

Review of Controlled Assessment in GCSEs



June 2013

Ofqual/13/5291

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1. Executive summary

Controlled assessment was introduced for GCSEs in 2009. It aimed to address concerns about the reliability and authenticity of coursework in GCSEs by improving the controls around setting tasks, the way work was produced by students and in the marking and moderation by teachers and exam boards.

In some subjects there is a high proportion of controlled assessment. Despite best efforts, since its introduction, controlled assessment has proved to be problematic in many ways, and some of those problems are intractable: it does not always assess those aspects of a subject it was put in place to assess, it can divert time from teaching and learning and be arduous to organise and deliver, and too often it is delivered inconsistently.

Nevertheless, there is, of course, an important place for non-exam assessment. Written exams cannot assess practical knowledge and skills in science, or performance in music or physical education. But when alternative assessment is used, it should be reliable and valid. We should also not assume that all alternatives to written exams should be marked by teachers. Alternatives to written exams should be designed so that they deliver reliable and valid outcomes for all students.

In 2010 we became aware of concerns from schools about the manageability of controlled assessment. We commissioned a survey of schools to gather evidence on the nature and scale of the problems. We found a mixed picture, with controlled assessment seen as more of a problem in some subjects than others. There were also manageability issues, but while some schools reported struggling with the practical issues of operating controlled assessment, others reported that they had put in place systems to manage it.

There were suggestions that controlled assessment should be removed, and replaced with written exams. We did not see this as a viable option – many GCSEs include practical elements that cannot be assessed in a written exam. Making changes to controlled assessment in syllabuses that are already up and running is also not inconsequential. It would mean schools and colleges having to change their teaching and learning for courses students had already started.

In the light of this feedback, we considered it appropriate to review controlled assessment from first principles. We wanted to know whether controlled assessment was providing a valid assessment of elements that cannot be assessed in a written exam, and whether it was helping to differentiate between students. We reviewed the controlled assessment in each subject to consider these questions.

We found that many GCSEs include content that cannot be assessed in a written exam. But in some cases what is actually being assessed by controlled assessment

is not what was intended. So, for example, students taking GCSEs in foreign languages are supposed to be tested on their writing in those foreign languages. But the way in which the writing controlled assessment in foreign languages operates encourages students to prepare a piece of writing and memorise it. The writing task then becomes predominantly a test of memory skills.

We also found that the more specific controls that were intended to provide greater consistency for students and teachers have not always been effective. Exam board guidance can never be absolutely precise to cover every eventuality. It is, therefore, open to interpretation. For example, where students are allowed to use their notes but not an essay plan to produce the final piece of work, it is difficult in practice to agree on the difference between notes and an essay plan. This places a considerable responsibility on teachers to interpret the guidance, and has led to concerns that they may be interpreting guidance too strictly or too loosely compared with other schools.

Based on the findings from this review, we have developed a set of principles to apply in reformed GCSE qualifications:

1. Non-exam assessment should be used only when it is the only valid way to assess essential elements of the subject.
2. Non-exam assessment must strike a balance between the valid assessment of essential knowledge and skills, sound assessment practice and manageability.
3. Any non-exam assessment arrangements should be designed to fit the requirements of the particular subject, including the relative weighting of written exams and other components.
4. Non-exam assessment should be designed so that the qualification is not easily distorted by external pressures.

We will use these principles when designing qualifications in the future. We will talk with exam boards and assessment experts about the best arrangements for future non-exam assessment, to make sure the right balance is struck between validity, manageability and true learning in any new qualifications.

2. Introduction

A brief history of GCSE internal assessment

GCSE coursework was introduced in 1988 as a means of assessing elements that are difficult to assess through written exam papers, such as performing, writing extended essays and carrying out practical experiments. Teacher-marked assessments were introduced as a means of assessing students' competence in practical and performance tasks, where marking can only be carried out as the student is completing the set task. The exam boards introduced moderation processes to check that teachers were applying the mark scheme for each coursework task appropriately and consistently.

In 2005 the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) carried out a review of GCSE coursework arrangements.¹ This review was made in response to a number of issues raised by stakeholders about coursework, including concerns about marking reliability, authenticity of the work, teaching practices and the impact of coursework on available teaching time.

QCA concluded that the benefits of coursework outweigh the drawbacks, but, nonetheless, it identified a number of ways in which coursework could be improved, including:

- improved guidance for teachers on setting coursework tasks;
- clearer guidelines explaining the limits of permitted help and advice from teachers and parents;
- more checks by exam boards on schools' internal standardisation of marks, and better guidance on standardisation;
- a subject-by-subject evaluation of the weighting and value of coursework assessment, to inform better-designed coursework in future specifications.

An independent report by Dr Ian Colwill² in 2007 investigated the findings of this review further and made a number of recommendations related to how: “the current controls relating to internal assessment in GCSE... should be developed and supplemented to promote greater public confidence across all subjects that internal controlled assessment is valid, reliable and manageable” (Colwill, 2007).

¹ QCA (2005) *A Review of GCE and GCSE Coursework Arrangements*.

² QCA (2007) *Improving GCSE: Internal and Controlled Assessment*.

QCA used Dr Colwill's recommendations to develop criteria for new GCSE qualifications, for first teaching in 2009, including the replacement of coursework by controlled assessment.

Controlled assessment is a form of teacher-supervised internal assessment that aims to encourage a more integrated approach to teaching, learning and assessment, and to enable teachers to confirm that students have carried out the work themselves. The controlled assessment regulations specify that:

- Each GCSE subject is placed in one of three groups with a specified percentage of controlled assessment: 0 per cent, 25 per cent or 60 per cent.
- There are three levels of control, or supervision, in controlled assessment (limited, medium and high), applied at three stages in the assessment: task setting, task taking and task marking.³

For example, a high level of control in task setting could, in some subjects, mean that teachers must select controlled assessment tasks from a number of comparable tasks provided by the exam board. If the regulations require limited control in task taking, this could mean that the work of individual students may be informed by working with other students, but that students must provide their own individual response to the task.

At each stage of the assessment, QCA aimed to set the level of control as high as possible, to ensure the authenticity of students' work, while also attempting to make the assessments manageable in practical terms for students, teachers and exam boards.

In 2010, QCA's regulatory functions were transferred to the newly established Ofqual. These functions included regulating qualifications and maintaining the standards of public exams and assessment, which includes monitoring and assuring the effectiveness of controlled assessment.

The scale of the GCSE exam system

In August 2012 the five exam boards serving England, Wales and Northern Ireland issued results for over 5 million GCSE qualifications. Across GCSEs and A levels there were over 25 million separate exam scripts and items of coursework submitted by students and marked by over 57,500 examiners and moderators.

³ QCA (2008) *GCSE Controlled Assessment Regulations*. The regulations currently in force were published by us in 2011. See www.ofqual.gov.uk/downloads/category/73-gcse-controlled-assessment-regulations (accessed 10th June 2013).

GCSEs are currently assessed in several ways: by written exams set and marked by the exam boards, or by controlled assessment. The amount of controlled assessment varies by subject. It can be 25 per cent, 60 per cent, or there may be none at all.

Most GCSE qualifications include some teacher-marked controlled assessment. We note that any shift away from teacher-marked assessment towards externally marked assessment could have a significant impact on the volume of marking that exam boards must deliver. This would have implications for the cost of GCSE qualifications for schools, and for the resources that exam boards would need to put in place.

Scope of this report

In 2011 we responded to concerns being expressed by stakeholders, and we commissioned a research project⁴ to review the experiences of stakeholders (including over 800 teachers) in delivering controlled assessment, and identify any improvements that stakeholders believed would reduce the problems and/or enhance the benefits of controlled assessment. One of the outcomes of this research was that many teachers told us they found the guidance on controlled assessment from the exam boards inconsistent and confusing. As a result of this, we required exam boards to review their guidance, and a revised version of *Instructions for Conducting Controlled Assessments*⁵ was published by the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) in September 2012.

In 2012, in the light of on-going concerns expressed to us by schools and colleges about the practicalities of delivering controlled assessment, we decided a more comprehensive review was needed to understand further any issues related to controlled assessment, and to assess its usefulness.

This report specifically addresses the context of GCSE qualifications in England, and how they are used by students, schools and the government. GCSEs are high-stakes qualifications, and the current accountability regime puts particular pressures on some subjects, such as English and maths. We know that this has profoundly affected the way in which GCSE subjects are taught and the way in which schools manage internal assessment. We know that these pressures exist and we have seen the extent to which they can distort qualification outcomes. Therefore, our principles reflect this wider context in which GCSE qualifications are taught and assessed.

⁴ Ipsos MORI (2011) *Evaluation of the Introduction of Controlled Assessment*. See: www.ofqual.gov.uk/files/2011-10-07-evaluation-of-the-introduction-of-controlled-assessment.pdf (accessed 10th June 2013).

⁵ Joint Council for Qualifications (2012) *Instructions for Conducting Controlled Assessments 2012 to 2013*. See www.wjec.co.uk/uploads/publications/8680.pdf (accessed 10th June 2013).

Controlled assessment was designed to address a number of concerns about the manageability and authenticity of GCSE coursework. When QCA devised controlled assessment it did so as a curriculum agency charged with promoting good teaching and learning and, at the same time, as a regulator responsible for ensuring valid and effective assessment. Controlled assessment put more responsibility onto schools to make sure internally assessed work was carried out in accordance with the rules. But in some cases, the proportion of controlled assessment has been too high, and the high levels of control, intended to improve authenticity, have resulted in more teaching to the task and narrower teaching and learning.

The precise arrangements for controlled assessment vary by subject. There are three levels of control – high, medium and low – and these apply to each of task setting, task taking and task marking. For example, the writing controlled assessment for GCSE English has high levels of control specified for task setting and task taking, but medium control specified for task marking. In practice, this means that the exam board must set the task, the students must be supervised while they carry out the task, and teachers mark the task.

Many subjects, particularly those we focus on in this report, involve mainly written controlled assessments in which students complete written assessment tasks, set either by the exam board or by the teacher. Candidates complete the assessment tasks in controlled conditions at a time and place determined by their school. The tasks are marked by a teacher, with samples of marked work being checked by exam board moderators, who can change the marks to bring them in line with national standards.

Controlled assessment can also involve laboratory tasks in science subjects, fieldwork in geography, speaking and listening in English and modern foreign languages, creating a piece of artwork in art and design, and performance in drama, music and physical education. In some cases in these subjects there is no evidence of the candidate's performance available for moderators to check.

Shortly after controlled assessment was implemented, a number of issues with its delivery were brought to our attention by schools.⁶ We commissioned research from Ipsos MORI⁷ to understand the scale and nature of the concerns about controlled assessment.

⁶ In this report we use the term “schools” to describe schools, colleges and all other providers of GCSE courses.

⁷ Ipsos MORI (2011) *Evaluation of the Introduction of Controlled Assessment*. See www.ofqual.gov.uk/files/2011-10-07-evaluation-of-the-introduction-of-controlled-assessment.pdf (accessed 10th June 2013).

This research found that teachers were broadly supportive of the idea of controlled assessment, and thought that it complemented written exams by assessing a different set of skills. But teachers were divided in their views about how easy it had been to implement. The biggest drawbacks were seen to be logistical – how to accommodate students who miss assessments or need extra time, scheduling difficulties, and demands on schools' ICT resources. These issues were exacerbated by what teachers saw as unclear guidance from the exam boards. Teachers were also concerned about the loss of teaching time as a result of time spent doing controlled assessment.

As a result of this research, in 2011 we required exam boards to review their controlled assessment guidance for schools to make it clearer and less open to varying interpretations. However, teachers still generally find the guidance ambiguous, with scope for each school to interpret it differently. This is particularly an issue for high-stakes subjects such as those included in the English Baccalaureate⁸, where teachers can find themselves under pressure to maximise student performance.

GCSEs are being reformed for 2015. We will set design rules for those reformed GCSEs, including rules about the amount and nature of any non-exam assessment. To inform this, and review the use of controlled assessment in current GCSEs, we have drawn together evidence from a number of different sources, including our own research (such as our investigation into GCSE English awarding in 2012), exam boards' research, and views of teachers, other stakeholders and subject experts. We have focused this report largely on the subjects in the first phase of reform – English language, English literature, mathematics, the sciences, geography and history.

