

Changes to GCE Examination Dates for Summer 2008

Background

“The JCQ Awarding Bodies have been asked to consider the timing of examinations in May/June 2008 in order to work towards the eventual release of GCE results at an earlier date than at present, should that be required. Examination timetables for 2008 have therefore been drafted to make more substantial use of the first week, and reduced use of the final week. Results would continue to be published on 14 August 2008 in line with current practice.”¹

Following the publication of provisional timetables for Summer 2008, several centres have expressed concern that compulsory AS and A2 Mathematics modules are scheduled to be substantially earlier than usual in 2008, with consequent reduction to teaching and revision time for candidates.

University Admissions

The Schwartz Review of Admissions to Higher Education recommended:

“6.3 The Steering Group asks the Secretary of State for Education and Skills to set up a high-level implementation group as soon as possible to achieve post-qualification applications (PQA). The current system, relying on predicted grades, cannot be fair.”²

The government response, following consultation, recommended that the results of AS, A Levels and Highers be published at least one week earlier than at present. However, it is clear that this was not intended to reduce the time available for learning: “This proposal was developed solely to free up time to enable a fairer and more efficient applications process to take place. It does not impact on teaching or learning time.”³

The published provisional timetables for June 2008, along with the JCQ notice to centres, show that some examinations have been moved three weeks earlier than last year, resulting in a significant reduction to teaching and learning time. This is a reversal of the government’s intentions. Because this is a feasibility study, there will be no earlier publication of results.

The impact of the changes to examinations on different subjects

Most Mathematics and Further Mathematics AS and A2 compulsory units have been moved to earlier timetable slots, many of them three weeks earlier than in 2007. In addition to the loss of significant teaching and learning time, some candidates will take their most difficult A2 unit before half-term, depriving them of the possibility of revising for it during the break.

Further details of the actual June 2007 GCE timetables and the provisional June 2008 timetables are shown in Appendix 1. The Mathematics timetables for all compulsory units are compared along with a selection of other subjects across all three awarding bodies for England. The other subjects were selected for comparison because they have compulsory units, which all candidates take, at both AS and A2 Level. They also have reasonably large entries at A Level.

Simple logic would suggest that, in order to publish results a week earlier, it should be sufficient to move examinations forward by a week. However, it is not quite as straightforward as that, due to half-term week being during the examining period. Many of the substantial changes, i.e. of more than a week, in Physics, Mathematics and Further Mathematics, are partly as a result of moving examinations from after half-term to before it. Such moves deprive candidates of the substantial revision potential of this week-long break.

Undesirable consequences

Students often decide their A2 subjects on the basis of AS results. The loss of significant teaching time for AS Mathematics and Physics could lead to lower results in these subjects with a consequent reduction in the number of young people completing A Levels in them.

The STEM programme's intention is to increase the number of young people taking Physics, Chemistry and Mathematics A Levels.⁴ It is, therefore, a matter for concern that AS Physics and AS and A2 Mathematics and Further Mathematics appear to be losing much more teaching time than other subjects.

Numbers taking A Level Mathematics and Further Mathematics are beginning to pick up following the substantial drop caused by ill-considered changes in Curriculum 2000. It would be unfortunate if the present recovery were arrested by changes to examination timetables.

So far the exercise has been entirely theoretical but it will have real consequences for the cohort of students sitting their examinations next summer. Moving examination dates is not a trivial exercise; it needs to be related to term and half-term dates. The problem with this feasibility study is that it is being conducted in isolation whereas it should be part of an overall consideration of the school year. At the moment, it looks as though a whole cohort of school students is about to be used as guinea pigs.

The effects of reduced teaching time will be felt most keenly by students whose parents are not in a position to make up for loss of revision time by paying for additional tuition. A fairer system for admissions to Higher Education is an excellent ideal to aim for but it would be counterproductive to disadvantage students by reducing their teaching time.

Suggested ways forward

Now that it is clear that problems will arise, it is appropriate to pause and to look more holistically at the school year before taking any action.

The GCE timetables for June 2008 should ensure that the loss of teaching time is not greater for some subjects than it is for others. If greater loss of teaching time leads to lower results in some subjects than in others, this can have knock-on effects on uptake for years to come.

