. We expect awarding organisations to interpret the Content Document such that –

- in assessments for the Reading Component, Learners are expected to respond to texts that are consistent with the description for the appropriate level,
- in assessments for the Writing Component, Learners are expected to produce texts that are consistent with the description for the appropriate level, and
- in assessments for the SLC Component, Learners are expected to complete tasks consistent with the description for the appropriate level.

In relation to the SLC Component, the term 'text' should be interpreted in a broad sense, in terms of the particular types and levels of discourse required, rather than indicating the intention that Learners should have to read, or write, written text, unless that would naturally be done for a particular type of task (e.g. speaking notes

used during a presentation). It also includes material that a Learner is expected to respond to, as well as produce.

Guidance on use of British Sign Language and Sign Supported English

In our [Specifications in relation to the reasonable adjustment of general qualifications](#), published under section 96 of the Equality Act 2010, specification G states –

Where an assessment seeks to test a Learner's knowledge of, skills in, or understanding of a particular language, the use of an alternative language – such as British Sign Language – must not be used as a reasonable adjustment where such use would prevent the Learner demonstrating the required knowledge, skills or understanding.

Functional skills qualifications in English are intended to assess communication skills generally, rather than communication specifically in English. Therefore, British Sign Language – as well as Sign Supported English – can be used as a reasonable adjustment in respect of those qualifications.

Guidance on assessment availability

We have not set any requirements with respect to when an awarding organisation must conduct assessments for a functional skills qualification in English that it makes available.

This means that an awarding organisation may choose its own approach to when assessments are taken. It may, for example, choose to set a number of assessment windows each year, and/or it may offer 'on-demand' assessments which can be taken by a Learner at any time.

Whatever approach an awarding organisation adopts to the availability of assessments, it must ensure that it meets the requirements in the General Conditions of Recognition in relation to the maintenance of standards, comparability and avoiding predictability.¹

Different approaches to assessment availability will give rise to different risks with respect to these issues and, as outlined in our requirements for the qualification, we will expect an awarding organisation to set out in its assessment strategy how it has sought to identify and deal with such risks.

¹ For example, Conditions D1, G1, G9, H2 (where applicable) and H3.

Guidance on Condition G3 Use of language and Stimulus Materials

Condition G3.1 requires awarding organisations to ensure that assessments use only appropriate language and Stimulus Materials.

In considering whether language and Stimulus Materials are appropriate, an awarding organisation must take into account the level of the qualification and the knowledge, skills and understanding assessed for it.

The Appendix to the functional skills Content Document sets out the words and types of words that Learners at entry level should be able to read.

Language (such as rubrics) and Stimulus Materials for entry level functional skills qualifications in English are unlikely to be appropriate if they exceed the expectations around reading ability set out in Appendix to the Content Document.

Guidance on notifying Ofqual of proposal to make qualification available

Condition FSE3.1(a) states that an awarding organisation must 'promptly' inform Ofqual that it proposes to make available a functional skills qualification in English.

We expect an awarding organisation to provide notification to us promptly following a firm business decision to develop the qualification and make it available. The purpose of this notification is to allow Ofqual to plan its technical evaluation of the qualification before it is made available.

Guidance on the Reading Component

Under our requirements in respect of the assessments for the Reading Component, an awarding organisation must ensure that each assessment assesses a Learner's ability to read a representative sample of the words and types of words required in relation to the relevant entry level by the Appendix to the Content Document.

We expect that the reading of such words will be assessed implicitly through comprehension of the texts of which they form part, rather than through assessment of a Learner's comprehension of individual words in isolation or by requiring the Learner to read aloud.

Guidance on Centre monitoring

In our requirements set under Condition FSE4.2, we set out minimum requirements in relation to Centre monitoring of assessments for the SLC Component.

Under Condition D3.1 an awarding organisation must keep its approach to the delivery and award of qualifications under review and enhance it where necessary so as to assure itself that its approach remains at all times appropriate.

Annual scrutiny of Centre marking

As part of our requirements in relation to Centre monitoring, awarding organisations must undertake annual scrutiny of the marking of assessments for the SLC Component by each Centre that undertakes such marking.

We would expect an awarding organisation to achieve this by comparing either or both of:

- observations of assessments being undertaken, as part of in-person monitoring visits to Centres; and/or
- reviews of evidence (for example, video recordings) of Learner performance in assessments,

with the Centre's marking in respect of those Learners.

Periodic scrutiny of Centre processes and controls

As part of our requirements in relation to Centre monitoring, awarding organisations must:

at least every three years, review each Centre's processes and controls for:

- (i) ensuring it undertakes the delivery – and, where relevant, the setting and/or marking – of assessments for the SLC Component consistently, appropriately, and in line with the guidance to Centres required above, and
- (ii) the standardisation of marking between assessors at that Centre.

We would expect an awarding organisation to achieve this through a combination of:

- reviews of relevant Centre documentation,
- interviews with key Centre staff with responsibility for the delivery, and, where relevant, setting and/or marking (including standardisation) of assessments, and

- observation (whether as part of in-person monitoring visits to a Centre or remotely) of –
 - assessments being undertaken, and
 - where relevant –
 - marking, and
 - standardisation of assessors.