⁸ The English Baccalaureate is a performance measure. See <http://education.gov.uk/schools/teachingandlearning/qualifications/englishbac/a0075975/the-english-baccalaureate> (accessed on 1st June 2013).

3. General findings

This section summarises the findings from our review of GCSE subjects that currently include controlled assessment. Many of these findings apply particularly to written controlled assessment. In section 4 we consider the findings in relation to the English suite, mathematics, the sciences, geography, history and modern foreign languages.

1. Many GCSE subjects include subject-specific elements that cannot be effectively assessed through written exams, but in reality the need for higher levels of control means that this is not always what is assessed by the current controlled assessment.

These elements include:

- practical knowledge and skills, such as conducting experiments in science, carrying out fieldwork in geography, and performing in subjects such as music and dance;
- aspects that need to be assessed over a sustained period of time, such as carrying out independent research and planning in subjects such as history and geography, or drafting and redrafting written work in subjects such as English.

If this content is integral to the subject and contributes to overall performance, there is a case for non-exam assessment, provided this can be done in a valid and manageable way.

One of the primary aims of controlled assessment was to place internal assessment under greater control and, in doing so, provide more assurance of authenticity. Our research in 2011 suggested that these controls appear to give teachers greater confidence that students' work is their own, but we find it is often at the cost of limiting the ability to test the kinds of skills that can be assessed only in a low-control environment. So, for example, in English literature the controls placed on the length of time that a student can spend on a written controlled assessment task, combined with controls on the amount of feedback on drafts that teachers can provide to students, limit the opportunity for students to practise the skills of drafting and redrafting a piece of extended written work.

In some cases, controlled assessment has removed the opportunity for students to reflect and improve on the work they have done, and this was seen to have reduced the scope for controlled assessment tasks to challenge and stretch the most able students.

Subject experts found that the time restrictions placed on many controlled assessment tasks stifles students' creativity because there is limited time available for reflection. They also considered controlled assessment to be less effective than

coursework in encouraging personal responses or innovative methods of work. This was attributed in part to the high levels of control of task setting in many subjects, which limit the opportunity for teachers and students to set their own tasks, and encourage formulaic responses.

In some subjects, the activities of research, planning and carrying out investigations are not directly assessed, even though those skills are meant to be assessed. As in coursework previously, it is the end product of these activities that is actually assessed. In most of the subjects included in section 4, the research/planning/investigation element has a low or medium level of control whereas writing up has a high level of control. This clearer separation of activities has highlighted the fact that the process skills can only ever be assessed indirectly.

In some subjects, this has also meant that controlled assessment assesses skills that were not intended to be assessed. Over a quarter (27 per cent) of the respondents to our call for evidence considered controlled assessment to be a measure of a student's ability to memorise and reproduce pre-prepared work under exam conditions.

2. In some respects, controlled assessment has proved to be a better form of internal assessment than coursework, but the tighter controls have led to greater inconsistency in the way controls are implemented and the way work is carried out.

There were mixed views about whether controlled assessment provides greater assurance about the authenticity of the work. Thirty-nine per cent of the respondents to our call for evidence believed that controlled assessment gives them more confidence in the authenticity of students' work – that is, confidence that the work produced is students' own work, without inappropriate levels of guidance from teachers or parents. However, half of these respondents added some kind of caveat to their response, and 21 per cent of the respondents believed that controlled assessment has reduced their confidence in this authenticity.

The controlled assessment regulations that were put in place by the QCA in 2008 were intended to minimise the risk that each exam board would interpret the regulations differently. We had similar intentions in 2011 when we required exam boards to review their guidance on controlled assessment: we wanted the guidelines to be as clear as possible to ensure that schools implemented the rules consistently.

This has proved to be very difficult in practice. Teachers told us that they believe there is still scope for each school to interpret the guidance differently, and this lack of consistent practice means that students are not on a "level playing field".

Guidance can never definitively cover all eventualities. We need to leave sufficient room in our regulations for exam boards to take the best approach for their own

subject specification, and exam boards need to allow teachers some scope to make sure the tasks are appropriate for their students and manageable within the school. But this can lead to greater ambiguity, as illustrated by the following quote from March 2012, posted by a teacher on the TES website's forum.

I can see that the exam boards are trying to provide clear guidance, but what are we expected to do with advice such as: 'Can CA sessions have starters and plenaries? No – there can be no teacher intervention once a CA session has started.'

Here's an attempt at clarity, at providing the uniformity of conditions needed for fairness. But hang on – in the real world what does this mean? How do we decide when a CA session starts? Does this mean we can't speak to them before the lesson? In the dining hall? At the end of whatever lesson they happen to have before English? In the corridor? Although I can see the thinking behind CA, it does not work in practice, and it's too important for students, teachers, schools, communities to tolerate this kind of looseness.⁹

In our investigation into GCSE English awarding in 2012, we saw that some teachers were anxious about whether they were interpreting guidance correctly. And we found a growing suspicion and mistrust between schools, with evidence that some schools apply the controlled assessment guidelines differently from others.

These issues are all the greater in high-stakes subjects, such as those included in the English Baccalaureate, or where the subject has a particular role in accountability measures and floor targets, and particularly in those subjects with 60 per cent controlled assessment where the marks scored make up most of a student's overall marks for the qualification.

3. Controlled assessment presents practical difficulties for schools to manage and has had a negative impact on a number of aspects of teaching and learning.

Controlled assessment was intended to encourage a more integrated approach to teaching, learning and assessment. However, of those respondents to our call for evidence who commented on the breadth and depth of subject content teaching, 73 per cent thought controlled assessment does not encourage breadth and depth in teaching. For example, the narrowness of tasks encourages superficial coverage of subject content, learning by rote and teaching to the task. And a disproportionate

⁹ Quoted in *GCSE English 2012*, Ofqual, November 2012 (page 54). See www.ofqual.gov.uk/files/2012-11-02-gcse-english-final-report-and-appendices.pdf (accessed 10th June 2013).

amount of teaching time is taken up with either preparing students for the task or taking the task, which leaves little or no time for expanding subject knowledge.

In some subjects, controlled assessment gives teachers greater autonomy in setting or adapting tasks than they previously had in coursework. This freedom was intended to give teachers greater scope to set tasks that would engage their students.

Our evidence from looking at controlled assessment work in history and geography, and from submissions from exam boards, shows that the quality of a controlled assessment task set by the teacher has a significant impact on students' ability to perform well in the task. The subject experts noted that the exam boards' lack of control over task setting "represents a risk that some tasks may not be fit for purpose."

Controlled assessment also presents practical difficulties for many schools. Our research in 2011 highlighted many concerns around the manageability of controlled assessment. In responding to our call for evidence, teachers noted that they have to plan controlled assessment tasks around the availability of accommodation and ICT facilities, and that in science "sometimes the equipment is not available to complete the task."

Teachers responding to our call for evidence told us that controlled assessment has generated significant additional burdens for them in terms of the time that they are required to spend on task setting, and also task marking. This is particularly an issue for subjects with written controlled assessment and/or with controlled assessment that is worth 60 per cent of the qualification.

4. In some subjects there is very little to distinguish between the controlled assessment task and the exam.

The introduction of control has, in many subjects, brought internal assessment much closer to a written exam. Of those respondents to our call for evidence who commented on this, 25 per cent thought written exams assess most skills that controlled assessment was intended to assess. This varies by subject, and in some cases is an unintended consequence of the change from coursework to controlled assessment.

In practical subjects, controlled assessment tends to be very similar to the coursework it replaced; but in subjects that previously had written coursework, controlled assessment is often very different because of the high levels of control introduced. Whereas, previously, students completed the work largely in their own time, with support from teachers, they now complete much of the controlled assessment in a supervised classroom environment, not unlike the exam hall.

Subject experts noted that, in art and design, similarities in the nature of the controlled assessment task and that of the exam meant that controlled assessment was being used by schools as “an opportunity to practise for the exam” rather than as an opportunity to demonstrate different skills from those that are assessed through an exam.

Where there is 60 per cent controlled assessment, it is highly likely there will be duplication between controlled assessment and written exams. This is not good assessment practice, particularly if it was not intended. But in a system where the only options were 25 per cent and 60 per cent controlled assessment, there were compromises to be made in some subjects where written exams could not cover enough in only 40 per cent of the assessment.

In considering the most appropriate balance of non-exam assessment and exam, the idea of different models for different subjects was supported by both the subject experts and other stakeholders. Controlled assessment at 25 per cent or 60 per cent does not reflect the needs of most subjects; rather it reflects an idea, from when controlled assessment was introduced, that there should be a common framework for all subjects. In the future we will make sure the proportion of non-exam assessment is determined by the needs of the subject.

5. Controlled assessment does not generally differentiate well between students of different abilities.

One of the purposes of controlled assessment is to differentiate between students on the basis of their ability in a subject. Written exams and other assessments should reward students across the full ability range in a way that reflects their performance. We have, therefore, considered to what extent controlled assessment achieves sufficient differentiation, and to what extent the outcomes from controlled assessment do and should relate to the outcomes from the written exams.

In the GCSEs that included coursework, students tended to score higher marks in their coursework than in the written exams. Marks for coursework were not as well spread out as marks on the written exams, and this meant that the job of differentiating between students across the grade range fell more to the written papers than to controlled assessment.

This has long been an issue with coursework but was not always apparent to teachers and students because students did not receive their component grades. In our report into GCSE English awarding in 2012¹⁰, we noted the imbalance in the

¹⁰ Ofqual (2012) *GCSE English 2012*. See www.ofqual.gov.uk/files/2012-11-02-gcse-english-final-report-and-appendices.pdf (accessed 10th June 2013).

previous GCSE English qualifications. In AQA qualifications, for example, 71 per cent of foundation-tier students achieved a grade C on their speaking and listening coursework and 56 per cent achieved a grade C on their writing coursework, but only 5 per cent achieved a grade C on the written papers. In the new GCSE English qualification, this imbalance is less but it has not been eliminated.

The reason for this imbalance is that in coursework and controlled assessment there tends to be a “bunching” of marks towards the higher end of the available marks, whereas on written papers the marks are more spread out across the full mark range.

Data from GCSEs in geography and French shows a similar picture. Students tend to score more highly in controlled assessment and so the controlled assessment units do not differentiate between students as well as the written papers.

If coursework or controlled assessment is assessing different elements from the written papers, then we might expect some students to do better in one element than in another. But in a well-designed and suitably demanding qualification, we would not expect to see students generally doing much better on one part of it.

The fact that controlled assessment marks are generally skewed towards the higher marks suggests that it is not always sufficiently demanding for high-ability students. Seventy-two per cent of the respondents to our call for evidence said they do not believe that controlled assessment is stretching and challenging students. They consider that controlled assessment is not appropriate for the less able (because the tasks can be seen as intimidating) and does not challenge the most able (often because the parameters of the tasks are seen as too restrictive).

4. Subject-specific findings

Our review included all subjects that currently have some form of controlled assessment. This section focuses mainly on those subjects that will be part of the first phase of new qualifications for teaching from 2015.

This section, therefore, includes the following subject areas:

- English, English language and English literature
- science subjects
- geography
- history
- modern foreign languages.

The above subjects currently include controlled assessment that is largely written, although there are exceptions for practical work in the sciences, and speaking and listening in English.

For each subject area we have considered whether the current controlled assessment provides a valid and reliable assessment of the elements that cannot be assessed in written exams, drawing on evidence expressed by teachers and other stakeholders, from our subject expert reviews in each subject area, and the views of exam boards.

4.1 English, English language and English literature

The table below provides a summary of the current controlled assessment arrangements in GCSEs in English, English language and English literature. All three qualifications include written controlled assessment. In addition, English and English language also include speaking and listening controlled assessment.

		English	English language	English literature
Weighting of controlled assessment		60%	60%	25%
Skills assessed by controlled assessment		20% speaking and listening (S&L) 20% reading 20% writing	20% S&L 20% study of spoken language 20% writing and study of written language	Study of linked texts
Level of control specified	Task setting	S&L – limited Reading – high Writing – high	S&L – limited Spoken – high Writing – high	High
	Task taking	High	High	Research and planning – limited Analysis and evaluation – high
	Task marking	Medium	Medium	Medium

Respondents to our call for evidence believe non-exam assessment of English subjects is necessary for the assessment of writing skills such as drafting and redrafting, as well as the assessment of speaking and listening. This view was supported by our subject expert reviews, which concluded that:

- If they are to form part of the GCSE qualification, the skills required in the speaking and listening components of English and English language can only be “appropriately and effectively assessed” through non-exam assessment.
- In English literature, only non-exam assessment allows students to “plan and produce extended structured literary responses to the texts they have studied”.

