

Comparative Analysis of Course Specifications across Selected Jurisdictions

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Key findings



Course specifications generally contain a common set of core elements.

Across jurisdictions, course documentation typically includes:

- a statement of course purpose or subject rationale
- descriptions of subject content or learning expectations
- information about assessment structure or performance standards

While terminology varies, most systems articulate what learners are expected to know or be able to do and how achievement will be recognised or assessed.



Jurisdictions differ in how curriculum intent, assessment, and guidance are organised.

A key point of variation is the extent to which curriculum intent, subject content, and assessment expectations are distributed across multiple documents or platforms. Some systems combine these elements, while others separate curriculum frameworks, assessment standards, and supporting guidance. These different approaches reflect varying assumptions about how specifications are used in practice.



Digital and modular documentation models are increasingly common.

Several jurisdictions organise course information across digital platforms and linked resources rather than a single static document. This allows curriculum descriptions, assessment guidance, and support materials to be updated or expanded independently.



Broader competences and cross-curricular capabilities are widely present but expressed differently.

Most jurisdictions emphasise broader learner capabilities alongside subject knowledge. However, these are expressed and located differently within documentation. In some systems they appear explicitly within subject specifications, while in others they are articulated primarily through overarching curriculum frameworks rather than within individual course specifications.



The role of assessment influences the focus of specification documents.

Where assessment requirements are centrally defined, course documentation more often includes explicit descriptions of assessment components, structures, or grading criteria. In systems where assessment is largely devolved to schools, documentation tends to emphasise curriculum intent and learning expectations rather than detailed assessment requirements.



Specifications vary substantially in length, format, and level of detail.

Across jurisdictions, course specifications range from concise documents outlining core expectations to longer specifications that include extended explanation and guidance. These differences appear to reflect differing policy choices. Overall clarity and coherence appear to depend more on organisation and alignment of content than on document length alone.

Context

Scotland is currently undertaking wide-ranging reforms to its curriculum, qualifications, and assessment system, following recommendations from the [OECD](#) (2021), the [National Discussion](#) (2023), and the [Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment](#) (2024). After reflecting on these recommendations, the Scottish Government asked Qualifications Scotland to reform qualifications in the senior phase, including rebalancing approaches to assessment, exploring modularisation of graded National Courses, and extending the range of assessment methods. We, in partnership with organisations including the Scottish Government, Education Scotland and key stakeholders in the Curriculum and Assessment Board, are leading the reforms to ensure that National Courses are evidence-informed and fit for purpose.

This report supports this work by comparing course specifications from a selection of jurisdictions, with the aim of identifying patterns, structures, and approaches that can inform any updates to Scotland's National Course specifications. Upper secondary course specifications are a key mechanism for communicating curriculum, assessment, and learning aims to educators. Variations exist internationally in terms of content, format, and purpose. Understanding these differences can inform potential improvements to our course specifications, ensuring clarity, usability, and alignment with intended learning outcomes as Scotland's curriculum, qualifications, and assessment system is reformed.

Research questions

This paper is designed to support the National Course reform strands that we are leading on. Specifically, in considering course specifications from across selected jurisdictions, this report seeks to explore the following research questions.

1. What are the key components of course specifications for outcome-based upper secondary qualifications in the selected jurisdictions?
2. How is this content communicated in terms of structure, level of detail, and organisation?
3. How do Qualifications Scotland National Courses compare with international practices in content and assessment articulation?
4. What role does the presence of a formal curriculum play in shaping course specifications?
5. What variation exists in volume, specificity, and guidance, and what does this imply for effective qualification frameworks?
6. How can these findings inform evidence-based improvements to Qualifications Scotland National Course specification templates?

Method

This desk-based study conducted a structured comparative analysis of course specifications for Higher English, Mathematics, Geography, and Physical Education in Scotland and for upper secondary qualifications in these subjects in selected international jurisdictions (England, Wales, Northern Ireland, British Columbia (Canada), Estonia, New South Wales (Australia), and New Zealand). The analysis was guided by a framework designed to examine both the content and structure of specifications, with a view to understanding how assessment expectations, learning outcomes, and guidance are articulated across systems.

Although this study focuses on course specification documents, the term course specification is not used consistently across jurisdictions. In some systems, elements such as assessment specifications, curriculum statements, or coursework guidance perform a similar role but are published separately. Where appropriate, this analysis also refers to these supplementary documents and guidance.

The analysis focused on several dimensions:

- scope and purpose of the specifications: what the specifications aim to achieve and how they relate to broader curricular frameworks
- representation of content: coverage of knowledge, skills, and competencies, and how these are expressed
- assessment requirements: how assessments are described, including level of detail
- structural organisation: layout, clarity, and guidance provided for educators and learners

The approach is descriptive and thematic. The body of this paper details high-level findings; more detailed jurisdiction- and subject-specific information is presented in the appendix.

Note that information in this paper has been compiled by our Research and Evaluation Team through readily available data; it may contain omissions or misinterpretations.

Overview of jurisdictions

Scotland

Qualifications Scotland's Higher course specifications consolidate core information about qualifications, including course rationale, aims, content, and high-level assessment structure. Specifications typically articulate the purpose of the course and the expected skills, knowledge, and understanding associated with the qualification. Equality and inclusion statements are embedded, with links to relevant policy and guidance. Detailed operational guidance (such as

specimen papers, marking instructions, coursework tasks, and conditions of assessment) is provided in supplementary documents, which centres are directed to consult alongside the specification.

Scottish specifications follow a standardised structure across subjects, supporting consistency, comparability, and navigability. Core sections generally include course overview, rationale and aims, course content, skills, knowledge and understanding, assessment structure, equality and inclusion, and appendices or support notes. Variations occur mainly in the depth of subject-specific content and assessment detail rather than in document structure.

In presentation, specifications typically combine extended narrative prose with structured tables and bullet points. Pedagogical guidance and advice on approaches to learning and teaching are typically provided in the appendix support notes or in linked support materials. Compared with jurisdictions that distribute information across multiple documents, Scotland emphasises a comprehensive core course-level reference point, with additional guidance layered through supporting materials.

This approach supports clarity for educators, standardises structure across subjects, and explicitly integrates equality and accessibility considerations, while allowing detailed assessment procedures to be maintained separately.

England

Course specifications in England reflect a structured but awarding-body-designed approach. While national regulatory frameworks set overarching requirements, the volume, emphasis, and presentation of specification content are largely determined by awarding organisations. This analysis focuses on AQA specifications.

Specifications typically prioritise subject aims, content domains, assessment objectives, and assessment structures. Grading structures and assessment objectives are defined, with detailed scoring guidance provided in separate mark schemes. Equality, accessibility, and inclusion statements are included within specifications, with more detailed procedural guidance provided through Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) documentation.

Compared with Scotland, English specifications place stronger emphasis on assessment objectives as the organising principle, linking content, cognitive demand, and assessment design. Broader contextual material, such as extended course rationale or learner guidance, is less prominent and may appear in supplementary or regulatory resources. Variation across

subjects is notable; document length, format, and level of explanation differ depending on subject priorities and awarding body design choices.

Specifications combine narrative prose, structured tables, and bullet points to convey content and assessment requirements. Non-exam assessment (NEA) frameworks are often included within the specification, with further operational detail and exemplification provided externally. This layered approach defines assessment structure and objectives within the specification while distributing detailed operational guidance across supporting materials.

Overall, English specifications emphasise assessment objectives, subject content, and assessment structures, with supporting materials providing detailed operational guidance where needed.

