



Qualifications and
Curriculum Authority

A level German

Review of standards 1996–2000

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Introduction

This review followed an earlier study into A level German examinations between 1976 and 1996.

Changes in A level German examinations between 1996 and 2001 were influenced by:

- the publication by the Schools Examination and Assessment Council (SEAC) in 1992 of *A and AS principles*, limiting the amount of internally assessed work permitted in a syllabus
- the publication by the Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA) in December 1993 of a GCE A/AS subject core for modern foreign languages.

The changes were:

- an increase in the permitted use of dictionaries in examinations
- the use of individual cassettes in listening examinations
- increased use of target language questioning and responses
- a move away from testing linguistic competence through translation.

Between them, the syllabuses in this study attracted about 76 per cent of the 8,575 candidates who took A level German in 2001.

Examination demand

Materials available

The reviewers considered the 1996 and 2001 syllabuses, question papers and mark schemes of each of the five awarding bodies. Where awarding bodies had been amalgamated, the awarding body syllabus that had the larger entry in 1996 was reviewed. There were some minor gaps in the material made available to the reviewers, most notably details of the procedures for coursework, but on the whole the reviewers were satisfied that they were able to form a comprehensive view of the examinations concerned.

Details of the syllabuses used in the review are given in Appendix A.

Assessment objectives

The reviewers noted a general increase over time in the detail of most of the syllabuses reviewed, reflecting the greater complexity of schemes of assessment with more optional routes. In 1996, some awarding bodies had already introduced several of the changes outlined above; by 2001, nearly all syllabuses reflected these changes. However, awarding bodies varied in the manner and proportion in which they introduced these changes.

In 1996, assessment objectives tended to be linked to the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), with an additional objective for literature/civilisation. These assessment objectives were usually addressed discretely through specific examination papers.

By 2001, the CCEA, OCR and Edexcel assessment objectives were based on the common subject core for modern foreign languages. These assessment objectives encompassed more than one language skill and were tested in an integrated skills format. As a result, the relationship between the four language skills and assessment objectives – and the way in which these were addressed through schemes of assessment – became much more complex. In general, there was a shift towards an integrated approach, testing assessment objectives and language skills across several examination papers. There was also an increased emphasis across all awarding bodies on developing candidates' discursive competence in spoken and written German.

The WJEC and AQA syllabuses and their assessment objectives did not change during the period.

These factors resulted in some changes to the overall weightings for different skills by some awarding bodies. In addition, where a syllabus change occurred, there was a discernible shift from discrete testing of listening skills towards an integrated skills format using questions in German.

There were variations between awarding bodies in the balance of marks awarded for content, the ability to select and present information, and reading and writing skills in the testing of literature and/or specified topics.

Assessment patterns and options

By 2001, schemes of assessment had become more complex, with more optional routes. In 1996, CCEA was the only awarding body not to offer a written coursework option; by 2001,

CCEA offered not only written coursework, but also an alternative to the standard writing paper in the form of 'Writing for vocational contexts'. Throughout the period, AQA offered a choice between a literature and/or specified topics examination and written coursework.

Where there were alternative routes through some 1996 syllabuses, options tended to have very different requirements and assessment criteria. This made it difficult to ensure comparability of scope and level of demand across the options. This was particularly the case for the three-way options offered in 1996 by Edexcel and WJEC involving literature and/or specified topics and coursework (see 'Literature/specified topics', below).

By 2001, most awarding bodies had taken steps to coordinate the different contexts and requirements of optional routes and their assessment criteria. For example:

- the 2001 Edexcel syllabus included a choice between an oral extension module, dealing with a topic chosen by the candidate from a list of topic areas, and an interpreting module. Common assessment criteria were used for similar skills across the two options. Where the options emphasised different skills, such as argument or transmission, descriptors reflecting the nature of the different tasks had parallel graduated demands
- similarly, the complex level of options in OCR's 1996 syllabus had been simplified by 2001 and the syllabus offered candidates a choice of three possible routes.

With the exception of WJEC, overall examining time in 2001 was broadly consistent. WJEC exceeded the typical examining time by two hours, partly because of testing literature/civilisation in English, which necessitated more extensive discrete testing of target language writing skills. Between 1996 and 2001, CCEA and Edexcel marginally reduced the overall examining time of their syllabuses. None of these differences was considered to have had any significant impact on examination demand.