Further to this point, AQA¹¹ notes that wider reading in English literature, currently included in the draft National Curriculum programme of study, “cannot be satisfactorily assessed in a written paper”.

Our own research¹² showed that 79 per cent of English literature teachers believe that controlled assessment assesses different skills from those that final exams are able to test (Ipsos MORI, 2011).

Cambridge Assessment cites the views of teachers, employers and higher education institutions¹³ that the omission of internal assessment from GCSE English subjects “could lead to a narrowing of skills being assessed (and consequently taught in the classroom) with students having fewer opportunities to show the breadth of their competence, including critical and interpretative skills.” (Cambridge Assessment, 2013).

The consensus view appears to be that English subjects include a number of elements that cannot be effectively assessed through written exams. For example, Cambridge Assessment’s report quotes the English and Media Centre’s argument that “single end of course written tests risk being considerably less reliable and robust than mixed forms of assessment and cannot give sufficient opportunities to assess two years of learning in an effective and comprehensive way.” (English and Media Centre, 2012).¹⁴

However, the current written controlled assessments do not provide a valid assessment. In our call for evidence and the subject expert reviews it was noted that the time limits and restrictions of the current controlled assessment limits the scope for students to develop redrafting and evaluation skills. This view was echoed by an English teacher in a focus group convened by the AQA Centre for Education Research and Policy¹⁵:

¹¹ AQA submission to us, received 3rd May 2013.

¹² Ipsos MORI (2011) *Evaluation of the Introduction of Controlled Assessment*.

¹³ Cambridge Assessment (2013) *Justification for the Inclusion of Coursework in the Assessment Model for Reformed GCSE English Language and English Literature Qualifications*.

¹⁴ English and Media Centre (2012) *Ten Statements of Principle on Curriculum Change*, www.englishandmedia.co.uk/EMC_statements_curriculum_change.pdf (accessed 9th April 2013).

¹⁵ AQA Centre for Education Research and Policy (2011a) *Findings from Focus Groups: Is Controlled Assessment Working?*

That moment when the child says “What about this?” and you’re actually not allowed to say. They’re missing out on a learning opportunity that they could take forward and perhaps develop. (AQA Centre for Education Research and Policy, 2011a).

Our 2011 research found that 86 per cent of English teachers, 80 per cent of English language teachers and 76 per cent of English literature teachers thought that controlled assessment gives a fair assessment of student performance, compared with an average of 75 per cent of teachers across the nine subjects surveyed.

However, we also know that marks for controlled assessment units tend to be skewed towards the higher marks, and our investigation into GCSE English awarding in 2012¹⁶ found evidence of widespread over-marking of controlled assessment. The large teacher-marked controlled assessment component of English and English language GCSEs made them particularly susceptible to pressures such as those from performance tables and other accountability systems.

In English and English language in summer 2012, many students had already sat the written paper and received a result that meant the schools could then calculate the number of marks on the controlled assessment that would give students a particular grade for the whole qualification, basing their calculations on assumed (January) controlled assessment grade boundaries. The patterns of controlled assessment marks suggest strongly that this assumption influenced the way that many teachers administered or marked controlled assessment. One teacher explained that he “used the controlled assessment and exam marks achieved in January to work out what students needed to do [in June].”¹⁷

Making the current GCSEs linear will address this problem to a large extent. However, there will always be a risk of distortion of results when a high-stakes qualification such as GCSE English includes a high proportion of internal assessment.

This problem is particularly acute in speaking and listening controlled assessment because there is no evidence of speaking and listening performance for senior examiners to review. Our subject expert review noted “a context of long term, upward grade drift in speaking and listening.” And our investigation into GCSE English in 2012 identified widespread over-marking in speaking and listening (as well as writing) controlled assessment.

¹⁶ Ofqual (2012) *GCSE English 2012*. See www.ofqual.gov.uk/files/2012-11-02-gcse-english-final-report-and-appendices.pdf (accessed 10th June 2013).

¹⁷ School interviews carried out by Capgemini as part of our investigation.

For these reasons, in April 2013, we launched a consultation on changes to GCSEs in English and English language¹⁸ whereby speaking and listening marks would no longer count towards a student's overall grade. Instead a new requirement was proposed for exam boards to report speaking and listening achievement separately on the GCSE certificate.

¹⁸ Ofqual (2013) *Consultation on the Removal of Speaking and Listening Assessment from GCSE English and GCSE English Language*. Available at: <http://comment.ofqual.gov.uk/speaking-and-listening> (accessed 10th June 2013).

4.2 Science subjects

The table below provides a summary of the current controlled assessment arrangements in the science suite.

		Biology, chemistry, physics, additional science	Science
Weighting of controlled assessment		25%	25%
Skills assessed by controlled assessment		Develop hypotheses and plan practical ways to test them, including risk assessment Manage risks when carrying out practical work Collect, process, analyse and interpret primary and secondary data, including the use of appropriate technology to draw evidence-based conclusions Review methodology to assess fitness for purpose Review hypotheses in light of outcomes	Plan practical ways to answer scientific questions and test hypotheses Devise appropriate methods for collection of numerical and other data Assess and manage risks when carrying out practical work Collect, process, analyse and interpret primary and secondary data, including the use of appropriate technology Draw evidence-based conclusions Evaluate methods of data collection and the quality of the resulting data
Level of control specified	Task setting	High	High
	Task taking	Research/data collection – limited Analysis and evaluation of findings – high	Research/data collection – limited Analysis and evaluation of findings – high
	Task marking	Medium	Medium

Our subject experts concluded that “written work alone cannot reliably assess all the skills candidates are asked to demonstrate within the qualification.”

The Gatsby Charitable Foundation and the Wellcome Trust have made clear their view that “studying science without practical experimental work is like studying

literature without reading books.” (Gatsby Foundation and Wellcome Trust, 2013).¹⁹ This is supported by the '59 Club, whose view is that “it is vitally important that pupils continue to engage in good quality practical work.”²⁰ The Gatsby Foundation and the Wellcome Trust make the case that one of the purposes of GCSE science qualifications is to assure “employers and universities that the holder has competence in technical and other investigative skills as well as theoretical knowledge and understanding”.

This view is supported by Pearson Edexcel, who told us that many stakeholders in further education and higher education want to “see students progressing from GCSE with a broad set of scientific skills developed to an appropriate level”.²¹

However, these same stakeholders also believe that the current controlled assessment fails to encourage good quality practical work in schools. According to the Gatsby Foundation and the Wellcome Trust, controlled assessment “makes teachers focus on a narrow range of externally set practicals as they hone students to do well in what constitutes 25 per cent of their final grade”. The '59 Club's view is that current arrangements are “time consuming, prescriptive and repetitive... [and] encourage ‘teaching to the test’”. And Pearson Edexcel told us that “at present GCSE Science qualifications do not seek to assess practical competency because they assess practical skills indirectly through controlled assessments.”

Responses to our call for evidence suggest that controlled assessment enables students to demonstrate their knowledge via practical tasks that give a clear indication of whether students have a good understanding of scientific theory. However, respondents believe controlled assessment has limited breadth of study because schools are too focused on preparing students for the tasks. There is also a risk that students are learning responses to tasks by rote, and that this is having an impact on their wider understanding and appreciation of the subject. Some schools are doing a great deal of preparatory work ahead of the tasks, and so passing the tasks becomes a test of students' memory rather than their scientific knowledge or practical skills. As a result, controlled assessment is less valid and not always fair to all students.

The subject expert review found that, in a number of areas, controlled assessment fails to assess effectively the skills that it was intended to assess, and in some cases

¹⁹ Gatsby Foundation and Wellcome Trust (March 2013) *Assessment of Practical Work in Science*.

²⁰ The '59 Club consists of the heads of science of 33 independent schools across England.

²¹ Pearson Edexcel submission to us, received 26th April 2013.

students are credited for skills that were not intended to be part of the assessment. For example:

- In biology and chemistry it was noted that although practical work is required in order to collect primary data, there is no requirement for teachers to record information about the practical performance skills of candidates.
- Collection of secondary data is often of limited relevance to the investigation and tends to demonstrate students' access to internet and library resources, rather than their understanding and data skills.
- Where controlled assessment materials are released early to teachers, there is scope for students to practise similar investigations to those in the controlled assessment. As a result, the assessment mainly tests recall of previous experience. This is exacerbated in biology, where it was noted that there are a limited number of potential topics that are suitable for an investigation, making them fairly predictable.
- Extended writing requirements within controlled assessment tasks assess students on their literacy rather than their scientific skills.
- In physics it was noted that although the limited controls placed on the processes of planning and obtaining evidence better mirror the "real" scientific process, students who are well organised and/or have good teamwork skills tend to receive higher marks, which means that, in reality, different skills are being rewarded.
- Pearson Edexcel observed that a student who collects "messy" data faces a more demanding task to process the data. A student who collects clean data (often as part of a group, perhaps led by a more-able student) faces a more straightforward processing task.²²

Concerns were raised about the impact of the high-stakes nature of GCSE science qualifications on the validity of the controlled assessment. The subject expert review of GCSE science observed that "there is unreasonable pressure on teachers to ensure that the teacher-mediated and teacher-marked components yield the highest mark possible. In spite of the levels of control there will always be some teachers who are tempted (or pressured) to push the boundaries of what is allowed, in ways in which they would not do for a written examination."

²² Pearson Edexcel submission to us, received 26th April 2013.

This view is supported by the Gatsby Foundation and the Wellcome Trust, who state that “students are internally assessed... by their teachers who, under our high stakes system, are under enormous pressure to give students maximum marks.” Oxford Cambridge and RSA Examinations (OCR) also believes that “pressures from the wider educational system are distorting the intended outcomes of the current GCSE science controlled assessment units”²³, and AQA argues for practical work to be excluded from GCSE assessment “because there is likely to be poor discrimination and because of the risk of malpractice (whether intentional or otherwise).”²⁴

Across the evidence that we reviewed, concern was expressed that without assessment, practical science skills would not be taught in schools. The '59 Club paper observes that “... absence of assessment [of practical skills] might well lead to the decline of practical work in some schools.” A number of schools within the '59 Club moved from GCSE schemes to IGCSE schemes, which use written papers to assess practical skills. “All seemed happier [with IGCSEs] but there were still some concerns that a purely paper-based assessment needed to be backed up by some requirement on schools to actually carry out practical work.”

To address this point, both AQA and Pearson Edexcel support the inclusion of practical experiments in GCSE science. They recommend that the marks would not count towards a student’s final grade but would be recognised through separate reporting on the qualification certificate.

²³ OCR submission to us, received 26th April 2013.

²⁴ AQA submission to us, received 3rd May 2013.

4.3 Geography

The table below provides a summary of the current controlled assessment arrangements in geography.

Weighting of controlled assessment		25%
Skills assessed by controlled assessment		Identifying, analysing and evaluating geographical questions and issues Establishing appropriate sequences of investigation incorporating geographical skills, including enquiry skills Extracting and interpreting information from a range of different sources Evaluating methods of collecting, presenting and analysing evidence, and the validity and limitations of evidence and conclusions
Level of control specified	Task setting	High
	Task taking	Research/data collection – limited Analysis and evaluation – high
	Task marking	Medium

From the evidence gathered, there appears to be a consensus that the ability to carry out fieldwork is an “essential skill”²⁵ for students studying GCSE geography. Pearson Edexcel reports²⁶ a view from its own stakeholder research that “field investigations” can only be meaningful once subject knowledge foundations have been “laid”, that is, at AS/A level and beyond, but notes that this is an opinion held by a minority of stakeholders.

The Geographical Association “regards fieldwork as an essential element of a worthwhile geographical education”²⁷, and OCR states that “fieldwork is necessary to ensure students can undertake specific geographical tasks including making observations, measurement techniques and using equipment in the field.”²⁸ OCR

²⁵ AQA submission to us, received 3rd May 2013.

²⁶ Pearson Edexcel submission to us, received 26th April 2013.

²⁷ Letter to us dated 20th April 2013.

