



The aim is to instil confidence in potential employers that job candidates are literate, numerate and capable of using ICT



Will skills tests be just the job?

The functional skills tests have been created to counter the accusations that young people do not have the right skills for work. As trials for the tests begin, Julie Nightingale asks what format they may take

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority was handed the task of developing functional skills in English, maths and ICT as part of the shake-up of 14-19 education announced in 2005. The rationale is to give every student the opportunity to show their competence in those subjects so that, no matter which route pupils take through secondary education, the public can be confident that every 16-year-old is skilled in all three areas.

Launching the Education White Paper for 14-19 reform in 2005, Ruth Kelly, then Education Secretary pledged to make them a keystone of secondary education.

"Where pupils are not able to achieve a GCSE in maths or English, we will ensure that they leave school with functional skills that will allow them to get on in life and in work," she said.

In particular, functional skills are aimed at improving "employability" and instilling

confidence in prospective employers that the candidates are functionally literate, numerate and capable of using ICT.

Pressure had been mounting for some time for a change to the way young people's basic skills are measured with employer groups such as the Confederation of British Industry leading the charge.

What good are record GCSE results, they demanded, if too many youngsters are unable to string a sentence together or carry out simple calculations?

"I get fed up with hearing from employers that young people don't have the necessary skills for work," says John Dunford, general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders.

"It's vital that they have the basic skills and exam syllabuses have not focused sufficiently on those in the past."

Trials

Functional skills will be an element of the new diplomas and form part of GCSEs, as well as being qualifications in their own right. The QCA is developing approaches to assessment and ways to package them. From September, it is trialling two models:

- Functional skills embedded into the teaching of existing GCSEs
- Standalone units taken in addition to GCSEs

Pilots for GCSE candidates in English will run from next September for two years and

BETTER JOB PROSPECTS

Employers' group the Confederation of British Industry is supporting the introduction of functional skills. At the launch of the white paper in 2005, Digby Jones, then CBI director-general, said: "Nothing can be more important than equipping young people with the basic skills they need to compete in the globalised economy. Illiteracy and innumeracy must be eradicated from the workplace."

Since then the CBI has produced *Working with the Three Rs*, a report for the Department for Education and Skills that makes a series of recommendations about the kinds of skills young people need to acquire at school to equip them for the modern workplace.

With numeracy, employees should be able to perform simple mental arithmetic, interpret data and calculate proportions and percentages, among other things. The areas of literacy most in need of improvement include handwriting, oral communication, and grammar and spelling.

The report was based on responses to a survey of CBI members. Rob Don, CBI policy adviser and compiler of the report, said: "Even some of those young people who pass five GCSEs at A-C aren't always equipped with the sorts of skills employers require today."

"The functional skills element of the white paper was a result of pressure from employers and we are delighted the government is introducing it. We are keen for our recommendations to be implemented in full when the skills modules are introduced."

ICT while a pilot for GCSE candidates in mathematics run from 2007 until 2010.

Exam overload

There is some resistance to offering the tests as standalone units because of the potentially huge administrative burden on a system already creaking under the weight of "exam overload". Some estimates put the number of extra scripts that standalone units would generate as high as three million on top of the 28 million scripts already produced for GCSEs.

Dunford, like some others, favours incorporating the tests into GCSEs. "We have far too many exams here already. If we have to have separate exams then the price must be a reduction in other exams elsewhere."

Tests on demand

One way to head off the risk of overburdening the system could be to offer the tests "on demand" and avoid the exam logjam of summer. Some schools – those that are accustomed to offering the GCSE early, for example – may well clamour for the test to be offered on demand so that their pupils can take it and move to the next stage without delay.

This approach has major implications, however. It would take more organisation by schools. As the same papers could not be offered at different times, it would also increase the burden on the awarding bodies that would have to produce the many more permutations of the tests.

Implications for assessors

The form of the tests, and the extra work they will generate, clearly affect assessors. But there is also a wider issue to wrestle with that could be triggered if the QCA opts to use standalone tests for functional skills.

The technology exists to scan around 12 million exam scripts within a working week and for exam centre "hubs" to work 24 hours and a seven-day week. It's also technologically possible to move large numbers of scanned scripts around at the press of a button – not only around the UK but also, potentially, abroad to any centre with the facilities and human resources to handle bulk marking.

Graham Herbert, project manager for the Institute of Educational Assessors, says: "The awarding bodies now have the technological capability to ship scripts off to New Zealand, Australia, India or Singapore if the capacity is not there to mark it in the UK and if people complain about the assessment burden. Obviously, I would not want to see that as it would have an impact on people here."

John Bangs, head of education for the NUT, takes a similar view. Sending exam papers overseas to be marked would inevitably influence the way questions were set, he says.

"It would mean that questions would be shaped by the ability of those overseas to mark them but, being based abroad, they will not understand the functional skills issues in the UK. The questions would have to be 'yes or no' tick-boxes and that would confirm all of our worst fears about functional skills tests.

He adds: "Functional skills are about how you engage with a whole string of life expectations, including work. Reducing something so complex to tick-boxes so that the exam markers can do the job is something that we have reservations about. This is a tail wagging the dog. It would mean that the operational requirements of meeting a government policy leads to dumbing down."

The new KS3 tests for ICT, which all schools must do from 2008, indicate one route that marking could follow. The ICT papers will be entirely automated; everything from administration to delivery to marking will be done by computer. Depending on the format of the functional skills tests, it's entirely possible that they would be automatically marked. This would render arguments about the location of examiners largely redundant.

For now, though, the QCA will only say more information will be available this year.

www.qca.org.uk/functionalskills

Even some young people with five good GCSEs don't have the right skills for work

