

New 'terminal rule' confirmed for Technical Awards on performance tables

The Department for Education (DfE) has confirmed that an assessment by examination must be taken at the end of a pupil's course of study for Technical Awards to be first taught from September 2021.

This 'terminal assessment' for pupils typically sitting the exam at the end of year 11, is one of the new criteria to be applied following an earlier [consultation](#) which focused on Technical Awards offered to 14 to 16 year olds.

Taken by 35% of Key Stage 4 pupils alongside GCSEs, Technical Awards are Level 1 and 2 non-GCSE performance table qualifications that are designed to provide pupils with applied knowledge and practical skills of a sector or occupational group.

Awarding Organisations must now submit Technical Awards for inclusion on the 2023 performance tables under new [DfE criteria](#). These include:

- The assessment by examination must contribute at least 40% of the total marks available for the qualification. Passing this assessment will not be a requirement for achieving a pass grade for the qualification, but the DfE says it is unlikely to approve a qualification where it is possible for candidates routinely to achieve a pass grade whilst demonstrating a low level of performance on the assessment by examination.
- The assessment by examination must be set and marked by numerical means by the AO and taken simultaneously by pupils on a date decided by the AO.

- The qualification should be at least 120 guided learning hours in size.
- Non-examined assessment, set and moderated by the AO, may contribute up to 60% of the marks available.
- Each Technical Award submission must include an assessment strategy setting out the AO's approach to the design, delivery and awarding of the qualification.

As previously determined, Technical Awards must be designed to be engaging for pupils who have chosen to take them as an alternative to GCSEs, with a comparable level of demand to support attainment and future progression.

None of the Technical Awards approved for use in performance tables in previous years will automatically be eligible for inclusion in the 2023 tables.

All Technical Award submissions by AOs will be reviewed by Ofqual and the DfE against their requirements with the final decision on inclusion in performance tables resting with the Secretary of State. The deadline for submitting qualifications to the DfE is 30 April 2020. There will be one submission window with one subsequent opportunity for AOs to request a review of the DfE decision.

Ofqual has published a new [regulatory framework](#) for Technical Awards that will apply to those qualifications once they are approved for inclusion in the performance tables.

Post-16 review continues with proposed list of qualifications for de-funding

The Department for Education has published the initial [list of qualifications](#) with very low or no publicly-funded enrolments in scope for the potential removal of post-16 funding approval.

The move is the latest step in the government's wider [review of post-16 qualifications](#) at Level 3 and below which aims to ensure that all qualifications are high quality with a distinct purpose, necessary and support students to progress into employment or further study.

Stage one of this two-stage review included proposals to withdraw funding from qualifications with a history of

very low or no uptake post-16 in England. The DfE is now enacting these proposals based on qualifications with less than 100 enrolments in each of the last three years.

Funding will be withdrawn from 1 August 2021 but any student enrolled before that date will be funded through to completion. For most programmes, this suggests a final enrolment date of September 2020.

Qualifications on the lists can continue to be offered to pupils on pre-16 programmes or on privately-funded courses or where they are offered outside England.

Also in this issue:

> New AO rules around centre assessments > Strengths of internal assessment > Malpractice > Ofqual summer reports
> UCAS end of cycle stats > Ofsted inspection framework > Qualifications market > Drivers of centre choice
> Publishing exam fees > Alternative maths GCSE proposals > Music education > GCSEs over three years
> Changes to conditions of recognition > Call for digitalisation of exams > Review of HE admissions > The Last Word

There is a six-week appeals process to highlight any qualifications with low or no enrolments which should remain approved for public funding. Following the appeals process, the outcomes and the final list of qualifications that will have public post-16 funding removed will be published by 31 July 2020.

OCR is currently checking the list of qualifications being 'de-funded' very carefully, and will consult with colleges and training providers to make sure there will be no adverse impact, particularly on students with protected characteristics.

The DfE will conduct annual reviews of qualifications approved for public funding in the future.