Nature of examination

Subject content

The number and breadth of the topic areas varied considerably across the awarding bodies. The reviewers felt that the range of topic areas between syllabuses was so wide that it was not possible to compare their demand with any confidence.

Listening

Two main factors contributed to changes in listening examinations between 1996 and 2001:

- the use of the target language
- for Edexcel and CCEA, the move towards individual tapes for candidates.

The general view of the listening tapes was that recordings were authentic, realistic and spoken at a suitable speed for the level. The difficulty and range of the stimulus material used by all the awarding bodies was considered appropriate. The reviewers also judged the coverage of the stimulus material by the questions set to be appropriate.

The use of candidate-controlled tapes, coupled with the shift towards an integrated skills approach, had an effect on the test types used in listening examinations. The testing of listening skills by OCR and Edexcel required active writing skills, rather than passive recognition exercises such as tick box tasks. This approach differed from the discrete testing of listening skills and the use of questions in English as the sole or predominant testing mode in several of the earlier syllabuses, such as the Edexcel and CCEA 1996 syllabuses and the AQA and WJEC syllabuses in both years.

In general, there was a suitable range of test types, ranging from concrete and accessible points to degrees of inference and abstraction. The introduction of candidate-controlled tapes allowed for more inferential questions to be set, for example the Edexcel summary task.

WJEC, Edexcel and OCR allowed candidates access to dictionaries for the listening papers; AQA and CCEA did not. Such access had little impact on overall performance. Where candidate-controlled tapes were used, the burdens of time constraint and time management placed demands on candidates equivalent to the memorisation required in a communal listening context.

In the cases of awarding bodies with revised syllabuses, the level of demand in 1996 and 2001 was felt to be similar overall. WJEC was the exception in both years: here very few questions required inference, eliciting in most cases short, factual and concrete items based on a very accessible text.

Reading

The reviewers felt that the demand of stimulus materials used by both CCEA and Edexcel had declined in difficulty between 1996 and 2001, while the material used by the other awarding bodies had remained fairly consistent. The stimulus material used in AQA reading examinations in both years was considered the most demanding; that used by WJEC in 1996, the least.

The stimulus materials used in AQA reading examinations were more difficult in terms of linguistic breadth and sophistication, volume, density and conceptual demands than those of the other awarding bodies. The review panel was concerned that the use of very demanding texts could make the examination inaccessible to some candidates, however straightforward the wording of questions. The reviewers agreed that the difficulty of the texts was a significant factor in the AQA reading examinations in both 1996 and 2001. At the script review it was noticeable that many AQA grade E candidates had experienced some difficulty with the reading examinations.

The reviewers were concerned about the 1996 WJEC reading examination. The stimulus material was relatively straightforward syntactically and presented difficulties confined mainly to vocabulary. The reading passages were also short, given the time allocation for the examination. However, the fact that candidates were not permitted to use a dictionary, and the nature of the test itself (whereby candidates could easily lose out due to lack of comprehension of individual words), increased the demand of the examination without effectively testing reading skills.

Speaking

The test types used in speaking components did not change significantly between 1996 and 2001, although there was a tendency towards increased use of discussion of a topic area. The reviewers agreed that the level of demand in the speaking examinations was appropriate in 1996 and 2001 and the demands were consistent across the awarding bodies.

The Edexcel syllabus was unique in offering an interpreting exercise as an option in the speaking component.

Writing

In most syllabuses, writing in German was assessed in more than one examination paper and, by 2001, usually covered more than one assessment objective.

In 1996, most awarding bodies assessed writing in German primarily through examination papers designed to test the degree to which candidates could express themselves accurately in written German, demonstrating an appropriate range of vocabulary and structures. Literature and/or specified topics papers (eg AQA in both years, CCEA in 1996) did not always require candidates to write in German. Where they did, most marks were awarded for knowledge, evaluation and analysis, in varying degrees. Active writing skills were tested elsewhere in the examination (eg CCEA in 2001).