Wales

WJEC specifications follow a broadly consistent structure across subjects, reflecting national reform efforts and alignment with Qualifications Wales's regulatory principles. Specifications typically integrate subject content, assessment information, and performance criteria, emphasising clarity, accessibility, and navigability. Companion materials, particularly an educator guidance document, function as an extended resource, providing detailed unit breakdowns, learning objectives, suggested teaching activities, and examples of assessment tasks.

Assessment design is central to Welsh specifications. Components, mark allocations, exam durations, and NEA requirements are clearly outlined, with assessment objectives acting as the primary organising principle linking subject content, cognitive demand, and evaluation criteria. Detailed marking guidance, exemplars, and procedural instructions are generally provided in separate supporting documents.

Equality, inclusion, and accessibility considerations are explicitly addressed within specifications, signalling policy priorities around fairness and learner access, although operational guidance relies on JCQ documentation. Specifications balance concision with clarity, while still providing sufficient guidance.

Variation exists across subjects in the depth of explanatory prose, table use, and placement of NEA guidance, but all specifications adhere to the same core structural principles. Skills are generally embedded within assessment objectives rather than categorised separately, and broader transferable skills are less prominently featured than in Scotland.

In general, Welsh specifications emphasise subject content, assessment objectives, and structured guidance, supported by companion materials to provide full operational and pedagogical detail, within a coherent and nationally regulated framework.

Northern Ireland

A level specifications in Northern Ireland emphasise clarity of assessment requirements, subject content, and grading arrangements. Specifications are organised around assessment objectives, subject content, assessment components, and mark allocations, with structure and terminology broadly consistent across subjects. Extended contextual or rationale sections are typically limited, making specifications more concise than those in Scotland.

Assessment objectives serve as the primary organising principle, linking knowledge expectations, skills development, and assessment criteria. Internal assessment requirements are included where applicable, while detailed marking guidance, exemplars, and operational instructions are generally provided in separate supporting documents. Cross-curricular skills and Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities are explicitly referenced in some subjects and indicated more broadly in others through curriculum objectives.

Equality, inclusion, and accessibility considerations are explicitly embedded in specifications, signalling regulatory and statutory priorities. More detailed procedural guidance for adjustments and accommodations is provided via external regulatory documentation.

Across subjects, specifications demonstrate a recognisable common framework, supporting comparability and navigability, although presentation details (such as document length, layout, and the balance of prose and tables) vary according to subject requirements. Companion materials, including sample assessment materials, mark schemes, examiner reports, and teaching guidance, supplement the core specifications.

In all, Northern Ireland specifications prioritise assessment clarity, subject content, and consistent organisational logic, with supplementary resources providing detailed guidance for implementation, within a cohesive regulatory and awarding structure.

British Columbia (Canada)

Specifications in British Columbia reflect a curriculum-led, competency-driven model organised around Big Ideas (enduring understandings), content (knowledge), and Curricular Competencies (skills and processes). Core Competencies (Communication, Thinking, Personal and Social) provide an overarching framework for holistic development, articulated separately

from the Big Ideas and Curricular Competencies of individual subjects. Documents are typically concise and conceptually framed, emphasising flexible pedagogical interpretation rather than prescriptive assessment procedures.

Assessment guidance is devolved to schools and educators. While curriculum documents define learning standards and provide exemplars through elaborations and online resources, they do not mandate specific assessment methods, leaving schools discretion in design and implementation. This contrasts with jurisdictions where specifications integrate detailed exam structures or grading criteria.

Glossaries, elaborations, and supporting materials clarify competencies, key concepts, and curriculum terminology, helping educators interpret standards consistently. Equity, inclusion, and Indigenous perspectives are embedded across curriculum elements, with guidance promoting culturally responsive teaching, differentiated instruction, and equitable learner access.

Across subjects, the overarching framework is consistent, although the number of Big Ideas, elaboration depth, and specificity of Content statements vary. Subject-level differences exist in emphasis and elaboration, but all courses share a flexible, concept-focused approach that supports local interpretation and school-based assessment design.

Generally, British Columbia specifications prioritise conceptual clarity, competency development, and interpretive flexibility, with assessment largely delegated to schools and educators, supported by elaboration documents that provide guidance, examples, and instructional context within a provincially coherent framework.

Estonia

Estonian upper secondary specifications are highly detailed, text-heavy, and embedded within the national curriculum, integrating learning outcomes, competencies, and assessment expectations within a single, standardised document. Specifications provide extensive narrative explanation, outlining course aims, subject content, and cross-curricular competencies, with particular attention to how general competencies, such as cultural awareness or environmental understanding, are enacted within subjects.

Specifications articulate learning outcomes across knowledge, skills, and attitudes, with assessment expectations linked to these outcomes. While some subjects include external exams, most assessment practice is school-based, and procedural or operational guidance is

defined locally. Assessment principles are established nationally, but task design and implementation remain the responsibility of individual schools.

Documents are structured with clear headings, subheadings, tables, and bullet points to support navigation and interpretation. Compared with other jurisdictions, Estonian specifications are more textually dense, consolidating guidance into a single document rather than distributing information across multiple resources.

Across subjects, the structure and format are highly standardised, supporting coherence, comparability, and clarity. Cross-curricular competencies are referenced broadly, but links to specific learning outcomes are general rather than operationally mapped. Equality and inclusion statements are largely absent from the specifications, with regulatory frameworks providing overarching guarantees of access and inclusive educational environments.

For the most part, Estonian specifications emphasise comprehensive documentation, standardisation, and integration of content, competencies, and assessment expectations, providing a detailed, nationally coherent framework while leaving operational implementation of assessment largely to schools.

New South Wales (Australia)

New South Wales (NSW) course specifications, presented as syllabuses, adopt a structured, modular format with clear separation of course content, learning outcomes, and assessment requirements. Syllabuses articulate subject aims, outcomes, and performance standards precisely, while extensive operational guidance — including marking criteria, exemplars, and internal assessment procedures — is provided in separate, linked supporting resources.

Each syllabus follows a consistent architecture across subjects, typically comprising an overview, course rationale, outcomes categorised by code, detailed content, and assessment principles. Internal and external assessment components, including Higher School Certificate (HSC) exam requirements, are clearly specified in terms of outcomes and weightings, but schools retain flexibility to design internal tasks within these parameters.

Documentation emphasises subject-specific knowledge and skills, embedding distinctions between knowledge and skills within outcomes rather than presenting transferable skill frameworks across subjects. Conceptual content, instructional guidance, and operational exemplars are provided via NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) standards materials, assessment advice, and sample exam papers.

Syllabuses are digital-first, concise, and navigable, employing structured headings, tables, and bullet points. Structural consistency supports comparability across subjects, while the framing of outcomes and content reflects subject characteristics. Equality, inclusion, and accessibility considerations are integrated through syllabus content, Life Skills outcomes, and complementary NESA policies.

Overall, NSW exemplifies a distributed specification model in which the core syllabus defines learning outcomes, content, and assessment principles, while detailed procedural, exemplification, and teaching guidance are located in separate, linked resources. This balances statewide standardisation with school-level flexibility and local pedagogical interpretation.

New Zealand

New Zealand's upper secondary qualifications are delivered through the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA), where achievement standards function as the operative course specifications. Each standard defines a discrete assessable outcome, associated performance criteria (Achievement, Merit, Excellence), credit value, and assessment mode (internal or external). Course-level coherence is achieved through the combination of multiple standards rather than a single consolidated document.

Documentation places strong emphasis on outcomes and assessment criteria, with clarity and explicit differentiation between levels of performance. Conceptual curriculum framing (such as Big Ideas, Significant Learning, and Curricular Competencies) is provided through New Zealand Curriculum (NZC) subject pages rather than embedded within the standards themselves. Supporting guidance, exemplars, and assessment schedules are also located in linked resources rather than within the achievement standards, resulting in a distributed documentation model.

