



1 Victoria Street
London SW1H 0ET

The Rt Hon Michael Gove MP
Department for Education
Sanctuary Buildings
20 Great Smith Street
London
SW1P 3BT

31 July 2013

STEM education in schools

A subgroup of the Council for Science and Technology met with you last year following our letter to the Prime Minister on STEM education in schools. We agreed with you to provide some further advice on practical assessment and governance in relation to science in schools.

Assessment of practical work in science

Practical laboratory work is the essence of science and should be at the heart of science learning. By international standards, England's schools are well provided for school laboratory facilities, but we are concerned that the pressures to perform in public examinations – especially GCSE and A level – are pushing inspiring practical work into the margins as teachers concentrate on preparing for examinations.

The forthcoming changes to GCSE and A level examination arrangements present opportunities to assess practical knowledge and skills in ways that encourage creative and inspiring practical science rather than repetitive preparation for tests. In particular, the move away from modularisation and towards terminal assessment will give teachers space and freedom to devise innovative and challenging practically-based science curricula for their students, including more independent, project-based work.

We sought the advice of the Gatsby Foundation and the Wellcome Trust, both of which have detailed understanding of the issues concerning science practical work, and we have attached a briefing paper that these organisations produced for us. Their recommendations for assessment of science practical work at GCSE respond to the government's concerns about reliability of teachers' assessments, while proposing an approach that gives a balance between written assessment of practical knowledge and direct assessment of pupils' practical skills. We support this approach and believe it will encourage better learning of practical scientific knowledge and skills.

We were pleased to note that Ofqual is adopting this mixed approach in recommending that teacher assessment of science practical work at GCSE should (exceptionally in the case of science) be used alongside written assessment of practical work¹. We strongly support Ofqual's decision: careful and imaginative work will be needed by Awarding Organisations to develop methods for direct assessment by teachers that will be fair and manageable.

We have also considered the assessment of practical work in A level sciences, noting that a review of A level specifications is imminent. We are concerned by evidence that A levels are not adequately preparing young people for the practical demands of undergraduate science courses at university or in scientific jobs, with 97% of lab managers in Russell Group universities surveyed reporting that incoming undergraduates are poorly equipped for first year practicals². We believe that improvements in the practical competence of A level science students could be driven by changes to assessment and to the content of specifications. The current A level subject criteria for the sciences need to be updated, because the present Assessment Objectives for A and AS Level³ do not reflect what universities say they want from the qualifications. They should be revised to give appropriate weight and clarity to the skills universities and employers expect from A level students.

We were pleased to hear your intention to transfer more control of the content and assessment of A level to universities, but we are unclear about how it is proposed to achieve this in practice. We believe that learned societies such as the Royal Society of Chemistry, the Institute of Physics and the Society of Biology are well placed to articulate the requirements of universities in their appropriate subjects. The review of A levels presents an opportunity to take a new look at current methods of assessment of practical knowledge and skills, to find methods better fitted to assessing the skills that universities and employers say they want. The opportunity should be taken to look at assessment methods for practical science that are used by universities and by high performing jurisdictions overseas.

¹ GCSE reform consultation, Ofqual June 2013

² Lab skills of new undergraduates (Russell group survey), Laura Grant Associates for the Gatsby Charitable Foundation (May 2011)

³ GCE AS and A Level Subject Criteria for Science, Ofqual September 2011

Governance and accountability

At our meeting with you we discussed the Wellcome Trust's Recommended Code of Governance, which is now being piloted in 21 schools across England, together with a data dashboard designed to give governors better access to the essential information they need to judge their school's performance. We remain convinced that good governance is essential to ensuring a broad education in science. Of course schools should make sure their pupils get the qualifications of which they are capable, but pupils should also be inspired by their teachers, have access to good careers guidance and to a range of extra-curricular activities such as science clubs and science lectures. A good school should do all these things and more, and it is the role of governing bodies to ensure that they do. The recent report of the Education Select Committee *The Role of School Governing Bodies* suggests there is some way to go before this is the case in every maintained school in England.