By 2001, more of the marks awarded for writing in German came from the paper covering literature and/or specified topics. This added to the overall volume of writing in German required by most awarding bodies. Questions on these papers required candidates to demonstrate specific knowledge of the specified topic/text, adopt a specific angle and use their independent judgement with appropriate analysis. Most awarding bodies also continued to use a variety of other test types for assessing writing, such as general topic essays and questions in German, as well as exercises requiring transfer of meaning into German. Edexcel no longer included prose translation in 2001; OCR did not include it in either year.

The reviewers considered that OCR did not make sufficient demands on candidates' writing skills in either year. The assessment of writing in OCR examinations was very predictable, especially in 1996 when writing was tested primarily by two long essays on the literature and/or specified topics component, with a very small element of writing assessed in Paper 2 (Reading). The syllabus prescribed literary themes, not texts, leaving the choice of texts to centres. This meant the questions testing this aspect of the subject were generalised and all-encompassing. However, the parameters for non-literary topic areas on this paper were more precise, and the questions on these topics were more rigorous. The situation was improved somewhat in 2001 by the introduction of a very short interpreting exercise and a short letter based on a listening stimulus in units 1 and 2, but the level of demand was still felt to be insufficient and inconsistent with the other awarding bodies.

Literature/specified topics

A variety of approaches to the testing of literature and/or specified topics were used across the awarding bodies. The main variable was whether candidates were required to write essays in English or in German or were allowed to submit some essays in German and some in English:

- AQA and WJEC continued to offer the possibility of answering some or all questions in English
- OCR required all answers in German in both years
- CCEA and Edexcel switched from requiring candidates to write essays in English in 1996 to requiring answers in German by 2001.

Candidates' responses in German were assessed for the quality of writing as well as for knowledge, understanding and evaluation. The reviewers were unable to decide whether these different approaches presented the same overall demand to candidates.

There were also variations between awarding bodies in the number of topics or texts that candidates were required to study. Some awarding bodies offered a free choice between literary and non-literary topics and literary texts; some required at least one topic of each variety. The general principle seemed to be that two topics were sufficient if tested in German, otherwise three were required.

In the 1996 syllabus, OCR specified that each literary topic area required the study of at least two texts. This requirement was dropped from the 2001 syllabus. The reviewers felt this

constituted a considerable reduction in the content of the syllabus. Similarly, in 1996, CCEA required the study of either one literary text and two non-literary topics or two texts and one topic. This was reduced to two themes (either literary or non-literary) in 2001 in line with the change requiring candidate answers in German. However, candidates choosing a literary theme in 2001 had to study two texts for each theme, but there was no corresponding increase in demand for non-literary themes. It was not clear why candidates choosing literary themes were required to cover twice as much ground as candidates choosing non-literary themes in 2001.

The reviewers were not convinced that in 1996 sufficient measures were in place to ensure comparability across optional texts and/or topics. For example, the Edexcel syllabus offered a three-way option between Paper 2 (Literature with English responses), Paper 3 (German responses on literary topics and civilization) and Paper 3C (two pieces of coursework totalling 2,400 words). The very different assessment criteria and marking procedures for the three options made it difficult to ensure comparability of scope and demand. By 2001, Edexcel offered a literature/topics examination paper or coursework as parallel options. The reviewers felt that the assessment criteria were parallel when the differing modes and contexts of the two options were taken into account.

The reviewers were concerned about possible inconsistencies between options in the WJEC syllabus in both 1996 and 2001. The syllabus offered a choice between: Paper 5 (Literature), which required answers in English on three literary texts and an element of coursework; Paper 6 (Extended language), which required answers in German on two literary texts, a speaking examination and an element of coursework; and Paper 7 (School-based project work), which consisted entirely of coursework. There was apparently little attempt to coordinate the options in terms of context, difficulty and demand, or the assessment procedures used. The panel also thought that the limit of 150 words for each of the two essays on Paper 6 would be unlikely to provide sufficient differentiation between candidates and might restrict more able candidates. Questions on this paper were also found to be less demanding of candidates' analytical and evaluative skills than on similar papers offered by other awarding bodies.

The AQA system for assessing literature and/or specified topics in both 1996 and 2001 required candidates to write three essays, at least one on a literary text and at least one in German. This allowed for a good balance between those candidates who wished to delve more deeply into the subject matter and those who wished to focus on language skills.

