

## **FINDINGS FROM FOCUS GROUPS: IS CONTROLLED ASSESSMENT WORKING?**

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### **SUMMARY**

This paper reports on the findings of a focus group study designed to explore how teachers have responded to the introduction of controlled assessment. A total of three focus groups were convened. The focus groups took place at three schools, with each school represented by six or seven teachers from a variety of subject areas. Analysis of the discussions suggested a number of different themes relating to controlled assessment. These were: support, fairness and validity of the assessment, impact on teaching and learning, logistics, workload and pressure, and change. Overall, the findings suggested that, although there are some issues specific to controlled assessment, the broader problem is that teachers feel they have not been adequately supported in the changes that have been made. In addition, it seems that while controlled conditions are not problematic for individual subjects, significant logistical issues arise when several subjects are required to work under these controls. Although these findings provide an insight into teachers' experiences of controlled assessment, due to the limited representativeness of the participants and the small scale nature of the study, it is recommended that further research, encompassing a broader range and a larger number of teachers, is conducted. In particular, research to inform the development of appropriate support materials would be of use.

### **INTRODUCTION**

In September 2009, new specifications for the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) qualifications were released for first teaching. These specifications incorporated a number of fundamental changes that represent a shift in the approach to examination at the age of 16. In the pre-2009 GCSEs, many specifications had units which were tiered, with higher ability and lower ability candidates taking different papers with different levels of difficulty. Most specifications required that all units were taken in the same examination series (linear specifications), and in many specifications, students were also required to submit coursework. By contrast, the new specifications are mostly untiered, students are allowed to take different units in different series (modular specifications), and coursework has been replaced by controlled assessment. It is the replacement of coursework with controlled assessment with which this paper is concerned.

Coursework can be defined as "any type of assessment activity undertaken by candidates... during their course of study and that contributes to the final grade awarded for a GCSE qualification" (Qualification and Curriculum Authority [QCA], 2006, p.4). Typically, coursework activities were developed by teachers according to criteria set by the awarding bodies, and were not carried out under close supervision. This type of assessment was intended to assess skills which cannot be easily or sensibly assessed through a written examination, such as practical cooking skills (QCA, 2006). However, a review of GCSE coursework, published by QCA in 2006, highlighted a number of issues which called into question the validity of coursework as an assessment method. One of the main issues was that the responsibility for marking coursework usually fell on the students' teacher. While this marking was subject to quality assurance procedures, it is perhaps inevitable that the consistency of interpreting and applying the mark schemes across schools has been questioned (QCA, 2006). Similarly, the absence of requirements for supervision cast doubt on the authenticity of students' work, with some

research indicating that “by intent or ignorance, some students are copying material from the internet and submitting it as their own work” (QCA, 2006, p.11). Furthermore, the predictability of coursework was also criticised (QCA, 2006). Although it is essential that candidates should be aware of what is being tested, predictable assessment allows candidates to be provided with extensive, detailed guidance. Such guidance could include allowing students the opportunities to redraft and re-submit after feedback, providing students with a checklist of things to do or points to include, and administering tutorials or clinics (Ipsos MORI, 2006). In moderation, such support is an acceptable pedagogical practice. When an assessment becomes overly predictable, however, it is easy for this support to be taken to a level where a candidate’s work no longer constitutes a realistic appraisal of their ability to undertake the task. In addition, concerns had been raised about the overall burden of coursework, with students often having to undertake similar pieces of work in several different subjects concurrently (Department for Education, 2005). Such criticisms raised questions about the suitability and validity of coursework as an assessment method.

However, coursework had several benefits and advantages for teachers and candidates. For one thing, it was largely popular; in a survey by Ipsos MORI of 700 heads of subject or department, 93 *per cent* believed that their students benefited from coursework. Coursework was considered to encourage independent learning, to give students the opportunity to gain experience and build subject skills, and ensured they had the opportunity to work in some depth on a particular topic. It was also considered less stressful than exams, and allowed students to work at their own pace. Indeed, 66% of teachers wished to retain coursework in their subject, with 51% of these strongly opposed to the removal of coursework (Ipsos MORI, 2006).

The intention to replace coursework with controlled assessment was complicated by the popularity of coursework among teachers, and by a number of other considerations. Replacing all coursework with an externally set and marked written examination would require an increase in the number of examiners required to carry out marking. This extra cost to the awarding bodies would likely be transferred to schools via the entry fees. The increased number of examiners needed would also present particular difficulties for subjects where examiners were already in short supply (QCA, 2006). Clearly, a compromise between the highly controlled external assessments and the minimally controlled coursework was needed. Thus QCA recommended that, for most subjects, where the predominant learning outcomes concern knowledge and understanding, coursework should be replaced by external examinations or controlled internal assessments, depending on which option was more appropriate<sup>1</sup>. For subjects where a large portion of the learning outcomes concern practical abilities or performance skills (e.g. Art and Design, Home Economics, and Music), coursework and internal assessments should remain (QCA, 2006).

### **The features of controlled assessment**

Over the past two years, most subjects have had their coursework elements replaced with a controlled assessment. Currently, there are three stages to controlled assessment: task setting, task taking and task marking. Each stage has either two levels of control (task marking) or three levels of control (task setting and test taking) (AQA, 2009):

#### ***Task setting***

- Can have limited, medium or high control.

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<sup>1</sup> An exception to this was made for Science, where a form of assessment sufficiently similar to controlled assessment had already been implemented.

