

New English and Maths GCSEs: Written evidence for post-19 sector

On Wednesday 2nd July 2014, the Government announced plans to introduce new GCSEs into the post-16 sector to meet the Government's ambition to enable as many young people and adults as possible who lack good qualifications in English and maths to have the chance to take GCSEs in these subjects.

NIACE, in partnership with the NRDC, has been commissioned by BIS and the DfE to seek views on how the new GCSEs in English and maths can be successfully implemented into post-16 education. These changes are far-reaching and we are keen to listen to education leaders, managers, employers, teachers and learners to understand how all learners can be supported to achieve English and maths GCSEs, including 16-19 students, apprentices, trainees and adults. We really want to hear from you and will be collating a response for BIS and DfE. The deadline for submissions is 30th September 2014.

[Click here](#) for full details about the call for evidence.

You can use this document to prepare your/your organisation's response. However, we will only be accepting evidence through our [online form](#). Any responses sent to us via email will not be included in our evidence base.

Please note this form is for written evidence in relation to the post-19 sector only. If you would like to submit evidence in relation to the 16-19 sector, please [click here](#).

If you have any questions or would like more information please e-mail Emily.Jones@niace.org.uk or tel/text 07771524254.

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

Unionlearn is the learning organisation of the TUC. Unionlearn supports unions' work in helping people in the workplace to access functional skills and other English and maths learning opportunities and encouraging them to progress to qualifications.

Unionlearn organised two focus groups to feed back trade unions' views of the proposed changes and their impact on adult learners. All the unions that took part have substantial experience on supporting English and maths learning in the workplace and they represent a variety of industries, such as finance, retail, food, health and care and public sector. The unions that took part in the focus groups were: Aegis, Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union (BFAWU), Britannia Staff Union (BSU), Royal College of Nursing (RCN), UFS, Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (Usdaw), UNISON and United Road Transport Union (URTU). The Behavioural Insights ASK team observed one of the focus groups.

As the recent House of Commons Business, Innovation and Skills Select Committee highlighted, unionlearn plays a positive role in supporting unions and union learning reps to help workers to improve their literacy and numeracy skills.

Union learning has reached over 1 million learners over the past decade. Union Learning Fund (ULF) funded projects delivered last year alone (April 2013 to March 2014) 22,793 English and maths learners and 5,916 English and maths learners achieved a qualification. Unions are very effective in reaching adult learners in the workplace and their reach is better than any other organisations. Hence, unionlearn has a wider interest and involvement in how numeracy and literacy qualifications are developing whether functional skills or the new GCSEs.

The starting point for union-led learning is that successful adult learning requires teaching which treats learners as adults, operates in a workplace environment and is tailored to vocational needs and the jobs that people do.

Unions generally work with local providers, such as colleges, who make their arrangements regarding choosing awarding bodies. Some unions' learning centres have their own provision and agreements with awarding bodies. For learners it is important that the assessments are available close to where they are and when they need to take an assessment. This is crucial for keeping learners motivated and interested in progressing further. The GCSEs can feature as a progression route from level two Functional Skills.

The TUC is, however, concerned about ideas that functional skills could be replaced by an academic approach focused on GCSE achievement. The GCSEs have their place as some learners' development route but to engage more people into learning English and

maths, it is essential that functional skills courses and qualifications are available as an option. One union has fed back to unionlearn that taking on GCSEs are sometimes part of learners' longer term plan and commitment while functional skills take learners to the heart of skills they need at work.

Unions have used functional skills in a highly innovative way to promote literacy and numeracy courses in the workplace and employees have warmed to them because they are robust with a focus on practical problem solving. In effect they are about applying English and maths skills in everyday situations and individuals easily see the relevance of this kind of learning, especially in the workplace environment. This leads to improved confidence and better results at work.

Support for 19+ adult learners

The Government's ambition for adults is that by 2020, GCSE will be the preferred qualification in English and maths at level 2, including in Apprenticeships. They will work with Apprenticeship employers, FE colleges and training providers and others to identify how to achieve this and remove barriers which get in the way.

What changes will need to be made to the funding system to support more adult learners to take GCSEs?

The funding system needs to respond to learners' needs. Learners should be able to take the Level 2 route that is appropriate for them whether it is functional skills or the GCSEs. The funding system needs to support this so that learning providers are not forced to shoehorn all learners through one qualification pipeline. The funding system should also allow enough time for people to develop their skills and providers to provide extra support and learning hours when needed to achieve the qualification.