Coursework

In 1996, coursework was offered as an option by all awarding bodies except CCEA. Typically, coursework carried a 20 per cent weighting as an alternative to a literature and/or specified topics paper. The pattern and weighting for coursework remained unchanged for the AQA, Edexcel and WJEC syllabuses. By 2001, CCEA had introduced a similar coursework option, also with a 20 per cent weighting.

OCR was the only awarding body to offer speaking coursework as well as writing coursework in both years, although candidates were only permitted to take one of the two. In line with regulatory requirements limiting the amount of internally assessed work permitted in syllabuses, OCR changed the weightings for the speaking and writing coursework options from 30 per cent and 25 per cent in 1996 respectively to 15 per cent for both options in 2001.

The reviewers found some variation between syllabuses in terms of the amount of coursework required, even where coursework was allocated the same weighting. Most awarding bodies required two pieces of work of about 1,000–1,200 words each. WJEC required candidates to

produce rather less – either one long piece or two or three shorter pieces totalling about 1,500 words.

Between 1996 and 2001, Edexcel and OCR reduced the amount of coursework required:

- Edexcel reduced their requirement from two pieces of 1,200 words to two pieces of 1,000 words, bringing their requirement closer to that of AQA and WJEC
- at OCR the requirement changed from six pieces of 500–700 words each in 1996 to either one piece of 1,000–1,200 words or two pieces of 500–700 words in 2001. This must be seen in the context of the overall weighting for the written coursework component being reduced from 25 per cent to 15 per cent. However, the reviewers noted that the reduction in the coursework requirement by over a half was disproportionate to the decrease in the weighting.

All the awarding bodies except CCEA offered some degree of freedom of choice outside the set topics. Edexcel and OCR syllabuses stated that work must show evidence of wide-ranging, in-depth reading and research and both encouraged originality and independence in approach combined with empirical research where appropriate. Where linked themes were demanded, progression had to be demonstrated. In the case of Edexcel, two contrasting themes had to be chosen with no overlap; in addition, very helpful exemplification was provided and the coursework guidelines stated clearly the level of intellectual rigour required.

The AQA syllabus offered a more directed approach to coursework: the choice given to candidates was tightly delineated. The syllabus specified that one essay must be based on one work of German fiction or non-fiction and that the second essay, if a different subject matter were chosen, must be equivalent in extent to the study required for a second work of German fiction or non-fiction. The reviewers considered this guidance to be helpful and a useful means by which to help ensure comparability with the alternative examination option.

The reviewers noted that all awarding bodies had coursework regulations stating that plagiarism and other examples of malpractice would be treated seriously and that mechanisms were in place to investigate such incidents. This was important, because malpractice issues commonly associated with the assessment of coursework are particularly acute in modern foreign languages.

The reviewers agreed that there were issues about the comparability of coursework with alternative examination options. However, the assessment criteria were differentiated to reflect the two options and the physical conditions in which they are pursued. This differentiation, plus the different grade boundaries set by all awarding bodies for examination and coursework options, takes into account the different contexts of the exercises. Overall, comparability between the options was achieved.

Summary

In 2001, syllabuses provided clearer and more detailed statements on the philosophy of the examinations and more precise information on the content of the examination in terms of language and content than in 1996. There was greater support for teachers and centres.

The requirements of some syllabuses changed significantly between 1996 and 2001, with a general move towards testing in German rather than in English. There was, therefore, a significant shift in the skills tested and in the modes used for testing. In particular, there was increased use of integrated skills testing. Where there had been changes to syllabuses, the level of examination demand was generally found to have increased.

In the case of AQA and WJEC, no changes were made at all. Both awarding bodies adopted a mixed approach to testing, using testing in German as well as in English. In both cases the tendency overall was to rely on testing in English. The reviewers found that the overall level of demand of the examination had been maintained within both awarding bodies. However, the overall level of demand of the WJEC syllabus in both years was judged to be less than that of the other awarding bodies. In particular, assessment of reading and listening was less demanding. Questions in German on literary texts did not give candidates sufficient opportunity to demonstrate higher-level skills of analysis and evaluation.

