



ASSOCIATION
OF COLLEGES

Department for Education

Maths and English functional skills: revised subject content

Association of Colleges response

6 November 2017

1. Does the proposed subject content cover the appropriate knowledge and understanding for functional skills in these subjects?

There needs to be clarification on the purpose of functional skills. Currently, they are taught as part of an apprenticeship, for adults returning to learning and under the condition of funding for 16 to 18-year-olds on Study Programmes who have achieved grades lower than D/3 at GCSE. For the latter group, current policy sets out that achieving a Level 2 Functional Skill in English or maths is not sufficient; the student needs to 'progress' to study GCSE. This means that Functional Skills as a brand are not regarded as highly as GCSE.

There needs to be a review of whether Functional Skills should be a 'stepping stone' to GCSE or an end in their own right: Are Functional Skills aimed at employment or are they a stepping stone to GCSE and further 'academic' study? Which is more appropriate for a 16 to 18-year-old student on a technical education programme or an adult aiming to enter or progress in the work place?

Finally, the current progress measures provide a perverse incentive to place students on GCSE. Moving from a 2/E to a 3/D is worth the same points as achieving Level 2 Functional Skills. As a result, since the introduction of the condition of funding in 2014/15, the number of 16 to 18-year-olds studying for Functional Skills has dropped dramatically, by 54% in English and 32% in maths¹.

In the short term, colleges should be able to use professional judgement to decide whether GCSEs or Functional Skills at the level suited to the student's ability and confidence are the most appropriate. In the longer term, DfE should consider a wholesale review of post-16 English and maths, and look at a more nuanced approach within the context of the Skills Plan for technical education. This would ensure that students study contextual English and maths as required by their individual route and for everyday life. We recognise that this may mean that students will be required to study maths to Level 3 in some routes.

In the interim, the proposed subject content covers much of the appropriate knowledge and understanding. However, the skills expected at each level appear to have shifted slightly. For example, some of the skills previously seen at Level 1 are now in Entry 3 and so on. Whilst we can appreciate that this may be a way of preparing students for GCSE and stretching them, there are students who struggle at lower levels and will not be preparing for GCSE.

AoC members have identified that on a number of occasions, the content appears to be too advanced for the level, and have provided some specific examples. Within the English, for example, colleges have suggested that the Entry 2 level has some difficult skills for students in both reading and writing. One example provided around the letter writing was cited. This is the same for Entry 3 in English, where the writing a report example was identified as being difficult for E3 students. In Level 1 English, colleges identified that some of the skills needed, for example possessive apostrophes were previously a Level 2 skill. Colleges had similar comments in relation to the maths requirements. In Entry 1 for example, AoC members noted that if a student is only required to 'read, write, order and compare numbers up to 20', then it

¹ Mides/ILR data

is unreasonable to require them to 'recognise the hours in a day; number of weeks in a year'. There were similar comments for Entry 2, including that recognising tenths is advanced for E2, it should simply be halves, quarters, fifths, and the introduction of mm, cm, ml and g in comparison to metres, litres and kilograms is contradictory to the student only being able to 'count reliably to 50 items'. This is the same for pints.

Level 2 seems to be very GCSE dominant which shows that they are very similar and allows for easier progression to the GCSE syllabus (if that is the intended purpose of Functional Skills).

Contextualisation for teaching will be needed to bring Functional Skills to life. It is also important that consideration is given to the contexts provided in exams. These should be employment or everyday financially focused, and avoid scenarios which are unfamiliar to students.

2. At Entry levels: Does the content cover the key elements of literacy and numeracy needed to support learners to progress to higher levels of study in English and mathematics?

At entry level, the overall subject content will enable students to progress to higher levels. However, many 16 to 18-year-old students with D/3 required to take GCSE resits would struggle with the homophones at E3, and yet this is the level required for students to be seen as progressing from grade F/G or 1. In addition, there needs to be clarification of how the word lists in English will be assessed for reading and spelling, and whether this will prevent students from progressing.

College staff may need training to support the teaching of phonetics which is more commonly taught to primary school pupils or students learning English as an additional or foreign language.

At entry level maths, the expectation of solving a problem in a context gets in the way of students developing effective numerical skills. In addition, it should be noted that imperial units have been removed from the GCSE specifications.

AoC member colleges have identified a number of specific issues in relation to Entry level English, and whether the questions are aimed at too high a level. Colleges questioned whether there was a set amount of words to be learned to satisfy the assessment. It was also identified that additional hyphen words are a good idea, but additional time would be needed to teach these. Colleges also noted the need for extra clarity on some issues, for example reinforced spelling, punctuation and grammar, which is seen as a good idea, but a definition on 'mainly correct' is needed.

