



Department  
for Education

**Consultation Response Form**

**Consultation closing date: 20 November 2014**

**Your comments must reach us by that date**

## **GCSE and A level reform**

**If you would prefer to respond online to this consultation please use the following link: <https://www.education.gov.uk/consultations>**

Information provided in response to this consultation, including personal information, may be subject to publication or disclosure in accordance with the access to information regimes, primarily the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and the Data Protection Act 1998.

If you want all, or any part, of your response to be treated as confidential, please explain why you consider it to be confidential.

If a request for disclosure of the information you have provided is received, your explanation about why you consider it to be confidential will be taken into account, but no assurance can be given that confidentiality can be maintained. An automatic confidentiality disclaimer generated by your IT system will not, of itself, be regarded as binding on the Department.

The Department will process your personal data (name and address and any other identifying material) in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998, and in the majority of circumstances, this will mean that your personal data will not be disclosed to third parties.

<b>Please tick if you want us to keep your response confidential.</b>	
Reason for confidentiality:	

Name: Alastair Lichten	
Please tick if you are responding on behalf of your organisation.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Name of Organisation (if applicable): National Secular Society	
Address: 25 Red Lion Square, London, WC1R 4RL	

If your enquiry is related to the DfE e-consultation website or the consultation process in general, you can contact the Ministerial and Public Communications Division by e-mail: [consultation.unit@education.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:consultation.unit@education.gsi.gov.uk) or by telephone: 0370 000 2288 or via the GOV.UK '[Contact us](#)' page.

Please insert an 'x' into one of the following boxes which best describes you as a respondent

<input type="checkbox"/> School	<input type="checkbox"/> College	<input type="checkbox"/> Subject associations
<input type="checkbox"/> Parent	<input type="checkbox"/> Young person	<input type="checkbox"/> Higher education
<input type="checkbox"/> Further education	<input type="checkbox"/> Academies	<input type="checkbox"/> Organisations representing school teachers and lecturers
<input type="checkbox"/> Employer/Business sector	<input type="checkbox"/> Local authority	<input type="checkbox"/> Teacher
<input type="checkbox"/> Awarding organisation	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Other	

Please Specify:

The National Secular Society is a non-profit campaigning organisation which promotes secularism as the best means to create a society in which people of all religions and none can live together fairly and cohesively – a key requirement for equal citizenship.

Is the revised GCSE content in each of these subjects appropriate? Please consider:

- whether there is a suitable level of challenge
- whether the content reflects what students need to know in order to progress to further academic and vocational education
- whether the amount of content in the qualification is appropriate and, if not, whether you have any suggestions for removing or adding content

Please provide evidence to support your response.

## 1 a) Citizenship studies

<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> Not Sure
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We regard education as a key element in preparing young people to exercise their rights as active, autonomous and equal citizens. The concept of equal citizenship regardless of one's religious or philosophical beliefs is central to secularism and something schools have a duty to promote as part of their Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED). In this way good provision of citizenship education can help schools meet their PSED.

We advocate a secular education system, free from religious discrimination or privilege in its form or content, where young people are educated together regardless of their religion or belief background.

We welcome measures to strengthen the Citizenship GCSE course which we hope will lead to increasing numbers of pupils taking the full course. However we have several concerns with the current course content and recommendations on how it could be improved.

The in-depth knowledge of the UK's democratic institutions is undoubtedly valuable. However, the focus on institutions, which may seem far removed from a 15 year-old's day to day life, could lead to too great a focus on the institutions which mediate ideas of citizenship rather than critically and practically exploring the values and ideas which underpin the concept of equal citizenship.

We share the concerns of the Citizenship Foundation that the increased range of content has led to an imbalance in focus towards detailed knowledge of specific institutions. While this is important in an academic subject – we particularly welcome pupils learning about the framework of laws which protect their rights as equal citizens – this focus should not come at the expense of pupils' opportunities to develop practical skills associated with active citizenship. A key objective should be for pupils taking the course to come to understand themselves and their peers as rights holding citizens. These processes and skills need to be clearly articulated within the subject content.

We welcome the content on "Rights and responsibilities". The content should enable students to recognise the protections granted to all people, regardless of belief, by human rights instruments such as the Human Rights Act 1998 - based on the

European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) - and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which the UK is a signatory.

We suggest that it would be helpful to emphasise that human rights apply to individuals and not organisations or ideologies – and for students to explore the difficulties with models of citizenship where human rights do apply to identity groups rather than individuals.

Pupils should consider how concepts of citizens' rights and equal citizenship relate to all areas of the subject, and ideally their wider education. In line with schools' PSED and new duty to promote 'British values', we believe the consideration of the impact of equality law and human rights on the nature of citizenship should be a key component of the course.

We would encourage an emphasis on the role of the individual citizen here, where every citizen has a vote, regardless of their beliefs, and that it is through the bestowal of the status of equal individual citizenship that the UK ultimately views and treats its citizens.