Funding for functional skills learning needs to be kept at the current level. As qualifications they should be considered as much a valid option for achievement as GCSEs. Funding arrangements can support this. Some learners will certainly want to use functional skills as a stepping stone to the GCSEs but it is important to emphasise that the functional skills Level 2 is as valid as a GCSE Level 2. It is essential that the funding helps providers guide learners through the appropriate route.

It does not motivate learners to reach for GCSE qualifications if they have failed the exam and keep failing. The system should include funded courses for adult learners who have failed the June exams so that they can have extra support before the November re-sit. A year between trying to pass the exams may mean losing the learner altogether.

The feedback from learners who have engaged through the union route indicates that they like the functional skills qualifications. They are relevant to adult working life and the practical emphasis on skills development, practical implementation in real life

scenarios and the focus on problem solving skills is good for employers and learners alike. These skills help people to do their work better.

The TUC wants to see more emphasis on helping disadvantaged learners access learning opportunities. One such group is learners whose first language is not English. The current funding regime does not support workplace learning for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). This is a serious hindrance for people who are not ready to take on a functional skills or a GCSE course, not to mention an exam. English language skills are a prerequisite for working with maths problems and improving literacy skills in the academic GCSE context.

What approaches are successful in motivating adults to engage with GCSEs?

Motivating adults to take GCSEs depends on them knowing it is the right route for them. This involves offering good quality advice and guidance and developing learning journeys – with functional skills included where appropriate – that clearly describe how they benefit from gaining their GCSEs. Under 16-year-olds use the GCSEs to showcase their skills but adults have demonstrated their skills at work. Even when moving from one job to another, an adult applicant's GCSE achievements are usually less weighty than their experience.

Employer engagement is vital. If they truly value their staff achieving GCSEs they need to be keen to provide paid time off for their staff for learning at all levels of the organisation. The Government can do more using levers that engage employers to provide the support and time needed to upskill their workforce. More and better employer investment is crucial: incentives such as PAYE relief, Industrial Partnerships and Employer Ownership Pilots should require action by employers on English and maths.

There are some innovative examples of businesses having qualified in-house English and maths tutors. Trialling funding for approaches such as these may help motivate both adult learners and employers.

Unions often manage to engage learners who have unhappy memories from their school days. They can overcome this barrier when being offered an opportunity to take up learning in a more relaxed and flexible adult environment. However, GCSE exams being held only once a year in June (with re-takes in November) hardly offers the flexibility needed for workplace learners. Even if the employer grants time off to take a course, prepare for an exam and to take the exam, there remain major challenges for adults taking GCSEs for the first time. In particular, sitting through hours of traditional exams involving a lot of writing is not something that adults find appealing. Therefore, there is a serious need to see how the exam practice can be more flexible by offering exams through the year and in a modular manner.

Adult learners also need opportunities for a modular approach to learning. This would better suit working life where shift patterns and untypical ways of working are a major barrier to learning as well as the challenge of managing personal lives involving caring duties and other responsibilities.

It would be advisable for the BIS and DfE to thoroughly explore why people have failed their GCSEs in the first place. This would help development of the correct support and tailored approaches to help them achieve their full potential. The feedback from unions indicate that the delivery of functional skills learning is different from traditional school learning which helps people to engage better to their studies.

If learners do want to progress from functional skills to the new GCSEs it is essential that the funding provides this opportunity to do this. Therefore, learners should have access to fully funded Level 2 functional skills and the new GCSEs if that is the appropriate route for them.

Often low skills and low pay are concentrated among the same groups of people. Boosting skills would therefore not only improve employees' progression at work but have an impact on business productivity. There is evidence that low paid employees receive fewer training opportunities and support than those on higher wages and are less likely to participate in workplace learning. (Making progress – Boosting the skills and wage prospects of the low paid, 2014) Employer support is important and working with unions will provide an opportunity to engage hard-to-reach groups. Providing paid time off for learning is one of the elemental parts of support from employers and this may require a push from the Government if necessary.

What is more, the learners need to understand the value of the qualification in terms of skills. It is not reasonable to push people to aim for a qualification just as a tick-box exercise without convincing them that this substantial learning is useful for them.

What is the most effective way of diagnosing English and maths proficiency in students?

The experience from union led learning tells us that it is important for adults to have flexibility with the way the diagnostics can be taken and accessed. This means providing initial assessments in the workplace, for instance. The assessments need to be accessible both on print and on-line to ensure wide reach. A good diagnostic takes two hours or so to complete and it is imperative that the time needed is provided by employers.

