



Aylsham High School

Frequently asked questions about the key stage 4 curriculum for 2023-24

What are key stages 3 and 4?

Students move into key stage 3 in year 7; during this key stage all students study all subjects on the curriculum. In key stage 4 all students still have a core curriculum but they are allowed to choose some option subjects. The transition to key stage 4 happens at the end of year 9 for all English Baccalaureate subjects. For other subjects we begin this transition at the end of year 8.

What is the core curriculum at key stage 4?

The national curriculum and the introduction of the English Baccalaureate dictate most of what students should study at key stage 4.

- English
- Mathematics
- Combined science
- Physical education (non-examination)
- Religious studies
- PSHE (personal, social, health and economic education) and citizenship
- **Business enterprise (year 9 only)**
- **Computing (year 9 only)**
- French
- Geography or history

Together these subjects are called the **compulsory core curriculum**.

What is the English Baccalaureate

The Department for Education recommends these core subjects, which make up the English Baccalaureate (EBacc), and help keep options for young people open:

- English language and English literature
- Maths
- Science - combined science or 3 single sciences from biology, chemistry, physics and computer science.
- History or geography
- A language (ancient or modern)

The EBacc is not a qualification in its own right; it is a combination of GCSE subjects, including a language, that offer an important range of knowledge and skills to young people.

EBacc future proofs your child's prospects

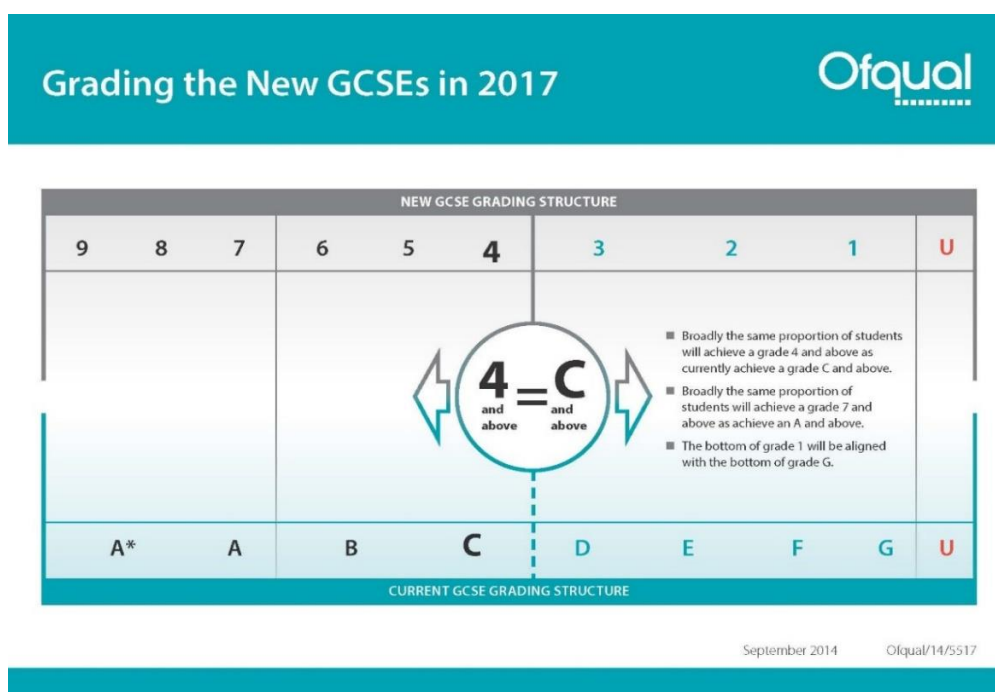
While your child may not have decided on their future career path yet, studying the EBacc at GCSE gives them access to a full range of employment options when they leave secondary school and the broad knowledge that employers are looking for.

If they are thinking of going to university the EBacc is also recommended by Britain's most prestigious universities.