Across subjects, achievement standards are consistent in format and coding, supporting comparability. Subject-specific content is assessed through discrete standards, while curriculum-level guidance provides conceptual coherence and progression. Equality, inclusion, and Māori perspectives are embedded at the curriculum and system level, with operational accessibility and accommodations administered through New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) policies.

On the whole, New Zealand exemplifies a standards-driven, modular specification approach, where assessment specifications are formally codified in achievement standards, and curriculum intent is articulated separately. This structure enables national consistency of

learning outcomes and assessment while supporting flexible implementation by schools and educators.

Thematic analysis

Course specifications are shaped by a mix of policy, regulatory, and design choices, producing variation in emphasis, detail, and document structure. While all systems use recognisable structural conventions, the extent to which curriculum, assessment, and guidance are integrated within a single document or distributed across multiple sources differs markedly.

These differences reflect the distinct purposes specifications serve. In some jurisdictions, documents simultaneously define curriculum expectations and provide guidance for assessment and teaching. In others, they primarily support teaching practice or provide conceptual frameworks, leaving operational detail to separate resources. Variations in volume, terminology, and presentation, therefore, correspond not only to subject-specific requirements, but also to assumptions about intended audience, professional educator autonomy, and the regulatory environment.

These distinctions are also likely to influence how accessible, interpretable, and useable the specifications are for educators, learners, and other stakeholders.

Overview of course specifications

Across the selected jurisdictions, specifications share the goal of providing structured guidance, including aims, content, and assessment. Scotland's specifications are relatively comprehensive, integrating course rationale, intended audience, detailed content, high-level assessment structure, equality statements, and support notes within a single document. Estonia produces relatively long, consistent specifications with detailed guidance on subject-specific content and broader competencies, reflecting a centralised approach.

In contrast, jurisdictions such as British Columbia, New Zealand, and NSW distribute content across multiple documents or digital resources, separating curriculum framing, assessment guidance, and teaching support. This modular approach can enhance flexibility and allow easier updates but requires users to navigate multiple sources for a complete understanding of expectations. Differences in assessment approaches, particularly the presence or absence of standardised external exams, further influence the depth and type of guidance included in specifications. For example, NSW clearly defines HSC external exams alongside school-based internal assessment, whereas British Columbia delegates assessment to schools.

Types of content

Course specifications vary in the range and organisation of content. Scotland includes both subject-specific and broader elements, including skills for life, learning, and work. Other jurisdictions tend to prioritise subject-specific content within specifications, with cross-curricular competences or holistic learning aims articulated either through separate curriculum frameworks or alongside subject documentation.

Glossaries and term explanations are more extensive in some jurisdictions, supporting interpretation of learning outcomes and assessment criteria, whereas Scotland provides more limited explanations. Equality and inclusion considerations are variably integrated across systems.

The way content is organised and presented also varies; centralised, integrated documents support consistency and comparability, whereas distributed or modular documents provide flexibility and ease of maintenance. For instance, Estonia consolidates curriculum, assessment expectations, and competences in one document, while New Zealand and British Columbia rely on distributed, linked resources with conceptual curriculum framing separated from assessment standards.

Approach to subject-specific content

Depth of subject-specific guidance differs across jurisdictions. Scotland's specifications clearly outline the knowledge and skills learners are expected to develop and explicitly link them to broader skill outcomes, though these skills are generally presented in discrete sections rather than embedded within subject content. New Zealand similarly describes connections between subject content and wider competences, whereas England and Wales focus primarily on subject content.

Consistency across subjects also varies; Scotland and Estonia maintain a relatively uniform structure and level of detail, whereas other jurisdictions show greater variation, reflecting differences in local autonomy, assessment practices, and curriculum integration. The alignment between subject content and broader skills highlights different assumptions about how specifications are used in practice, whether as reference documents for teaching, frameworks for assessment, or policy instruments. For example, in Northern Ireland, specifications embed cross-curricular skills and thinking capabilities within subject content, while in British Columbia, competencies are articulated separately through the curriculum framework.

Content aesthetics and format

Jurisdictions differ markedly in the presentation and formatting of specifications. Many separate course information across multiple documents or online platforms, including assessment guidance, coursework instructions, and teaching materials. Most jurisdictions favour concise writing with tables, bullets, and numbering, while Estonia produces long-form, text-heavy specifications. Scotland's specifications are relatively plain in visual design, whereas New Zealand incorporates colour, graphics, and other visual elements to aid navigation.

Increasingly, digital-first presentation allows hyperlinked navigation and layered resources, which can improve usability and access to supplementary materials. These differences in format, length, and integration have implications for readability, interpretation, and practical implementation, influencing how educators, learners, and other stakeholders engage with the specifications. For example, NSW uses hyperlinked syllabuses with linked assessment and teaching resources, enabling modular navigation without increasing core document length.

Conclusions and implications

The analysis shows that course specifications differ across jurisdictions in content, structure, and presentation. Overall, specifications reflect a balance between subject-specific guidance, broader course-level information, and, in some jurisdictions, assessment expectations, although the emphasis on assessment varies according to regulatory and curriculum design. Differences in content types, presentation, depth, and consistency across subjects and jurisdictions are shaped by curriculum frameworks, assessment models, and the degree of local autonomy.

These findings highlight that course specifications are primarily designed for educators, although regulators and policymakers may also use them. The extent to which learners or parents and carers can interpret or use them is less clear. Variations across jurisdictions demonstrate different approaches to providing guidance while maintaining flexibility, revealing trade-offs between clarity, usability, and adaptability.

Addressing research questions

1. What are the key components of course specifications for outcome-based upper secondary qualifications in the selected jurisdictions?

Across the jurisdictions, course specifications consistently include a core set of elements. These typically comprise:

- a statement of purpose or rationale
- articulation of learning outcomes or subject aims
- an outline of course content (expressed through knowledge, skills, competences, or conceptual strands)
- information about assessment structure and grading arrangements

Learning outcomes are often central, often forming the organising principle around which content and assessment are framed. Most specifications also indicate performance expectations, whether through grade descriptors, assessment objectives, or criteria statements.

While these components are broadly shared, jurisdictions differ in the emphasis placed on each and in how they are structured within documentation. Some highlight subject-specific knowledge and expectations, while others give greater prominence to overarching competences, cross-curricular priorities, or conceptual frameworks. For example, Scotland explicitly separates skills for life, learning, and work, while Northern Ireland embeds cross-curricular skills directly within subject content and assessment objectives. In certain systems, curriculum intent and assessment requirements are closely integrated within a single specification; in others, these elements are distributed across related documents. The balance and presentation of specification components vary in line with differing policy contexts and assumptions about the function of specifications.

2. How is this content communicated in terms of structure, level of detail, and organisation?

Course specifications differ markedly in their structural design and organisation. Some jurisdictions employ highly standardised templates, ensuring consistent headings, terminology, and sequencing across subjects. This approach promotes comparability and predictability, particularly for educators working across multiple courses. Other systems permit more flexible formats, leading to variation in length, layout, and the prominence given to particular sections.

The level of detail also varies substantially. In some systems, specifications provide concise, high-level descriptions of outcomes and assessment, with further elaboration located in supplementary materials. In others, the main document itself contains extended narrative explanation, detailed exemplification, and elaborated criteria.

Differences are also apparent in the use of tables, bullet points, prose, glossaries, and visual hierarchy. The organisation of material — whether curriculum intent, assessment structure, and support guidance are combined or separated — reflects differing assumptions about audience, regulatory expectations, and the intended practical use of specifications. For instance, NSW

syllabuses separate core outcomes from extensive operational guidance, while Estonia consolidates most guidance within a single long-form specification.

3. How do Qualifications Scotland National Courses compare with international practices in content and assessment articulation?