Diagnostics should be benchmarked for quality by Ofqual, for instance, so that learners and those engaging learners to take up initial assessments can trust them to lead to the right learning journey. An effective diagnostic is also timely. This means that it should always be taken well before learner embarks on a training course so that the advice and guidance is accurate and responds to learner's needs.

What support is required to help learners make the transition from Functional Skills to GCSEs or from old to new GCSEs?

When it is appropriate for a functional skills learner to move to new GCSEs it is crucial that the learner is provided the time they need to get to the GCSE level. This might mean support for learning to learn with a more academic approach. It is essential that funding is available to cover this bridging stage.

Learners shifting from old to new GCSEs need exact information, advice and guidance on the implications of the change. This includes making clear what happens if the learner fails and what support is available for the learner in these instances.

As the content of the new GCSEs is not clear yet, including how they truly differ from functional skills, it is difficult to see how they apply to adult learners in the workplace. The support required largely depends on adequate time and funding being available for learning but the detail can only be gauged when there is something to properly compare with. The appropriateness of GCSEs that have traditionally been designed for under 16-year-olds is a major concern for those involved in supporting workplace learning.

Also, currently there are learners on functional skills programmes because these are the qualifications needed for their college courses. The uncertainty of whether this approach will continue is a major hindrance to keeping learners engaged especially if they cannot be certain that the programme they are on is the most suitable for progressing with their college studies.

What are the practical issues for part time adult learners or those on short programmes such as job seekers?

For part time adult learners as well as trainees and apprentices a major issue is scheduling of the GCSE exams. The rigidity of the system offering exam dates only once a year can have a major impact on learners' ability to complete their programmes. This is especially the case if the learners have been able to achieve all other parts of their learning such as any vocational courses.

Those on traineeships should undoubtedly have the opportunity to continue with their learning for GCSEs regardless of whether or not the programme has otherwise come to a conclusion.

Also job-seekers attending short programmes need to have a guarantee that they can take their exams even after the short programme has finished.

A modular approach to learning can help part-time learners to stick with their studies. Rather than completing activities or tasks adult learners need to experience that they are developing skills and knowledge and this can be helped with a step-by-step approach.

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

Funding arrangements for extra support for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities will have to be maintained. Learners need tailored support from providers and access to assessments such as dyslexia screening to ensure the support is effective. Dyslexia, mental health issues and other disabilities can make it difficult for learners to stick with a demanding programme or schedule of learning. These challenges can be helped by providing enough time to enable these learners to fully engage alongside a full range of appropriate support services. Funding for SEN assessment is the key for effective support and it is welcome that educational support for young people with special educational needs is being extended up to the age of 25 as a result of recent changes to SEN provision in England.

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

The feedback from unions indicated that there is very little conviction that more academically slanted GCSEs will help people raise their skills levels if they already have encountered difficulties in achieving Level 2 in functional skills and/or GCSEs.

It is debatable whether there is a need at all to transfer adult learners from old GCSEs to the new ones. It might serve them best if they were allowed to finish their learning journey with the old GCSEs if that is what they have already started. An adult who fails the old GCSE is not likely to be motivated to keep taking an exam if they have to start at some point with the new GCSEs instead.

How can technology support the achievement of GCSEs for adults?

Digital learning is an essential part of modern learning and work environment but cannot be a substitute for the face to face learning, and this is especially relevant in the case of lower qualified learners.

Technology can help adults learn flexibly, fitting learning with all the other commitments in their life. Technology can also help build supportive peer groups. However, the problem is that there is not equitable access to ICT and Internet resources across our society. The Tinder Foundation has found that nearly 1 million people in the UK do not have digital skills. They also highlight that those who are elderly, on a low income or lower qualified are likely to be offline.

Trade union led learning centres have been successful in engaging learners to try out using computers for the first time and this has often proved a stepping stone to engagement in a wide range of other learning. These learning centres are an excellent example of using blended learning to help learners engage. Online learning in itself is rarely an appropriate response to meeting the totality of a person's learning needs, especially if they face a range of other barriers to learning. Differentiation is also a very important principle of teaching English and maths to adult learners and this is also very necessary in the context of the use of ICT resources.