For some students it would be wrong for them to pursue a language and humanity to 16 and the Government recognises this. At Aylsham we expect almost all students to carry on studying a language and humanity in year 9. Then in years 10 and 11 those students that are able (the majority) must carry on with a language and humanity and almost all other students must, as one of their options, choose from either geography, history, separate sciences or computer science GCSE.

How does the GCSE grading system work?

From 2017 GCSEs were reformed. The new grading structure now ranges from 9-1, where 9 is high pass and 1 a low pass. Ofqual have stated that the same number of students will be awarded a grade 4 or above that used to be awarded a grade C or above. However, the government is keen to see the good pass grade rise from a 4 to a 5. The graphic below helps to see the other points on the scale where comparisons can be drawn with the old style A*-G grading system.



What else is different about new style GCSE?

New style GCSEs are very different to the qualifications that they replaced. They have been designed to be more rigorous, have more content and to be assessed through more formal methods. Gone from the majority of GCSEs are coursework, controlled assessment and module examinations. Where controlled assessment remains, for example in technology subjects, it is not worth as many marks as it used to be and there will always be a formal terminal examination. If students are to achieve high pass grades they must therefore become expert at the learning and recalling of core knowledge and applying this knowledge to the course in an exam situation. Teachers have produced core knowledge questions and answers to help with this and many successful students use parents and other family members to help them learn this knowledge. Once that has been done past paper questions then need completing to ensure this knowledge can be applied correctly.

How do students best succeed at GCSE?

Every year we see students that have struggled in school, up until they have started their GCSE courses, achieve levels of success they thought were beyond them. Success at GCSE level is not defined by the intelligence we were born with; it is much more closely linked to the way we work. Successful students more often than not have these 4 things in common:

1. **They try hard in lessons.** For example: they are organised, start work quickly, try and complete every task to the best of their ability and ensure that their behaviour does not affect their, or other students', learning.
2. **They ask questions when they are stuck.** This is crucial. The most successful students often ask the most questions. If you are stuck you are wasting time, if asking a question gets you working again then you are learning. Asking questions can also help the teachers to show which information has, or has not, been understood.
3. **They complete their homework to the best of their abilities.** Research has shown that students who complete more homework go on to achieve better grades.

"The amount of time students said they spent on homework predicted better academic attainment and progress (strongest effects for 2-3 hours on a typical weekday evening). Students who spent more time on homework during year 11 were almost 10 times more likely to achieve 5 grades 9-4 than those who did less homework."

There will be more homework with GCSE courses. Teachers will set your child homework and give core knowledge to learn. Your child needs to find time in their schedule to complete this. If there is no homework set then they can use the time to learn and revise core knowledge. It can work really well when parents/carers test their child at home on this core knowledge. If homework isn't being set then please contact the school.

4. **They attend school every day.** Again this has been nationally researched; last year the children that attended their schools more often got higher GCSE grades. We all get ill and we shouldn't feel bad about taking the time to get better. However, we should try and attend whenever possible. The highest grades are more often than not attained by students with over 95% attendance; national data indicates that students in the highest attendance bands can achieve nearly a whole GCSE grade higher than students whose attendance falls in to the lowest attendance band.

What is combined science?

Combined science is worth two GCSEs (which meets the requirements of the English Baccalaureate) and is comprised of equal amounts of biology, chemistry and physics. All Science A Level specifications assume that students will have studied combined science at GCSE. If students choose to study separate sciences as one of their options this will provide them with individual GCSEs in each of the sciences and this would ease the transition to A Level studies. We would therefore advise any student that might aspire to study any science at A Level to choose separate sciences as one of their options.

How is PSHE (personal, social, health and economic education) and citizenship taught?

Students will be taught PSHE and citizenship through activities in form time, assemblies and occasional days when their timetable will be collapsed (this means they will come out of their normal timetabled lessons to take part in larger group activities).

Why do we have mixed age teaching in options at key stage 4?