New AO rules around centre assessment checks to be introduced

Ofqual has confirmed that Awarding Organisations (AOs) must introduce Centre Assessment Standards Scrutiny (CASS) processes by no later than 1 September 2021. This is the new term to cover the arrangements AOs must have in place to scrutinise assessment judgements made by schools, colleges and training providers (centres) offering their qualifications.

The [announcement](#) comes as part of the outcomes of an earlier [consultation](#) on how Ofqual will regulate AOs on their control of assessment judgements made by centres.

All of the proposals in the original Ofqual consultation will be implemented, subject to some minor changes to the wording to address points of clarity. In summary, Ofqual's new requirements include:

- AOs must put in place Centre Assessment Standards Scrutiny (CASS) arrangements for all assessments marked by centres and be fully compliant with the related Ofqual requirements by 1 September 2021.
- Moderation will be a distinct form of CASS which must take place for all cohorts of learners before results are issued, allowing AOs to adjust any results

as necessary before they are issued.

All centre-marked assessments in GCSEs, AS/A Levels, technical qualifications and project qualifications, will be subject to moderation.

- All other forms of CASS must take place before or after results are issued and AOs must consider the appropriate action to take for any results discovered that are not in line with the required standard.
- AOs must put in place, comply with, and keep under review a CASS strategy for all qualifications that are marked by centres (including those that are subject to moderation).
- Where an AO discovers an incorrect result, it must be corrected where necessary in line with Ofqual guidance. AOs must revoke certificates where they are found to reflect an incorrect result which has been corrected.

If an AO already carries out the minimum requirements for centre monitoring, centres may not notice any difference. Ofqual has produced [guidance](#) on what these decisions mean for centres.

Ofqual report highlights strengths of internal assessment

The diverse range of vocational and technical qualifications, with differences in learners and settings and the way qualifications are delivered is seen as a strength, according to those surveyed in Ofqual's [study](#) of internal assessment for national vocational and technical qualifications (VTQs).

Whilst recognising that the VTQ sector "is a highly complex space for regulation", Ofqual's research study acknowledged that VTQs afford internal assessors the flexibility to deliver qualifications which engage learners and prepare them to meet the needs of local employers. The assessors interviewed spoke highly of the internal assessments with which they worked for the 'real world' preparation they gave to learners.

Whilst internal assessors in the study rarely talked about the complexity of the system, they did express frustrations about the frequency of reform in the sector.

The findings show that despite being generally highly experienced and confident in their ability to deliver assessments, regular change in the content and structure of VTQs made it harder for internal assessors to keep up with assessment requirements.

The study concludes with a note of caution when looking to make changes or improvements to internal assessment: "The assessment system is a complex network of interconnecting parts; any attempts to strengthen one part could well undermine other elements of the system". There was a perceived risk from internal assessors that additional regulatory controls could adversely affect the value of certain qualifications.

Ofqual intends to conduct further research into internal assessment in this sector.

Improving malpractice systems: JCQ update

JCQ has issued its interim progress [report](#) in response to the [Independent Commission on Exam Malpractice](#), published in September 2019.

The Commission's report included a number of recommendations for a wide range of stakeholders, with 51 recommendations for JCQ to address directly or in collaboration with other stakeholders

Following the creation of the JCQ's Malpractice Commission Implementation Forum, several areas of action have been identified:

- **The use of the term 'malpractice':** Following recommendations from the Commission, Ofqual is currently consulting on the use of the term 'malpractice' and further areas to prevent, detect and investigate malpractice (see article below).
- **Watches in the exam room:** As recommended by the Independent Commission, JCQ has now issued a [consultation](#) specifically in relation to the potential banning of watches in exams.
- **Communications:** In 2020, JCQ will relaunch its website, further improve its social media messaging, produce a regular subscription e-newsletter, and consult more in order to adopt a more personal

approach and widen its communications to schools, colleges, candidates and parents. Communications will aim to improve awareness of good exam practice, highlight the implications of malpractice, and support students through what can be a stressful time.