Teachers no longer invigilate examinations and school holiday patterns now vary from school to school so it may eventually be possible to avoid a week long break in the examination timetable. This would need to be carefully thought through, as part of a wider consideration of the school year.

References

1. *Notice to Centres: June Examination Timetables 2008*, JCQ, April 2007.
2. *Fair admissions to higher education: recommendations for good practice*, Independent Review chair Steven Schwartz, September 2004.
3. *Improving the Higher Education Applications Process*, Government Response to the Consultation, May 2006.
4. *The STEM programme report*, DfES, 2006.

Appendix 1: Comparison of dates between actual Summer 2007 timetable and provisional Summer 2008 timetable

The provisional dates for 2008 are taken from timetables available on 8.8.07.

Negative figures in the final column show that the examination is scheduled to be later in 2008.

COMPULSORY UNITS (AS units unshaded, A2 units shaded grey)				
Examination	Unit Code	2007 Date	Provisional 2008 Date	Days earlier
AQA MATHEMATICS				
Pure Core 1	MPC1	21 May	15 May	6
Pure Core 2	MPC2	21 May	15 May	6
Pure Core 3	MPC3	11 June	23 May	19
Pure Core 4	MPC4	18 June	12 June	6
EDEXCEL MATHEMATICS				
Core 1	6663	21 May	2 June	- 12
Core 2	6664	21 May	2 June	- 12
Core 3	6665	14 June	6 June	8
Core 4	6666	18 June	12 June	6
FP1	6674	20 June	16 June	4
At least one of FP2, FP3	6675/6676	22/26 June	18/20 June	4/6
MEI MATHEMATICS AND FURTHER MATHEMATICS				
Core 1	4751	7 June	15 May	23
Core 2	4752	7 June	15 May	23
Core 3	4753	11 June	2 June	9
Core 4	4754	14 June	21 May	24
FP1	4755	11 June	2 June	9
FP2	4756	7 June	15 May	23
OCR MATHEMATICS AND FURTHER MATHEMATICS				
Core 1	4721	7 June	15 May	23
Core 2	4722	7 June	15 May	23
Core 3	4723	11 June	2 June	9
Core 4	4724	14 June	21 May	24
FP1	4725	11 June	2 June	9
AQA PHYSICS A				
Unit 1	PA01	8 June	22 May	16
Unit 2	PA02	8 June	22 May	16
Unit 3	PHA3/W	8 June	22 May	16
Unit 4	PA04	14 June	11 June	3
Unit 10	PA10	21 June	17 June	4
EDEXCEL ENGLISH LITERATURE				
Drama & poetry	6391	25 May	21 May	4
Pre 1900 prose	6392	25 May	21 May	4
Shakespeare in Context	6393/02	14 May	12 May	2
Modern Prose	6394/02	11 June	11 June	0
Poetry and drama	6395	11 June	11 June	0
Criticism and comparison	6396	19 June	13 June	6

COMPULSORY UNITS (AS units unshaded, A2 units shaded grey)				
Examination	Unit Code	2007 Date	Provisional 2008 Date	Days earlier
OCR GEOGRAPHY A				
The Physical Environment	2680	25 May	20 May	5
The Human Environment	2681	25 May	20 May	5
Geographical Investigation	2682	25 May	20 May	5
Options in Physical & Human Geography	2683	12 June	6 June	6
People & Environment Options	2684	15 June	18 June	-3
AQA BIOLOGY B				
Unit 1	BYB1	4 June	3 June	1
Unit 2	BYB2	4 June	3 June	1
Unit 3a	BYB3/W	4 June	3 June	1
Unit 4	BYB4	19 June	13 June	6
Unit 5a	BYB5/W	19 June	13 June	6
Unit 6 or 7 or 8	BYB6/7/8	22 June	18 June	4

All Mathematics timetables were compared. AQA Further Mathematics does not have compulsory units. Timetables for one board only were compared for other subjects; it is likely that the dates on timetables for other awarding bodies are similar. The subjects below were chosen because they have reasonably high entries and some compulsory units, taken by all candidates, at both AS and A2. Dates for optional units were not compared.