Mixed age teaching will only happen in the option subjects; students will be taught in their current sets (with the usual minor alterations) for all their core subjects. We hope that teaching the option subjects in mixed age groups will have two main benefits for students. Firstly, it will mean many more students get their first choice option subjects. When questioned, under the old system of option blocks, only half of our year 9 would have been able to study the combination of subjects that they were most interested in. Secondly, because more students are involved in the options process, we will be able to offer more choice. Since introducing this curriculum model we have managed to add GCSEs in business studies and computing, BTECs in music technology and health and social care and entry level resistant materials.

What are BTEC qualifications/ Cambridge Nationals?

BTEC/Cambridge Nationals are work-related qualifications suitable for a wide range of students, built to accommodate the needs of employers and allow progression to university. They are recognised by schools, colleges, universities, employers and professional bodies across the United Kingdom and in over 100 countries worldwide. They provide a practical, real-world approach to learning without sacrificing any of the essential subject theory. The other key difference of these courses is that the students are assessed throughout the course with a smaller exam compared to GCSE. Students are expected to continuously add to a portfolio of evidence with a formal assessment (exam). BTECs do not count towards the English Baccalaureate and are not good foundations to A Levels in those subjects, for example you would not be able to do an A level in chemistry after studying BTEC science. However, many colleges do offer BTEC level 3 qualifications and they are an excellent qualification for many of our students.

Will having mixed age groups increase the ability spread within the room and make it more difficult for the teacher?

We believe that, rather than age being the most critical factor that we should concentrate on, we should look at a student's ability and work ethic. We know there can be a large difference in the ability range of a year group so if we are really going to meet students' needs we need to put on a greater range of courses. Our system makes this possible because of the increased numbers of students choosing. This will hopefully mean that the ability range in the groups becomes narrower and not wider. We have also found that year 9 students that approach GCSEs seriously and try their best often outperform older students that on paper have a higher ability but are not working as hard.

If a student undertakes a GCSE in year 9 surely they will not do as well as if they took it in year 11?

The question of how can different aged students learn at the same rate is one that we spent a lot of time researching in other schools that were already running this type of curriculum. Maturity obviously counts against year 9 students, but in their favour is that they are only working towards GCSEs in 1 subject. Whereas the year 10 and 11 students also have the demands of GCSEs in the core subjects placed upon them. Also, students perform better in subjects that they are interested in so if we can offer them this chance hopefully the students will be more motivated to succeed. Previously our students saw year 9, as it used to be, as less useful because lots of them felt ready for the next step and research states that if students are challenged their level of work rises. Since the introduction of this curriculum model our year 9 students have worked extremely well in their options. Results are in line with what we would expect and in some cases better. If a student has not taken to GCSE work in Year 9 we do have the option of postponing the assessment of that option until the following year and for some of our students this has been very useful.

When will students obtain their GCSE results if they complete a course in Year 9?

Students will receive their results in August of that year. This gradual accumulation of qualifications we also see as a good thing because students will be able to apply for post 16 courses in Year 11 with a real idea of the level they are capable of working at and with excellent evidence to back up that application process. It also spreads the load which will be advantageous when students are in Year 11.

If a student completes a course in year 9 how will they be able to take an A Level in it at sixth form if they have had a 2 year break in study?

The question of progression was probably the most asked by parents when we introduced this model. We therefore spent a lot of time looking into this when designing our new curriculum. There are two answers we can offer; the first is that 52% of students in further education study courses that they have never studied before and are very successful at them. The important thing is for students to learn the necessary skills. Secondly, because we have more subjects on offer students have often benefitted from taking a similar subject within their interest area. For example: art and graphics, iMedia and computing.

When are exams taken for the core subjects?

Exams in the core subjects are taken at the end of year 11.

When will the teaching of the options start?

The year will begin in June because that is when the GCSE examinations have just finished and we want to give students the maximum amount of time in their chosen option. This means that towards the end of year 8, mid June, our timetable for the whole school will 'rollover' to the new academic year; we will issue new timetables to students with their core year 9 classes and option subjects.