- Under high control situations, the awarding body specifies the task.
- Under medium control, the teacher may set the task with guidance from the awarding body (AQA, 2010).
- Under limited control, the teacher may provide the task, or it may be developed from the candidate's personal starting point (AQA, 2008).
- Teachers can usually have access to the task up to a year in advance, but are not permitted to make the tasks available to students until the beginning of the time designated for undertaking the controlled assessment (AQA, 2009).

### ***Task taking***

- Can have limited, medium or high control.
- Specifications are broadly in two categories: those with medium control throughout (with some subjects under limited control for research) and those with limited control for research and high control for analysis and evaluation.
- The 'writing-up' phase in many specifications is taken under high control conditions, where candidates must be formally supervised (AQA, 2009). Students are restricted as to the resources they can use, and they must work independently, without assistance from other students or the teacher.
- Under medium control conditions, the supervision is more informal; candidates may work together in the classroom and the use of resources is less prescribed.
- Under limited control, there is little supervision and candidates may work outside the classroom.
- Under all conditions, the amount of time that students are allowed to spend on the work which will be directly assessed is specified by the awarding body.
- Schools are also required to securely store students' work between sessions, presumably except for work produced under limited control conditions (AQA, 2010).

### ***Task marking***

- Can only have medium or high control.
- Under medium control, the work is marked by the teacher and moderated by the awarding body.
- Under high control, the awarding body marks the work (AQA, 2009).
- Currently, only Modern Foreign Languages and Welsh are under high control; for all other specifications the marking is identical to the system used previously for coursework (QCA, 2008).

For all three stages, these levels of control are set by the regulators and so are the same for equivalent specifications, regardless of the awarding body offering the specification (QCA, 2008).

While QCA's 2006 report emphasised the need to consider issues of manageability in designing new assessment arrangements (QCA, 2006), initial feedback from schools indicates that many have experienced difficulties in implementing controlled assessment. Wheadon, Pinot de Moira and Meyer (2010) comment that "indications are emerging that [controlled assessment] is not working well in centres", noting that this is hardly surprising given that no piloting took place before implementation (p.16). Letters from schools and feedback from visits to schools indicate that a number of schools have expressed difficulty in co-ordinating controlled assessments across the timetable, commenting also that controlled assessment detracts a large amount of time from normal teaching. Both issues are compounded when the impact of catering for students with special educational needs or students who missed the original date for controlled

assessment is considered. Further, there is concern that private candidates are unable to take controlled assessments, as schools are often unwilling to provide the necessary levels of supervision. As many courses cannot be completed unless a controlled assessment is undertaken, there is concern that private candidates are effectively being excluded from gaining GCSE qualifications in many subjects. Schools have also expressed concern at the amount of pressure put on students by controlled assessment, and the effects of the assessment on their motivation and their marks. Some schools observed that they found it difficult to ensure students had sufficient access to computers, and were concerned that schools with better ICT facilities and other resources may be unfairly advantaged. Some positive feedback has been received, however, with some schools commenting that controlled assessment has reduced the time they spent “chasing up” students for coursework and observing that their students responded positively to it.

At present, the evidence regarding the effectiveness and suitability of controlled assessment is largely anecdotal. Importantly, the feedback received so far from schools has been mostly unsolicited. As such, it is unclear whether these issues affect all schools, or merely those who have taken the time to make their views known. Therefore, in moving forward with the new GCSE specifications, it was deemed prudent to gather more evidence regarding the effectiveness (or otherwise) of controlled assessments. Accordingly, this study aims to investigate the experiences of schools in implementing controlled assessment, both within the classroom and within the school as a whole. This includes identifying the support that schools need to effectively run the controlled assessments.

## **METHOD**

### **Methodology and design**

Given the nature of the research questions, a participant-led methodology such as focus groups seemed most appropriate. Focus groups allow the collection of rich and detailed data, and allow the participants to define what the important issues are (Bryman, 2004). Focus groups also permit different viewpoints to be discussed and can encourage participants to compare and contrast their experiences (Bryman, 2004). Indeed, this research is interested in differences, as well as similarities, between the problems and approaches experienced by different teachers, in different situations or subject areas. In accordance with Krueger and Casey's (2000) recommendations, it was determined that five focus groups was sufficient to reach saturation point - the point where it is less likely that new ideas or opinions will emerge (Krueger & Casey, 2000). However, as discussed further below, in the event, three focus groups were convened.

### **Participants**

The sampling frame for the study consisted of schools within a 15 mile radius of Manchester. An invitation to participate outlining the aims and purpose of the research was sent to the Headteachers of five schools (see Appendix A). This was followed with a telephone call two weeks later. Two schools declined to participate and replacements were sought. However, despite these efforts, it was only possible to recruit three schools in total.

Seven teachers took part in the first focus group, and six teachers took part in the second and third focus groups. Schools were asked to ensure that one teacher was responsible for a “high

control” subject<sup>2</sup>, such as History, Statistics, Geography or a Modern Foreign Language (MFL). Similarly, as English and ICT have only been available since 2010, it was requested that a teacher from one of these subjects was also included. As such, the participants represented a range of subjects, both in terms of content and the level of control over and familiarity with the controlled assessment. All participating teachers did some teaching at GCSE level. To promote a general discussion about controlled assessment, schools were encouraged to include both participants using AQA and participants using awarding bodies other than AQA. The focus groups were held in March and April 2011.

The information below details the characteristics of participating schools; all information has been taken from the schools’ websites, the Ofsted reports, and the 2010 league tables.

### ***Focus group one***

Participants in the first focus group worked in a selective school. Comparatively few students at the school require learning support or have special educational needs (SEN). The proportion of students eligible for free school meals is below average. Students come from the top of the ability range, with over 90% achieving five or more A\* to C GCSE grades, including English and Maths, in 2010. The school took a high number of GCSE subjects with AQA in June 2010.

