

Functional Skills reform continues as new content published

The government has published the content for Functional Skills [maths](#) and [English](#).

The publication of the subject content follows last Autumn's national consultation. 333 responses to the consultation were received from Further and Higher Education institutions, apprenticeship providers, employers, subject experts, practitioners and Awarding Organisations.

The main issues in the consultation which attracted comment included: the use of aids to support spelling, grammar and calculations; the distinction between subject content levels, particularly between Entry Level

3 and Level 1; the number of guided learning hours; and the inclusion of spelling lists based on a phonics teaching approach at Entry Level.

The development of new Functional Skills qualifications will continue in the run up to first teaching in September 2019 with a further consultation expected from Ofqual around Easter.

The DfE has also published [research](#) on improving engagement and attainment in maths and English in FE colleges and also for adult learners in education, the workplace and the community.

Schools to get extra funding for post-16 advanced maths

Following its [earlier announcement](#), the government has now increased the amount of funding that schools and colleges can receive for additional 16-19 year olds studying advanced maths.

The advanced maths premium announced in last year's autumn budget was originally going to be worth £600 for every additional pupil studying maths beyond GCSE. But the DfE has now announced that schools will get £1,200 for every additional pupil who studies a two-year A Level in maths or further maths from 2018/19.

Additional pupils who study both maths and further maths

A Levels over 2 years will be worth £2,400 to their school or college.

A £600 funding uplift will be received for AS maths or Core Maths taken over one year by additional pupils.

The increased funding follows the [Smith Review of post-16 maths](#) which confirmed the case for raising participation in advanced post-16 maths.

Further guidance on the advanced maths premium is available on the [DfE website](#).

Universities urged to open maths schools

Universities in England can now [apply to open](#) specialist 16-19 maths schools.

First announced in the government's 2017 industrial strategy, maths schools are specialist schools for the most mathematically able 16-19 year olds. They aim to prepare students for maths-related disciplines at universities and pursue mathematically intensive careers.

Universities hoping to establish maths schools must show strong engagement and a commitment to the day to day involvement in running the school including providing: curriculum support through project work and master classes; access to resources such as lecturers and facilities; careers advice; and links to business and industry.

Maths schools not only aim to raise participation and attainment in maths for their own students, but must also be able to support and influence the teaching of maths in the local area, and contribute to the university's widening participation commitments.

This recent expansion of the maths school initiative follows the success of two already existing maths schools supported by the universities of King's College London and Exeter.

Each maths schools will receive £350,000 additional funding every year, on top of its post-16 funding allocation, specifically to support maths.

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DfE publishes invitation to deliver T Levels

Providers in England have been invited to express an interest in delivering the first three T Levels from September 2020.

The T levels which will be available for teaching will be:

- Digital route: Software applications design and development T Level
- Construction route: Building services and engineering T Level
- Education and childcare route: Education T Level.

The DfE is looking for a limited number of institutions to deliver these T levels and has issued [guidance and eligibility criteria](#).

T Levels: next steps for providers

The implementation of T Levels continues as the government publishes further information on [next steps for colleges](#).

Providers who [expressed an interest](#) in delivering the first tranche of T Levels from 2020 will find out in early May 2018 whether or not they have been successful.

To understand more about the capacity of the FE sector, three surveys will be issued in the coming months asking providers questions about current teachers and leaders, plans around T Level delivery, and views on a number of

post-16 issues.

The government's official response to the recent T Levels consultation is now expected in early May, with updated versions of occupational maps available in the spring.

Further introductory and background information is now available for providers on the [DfE website](#) including what T Level programmes are intended to achieve, how and when they will be introduced, what they will cover and how the qualifications will be awarded.

Education reforms impact on qualifications market

Reforms to GCSEs and A Levels and changes in accountability measures for schools are just two policy areas influencing the take up of qualifications, according to Ofqual's latest [annual qualifications market report](#).

Other drivers behind this year's qualifications trends (2016-2017) include the availability of re-sit opportunities for legacy GCSEs, the decoupling of AS from the A Level, post-16 maths and English GCSE requirements, the establishment of Progress 8 and Attainment 8 performance measures, and a focus on EBacc subjects.

The main findings in the report include:

- The overall number of certificates awarded in GCSE, AS, A Level and vocational and other qualifications fell by nearly 8% (to 12.4 million) in England compared to the previous year, continuing the trend seen over several years.
- AS Levels had the biggest percentage drop in the number of certificates awarded (down by 43% on the previous year).