Good governance needs to be supported by the right accountability measures to which schools and governing bodies respond.

We welcome your proposals⁴ to widen secondary school accountability measures beyond the simplistic 5-GCSE measure, but these need to go further. Measures based only on examination results, however sophisticated, drive teaching to the test, and we believe that a wider basket of measures is needed to capture the things that parents seek from schools, beyond examination performance. These include employability (which could be captured using the destination measure), inspirational teaching (which could be captured using the proportion of students opting to continue their study of science and mathematics past 16) and opportunities to take part in extra-curricular activity. These are the kind of outcomes that a good governing body should monitor closely, but they will be more likely to do so if they know that Ofsted and the government are doing likewise.

Other issues

We have focused here on practical work and good governance. There are a number of further specific areas which CST believes are critical to the UK's long term success and where we would be keen to hear more about the Government's developing plans:

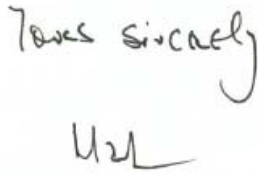
- support for science teachers' continuing professional development, and the Department's long-term intentions concerning the Regional Science Learning Centre provision;
- mathematics beyond the age of 16, where we would like to learn more about progress towards your ambition for the large majority of young people to study some form of mathematics until 18;

⁴ Secondary school accountability consultation, DfE February 2013

- the computer science curriculum, where we support your proposals for a curriculum that emphasises computational thinking, but we would like to hear about progress in the challenges of developing appropriate curricula and training enough staff to meet these ambitions.

We hope to discuss these in more depth with the Department going ahead.

We are copying this letter to the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister, Vince Cable, David Willetts, and Sir Jeremy Heywood.



Yours sincerely
M2L

Sir Mark Walport
Co-Chair



Nancy Rothwell

Professor Dame Nancy Rothwell
Co-Chair

Assessment of Practical Work in Science

Purpose

This policy note has been written by the Gatsby Foundation and the Wellcome Trust to support decisions about the assessment of science practical work in English schools. It is particularly concerned with GCSE assessment, given the timescale for developments at that level. The proposals have been shaped by a study of practice in other subjects and in other countries and by consultation with subject and assessment experts in schools, universities and Awarding Organisations. Annex 1 has details of the evidence base.

Why is it so important to assess science practical work?

Experiments are the essence of science, and studying science without practical experimental work is like studying literature without reading books. Practical work develops technical and scientific skills, and improves scientific understanding. Yet, over the last 20 years, there has been a steady erosion of laboratory skills taught in school science and this is of significant concern to industry and universities.

It is vital that practical work is assessed as part of all science qualifications including at GCSE and A level. A qualification such as GCSE Physics or A level Chemistry needs to assure employers and universities that the holder has competence in technical and other investigative skills as well as theoretical knowledge and understanding.

No GCSE or A level science qualification should be awarded without evidence that students have developed hands-on practical scientific skills.

The problem with present arrangements for GCSE science

The current norm at GCSE is 'controlled assessment', whereby, in science, candidates have to carry out one or two investigations from a small number set by the Awarding Organisation under highly controlled conditions. There is universal agreement among those we consulted that this assessment method is deeply flawed. It makes teachers focus on a narrow range of externally-set practicals as they hone students to do well in what constitutes 25% of their final grade. Students are internally assessed on their planning and analytical abilities (not on their technical skills) by their teachers who, under our high stakes system, are under enormous pressure to give students maximum marks.

Our current system of controlled assessment in science has to go, but what should take its place?

Our study of practice in other countries and other subjects shows that direct assessment of practical work, involving the teacher in some way, is widely trusted. It

is not seen as problematic in countries such as China, Singapore and Finland, and in our own country it is settled practice in modern languages and music – though usually involving some kind of moderation to secure standards. We believe that in the long term, this is the way to go.

