

Pearson response to the NIACE Call for Evidence To ensure effective implementation of new GCSEs (maths and English) October 2014

Please outline the background to your submission (including brief details on your context and interest in the policy changes)

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 Random House, 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 is also the UK's largest awarding organisation, offering academic and vocational qualifications and training to schools, colleges, employers and other places of learning in the UK and internationally. We are committed to ensuring that learners and providers using our qualifications and services are supported through these policy changes.

Support for 16-19 full time learners

The aim is that the vast majority of 16-19 full time students will work towards achievement of GCSEs in English and maths. The new GCSEs will be more stretching and demand more practical skills in literacy and numeracy. Functional Skills will continue to be supported up to Level 2 as a useful step on the way to GCSE attainment, for those 16-19 full time students with achievement below grade D.

What approaches are successful in motivating young people to re-engage with GCSEs?

It is crucial that young people who are required to retake maths or English GCSE clearly understand why they are doing so, and can see the relevance of a retake to other qualifications they are pursuing. We recognise that some providers see contextualising English and maths curriculum into vocational courses as a useful way of achieving this. However, given the challenges teaching staff face in adjusting to delivering GCSE we believe that there is a case to be made for keeping maths and English delivery separate, provided by an expert in these particular subjects.

What are the effective ways of diagnosing English and maths proficiency in students?

We recognise that online diagnostic and assessment tools can be invaluable in helping teaching staff with limited time assess the appropriateness of different courses and qualifications and progression routes for large numbers of individual learners. However,

teaching staff also tell us that any such tools must be reliable and quality assured, with results interpreted and mediated by teachers.

Wherever possible we recommend that information on learners' prior achievement in English and maths, particularly GCSE, is made available to the teaching staff working with them post-16. Ideally this should be detailed information breaking down performance across different areas. This is likely to be a challenge in situations where learners have moved from one institution to another, but has the potential to greatly enrich the information used to ascertain a learner's proficiency and aid future planning.

How can students with grade D or below be supported to achieve GCSEs?

While we welcome the fact that the study of English and maths beyond the age of 16 is now compulsory for those in full-time education who have not achieved at least a grade C in these subjects, we have some concerns about the implementation of this policy.

In particular, the designation of Functional Skills as a 'stepping stone' places these qualifications in a role they were not originally designed for. Our research suggests that there are areas in which Functional Skills may not be suited to preparing learners for GCSE, and we will work with providers and learners to monitor how effectively these qualifications perform in this role.

It is important that students have a carefully constructed curriculum to help them progress towards GCSE, identifying specific areas they need to strengthen, and that 'stepping stone' qualifications are used with this plan in mind.

What are the practical issues in preparing for GCSE part-time 16-19 students?

Clearly contact time with part-time students is likely to be an issue, given the breadth and depth of content to be covered. From our experience with learners in further education or work-based learning settings, we know that it can be sometimes be difficult to predict exactly when and where learners will be at a particular time. Combined with a potentially low number of contact hours allocated to the study of maths and/or English GCSE, providers face a challenge in covering all the required content in a relatively short timescale.

Providers also face a challenge in deciding not only which qualification to pursue with learners who have not previously achieved a C grade at GCSE (either GCSE again or a stepping stone), but also whether to enrol learners on the current or new GCSEs. For instance, providers with post-16 students commencing programmes in 2015 will need to choose whether to enter students for retakes on the current GCSE, or whether to commence teaching the new GCSE. Post-16 providers and students in 2016 wishing to retake the current GCSE must pass in November of that year, or will have the challenge of sitting the new GCSEs, which are widely accepted as being more difficult.

Making these decisions will require a clear understanding of a learner's proficiency and previous attainment in English and maths which, as already discussed, is also a challenge.

In a recent survey we conducted with further education colleges and private training providers, respondents identified the following factors as having a particular impact on their confidence in delivering GCSE English:

- Having staff who have the specialist knowledge at this level and above

- The amount of experience they have teaching GCSE
- The number of teaching hours required to teach GCSE
- Availability and cost of delivery (team members and resources).

For maths, respondents identified:

- Not having experienced staff with specialist knowledge
- Not knowing enough about the changes to the subject.

We believe that awarding bodies can help ensure teachers are fully aware of the changes in their subjects and will work with providers to ensure this is the case.