- **Reporting on malpractice:** JCQ will introduce an annual malpractice report identifying key trends and sharing best practice. Given that there are already existing reports on malpractice, consultation on the format of the report will take place in June 2020 with the first report proposed for November 2020.
- **Access Arrangements:** JCQ is proposing a major project on access arrangements to review current activity and develop an annual summary to highlight key trends. Consultation with key stakeholders will take place from March 2020 with potential new data collection in the 2020/2021 academic year and an annual report following the 2021 summer exams.
- **Training:** JCQ will carry out a full review of training needs for exams officers, invigilators and assessors in relation to malpractice to consider whether further training provision in addition to existing CPD is required. JCQ will report by the end of 2020 with proposals.

Preventing, detecting and investigating malpractice

Ofqual has published a new [consultation](#) on how Awarding Organisations (AOs) approach the process of preventing, detecting and investigating malpractice and maladministration, and deciding what action to take.

Informed by JCQ's [Independent Commission](#) on Examination Malpractice, proposals in the Ofqual consultation cover:

- The differences between malpractice and maladministration, and the implications of this.

- How AOs might act to prevent malpractice and maladministration.
- The factors AOs might wish to consider when deciding who should investigate alleged malpractice and maladministration.
- The considerations AOs should have in mind when deciding what action to take once malpractice and maladministration has been established.

The deadline for responses is 26 March 2020.

Ofqual summer 2019 reports round-up

Ofqual published a number of reports on the summer 2019 exam series for GCSEs, AS and A Levels. Here is a quick guide to each of the reports:

1. GCSE, AS and A Level summer report 2019

This lengthy [report](#) and [infographic](#) provide an overview of exam boards' planning, administration and marking over the summer 2019 series, along with a summary of the awarding process and what happened post-results. Ofqual concluded that the exams in 2019 were "carefully planned, effectively managed and successfully delivered". 138 reformed qualifications were awarded, with marking completed and results announced on time. The scale of exam board activity can be seen in some of the report's statistics:

- 1.3m A, AS and GCSE students
- 5,900 schools and colleges
- 2,199 A, AS and GCSE question papers
- 16.1m A, AS and GCSE scripts
- 69,000 examiners
- 5.19m GCSE certificates issued
- 869,000 AS/A Level certificates issued.

2. Maintaining standards in summer 2019

Ofqual's view is that in summer 2019, standards were aligned between exam boards in GCSE, AS and A Level qualifications and Ofqual was content with the way in which grade boundaries were set. Ofqual published several reports on maintaining standards:

- **Maintaining standards**

This [report](#) explains the work Ofqual does to make sure that standards are set and maintained appropriately, and also includes summaries of its work to incorporate examiner judgements into the decisions about setting grade boundaries. The report also refers to standards maintenance in vocational and technical qualifications included on DfE performance tables.

- **Improving awarding: 2018/2019 pilots**

A further detailed [report](#) outlines Ofqual's research into comparative judgement and rank ordering techniques including several pilots aiming to capture expert judgement for the purpose of maintaining standards.

- **A Level maths – maintenance of standards investigation**

This sets out in detail the [outcome](#) of Ofqual's investigation into the difference in grade boundaries set in 2018 and 2019 for reformed A Level maths. Ofqual considered with exam boards whether there was a case to re-visit the grade boundaries set in reformed A Level maths in 2018 and concluded, on balance, that there was not.

- **National Reference Test**

This [report](#) provides an analysis of the NRT results from 2017-2019. It covers the work Ofqual does after summer awarding, to examine the relationship between NRT performance and subsequent attainment at GCSE.

3. Reviews of marking and moderation

These [statistics](#) on the number of reviews of marking and moderation (previously known as enquiries about results) for GCSE, AS and A Level showed:

- 5.4% of GCSE grades awarded were challenged and 1.1% of GCSE grades awarded were changed
- 7.4% of A/AS grades were challenged (up from 5.6% in 2018) and 1.5% of A/AS grades were changed (up from 1.2% in 2018).

4. Malpractice in GCSE, AS and A Level

The main trends highlighted in the malpractice [report](#) included:

- 3,040 penalties were issued to students – up from the previous year but still only accounting for 0.02% of all entries. Most commonly these were via the use of a mobile phone or other communication device.
- The number of penalties issued to schools or colleges decreased to 110 - down from 140 in 2018, involving just over 1.5% of centres.