²⁸ OCR submission to us, received 26th April 2013.

also notes that GCSE fieldwork provides students with fieldwork skills that are essential for more advanced geographical study at AS/A level and higher education.

However, concerns have been expressed that controlled assessment does not always enable students to develop and demonstrate the full range of geographical enquiry skills. The experts who reviewed GCSE geography assessment materials and student work noted the limitations of school fieldwork exercises: “even the most capable students were unlikely to have time during their one day in the field to experiment with alternative approaches to data collection.” Respondents to our call for evidence said the nature of controlled assessment means that students are not able to reflect on, further analyse and evaluate their work in the controlled assessment tasks.

This view was supported by our subject experts. They found that the ability of students to collect primary data was not assessed through controlled assessment because the practicalities of a large group doing fieldwork means that data is collected as a group and then shared. In addition, since all the data usually has to be collected in one day’s work, this leaves little time for students to do anything other than “what they are told”.

The nature of controlled assessment tasks can also encourage teachers to set fieldwork tasks that focus on enabling students to fulfil the requirements of the mark scheme, rather than enabling them to learn the full range of geographical enquiry skills. A geography teacher noted that in controlled assessment “... you’re not teaching them to be a good geographer, you’re teaching them to pass it.” (AQA Centre for Education Research and Policy, 2011).²⁹

Although there is broad agreement that fieldwork skills are an essential part of GCSE geography, there is far less agreement about whether it is possible to assess these skills in a valid way, either through internal assessment or through an exam. There is also no common view among the exam boards.

AQA believes that “... a written paper is not a valid form of assessment... experience at A level of external assessment of fieldwork would suggest that the assessment is liable to become too predictable and that it does not guarantee that students have actually worked in the field.”

The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) told us that “outcomes of practical components of e.g. science specifications and geography show that there is little discrimination [between students].”

²⁹ AQA Centre for Education Research and Policy (2011) *Findings from Focus Groups: Is Controlled Assessment Working?*

Pearson Edexcel believes that, “the ability to undertake practical enquiry skills (fieldwork) is an essential learning outcome for geography that cannot be assessed adequately through exams and/or be reliably assessed through internal assessment.... [however] certain geographical enquiry skills such as data manipulation, interpretation and analysis can be assessed through exams.”

And in OCR’s view, “removing the assessment of [fieldwork] skills would lead to a narrowing of the subject and reduction in demand.”

The two learned associations also hold different points of view. The Geographical Association, “regards terminal written examinations as an inadequate tool for assessing the broad range of complex skills involved in fieldwork design, data collection and interpretation and fieldwork evaluation...”³⁰, whereas the Royal Geographical Society has put forward two possible alternatives to internal assessment of coursework skills: “a fieldwork/geographical skills exam paper” similar to that currently used in geography IGCSEs and/or awarding students additional marks in their final exams “for use of relevant first hand fieldwork exemplars”.³¹

Most geography teachers appear to believe that non-exam assessment is a valid means of assessing fieldwork skills. In 2011, 77 per cent of geography teachers said that they think controlled assessment gives a fair assessment of student performance, compared with an average of 75 per cent of teachers across the nine subjects surveyed (Ipsos MORI, 2011).³² However, we also know that marks for controlled assessment tend to be skewed towards the higher end and that the differentiation between students of different abilities tends to take place in the written exams.

Our own research found evidence that controlled assessment does not provide a valid means of assessing all geographical enquiry skills. In part, this is because the task is largely in the hands of the school. The students’ choice of topic is restricted to the fieldwork opportunities provided by their school, which means that students are not always able to demonstrate the skills that controlled assessment is supposed to assess, such as “identifying geographical questions and issues” and “establishing appropriate sequences of investigation”. As a result, the assessment may not always be fair to all students.

³⁰ Letter to us dated 20th April 2013.

³¹ Letter to us dated 16th April 2013.

³² Ipsos MORI (2011) *Evaluation of the Introduction of Controlled Assessment*.

Our subject experts noted that controlled assessment unintentionally assesses the ability of the school to plan the fieldwork and contextualise the task in a way that is suitable to meet the assessment criteria.

4.4 History

The table below provides a summary of the current controlled assessment arrangements in history.

Weighting of controlled assessment		25%
Skills assessed by controlled assessment		Historical enquiry Historical interpretation
Level of control specified	Task setting	High
	Task taking	Research/data collection – limited Analysis and evaluation - high
	Task marking	Medium

There appears to be consensus that non-exam assessment in history enables students to develop valuable research and planning skills that could not be assessed in an exam. OCR states that, “developing independent research and enquiry skills is essential for those studying history.... Were history specifications not to include practical application of research and enquiry skills they would be lacking a large and important area of the subject. Demand would be reduced and there would be an unacceptable narrowing of what the subject is about.”³³

Responses to our call for evidence stated that controlled assessment allows students to produce work of a high quality (similar to that produced by AS students) and assesses skills such as research and planning, analysis, and evaluation and enquiry skills that cannot be assessed via external assessment. However, respondents also expressed some concerns that the controlled assessment tasks are too prescriptive and this inhibits students from demonstrating the depth of their knowledge.

Our subject experts reported that controlled assessment provides, “an ideal opportunity for candidates to test interpretations and develop independent learning skills and research skills as well as developing source analysis skills as a natural part of the process”. They also thought that the controlled assessment approach “allows for a more ‘realistic’ look at the work of the historians”.

However, a number of history teachers who participated in our controlled assessment survey believed that controlled assessment results in a loss of teaching and learning

³³ OCR submission to us, received 26th April 2013.

time. Twenty-four per cent of history teachers thought that this is the single biggest drawback to controlled assessment.³⁴

As was the case with geography, it was noted that GCSE history provides students with the historical enquiry skills they need for further study. OCR observed that, “at the History stakeholder forum the extent to which students are under-prepared in [independent research] skills comes up again and again” and stated that the removal of controlled assessment “will make the qualification a less effective preparation for further study than it currently is”.

AQA notes “the existence of a variety of different specifications”³⁵ with most exam boards having more than one specification for GCSE history. It suggests that the need for internal assessment varies depending on the specification content. For example, one of AQA’s specifications includes local history, for which it considers internal assessment to be essential. However, AQA believes that the content of its other GCSE history specification could be assessed through a written exam.

History as a subject does not appear to present any specific challenges with regard to valid assessment. Seventy-four per cent of the history teachers surveyed by Ipsos MORI said that they thought controlled assessment gives a fair assessment of student performance (Ipsos MORI, 2011c), broadly in line with the average of 75 per cent of teachers across the nine subjects surveyed. However, we also know that marks for controlled assessment tend to be skewed towards the higher end and that students tend to score more highly in controlled assessment than in written papers.

Our comparison of coursework and controlled assessment found that controlled assessment provides the most effective test of the students’ historical communication because they have to write at greater length in a considered fashion. Controlled assessment also encourages students to demonstrate their historical enquiry skills in using sources to investigate a historical question in a way that is not possible with the constraints of the written papers.

However, our subject experts did note the difficulty of striking the right balance between “allowing candidates and centres a degree of freedom to choose, plan, research and write up” extended pieces of writing without “allowing too many opportunities for plagiarism, writing frames and too much teacher input”.

³⁴ Ipsos MORI (2011) *Evaluation of the Introduction of Controlled Assessment*.

³⁵ AQA submission to us, received 3rd May 2013.

4.5 Modern foreign languages (MFL)

The table below provides a summary of the current controlled assessment arrangements in modern foreign languages (MFL).

Weighting of controlled assessment		60%
Skills assessed by controlled assessment		Minimum 50% must relate to communication in speech and communication in writing Maximum 10% may relate to understanding spoken language and/or understanding written language
Level of control specified	Task setting	Limited
	Task taking	Communicate in speech – medium Communicate in writing - high
	Task marking	Communicate in speech – medium Communicate in writing - high

OCR has advised us of emerging findings from a piece of research currently underway by Cambridge Assessment into controlled assessment in MFL that suggest controlled assessment:

- motivates independent learning by enabling students to learn and use language in the context of conducting their own research;
- can have a positive impact on teaching via greater teacher involvement in assessment resource/task development;
- allows assessment of the spontaneous production of language that goes beyond a pre-learned pattern of response;
- allows students to demonstrate their understanding of grammatical patterns and be able to re-use it in different contexts;
- encourages students to move beyond pre-learned materials in order to generate their own language development, supporting higher language development;
- allows the integration of reading, writing, speaking and listening skills.

However, the evidence we have gathered suggests that, in practice, controlled assessment in MFL is having a detrimental effect on teaching and learning. When we carried out our first research into the experiences of teachers in implementing

controlled assessment³⁶, we found that the implementation of controlled assessment raised more concerns in MFL than in other subjects. For example:

- Five per cent of French teachers said that a drawback of controlled assessment is that students are less well-prepared for A level, significantly higher than the average of 1 per cent of respondents who said the same across the nine subjects surveyed.
- Fifty-five per cent of French teachers said that they thought controlled assessment gives a fair assessment of student performance, compared with an average of 75 per cent of respondents who said the same across the nine subjects surveyed.
- Fifty-seven per cent of French teachers said controlled assessment is good at assessing an appropriate breadth of skills, compared with an average of just over three quarters (76 per cent) across teachers of all subjects.

We, therefore, commissioned a further piece of research to explore in more detail the causes and nature of these concerns³⁷, which found that:

- Most MFL teachers consider that the available teaching time is reduced and learning is narrowed by controlled assessment.
- Students' skills development is skewed towards those language skills covered by controlled assessment (speaking and writing), which means reading and listening skills suffer.
- The controlled assessment tasks test memory rather than language skills. Students often learn their written and oral material by rote, and simply reproduce it during the task taking. As one teacher observed, "... it's not testing their ability to write in French, it's testing their ability to learn French."

The final point was supported by respondents to our call for evidence, who stated that students can pass controlled assessment tasks by memorising chunks of text to reproduce either in written or spoken form. This limits the scope of language learning, fails to challenge students and also means they are not being equipped with skills that prepare them for further language study.

An MFL teacher taking part in a focus group convened by the AQA Centre for Education Research and Policy said that "Children are faced four times in Key Stage

³⁶ Ipsos MORI (2011) *Evaluation of the Introduction of Controlled Assessment*.

³⁷ Ipsos MORI (2012) *Controlled Assessment in Modern Foreign Languages*.

4 with a rote learning task... because if anybody imagines that children are going to produce pieces of writing, or oral work, off the top of their head, they are living in complete cloud cuckoo land” (AQA Centre for Education Research and Policy, 2011c).³⁸

The same point was made by our subject experts, who found that “weaker learners... may rote learn chunks of language they do not necessarily understand with a detrimental effect on pronunciation and intonation” and also found evidence of “over reliance on learning large chunks of language during the preparation time that they then write out during task taking at the expense of creativity and spontaneity.”

This practice has a detrimental effect on students’ preparation for A level studies. A teacher interviewed as part of our research into controlled assessment in MFL told us: “We’ve got a really good set of GCSE results, but as we go through to AS, we’ve got grammar gaps, which are quite evident because they [the students] haven’t learned the grammar behind the concept, they’ve just learned what they need to get through the controlled assessment.”

This view is supported by Pearson Edexcel, reporting that A level teachers have stated that the rote learning applied in GCSE controlled assessment has resulted in students being less well prepared for A level studies.³⁹ Pearson Edexcel goes on to note that “teachers would not disagree that they do teach to the test but cite various mitigating factors including... the overwhelming pressure to maximise student performance for their school’s standing in league tables.”

As described above, controlled assessment is proving a valid test of students’ memory but not a valid test of their language skills. In the case of speaking tasks, which are subject to a medium level of control in task taking, there is also concern that students may be learning text that is not their own: “[They might be] getting someone else to write their stuff for them, then they’ll learn it off by heart... But because they’re not with me I cannot prove that so I have to take their word for it. And they might be lying through their back teeth to me or they might be telling me the truth, I just don’t know.” (Ipsos MORI, 2012).⁴⁰

³⁸ AQA Centre for Education Research and Policy (2011) *Findings from Focus Groups: Is Controlled Assessment Working?*

³⁹ Pearson Edexcel submission to us, received 26th April 2013. Evidence taken from Pearson Teacher Panel survey results and stakeholder interviews.

⁴⁰ Ipsos MORI (2012) *Controlled Assessment in Modern Foreign Languages*.