Compared with the jurisdictions analysed, Qualifications Scotland specifications typically consolidate a relatively broad range of content within a single document. Course overview information, subject content, high-level assessment structure, grading arrangements, equality statements, and support notes are presented together. This integrated format contrasts with systems in which curriculum content, assessment specifications, and guidance materials are more clearly separated or modularised across different documents or platforms.

Qualifications Scotland specifications also include a discrete section identifying skills for learning, skills for life, and skills for work. These are clearly signposted but are not generally elaborated in extended subject-specific terms within the main body of the specification. By contrast, in Estonia, general competences are integrated throughout subject specifications, and in British Columbia, competences are expressed at the curriculum level rather than embedded in the subject specifications. The comparison therefore illustrates differing approaches to articulating the relationship between subject learning, broader capabilities, and assessment expectations, as well as alternative balances between comprehensiveness and modular clarity.

4. What role does the presence of a formal curriculum play in shaping course specifications?

The presence of a formal curriculum framework influences how course specifications are constructed and interpreted. In systems where curriculum and assessment are tightly aligned (Estonia, for example), specifications often integrate statements of curriculum intent, learning outcomes, performance standards, and cross-cutting priorities within a single coherent document. In such contexts, specifications may function simultaneously as curriculum guidance and as documents defining assessment expectations and performance standards.

In systems where curriculum and assessment are more loosely coupled (such as Scotland), specifications may focus primarily on defining assessment structures and performance expectations, while broader curricular aims are articulated elsewhere. In other jurisdictions, such as British Columbia, assessment is largely devolved to schools. Consequently, the specification document (or equivalent) primarily conveys curriculum intent, rather than functioning as a qualification specification as it does in Scotland.

However, the relationship between curriculum architecture and specification detail is not linear. Document length, depth of explanation, and structural format are also shaped by governance traditions, regulatory requirements, and assumptions about professional autonomy. The presence of a formal curriculum therefore shapes specification design but interacts with wider policy and institutional factors.

5. What variation exists in volume, specificity, and guidance, and what does this imply for effective qualification frameworks?

There is substantial variation in the volume and density of course specifications across jurisdictions. Some documents are concise and focused, outlining essential outcomes and assessment requirements with limited elaboration. Others are extensive, providing detailed descriptions of knowledge and skills, subject practices, grading criteria, and in some cases explanatory commentary. Specificity similarly ranges from broad outcome statements to highly granular articulation of performance expectations.

This variation suggests that effectiveness is not determined by length. Both concise and detailed specifications can ensure clarity if they are coherent and aligned with their intended purpose. The critical factors would appear to be transparency of expectations, logical organisation, and alignment between outcomes and assessment.

Differences also reflect differing positions on the balance between prescription and professional discretion. For example, highly detailed Estonian specifications may provide clarity for educators but require careful navigation, whereas concise British Columbia specifications allow interpretive flexibility but require educators to design assessment locally.

Effective qualification frameworks therefore depend on achieving an appropriate balance between clarity, consistency, and flexibility within the broader regulatory context.

6. How can these findings inform evidence-based improvements to Qualifications Scotland National Course specification templates?

The comparative findings point toward refinement rather than a complete redesign of existing templates. One area for consideration is the balance between contextual and subject-specific information. Strengthening the explicit linkage between broader skills and subject-level learning may also provide greater clarity without increasing overall volume.

Comparative evidence suggests benefits from moving specifications toward a web-based, digital-first model. This approach could allow content to be structured modularly, with hyperlinked sections for course overview, subject content, assessment guidance, and support

materials. It would enable easier updates, clearer navigation, and enhanced accessibility for educators, learners, and other stakeholders. Digital delivery also allows the integration of interactive elements such as glossaries, examples, or visual hierarchies without increasing the volume of static text, supporting usability while maintaining comprehensive guidance.

At the same time, the consistency and predictability of the existing template structure represent clear strengths that support usability across subjects. Evidence-based refinement would therefore involve targeted adjustments informed by how specifications are used in practice, rather than structural transformation.

Appendix — jurisdiction profiles

Scotland

System context

Scotland's [National Qualifications](#) are designed in line with the principles of Curriculum for Excellence ([CfE](#)), emphasising breadth, progression, challenge, and application. Course specifications articulate skills, knowledge, and understanding alongside assessment requirements, intended to support accessibility and fairness across subjects.

Scotland's CfE (consisting of Broad General Education and the Senior Phase) is not a prescriptive list of topics but a flexible framework focusing on skills, interdisciplinary learning, and personal development. This contrasts somewhat with the [curriculum in England](#).

For this paper, we analysed Higher specifications in English, Mathematics, Geography, and Physical Education.

Specifications:

- [English](#)
- [Mathematics](#)
- [Geography](#)
- [Physical Education](#)

Structure of course specifications

Qualifications Scotland Higher course specifications follow a standardised template across subjects, supporting consistency in the type and sequencing of information provided. Core sections typically appear in the same order across subjects. These commonly include:

- course overview
- rationale, purpose, and aims
- course content
- skills, knowledge and understanding
- [skills for learning, skills for life, and skills for work](#)
- assessment structure
- equality and inclusion statement
- appendices including administrative and further information, and course support notes

Variations occur primarily in the depth and configuration of subject-specific content and assessment sections, rather than in document structure.

Organisation of documentation

Each National Course specification is a core document that consolidates course purpose, content, assessment structure, and grading information. Key organisational features include:

- clear sections with headings and subheadings, allowing users to navigate between conceptual (purpose, aims) and operational content (assessment structure)
- appendix support notes which provide pedagogical advice, approaches to learning and teaching, and example learner activities
- equality and inclusion information, embedded within the specification but with links to external documents

Although course specifications consolidate course design, assessment structure, grading, and support notes within a single core document, subject pages provide an extended suite of materials. These include specimen question papers, detailed marking instructions, coursework assessment tasks, and Understanding Standards resources. As a result, while the specification offers a comprehensive overview of assessment design, centres rely on supplementary documentation for procedural, marking, and exemplification detail.

For example, substantial additional guidance is delivered through dedicated coursework and assessment support documents. These materials typically include coursework assessment tasks, submission instructions, authentication requirements, [conditions of assessment for coursework](#), marking guidance, and templates to support centres in administering internally assessed components.

Centres are explicitly directed to read these documents in conjunction with the course specification, indicating that full operational understanding of assessment requirements relies on engagement with multiple complementary resources.

This layered documentation model distinguishes between defining the qualification (course specification) and supporting its delivery and assessment (coursework tasks, marking instructions, and administrative guidance). While this separation allows detailed procedural and technical information to be updated independently of the specification, it also means that key aspects of assessment implementation are distributed across several documents.

Subject pages:

- [English](#)
- [Mathematics](#)
- [Geography](#)
- [Physical Education](#)

Approach to subject-specific content

Across subjects, course content is articulated with skills, knowledge and understanding clearly delineated, and explicit links to skills for learning, life, and work are made within the specification.

English

The English specification details the four assessment components (two question papers, a writing portfolio, and spoken language performance) with explicit marks and durations for each component. The document articulates how reading, writing, talking and listening skills integrate across the course, emphasising critical analysis, textual understanding, and effective communication in a range of contexts. Literary study and language analysis are framed not only as knowledge acquisition but as ways to develop interpretative, evaluative, and expressive skills.

Mathematics

The Mathematics specification outlines a coherent progression of numerical, algebraic, geometric, and statistical concepts, integrating both procedural fluency and higher-order reasoning. Content is organised around key topics, such as calculus, trigonometry, probability, and data handling, each with clearly stated outcomes that link knowledge with application and problem-solving. The specification emphasises the development of analytical and modelling skills, including the interpretation of mathematical information in context, logical argument, and the communication of mathematical reasoning. Assessment structures are clearly described, detailing the formats of question papers, the balance of content sampling, and the mathematical skills that learners are expected to demonstrate under exam conditions.