The reviewers were concerned about the assessment of writing in the 1996 OCR syllabus, in which questions tended to be generalised and rather predictable. Significant changes in the OCR syllabus between 1996 and 2001 addressed some of these problems. These changes demanded a higher level and increased volume of active language skills within an integrated skills-testing context. The writing tasks were of a more unpredictable and demanding nature, and the speaking examination included more unpredictable elements. These changes were judged to have increased the demand of the examination.

Between 1996 and 2001, the philosophy of the CCEA syllabus changed significantly to testing predominantly in German.

Of all the awarding bodies, the Edexcel syllabus underwent the most radical changes between 1996 and 2001. The 1996 syllabus required English responses in one form or another in most examination papers. By 2001, the syllabus had adopted an integrated skills approach, with most testing in German and a variety of optional routes between and within papers. Candidates had to undertake a significantly increased amount of oral work, with an increased element of choice and predictability. The amount of writing in German increased significantly.

The reviewers were concerned about the lack of comparability between optional routes in several of the 1996 syllabuses. Very different requirements and assessment criteria across options made it difficult to achieve comparability in scope and level of demand. By 2001, these inconsistencies had largely been addressed.

Standards of performance at grade A and grade E

Materials available

The review of candidate work focused on work from the three English awarding bodies (AQA, Edexcel and OCR). In some cases, and especially for modular syllabuses, a candidate's work used in the review actually comprised performance by more than one candidate, rather than being the work of individual candidates. See Appendix B for numbers of the scripts used in the review.

Standards expected at grade A and grade E

The reviewers developed performance descriptions based on published grade descriptions, adjusted to take account of the borderline nature of the work. The performance descriptions can be found in Appendix C.

Performance at grade A

Work from OCR candidates in 2001 was found to be of a slightly lower standard than from AQA and Edexcel candidates. Work from both AQA and Edexcel in 2001 was slightly better than in 1996; that from OCR slightly worse.

Where candidates were required to answer questions in German on literature and/or specified topics papers, the reviewers saw evidence of a high level of evaluation and analysis in candidates' answers. The rather generalised nature of the questions on the OCR literary topics had led to some candidates appearing to regurgitate pre-learnt essays. The non-literary topic questions tended to be more specific and elicited fewer responses of this type.

Grade A candidates' coursework demonstrated originality of approach and evidence of wide-ranging reading, as well as well-conducted empirical research with high levels of evaluation and discussion. The reviewers found no evidence that the reduction in word count requirements in the 2001 Edexcel and OCR syllabuses had lessened the conceptual demands of the exercise.

Performance at grade E

The findings suggested an improvement in the level of performance of AQA candidates between 1996 and 2001. However, many AQA candidates appeared to have experienced some difficulty with the reading examinations in both years. This confirmed the reviewers' concerns about the demanding nature of the stimulus material used.

Standards of performance of Edexcel candidates were found to be broadly similar in 1996 and 2001. The performance of OCR candidates was generally found to be stronger in 1996.

In 2001, differences between the awarding bodies were slight, but if anything AQA's candidates were better than those from OCR, and OCR's were better than Edexcel's.

The panel found that candidates at grade E tended to demonstrate stronger written skills in coursework than in the alternative written examinations. This meant that coursework tended to have a positive impact on overall grade outcome.

Summary

None of the evidence suggested a clear trend in standards over time nor systematic differences in standards across the awarding bodies.

The performance of AQA candidates suggested a slight improvement at both grades between 1996 and 2001.

The performance of OCR candidates at grades A and E was found to be slightly stronger in 1996 than in 2001.

The performance of Edexcel grade A candidates showed an improvement in 2001, particularly in speaking and writing skills. There was no change in performance at grade E.

Appendix A: Syllabuses used in the syllabus review

Year	Awarding body and syllabus				
1996	AQA/N 4216	CCEA	Edexcel 9230	OCR 9822	WJEC
2001	AQA/N 4216	CCEA	Edexcel 9234	OCR 9922	WJEC 027

Appendix B: Numbers of scripts used in the script review

AQA		Edexcel		OCR	
1996	2001	1996	2001	1996	2001
A (15)	A (15)	A (15)	A (15)	A (15)	A (15)
E (15)	E (15)	E (15)	E (1)*	E (15)	E (7)

Numbers of scripts available to the reviewers are shown in brackets.