Exam boards are varied in their responses on the validity of controlled assessment in MFL:

- AQA notes that controlled assessment of writing has become “to some extent a memory text” and recommends that an unseen piece of writing, with students having access to dictionaries, “would be a more valid form of assessment”.
- Pearson Edexcel recommends 100 per cent external assessment “as all skills (reading, listening, speaking and writing) can be validly assessed externally”.
- OCR suggests that the main issue with controlled assessment in MFL is the high weighting it carries (60 per cent), and it recommends only spoken language being assessed via controlled assessment.

5. Principles for non-exam assessment

Controlled assessment in its current format has not worked as intended. We will want to talk with exam boards and assessment experts about the best future arrangements for non-exam assessment, to strike the balance to ensure the right trade-offs between validity, manageability and true learning.

There are many aspects of current GCSEs that cannot be assessed by written exams. Some form of alternative assessment, therefore, has a role to play in many subjects – to assess practical work in science, artefacts in art and design, and performance in music, drama and physical education, and so on. We are not suggesting that this sort of non-exam assessment should stop.

But in other subjects the case for alternative assessment is less clear. Currently in some subjects controlled assessment is used for elements that are suited to a longer piece of work than a written exam can accommodate. Or it might be used to assess the same elements as the exam but without the pressure of exam conditions, perhaps because those elements are seen as critical to the subject. In an ideal world, qualifications could include these sorts of non-exam assessment. But we have seen that the accountability pressures in the system mean that, in some subjects, this sort of controlled assessment can become distorted and, therefore, less valid.

Our role is to balance the views from teachers, subject experts and exam boards, alongside what we know about other pressures in the system and taking account of good assessment practice. Non-exam assessment, where it is part of qualifications, should be valid and fair to all students.

Some subjects will include elements that are deemed essential and cannot be assessed through exams, but which cannot be reliably assessed through other methods of assessment. It is important that these skills are taught and are part of the curriculum requirements, but that does not always mean they should be assessed as part of GCSE qualifications. The quality of teaching of these elements by schools could be monitored and assured through other assurance mechanisms.

We have developed the following principles that we will use for reformed GCSE qualifications to determine where we should use alternative assessment for elements that cannot be assessed by written exams.

1. Non-exam assessment should only be used when it is the only valid way to assess the elements of the subject that are essential to that subject.
2. Where non-exam assessment is used, careful consideration should be given to the elements that are essential in each subject and the balance between the valid assessment of those elements, sound assessment practice, confidence in the assessment arrangements and manageability for schools. A distinction

should be drawn between the elements essential to the subject that can be assessed and those that should be taught but cannot be formally assessed appropriately or would present significant practical difficulties for schools.

3. Non-exam assessment arrangements, including the weighting assigned to any non-exam assessment, should be designed to fit the requirements of the subject. Currently, all subjects have to fit within a model of 0 per cent, 25 per cent or 60 per cent controlled assessment. There are no good assessment reasons for such a neat solution. In future there should be no expectation that a single set of arrangements will suit all the subjects. Controls should be used to ensure that we can be confident that what is assessed is what was intended to be assessed. The relative weighting of different types of assessments should also be considered on a subject-by-subject basis. There should be no pre-determined limits applied beyond the requirements of sound assessment practice.
4. Non-exam assessment should be designed so that external pressures do not easily distort the qualification. Where alternative assessment takes place in very high-stakes qualifications that are key parts of the accountability system, achievement in the internally assessed element should be reported separately. In these, and in other qualifications where non-exam assessment contributes to the overall grade, we will require exam boards to put in place robust arrangements to make sure the marks are valid and reliable.

Current GCSEs

The principles for new GCSEs could also be applied to existing GCSEs. In the light of the work that would be involved, the associated cost, and the time it would take to introduce changes, we do not intend to make changes to controlled assessment in current GCSEs beyond those that we have already consulted on for GCSE English and GCSE English language.

However, it may be useful to see how the principles might operate in the current GCSEs. We have used these principles to categorise subjects into three groups.

Group A: subjects where there is, and will always need to be, some form of non-exam assessment, although the proportion of the latter may need to be revisited. In some cases, the decision is less clear cut and hinges on whether the elements being assessed are such integral parts of the subjects that a grade excluding them would not be a valid measure.

Group B: subjects that currently include controlled assessment but appear to be suitable for exam-only assessment, or where we might consider whether there is any benefit in reporting achievement separately in non-exam assessment.

Group C: subjects assessed entirely by written exam, and where there is no evidence of any resulting problems.

The subjects that fall into each of these groups are shown in the table below.

Group A	Group B	Group C
Art and design	Business	Classical Greek
Dance	Citizenship	Economics
Design and technology	Classical studies	Latin
Drama	English/English language	Law
Engineering	English literature	Maths
Expressive arts	History	Psychology
Geography	Humanities	Religious studies
Home economics	Health and social care	Sociology
Media studies	ICT	
Modern foreign languages	Statistics	
Music		
Physical education		
Sciences		

(note: small entry subjects are not included)

We have considered whether we should require changes to the current GCSEs in the light of this review and our findings. We recently consulted on making changes to GCSEs in English and English language⁴¹ so that speaking and listening no longer contributes to the overall grade and is reported separately. We have done that in response to particular problems identified as part of our investigation into GCSE English grading in summer 2012.

⁴¹ Ofqual (2012) *Consultation on the Removal of Speaking and Listening Assessment from GCSE English and GCSE English Language*. See <http://comment.ofqual.gov.uk/closed-consultations> (accessed 10th June 2013).

We are not proposing to make changes to any of the other current GCSEs because there is already a major reform programme in place, with reformed GCSEs in English language, English literature, mathematics, the sciences, geography and history planned for September 2015, and reformed GCSEs for other subjects from 2016 onwards.

Reformed GCSEs

We are currently consulting on some of the arrangements for the reformed GCSEs for teaching from 2015.⁴² We have used these principles to propose arrangements for non-exam assessment in each of the reformed GCSEs, based on the curriculum requirements set out by the Department for Education.

⁴² Ofqual (2013) *GCSE Reform Consultation – June 2013*. See <http://comment.ofqual.gov.uk/gcse-reform-june-2013> (accessed 10th June 2013).

6. Methodology

Our primary aim in carrying out this review was to establish the extent to which controlled assessment in practice is fulfilling its objective of assessing subject-related knowledge and skills effectively. However, we have also sought to understand the extent to which controlled assessment may have an impact on student learning, in ways that were not anticipated when controlled assessment was first developed in 2009.

Our review of controlled assessment was several separate pieces of work.

Our sources included research that we had commissioned, such as the 2011 report *Evaluation of the Introduction of Controlled Assessment* and the follow-up report *Controlled Assessment in Modern Foreign Languages* that was published in July 2012. We also considered research from other organisations, such as Cambridge Assessment's *Controlled Assessment in GCSE: Effects of Implementation in Six Specifications* and the Centre for Education Research and Policy's *Findings from Focus Groups: Is Controlled Assessment Working?*

We carried out a review by subject experts of controlled assessment arrangements, to establish the extent to which controlled assessments, across the range of GCSE subjects, achieve their purpose of assessing the relevant subject skills. We commissioned 64 subject experts to review the controlled assessment regulations and a sample of subject specifications (taken from across the five exam boards in England, Wales and Northern Ireland) and report their findings. The subject experts attended workshops to explore further the purpose of controlled assessment in their subjects.

We put out a call for evidence in 2012 to solicit the views of a range of stakeholders on the effectiveness of controlled assessment in assessing subject-related skills and the impact of controlled assessment on student learning. We received 510 responses to our call for evidence, of which 458 came from schools and colleges.

We then invited a number of those respondents to workshops so we could explore their views in greater depth. Thirty-two respondents to our call for evidence attended these workshops. Annex 1 provides further details of the analysis of responses to our call for evidence.

Since our call for evidence closed in July 2012, we have received a number of further submissions from organisations including the Gatsby Foundation, the Wellcome Trust, the Geographical Association, the Royal Geographical Society and the '59 Club. We have taken account of all the submissions we received in developing our principles, and have referenced relevant submissions in the section of this report on subject-specific findings.

We have also included in this review preliminary evidence from a comparison of coursework in 2009 and controlled assessment in 2011. This research reviewed a sample of work from a number of students across four subjects (geography, history, food technology and music). The aim of this comparative research was to understand in detail student work/performance outcomes as a result of the introduction of controlled assessment in comparison with coursework and external assessment. Annex 2 provides more details of this work.

In autumn 2012 we carried out a detailed investigation to understand why there was unexpected variability in the results for GCSEs in English and English language results in some schools in 2012. We published a report in November 2012⁴³ that describes the factors behind this variability and sets out the actions we would take based on those findings. Our findings and conclusions that were in relation to controlled assessment have also informed this review.

In April 2013 we wrote to the five exam boards that provide GCSE qualifications (AQA, CCEA, OCR, Pearson Edexcel and WJEC) to invite feedback on our draft findings and draft principles for controlled assessment, and to request the details of any specific research or evidence that had informed the exam boards' views.

We received responses from four of the five exam boards, and we have referenced their views and the evidence they provided to us in the section of this report on subject-specific findings.

⁴³ Ofqual (2012) *GCSE English 2012*. See www.ofqual.gov.uk/files/2012-11-02-gcse-english-final-report-and-appendices.pdf (accessed 10th June 2013).

7. Next steps

Some of the issues raised in this review cannot be addressed without changing the qualifications. For example, to address concerns about where the elements intended to be assessed are not assessed in practice, exam boards would need to make changes to the assessment. It may be possible to address other issues, in relation to guidance to schools, for the current qualifications. We have already made changes to the moderation of GCSE English controlled assessment, following our investigation into awarding in summer 2012, and we are consulting on a proposal to remove the speaking and listening marks from contributing to the overall grade in GCSEs in English and English language and to report achievement separately.

This report focuses mainly on those subjects that are in the first phase of GCSE reform (with the addition of modern foreign languages). The findings from this review have informed our proposals for the reformed qualifications.⁴⁴ We will also use these findings to inform future phases of the GCSE reform.

We will consider with exam boards how best to design alternative assessment arrangements where written exams cannot assess the full range of skills in a subject. We will want to review and consider the feedback on the proposals in the consultation on reformed GCSEs as part of this.

We will also review the controls in current GCSEs with 60 per cent controlled assessment, to make sure the marks are as valid and reliable as they can be. We will also consider whether there are any arrangements in other qualifications, for example in A levels, that we should review in the light of this work.

⁴⁴ Ofqual (2013) *GCSE Reform Consultation – June 2013*. See <http://comment.ofqual.gov.uk/gcse-reform-june-2013> (accessed 10th June 2013).

Annex 1: Analysis of responses to Ofqual’s call for evidence on controlled assessment

As part of our controlled assessment review, we conducted a call for evidence to better understand the views of a range of stakeholders. This report presents the analysis of the responses.

Our call for evidence was open from 15th June 2012 to 12th July 2012. It was open to anyone to respond, and respondents were invited to provide comments via our website, or by email or letter, on the following areas:

- the effectiveness of controlled assessment in assessing subject-related skills;
- any particular comments or concerns about issues they had encountered regarding the impact of controlled assessment on teaching and learning.

Respondents were asked to provide background details, including the subject(s) they were responding in relation to. They were also asked to provide details of the context in which these opinions had been formed (for example, personal experience; feedback or comments from colleagues, teachers and students; feedback from the public; specific research or evidence).

Respondents were invited to comment as they wished. The results show that some responded partly, others answered all the questions and some provided a single response addressed to some or all the questions.

The full list of questions, and the number of responses received for each, is included in appendix A.

This analysis presents a thematic review of the responses. Responses were coded using a three-tier approach: by question and stakeholders, then by emerging matter and subject-specific issues (using a grounded-theory method).

Responses received

We received a total of 510 responses. Most responses (458) were received from schools or colleges, or teachers who worked in a school or college. Figure 1 shows a breakdown of the respondents.