Seven teachers took part: six females and one male. The subjects represented were History, Business Studies, Geography, MFL, English, Design and Technology, Expressive Arts, Physical Education, Music, and Design (with one teacher having responsibility for the latter five subjects).

### ***Focus group two***

Participants in the second focus group worked in a comprehensive school. The school has a below average proportion of students requiring significant support to learn in English or who have SEN. The proportion of students eligible for free school meals is below average. In 2010, just over 70% of students achieved five or more A\* to C GCSE grades, including English and Maths. The school took a high number of GCSE subjects with AQA in June 2010.

Six teachers took part: five females and one male. The subjects represented were English, History, MFL and Geography. One participant was the deputy head teacher for the school.

### ***Focus group three***

Participants in the third focus group worked in a secondary modern. The proportion of students with learning difficulties or disabilities is above average. The proportion of students eligible for free school meals is below average. In 2010, around 60% of students achieved five or more A\* to C passes at GCSE, including English and Maths. The school took a medium number of GCSE subjects with AQA in June 2010.

Six teachers took part: five females and one male. The subjects represented were English, Maths/Statistics, MFL, History, Geography, and Child Development. The representative for Child Development also provided feedback from other Design and Technology subjects. One participant was the assistant head teacher for the school.

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<sup>2</sup> As the majority of subjects are medium control, it did not seem necessary to specify that a teacher from one of these subjects be included.

***Limitations in the sample***

This study included only three focus groups rather than the five suggested by Krueger and Casey, 2000. Further, only three of the seven schools which were contacted agreed to participate. It is possible that these schools differ in some systematic way from the schools which did not choose to participate. The participating schools are also fairly homogeneous. All schools are located in the Greater Manchester area, are generally successful and have catchment areas with average or below average levels of socioeconomic deprivation. While there are differences in student make-up, ability and achievement, these schools by no means represent the entire spectrum of ability. Importantly, none of the schools have high levels of students with special educational needs, who may have a very different experience of controlled assessment.

Finally, not all subjects were represented. English, History, Geography and the Modern Foreign Languages were represented in all three focus groups, but other subjects, such as Music, Drama, and Maths were less well-represented. Other subjects, such as Classical Civilisation and Engineering, were not represented at all. For this reason, and those outlined above, the findings from this study are unlikely to be representative of the views of all schools involved in controlled assessment, however, this study does provide a useful initial insight.

**Procedure**

Before commencing the discussions, participants were reminded of the aim and purpose of the study and that the focus group would be audio-recorded. Participants were reassured that their data would remain confidential and that no data would be published or distributed in a format that would allow the participants to be identified. All participants signed a consent form (see Appendix B).

The focus groups broadly followed the structure outlined in the focus group schedule (see Appendix C). However, this structure was designed to act more as a series of prompts to stimulate discussion if needed than as a strict list of questions. Ideally, there would be little need for the facilitator to intervene, as the intention was to allow the participants to decide the direction and important issues of the discussion. The facilitator's main role then, was to ensure that all participants had an opportunity to respond, and to ensure that the discussion remained relevant to controlled assessment. An additional researcher acted as an observer, taking notes of the discussion and monitoring the audio-recorder. Each focus group lasted approximately an hour.

**ANALYSIS**

As the study aimed to yield descriptive data, analysis of the data for dominant themes was deemed sufficient. Each focus group recording was transcribed verbatim. The facilitator and observer independently read the transcripts, coding each section with a theme that characterised that section. Similar or related themes were then clustered together (Willig, 2001). A theme was considered dominant if there was significant strength of feeling regarding the matter, and if similar comments were made by several individuals (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The themes generated by the facilitator and the observer were then compared to check the validity of the findings. Disagreements about interpretation were resolved through discussion.

## FINDINGS

The findings are outlined below as a series of dominant themes. The themes are intertwined, with issues raised from one theme linking closely to issues of another theme. The links, along with any disagreements between or within groups for a given theme, have been highlighted. Each theme is accompanied by quotes which exemplify the point of discussion. As the research was participant-led rather than researcher-led, the extent to which each theme was discussed varied between groups.

Although a number of clear themes could be identified, the attitudes towards each theme were mixed, and for most themes both positive and negative perspectives were shared. All relevant perspectives on a theme have been included.

The findings section discusses the following themes: support, fairness and validity of the assessments, impact on teaching and learning, logistics, workload and pressure, and change.

### Theme 1: Support

By far the most dominant theme running through all three focus groups was the issue of support. Although one or two teachers had more positive experiences, the overwhelming majority of the participants felt that they had been inadequately supported by the awarding bodies, both for the controlled assessments specifically, and for the new GCSE specifications more broadly.

Perhaps the biggest source of discontent was concerning the regulations: the teachers felt that they were unclear, often complex, occasionally unworkable, and many commented that they had been given conflicting advice from the exam boards, both from face to face meetings and from the guidance materials provided.

*There's contradiction in the handbook. It says the children cannot confer while they're producing their draft but then it says they can ask each other an item of vocabulary so either they can't confer or they can. (Female, MFL, group two)*

*I mean there are guidelines, don't get me wrong... but it's been very wishy-washy. One minute they can use the books, and then they can't. (Female, MFL, group three)*

Teachers expressed similar dissatisfaction and confusion regarding the teaching support materials. Participants in all three focus groups felt that there was a lack of appropriate support and exemplar material. Comments included that the exemplar material did not cover a sufficient range of marks, that there were factual errors in the support material, or simply that there was not enough of it. Some felt that the support materials had been rushed, or in some cases, that they were "cut and paste" versions of support material from the old specifications.

