

Developing New GCSEs, AS and A Levels for First Teaching in 2017 – Part 1

Regulatory Impact Assessment



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1. Introduction

GCSEs, AS and A levels are being reformed. We are introducing regulatory requirements to achieve comparability for similar qualifications in the assessment arrangements across the exam boards. We regulate how these arrangements are implemented to secure standards over time.

This regulatory impact assessment considers the impact of the new assessment arrangements compared with the pre-reform assessment arrangements for the following qualifications:

- GCSE – astronomy, business, economics, engineering, geology, psychology
- AS and A level – design and technology, environmental science, history of art, music technology, philosophy.

We have previously set out our principles for tiering and assessment arrangements for all general qualifications. We have considered whether it is appropriate to implement these changes and assessed the impacts relative to continuing with the existing approach.

2. Changes to the assessment arrangements

Non-exam assessment

We have revised the percentage of non-exam assessment in each qualification in line with our following principles:

- Non-exam assessment should only be used when there is not a valid way to assess by exam.
- In most circumstances, the percentage of marks that are attributed through non-exam assessment should be the same across all exam boards.

Table1 sets out the changes we have made.

Table 1. Comparison of current and proposed weightings of non-exam assessment

Subject	GCSE		AS		A level	
	Weighting		Weighting		Weighting	
	Current	Proposed	Current	Proposed	Current	Proposed
Astronomy	25%	0%	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Business	25%	0%	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Design and technology	N/A	N/A	60%*	50%	60%*	50%
Economics	0%	0%	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Engineering	60%	40%	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Environmental science	N/A	N/A	25%	0%	25%	0%
Geology	25%	0%	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
History of art	N/A	N/A	0%	0%	0%	0%
Music technology	N/A	N/A	65%	40%	70%	40%
Philosophy	N/A	N/A	0%	0%	0%	0%
Psychology	0%	0%	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

* This figure is the maximum weighting of a range allowed under our regulations. One or more boards may currently use a lower weighting in their qualification.

Tiering

We set out our principle that tiering should only be used when it is not possible to adequately assess all students using the same exam questions. For qualifications in this impact assessment, this represents no change.

Assessment objectives

We have revised assessment objectives for each subject. The changes are made on a subject-specific basis, and largely represent realigning assessment objectives with the changes made to the specification's content by the Department for Education.

Additionally, we propose to move from a situation where an assessment objective could make up a wide range of the marks for a subject, to where it must make up the percentage set out by us or, for some AS and A levels, be within a narrow and prescribed range. This means that, historically, exam boards could have a very different weighting between assessment objectives for the same qualification. The new system will reduce the differences between specifications for the same subject.

3. Assessing costs and benefits of the changes to assessment arrangements

Non-exam assessment

We are reducing the percentage of non-exam assessment in the following qualifications:

- GCSE astronomy
- GCSE business
- GCSE engineering
- GCSE geology
- AS and A level music technology.

In AS and A level design and technology, we are proposing changes to the non-exam assessment arrangements to standardise all exam boards' qualifications at 50 per cent. For some exam boards, this will mean a change in the non-exam assessment of their qualification.

In AS and A level environmental science, the current subject criteria document allows for 25 per cent non-exam assessment. However, the only qualification offered at present in this subject is assessed wholly by exam.

In total, 'these changes will affect about 150,000 entries annually'¹

While we have set out the reductions in weightings in non-exam assessment, we have not prescribed what this means for the future number or size of non-exam assessments or the length (or number) of exam papers. For subjects where the reduction in non-exam assessment is small, it is possible that exam boards will continue to set a similar number of tasks, 'and their workload and costs will remain the same.

Exam boards will set the length of exam papers based on their assessment strategies. It is possible that, for some subjects, increasing the proportion of exam-based marks will mean increasing exam time. This would have cost implications for the exam boards in preparing longer or additional papers, as well as the additional costs of marking them.

¹ Data from JCQ summer 2014, England only.

It is difficult to predict the net impact of a reduced percentage of non-exam assessment on exam boards without being sure of the impact on overall length and mix of assessment. It seems likely that when exam boards set their assessment strategies, they will consider manageability and costs alongside standards to deliver valid assessments.

For schools, a reduction in the number or size of non-exam assessments should reduce the time spent by teachers preparing students for the assessments and marking them. It is possible that the teacher will use this time to undertake other tasks, including preparing students for exams.

The principal driver and main benefit of reducing the percentage of non-exam assessment is to improve the validity of the qualifications by ensuring that the nature of the assessment is appropriate to the skills, knowledge and understanding being assessed.

Making assessment more similar across exam boards

We have moved from a situation where exam boards could, in many cases, choose the weighting of assessment objectives and non-exam assessment from a range, to one where each specification would be expected to have the same weighting. This will have benefits as it means that the assessment arrangements are more similar across exam boards, so wider users of qualifications can be confident that the same qualification is of a comparable standard, no matter which exam board or specification was used.

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