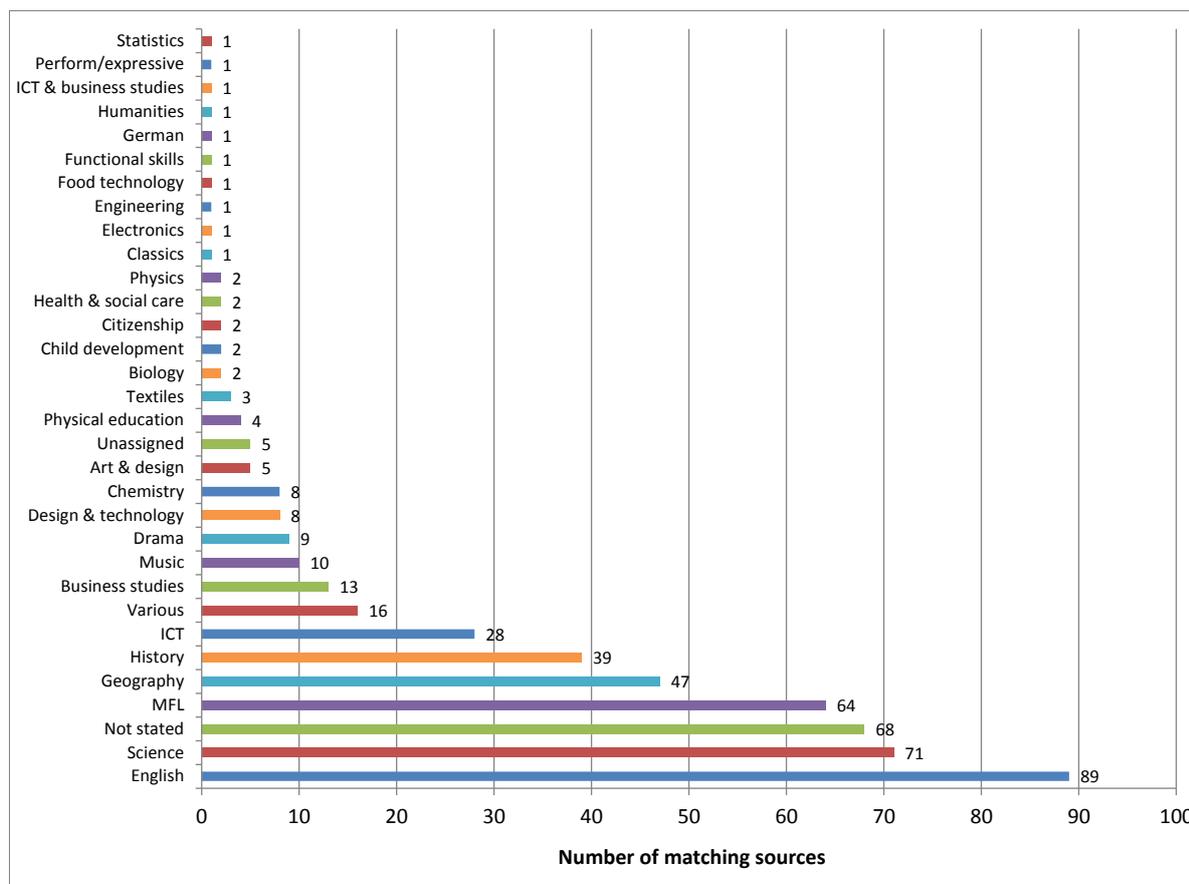
Figure 1: Breakdown of the respondents to our call for evidence on controlled assessment

Type of organisation	Number of responses
School/college	458
Training provider	4
Higher education institute	3
Awarding organisation ⁴⁵	17
Parent/carer	2
Representative/interest group ⁴⁶	10
Government body	3
Other, including the general public	12
Anonymous	1

Figure 2, below, shows the number of responses by subject. A relatively high proportion of the responses related to English, science, modern foreign languages, geography, history and ICT.

⁴⁵ Awarding organisations or examiners working for an awarding organisation.

⁴⁶ These groups were placed in different categories, for example Trade Union or special interest/subject organisation, government, employer, private training provider or consultant. They have been gathered together because each individual group was too small to report.

Figure 2: Number of responses by subject

This was an open call for evidence, so no controls were placed on subject or organisation type. The evidence, therefore, comes from a self-selecting sample and it may be the case that respondents are those with the strongest views about controlled assessment. The skew towards certain subjects and the possible biases in the views expressed must be kept in mind when interpreting the findings.

Assessment of subject-related skills

The respondents' views were that students learn and are tested on a wide range of skills through controlled assessment.

- Just over a third (34 per cent) of the respondents believed that controlled assessment allows students to demonstrate project or research-related skills, that is: research, evaluation, analysis, synthesis of finding, selection of evidence skills and problem-solving skills. This was particularly the case in the sciences, history, geography and business studies.
- A quarter (25 per cent) of the respondents believed that controlled assessment allows students to recall and apply subject knowledge and understanding.

- Eighteen per cent of the respondents believed that controlled assessment allows students to demonstrate writing skills in timed conditions. However, they also noted disadvantages associated with the control aspect, which restrict the skills of drafting a piece, limit creativity and restrict the ability to demonstrate writing constructively at length. This was particularly the case in English and history.
- Several respondents believed that controlled assessment has removed the opportunity for students to practise the skill of redrafting and crafting a piece of writing to improve their work, which means they are not well prepared for A level. Linked to this, some respondents expressed a view that controlled assessment has removed the opportunity for students to reflect and improve on the work they have done.
- Twenty-seven per cent of the respondents believed that controlled assessment is a measure of a student's ability to memorise and reproduce pre-prepared work under exam conditions, that is, it tests recall skills rather than subject-related skills. This was particularly the case in modern foreign languages and English. There is also a strong indication from the responses that many students have been taught to do well in the controlled assessment rather than to apply their knowledge of the subject independently.
- Fourteen per cent of the respondents indicated that teachers offer students unlimited help in preparing for tasks, and in class they often conduct almost identical tasks to the actual/real tasks. The respondents believed that this had a negative impact on the students' ability to demonstrate their knowledge, skills and understanding, and that this is particularly the case for high-ability students who have little opportunity to demonstrate their higher-level skills.

Respondents from the awarding organisations were most concerned that controlled assessment, as it stands, is not meeting its stated purposes. Two particular concerns were noted.

- The fact that students cannot set their own task is seen to be limiting.
- There was a concern that controlled assessment is not always testing the skills it sets out to assess. In some subjects, students who have good memory skills are at an advantage, and this is especially true in modern foreign languages.

The responses indicate that many respondents believe that controlled assessment allows students to demonstrate subject-specific skills and the skills that the external exams are unable to assess. But the controlled elements of controlled assessment have led to unintended behaviours and practices such as memorising answers, and teaching and practising to complete the assessment rather than teaching a broader understanding and learning the skills and knowledge in order to complete the task.

Nearly two thirds of the respondents (65 per cent) believed that controlled assessment has not improved the assessment of subject-related skills. The most common reasons mentioned for this are: the fact that some skills are simply not taught or learned, the reduction in teaching time as a result of controlled assessment, and the view that there is little difference between controlled assessment (or coursework) and written exams in terms of the skills assessed.

However, just over a third (35 per cent) of the respondents believe that controlled assessment has improved the assessment of subject-related skills. Reasons for this include the view that controlled assessment better reflects the students' own ability and that a wide range of skills are learned and assessed. Students have to work independently without input from the teacher. They are unable to spend hours redrafting and perfecting their work, as was the case with coursework. However, some respondents noted this is only the case if controlled assessment is carried out in line with the specified requirements.

Awarding organisation views are that:

- Controlled assessment enables students to use a wider variety of sources than is possible in external assessment.
- Controlled assessment allows time for individual research, analysis and evaluation – students need to understand what they have discovered to be able to write about it in a controlled environment.
- While some respondents were not certain that controlled assessment has improved the assessment of subject-related skills, they noted that it does assess generic skills that cannot be assessed via written exams.
- Controlled assessment, in some subjects, allows students to demonstrate skills practically, rather than just writing about them.
- In some subjects, controlled assessment is very different from the coursework it replaced. Controlled assessment that assesses practical work is very similar to the previous coursework, whereas, for written tasks, a much more significant change has been seen.

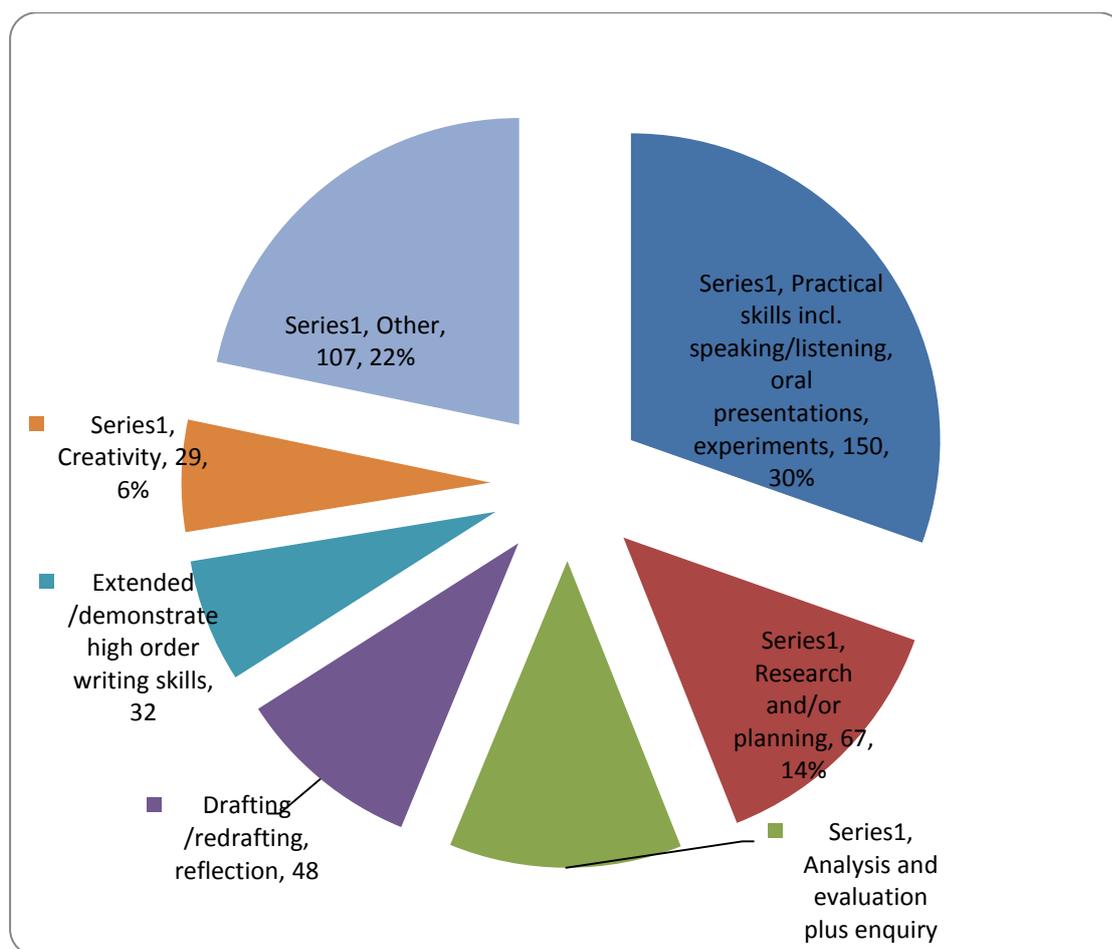
The value of controlled assessment and coursework should be to give students the opportunity to learn and demonstrate knowledge and skills that are difficult to assess in a written exam. Respondents believe it is doing this to varying degrees across the range of subjects, but in some subjects the tighter controls mean that controlled assessment is very similar to a written exam.

What cannot be assessed through written exams?

Controlled assessment, like coursework previously, was intended to assess skills that the written exams are unable to test.

Twenty-five per cent of the respondents believe that the written exams could assess most of the skills intended to be assessed via controlled assessment. For those who expressed the opposite view, figure 3, below, shows those skills that respondents most commonly believed cannot be assessed through written exams.

Figure 3: Respondents' views of skills that cannot be assessed by written exams



Respondents with an interest in some subject areas tended to focus on particular skills, for example:

- For the sciences, comments generally related to the difficulties of assessing practical skills.
- For English, comments related to drafting/redrafting/reflection and creativity.
- For history and geography, there was reference to research and planning, analysis, evaluation and enquiry skills.

- For modern foreign languages, comments related to the lack of spontaneous speaking/writing.

The evidence reviewed so far highlights that controlled assessment, in terms of assessing subject-specific skills, varies by subject; external assessment is unable to assess all relevant skills for all subjects.