We accept that a system relying mainly on teacher assessment has pragmatic and political implications difficult to resolve in the short term. We are however convinced that such a system would better recognise technical skills and improve teaching practice. We have considered several models (see Annex 2), including externally marked practical examinations, and we make the following recommendation for the shorter term.

Our recommendation for the shorter term

All GCSE science qualifications should include practical work assessed by a combination of:

- A. **Questions in the written paper** which are designed to assess candidates' experimental and investigative skills developed through their familiarity with performing, and understanding of, certain experiments identified in the specification (for example, investigating the effect of temperature on enzyme action).
- B. **Teachers' assessments** of certain technical and scientific skills identified in the specification (for example, using an ammeter to measure the current in a circuit). Evidence of participation in this work should be collected for every student and the headteacher of each school would be expected to certify the authenticity of each teacher's assessments. Teachers would give each student an overall mark across the full range of skills, thus allowing a deficit in one skill to be compensated for by proficiency in others.

The combination would be more heavily weighted towards component A: the purpose of B is to ensure that candidates have sufficient experience of a range of essential practical techniques to assure their competence. As a starting point, we suggest Component A should carry 15% of the overall marks, and Component B 10%. It must be stressed that component A can never be sufficient on its own, not least because it leaves open the likelihood of teachers coaching students to do the questions without having done any real practical work.

Awarding Organisations would be expected to publish in their specifications lists of (a) the specific experiments that candidates will be expected to have done and (b) the specific technical and scientific skills they will be expected to have acquired. Annex 3 has examples of such lists.

If for any reason this recommendation is unacceptable, our fall-back recommendation would be for an externally set and marked practical examination.

In the longer term

We believe that both components A and B can be optimised through research and development. For component A, Awarding Organisations should undertake work to improve questions and develop assessment techniques, perhaps involving computers, to minimise the potential for students to score well without having done the experiment.

For Component B, Awarding Organisations should pilot systems for quality assuring teachers' assessments, so that confidence in the reliability of these assessments grows over time. This might involve the accreditation of individual schools, or the use of local school cluster moderation whereby experienced teachers from nearby schools collectively help standardise each centre's assessment.

Finally, we are convinced by the evidence that open-ended project work, in which candidates are able to explore a practical project of their own devising, has great potential for developing a wide range of practical and enquiry skills. While we accept that this is not yet a pragmatic possibility at GCSE, we believe it should be explored further, especially at A level, where the Extended Project Qualification has great potential for practical projects.

Annexes

Annex 1 Sources of evidence

Due to the lack of relevant, published research on this issue, in June 2012 the Gatsby Charitable Foundation commissioned a review of assessment of practical skills in other countries, subjects and qualifications from senior researchers at the Institute of Education (University of London) and the University of York. The final report on 'Improving the assessment of practical work in school science' from Professor Michael Reiss, Dr Ian Abrahams and Ms Rachael Sharpe was published in October 2012 and is available to download from the Gatsby website:

<http://www.gatsby.org.uk/~media/Files/Education/Improving%20the%20assessment%20of%20practical%20work%20in%20school%20science.ashx>

The results of the report were discussed with representatives from the three main Awarding Organisations in England (AQA, OCR and Edexcel) in November 2012 who acknowledged that the current methods of assessing practical science were not optimal. These representatives claimed that greater clarity from the science community regarding the most important practical skills at GCSE level would help them to develop more suitable methods of assessment.

In December 2012 Gatsby invited a panel of 18 science education experts from across Chemistry, Physics and Biology to suggest the most important technical and investigative skills they felt should be learned by the end of Key Stage 4 science, and the results of this consultation have informed this paper.

Annex 2 Summary of the models of assessment considered

The research by Reiss, Abrahams and Sharpe identified a range of different forms of assessment of practical work (across a number of subjects) currently in use:

1. Report on an investigation – students write their report on an investigation using their own data OR data with which they have been provided. In neither case are their practical skills observed or assessed directly.
2. Written examination – students complete a test paper under examination conditions, some questions in which will relate to practicals undertaken during their course.
3. Viva – students are given an oral examination in which they are asked questions about a project they have undertaken.
4. Practical examination by means of a report – students conduct a practical and write up their apparatus set-up, methods, results and evaluations.
5. Practical examination – teacher (or other examiner) observes students undertaking practical work.
6. Practical examination by means of recording – examiner listens to an audio- or video-recording of a performed task.
7. Practical examination by means of observation of an artefact – examiner views a painting made in Art or a product made in Design and Technology.

