

## The Curriculum and Assessment Review: AQA's Response

AQA, England's most popular exam board and a leading education charity, said that the Government is right to adopt an evolutionary, not revolutionary, approach. Rather than reinvent the wheel, the Department for Education should look to lessons from past reforms of GCSEs and A-levels to consider where to go next. Like students and teachers, we do not advocate dramatic change.

Exams work, and the Government should keep the best of the system. High stakes, end point exams are very good for assessing entire groups of students efficiently, fairly and reliably. GCSEs and A-levels provide robust and respected academic routes and prepare students for further study. And they provide evidence for policymakers to target support for areas that need it.

Teachers have however told AQA that there is too much content that is expected to be covered in subjects such as GCSE History, or that some content – as is the case with GCSE English Language, Geography and Religious Studies – is outdated or mechanistic. Too often, teachers say, they end up teaching to the specification to the detriment of preparing young people for the next stage in their life. An update would serve to improve the quality and balance of what students learn.

Trimming some subject content and reducing the number of exam papers, on a subject-by-subject basis, would free up teachers and students to develop wider skills that would help them get on in life, study or work.

This would also leave room for schools, colleges and exam centres to teach different types of qualifications, such as on-demand digital assessments, as well as extended project qualifications.

An example is AQA Stride, which is a powerful new diagnostic maths test that allows teachers to find and fix students' maths gaps. This test is fully funded for schools and colleges in England and, so far, more than 6,300 students have used it.

In its response to the call for evidence, AQA also said that the Government should:

- Improve numeracy, literacy and digital fluency skills for which AQA is developing tests
- Take an evolutionary approach in moving to digital assessment
- Be cautious about introducing coursework in its previous form – teachers don't want it
- Deal with the logistical challenges of access arrangements
- Keep resits available for those students who want them but provide alternatives
- Reduce specialisation for A-level students, who should have a broader range of options
- Reform vocational qualifications so that they are better understood and are more flexible
- Recognise there is a trade-off between mandating content that recognises diversity and giving teachers the autonomy to choose.

**Colin Hughes, AQA CEO, said:**

"Exams are efficient, fair and reliable, and they allow students to progress to the next stage in their lives. We agree with the Government that we should be reforming in an evolutionary, not revolutionary, way – an approach that recognises there is much that is good with the current system.

"It's clear however that the curriculum has become a bit too crowded and that teachers and students would welcome updated and slimmed down content. We believe this should be done on a subject-by-subject basis. There is also scope to reduce the number of exam papers – for example, we could explore reducing the number of GCSE Maths papers from three to two.

"Reforms such as these would give space for students to, for example, do extended project qualifications, which will support future life, study and work."