*The text books have been rushed... the number of spelling errors and historical errors within the book kind of suggest that things have been rushed; you know contradictory dates such as when the Blitz started... (Female, History, group two)*

The guidance for marking the controlled assessment was also considered inadequate; teachers were especially concerned that they did not have information on what grade a particular mark

was worth<sup>3</sup>. They commented that this was difficult when providing feedback to students and their parents, as well as for creating predicted grades and making re-sit decisions.

*They ask us what grade is that, but we don't know because it's all in bands, so it's band six and it's band five. Then on parents evening, well what grade is that... and you can't answer that question. (Female, English, group one)*

*Every school ends up trying to work out some kind of system as to what band is what grade. And I sort of worry, at the back of my head, like, oh no what if I think I'm giving a student an A but actually... (Female, English, group three)*

Teachers expressed frustration with their difficulties in getting clarification and support from the exam boards. The feeling seemed to be that they had been made responsible for finding out what they needed to know, rather than having the information given to them by the awarding bodies. Given the level of accountability that they felt for their students' grades, this was understandably stressful.

*If it's something that's as important as a controlled assessment I'd like it sent to me... or even actually a letter so I get it... instead of having to go and find the information all the time yourself. (Male, Humanities, group three)*

In sum, support was a strong theme running through all three discussions. The vast majority of teachers agreed that there was a lack of support from the awarding bodies in a number of areas, and were concerned that they were inadvertently disadvantaging their students as a result.

## **Theme 2: Fairness and validity of the assessments**

The participants also shared their views on the validity of the controlled assessments in terms of how well they measured students' abilities. This was closely linked to issues of fairness. However, unlike the problems with support outlined above, opinions about the fairness and validity of the controlled assessments were mixed.

Some felt that the controlled assessments were little more than rote learning, particularly in MFL subjects. Some felt that the students who did not perform as well in exam conditions were disadvantaged, arguing that they were being deprived of the chance to show their true ability. Similarly, some teachers felt that the time restrictions placed upon students did not allow them to demonstrate the best of their abilities in the same way that coursework had. This was particularly the case for higher ability students.

*Children are faced four times in Key Stage 4 with a rote learning task... because if anybody imagines that children are going to produce pieces of writing, or oral work, off the top of their head, they are living in complete cloud cuckoo land. (Female, MFL, group one)*

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that this is likely to be intentional, as the awarding bodies themselves would have a limited notion of where the grade boundaries would be until after the controlled assessments had been submitted and the awarding process had taken place. It is likely that under the old specifications, the grade boundaries had been stable enough over the years to give teachers a clear indication of the expected relationship between marks and grades (as opposed to the awarding bodies specifying this relationship).



*With the written work they used to be able to go away and work on it and they could look at the linguistic sides of their written work and spend more time, whereas now... they have two lessons of preparation time and then the third lesson is when they write it up in neat. (Female, MFL, group three)*

One teacher commented that the quality of students' work was also determined by the year in which they completed the controlled assessment. They suggested that performance in Year 10 would not be as good as those who completed the assessment in Year 11. Consequentially, the accuracy and validity of the final grade for a subject would be affected by the timing of the controlled assessment<sup>4</sup>. As controlled assessment can account for up to 60 per cent of the final mark, this is a significant consideration.

*We've got to do two units in year ten, two in year eleven. The controlled assessment's got to come somewhere in that. It's going to have to come in year ten because we've got more opportunity to prepare them but then that doesn't necessarily mean that those children have had the opportunity to build up the skills that they need to do it yet. You know, there's always those pupils in year ten who are okay, but suddenly in year eleven they come into their own and really flourish. (Female, History, group two)*

Others, however, felt that the controlled assessments, in requiring the students to produce the work "on the spot", provided a more accurate reflection of their students' abilities. For some, the focused, controlled nature of the assessment enabled students to produce higher quality work than coursework had, encouraging them to produce work that better displayed their skills. Some felt that the change to controlled assessment had not altered the skills that were tested, and considered that both were equally good measures of ability in the subject.

*It's probably a fair representation of what their actual abilities are because they've got to do the work and perform there and then and actually show what they can do. (Female, History, group two)*

*I think that the controlled assessments have been mostly positive, particularly in the way that the children focus on them... because of the way that we structure them under exam conditions, the actual writing of them under exam conditions, it's obliged them to produce a really, really focused piece of work so what they're producing is a much higher quality than they had previously under coursework. (Female, English, group two)*

Similarly, some teachers argued that the exam-like conditions of the controlled assessments encouraged their students to take the assessment more seriously, and to produce work that better reflected the best of their ability. The controls also ensured that students who might otherwise produce no work had something to hand in for marking.

*There were fewer children missing pieces of work because to all intents and purposes they see it as an exam. They seem to treat much more seriously than they did under coursework. (Female, English, group two)*

However, some teachers felt that controlled assessment, combined with modularisation, had led students not to take the assessment seriously, as they felt they could just re-take it.

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<sup>4</sup> It is worth note, however, that such maturation effects are likely to be present across all forms of assessment under the new modular scheme.

*Because they're called controlled assessments the children don't take them seriously... they're getting used to the idea of modular exams and modular exams they can re-sit. And we have said... because of the numbers, because of the logistics, because of all of the implications, we have said we will not routinely allow children to repeat controlled assessments because it's just a nightmare...* **(Female, MFL, group one)**

The discussion about how well the marks reflect students' ability naturally extended into discussion about the effect of mark schemes on validity. Some participants argued that the approach to marking in their subject did not adequately reward the skills demonstrated, or did not adequately discriminate between students.