- 6.1 million certificates were awarded in vocational and other qualifications - a drop of 10% compared with the previous year.
- The top 10 highest volume GCSE subjects accounted for 73% of all GCSE certificates awarded. Maths remained the most popular subject at GCSE, AS and A Level.

Ofqual believes that further changes to the qualifications market in the coming years will be seen in the vocational arena due to:

- The potential impact of T Levels on the number of available Technical awards and certificates
- Changes in performance tables continuing to impact on take up
- The phasing out of Apprenticeship frameworks and the growth of apprenticeship standards (the majority of which do not currently contain separately awarded qualifications)
- The reduction of the adult skills budget with fewer certificates awarded to post-19 year olds.

Teacher/examiner safeguards to be strengthened

Teachers will continue to have access to confidential assessment materials but Awarding Organisations must further strengthen the safeguards to mitigate the risks.

That is the main message from Ofqual's latest [consultation](#) following a [review](#) of the risks and benefits of teacher involvement in exam material.

Whilst current rules on confidentiality and malpractice are demanding, these latest proposals aim to build on current Awarding Organisation practices.

Ofqual believes there are clear benefits to allowing teachers to be involved in the assessment process, but is proposing that Awarding Organisations strengthen:

- effective mitigation of the risks of using teachers in the development of assessment materials, for example by making sure no teacher knows whether any assessments they have developed will be used, and by keeping records of conflicts of interest
- support for teachers to “do the right thing”, through appropriate training and contractual obligations
- the detection of malpractice, for example by sampling the work of teachers who have written exam papers to look for any unusual patterns of response.

Ofqual expects Awarding Organisations to have made significant progress in terms of the proposed safeguards by summer 2019, with fully revised approaches by 2020, for both general and vocational regulated qualifications.

FE Commissioner admits “on-going challenges” for Area Reviews

The Further Education Commissioner has outlined the challenges in implementing Area Reviews, despite some successful restructuring of post-16 institutions that have taken place.

In his [2016-17 annual report](#), Richard Atkins reports on his activity and on the health of the FE college sector, and provides some statistics on the Area Review process to date.

Between September 2015 and March 2017, all 332 colleges in England were visited, and 37 Area Reviews took place. It was agreed that 133 colleges would remain as standalone organisations. In the same period, only 23 General FE Colleges and 5 sixth-form college mergers took place, though further applications for restructuring are currently being processed.

According to the report, challenges in implementing Area Reviews include difficulties in reaching agreement on mergers at either senior leader or college governor level, and banks' risk appetite for lending to organisations looking to merge.

Colleges opting to remain standalone in the course of the Area Review process, are reminded to continue to challenge their income assumptions. The report warns that this is particularly relevant in areas where colleges are competing to grow income.

[Area Reviews](#) of the post-16 education and training sector, first announced in 2015, aimed to create more financially stable and efficient providers and improved collaboration across different types of institution.

Basic Digital Skills for adults

A [consultation](#) on the way we understand and measure the basic digital skills required for adults has been launched.

The consultation focuses on the basic digital skills adults need to thrive in a digital world, providing easier access to work and education. It proposes a framework which has been remodelled to reflect the significant changes in technology that have taken place since it was originally created.

The Department for Education plans to use the updated Framework as the basis for developing new national standards for basic digital skills.

Vocational routes into Higher Education

A new report *Vocation, vocation, vocation* examines the current role vocational education plays in preparing young people for Higher Education (HE).

This research from the Social Market Foundation identifies some of the existing challenges associated with the vocational route into HE including qualification design, prior attainment and current progression routes. The report draws on insights from universities to assess how the vocational route is currently working and looks to identify what more can be done to ensure student success.

The report also considers the risks and opportunities of forthcoming changes to post-16 skills policies particularly around the implementation of T Levels and how universities may incorporate them into future admissions processes.

Six new opportunity areas announced

The Education Secretary has announced the expansion of the [opportunity areas programme](#) to a further six areas across England.

Bradford, Doncaster, Fenland/East Cambridgeshire, Hastings, Ipswich and Stoke-on-Trent have been added to the list of existing areas targeted for additional DfE funding to address issues of social mobility.

Opportunity areas are given prioritised access to a wide support package to help young people from nursery right through to starting work, aiming to raise education standards in disadvantaged areas.

