

Changes to GCSEs

1. **I've heard that GCSE coursework is being scrapped. This is good for home educators, isn't it, because we currently have problems with getting coursework authenticated?**

At present, home educated young people who take GCSEs as private candidates need to find someone who can authenticate the coursework element of their GCSE and sign a statement vouching that this is all the student's own work. In many cases this means that the home educating family signs up with a distance learning provider such as NEC (http://www.nec.ac.uk/info/?usca_p=t) or Oxford Home Schooling (<http://www.oxfordhomeschooling.co.uk/>). Courses for each subject cost in the region of £250. The student completes the assigned coursework at home and sends it back to the tutor who has become familiar with the student's level of attainment. There are other ways of getting coursework authenticated but this is the most common route. Some home educators presumed that the coursework element would simply be replaced by more final exams but this is not the case.

2. **Coursework in most subjects is being scrapped and replaced by controlled assessments. This is NOT the same as taking extra exams.** The Qualification and Curriculum Authority (<http://www.qca.org.uk/aboutQCA.aspx>) maintains and develops the national curriculum and associated assessments, tests and examinations as well as accrediting qualifications in colleges and at work. It also regulates awarding bodies and exams to ensure they are fit for purpose. In October 2006 QCA put forward proposals for scrapping coursework and replacing it with controlled assessments (<http://image.guardian.co.uk/sys-files/Education/documents/2006/10/06/courseworkreport.pdf>).

In June 2007 QCA launched a consultation into these proposals and the results were published on the QCA website and reported in the press on 21 December 2007. QCA also proposed a number of other changes to the way the exam subjects were studied and assessed and many teachers responded. Education Otherwise asked (<http://www.freedomforchildrentogrow.org/qca.pdf>) how the controlled assessment system would be implemented for home educated young people sitting the exams as private candidates.

3. **What are these controlled assessments?**

They are sometimes described as "exam type conditions", but this has been explicitly rejected by QCA. Controlled assessments have also been described as "supervised extended essay writing" or "projects set by exam boards under controlled conditions. "

One way to imagine this working in a school is that the pupils would go to the school library where they would complete their project under the teacher's supervision. There is a 19 page article on controlled assessments (http://www.qca.org.uk/libraryAssets/media/qca-07-3208_controlledassessmentfinal3.pdf) to be found on the QCA website from June 2007, which talks about task setting, task taking and task marking. We might usefully think of "tasks" as "projects".

Task setting is to do with the kind of projects that the students carry out and how much the projects are directed or determined by the exam board. Task taking is to do with the conditions under which the work is carried out. Task marking looks at who has responsibility for marking the projects.

TASK SETTING

There are a number of possibilities for task setting and this appears to be an area which causes QCA less concern than task taking and where there might be more flexibility from different awarding bodies in different subjects. One option would be for the awarding body to set the tasks, which could be accessed eg via an online task bank. Alternatively, the awarding body could publish guidance and criteria for tasks, and teachers would submit task proposals for approval. Under another proposal teachers would consult published guidance and criteria before devising tasks but would not need to secure prior approval from the awarding body. Finally, the teachers might set tasks with minimal awarding body guidance/criteria.

TASK TAKING

As set out on page 6 of the QCA article, under the highest control for task taking, students would complete all work under the direct supervision of a teacher (authenticity control) ; feedback to students would operate within tight guidelines specified by the awarding body (feedback control) ; students would have a limited amount of time in which to complete the work (time control) ; students would complete all the work individually (collaboration control) ; and access to resources would be limited to those specified by the awarding body (resource control).

TASK MARKING

The different levels of control for task marking would be to do with whether the awarding body/exam board marked the task, whether the teacher marked and the awarding body moderated the marking, whether the teachers were further accredited to do their own unmoderated marking, or whether, at the lowest level of control, teachers mark against guidelines or standards with no external moderation.

4. What will this mean for home educators ? How will we be able to fulfil the terms and conditions for these controlled assessments ?

An article in the Times

(<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/education/article3081259.ece>) stated that "controlled assessments will be supervised under strict conditions at school. Although pupils will still be able to consult the internet and other source material, teachers will be on hand to ensure that the work is suitably referenced and not simply copied."

We just don't know how this will operate for home educators. What seems likely is that home educated young people will no longer be able to complete assignments at home in their own time. It may be possible for them to attend a recognised learning centre to complete their controlled assessments or to sign on to some type of online arrangement similar to the one proposed by QCA for disabled students engaged in distance learning. (See question 15)

QCA has published an article on coursework review

(http://www.qca.org.uk/libraryAssets/media/qca-07-3207_Improving_GCSE_internal_and_controlled_assessment.pdf) which talks about electronic assessment, where the student could upload to a PDA (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Personal_digital_assistant) under controlled conditions [p.33]

5. Can't we just sit an extra exam paper ?

In theory one possible option would be for home educated young people who register as private candidates to take additional exam papers if suitable arrangement cannot be made for controlled assessments.

6. **What if they just try and fob us off with an extra exam paper ? My son/daughter would get a much higher mark for coursework than for a final exam and more exams will be very stressful. Isn't it discriminatory if they just make us take more exams than everyone else ?**

Putting 100% of the marks into the end of course exams would prejudice the chances of those home educated candidates who perform better outside the restrictions of final external exams.

7. **Isn't there some kind of GCSE where you don't have coursework in the first place ?**

If home educated young people want to do all-exam courses, because they prefer not to do coursework or because of difficulties/expense associated with getting coursework authenticated they can choose IGCSEs (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/IGCSE>) over GCSEs. International GCSEs do not follow the English National Curriculum and are therefore not taken at present in state schools in England, though they are widespread in the independent schools sector. This has implications for home educators when it comes to finding an exam centre which will accept private candidates.

8. **What is EO doing about it ? (+ What can individuals do ?)**

EO has already taken this up with QCA in the September Curriculum Review (<http://www.freedomforchildrentogrow.org/qca.pdf>) and with [Mary Griffin of QCA](#). Mails have also been copied to [Denise Hunter of DCSF Elective Home Education Team](#) who is aware of EO's concerns. Education Otherwise Government Policy Group will be discussing the details of controlled assessments with QCA, with the different awarding bodies/examination boards (<http://www.parentscentre.gov.uk/foragegroup/16plusyears/examinationservices/>) and also with DCSF.

If you have any queries about the consultation summary or the qualification and subject criteria, you can also get in touch with QCA at: GCSE@qca.org.uk.

9. **What is the timeline for this ?**

As QCA points out "none of these examples has been trialled. Awarding bodies will be expected to trial their own controlled assessments before they are used in live examinations." ([p. 8 of QCA article on controlled assessments June 2007](#) http://www.qca.org.uk/libraryAssets/media/qca-07-3208_controlledassessmentfinal3.pdf). According to an article in the Guardian (<http://education.guardian.co.uk/gcses/story/0,,2231174,00.html>), Controlled assessment (http://www.qca.org.uk/qca_11551.aspx) will replace teacher-marked coursework in most major GCSE subjects in 2009. We give more details about the proposed timescale for other changes to the GCSE curriculum in Question 14. QCA's final consultation report http://www.qca.org.uk/qca_11693.aspx#Next%20stepssays that the awarding body revised specifications will be submitted to the regulators in spring 2008, with the majority being accredited by August 2008. The specifications will be available to centres from September 2008 with first teaching from September 2009.

10. **Will it apply to all subjects ? (And if not, why not ?)**

The QCA website published revised criteria for 28 GCSE subjects on December 21st. Here is a link to the main page (http://www.qca.org.uk/qca_11693.aspx) where you can check what is being proposed for various different subjects, covering modular exams and the relative proportion of controlled assessment to final exams. 1,865 teachers contributed to the QCA consultation into curriculum reform and the Times Educational Supplement

believes (<http://www.tes.co.uk/2486735>) that the teachers' influence was behind many of the differences between the draft proposals put forward in June and the final criteria which QCA published in December. In Modern Languages, music, engineering, Media Studies and Citizenship GCSEs for example, the results will be based on 60% controlled assessment, whereas in Religious Education both the short and the full GCSE course will remain exam-only. Law, sociology and psychology will become exam-only courses from 2009. (Currently, pupils can opt to take up to 20 per cent of the GCSE as coursework.) Geography and history will specify 75% external assessment, or exam, and 25% controlled assessment, or supervised extended essay writing. Latin and Greek will also remain exam-only

11. Did anyone ever ask us about this before they went ahead and decided ?

Education Otherwise was not formally notified or invited to comment on the proposed changes. We became aware of the extent of the reforms through articles in the press in June 2007 which we flagged up on the Education Otherwise Campaign Website and on home education internet support lists.

12. Why are they doing it ?

There are a number of reasons for the proposed GCSE reforms. The major impetus behind changing the arrangements for coursework (either replacing coursework with controlled assessment or moving to exam-only system) has been the fear that coursework is susceptible to plagiarism and outside assistance as outlined in this June article from the Guardian (<http://education.guardian.co.uk/gcses/story/0,,2101972,00.html>). Teachers have also lobbied for changes to the system, some wanting more emphasis on external exams and others wanting a higher percentage of marks to be awarded via internal assessment.

13. Where can I find out more ?

Details can be found on the QCA website (http://www.qca.org.uk/qca_11693.aspx), where you can also register for email updates. This is the QCA page of useful links (http://www.qca.org.uk/qca_11518.aspx) including FAQ and contact details for awarding bodies/exam boards. You can also read the March 2007 QCA article (http://www.qca.org.uk/libraryAssets/media/qca-07-3207_Improving_GCSE_internal_and_controlled_assessment.pdf) on internal controlled assessments. There will be more information about this in the Education Pages of newspapers such as the Guardian, Independent, Times and Telegraph. We would also expect the BBC Online Education pages (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/default.stm>) to feature regular updates.

Education Otherwise Campaign Website will highlight further developments.

14. I've heard that students will be able to resit parts of the exam to improve their grades. What's that about ?

According to the Times (<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/education/article3081259.ece>) QCA has been describing the new GCSEs as modular or "unitised" exams, where pupils will be allowed to resit an exam unit if they are unhappy with their marks. Critics of modularisation at A level have said that pupils are tested before they are ready (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/338219.stm>) and that knowledge becomes fragmented. The Daily Mail terms the new GCSEs as "bite-sized GCSEs" (http://www.dailymail.co.uk/pages/live/articles/news/news.html?in_article_id=) you can keep resitting until you get a pass." "Pupils will be able to walk into final exams

at the end of two-year courses with 60 per cent of their marks already in the bank." You can find more about GCSEs on the QCA website (http://www.qca.org.uk/qca_6241.aspx). Education Otherwise Government Policy Group will be discussing the new curriculum requirements with QCA, with the different awarding bodies/examination boards (<http://www.parentscentre.gov.uk/foragegroup/16plusyears/examinationservices>) and also with DCSF.

15. What account are they taking of Special Educational Needs ?

In June 2007 QCA published a 19 page document on the regulatory impact (http://www.qca.org.uk/libraryAssets/media/qca-07-3208_controlledassessmentfinal3.pdf) of proposals to change coursework arrangements. The following is from page 9 : "QCA has consulted a small number of students with a range of disabilities on the implications for replacing traditional coursework with controlled assessments. One major issue to be resolved concerns the timed nature of the assessments. Reasonable adjustments will need to be made for some students involving additional time. This raises questions about how that best fits into a normal school timetable and who might be able to carry out supervision. As part of the consultation on the draft GCSE criteria, the regulators are seeking advice on how these important practical issues can best be addressed and on the implications of the introduction of controlled assessments for distance learning students. "

The December consultation report (http://www.qca.org.uk/qca_11693.aspx#Disability%20Discrimination%20Act) refers briefly to the Disability Discrimination Act, stating: As part of our consultation on the draft GCSE subject criteria, we asked stakeholders whether they thought that we had only included requirements essential to each subject, and therefore not put unnecessary barriers in the way of students with disabilities. "

Quite clearly, more work needs to be done in this area.

16. Does this only apply to England or will it be extended to Wales and Northern Ireland ?

The QCA website states that the consultation on GCSE reform was carried out with the regulators of external qualifications in Wales [DCELLS] and Northern Ireland [CCEA]

The regulatory body in Wales is the Welsh Assembly. Welsh (first language), Welsh literature, English, English Literature, Mathematics and ICT were not covered in the consultation as these GCSEs were already being revised for teaching from September 2010. At the time of writing there has been little in the media in Wales about the new GCSEs, but the relevant website is the Department for Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (<http://wales.gov.uk/topics/educationandskills/?lang=en>). Further enquiries may be directed to: miranda.morton@wales.gsi.gov.uk

or by post to:

Qualifications and Curriculum 14-19 Division,
Castle Buildings,
Womanby Street,
7y6 Cardiff, CF10 1SX

The CCEA website (http://www.rewardinglearning.org.uk/regulation/accreditation_and_monitoring/gcse.asp) has links to revised curriculum specifications for GCSEs in Northern Ireland and further enquiries may be directed to:

info@ccea.org.uk

02890 261200

Council for the Curriculum Examination and Assessment,
Clarendon Dock,
Belfast BT1 3BG.

It seems as though controlled assessments will also replace coursework in Wales and Northern Ireland, although the individual GCSE subject specifications may sometimes differ in detail from those proposed for England.