Geography

The Geography specification details conceptual themes across physical and human geography, including global issues, environmental processes, and socio-economic development. Content is organised into discrete sections that combine knowledge of case studies and geographical

contexts with clearly defined skills, such as data interpretation, map and graphical analysis, and fieldwork techniques. The specification distinguishes between knowledge and understanding, geographical skills, and application, making explicit how these elements contribute to overall course assessment. Assessment components, including question paper structure and an assignment, are outlined within the specification, linking subject content to assessment expectations.

Physical Education

The Physical Education specification articulates a broad range of theoretical and practical competencies related to human movement, health, and performance. Content is structured around contexts that require learners to apply knowledge of anatomy, physiology, biomechanics, and wellbeing to movement performance, analysis, and planning. The specification emphasises the development of movement skills alongside critical reflection, decision-making, and evaluative processes, linking practical performance with conceptual understanding of health and physical activity. Assessment information within the specification details both internal and external components, outlining how performance, planning, and evaluation are sampled and how these connect to the defined skills and knowledge outcomes of the course.

Assessment information

Assessment information is structured and transparent. Each specification includes a course assessment section that outlines assessment components, their purpose in sampling learning, and how marks contribute to overall grade. Qualifications Scotland provides specimen papers and marking instructions alongside the course specification to illustrate requirements, but these are not included in the specification itself.

Volume and format characteristics

Compared to many other jurisdictions, Scottish Higher course specifications are lengthier and more detailed. They employ a mix of:

- narrative explanatory prose outlining aims, skills, and course structure
- structured tables summarising skills, knowledge and understanding and assessment components
- appendices for support notes and additional guidance

Unlike some international models, Scotland consolidates key information within the main specification document, although centres still engage with supplementary materials for detailed procedural and marking guidance.

Consistency across subjects

A distinctive feature of the Scottish model is consistency of structure and content across subjects. National Course specifications adhere to the same template, ensuring that sections such as rationale, purpose, content, assessment structure, and grading are present and located in predictable places within each document. This supports ease of use and comparability across subjects.

Equality and inclusion

Equality and inclusion are explicitly referenced within Qualifications Scotland course specifications through dedicated sections. This aligns with Qualifications Scotland's broader [Equality of Access Policy](#), which aims to ensure that qualifications and assessments do not unlawfully discriminate and that [reasonable adjustments](#) are provided where necessary.

Notable features

- There is a standardised structure across all subjects, ensuring predictability and comparability.
- Assessment structure and performance standards are outlined in the core specification.
- Appendices and support notes are embedded in the main document.
- Supporting materials are published alongside the specification separately.

Summary

Scotland's approach to National Course specifications emphasises comprehensive, standardised, and integrated documentation. A common structure and explicit detail ensure clarity for educators and learners alike. Assessment structure and performance standards are clearly represented within each specification, with detailed marking guidance and exemplars hosted online to support implementation. Equality and accessibility are embedded in the specification, reflecting statutory duties and policy commitments.

England

System context

Upper secondary qualifications in England are delivered within a framework shaped by a [nationally defined curriculum](#) and regulated by [Ofqual](#). The national curriculum is statutory only up to Key Stage 4 (age 16). Therefore, A levels sit outside the statutory national curriculum. A level content is instead defined through [DfE](#) content requirements, Ofqual regulatory rules, and awarding body specifications.

GCSEs and A levels are awarded by multiple awarding organisations, including AQA, Pearson Edexcel, and OCR. While qualifications are aligned to subject criteria and regulatory requirements, awarding bodies retain discretion over specification design, assessment models, and supporting documentation.

Specifications are expected to reflect subject aims, content domains, and assessment objectives defined at national level. However, responsibility for articulating these within specifications lies largely with awarding organisations, resulting in variation in how information is presented.

For this paper, we analysed A level specifications from AQA in English Language, Mathematics, Geography, and Physical Education. AQA has the [largest share](#) of the A level market in England.

Specifications:

- [English Language](#)
- [Mathematics](#)
- [Geography](#)
- [Physical Education](#)

Structure of course specifications

Across the four analysed subjects, specifications are organised as subject-focused documents emphasising assessment objectives, content coverage, and assessment approaches. Relative to Scotland, specifications place greater emphasis on assessment frameworks and content statements rather than extended course overviews.

Common structural features include:

- subject aims and learning objectives
- assessment objectives (sometimes integrated with content statements)
- subject content and topic domains
- concise overview tables summarising assessment components
- assessment structure (papers and components)
- mark weightings and durations
- grading information
- scheme of assessment (including NEA where applicable)
- equality, accessibility, and inclusion information

Organisation of documentation

In AQA specifications, NEA frameworks and procedures are included within the main specification document, with further operational guidance typically available through supporting resources. A notable characteristic of English specifications is the distribution of assessment-related information across multiple documents. While the specification itself defines assessment objectives, structures, and component requirements, AQA typically provides supplementary materials separately, including:

- sample assessment materials
- mark schemes
- examiner reports
- expanded NEA guidance and exemplification
- teaching and delivery resources

Subject webpages organise these materials into clearly defined sections or tabs, including the specification, planning resources, teaching resources, assessment resources, key dates, and news. This layered documentation model allows centres to access both core specification content and detailed operational guidance needed to deliver and assess the course effectively.

- [English Language](#)
- [Mathematics](#)
- [Geography](#)
- [Physical Education](#)

JCQ also offers [guidance](#) to centres on coursework and NEA.

Approach to subject-specific content

Specifications in England are strongly oriented toward subject content and assessment objectives. Across subjects, content statements are detailed and domain specific. Skills are typically embedded within assessment objectives rather than presented as standalone categories. Explicit distinctions between skills, knowledge, and understanding are less prominent.

Across all subjects, the depth of subject-specific content is substantial, although presentation varies, with some specifications relying more heavily on explanatory prose and others on structured bullet points or tables.

English Language

The English Language specification emphasises reading, writing, and analysis framed through assessment objectives. Skills are articulated through cognitive processes (for example, analyse, evaluate, compare) rather than categorised skill types. Content is structured around text types, genres, and literary study.

Mathematics

The Mathematics specification provides highly detailed content listings, including topic breakdowns, mathematical techniques, and problem-solving contexts. Skills are implied through reasoning and application objectives rather than described separately as generic or transferable capabilities.

Geography

The Geography specification integrates thematic and topic-based structures, connecting physical and human geography concepts. Fieldwork requirements are explicitly described, with clear links to assessment objectives and criteria.

Physical Education

The Physical Education specification combines theoretical content with practical performance components. Guidance on NEA administration (including supervision, authentication, internal standardisation, moderation, and access arrangements) is included within the main specification document itself, with further exemplar-level support available through supplementary resources.

Assessment information

Assessment approaches are a central organising principle of specifications. Common features across subjects include:

- clear description of assessment components
- explicit mark allocations and weightings
- duration of exams
- links between assessment objectives and assessment tasks

Specifications typically provide exam paper structures, question types and formats, and NEA requirements (where applicable).

Compared with Scotland, AQA specifications place greater emphasis on assessment objectives as structuring devices, shaping both content and assessment design. Detailed marking guidance, including scoring criteria and exemplar responses for examined components, is generally provided in separate mark scheme documents, although brief guidance and rubrics may also appear for NEA elements.

Volume and format characteristics

Across the four subjects analysed, specification length varies by subject. Documents rely on structured headings, bullet points, and tables, with concise prose explanations used to clarify content, skills, and assessment requirements. Specifications are generally shorter than Scottish course specifications when considered in isolation. However, the overall volume of qualification documentation — including mark schemes and other supporting resources — is substantial.