The Last Word

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

The review of Functional Skills is coming into the final straights, but there is still plenty to do. We await the next technical consultation from Ofqual and the devil is very much in the detail. Issues about the restricted use of dictionaries, spell checkers and calculators have yet to be firmed up, the weighting of different components and the relationship between context, complexity and underpinning skills and knowledge have yet to be fully established, awarding arrangements that ensure a strong comparability between exam boards have yet to be finalised. Once the detail is sorted, the pressure will be on the exam boards to develop and submit their assessments for approval by the regulator, all for first delivery in September 2019. It is amazing to think that the original timeline was for first teaching this September – the delay of one year has proven essential, and an important reminder of how long it takes to develop and implement a qualification.

When the Functional Maths and English qualifications are finally introduced many are hoping there will be a review of the GCSE re-sit policy and that people who failed to achieve GCSE Maths and English at 16 will have the option of taking Functional Skills instead of re-sitting the GCSEs as part of their post-16 studies. Hopefully, the practical approach of Functional Skills will present students with something that feels more relevant to life and work, with a practical approach to learning that

supports them in developing the skills they need.

The introduction of the Advanced Maths Premium shows the government's commitment to raise the numbers of people studying A Levels and other Level 3 maths qualifications post 16. Although A Level Maths is already the most popular A Level subject by far, the UK remains one of the few education systems which allows large numbers of young people to drop the study of mathematics at 16. Arguments as to why this is a bad thing for individuals and the economy were clearly set out in Professor [Adrian Smith's review](#) of Post-16 Mathematics Education.

The new premium offers financial rewards to colleges and schools which increase the number of students on roll taking Level 3 maths qualifications. They receive extra funds for every Level 3 maths qualification taken above a baseline - calculated from numbers of maths qualifications taken by students in previous years in the same institution. How this will work is set out in DfE guidance which, at times, looks like an exercise in functional mathematics in its own right. The following extract has been tweaked so it ends with a question:

- *a provider has 30 students studying A level maths, 10 students studying core maths and 5 students studying AS level statistics in the baseline*

- *in academic year 2018 to 2019, they have 25 students studying A level maths, 15 students studying core maths and 10 students studying AS level statistics*
- *the number of students studying AS level statistics has increased by 5, the number of students studying A level maths has decreased by 5 and the number of students studying core maths has also increased by 5*
- *by netting off the decrease against the increase, how many students would attract the premium in 2019 to 2020?*

Of course this isn't a great exam question. The language is dense and uses phrases like 'netting off' so that it is more a test of comprehension than of mathematical skill. The maths required is that of a most basic calculation: $50 - 45 = 5$. But it is a 'real life' context, and one which will be unfamiliar to most students, both of which are requirements for Level 2 Functional Maths.

There are some more difficult maths questions we could ask. For example, will this incentive lead to an increase in uptake of A Level Maths or in Core Maths, or both? Will the incentive compensate for the risk that the new 9-1 GCSE will result in fewer people wanting to go on to study Maths at A Level – the argument here is that, as fewer students will achieve the top grade 9, fewer will feel encouraged to go on and study more maths.

We could also wonder what the effect might be on other subjects and qualifications which are not incentivised

in this way, including the Applied General qualifications covered in the report *Vocation, Vocation, Vocation* which stresses the importance of these qualifications. And the recent *Ofqual report on the qualification market* shows there is already a narrowing in the number and range of subjects taken in what it describes as the EBacc effect. A further maths question would be how much impact the premium could have on the overall budgets of schools and colleges - the Sixth Form Colleges Association was sceptical arguing that the extra funding would have "little impact on the vast majority" of students. This echoes the point made by the Further Education Commissioner that some colleges remain financially precarious despite the area review process.

Colleges seeking new funding pots might be tempted to respond to the DfE's invitation to express interest in the phased roll out of T Level qualifications from 2020. However, the scale of the opportunity looks modest. The DfE has wisely referred to this first year as a small scale, transition year. In order to take part, a college has "to identify and recruit a suitable cohort, with a minimum of 10 students aged 16 to 18 in each T level cohort". Ten students might be the minimum but this still smacks of a very cautious approach. Given what we know about how much is involved in developing and then implementing a relatively straightforward qualification like Functional Skills, the DfE has sensibly put a premium on quality over quantity.