

Consultation on GCSE reform

Response of the Association of School and College Leaders

- 1 The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) represents over 15,000 members of the leadership teams of maintained and independent schools and colleges throughout the UK. This places the association in a unique position to consider this issue from the viewpoint of the leaders of both secondary schools and colleges.
- 2 ASCL is dismayed that the decision has been taken to make such major changes to GCSE examinations without any consultation or any consideration of the impact on the whole system. The new modular specifications have just had their first awarding period and, as with any change to qualifications, this has had huge implications in time and cost for both awarding bodies and centres. Schools have altered their curricula and trained teachers to adapt to the different approaches to teaching and learning needed for a modular system. Both awarding bodies and centres will now have further costs as a result of the changes and yet we understand that GCSEs will have to undergo a further major revision from 2013 as a result of the revision of the National Curriculum.
- 3 Constant changes to GCSE are undermining the system and leading to unnecessary expenditure at a time of budget cuts. They also undermine the morale of teachers who have to cope with perpetual change; revising their schemes of work, preparing new materials, and adapting teaching approaches. There is no time for consolidation.
- 4 The basis on which these changes are being made is flawed, calling into question the need for them to be made at all, certainly at this time. At present centres are not obliged to follow a modular route, they can choose the approach which best suits the structure of the curriculum and the needs of the students.
- 5 Little thought seems to have been given to the three country issue over this change. Many English schools already use WJEC examinations and more will undoubtedly do so if Wales decides to retain modular exams. This would destabilise the system yet further as loss of business on a large scale for the English awarding bodies would probably lead to higher costs.
- 6 This change does not seem to have been thought through in detail.
- 7 In answer to your specific questions:

Question 1

Do you agree that there is a need for a November re-take opportunity for English, English language and mathematics, as set out in paragraphs 18 to 20?

- 8 Yes there is a need particularly in view of the need for young people to gain a level 2 maths and English qualification by 18, as outlined in the Wolf report.

Question 2

Do you agree that we should permit controlled assessment results to be carried forward for students re-taking a qualification, as set out in paragraphs 21 to 23?

- 9 Yes we agree.

Question 3

Do you agree that students should be allowed to use unit results from a single GCSE to aggregate to a double award GCSE in the same subject, as identified in paragraphs 25 and 26?

10 Yes we agree.

Question 4

Do you agree that students should not be allowed to carry forward units from a short course to a full course award, as set out in paragraph 27?

11 Yes we agree.

Question 5

Do you agree that, subject to the considerations detailed in paragraph 28, pilots should be considered as exceptions?

12 Yes, particularly for existing pilots. It would seem extremely unfair to change the rules during a course.

Question 6

What, if any, other exceptions should we consider to the proposal to make GCSEs linear, as set out in paragraphs 18 to 28?

13 School and college leaders are particularly concerned about the impact on science, where the existence of modular assessments has enabled more students to take three separate sciences by following courses over a three year period.

Question 7

Do you have comments on any potential equality impacts, as detailed in the equality analysis form, of the proposed move to linear assessment in all GCSE qualifications, as set out in paragraphs 18 to 28?

14 Having the choice between modular and linear assessments enables centres to choose assessment processes which best suit the learning styles of particular groups; the removal of that choice will inevitably have a negative impact. Modular assessments have helped to engage students who might otherwise have lost interest in their education and ASCL members fear that there will be an increase in NEETs as a result of this move.

Question 8

Do you have comments on any other aspects of the proposed move to linear assessment in all GCSE qualifications, as set out in paragraphs 18 to 28?

15 ASCL is alarmed at the speed of this change, which has not been subject to consultation. Centres will not know the nature of the revisions until early in 2012 by which time they have usually already published their option brochures for Y9 students and their parents. These brochures usually outline the assessment methods to be followed in the courses so that the young people are aware of which approaches might be preferable for them. The brochures will have to be delayed, leading to the whole curriculum and staffing planning process also suffering delay. This has significant cost implications as schools need to know size and number of groups at an early stage to plan their staffing effectively.

Question 9

Do you agree that the performance descriptions, as set out in paragraph 35, provide a sound basis for assessing candidates' abilities to spell, punctuate and use grammar accurately?

- 16 ASCL is not convinced that the performance descriptions are adequate to ensure consistency of marking unless substantial additional training is to be provided for examiners.

Question 10

Do you think that question papers should indicate to candidates which questions will involve the assessment of accurate spelling, punctuation and use of grammar, as set out in paragraph 40?

- 17 In the time available for awarding bodies to make this change this is probably a sensible approach. It will not seem logical to candidates, however, as they will undoubtedly understand it to mean that spelling, punctuation and grammar can be ignored in the other questions. ASCL would prefer to see a more carefully thought out strategy in the long term that rewards candidates for using accurate spelling, punctuation and grammar at all times. Otherwise they will not believe that it is an important life skill.

Question 11

Do you agree that allocating 5 per cent of the total marks available for the qualification, as set out in paragraph 35, gives sufficient emphasis to the importance of accurate spelling, punctuation and use of grammar?

- 18 Five per cent is the absolute maximum which should be awarded given the hasty nature of the introduction of this change. Even five per cent of the marks could mean that candidates do not reach important grade thresholds which will have a lasting impact on their careers.

Question 12

Do you have comments on any potential equality impacts, as detailed in the equality analysis form, of the proposal to assess spelling, punctuation and grammar separately and directly in externally assessed units in English literature, history, geography and religious studies, as set out in paragraphs 31 to 40?

- 19 The introduction of these changes only to particular subjects after young people have already chosen which subjects to follow inevitably has an equality impact.
- 20 I hope that this is of value to your consultation, ASCL is willing to be further consulted and to assist in any way that it can.

Martin Ward
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