



CAMBRIDGE ASSESSMENT

Research summary – Focus group findings on stakeholders' views on the new English qualification for sixteen year olds

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1 The study

The Research Division at Cambridge Assessment conducted a series of focus groups with the aim of investigating teachers' and employers' views on the development of new qualifications for 16 year olds. Two of the focus groups had stakeholders present who were interested in the new English qualification. One focus group contained 11 English teachers, with representation from independent, comprehensive and grammar schools. The second focus group had five employers present, and included a member of a sector skills council, independent employers and employers linked to the training of 16 year olds for apprenticeships. The study investigated teachers' and employers' views in relation to the following themes:

- A. The important English skills that 16 year olds require for later education and employment
- B. The important knowledge areas in English that 16 year olds require when moving into further education or employment
- C. The views of teachers and employers on the 'statement of achievement'
- D. The perceptions of the grade C in GCSE English
- E. The assessment structure of a new qualification in English
- F. Tiering of the new English qualification
- G. Grading of the new English qualification
- H. The use of set texts in an English qualification
- I. Selection of 16 year olds for employment
- J. Training of 16 year olds once in employment.

2 Main findings

- A. The participants in the English focus groups considered the following skills to be the most important for 16 year olds to progress to later education and employment: verbal communication and listening; functional literacy and grammar; practical application of language; and extended writing. Both employers and teachers saw these skills as crucial in being able to tailor communication effectively to a recipient.
- B. Some English teachers felt that learning of word classes and analyses of whole texts were important knowledge areas for 16 year olds. However, knowledge of meta-language was deemed not as important as constructing sentences effectively. Employers added that they would like students to have more knowledge of different forms of writing (eg formal vs informal).
- C. The majority of the participants across the two focus groups were opposed to the idea of a 'statement of achievement'. The employers thought that it could be useful, if it highlighted students' motivations for specific jobs, but thought it should be for all students. Teachers raised a number of concerns including its usefulness in helping students gain employment, the difficulty of transferring the skill set of a student into appropriate language for a range of audiences and the time to produce such statements.
- D. English teachers considered the grade C "the holy grail" due to its impact on performance league tables. Employers had a number of expectations of someone who had achieved a grade C in English: being able to write in sentences; being able to structure an essay; common words spelled correctly; and a functional vocabulary.
- E. The English teachers were generally in favour of teaching literature and language as a combined qualification. Some teachers saw the distinction between the two as artificial, as language could be taught through literature. When asked how 'teaching to the test' could be avoided, teachers thought that unseen elements were potentially useful, as they encouraged teachers to expose students to a variety of different forms of writing.
- F. When asked about tiering, the English teachers did not reach a consensus. Some teachers thought that the removal of tiering would relieve the pressure on teachers to make correct tiering decisions for individual students. However, other teachers thought that tiering made examination papers more accessible to students, and raised concerns that selecting passages to cater for the full ability range would be difficult.
- G. There was no consensus reached on whether the grading system needs to be changed. Several teachers raised concerns about maintaining a consistency with earlier key stages, while others thought that a new grading system would end up being 'converted' into the currency of the current GCSE.
- H. A number of the teachers thought that training would have to be provided for teachers who had not been explicitly taught meta-language during their own education. Several teachers were in favour of a set texts list, provided the list included a wide range of texts. Teachers were in favour of a 'revolving' text selection policy, to prevent too much focus on canonical works.

- I. The employers in the focus group had a range of minimum grade requirements when selecting employees who were leaving compulsory education. There was some mistrust as to the predictive value of grades for later attainment. In addition to grades, several other criteria, for instance, candidates' previous work experience, team work and communication skills and professed motivation for a job role influenced the selection process.
- J. The employers listed a number of training provisions they had in place for their new 16-year-old employees. These included remedial literacy and numeracy training (eg how to write effective emails) and job-specific training (eg how to use a particular software programme).