5. Special Considerations

Highlighted in this annual [report](#):

- The number of applications (590,855) for special considerations fell by 4% - the first drop in five years.
- 92% of special consideration requests were approved in 2019, meaning there was an approved special consideration request for 3% of all assessments.
- 95% of these were mark adjustments.

6. GCSE reforms: The impact of reforms on students' preparedness for A Level maths and English literature

This [report](#) explores teachers' views on the degree to which reformed GCSEs in maths and English literature prepare students for A Level study in these subjects.

7. November 2019 entries

Another statistical [report](#) showing that GCSE entries increased by 5% overall for the November 2019 series from 104,710 in 2018 to 109,495 in 2019. Entries in English language saw an 8% increase and maths entries were up by 2%.

And last, but definitely not least....

8. Delivery of VTQs in performance tables

This [report](#) records Ofqual's approach to monitoring the delivery of assessments for vocational and technical qualifications before comparing trends and themes in issues reported over the last two academic years.

Vocational entries to HE on the rise

The total number of UK students entering HE with vocationally related qualifications has grown, according to UCAS' 2019 End of Cycle [qualifications report](#) (chapter 8).

Rise in Applied General Qualifications

The number of applicants holding an Applied General qualification, such as a Cambridge Technical, has increased. There were 76% (4,475) more UK 18 year old applicants holding an OCR Cambridge Technical in 2019 than in 2017, either on its own or in combination with an A Level.

Diversity of qualifications

Students applied to Higher Education with over 750 different qualifications in 2019. 58% of UK 18 year olds applied with A Levels alone – down 1.2% on 2018. The number of UK 18 year old applicants holding the Extended Project Qualification (EPQ) has increased 14.8% since 2017 to 37,095.

Predicted grades

43.2% of accepted applicants missed their predicted grades by three or more grades – up from 37.9% the previous year. On average, 18 year old UK students studying A Levels are predicted 2.35 A Level grades above their achieved grades.

Unconditional offers

In 2019, 25.1% (64,825) of UK 18 year olds received at least one unconditional offer – up from 20.9% in 2018. However, applicants holding unconditional offers are now less likely to choose this as their firm choice than in the past (20.6% in 2019 compared with 25.6% in 2014). As last year, applicants with an unconditional firm choice are more likely to miss their predicted grades (57% compared with 43% of applicants holding a conditional firm offer).

Offers and acceptance rates up

Students had more chance of receiving an offer of a Higher Education place than ever before and 86% of applicants (464,335 UK 18 year olds) were accepted into Higher Education (up 1.1% on last year). Clearing has become an increasingly popular entry route.

Responses to new framework have been “very positive”, says Ofsted

Feedback so far on Ofsted’s new education inspection framework shows that “people find working on curriculum plans and strategies for effective teaching of the curriculum much more rewarding than over-elaborate marking, assessment, data capture and data analysis”, according to Ofsted’s latest [annual report](#).

Whilst recognising that changes to the inspection framework do create some work, Ofsted says that responses to the new framework have been very positive so far.

The new [education inspection framework](#) came into effect from September 2019 with an emphasis on what Ofsted calls “the real substance of education: a rich and broad curriculum”. Inspections start with a top-level view of the curriculum followed by “deep dives” into individual subjects.

According to the annual report, the intent of the new framework has released leaders and teachers from believing that they must teach to the test or narrow the curriculum to secure success at inspection, welcoming

the opportunity to think more carefully about the curriculum. Ofsted is clear however, that attainment does still matter: “It would be hard to describe a curriculum as high quality if it does not lead to substantive educational achievement”.

Ofsted will be working to be able to inspect Multi-Academy Trusts so that the processes for decisions about finance, curriculum and behaviour can be inspected at the Trust level.

Future work will also include a new programme of thematic subject reviews around national curriculum subjects.

Overall, the proportion of good and outstanding education providers remains at similar levels to last year.

Offering a national picture of education, Ofsted’s 124-page annual report covers schools, early years, further education and skills and children’s social care and is based on evidence from inspection visits and research.