Additional Centre monitoring

There will be circumstances in which additional Centre monitoring, beyond our minimum requirements – of Centre marking and/or Centre processes and controls – will be appropriate. Some examples of such circumstances include the following –

- (a) New Centres.
- (b) Centres with significant changes in pass rates over time.
- (c) Centres with significant variation in pass rates for different Components.
- (d) Centres where previous monitoring has identified particular risks or issues.

Guidance on standard setting for functional skills qualifications

Condition FSE5.2(b) allows us to specify requirements and guidance in relation to the setting of specified levels of attainment for functional skills qualifications in English.

We set out below our guidance for the purposes of Condition FSE5.2(b).

Condition FSE5.3 states that in setting the specified levels of attainment for a functional skills qualification in English which it makes available, an awarding organisation must have regard to an appropriate range of qualitative and quantitative evidence.

Condition FSE5.4 states that such evidence will only be appropriate if it includes evidence of –

- (a) the Level of Demand of the assessments for that qualification,
- (b) at levels 1 and 2, the level of attainment demonstrated in those assessments by –
 - (i) an appropriately representative sample of Learners taking that qualification, or
 - (ii) individuals (whether Learners or otherwise) as part of robust technical pre-testing of those assessments,
- (c) at the entry levels, the level of attainment, where available, demonstrated in those assessments by –
 - (i) an appropriately representative sample of Learners taking that qualification, or
 - (ii) individuals (whether Learners or otherwise) as part of robust technical pre-testing of those assessments,
- (d) where available, the level of attainment demonstrated by Learners taking that qualification in a –
 - (i) prior assessment (which was not for that qualification), whether or not that assessment was for a regulated qualification, or
 - (ii) prior qualification, whether or not that qualification was a regulated qualification, and

- (e) following the first time that a Component designed in line with these Subject Level Conditions is awarded, the level of attainment demonstrated by Learners who have previously been awarded that Component.

Without prejudice to any requirements that Ofqual may set in relation to the weight to be given to evidence in the first awards, examples of the evidence that may be used by an awarding organisation in setting the specified levels of attainment for a functional skills qualification in English which it makes available may include –

- question papers/tasks and final mark schemes,
- senior Assessor input into decisions, for example comments on how the assessments have worked or are likely to work, and recommendations for the setting of specified levels of attainment,
- technical information about how the assessments, and/or any similar assessments previously and concurrently available, have functioned, for example mark distributions, mean marks, standard deviations, item-level statistics,
- samples of current Learners' work selected from a range of Centres and assessed/Moderated by Assessors/moderators whose work is known to be reliable,
- details of changes in entry patterns and choices of options,
- archive Learners' work exemplifying specified levels of attainment in previous assessments for the qualification, together with the relevant question papers/tasks and mark schemes,
- inter-awarding organisation evidence for functional skills qualifications in English,
- pertinent material deemed to be of equivalent standard from similar qualifications or other relevant qualifications,
- information on Learners' performance in previous assessments for the qualification, and
- marking guides for assessments where the evidence is of an ephemeral nature.

In addition, in setting the specified levels of attainment for a functional skills qualification in English that it makes available, we expect an awarding organisation to have regard, as appropriate, to the level of attainment demonstrated by Learners who have taken a pre-reform functional skills qualification in English.

We expect the weight placed on such evidence to decrease over time as the awarding organisation builds an archive of evidence of the level of attainment demonstrated by Learners in the reformed qualification.

In determining whether it has sufficient evidence of the level of attainment demonstrated, or likely to be demonstrated, in the assessments for a functional skills qualification in English by an appropriate percentage of the Learners taking that qualification, an awarding organisation should consider whether the marks on its system, or the equivalent information it has available, reflect –

- all possible routes through the qualification and/or Component, and
- a representative proportion of Learners' marks for, or likely to be achieved in, the qualification and/or Component.

In setting the specified levels of attainment for a functional skills qualification in English that it makes available, we expect an awarding organisation to use the appropriate balance of evidence for –

- its assessment approach, and
- the cohort taking the assessment.

For example, in a sessional award and where prior attainment data is available for many or most Learners, an awarding organisation might combine –

- senior Assessor judgement regarding the Level of Demand of the relevant assessment,
- qualitative and quantitative evidence of Learners' actual attainment in the assessment, and
- information regarding Learners' prior attainment in other assessments.

In an on-demand award and where there is little or no prior attainment data available for Learners, an awarding organisation might –

- when an assessment is first introduced, place greater weight on senior Assessor judgement regarding its Level of Demand, using a robust and recognised technical methodology, and
- incorporate consideration of qualitative and quantitative evidence of Learners' actual attainment in that assessment, and/or other versions of that assessment, once that evidence becomes available, and before results are issued.

We wish to make our publications widely accessible. Please contact us at publications@ofqual.gov.uk if you have any specific accessibility requirements.



© Crown Copyright 2021

This publication is licensed under the terms of the Open Government Licence v3.0 except where otherwise stated.

To view this licence, visit

www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/

or write to

Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU

Published by:

ofqual

Earlsdon Park
53-55 Butts Road
Coventry
CV1 3BH

0300 303 3344

public.enquiries@ofqual.gov.uk

www.gov.uk/ofqual