Colleges also identified issues in relation to Entry level maths. For example, there needs to be more focus on key mathematical methods and processes in E3, such as simple formulae and two and three step calculations to prepare students for Level 1 and ultimately, GCSE/ Core maths as they progress. The guidance for E3 needs to give more direction/indication of the level of problem solving that will be used rather than distinguishing it using familiar/unfamiliar

context alone. In addition, the language is not necessarily accessible for those who do not have English as their first language.

3. At Levels 1 and 2: Does the content cover the key elements of literacy and numeracy needed for employment?

The current condition of funding means that if a 16 to 18-year-old student passes Level 2 Functional Skills in English or maths, s/he still has to study for a GCSE in the subject. Functional Skills at Level 2 should be an end in its own right for students who are focusing on an employment related route.

In general, the content for both English and maths is adequate, but greater consideration needs to be given to synergy with the 15 forthcoming technical routes of the Skills Plan.

English and maths should be embedded and contextualised within each of the 15 technical routes, so that specific skills are covered for each relevant area; e.g. the maths an engineer needs to use is very different to that of a hairdresser, or chef, or digital artist. This also needs to be built around a common framework of core skills and knowledge underpinning Functional Skills English and maths qualifications. For example, a 1,500-word evaluation of a three-month work placement and a synopsis of the maths involved in the role they undertook.

The speaking and listening subject content needs a greater focus on note-taking from verbal discussions to fully prepare for real-life working environments, including training, team meetings and disseminating information to colleagues.

AoC member colleges have made the following comments on Level 1 literacy and numeracy:

In terms of literacy, colleges identified that instructions were mentioned as part of the scope of study, but this was not obvious in the eight points provided. For a technical route, following and understanding instructions needs to be more clearly identified. Colleges also identified that the reading skills covered are comprehensive and have elements of the current Level 2 requirements. In terms of writing, the skills covered are comprehensive and relevant to employment. There is a very high threshold of understanding of grammatical elements, which could be challenging for the level of the students. The inclusion of audience and register in speaking, listening and communicating is positive for progression into employment. These should perhaps also be included in writing.

In terms of numeracy, colleges identified that content does cover some key elements required for employment, however it is too generic and some topics are not relevant. The qualification seems to be of the level of the legacy specification for GCSE maths. There is also no indication as to how the content will link to the 15 technical pathways. Guidance may be required in order to vocationalise/embed the content for both maths and vocational/technical staff. Colleges suggest that Level 2 Functional Skills students could find this level difficult and irrelevant to their chosen area of employment. The level of knowledge required at Levels 1 and 2 should support students into employment. However, there is no coverage of PAYE, NI, payslips,

invoicing, bank accounts and loans which would be helpful for students progressing into employment.

4. At levels 1 and 2: Will the proposed qualifications secure sound progression for the purposes of progression into further study?

Functional Skills should provide sound progression for the purposes of further study, but under the current condition of funding 16 to 18-year-old students have to continue on to study English and maths GCSEs. Functional Skills are not a suitable stepping stone to GCSE. There needs to be clarification regarding the link between Functional Skills and GCSE. Are Functional Skills an end in themselves or a 'stepping stone' to GCSE? If they are the latter the content needs to be reviewed again. Functional Skills do not cover the breadth of a GCSE in terms of subject content.

Colleges have noted that some topics that remain as an omission are:

English

- Reading (a wide range of texts from the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries)
 - Interpretation of a range of literature and high-quality writing
 - Summarising and synthesising from more than one text
 - Effectiveness and impact of vocabulary and grammar
- Writing
 - Creative writing (using imaginative and emotive language, including rhetorical devices)
- Speaking and listening
 - Contributes to the overall qualification unlike in GCSE.

Maths

- Pythagoras
- Algebra
- Standard form
- Simultaneous and quadratic equations
- n th term
- Rotations, reflections, translations and enlargements
- Trigonometry
- Vectors
- Venn diagrams

5. Does the proposed subject content provide assurance that essential knowledge taught in earlier levels is built upon and represented adequately?

The proposed subject content appears to build level on level although there is a significant jump between Entry 3 and Level 1. For some students, the jump between levels will be too great.

6. Do any of the proposals have potential to have a disproportionate impact, positive or negative, on specific learner groups, in particular the 'protected characteristic' groups? (The protected characteristics are age, disability, gender reassignment, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation, marriage and civil partnership, and pregnancy and maternity); if they have potential for an adverse impact, how can this be reduced?

Consideration needs to be given to the needs of students with learning difficulties and disabilities who are working at entry level. The jump between Functional Skills levels, especially between Entry levels and between Entry 3 and Level 1 is often too great. Unitised opportunities would be helpful for this profile of student.

Care must also be taken to attend to the reading level of a maths paper, acknowledging that students may have a disparity and their language skills may be lower than their mathematical ability. However, the language of the maths paper makes it inaccessible (particularly where English is an additional language).

Assessment content should be embedded within employment scenarios. As noted earlier in the submission, contextualising the questions into scenarios easily recognisable by students is important.

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