*You are penalised, in Geography, for the most ridiculous thing. You could have done an absolutely amazing map work... and if the map doesn't have a north line on it... it doesn't qualify, so it's level 1. And actually, the work that they've done for it is level 3.* **(Female, Geography, group one)**

*The whole year group are within four marks of each other. But in terms of ability there is a much bigger spread than that.* **(Female, English, group one)**

Some teachers felt that changes in the mark scheme and the structure of the assessment led to an unfair level of demand. Concerns that students would be dissuaded from the subject were also raised.

*On the new specification, our weighting for writing and speaking have been increased to 30 per cent each... we've taken the two most difficult skills and we have awarded a greater percentage of the mark. This, in a subject where it was already acknowledged that for children to get the highest grades was more difficult. Is it any wonder that this country's haemorrhaging linguists when we just keep putting increasingly difficult hurdles in their way instead of being able to develop linguists who are skilled?* **(Female, MFL, group one)**

Others had more positive experiences of the new mark schemes, commenting that they were clearer and more accessible. Some argued that the new controls had led to better standardisation of marking for the internal assessments, and presumably to greater fairness in the marks awarded.

*The high level control write up has got a definite time limit on it and a word guidance with it... every year there used to be people arguing that someone would have a 45 page piece of coursework got an A\* and somebody else arguing that a nine page piece of coursework got an A\* and they were both right, but the word limit has kind of brought everyone into line.* **(Male, Geography, group two)**

Finally, teachers expressed concern that the openness to interpretation of the rules of the controlled assessments, as outlined above, could lead to unfairness, as different schools might carry out the assessments in different ways.

*You're only allowed to give them the sources that they can study for the actual answers two weeks before... we have five hours in that two weeks but I feel it should be hours*

*rather than weeks because, you know, some schools could be having less time than that, some schools could be having considerably more. (Female, History, group two)*

Clearly, if different interpretations in the rules lead to students receiving different levels of support, then work at the same grade would not reflect the same level of achievement, thus compromising the validity of the assessment.

Although not often raised explicitly, notions of validity and fairness underpinned many of the discussions in the focus groups. The extent to which the mark schemes and the regulations for the controlled assessments, as well as the assessments themselves, contributed towards producing fair and accurate indications of a student's ability were debated. The impact of the assessments on students' motivation to produce work which reflected the best of their ability was also discussed.

### **Theme 3: Impact on teaching and learning**

The extent to which the introduction of controlled assessments had impacted on students' educational experiences, both through changes to the quality of the teaching and the quality of their learning, were also discussed.

Closely linked to the relationship between the mark schemes and validity, as outlined above, was the effect that those mark schemes had on the quality of teaching and feedback that students received. Some teachers felt that the new mark schemes improved their ability to give feedback.

*I think the feedback that I've been able to give them of the marks scheme, it's much more focused so we can target that particular weakness in the next essay... I can give them more sort of positive, useful and constructive feedback and set targets in line with the marks scheme. (Female, English, group three)*

Some teachers, however, felt that they had no sense of what feedback was needed to help students improve. This was tied to the problems outlined above with the guidance about the relationship between marks and grades and the lack of appropriate support materials. In cases where the mark scheme was prescriptive, teachers argued that they had resorted to teaching to the mark scheme. In both cases, teachers felt that the quality of students' learning was affected.

*You know, you shouldn't be rewarding weak geog... well whatever subject it is, you shouldn't be rewarding that but to not reward because it's not met a particular... criteria, seems a bit backward ... you're not teaching them to be a good geographer, you're teaching them to pass it. (Female, Geography, group one)*

*That's been quite a considerable issue... of being able to say quite explicitly to the children... "This is where you currently are, and this is what you've got to do to move on". We're having quite a good deal of difficulty in that at the moment because we're having a bit of a lack of information and support material. (Female, English, group two)*

Further, the regulation that teachers should not provide feedback during controlled time was contentious. Participants felt that this requirement did not sit easily with their status as teachers,

and worried that their students were missing out on opportunities to learn from their experiences during the controlled assessment.

*And that's like a learning opportunity isn't it? That moment when the child says "What about this?" and you're actually not allowed to say. They're missing out on a learning opportunity that they could take forward and perhaps develop. (Female, English, group two)*

However, others felt that the restrictions on the controlled assessment provided learning opportunities they might not have otherwise, including increased opportunity to work independently and for creative work.

*When we did the traditional coursework and we would let them take it home and they'd do it on computers, they would rely heavily on spell check and things like that... and then when they go into the exam and, you know, there's a chunk of marks awarded for the spelling, punctuation and grammar, they would fall down on that area. So I think it's making them think more about what they are writing. (Female, English, group three)*

*It's good that pupils do get used to working in a controlled amount of time. I do think that that element of it is good, that they understand how to organise their time, organise their work, look at what they've got to do and how long they've got to do it. (Female, MFL, group three)*

Thus it seems the effects of controlled assessment on the quality of the teaching students receive and the quality of their learning is mixed, with some teachers arguing that controlled assessment provided new opportunities for learning, or that the mark scheme improved the feedback students received, and others arguing that controlled assessment reduced learning opportunities and encouraged teaching to the test.

#### **Theme 4: Logistics**

For the majority of teachers, the management and the logistics of controlled assessment had presented significant obstacles. The logistical issues included timetabling and access to resources.

Many teachers felt that the controlled assessments took up a large amount of their teaching time, with a number of consequences. Teachers felt they did not have enough time to teach the subject content, that the amount of assessment led to a narrowing of students' educational experiences, and that they often needed to take time out of other subjects to fit the assessment hours in. In addition, this led to disruption in teaching the lower years.

