

Controlled Assessment: What it Means for You and Your Department

Why has controlled assessment been introduced?

The changes are being made in response to concerns from everyone in the system – exam boards, teachers, parents and students – about the ‘fairness’ of coursework. Although out-and-out cheating is pretty rare, between parental help, the Internet, and teachers pressurised to deliver results, the declaration of a candidate’s work as ‘all their own’ is not always as true as it should be.

Perhaps it’s no surprise that in a QCA survey, two thirds of teachers said they did not think coursework was ‘valid and reliable’. On the other hand, most English teachers did not want to see coursework disappear altogether. Controlled assessment is intended to be a kind of half-way house between coursework and exam.

What is controlled assessment?

Controlled assessment breaks down into several stages: task setting; research and preparation; task taking. QCA regulations set out different levels of control for each stage. (http://www.qca.org.uk/qca_16010.aspx). Students must complete the final stage of the task on their own, in supervised conditions.

The boards will set generic tasks. Teachers will choose one, and then an appropriate text or topic to customise the task for their students. Tasks will change each year but will be pre-released. It’s likely that some boards will offer the option of an oral assessment for one of the tasks.

Boards will give guidance on the amount of time to be spent and/or the word limit. The generic guidance suggests 15 hours of preparation and writing time for each 20% proportion of the overall assessment.

It is up to individual schools whether the final task is completed with everyone in an exam hall for a block of time, or in timetabled lessons over several sessions.

Work will be marked internally but moderated externally, just as coursework is now. With everyone completing much more similar tasks, it will be easier to moderate and to standardise marks.

What are the issues for my department?

Other subjects, such as Media Studies and Science, have had a form of controlled assessment for a while now. It’s worth asking teachers in these subjects about their experiences.

Your school may already have made decisions for all subjects about whether controlled assessment should take place in normal lesson time or in an examination room.

If the decision hasn’t yet been made for English, you will want to consider issues such as: what is in place for those needing extra time; access to dictionaries and thesauruses for the literature exam; the fact that students can word process their

work; how to check that those who are using computers are not accessing the Internet and, when taking English and English Language tasks, are not using a spelling or grammar checker.

You will want to discuss in your department whether teachers will be free to choose their own task from the board's selection, or whether you want to choose together. With the tasks changing each year, it could lighten everyone's load to plan schemes of work together, if only for the first cohort. Unlike an exam, classes can take the controlled assessment at different times, so the strain on the stock cupboard is not too great. Bear in mind that candidates will need a clean copy of any text to use in their controlled conditions task.

In our next blog we will look at issues around managing the three Englishes as well as some of the issues around modularity. Although you could plan a course in which everything leads to a set of terminal exams, at the very least you will need to consider when to set the controlled assessments.

Be aware that, with the tasks changing each year, a controlled assessment must be submitted in the same year that students sit that module. In the past some schools had their students do a piece of coursework early in year 10, or even in year 9, and then re-draft it in year 11. That will no longer be possible.

Once the specifications are available, you will also want to look at where there is overlap between controlled assessments in English, English Language and Literature. This will relate to the issues we will discuss in our next blog.

What does 'controlled conditions' mean in practice?

Preparation work can include anything you would normally use for teaching a coursework assignment, including pair and group work. However, once students are actually completing the task, they must work individually. Candidates can do more than one draft, but the teacher must not give them feedback in the redrafting process, however much they are itching to do so!

So is controlled assessment a good thing?

As with any system, controlled assessment has its loopholes, which a few people will look to exploit. Common under the current regime is over-scaffolding, and, with controlled assessment, teacher's task plans could be memorised by students: everyone is keen for candidates to emerge with the best grades. However, it is worth remembering that over-scaffolding leads to lower, not higher, attainment, as examiners' reports, Ofsted, and educational research often remind us.

Some teachers may be sad about the narrowing down of one of the few remaining areas of GCSE that teachers and pupils could customise for local conditions, individual interests and strengths. Some may simply be glad to have confidence that a student's work is really 'all their own', and a sense that their candidates are competing on a more level playing field. As for the practical issues, only time will tell.