Consistency across subjects

AQA specifications vary in length, level of detail, document layout, use of explanatory prose, and placement of assessment guidance. Differences are also likely across other English awarding bodies. This contrasts with Scotland's more standardised specification template, where structure and presentation are tightly regulated. Variation in England is likely to reflect awarding body autonomy, subject-specific priorities, and design choices tailored to assessment approaches and subject content.

Equality and inclusion

In England, equality and inclusion are explicitly addressed within subject specifications. Specifications typically contain clear statements on accessibility, diversity, and safeguarding.

More detailed operational guidance on reasonable adjustments, special consideration, and centre responsibilities is provided through [JCQ documentation](#) and broader [regulatory](#) principles. Consequently, information about inclusion is present within the specification but works in conjunction with broader procedural guidance.

Notable features

- Assessment objectives serve as primary organising structures, linking content, cognitive demand, and assessment design.
- More detailed qualification information and support materials are distributed across multiple companion documents.
- Differences across subjects are more pronounced than in Scotland, particularly in specification length and layout.

Summary

AQA specifications in England prioritise subject content and assessment requirements within a regulatory framework which allows for awarding body flexibility. Compared with Scotland, there is less emphasis on extended course overview material and greater reliance on assessment objectives. Differences observed across subjects primarily reflect subject characteristics and awarding body design choices.

Wales

System context

Upper secondary qualifications in Wales are delivered within a nationally regulated framework overseen by [Qualifications Wales](#), the independent regulator. GCSEs and A levels form the primary qualification routes, with specifications developed by awarding bodies.

Wales has undergone significant [qualification reform](#) in recent years, influencing both the content and structure of specifications. These reforms emphasise clarity of standards, explicit articulation of assessment objectives, and strengthened links between subject purposes and assessment design.

Wales now operates under the [Curriculum for Wales](#). It is a framework curriculum, not a detailed content prescription. It applies from age 3 to 16, with progression guidance beyond. Post-16 qualifications (such as [AS and A levels](#)) are regulated separately, designed by WJEC or CBAC under Qualifications Wales, and not tightly curriculum prescribed.

For this paper, we analysed A level specifications from WJEC in English Language, Mathematics, Geography, and Physical Education. WJEC certificates the [vast majority](#) of A levels in Wales.

Specifications:

- [English Language](#)
- [Mathematics](#)
- [Geography](#)
- [Physical Education](#)

Structure of course specifications

WJEC specifications follow a broadly consistent organisational format across subjects. Each specification typically contains:

- a course overview including aims and objectives
- subject content presented in topic areas
- assessment approaches, including written exams and any NEA components
- grading and mark allocation information
- appendices or links to additional technical or assessment detail

The structure is largely subject-focused, with specifications emphasising learning objectives, content coverage, and assessment criteria. Extended course rationales or audience-positioning statements are generally limited within the main specification document.

Compared with Scotland, Welsh specifications tend to include less extended contextual or narrative overview material. Instead, documents focus on defining subject expectations and explaining how assessment objectives shape both teaching and evaluation.

Organisation of documentation

Qualification information in Wales is distributed across a structured suite of documents. The core specification is supported by companion materials, including:

- sample assessment materials
- mark schemes
- NEA guidance
- examiner reports
- administrative and regulatory guidance

In particular, in addition to the core course specification, WJEC provides a substantial educators' guidance document which functions as an extended specification resource. This guidance breaks down units, learning intentions, and assessment objectives in greater depth than the main specification. It offers suggested teaching activities, examples of learner tasks, and detailed explanations of how skills and content can be developed. Its breadth means it contributes to the effective interpretation and implementation of the qualification, helping centres translate high-level aims into teaching and assessment practices.

Welsh qualifications require users to engage with multiple companion documents to access full assessment detail, marking guidance, and exemplification. However, these materials are systematically organised within subject webpages:

- [English Language](#)
- [Mathematics](#)
- [Geography](#)
- [Physical Education](#)

JCQ also offers [guidance](#) to centres on coursework and NEA.

Approach to subject-specific content

Welsh specifications demonstrate a strong orientation toward subject knowledge, skills, and assessment objectives, with variation across subjects in how these are presented.

Across subjects, distinctions between knowledge, understanding, and skills are present, although they are generally structured through assessment objectives rather than formally categorised frameworks. Broader transferable or cross-curricular skills are less explicitly highlighted than in Scotland.

English Language

The English Language specification emphasises reading and writing skills, textual analysis, language variation and change, and understanding audience and purpose. NEA components include a Language Investigation and Original Writing task, with separate guidance documents for educators. Assessment evaluates comprehension, communication, and analysis skills.

Mathematics

The Mathematics specification provides detailed topic listings, including numerical, algebraic, geometrical, and statistical domains. Emphasis is placed on reasoning, problem-solving, and application. Skills are articulated through cognitive demand and assessment objective frameworks rather than described as discrete transferable skill groupings.

Geography

The Geography specification integrates physical and human themes, often framed through conceptual strands such as processes, interactions, and sustainability. Fieldwork requirements are explicitly described, including expectations for data collection, analysis, and evaluation, with clear links to assessment objectives.

Physical Education

The Physical Education specification combines theoretical study with practical performance elements. Content includes physiology, psychology, socio-cultural influences, and performance analysis. Practical assessment components are supported by detailed NEA guidance detailing administration and moderation procedures.

Assessment information

Assessment design is a central feature of Welsh specifications. Common characteristics include:

- explicit assessment components (papers or units)
- clear mark allocations and weightings
- duration of exams
- NEA requirements (where applicable), including task parameters and administrative expectations

Assessment objectives function as key structuring devices, linking subject content, cognitive demand, and evaluation criteria. Specifications typically provide clear outlines of paper structure and question types, while detailed marking guidance and exemplar materials are located within separate documents and supporting resources.

Volume and format characteristics

Across the four subjects analysed, specification length varies by subject, and the wider qualification documentation suite contributes substantially to the overall volume of information available to centres. Documents rely on structured headings, bullet points, and tabular presentation, with explanatory prose used selectively to clarify aims, content, and assessment arrangements.

Glossaries and definitions are not systematically included within the main specifications. Where provided (such as [command word](#) or key terms lists) they appear as separate supporting resources hosted online rather than embedded in the specification itself. This means that while core specifications focus on content, assessment, and structure, centres may need to access additional documents to consult definitions and explanatory guidance.

Consistency across subjects

Common structural principles are evident across WJEC specifications, but variation exists in length, level of detail, document layout, and the balance between explanatory prose and bullet points. While all specifications consistently include assessment components, mark allocations, and links to assessment objectives, the degree of explanatory detail and the guidance format differ between subjects. For example, some specifications provide more extensive prose alongside tables to describe assessment and NEA requirements, whereas others rely primarily on concise tables or bullet points. References to supporting NEA guidance also vary in placement and prominence within the specification, reflecting differences in how each subject

chooses to integrate procedural information. Overall, this results in specifications that are broadly comparable in structure but show noticeable variation in presentation.

Equality and inclusion

Welsh specifications include explicit references to equity of access and fair assessment, typically within introductory or administrative sections. These references mostly outline compliance with regulatory requirements and access arrangements, and often defer to [JCQ](#) for detailed procedural guidance on reasonable adjustments, special consideration, and inclusive assessment practices. While the language signals that accessibility considerations are important, detailed operational guidance is not extensively developed within the WJEC specification itself.

Notable features

- Assessment objectives play a central role in structuring subject expectations and assessment design.
- Skills are embedded within subject aims and assessment objectives rather than categorised separately.
- Assessment and marking guidance are distributed across companion documents.