*We're actually talking about children in Year 10 and 11 being restricted in where they can go, trips, visits, things that are educationally... of benefit to them because of the impact upon the controlled time because if you try to map it across the school calendar, there are very few times when there isn't a level of controlled assessments. (Female, English, group one)*

*We can't teach the Key Stage 3 the skills that they need to be able to go on the visits. We used to do two or three visits a year for year nine and now we're doing perhaps one*

*visit a year. And it's not just a day out its whether they're actually learning skills that many of them will then take on and do at GCSE. (Male, Geography, group two)*

This issue of timetabling was exacerbated when students were absent from the controlled time, or when a cohort was particularly large. Further, as one teacher noted, after-school and lunchtime catch-up sessions were not always feasible.

*If a pupil's off ill or missing one time, it's very awkward to try and get them to get up to speed with the rest of the class... you've got to put extra provision for them. Whereas before when they were just doing coursework, there was a lot more freedom there than there is now. (Male, Humanities, group three)*

*If you try and do it lunchtime they're going out for lunch, it's noisy et cetera, so you're trying to do that after school and I think we're perhaps a little unusual in that we have a huge number of kids that travel quite a long way and it's not so easy for them just to walk home afterwards... then you clash with somebody's else's detention. (Female, English, group one)*

Not all teachers agreed, however. Some felt that the controlled assessments were easier to manage than the coursework had been, taking up less of their time – both in lessons and in chasing up students to hand in work.

*For us it's one big task that it works out quite well... as regards time taken out of lessons it's actually been done and dealt with a lot quicker than, you know, coursework. (Male, Business Studies, group one)*

One logistical obstacle which all teachers agreed upon was that of access to resources. This was particularly problematic for subjects where ICT is a compulsory element. Teachers expressed concern that their students would receive lower marks for their work if they did not have access to ICT or other resources. Often, the problem was not that the school did not have the resources, but that they did not have enough for the entire cohort to use them. Again, these problems were exacerbated with absent students or large cohorts. One geography teacher also raised the issue of field-work, arguing that they were restricted logistically in where they could go to carry out field-work, which meant that they had to make the question fit their location, rather than being able to take the students to the best location for that question.

*It's a huge demand on the resources. They see a nice little piece of work that looks fantastic with a school, from one small cohort of school, and then the assumption is that all these schools have got access to CAD equipment, to laser cutters, to fantastic resources, but you try and get 180 kids through that, not just for example 20... So I think it's the unrealistic... expectations. (Female, D&T, Expressive Arts, PE, Music and Design, group one)*

*The location that we use this year... you'll have to make the question fit that field work location because you can't set up going somewhere else again... if you could do a river study you can do it nice and easy but you can't take a hundred kids down a river... You've got to do something urban because you can't physically get the kids to do something physical because you can't actually manage them. (Female, Geography, group one)*

The requirement for controlled, supervised time to complete internal assessment work thus seems to have had mixed effects. For some teachers, these effects have been largely negative, with the number of hours where students must be supervised leading to difficulties in timetabling and teaching. For others, the requirement for supervision has made the internal assessment process quicker. All teachers, however, were agreed that the need to supervise students had created significant problems in terms of accessing resources.

### **Theme 5: Workload and pressure**

The extent to which controlled assessment had impacted on the workload of both teachers and students was discussed. Understandably, the issue of workload was closely linked to that of pressure.

Some teachers felt that controlled assessments had added to their workload, through increased paperwork, planning and marking. Changes to the assessment added to this workload, and some argued that even small changes to the task or the guidelines could also lead to significant extra work. Some teachers felt unhappy at the increase in the amount of marking expected from them.

*The fact that the controlled assessment changes every two years is a massive problem as well... the fact that one whole section of it, half of it, changes every two years is a huge chunk of work to put on people. (Female, History, group two)*

*The percentage of internal assessment has increased considerably whereas the external exam has previously been 60%. Now the controlled assessment task is 60% for which we're responsible for the marking and the standardisation of it and that's only in one course. (Female, English, group two)*

However, some teachers felt that controlled assessment had improved their workload in some areas. For some, the marking had become less onerous than it had been for the coursework. As mentioned above, some teachers' workloads were reduced by not needing to chase up students who had not done the work.

*We used to mark the written coursework but send off the speaking and it's completely changed now. We mark the speaking and the exam board are going to mark the writing. So for us, it used to take a lot longer to mark the writing than we've found that it has done to mark the speaking and we've enjoyed marking the speaking a lot more. (Female, MFL, group three)*

*In the past it's been, you know, this time of year, getting them all in, finishing things off, whereas it's done and we've managed to do it and we can box that off and finish it. So for me it's been quite positive. (Female, Child Development, group three)*

The workload and consequent pressure experienced by students was also discussed. Overall, students were felt to be under pressure from a large workload. Modularisation was felt to be particularly problematic as it meant that students were under pressure from controlled assessment throughout the whole school year. Perhaps counter-intuitively, some felt that this increased workload actually reduced pressure in the long term, as students had a large chunk of their final mark "under their belt" before the end of the course.

*A lot of teenagers are still, they're still teenagers, they're still young people. You know, a lot of these kids are only fourteen and they're managing quite large work burdens, particularly the able. (Female, English, group one)*

*While I think it's a good thing that they're not under pressure for everything at the end of Year Eleven in the terminal exam in the summer, it does mean that there are pressure points elsewhere as well and if you've got children who... don't cope well with examination pressures then, you know, it can be quite intense for them. (Female, Deputy Head, group two)*

Thus while the teachers disagreed on the extent to which they experienced greater workloads and pressure due to controlled assessment, there was agreement that students generally had a greater workload than previously, largely because of modularisation. Whether this had a positive or negative effect on the pressure experienced by students was up for debate, however.