Qualifications market: the stats

11.7 million certificates were awarded in England in GCSE, AS, A Level, vocational and other qualifications in 2018-19, according to Ofqual’s latest annual [qualifications market report](#). This represents a decline of 1% compared to the previous year. Other trends emerging from the report include:

Certificates

- The number of overall certificates for A Level qualifications decreased by 2% compared to the previous year.
- AS certificates continued to decline following the de-coupling from the A Level – down 59%.
- The number of overall certificates for GCSE qualifications increased slightly by just over 1%, driven by a rise in certificates in EBacc subjects.
- The number of certificates in vocational qualifications decreased slightly by 1%.
- 555,000 Technical and Applied General qualification certificates were awarded.

Qualifications

- 19,400 regulated qualifications were available in the academic year 2018-19 - a 7% decrease on the previous year.
- The top 10 highest volume GCSE subjects accounted for 79% of all GCSE certificates.
- The top 10 highest volume A Level subjects accounted for 67% of all A Level certificates.

Awarding Organisations

- There were 2 more Awarding Organisations in 2018-19 compared to the previous year bringing the total to 160.
- The 20 Awarding Organisations reporting the highest volume of certificates awarded over 88% of all certificates.

Range of factors influence choice in vocational qualifications

Schools, colleges and training providers take a broad view and consider a range of factors when deciding which vocational and technical (VTQ) qualifications to offer to 16-19 year olds.

Findings from a recent Ofqual-commissioned [survey](#) indicate that students' needs, the capacity or facilities of the individual educational establishment, and the needs of employers are all drivers of centres' choice for VTQs.

While all three feature in decision-making, the research indicated that meeting students' needs and serving their interests is a common priority across educational settings. Learner interests, the intrinsic educational value of qualifications, and how qualifications position learners for further study commonly and consistently influenced choices across centre types. This shared commitment to students prompted centres to continue offering courses,

even when they were not financially viable.

Across all types of centres, staff regularly reviewed their offer and made decisions to change qualifications.

When choosing awarding organisations, very similar sets of factors were reported across the different centre types. Course content and the ability to tailor it to learners, results and the reputation of the qualification and awarding organisation were the main reasons that centres chose a particular awarding organisation's qualification.

More than 500 responses to the survey from across England were received from people in a range of roles and from all of the main types of provider of VTQs. Responses related predominantly to Level 3 qualifications and to a range of subject areas.

Ofqual says AOs must publish exam costs

Ofqual has [confirmed](#) that Awarding Organisations (AOs) will be required to publish fee information on their websites in a standard format.

Transparent fee information must be easily accessible to customers and potential purchasers in England from 1 October 2020.

Where possible, AOs must publish the standard qualification fee, any package fee, any associated learner fees and any mandatory centre fees, or a statement of the method by which these fees are calculated.

Ofqual has issued a [consultation](#) for AOs on proposed guidance in relation to this new requirement.

MEI proposes post-16 GCSE maths curriculum

Mathematics in Education and Industry (MEI) has published a [report](#) investigating the feasibility of a new maths GCSE curriculum for post-16 resit students.

The report outlines a curriculum for a new qualification that focuses on the maths needed for everyday life and work, with sufficient rigour to meet the requirements of a GCSE qualification. The themes for the curriculum content include: financial understanding; working with measures and shape; planning activities; and understanding quantitative information.

The proposed new post-16 maths GCSE would be available at Foundation tier only (grades 1-5) with a 'stepping stone' paper that could be taken early.

With funding from the Nuffield Foundation for this project, the proposals aim to address low GCSE resit success rates and provide an alternative curriculum for post-16 maths.

MEI is an independent charity committed to improving mathematics education.

Call for evidence on music education announced

“Music is not a nice-to-have part of the curriculum for the privileged few. It is a vital part of a broad and balanced curriculum for all pupils”. This is the claim from the Minister for School Standards, Nick Gibb, in his introduction to a [call for evidence](#) on music education.

The DfE is seeking views to inform its National Plan for music education. This call for evidence will gather views on what is working well and areas which should be built on in refreshing the National Plan to ensure it remains fit

for purpose.