Summary

Specifications in Wales emphasise subject content and assessment objectives within a nationally regulated reform context. Compared with Scotland, documents typically contain less extended course overview material and greater reliance on assessment objectives as organising structures. Differences across subjects largely reflect subject focus and assessment models rather than variation in regulatory intent.

Northern Ireland

System context

Upper secondary qualifications in Northern Ireland are regulated by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment ([CCEA](#)), which operates as both regulator and awarding body. Northern Ireland's qualification framework reflects a balance between maintaining comparability with qualifications elsewhere in the UK and preserving jurisdiction-specific curricular and assessment priorities. This dual function of CCEA contributes to a relatively cohesive relationship between curriculum policy, specification design, and assessment structures.

The [Northern Ireland Curriculum](#) is only statutory up to age 16. Similar to the situation in England, A levels are governed through CCEA specifications and regulation rather than curriculum programmes of study. However, the [TransformED](#) programme, which includes reviews of the curriculum, assessment and qualifications, will result in changes to GCSEs and A levels in Northern Ireland. As part of this programme, a [strategic review](#) of the curriculum has recently been completed.

For this paper, we analysed A level specifications from CCEA in English Literature, Mathematics, Geography, and Sports Science and the Active Leisure Industry. English Literature and Sports Science and the Active Leisure Industry were selected as the closest available comparators to English and Physical Education within the Northern Irish A level qualification suite.

Specifications:

- [English Literature](#)
- [Mathematics](#)
- [Geography](#)
- [Sports Science and the Active Leisure Industry](#)

Structure of course specifications

Across the four analysed subjects, specifications in Northern Ireland are organised around clearly defined components:

- qualification aims
- subject content and learning outcomes
- assessment objectives

- assessment structure
- mark allocations and weightings
- grading information

Specifications tend to prioritise assessment design and subject expectations rather than extended course rationale or narrative overview sections. Compared with Scotland, introductory contextual material is typically more concise. Assessment objectives are consistently presented as central organising elements linking knowledge expectations, skills development, and assessment demands. Additionally, specifications often reference cross-curricular skills and broader Northern Ireland Curriculum objectives, integrating wider competencies alongside subject-specific content.

Organisation of documentation

Qualification information in Northern Ireland is centred on the specification, with additional resources provided through CCEA's online support pages. The core specification is supported by:

- sample assessment materials
- mark schemes
- examiner reports
- administrative guidance
- schemes of work and optional teaching resources

Online subject resources provide additional support for teaching and assessment. These materials illustrate how assessment objectives are applied in practice, helping educators (and learners) understand expected standards and approaches to exam preparation. Subject pages typically include tabs for assessment, past papers and mark schemes, chief examiner reports, teaching resources, support materials, webinars, and administrative guidance.

- [English Literature](#)
- [Mathematics](#)
- [Geography](#)
- [Sports Science and the Active Leisure Industry](#)

Approach to subject-specific content

Specifications in Northern Ireland demonstrate a strong subject-centred orientation, with variation reflecting subject differences.

Across subjects, distinctions between knowledge, understanding, and skills are present but are not formalised into separate transferable skill categories such as skills for learning, life, and work.

English Literature

The English Literature specification emphasises reading, writing, and critical analysis. Subject content is organised by literary forms, text types, and communication skills. Skills are embedded within assessment objectives and content statements rather than categorised separately.

Mathematics

The Mathematics specification provides structured topic listings covering number, algebra, geometry, and statistics. Emphasis is placed on reasoning, problem-solving, and application. Cognitive demand is articulated through assessment objectives and command words.

Geography

The Geography specification integrates physical and human geography, often structured through thematic units. Fieldwork requirements are explicitly described, including expectations for investigation, data handling, and evaluation.

Sports Science and the Active Leisure Industry

The Sports Science and the Active Leisure Industry specification combines theoretical study with practical assessment elements. Content areas commonly include physiology, psychology, and socio-cultural influences. Practical performance and evaluation expectations are defined in terms of assessment modes.

Assessment information

Assessment structures are a prominent feature of Northern Ireland specifications. Common elements include:

- clearly defined assessment components
- exam durations
- mark weightings
- assessment objectives
- internal assessment requirements

Detailed marking criteria is typically provided in separate mark scheme documents.

Volume and format characteristics

Northern Ireland specifications are generally of moderate length and employ structured headings and subheadings, bulleted lists, and tables to present assessment information. Compared with Scotland, specifications contain less non-subject-specific course information (for example, extended audience statements or broader qualification rationale), focusing instead on subject content and assessment expectations. Detailed assessment guidance and exemplars are provided through companion materials, supporting educators and learners in understanding the application of standards.

Consistency across subjects

CCEA specifications display a consistent structural logic across subjects, with common features including assessment objectives, clearly presented assessment structures, and organised subject content. Variation exists in document length, layout, and the balance between explanatory prose and tables, reflecting subject differences. Cross-Curricular Skills (Communication, Using Mathematics, Using ICT) and Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities (Problem Solving, Working with Others, Self-Management) are consistently emphasised as learning outcomes, although the mode of articulation varies. In Sports Science and the Active Leisure Industry, these skills are explicitly referenced within the specification. In English Literature, Mathematics, and Geography, they are indicated more indirectly through curriculum objectives and broader statements about learner development. Overall, while Northern Ireland specifications allow for some subject-level differentiation, they maintain a recognisable common framework that supports comparability and coherence across qualifications.

Equality and inclusion

In Northern Ireland, [equality and inclusion](#) are governed primarily by [statutory duties](#) and regulatory frameworks. Specifications typically include statements referencing fairness, accessibility, and accommodations for diverse learner needs, establishing high-level principles and expectations. Detailed operational guidance on adjustments, access arrangements, and equitable assessment practices is provided through [overarching regulatory documentation](#) rather than within the subject specifications themselves.

Notable features

- Assessment objectives are consistently positioned as organising frameworks connecting content and assessment.
- Course rationales and contextual sections are generally brief.

- Skills are embedded within subject aims, content, and assessment objectives rather than separated into distinct categories.
- Assessment and marking guidance are distributed across supporting documents.

Summary

Specifications in Northern Ireland prioritise subject content and assessment requirements within a cohesive regulatory and awarding structure. Documents emphasise clarity of assessment objectives and component design, with less extended narrative course framing than observed in Scotland. Variation across subjects primarily reflects subject assessment requirements rather than structural inconsistency.

British Columbia (Canada)

System context

In British Columbia, the upper secondary curriculum is overseen by the Ministry of Education. The [provincial framework](#) is organised around a competency-driven model, with the [curriculum](#) structured through Big Ideas (what learners should understand), Content (what learners should know), and Curricular Competencies (what learners should do).

Unlike systems with centrally prescribed high-stakes external exams across subjects, British Columbia operates with substantial local autonomy in assessment design and implementation. They have a fully defined [provincial curriculum](#). This covers kindergarten to Grade 12. Qualifications and the curriculum are essentially the same system, and therefore the curriculum and course specifications are essentially inseparable.

Provincial documentation reflects a curriculum-led approach in which learning standards define expectations, while decisions about assessment methods are largely determined by schools and educators. This distinction has important implications for specifications.

In addition to subject-specific Big Ideas, Content, and Curricular Competencies, the British Columbia [curriculum framework](#) also defines a set of cross-curricular Core Competencies: [Communication](#), [Thinking](#), and [Personal and Social](#). These competencies describe broader capabilities expected to develop across all areas of learning and are articulated through a separate framework rather than embedded directly within individual subject specifications. As a result, subject documents focus primarily on subject content and competencies, while the Core Competencies provide an overarching structure for holistic learner development.