Pupils should consider how equality law principles (and exemptions) may affect them and their peers and their participation in active citizenship. Pupils should understand the principles that demonstrate equal and unequal citizenship; (un)equal rights and responsibilities, (un)equal access to public services etc. Where public institutions mediate citizenship (e.g. pupils exercise their right to an education through schools), pupils should understand how the duty of these institutions to treat them with equal respect regardless of their protected characteristics (including religion or belief) relates to their status as equal (or unequal) citizens.

Article 29 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child requires education to be directed to "the development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations".

In addition to the principles already covered we believe the course should explicitly teach pupils about human rights and child rights, including the treaty dedicated to their own circumstances – the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

We welcome the comparative citizenship exercise in "Politics beyond the UK". However we believe that this focus on democracy is too narrow and should not just be relate to that specific unit. Instead of comparing the UK to another democratic/nondemocratic country, young people should compare and contrast different models of citizenship. Pupils should consider the consequences when full citizenship is not equal or is restricted to (or closely related to) only citizens of a particular race, religion, gender or caste. As well as comparing the differences in

citizenship in democratic and nondemocratic states we believe there would be great value in pupils comparing the differences in citizenship in theocratic and secular states.

If appropriate students may also reflect compare different time periods rather than different countries, for example the UK before women had the vote, when homosexuality was illegal or when the non-religious/non-Christians could not hold certain public trusts or offices. It a mistake, which should not be encouraged, to believe that barriers to equal citizenship do not exist in the modern UK. Pupils should reflect on contemporary debates around barriers to fully equal or active citizenship based on protected characteristics.

The focus on equality law is welcome, however, we believe the course will be more effective and empowering for pupils if the course also explored how their educational rights relate to their own standing as equal citizens.

2 Is the content for citizenship studies GCSE short course appropriate? Please consider:

- whether there is a suitable level of challenge
- whether the content reflects what students need to know, including whether it meets the national curriculum requirements
- whether the amount of content in the qualification is appropriate and, if not, whether you have any suggestions for removing or adding content

Yes

No

Not Sure

Citizenship is a wide ranging subject but key themes should be emphasised throughout the subject rather than in specific units to ensure that they are covered by all students including those on the short course.

We believe that these key themes should be: active citizenship, comparing different models of citizenship and the relationship between human rights and citizenship.

We share the concerns expressed by the Citizenship Foundation that the short course does not provide sufficient opportunity for pupils to develop their knowledge and understanding of these key themes and of themselves and their peers as equal citizens and that the short course will offer less space for practical assessment.

5 Do you think that any of the proposals have the potential to have a disproportionate impact, positive or negative, on specific students, in particular those with 'relevant protected characteristics'? (The relevant protected characteristics are disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation) Please provide evidence to support your response.

<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> Not Sure
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We favour a children's rights based approach to education and believe that all aspects of education should be equally welcoming and respectful to all children, regardless of their religious and philosophical backgrounds – or protected characteristics.

Some pupils may have had direct or indirect experience of unequal treatment as citizens – including for reasons related to religion or belief. For example, pupils taking the course may be attending a school which can legally discriminate against them, their peers or their teachers based on their beliefs.

Naturally we believe that educating young people on the relationship between equal treatment, and the principle of equal citizenship will have a positive impact on their understanding and empower them to challenge privileges and inequalities. We also believe that this in turn will have a positive impact on equality in the wider school environment.

We are concerned that the course does not adequately address barriers to equal citizenship (including discrimination based on religion or belief, including non-belief) or unequal models of citizenship (e.g. models which privilege particular genders, religions or ethnicities).

6 How could any adverse impact be reduced and how could the subject content of GCSEs and/or A levels be altered to better advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a protected characteristic and those who do not share it? Please provide evidence to support your response.

In delivering the Citizenship Studies course (and in providing opportunities for pupils to develop active citizenship skills across all other areas of school life) schools should be mindful of their PSED and new duty to promote fundamental 'British values'. Both of these duties are related to and attempts to act on the principle of equal citizenship.

Issues of equality, between persons who share a protected characteristic and those who do not share it, can best be tackled by addressing them through the course subject. Critical debates of different concepts of citizenship should be encouraged. However, pupils should understand why concepts of citizenship based on privileging particular protected characteristics (or lack of those characteristics) are not compatible with models of equal citizenship.

Thank you for taking the time to let us have your views. We do not intend to acknowledge individual responses unless you place an 'X' in the box below.

**Please acknowledge this reply.**

x

E-mail address for acknowledgement: [alastair.lichten@secularism.org.uk](mailto:alastair.lichten@secularism.org.uk)

Here at the Department for Education we carry out our research on many different topics and consultations. As your views are valuable to us, please confirm below if you would be willing to be contacted again from time to time either for research or to send through consultation documents?

Yes

No

All DfE public consultations are required to meet the Cabinet Office [Principles on Consultation](#)

If you have any comments on how DfE consultations are conducted, please contact Aileen Shaw, DfE Consultation Coordinator, tel: 0370 000 2288 / email: [aileen.shaw@education.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:aileen.shaw@education.gsi.gov.uk)

Completed responses should be sent to the address shown below by 20 November 2014

Send by e-mail to: [GCSEandAlevelSeptember.CONULTATION@education.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:GCSEandAlevelSeptember.CONULTATION@education.gsi.gov.uk)