Whilst music is compulsory in the curriculum from Key Stages 1 to 3 with an entitlement at Key Stage 4 if desired, the call for evidence asks whether this is being delivered.

The deadline for responses is 13 March 2020.

Can teaching GCSEs over three years help boost grades?

A new research [project](#) will examine how the decisions that schools make, impact on GCSE attainment.

The study will seek to find out whether teaching GCSEs over three years is more effective than teaching them over two.

According to [research](#), 56% of schools now teach some of their GCSEs over three years, starting in year 9, rather than covering GCSE content during the traditional, 2-year Key Stage 4 phase of years 10 and 11.

While this allows more time for pupils to cover GCSE content, there is concern, says the study, that it narrows the curriculum too early. It could mean, for instance, that some pupils will only experience 2 years of secondary level study before dropping history, geography or a

language, or arts subjects such as music and drama

This project, funded by the Education Endowment Foundation and carried out by the National Foundation for Educational Research, aims to understand what impact the decisions schools make about how to organise GCSEs have on grades, as well the breadth of curriculum offered by schools.

Every eligible secondary school in England will be invited to take part in a survey to find out how they organise their Key Stage 4 curriculum.

Outcomes of the research project will be published in Spring 2021.

Updates to conditions of recognition announced

Ofqual has made a number of [changes](#) to its conditions of recognition for Awarding Organisations.

These changes come as a result of an earlier consultation, and relate mainly to clarity of wording and numbering. A number of substantive changes have been made to regulatory rules however, relating to:

- The publishing of fee information on AO websites
- The recognition of prior learning
- The powers of Ofqual to delay the issuing of results.

Other conditions which have been updated include the role of the Responsible Officer, and clarity on the definition of special consideration adjustments.

An Ofqual explains [video](#) (see from 6 minutes 50 seconds) sets out the changes that AOs have to make and the timescales involved.

Call to ditch pen and paper exams

A new report recommends that from 2025, exam assessment should be digital rather than pen-and-paper-based.

The [report](#), produced by JISC, provides five principles to advance assessment digitally in Further and Higher Education, so that the education sector can make use of emerging technologies. The targets set out in the report are:

1. **Authentic:** skills need to be assessed in a more realistic way and transferable skills gained.
2. **Accessible:** the same assessment needs to be delivered in multiple ways depending on the needs of the learner.
3. **Appropriately automated:** a balance between automated and human marking and feedback needs to be established.
4. **Continuous:** data and analytics must be in widespread use to assess effectiveness and impact.
5. **Secure:** there needs to be an adoption of authoring detection and biometric authentication.

JISC acknowledges that such an infrastructure overhaul will take time but believes that the time has come for assessment to evolve.

The report contains advice and guidance aiming to help organisations improve assessment.

JISC is a membership organisation, providing digital solutions and research for the UK post-16 and higher education sector.

Debate about post-qualifications applications continues with review of HE admissions

A new, major review poses fundamental questions for the future of higher education admissions.

Launched by the Higher Education regulator, the Office for Students (OfS), the [consultation](#) covers a range of issues relating to university and college admissions including:

- Predicted grades and personal statements
- Unconditional offers
- Incentives and inducements in the admissions process
- Providers' approach to marketing their courses
- Transparency, fairness and effectiveness of the system for all students.

The consultation seeks suggestions for future reform of the admissions system, and offers three potential options to generate debate:

1. Retaining the current system with reforms
2. Introducing post-qualifications *offers* for undergraduate admissions
3. Introducing post-qualifications *applications* for undergraduate admissions.

With a deadline of 21 May 2020 for responses to the consultation, the OfS will examine next steps from this autumn.

The Last Word

Paul Steer, Head of Policy, comments on some of the issues featured in this issue.

With so many things going on for them, you might wonder why, following a lengthy consultation, Ofqual and the Department for Education (DfE) are introducing some changes to Technical Awards.

Well, these are high stakes qualifications, recognised as equivalent to GCSEs in performance tables, and are growing in popularity. As such it is right and proper to have reviewed and evaluated them and to tighten the rules to ensure that they are transparent and consistent. Pupils and parents must have absolute confidence that Technical Awards share the same status and are regulated with the same rigour as GCSEs. So what are the key features of Technical Awards and what is changing?