Authenticity

One of the aims of controlled assessment was to ensure the authenticity of the students' work. Over a third (39 per cent) of the respondents believe that controlled assessment has improved confidence in the authenticity of students' work. However, 16 per cent believe there has been no effect, and 21 per cent believe that controlled assessment provides less confidence in the authenticity of students' work.

Controlled assessment in practice

Generally, controlled assessment differs from coursework in two ways: the tasks are more closely prescribed, and tighter controls must be in place when students complete the work.

We asked the respondents for their views on the effectiveness and efficiency of the different elements of controlled assessment, including task type, task setting, task taking, and task marking.

Task type

Over half (57 per cent) of the respondents were positive about the types of tasks used in controlled assessment. Generally, this was because they believed that:

- The task type is related to the subject and gives students the opportunity to develop their knowledge and skills and apply these to a particular situation.
- Awarding organisations specify more closely what is to be done, which gives teachers the chance to focus on what they want to teach and vary lessons according to the subject(s).
- Having set tasks gives greater comparability in terms of demand for schools or colleges, and better guidance for teachers in providing a more structured frame and context for undertaking the tasks.

However, 43 per cent of the respondents expressed opposite views, as follows:

- Different tasks each year were seen to have increased the workload of teachers, who have to write new schemes of work each year. There was also a view that this means teachers cannot improve their teaching of particular tasks.

- There was seen to be less potential for creativity as a result of tasks being set by awarding organisations, and some respondents perceived task type to be restrictive, narrow, dull and uninspiring.
- There was also a view that the current tasks are not suitable for the full ability range – they are not challenging for the most able and not accessible enough for lower ability candidates.

Task setting

There were mixed views around the effectiveness and efficiency of task setting, and this is similar across subjects. Controlled assessment tasks are generally set by the awarding organisation, although there is scope in some subjects for schools or colleges to contextualise the task.

Thirty-nine per cent of the respondents believe task setting is “good”, “clear” and/or “fine”. In their view, arrangements around task setting offer a degree of autonomy that allows schools and teachers to differentiate tasks by students' ability and interests.

However, nearly half (45 per cent) of the respondents raised the following concerns around task setting:

- Exemplar materials/guidance provided by the awarding organisations is not always fit-for-purpose.
- Controlled assessment tasks do not allow for much originality.
- There is too much variation between schools, where rules are not always understood or consistently applied.
- Tasks are released too late to allow for effective curriculum planning.

Task taking

Respondents were the most negative about the management of the task taking – when students actually complete their controlled assessment work. Unlike coursework, controlled assessment generally has to be done in school time, with supervision. Seventy-six per cent of the respondents believe this is problematic, for reasons that are largely around manageability.

- Task taking is seen as onerous in that it places significant demands on teaching and learning time, as well as on resources such as accommodation and ICT.
- Task taking is seen as logistically difficult when students are absent for one or more sessions and then have to catch up on missed time.

- Task taking is also seen to pose additional challenges for schools or colleges trying to address the needs of students with disabilities, who require additional computers, extra time, rooms and/or scribes for each controlled assessment session.

Task marking

Like coursework previously, controlled assessment is marked by the teacher and moderated by the awarding organisation. Just over a fifth (22 per cent) of the respondents were positive about task marking. Some respondents believe that task marking is straightforward and no more onerous than the previous coursework. However, in their view, marking is still as open to abuse as with the old system.

However, nearly two thirds (63 per cent) of the respondents had negative views of controlled assessment marking, citing issues such as:

- There is seen to be a lack of consistency of marking between schools and between moderators.
- Mark schemes can be “convoluted”, “confusing”, “generic”, “rigid” and/or “open to interpretation”.
- Marking and making arrangements for moderation is time consuming.

Implementation concerns

Manageability was the main cause for concern around the implementation of controlled assessment, mentioned by more than half of the respondents (52 per cent). This was followed by concerns about the task itself (20 per cent) and awarding organisations’ requirements (10 per cent).

Manageability

Over half of the respondents (52 per cent) believed that delivering controlled assessment is time consuming. Specific concerns were expressed about the amount of teaching time lost as a result of controlled assessment. In the view of many respondents, too much time is spent on task setting, preparation, and task taking. Consequently, some respondents reported not being able to teach fully the content of the specification. Many respondents believed that activities associated with marking controlled assessment (such as moderation, standardisation, setting mark schemes, and the creation of mark schemes for each task) take too much time to complete and increase pressure on teachers.

The tasks

Twenty per cent of the respondents raised concerns with the actual tasks, including the following:

- Content of controlled assessment is not challenging: the most common concerns expressed were that tasks are limited, do not challenge the most able students, do not differentiate between candidates and/or stifle any imagination and enjoyment of the different subjects.
- Inconsistent practices across schools or colleges and/or awarding organisations: respondents questioned whether all schools are carrying out assessments with the same degree of control. Related to this, the respondents questioned the integrity of the process and expressed concerns about teachers, departments and/or schools or colleges breaking the rules around the conduct of controlled assessment, as a result of the pressure schools are under to improve their GCSE results and because of the lack of policing of the rules. Several respondents gave examples of schools or colleges bending the rules, for example by allowing redrafting, falsifying data, giving more individual feedback than is allowed, and/or having mock assessments that are very close to the task.

Awarding organisations' requirements

Ten per cent of the respondents were concerned by the awarding organisations' requirements. The main concern raised was the lack of consistency between awarding organisations. According to some respondents, awarding organisations are unable to guarantee consistency since the rules for controlled assessment are not well defined.

Impact on teaching and learning

To understand the effect of controlled assessment on teaching and learning, we asked respondents about its impact on breadth and depth of learning, stretch and challenge, and the application of learning and skills.

Breadth and depth

Most respondents (73 per cent) who commented on breadth and depth believed that controlled assessment has not encouraged breadth and depth of learning. The main reasons identified were:

- There is too much emphasis on learning by rote and teaching to the task.
- A disproportionate amount of lesson time is spent on preparing for controlled assessment tasks, which has an impact on deeper learning.
- The narrow nature of the controlled assessment tasks restricts what students learn, which leads to subject matter being covered in a superficial way.

These issues were mentioned in relation to all subjects.

Some positive views were expressed by respondents on the impact of controlled assessment, centring mainly on the acquisition of knowledge.

Stretching and challenging students

Seventy-two per cent of the respondents commented they do not believe that controlled assessment is stretching and challenging students, for the following reasons:

- Controlled assessment is not always appropriate for the less able students, who find controlled assessment tasks intimidating and often struggle to understand the structure of them. This is particularly the case in history, English, and the sciences.
- Controlled assessment is not challenging the most able students because tasks are seen to be too restrictive, and have removed the ability for the most able to demonstrate independent learning.
- Delivery of controlled assessment takes up too much time.
- There is too much emphasis on teaching to the task.

In contrast, there were some positive views about the impact that controlled assessment has had on stretch and challenge. Contrary to views that controlled assessment is not stretching the most able, some respondents (16 comments) believe that controlled assessment is having a positive impact on the most able. Respondents commented that the independent nature of the controlled assessment tasks challenges the most able and that the level of the tasks themselves is suitable for these students.

Application of learning and skills

Most respondents (56 per cent) did not believe controlled assessment has had a positive impact on the application of learning and skills. Specific concerns mentioned were as follows.

- There is limited opportunity for students to consolidate their learning. Skills are not easily transferable from one task to the next, and learning has, therefore, become more piecemeal and students are not getting a holistic view of the subject.
- Controlled assessment is perceived to be too structured. Controlled assessment tasks limit the chance for students to demonstrate independent learning and apply prior knowledge as the tasks tend to be prescriptive.
- Delivery of controlled assessment takes up too much time.

- There was also some concern that the lack of ability to redraft controlled assessment means that students lose the opportunity to develop their quality of written communication.

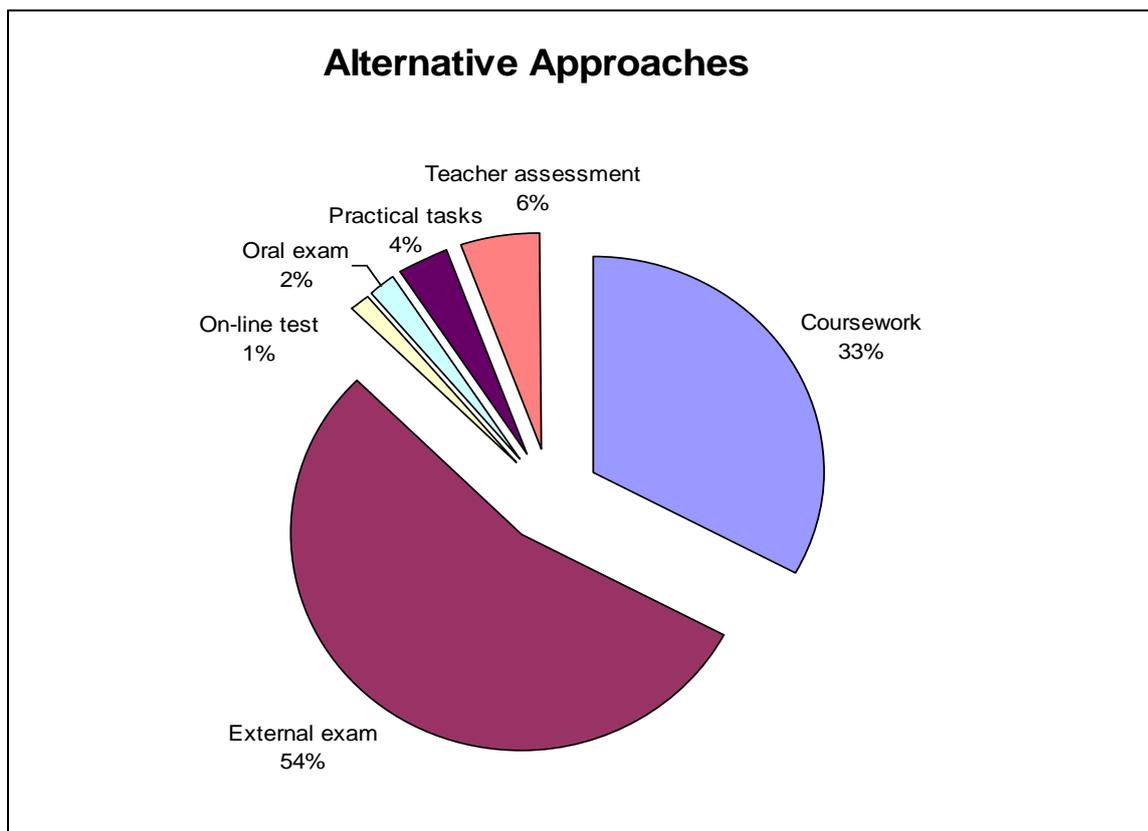
There were, however, those who believed that controlled assessment has had a positive impact on the application of teaching and learning. They identified the following skills that controlled assessment develops: analysis, independent working, writing and note-taking skills, memory skills.

Alternative approaches

This section summarises responses received on alternative approaches in assessing the same knowledge and skills validly and reliably.

Alternative approaches to assessment proposed by respondents are shown in figure 11, below.

Figure 11: Alternative approaches to assessment



It is clear that most respondents believed the skills currently tested in controlled assessment could be tested by coursework or written exam. Those who gave coursework as an alternative to controlled assessment believe that this method is fit-for-purpose, although there was some concern expressed about the potential for plagiarism. Other suggestions included external moderation or direct teacher supervision, along with random checks on student work and a portfolio approach.

Awarding organisations' perspective

The awarding organisations expressed a view that one size does not fit all, as practical subjects need the opportunity for coursework of one sort or another and assessment must be led by the content, skills and competences required. Feedback from awarding organisations suggests that controlled assessment requires some refinement and it would be beneficial to reduce the number of subjects with controlled assessment.

Practices from other fields

Respondents were asked whether they thought there were practices used elsewhere that might be valid alternatives to controlled assessment. Several practices were suggested.

The most popular suggested alternative was the assessment style commonly used in vocational qualifications to allow students to demonstrate mastery of a particular skill. There were also several mentions of the Extended Project Qualification-style assessment, where students submit ideas, plan, research, and follow through to an extended piece of writing and/or a presentation.

Several respondents mentioned practices used internationally, and there was a view that teacher assessment is trusted far more in many international jurisdictions.