### **Theme 6: Change**

Among the participants, there was notable variation in the way that they interpreted the change to controlled assessment.

For some teachers, controlled assessment closely reflected the way that they had chosen to organise coursework in the past. For these teachers, it seems very little had changed with the introduction of controlled assessment.

*I don't think it's had a big impact because we've always had quite controlled, you know, timescales on things... I mean, it's not been quite so intensive as 'You're not leaving this room'... but it's not really been a huge change for us, because that's how we've always done it really. (Female, Child Development, DT, group three)*

While some were inclined to attribute the changes in their experience to features of the controlled assessment alone, others felt that other changes to the specification, such as modularisation, had also had an impact.

*Some of these issues haven't just materialised because of the introduction of controlled assessment... the other things are happening because of the way that examinations are developing are happening I think, and the modularisation of them, whether it's controlled assessment or coursework. (Female, Deputy Head, group two)*

For other teachers, it was not the specific nature of the change, but the change itself which had affected their experience. Some of those whose experience had been more negative felt that the obstacles presented by controlled assessment would be overcome as they became more familiar with the requirements. With time, they would be able to adjust their teaching to suit the new assessments.

*I do think with practice, for us in particular, it will get easier. And I think as teachers, once we've spent more time analysing and looking at our schemes of work, looking at what they've been able to do and what they've not been able to do, I think we'll be able to improve our teaching in the future. (Female, MFL, group three)*

## DISCUSSION

The themes presented here have been derived to represent as closely as possible the issues that were discussed in the focus groups. Many of the issues raised were specific to the teachers' individual circumstances, and their significance for teachers in general will vary depending on the level of control of the subject and the subject itself. The aim of this discussion is to draw out some broad conclusions from the study.

Interestingly, and in contrast to much of the anecdotal evidence received by AQA, the participants were able to offer a range of positive and negative perspectives on controlled assessment. For almost every theme any negative perspectives are balanced by alternative, positive, perspectives. As such, it seems that controlled assessment is not an inherently bad design. It is certainly striking that many of the issues discussed here could equally have applied to coursework – issues such as equity between centres, the validity of the marking schemes and the pressure on students, for example. Few of the issues raised are problems inherent within controlled assessment as a design. Despite this, it is clear that many teachers felt strongly about the changes that have been made. Indeed, it seems that the issue is about implementing change, and the way it has been managed.

This is evident in that, although the quotes presented here relate only to controlled assessment, at several points in the discussions the participants slipped into discussing the new GCSEs generally. Many of the issues raised relate to the modularisation of the course as much as to the introduction of controlled assessments: the idea that students taking the assessment in Year 10 are potentially disadvantaged compared to those in Year 11, the constant pressure of assessment, the lack of opportunities for enrichment in the Key Stage 4 timetable and so on.

It is also telling that the most dominant theme in all three focus groups was lack of support. Teachers expressed frustration at the inadequate support materials, and what they felt to be the rushed nature of the changes. Lack of clarity in the rules and the changes to the rules and tasks were the primary causes of concerns about lack of equity between schools and about teacher pressure and workload. In other words, it seems that teachers felt that they had not been given sufficient advice and support to deal with the changes that had been made, and as such, had not been able to deal with them as easily or successfully as they might have done otherwise.

Further, while the requirement for extra control over internal assessment work does not seem problematic in itself, it does seem to have exacerbated existing issues. For example, extra time has needed to be found in an already time-pressured curriculum; students who miss lessons cause more disruption than usual as they cannot catch up on what they have missed at home; access to the schools' resources has been further constrained as they can no longer be supplemented by students' resources at home. All these things are manageable within one subject, but the compound effect of these new requirements appears to create difficulties when several subjects must work this way.

However, while broadly speaking there is nothing wrong with controlled assessment in itself, some specific issues were raised in the discussions which seem worth consideration. For example, the difficulties schools are experiencing in providing access to ICT resources for all their students is perhaps concerning given that ICT skills are, and are likely to continue to be, essential for daily life and work. Similarly, the fairness and the pedagogical justification of the requirement that teachers should not provide feedback also merits consideration, given the large amount of teaching time which now seems to be given to controlled assessment. It may



also be worth remembering that changes in the weightings of internal and external assessments can have considerable impact on the workload of teachers.

These issues aside, however, it seems that the majority of the objections towards controlled assessment stem from two main sources: a lack of high-quality guidance and support from awarding bodies about the controlled assessment specifically and the new specifications generally, and the logistical difficulties of implementing controlled assessment across several different subjects.

However, although this study can be considered to provide useful insight into the problems relating to controlled assessment, it is important to remember that these findings cannot be considered to represent the experiences of all teachers involved in controlled assessment. As outlined above, fewer focus groups were carried out than is ideal and both the schools and the teachers were similar in a number of ways. Further, not all the subjects affected by controlled assessment were represented in the study. As such, it would seem worth conducting further research with a wider sample, with more diversity in terms of their geographical location, student catchment and subjects sampled, should a deeper and more generalisable appreciation of the issues be required. If so, the findings from this study could be used to inform the development of an appropriately tailored questionnaire.

Indeed, even within this small sample, there were significant differences between teachers in the extent to which they had adjusted to the changes presented by the new GCSE specifications. What remains unclear, however, is the extent to which differences in adjustment are due to features of the teacher, the school, the awarding body, or the subject being taught. Further research would be required to unpick the role of each of these in affecting teachers' experiences of the changes, to inform the development of support materials that are appropriate to the majority of teachers.