*In some cases it was impossible to provide all the work from a single candidate.

Appendix C: Performance descriptors used in the script review

Grade A

Speaking:

- no problems of understanding
- no long pauses (except when genuine reflection is required)
- no impression that answers are short because of lack of language skills
- some flexibility shown (ie ability to react to examiner and expand if requested)
- ideas, not merely narrative or description on offer (ie evidence of conceptual thinking)
- grammatical errors limited mainly to minor failures (genders; plurals; adjective endings) with only occasional major errors (tense; case; word order involving verb). Almost complete absence of structural errors
- pronunciation and intonation would not cause embarrassment to you if you had described the candidate as a very promising student to a German friend.

Reading and listening:

- ability to cope with what can be identified as the more complex stimulus material (a success rate of about 70 per cent – depending on degree of complexity – might be expected here)
- ability to cope with ‘reading-between-the-lines’ questions (a similar success rate expected as for complex stimulus material)
- an eye shown for detail (This is a useful discriminating device with the less demanding questions or stimulus material. A higher success rate than for the categories above could be expected here)
- where English is required, answers will be clearly and unambiguously expressed.

Writing:

- ability to produce discursive writing with a reasonable range of notions (eg cause/effect; conditions; evidence; purposes; reactions; connections; comparisons; judgements; third party opinions; recommendations; speculations)
- ability to produce a corresponding variety of language structures (Some repetition of structures is acceptable but not to the point of creating a ‘fenced-in’ feeling in the reader)
- grammatical errors limited mainly to minor failures (genders; plurals; adjective endings) with only occasional major errors (tense; case; word order involving verb). Almost complete absence of structural errors. These are the same as for speaking, but it is assumed that they should apply in a context of greater linguistic ambition.

Cultural component:

- detailed knowledge demonstrated. This will be the main element at this level. The proportion of evaluation and analysis compared with knowledge would be expected to increase as we move further up the grade A scale
- knowledge presented in a clear progression with some internal logic and in terms dictated by the question
- some sensible evaluation and analysis demonstrated
- some linkage established between evidence and conclusion.

Grade E

NB In deciding that a candidate is worth a grade E, one is making both a negative and a positive decision.

Speaking:

- occasional problems of understanding
- frequent pauses and hesitations
- little flexibility shown (ie limited ability to react to examiner and expand if requested). Only minimal responses offered
- few ideas, mainly narrative or description on offer
- language is simple and fairly inaccurate; structures and vocabulary limited. The saving grace is achievement of a reasonable degree of communication
- if more complex language offered, it is marred by frequent major and minor errors, but is still good

enough to demonstrate a reasonable degree of communication

- pronunciation and intonation clearly influenced by English, but still comprehensible without the examiner having to make Herculean efforts.

Reading and listening:

- very limited ability to cope with what can be identified as the more complex stimulus material (a success rate of about 25 per cent – depending on degree of complexity – might be expected here)
- very limited ability to cope with ‘reading-between-the-lines’ questions (a similar success rate expected as for complex stimulus material)
- in the less demanding questions/stimulus material little eye shown for detail. Details will often, but not always or nearly always, be missed or misunderstood. However, the main gist will, for the most part, be grasped
- where English is required, answers will be clumsily expressed and subtleties missed.

Writing:

- very limited ability to produce discursive writing. When achieved, it will contain only a very restricted variety of notions
- inability to produce any variety of language structures. Repetition or simplicity of vocabulary and structures will be such as to produce a ‘fenced-in’ feeling in the reader
- when more complex language attempted, grammatical errors of both a major and minor order will be common, but the language should still be good enough to demonstrate a reasonable degree of communication
- simple content (factual, narrative, descriptive) – simple language pattern of work evident. In this scenario, grammatical accuracy should be of good A–A* standard at GCSE.

Cultural component:

- adequate knowledge demonstrated, but in the form of narrative or description
- knowledge not presented in a clear progression with any internal logic or in terms dictated by the question
- little, if any, evaluation and analysis demonstrated
- if offered at all, linkage between evidence and conclusion will be dubious or unsound.