



REVIEW OF CONTROLLED ASSESSMENT IN GCSEs

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Coursework has been part of the GCSE examination since 1988. In 2005, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) carried out a review of GCSE coursework arrangements in response to stakeholder concerns which included marking reliability and the impact of coursework on teaching time. This review identified a number of ways in which coursework could be improved, including clearer guidelines about the limits of permitted help and more checks on the internal standardisation of marks. An independent report by Dr Ian Cowell in 2007¹ further explored the findings of the review and made a number of recommendations related to how 'the current controls relating to internal assessment at GCSE... should be developed and supplemented to promote greater public confidence across all subjects'. Dr Cowell's recommendations were instrumental in developing criteria for new GCSE qualifications, including the replacement of coursework by controlled assessment. Controlled assessment is a form of teacher-supervised internal assessment which aims to ensure that pupils 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%, 25% or 50%.
- 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 timing and task marking.

In 2011 Ofqual responded to concerns being expressed by stakeholders about controlled assessment and commissioned a research project to explore these in detail. This research reported, amongst other things, that many teachers found guidance from the exam boards inconsistent and confusing. In spite of Ofqual's efforts to address these concerns, there is ongoing dispute. This report explores whether controlled assessment is providing a valid assessment of elements which cannot be addressed in a written exam and whether it is helping to differentiate between students. Subject specific considerations are addressed in the full report. Key findings and recommendations are outlined below.

KEY FINDINGS

- In some cases, such as in English, controlled assessment has removed the opportunity for students to reflect and improve on their work. Subject experts also found that the time restrictions placed on tasks can dilute students' creativity and be less effective in encouraging personal responses and innovative methods of work. This was also attributed to the high levels of control of task setting in many subjects.
- As with the more traditional coursework which preceded controlled assessment, the activities of research, planning and carrying out investigations are not directly assessed. It is only the end product which is assessed.
- In some subjects, controlled assessment ends up by assessing skills which were not meant to be assessed. Over a quarter of respondents to the call for evidence considered that controlled assessment was often a measure of a student's ability to memorise and produce pre-prepared work under exam conditions.
- Thirty nine per cent of the respondents to the call for evidence believed that controlled assessment gives them more confidence that work produced is actually the students' own. However, half of these respondents added a caveat and 21% believed that controlled assessment had reduced their confidence in its authenticity.
- Guidance on controlled coursework can never cover all eventualities. Ofqual states in this report that sufficient room must be left in the regulations for exam boards to take the best approach for their own subject specification. Exam boards must, in turn, be able to make sure that the tasks are appropriate and

¹ QCA (2007) Improving GCSE: Internal and Controlled Assessment