In addition to providing a basis for further investigation, the findings of this study can be taken as a reminder of the importance of careful planning, detailed guidance and high quality support materials in any major change to assessment. Based on these teachers' experiences, it would seem worth taking the time to ensure that teachers, and thus their students, are fully supported. This seems essential for maintaining good teacher-awarding body relationships, and to ensure that all teachers and students are adequately equipped for success.

Kate Tremain  
16<sup>th</sup> May 2011

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## APPENDIX A – LETTER TO SCHOOLS



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Headteacher  
School name  
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Town  
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Postcode

e-mail: [ktremain@aqa.org.uk](mailto:ktremain@aqa.org.uk)

11 February 2011

Dear <insert name here>

### **Controlled assessment focus groups**

As of September 2009, controlled assessments have replaced coursework in all new GCSE specifications. The AQA is keen to develop a clear picture of the effect that these assessments are having on centres, with a view to informing future improvements to our support and to the assessments we offer. Your centre has been selected as one of five centres whom we would like to invite to participate in an after-school focus group. This is an opportunity for your teachers to discuss their views regarding the controlled assessments, and your input would be greatly appreciated.

We would like a total of six teachers from a range of subjects to participate; ideally, we would also like at least one teacher with responsibility for controlled assessment in Geography, History, Statistics or a Modern Foreign Language and one teacher from English or ICT to take part. It is not necessary that participants teach the AQA specification. The focus groups will be audio-recorded; however, we would like to assure you that information will be rendered anonymous as soon as possible after collection. Furthermore, any data collected during this project will not be made available in an attributable form to any third party outside the AQA Research and Policy Analysis Department, nor will any information be used for any other purpose than that outlined above. Once the research has been completed, we will also ensure that you receive a copy of the findings.

I will ring you in the week beginning 28th February to confirm whether or not you would like to take part in the study. If you have any questions about this project, please do not hesitate to contact me on the details above.

Yours sincerely

Kate Tremain  
Research Assistant

The Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA) is a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales (company number 3644723) and a registered charity (registered charity number 1073334). Registered address: AQA, Devas Street, Manchester M15 6EX.

## APPENDIX B – CONSENT FORM



### Controlled assessment study – consent form

I (name) .....

agree to take part in the above research project. I give my permission for any data I supply to be audio-recorded and transcribed for data analysis purposes. I understand all data collected will be anonymised and any resultant reports will not identify specific individuals. I understand that these reports may be circulated to audiences outside the AQA. I also understand I may withdraw from the research at any time without giving a reason for doing so.

Signed (participant)..... Date.....

Signed (researcher)..... Date.....

## APPENDIX C – FOCUS GROUP SCHEDULE

### FOCUS GROUP SCHEDULE

#### Introductions (5 minutes)

- Introductions. Outline purpose of research and eventual uses.
- Mention use of audio recording – emphasise that this is for personal reference only. May wish to consider turning on the recorder here to allow participants to get used to it before the discussion.
- Outline their rights as participants: data will remain confidential, participants will be made anonymous, and participants have the right to withdraw from discussion or withdraw data at any point.
- Ask participants to fill out consent forms.
- Outline some guidelines for the focus group:
  - discuss practicalities (hour long session)
  - group discussion – researcher is mainly an observer
  - all views are of interest; do not wait to be invited to speak
  - no right or wrong views
  - try to speak clearly and try not to talk over each other (for the recording)

#### Group discussion (60 minutes)

- Switch on tape recorders. Ask participants to state their name and subject/s (to help distinguish between voices in the transcription) Remind participants that data will be anonymised.

N.B. Ask observer to make a note of the first sentence spoken by each participant to aid with identifying speakers.

- **How has controlled assessment affected your teaching?**
  - **Prompt:** How does controlled assessment affect the way you organise your teaching time?
  - **Prompt:** How do you find the requirements for supervision compared to the coursework requirements?
- **How does controlled assessment affect your students?**
  - **Prompt:** How do you think controlled assessment affects the pressure experienced by students?
  - **Prompt:** Does the more structured nature of controlled assessment in terms of writing up have any benefits or disadvantages?
  - **Prompt:** Has controlled assessment had an effect on when you enter your candidates for a GCSE?
- **How does controlled assessment affect your school as an organisation?**

- **Prompt:** How does controlled assessment affect timetabling for the school as a whole?
  - **Prompt:** Do you think your school has sufficient resources to offer controlled assessment effectively? Do you think this puts you at an advantage/disadvantage compared to other schools?
- **How well do you think controlled assessment assesses the intended skills?**
  - **Prompt:** How different is controlled assessment to the examined units in terms of the skills assessed?
  - **Prompt:** Does it examine the same/different skills?
  - **Prompt:** Does it examine these skills better/worse?
- **To what extent do you feel that controlled assessment is fit for purpose?**
  - **Prompt:** Do you feel that there is more or less scope for abuse than with coursework?
  - **Prompt:** Do you feel that controlled assessment is a workable system?
- **What do you think could or should be done to improve controlled assessment?**

#### Probing techniques

- Ask in general if others in the group share the same opinion.
- **Ask how this issue impacts at school/class/year group level.**
- **Ask if there are any particular groups of students for which this issue has particular impact.**
- Repeat some, or all, of the question.
- Ask for group's thoughts/more details on a particular point that has been made.
- Use expectant silences to allow the group time to reflect further on the issue.
- Highlight differences in views and encourage the group to explore and explain them.

#### Closing (2 minutes)

- Ask if participants have any further comments.
- Thank participants for taking part.
- Switch off tape recorders.
- Provide contact details of researcher.