Appendix A: Questions in our call for evidence, and the number of responses to each

Questions	Number of responses
01. What is controlled assessment asking learners to demonstrate?	490
02. How has controlled assessment improved assessment of subject-related skills?	489
03. What essential subject-related skills cannot be assessed effectively through external assessment?	452
04. Has controlled assessment improved confidence in authenticity?	486
05. How effective and efficient have task type, setting, taking and marking been?	198
06. Which components of controlled assessment are causing concern?	483
07. Has controlled assessment had any impact on teaching and learning in terms of breadth and depth of subject content, stretching and challenging students and application of learning and skills?	249
08. What other ways could the same knowledge and skills be validly and reliably assessed and would this vary by subject?	309
09. Please outline any practices from other fields which could be applied to the GCSE context.	317
10. Any other comments related to specific subjects	252
11. Any other comments relating to the issues raised here	201

Annex 2: Preliminary findings from a comparison of coursework and controlled assessment in geography and history

Introduction

The Awarding Body Data Archive (ABDA) was developed to collect evidence of student work to inform the Secondary Reform programme, which saw the introduction of new A levels in 2008 and new GCSEs in 2009 and 2010. Assessment materials (question papers, student work, and so on) and data are collected from a sample of GCSE and A level subjects each year.

As part of our review of controlled assessment, we used materials from this archive to compare student work in geography and history in controlled assessment, coursework and written exams. For each subject, across the range of grades, we compared GCSE geography and history specifications, assessment materials and student work from 2009 (with coursework) and 2011 (with controlled assessment).

This work was part of a wider research project comparing coursework, controlled assessment and written exams in four subjects: design and technology, geography, history and music. This report includes only the preliminary findings relating to the review of controlled assessment in two of the four subjects – geography and history.

Methodology

The exam board specifications and assessment materials (mark schemes, internally assessed tasks, question papers and any supporting materials) for each subject were considered. The following student work was also used for this project:

	Number of pieces of work at grade						
	A*	A	B	C	D	E	F
Geography 2009	3	3	3	6	6	6	3
Geography 2011	3	2	3	6	6	6	3
History 2009	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
History 2011	1	1	3	3	3	3	3

We used a team of subject experts for each of the GCSE subjects included in this review. Each team consisted of seven experts in the GCSE subject, including a lead reviewer. All seven members of each team were contracted to review both the specification materials and student work.

Preliminary findings

Geography

There are no significant differences between the specifications for 2009 and 2011. In both years, coursework (in 2009) or controlled assessment (in 2011) made up 25 per cent of the qualification, with 75 per cent allocated to the written papers. In both years, the written papers were tiered⁴⁷, although the coursework/controlled assessment was untiered.

Most of the subject-related skills were assessed via a fieldwork report (coursework or controlled assessment). However, the written papers did assess students' geographical communication skills in producing graphs, diagrams and sketch maps and also students' extracting and interpreting skills.

Controlled assessment is intended to assess the following skills:

- identifying, analysing and evaluating geographical questions and issues;
- establishing appropriate sequences of investigation incorporating geographical skills, including enquiry skills;
- extracting and interpreting information from a range of different sources;
- evaluating methods of collecting, presenting and analysing evidence, and the validity and limitations of evidence and conclusions.

The view of the subject reviewers was that controlled assessment in 2011 did give students opportunities to demonstrate a wide range of geography-related skills, but only within the limited choice of tasks issued by the awarding organisations. In practice, an individual student's choice of topic was restricted to the fieldwork opportunities provided by their school or college. This limited the student's ability to demonstrate the skills of "identifying geographical questions and issues" and "establishing appropriate sequences of investigation". These two skills provide the basis for the entire task and a poor choice of task would restrict students' opportunities to demonstrate fully their level of ability in the rest of the task.

In controlled assessment, the levels of control are specified for each of task setting, task taking and task marking. We have, therefore, set out our findings under these headings.

⁴⁷ In some GCSEs, assessments are tiered. Students enter either foundation tier (which allows access to grades G to C) or higher tier (which allows access to grades E to A*).

Task setting

The level of control for controlled assessment task setting is high, which means the exam board sets the tasks. In 2011, the exam board provided eight tasks for assessment. A new selection of tasks is issued each year. Each task consists of a single question, on a specific theme, which is then given context by the school's choice of location or area to conduct the fieldwork.

This is very different from coursework in 2009 when students were required to undertake geographical investigations supported by fieldwork, but there were no example tasks and the students' choice did not need exam board approval. The teacher was responsible for ensuring the task was appropriate to the ability of individual students, and the task specifically included students in planning the topic for study and defining the aims of their enquiry.

Task taking

The level of control for controlled assessment task taking was set as:

- research and data collection – limited level of control;
- analysis, conclusions and evaluation of findings – high level of control.

The specification for 2011 suggested the students should spend one day on data collection in the field and about 20 hours in the classroom preparing for fieldwork, processing the data and preparing the final report.

This included approximately three hours for students to define for themselves the “purpose of investigation” and decide the “method of data collection” within the limits of the task selected and the fieldwork opportunity available to them. Under limited control, teachers were permitted to give feedback to individual students, although this had to be recorded with the student's final work.

This appears more stringent than for coursework: the 2009 specification allowed teachers to give guidance throughout the research and data collection stages.

Across both specifications, the parts of the task where teachers could provide direct support to students were broadly the same, but the approach was very different. Guidance issued for coursework in 2009 suggested the teacher could provide direction to students to avoid poor decisions about the approach to the task having a significant impact. Advice in relation to controlled assessment in 2011 suggested that students had to complete a piece of work before teachers could provide feedback.

Both specifications provided clear guidance on the use of students' secondary research in the final report, which for both coursework and controlled assessment was to be approximately 2,000 words. In 2009, coursework had to be a written report

supported by maps, diagrams, tables, photographs and other illustrations, including video and audio. In 2011, presentation options were broader: students could present some or all of their controlled assessment work as DVDs, presentations, personal diaries, personalised geographic information system (GIS) maps created online, web pages, and so on.

Task marking

In principle, the approach to marking coursework and controlled assessment has remained the same. Student work is marked by teachers and the results are moderated by the exam board. Marking criteria for coursework and controlled assessment are very similar. Controlled assessment marking criteria are set out under six main headings, as shown below:

- Purpose of investigation
- Planning and organisation
- Methods of collecting data
- Methods of presenting data
- Analysis and conclusions
- Evaluation.

Analysis of whole candidate sets of work for 2011 cohorts

Each available whole candidate set of work was analysed to determine what level of subject-related skills the candidate had demonstrated in his or her response to both the controlled assessment and written papers.

Most of the evidence for students' subject-related skills was found in their responses to the controlled assessment. However, all the candidates also demonstrated some elements of "extracting and interpreting information from a range of different sources" in response to the written paper.

The more capable candidates also demonstrated some elements of "evaluating methods of collecting, presenting and analysing evidence" in response to the written papers, but not at the higher levels seen in their responses to the controlled assessment.

There was least differentiation between candidates in the skills of "identifying, analysing and evaluating geographical questions and issues" and "establishing appropriate sequences of investigation incorporating geographical skills, including enquiry skills".

All the reviewers found evidence, across the full range of student ability, of teacher-led activity in the planning and organising stages of the fieldwork activities. This included the provision of questionnaires, and very similar work produced by students of different abilities preparing for the same fieldwork opportunity. Reviewers found it difficult to discriminate between school-directed and independent work. No evidence was found of any students demonstrating these skills at the higher levels.

There were much clearer differences across the range of students in the demonstration of “extracting and interpreting information from a range of different sources”. The more able students used wider data sets and information from a much wider range of sources. They demonstrated some higher level skills in producing a more thorough analysis of the data and were able to utilise their findings in support of their conclusions, which were generally expressed clearly using appropriate geographical terms. However, no evidence was found that any student had demonstrated the full range of skills at the highest levels.

Less capable students used fewer sources, sometimes only their fieldwork data, producing descriptive comments and basic presentations that showed significantly less geographical knowledge and understanding.

The clearest distinctions were in “evaluating methods of collecting, presenting and analysing evidence, and the validity and limitations of evidence and conclusions”. Although no student was able to demonstrate the full range of these skills at the highest levels, it was clear the concepts were understood better by the more capable students. Most students had included an evaluation section, but the reviewers found the best demonstration of these skills was by a student who threaded evaluation through the report at the relevant sections. However, the focus of all but the most capable students was just on evaluation of their methodology.

History

There are no significant differences between the specifications for 2009 and 2011. In both years, coursework (in 2009) or controlled assessment (in 2011) made up 25 per cent of the qualification, with 75 per cent allocated to the written papers. In both years, the written papers and the coursework/controlled assessment were untiered.

Coursework in 2009 required students to produce two pieces of extended writing (each a maximum of 1,250 words), which could be on the same topic or different topics. In 2011, students completed just one piece of controlled assessment (maximum 2,000 words).

Controlled assessment is intended to assess historical enquiry and historical interpretation skills.

In the view of the subject reviewers, the controlled assessment in 2011 did offer a significant opportunity for students to demonstrate their ability to comprehend, analyse and evaluate, in relation to a historical context, how and why historical events, people, situations and changes have been interpreted and represented in different ways. In addition, the written papers tested the same skills of historical communication and enquiry to varying degrees.

However, the controlled assessment provided a more effective test of the students' historical communication skills because they have to write at greater length in a considered fashion. It also encouraged students to demonstrate their historical enquiry skills in using sources to investigate a historical question in a way that is not possible with the constraints of the written papers.

The controlled assessment also set out to test students' historical interpretation, which is not assessed by the written papers.

However, the controlled assessment work seen during this review included very little demonstration of historical interpretation skills. Even the students with high marks were not demonstrating one of the key skills that controlled assessment is intended to test.

Task setting

There were differences in the coursework tasks in 2009 and the controlled assessment tasks in 2011. The 2009 coursework tasks focused on a particular aspect of history and asked questions to provide structure for the students' responses.

The level of control for controlled assessment task setting is high, which means the exam board sets the tasks. In 2011, the exam board offered four options for controlled assessment:

- the role of the individual in history;
- a thematic study in twentieth-century history;
- a modern world depth study;
- a study in depth.

The exam board provides four generic tasks for assessment (one per option), which change each year. Each task has to be adapted by the teacher to fit his or her students' learning programme. This, of course, introduces the possibility that poor decisions about adapting tasks might disadvantage some students and/or mean that tasks are not always comparable in demand.

Task taking

The level of control for task taking was high and the exam board provided specific guidance on the application of controls in the specification.

In 2011, the specification recommended students spend eight classroom hours to complete their controlled assessment task: four hours on preparation (research, note taking, planning and drafting) and four hours to write up their work. Students could be given the task one week before the controlled assessment started in order to plan their approach, but there were restrictions on the material they could then take into the controlled assessment.

There was no guidance in the 2009 specification on the amount of time students should spend on their coursework, but there was clear guidance about teacher supervision of student work.

Task marking

In principle, the approach to internal assessment has remained the same. Student work is marked by teachers and moderated by exam boards.

Analysis of whole candidate sets of work for 2011 cohorts

Each available whole candidate set of work was analysed to determine what level of subject-related skills the candidate had demonstrated in his or her response to both the controlled assessment and written papers.

Evidence for candidates' historical enquiry skills was found in their responses to both the controlled assessment and written papers. There were clear differences across the range of candidates in investigating specific historical questions and using a range of sources, critically and in context.

The highest ability candidates were able to address clearly the questions using the available primary and secondary sources to support their arguments. In their responses to the controlled assessment, they explained their choice of sources and why certain sources were likely to be less reliable, or not valid. Their work provided evidence they could use their own historical knowledge in combination with external sources of information or stimulus to address both the controlled assessment and written paper questions.

The other students were less capable in their use of sources in their response to the controlled assessment, relying on a much narrower range with little or no evaluation of the source material. In the lower ability students' work, the evidence for historical enquiry was implicit in the use of quotations, or the presence of source material, but many used a narrative style with no reference to the basis of their information.

The least able candidates did not demonstrate the ability to use their own historical knowledge in combination with source material to produce responses to the controlled assessment or within the written papers.

Minimal evidence was found of their historical interpretation skills of understanding, analysing and evaluating how the past may have been interpreted and represented.

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First published by the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation in 2013

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