For this paper, we analysed English Language Arts (Grade 12), Mathematics (Grade 12), Human Geography (Grade 12), and Physical and Health Education as the closest available comparators to the Scottish Higher specifications. Note that English Language Arts and Mathematics have several possible Grade 12 course pathways; Human Geography is used here, but there is also a Physical Geography qualification; and Physical and Health Education in British Columbia is defined at the curriculum-area level, with multiple Grade 12 courses that share competencies through different experiential contexts.

- [English Language Arts](#)
- [Mathematics](#)
- [Human Geography](#)
- [Physical and Health Education](#)

Structure of course specifications

British Columbia specifications are organised around three core elements:

- Big Ideas – broad conceptual statements describing enduring understandings ('Understand')
- Content – essential topics and knowledge areas ('Know')
- Curricular Competencies – skills, strategies, and processes learners develop ('Do')

Unlike many other jurisdictions, there is no separate assessment blueprint embedded in the specifications. Curriculum documents focus on learning standards rather than prescriptive assessment requirements.

Organisation of documentation

British Columbia's curriculum is delivered through a network of inter-related resources rather than a single consolidated specification. Core subject guidance is provided in curriculum overviews, which define Big Ideas, Curricular Competencies, and Content. Elaborations offer more detailed guidance, examples, and suggestions for interpreting learning standards. This includes attention to Indigenous perspectives, inclusion, and equity. Educators navigate between overviews, information on goals and rationale, elaborations, and supplementary guidance to implement the curriculum effectively. Glossaries and definitions are provided to clarify subject-specific terminology and learning expectations.

Approach to subject-specific content

While the curriculum framework is consistent across subjects, the expression of standards varies depending on subject characteristics.

Across subjects, distinctions between knowledge, skills, and understanding are implicit rather than categorically separated. Elaborations provide examples and explanatory notes to support educators' interpretation and contextualisation of learning standards.

English Language Arts

The English Language Arts specification includes multiple course pathways at the same grade level (composition, creative writing, English studies, literary studies, new media, spoken language). Big Ideas emphasise communication, textual interpretation, and –construction of meaning from text. Curricular Competencies integrate analytical, reflective, and expressive

processes. Content statements define key knowledge areas, with examples provided in elaborations.

Mathematics

The Mathematics specification includes multiple pathways at Grade 12 — calculus, computer science, foundations of mathematics, geometry, pre-calculus, and statistics. Documentation highlights reasoning, problem-solving, and application. Big Ideas highlight conceptual relationships. Content statements identify key knowledge domains. Curricular Competencies integrate mathematical practices, modelling, and communication of reasoning.

Human Geography

The Human Geography specification focuses on inquiry processes, spatial thinking, and analysis of human-environment interactions. Big Ideas frame understanding of societal and environmental patterns. Curricular Competencies emphasise investigation, mapping, and interpretation skills. Content identifies key concepts such as population, migration, and resource management.

Physical and Health Education

The Physical and Health Education specification emphasises participation, health literacy, wellbeing, and safety. Big Ideas and Curricular Competencies are fewer and more directly tied to applied contexts, while Content statements identify relevant knowledge of anatomy, movement, and fitness principles.

Assessment information

Assessment in British Columbia is devolved to schools and educators. Provincial curriculum documents define learning standards but do not specify assessment approaches. Schools are responsible for designing assessments aligned with the standards. Elaborations and online educator resources may offer guidance or exemplars for formative assessment, but these are advisory rather than mandatory. This contrasts with systems where course specifications tightly integrate curriculum and summative assessment design.

Volume and format characteristics

Documents vary in length but generally present information in a structured, modular format using headings, tables, bullets, and narrative explanations. Examples and elaborations are

included to illustrate learning standards and classroom implementation. While the core overviews are concise, the total volume of information is substantial.

Consistency across subjects

The overarching design model (Big Ideas, Curricular Competencies, and Content) is consistent across subjects. Variation occurs in the number of Big Ideas, depth of elaborations, and specificity of Content statements. English and Mathematics often include richer elaboration sections, whereas Physical and Health Education is more concise. Despite these differences, all subjects share a competency-driven, concept-focused approach.

Equality and inclusion

British Columbia's curriculum embeds equity and [inclusion](#) at multiple levels. Sections in subject curriculum introductions outline inclusive approaches, such as mixed-ability learning, differentiated opportunities, and equitable access for all learners. Indigenous perspectives and knowledge are [explicitly integrated](#) throughout the curriculum, guided by the [First Peoples Principles of Learning](#), with recommendations for educator consultation with local communities and cultural experts. Beyond individual subjects, provincial programme considerations emphasise valuing diversity, safe and welcoming learning environments, equitable access and participation, and support for learners with special or English language learning needs. Equity and inclusion principles are also embedded across Big Ideas, Content, and Curricular Competencies, ensuring that learning standards, instructional design, and assessment practices collectively foster accessibility, cultural responsiveness, and fair treatment for all learners.

Notable features

- Information is spread across overviews, goals and rationale passages, summaries, and elaborations.
- The design is competency-driven with Big Ideas, Content, and Curricular Competencies defining learning outcomes.
- Local autonomy is balanced with the need to maintain provincial expectations.
- Assessment design is largely devolved to schools and educators.

Summary

British Columbia's curriculum provides a fully articulated, competency-driven framework for upper secondary education, in which information is distributed across multiple online resources rather than consolidated into a single specification. Big Ideas, Content, and Curricular

Competencies define learning outcomes, while subject elaborations offer detailed guidance on implementation and interpretation of standards. Educators and schools are responsible for translating these resources into local curriculum and assessment practices, highlighting the interpretive rather than prescriptive nature of the British Columbia curriculum documentation.

Estonia

System context

Estonia has a [national curriculum](#) that applies through to upper secondary level. Learning outcomes are nationally defined and there is strong alignment between curriculum and qualification expectations. The national curriculum also exists in a [regulatory form](#) that:

- defines competencies at a higher system level (for example, communication, self-management, learning to learn)
- states that learning outcomes support development of subject-related competencies
- embeds overarching assessment principles as part of the curriculum regulation

Estonia's [upper secondary curriculum](#) is overseen by the Ministry of Education and Research and is highly structured around national standards. Estonia operates a highly centralised curriculum framework in which learning outcomes and competencies are defined nationally. However, while assessment principles are set at national level, most assessment practice is school based. Schools design and implement assessment aligned to national learning outcomes, and detailed procedures are defined within local school curriculums.

External state exams are required in specific subjects for graduation (Estonian language, mathematics, and a foreign language). In addition, learners must complete an independently conducted research paper or practical project and achieve satisfactory school grades. This model reflects a system in which national curriculum expectations shape both internal and external assessment, but detailed implementation remains locally managed.

Although this section refers to course specifications, these are in practice subject specifications embedded within national curriculum documents rather than standalone qualification documents.

For this paper, we analysed specifications for Language and Literature, Mathematics, Social Studies, and Physical Education as the closest available comparators to the Scottish Higher specifications. Note that Human Geography is a compulsory module within the broader Social Studies course, which also includes History, Civics, and Economics components.

- [Language and Literature](#)
- [Mathematics](#)
- [Social Studies](#)
- [Physical Education](#)

Structure of course specifications

Estonian upper secondary course specifications are embedded within the national curriculum and follow a centralised, comprehensive document model. Each subject-specific appendix typically includes:

- course overview — rationale, purpose, target audience
- learning outcomes — defined across knowledge, skills, and attitudes
- course content — detailed topics and subtopics for the subject
- assessment guidance — outlining principles of assessment and key skills or areas of learning to be assessed
- supplementary guidance — additional guidance for teaching and learning

This centralised structure contrasts with jurisdictions that distribute guidance across multiple documents or online resources. