

What is the purpose of education?

This is the question being asked by the Education Select Committee in the latest of a series of inquiries exploring the fundamentals of education in England.

This latest investigation will look at:

- The purpose of education for children of all ages
- What measures should be used to evaluate the quality of education against this purpose
- How well the current education system performs against these measures.

The Committee claims that approaching this basic question of the purpose of education will pave the way to examine whether our curriculum, qualifications, assessment and accountability systems are fit for purpose.

Alongside the formal call for evidence (deadline 25 January 2016), the Committee is encouraging views to be submitted on a new [on-line forum](#) on the Committee's website.

Read the OCR blog on this inquiry [here](#).

Appeals process in the spotlight

Figures released by Ofqual in its annual statistical [report](#) on Enquiries About Results (EARs) show an increase in the number of enquiries received by exam boards in 2015.

Ofqual's data for 2015 shows the continuing upward trend in individual enquiries - up 27% from 451,000 in 2014 to 572,350 this year.

The number of qualification grade changes as a result of EARs was 90,650 which represents 1.1% of all grades awarded and 17.9% of all grades challenged (down from 18.7% in 2014).

Despite the increase in enquiries, turnaround times by exam boards were shorter in summer 2015.

Alongside the statistical report, Ofqual has announced a new Enquiries About Results [consultation](#) to ensure the service provided by exam boards continues to improve.

The consultation covers the review and appeal systems used by exam boards in England for addressing enquiries about a candidate's GCSE, AS or A Level marks. It also proposes new rules for how exam boards should set

grade boundaries for new and legacy GCSEs, AS and A Levels.

Proposals include:

- teachers should be able to request to see all marked GCSE, AS and A Level scripts before deciding if they want them to be reviewed - at the moment only AS and A Level scripts are routinely accessible in this way
- the focus of a review should be on the quality of the original marker's work and application of the mark scheme
- papers should be reviewed by markers specifically trained to review someone else's marking and have received that training at the right time
- marks should only be changed where there is an error in applying the mark scheme or in counting the marks (a system error) - where there is a legitimate difference of opinion in application of the mark scheme between two markers, the original mark should stand - at the moment this happens in some but not all cases.

The deadline for the consultation is 11 March 2016 with outcomes coming into effect from summer 2016.

Also in this issue (click to skip to article):

- > Resits for legacy GQs
- > National Reference Tests
- > Ofsted annual report
- > Use of calculators in exams
- > Functional Skills reform
- > Area Reviews
- > Careers guidance
- > Autumn Spending Review
- > The Last Word
- > STOP PRESS: comparability of GCSE and A Level subjects

Resit proposals announced for legacy GCSEs, AS and A Levels

As reformed qualifications are introduced in England, 'legacy' GCSEs, AS and A Levels are being withdrawn. Ofqual is now consulting on the final re-sit arrangements for these qualifications. The main [recommendations](#) are:

1. AS and A Levels

Ofqual is proposing that re-sit opportunities in all AS and A Level subjects, where new qualifications were introduced in September 2015, will be available for the last time in the legacy qualifications in May or June 2017. This arrangement would be repeated for subsequent phases of AS and A Level reform.

2. GCSEs

The consultation proposes that students taking GCSEs in English, English language and mathematics in summer 2016 will have a re-sit opportunity in November 2016. Ofqual is also seeking views on whether these students should have a further re-sit opportunity in May/June 2017.

There will be no re-sit opportunities in other GCSE subjects that are subject to reform.

Ofqual has produced a [table](#) to illustrate the last teaching, last exams and resit timings for its proposals. The table does not currently include information about modern foreign languages (other than French, German and Spanish). Final decisions have not been taken about when these subjects will be reformed.

Selected schools will have no choice but to participate in new National Reference Test

Legislation is being proposed to require selected schools to take part in the new National Reference Test (NRT). "This will help to ensure that the sample of pupils and schools that take part each year will be fully representative of the national cohort taking GCSEs at the end of key stage 4" claims Schools Minister, Nick Gibb.

As reported in April's [OCR Policy Briefing](#), the National Reference Test is being introduced to provide additional information to support the awarding of GCSEs in English Language and maths. Each year in March, ahead of their GCSEs, a random sample of year 11 students will be asked to take a test in English or maths. The results will not be used for school accountability purposes and results will not be given

to individual pupils. The NRT aims to provide Ofqual with additional evidence on year-on-year changes in performance.

The proposed legislation, outlined in a [DfE consultation](#), would apply to maintained schools and most academies and free schools. It would not apply to independent schools although pupils at independent schools will also be asked to take the test to ensure that the sample of pupils is nationally representative.

The legislation will come into force on 1 September 2016 and the first full NRT will take place in March 2017. Ofqual has stated in later [documentation](#) (WOO0027) that "it is likely to be in subsequent years when Test results can be fully taken into account in GCSE awarding".

Ofsted Chief Inspector warns of teacher shortages and regional divides

"If teacher recruitment issues remain unaddressed, if training provision in much of the country continues to be patchy, and if schools that are desperate for good teachers struggle to find them, we are destined to remain a nation divided".

In his annual state of the nation [report into the quality of schools and further education](#), Sir Michael Wilshaw says that "collective action and political will" are key to raising standards, particularly in the North and Midlands, where, according to the report, underperforming schools are concentrated.

Other highlighted issues in the report include:

Schools

- There is much to celebrate about England's schools, with more children currently in good and outstanding schools than ever before, but improvements at primary level are not always matched in secondary education
- Increasing the number of good leaders is important to meet the challenges of further improvement in schools
- The achievement of pupils from low-income backgrounds remains an on-going weakness in the education system.

FE and Apprenticeships

- In the FE and skills sector the annual report finds that improvements among providers have slowed, and performance has declined in general FE colleges (GFE)
- Only 35% of GFE colleges inspected this year were good or outstanding
- Concerns surrounding the quality of apprenticeships are on-going. Schools are not promoting apprenticeships widely as an option for all pupils but this will not change until quality improves.

The report is underpinned by the findings of over 5,000 inspections of schools, colleges and providers of further education and skills carried out during 2014/15.

Change of rules for calculators in exams plus amendments to maths content

In another [consultation](#) on GQ reform, Ofqual is proposing to withdraw the current subject-specific rules which apply to the use of calculators in new maths GCSEs. Instead it intends to introduce less prescriptive rules which apply to all new GCSE, AS and A Level assessments which allow students to use calculators (not just maths).

Ofqual is proposing to put in place rules which require exam boards to ensure that – if students use calculators in exams – the assessments remain fit for purpose.

An additional [consultation](#) includes two proposed new

appendices to the subject content for maths and further maths – covering mathematical notation and formulae which students will be expected to know.

To support these proposed changes, Ofqual has set up the A Level Mathematics Working Group - an expert panel including representatives of ALCAB, subject associations, teachers and exam boards. Although having no formal regulatory status, a [report from the working group](#) has been published alongside the consultation as it was used as a main source of evidence when developing the proposals.

Functional Skills reform programme underway

A consultation and the creation of a working group are the first steps that have been taken towards the reform of Functional Skills.

As reported in October's [OCR Policy Briefing](#), the Education and Training Foundation (ETF) has been commissioned by the government to lead on the reform of English and maths Functional Skills qualifications.

Pye Tait Consulting, in partnership with NIACE, has now been appointed to lead on a consultation to be launched in January.

In addition, a working group has been created with members from AoC, AELP, FSB, HOLEX and UKCES, to have oversight of the reform programme and ensure consultations are effective and “manage opinions to reach consensus”.

The first stage of the reform programme will be completed by August 2016 and, subject to further funding, the ETF plans to produce new core curricula and a continuing professional development programme to support teaching of the new qualifications in 2018.

More colleges announced for Area Reviews

The government has announced further regions for its Area Reviews.

[Wave 2 reviews](#) will cover nearly 50 colleges and 34 sixth form colleges and will begin early in 2016 in:

- The Marches and Worcestershire
- Thames Valley
- West of England
- Cheshire and Warrington
- Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire
- Surrey.

These wide-ranging reviews of post-16 education and training will assess the economic and educational needs of the area and the related implications for post-16 education and training provision.

Provisional plans for the [third, fourth and fifth waves](#) have also been set out and are expected to start in April, September and November 2016. These cover all the remaining areas in England with the exception of Greater London (expected to be in the 2nd or 3rd wave).

Government shows renewed interest in careers guidance

The Department for Education plans to publish a comprehensive careers strategy in the coming weeks.

The Under Secretary of State for Childcare and Education, Sam Gyimah, has outlined [the government's vision](#) for careers education. This aims to result, by 2020, in a system where young people have access to the information they need to make informed decisions on their education, training and employment options. This includes:

- Clear guidance at the end of primary school, and at ages 14, 16 and 18
- An expectation that careers guidance “should be an integral part of what good schools do”
- A clear understanding of routes into technical and professional education and apprenticeships
- More employer engagement and work experience opportunities.

Aligned with the careers strategy, comes an [inquiry on](#)

[careers, education and guidance](#) which will look into:

- The quality and impartiality of current provision
- How careers advice in schools and colleges can help to match skills with labour market needs
- The role of the new Careers and Enterprise Company and its relationship with other bodies such as the National Careers Service
- The balance between national and local approaches to careers advice
- Careers advice and apprenticeships
- The potential for employers to play a greater role in careers advice.

This is the first inquiry from a new parliamentary committee – the [Committee on Education, Skills and the Economy](#) – which has been formed from the existing select committees on Education and on Business, Innovation and Skills. The new committee will examine issues around education and skills, and how they impact upon business and the economy.

Autumn Spending Review 2015: impact on education and skills

The news from the Chancellor's autumn statement was considered better than expected for further and higher education, and we now have further details on how the apprenticeship levy will operate. Key points from the spending review include:

Schools

The Spending Review protects the core schools budget in real terms.

The government will introduce a national funding formula for schools. A consultation will be launched in 2016 with the new formulae implemented from 2017-18.

£23 billion will be invested in school buildings, opening 500 new free schools, creating 600,000 school places, rebuilding and refurbishing over 500 schools. This will accelerate the government's ambitions towards ending local authorities' roles in running schools and all schools becoming academies.

£1.3 billion of spending will be used to attract new teachers into the profession, particularly into Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects and to deliver the English Baccalaureate (EBacc).

The current national base rate per student for 16 to 19 year olds in school sixth forms, sixth form colleges and further education colleges in England will be protected for the rest of the Parliament in cash terms.

Sixth Form Colleges in England will be given the opportunity to become academies, allowing them to recover VAT costs. Academies are currently excluded

from the government's Area Reviews.

Apprenticeships

The apprenticeship levy on larger employers will be introduced in April 2017. It will be set at a rate of 0.5% of an employer's paybill. The levy will only be paid on any paybill in excess of £3 million and less than 2% of UK employers will pay it. Each employer will receive an allowance of £15,000 to offset against their levy payment. The levy will be paid through Pay As You Earn. By 2019-20, the levy will raise £3 billion in the UK.

A new employer-led body will be established to set apprenticeship standards and ensure quality. The body will be independent of government and will also advise on the level of levy funding each apprenticeship should receive.

Adult skills

Funding for the core adult skills budget will be protected in cash terms.

“Efficiencies will be delivered” through locally-led Area Reviews, which will be supported with additional government funding aiming to ensure the FE sector is financially resilient and meets local economic needs.

Five National Colleges and a network of Institutes of Technology will be created.

Maintenance grants are being replaced by tuition fee loans which will be expanded to 19 to 23 year olds at levels 3 and 4, and 19+ year olds at levels 5 and 6, and the government will consult on introducing maintenance loans for people who attend specialist, higher-level

providers, including National Colleges.

Higher education

The government will lift the age cap on new loans to postgraduates from 2016-17 so they are available to all those under 60. For all STEM subjects, tuition loans will be extended to students wishing to do a second degree from 2017-18.

The range of higher education providers will be widened: a new Institute of Coding will be set up to provide training in higher level digital skills; a new university in Hereford will be created focusing on engineering; part funding will be provided for a new campus in Battersea for the Royal College of Art.

The Last Word

Paul Steer, Head of Policy, comments on some of the issues featured in this issue.

The Education Select Committee inquiry into the purpose of education has drawn a few brickbats from commentators who wonder whether it should be asking broad philosophical questions of this nature, especially at a time when every aspect of the entire education system seems to be convulsed with reform. However, a closer look suggests that the committee is looking for a set of metrics that can be used to measure the quality of education provided. A better opening question might have been: What are the things we most value in education and how can we measure them?

If this is really what's behind this inquiry then there is a glimmer of hope it will deliver something worthwhile. It has picked up on a general unease that is heard throughout the education system – that school accountability has become a bean-counting process fed solely by data from tests and exam results. As Margaret Kerry of OCR has observed in a recent blog, that isn't to say that exam results aren't important but they aren't the only thing that matters and they can't be a proxy for everything valuable that goes on in a good education system.

Ofqual has been promising to publish a consultation on making changes to the current results and appeals processes for some time. Although it has been a long time coming it seems that the time has been well spent. The recommendations are balanced and backed up with authoritative research (research which, incidentally, provides reassuring data on the performance of examiners and the quality of marking in the exam system). There is a reminder of an important truth that there isn't always such a thing as a right mark: "In some cases, a candidate might receive a slightly higher mark from one marker than they would from another. In other cases, they might be given a slightly lower mark. This does not mean that either mark is wrong".

There is nothing, however, in the proposals which seem likely to do anything to halt the increasing tide of appeals being made. The pressures of accountability measures are such that any possibility of an upward adjustment to a mark on the borderline between one grade and another will increasingly be pursued.

The Ofqual consultation on results and appeals enquiries is but one of a whole spate of education-related consultations, well over ten of them, that have come out in the period leading up to Christmas – just one more indication of the scale and pace of reforms. Another example is the DfE consultation about the roll out of National Reference Tests. National Reference Tests in English and maths will be used to measure the year-on-year performance of pupils at key stage 4 and, in the longer term, are intended to provide additional data to inform the awarding of GCSEs. Some members of the teaching community have queried whether these tests, to be taken by a random sample of pupils from a random sample of schools, will deliver any meaningful data. But that is not the subject of this consultation. This is about making it mandatory for schools to participate in the tests.

If the NRTs succeed in measuring the performance of pupils across the country, they can also set a benchmark of expectations across regions. Sir Michael Wilshaw's annual Ofsted report into the quality of schools and further education highlights concerns about the variation in achievements in schools on a regional basis, identifying particular concerns about some schools in the North and the Midlands. In particular, the report refers to the 'patchy' nature of teacher training across the regions. Recruiting, training and retaining good teachers is likely to be a major challenge in coming years with the rising numbers of school pupils and the introduction of the Government's compulsory EBacc policy. The DfE's consultation on the compulsory EBacc asks an open question - "What additional central strategies would schools like to see in place for recruiting and training teachers in EBacc subjects?". The proposals to introduce a new National Teaching College may be part of the solution but its establishment as a force in supporting the profession has a way to go. A recent visit to the College's crowd-funding website reveals it has raised 7% of the £250,000 start-up fund it is hoping to raise. You have until the 25th February 2016 to make a pledge.

Sir Michael's report also voices concern about the performance of parts of the Further Education sector - a sector that is currently undergoing fundamental change through the Area Review process. Notwithstanding the fact that the

government's spending review has generally been much better news for this sector than feared, these Area Reviews are still an ambitious and essential mechanism for getting the finances of the sector back on an even keel. They are also key to the government's determination to introduce a different vocational curriculum with a stronger emphasis on higher level technical and professional routes. It will be interesting to see the extent to which the Reviews, with their emphasis on regional planning, will lead to greater consistency or greater disparity between the quality and choices available to our young people from one region to another.

Whatever your role in the education sector, next year looks set to bring yet further challenges. It won't be dull, that's for sure, and let's try and hang on to those core values of education that never change, regardless of policies and funding changes, and regardless of social and technological developments. And, in the meantime, let's put our minds to the festivities and enjoy a well-earned and much needed Merry Christmas.

..STOP PRESS...STOP PRESS...STOP PRESS...STOP PRESS...STOP PRESS...STOP PRESS..

Can different GCSE and A Level subjects be compared accurately?

New [research](#) examines whether different GCSE and A Level subjects are comparable to each other and whether a better alignment could be achieved.

Ofqual is [seeking views](#) on its six research papers which identify the policy options that could be adopted in relation to the comparability of different subjects:

- Comparability of different GCSE and A Level subjects in England: An introduction
- Inter-subject comparability: a review of the technical literature
- Inter-subject comparability of examination standards in GCSE and GCE
- Inter-subject comparability: an international review

- A recent history of regulatory perspectives on inter-subject comparability in England
- Exploring implications of policy options concerning inter-subject comparability.

Chief Regulator Glenys Stacey explains: "We expect a GCSE from one exam board to be as demanding as one from another exam board in the same subject, and as those from previous years. But doing the same for different subjects is another issue. When you look closely there are many factors to consider. Ultimately should you be able to, or even want to, compare say, chemistry and art, or chemists and artists?"

Following the results of the survey, Ofqual will decide whether or not it needs to introduce a policy position to achieve inter-subject comparability.