

Consultation Summary Paper

Ofqual Consultation on Reforming GCSEs in Modern Foreign and Ancient Languages

19 May 2014

Opened 09/04/2014, closed 23/05/2014, Pearson Lead: Parul Patel

A brief introduction to Pearson

Pearson is the world's leading learning company. Our education business combines 150 years of experience in publishing with the latest learning technology and online support. We are also part of the wider Pearson family which includes Penguin, Dorling Kindersley and the Financial Times. We provide education and assessment services in more than 70 countries. Our qualifications, courses and resources are available in print, online and through multi-lingual packages, helping people learn whatever, wherever and however they choose.

Pearson currently offers GCSEs in 10 languages, all of which are also offered at A Level.

A summary of the consultation

The consultation sought views in three main areas, 1) how Ofqual proposes to apply assessment and tiering principles to new GCSEs in MF&AL, 2i) the possible wider impact of the proposed arrangements on students, including those who share protected characteristics and 2ii) wider financial and resource impacts, 3) the availability of GCSEs in a range of languages, particularly the lesser taught languages.

A summary of the Pearson response

Pearson only responded in relation to MFL as we do not offer GCSEs in the ancient languages.

Assessment arrangements – We strongly agree with the proposal to externally set and mark papers in all of the four language skills. Setting tasks enables an exam board to maintain standards across all languages. This view is reinforced by Ofqual's review of controlled assessment, recent CILT/CfBT Language Trends reports and the Association for Language Learning's responses to the DfE consultations. Pearson's own research also mirrors this opinion.

Tiering – Pearson agrees that all languages, in all four skills, should be tiered. Differentiation allows students of all abilities to access questions, without overburdening assessment. Tiering is even more important given the demanding nature of the new GCSE criteria. Moreover, since the English Bacc has been in place there has been an increase in Foundation tier entries for the main taught languages. This and the fact that GCSE is now largely the only qualification used means that there is an even broader attainment range of learners taking GCSE. We would question the necessity of tiering for lesser taught languages where the number of entries is low, and the proposed % of marks for overlap tasks. Ofqual proposes 20% for all skills, except speaking where 50% is suggested. Best practice indicates that the number of common items should be 25%. This would require each tiered paper to contain 40% of common items.

Availability of MFL GCSEs – It is essential that all learners have the opportunity to learn a language and ideally there should be a wide range of languages to choose from. However, we would only support the offer of any GCSE if it could be supported appropriately in the centre that offered it, for example by providing qualified teachers and examiners where needed.

Financial and wider considerations – New GCSEs will increase costs for exam boards, largely because of the proposal to tier all four skills and the introduction of external assessment across all languages and skills, and centres will need to invest in training for teachers because of the changes. It is up to schools and colleges to respond as to whether they will be willing to pay higher fees for low-volume MFL GCSEs. However there are already some low volume GCSE/GCE qualifications that are priced at a higher rate. There could be implications for take-up as less able learners could struggle with the new assessments and may choose not to take a language GCSE. We do not believe any impact will be felt by those who share a protected characteristic.