How can students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities be effectively supported?

We feel that teaching staff are best placed to respond to this question, and we are very keen to work with them to ensure all learners are supported.

For students transferring from the old to the new GCSE, what challenges do you consider there may be and how can they be addressed?

At the most basic level, the Department for Education and Department for Business, Innovation and Skills have stated that the new GCSEs will be more challenging at a level commonly considered a pass. For students who have been unsuccessful in gaining a good grade on the old GCSE this clearly presents a potentially demoralising challenge. For example, in English the move to 100% exam and a greater emphasis on unseen text may prove difficult for students who have already found the qualification hard, even in a more modular format.

This makes it all the more important that students' proficiency and prior attainment is clear to providers delivering in a post-16 environment in order to ensure that teaching is targeted in the right areas, and that students are entered for appropriate qualifications, be they GCSE or stepping stones.

How can technology support the achievement of GCSEs?

As previously stated, we believe that online diagnostics can have an important role to play in help providers prepare to teach GCSE post-16, and that information available through tools like Pearson's ResultsPlus, an online service that helps teachers identify topics and skills where students could benefit from further learning, can inform curriculum planning.

We also believe that technology has the potential to help address the challenge identified earlier of lack of contact time with students, particularly those in a work-based learning environment. Online teaching, mentoring and resources have the potential to lessen the impact of students not being permanently based in a school or college, which could otherwise make it difficult to cover the large amount of content required in the new GCSEs.

Support for teachers

Awarding organisations will provide resources to support providers to implement the new specifications. The current FE workforce strategy is designed to help providers secure sufficient specialist teachers to improve teaching of English and maths to 16-19 year old students, adults, apprentices and trainees. £30m has been invested this year and next to bring in more graduates to teach English and maths in FE and expand CPD programmes for existing teachers to improve their skills and knowledge, and share innovative practice. The GCSE Maths Enhancement Programme has engaged 2,000 teachers and an equivalent programme for English will be rolled out nationally from September 2014.

From August 2014, 16-19 students who have not achieved a good pass (GCSE A*-C) by 16 must continue working towards achieving these qualifications as a condition of student places being funded. This policy allows exemptions for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities on an individual basis but there will be no blanket exclusion.

What further professional development is needed for teachers to deliver GCSE Maths and GCSE English to 16-19 students?

As previously stated, teaching staff we have spoken to have expressed concerns about the level of experience required to teach GCSE. In particular teaching staff are likely to require professional development to teach the less 'functional' aspects of GCSE, such as Shakespeare or trigonometry. We believe that awarding organisations like Pearson can play a key role in supporting teaching staff in this area.

As other organisations such as the Education and Training Foundation have found, there are a significant number (17.1%) of maths teachers in the further education sector who have only achieved a functional or adult basic skills level 2 qualification. Among those leading GCSE classes, 9% have not achieved this qualification themselves.

This is clearly a fundamental issue in the sector, and should be addressed by government policy, working together with awarding organisations and learning providers.

What further professional development is needed for teachers to deliver GCSE Maths and GCSE English to 16-18 apprentices?

In our recent survey of private training providers respondents conveyed frustration that in their eyes they are being asked to tackle the failure of the secondary education system to deliver young people with good English and maths qualifications, but with fewer resources and less contact time.

Again, a key area identified was a lack of subject knowledge among trainers, something that we believe organisations like Pearson can help to address through professional development that introduces providers to teaching GCSE, particularly in a work related environment. Some providers felt that they had made a success of delivering Functional Skills, and so have the expertise to provide GCSE, but that they lack experience with this particular qualification. In these cases it would seem that professional development should be centred on preparing people to teach these specific qualifications, as well as giving them a clear understanding of how they are assessed.

We also found that there were a number of training providers who were not familiar with the changes to policy around GCSE and how this affects them so more needs to be done to engage with this group to ensure that this information is effectively communicated.

It is worth noting that a number of the training providers we have engaged with said they were not currently planning to deliver GCSE to apprentices they will be working with. Others have told us they are planning to partner with local colleges to help deliver these qualifications.

What further development is needed for teachers to support students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities?

We feel that teaching staff are best placed to respond to this question, and we are very keen to work with them to ensure all learners are supported.