Support for apprentices

The ambition is that, by 2020, apprentices of all ages studying English and maths will be working towards achievement of the new GCSEs, taking stepping stone qualifications if necessary. Functional skills will continue to be part of Apprenticeship completion requirements but we will work with Apprenticeship providers to enable them to offer GCSEs to their apprentices.

What needs to be in place for employers to support GCSEs as part of Apprenticeships for adults?

Whether the apprentice is studying English and maths through the functional skills route or working towards the GCSEs they need employers to release them to take the relevant courses with providers and to complete their coursework.

The Richard Review called for more employer engagement and flexibility in the delivery of apprenticeships. The review states that 'The Level 2 English and maths test must be taken before the Apprenticeship end test.' However, the GCSEs will not be offering a lot of flexibility in how and when learners can take the exams which needs to be taken into account for apprenticeship programmes which do not follow the academic year.

The funding arrangements for providers and employers should be devised in a way that includes a strong incentive to ensure the apprentices are released to do their GCSE learning and exam taking. Consideration should be given to funding providers and employers on the basis that the GCSE and vocational learning components have all been finished.

The length of apprenticeship programmes should be considered. If achieving a new GCSE both in English and maths requires whole year's studies and time needs to be set aside for vocational studies as well it might be necessary to consider making the apprenticeships longer. A year will not be long enough to achieve all the apprenticeship components that individuals are expected to accomplish when achievement of GCSEs are required. The Government should also consider policy levers that could be utilised to incentivise or require apprenticeship pay levels to be increased after the apprentice has achieved their GCSEs.

What needs to be in place for education providers to support GCSEs as part of Apprenticeships for adults?

As the TUC is not a provider, we are not in a position to respond to this question

How can the teaching of the new GCSEs be contextualised for learners following predominantly vocational programmes or Apprenticeships?

As the TUC is not a provider, we are not in a position to respond to this question.
Affiliate teaching unions are better placed to respond to this.

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.

What further professional development is needed for teachers to deliver GCSE Maths and GCSE English to adults?

As the TUC is not a provider, we are not in a position to respond to this question. We would, however, like to highlight the need for funding and provision of paid time off for teachers to take up the Continuous Professional Development (CPD) this implementation of the new GCSEs may require.

Union led learning centres employ a number of qualified tutors whose access to Continuous Professional Development is an issue that requires highlighting here as well. The transfer to the new GCSE is as demanding as for regular FE teachers so deserves appropriate funding and learning offer.

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

As the TUC is not a provider, we are not in a position to respond to this question. Affiliate unions are better placed to respond to this.

Please provide any further comments for consideration:

The TUC welcomes the opportunity to submit a response to this call for evidence by BIS and DfE. Everyone undoubtedly agrees with the aspiration of raising English and maths skills levels and developing progression routes for all individuals. As the recent OECD Adult Skills Survey highlighted, the scale of the challenge facing our nation on this front is huge and there is a widespread consensus that tackling this central skills issue must be a priority for all governments. In a globalised economic environment where human capital plays an increasingly important role, it is necessary for the vast majority of the workforce to achieve minimum standards of capability in reading, writing and maths.

Using existing qualifications should be encouraged and the funding should support this view. Functional skills have already been found useful and appropriate for adult learners and they should be offered as a viable option to learners and employers alike. They allow lower level students to gain confidence and experience achievement.

The TUC is concerned that the drive for adult learners to take up the new GCSEs does not improve access of equality to learning opportunities. We highly recommend that there are alternative routes, such as functional skills qualifications, to cater for differing learning needs and skills and confidence levels.

Some workplace learners will find that progression to the GCSEs is right for them and this should be supported. However, the new GCSEs should not be seen as the only option for learners to take. Ofqual has an important role in taking steps in ensuring that the functional skills learning is valued and of good quality. Funding arrangements should enable learning providers to offer learners appropriate learning journeys instead of encouraging the options with most funding attached. Information, advice and guidance provided to adult learners has a vital role in getting this right. Union learning reps role as peer support to adult learners in the workplace should be acknowledged with appropriate funding arrangements.

Lastly, the feedback from unions is that they look forward to a longer period of time without constant change of the funding rules and qualifications. The current continuous state of flux makes it difficult to engage adult learners and employers even if the benefits of learning are apparent.

If a learner has failed to get their GCSE it can be for a number of reasons, but sometimes it is just that the qualification itself was not suitable. Simply encouraging them to re-sit the exams over and over again until they achieve is not appropriate, which means that functional skills and other equivalent qualifications, such as ESOL, need to be given an equal footing.