Only methods 5 – 7 employ *direct* assessment of practical skills.

The view from the experts we consulted in February was that while assessment was a complex area, it was clear that in science we are talking about a range of different skills which logically require a range of different assessment methods. Those methods with most support were:

1. A written exam (which would assess parts of scientific enquiry such as planning an investigation, identifying dependent and independent variables, data analysis).
2. A practical exam OR series of 5-10 practical tasks (which would assess the ability to manipulate apparatus, take accurate readings, and work safely and logically).
3. A project report (which could assess the ability to apply knowledge, record and communicate findings, work in a group and present results).

There was no support among educationalists for the continued use of investigations as instruments for assessment under controlled conditions. It should also be noted that a minority felt that the problems of assessment in science were insurmountable under our high stakes system and that there were risks in the premature introduction of any new method.

Subsequent discussions with Awarding Organisations established that they do not want to continue with the current model of controlled assessment in GCSE science either. However they are mindful that whatever they do, their 'product' needs to be acceptable to schools in terms of costs and complexity. They also argue that any method needs to allow them to 'differentiate' among the ability range. With relatively little time to develop and test new methods of assessment, our impression is that the written examination would be their preferred option of assessing practical skills, despite the fact that this would inevitably involve a trade-off with the time and space available to assess core knowledge.

Annex 3 Examples of the skills experts suggested that GCSE science students should have acquired by the end of Key Stage 4, and experiments they should have experienced in order to gain and practice these skills.

<i>Most important technical skills</i>	<i>Experiments through which that skill may be gained</i>
Assemble simple apparatus from instructions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Use an ammeter to measure the current in a circuit – Use a respirometer to measure fermentation rates in yeast – Use volumetric apparatus to undertake titrations
Reliably demonstrate or test a scientific phenomenon using specialist equipment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Use quadrats to investigate the effect on plant diversity of trampling on a playing field – Use a balance to determine yield when making ammonium sulfate
Make accurate and precise measurements of quantities with appropriate equipment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Measurement of volume of liquids using measuring cylinders, syringes, burettes, pipettes, as appropriate – Measure the speed of an object with a light gate or ticker tape
Use glassware with safety and precision in laboratory-based investigations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Collect samples of gases from chemical reactions – Measure the effect of temperature on an enzyme reaction using a water bath
Follow and safely use basic protocols and procedures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Make up solutions using volumetric flasks – Prepare temporary mounts for microscope examination
<i>Most important investigative and experimental skills</i>	<i>Experiments through which that skill may be gained</i>
Able to identify an appropriate question for investigation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Devise a way of investigating the relationship between two variables e.g. height of drop and size of impact crater
Decide how many samples to measure and at what intervals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Investigate the effect of temperature on enzyme action – Measure current in a circuit for changing potential difference
Able to carry out basic calculations using real data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Calculate average speed from measurements of distance and time – Measure voltage and current and calculate resistance
Able to record and manipulate data in SI units	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Convert from cm to m and ms to s and similar
Able to present results in appropriate form	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Present patterns in observations related to reactivity series – Plot a graph of rate of reaction data (e.g. volume of gas

	against time)
Use conceptual models to provide explanations of their experimental results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Use a lock and key model of enzyme action to explain the effect of temperature on enzyme action – Explain why two masses fall at the same rate
Relate observed patterns in data to emerging scientific explanations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Explain the diffusion rate of beetroot pigment at different temperatures – Interpret observations of displacement reactions of metals
Able to draw the most reliable conclusions from available data and defend decisions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Explain the extent of correlation shown in a scattergram – Draw conclusions about patterns in thermochemistry from tables of data