What are 'Technical Awards'?

If you aren't familiar with the term 'Technical Award' and many people aren't, you may be surprised to learn that they are taken by 35% of Key Stage 4 pupils. 'Technical Award' is a term coined by the DfE to describe vocational qualifications for 14-16 year olds that can count in school performance tables. They are often more widely known by their individual brands of which OCR's Cambridge Nationals is one of the most popular - approximately 120,000 young people are will be completing Cambridge Nationals this year.

Technical Awards are Level 1 and 2 qualifications and are the same size as a GCSE. Technical Awards do not feature in the EBacc but they can contribute a limited number of points towards a school's Progress 8 score. Most pupils who take an OCR National do so alongside their GCSEs.

Key features

1. **Engaging qualifications for all:** Cambridge Nationals are suitable for a wide range of pupils. We know from research that high achievers value the opportunity to study something different and to study it in a different way. We also know from DfE research that Technical Awards are successful at engaging 'hard-to-reach' students. The research examined student absence and exclusion rates and concluded that taking a Technical Award is associated with lowering such rates.
2. **Demanding and valued:** Technical Awards are not a soft option. We know that, for pupils with similar prior achievements, achievement rates for Cambridge Nationals are broadly comparable to those at GCSE for pupils with similar prior achievement. And pupils who take an OCR National alongside their GCSEs progress in almost identical ways to their next stage of study.

3. **Practical and applied:** Pupils and teachers tell us of the value of the practical and applied nature of these qualifications. They talk about activities such as pitching an enterprising business idea, creating a multipage website for a local business, or designing a fitness programme for a client. Despite being grounded in real work contexts, Technical Awards are not intended to prepare people for a specific job, but to foster their *vocational inquisitiveness* through raising their awareness about the world of work.
4. **Breadth:** Even though non-EBacc GCSEs (eg Citizenship Studies, Music, Drama) help to broaden the curriculum, Technical Awards, with their greater emphasis on applied learning and vocational contexts, provide additional breadth or, as the DfE puts it “complement and supplement the academic offer” and help students to develop an even broader repertoire of skills.
5. **Choice:** Technical Awards can help pupils to access choices that suit their personal needs and interests. Choice, through the flexibility to combine academic and vocational learning, empowers students, enabling them to explore new topics and develop aspects of their skill set not sufficiently emphasised by GCSEs.

Main changes

The changes will be introduced for first teaching in September 2021. They are not huge but there are two worth being aware of. The first is that all Technical Awards must have a minimum of 40% of marks gained through an external assessment. The second is the introduction of a terminal rule which requires exams to be taken at the end of a pupil’s period of study.

Most Technical Awards already meet the 40% requirement although some of our Cambridge Nationals will need to be adjusted to meet this minimum requirement. In our experience, Cambridge Nationals candidates perform well at the examined components and we will be making sure that, where changes are made, candidates under the new arrangements are not disadvantaged. With most GCSEs being 100% examined there is still plenty of opportunity to preserve the distinctiveness of Technical Awards.

Many teachers have told us that they are disappointed by the introduction of the terminal rule. They like being able to enter pupils early for the exam. There is a logic to this in that the knowledge is often taught first and then pupils go on to apply it. There is also a benefit in getting the exam ‘out of the way’ early so there is less to revise for in the crowded summer exam period. Also some pupils, lacking confidence in taking in exams, often got a real boost from passing an exam early which sets them up for taking their GCSEs later. However, we recognise and accept that the new rule puts Technical Awards on a par with GCSE requirements, mainly by enforcing a limitation on multiple entries and re-sits.

What is important to emphasise is that these changes need not compromise the essential benefits and core purpose of Technical Awards. In making the necessary adjustments, OCR will be working to design principles to ensure our Nationals continue to support a broad and balanced curriculum, provide engaging and inclusive choices, and provide the opportunity to take part in a practical, relevant learning experience – all the things which make these qualifications unique and special.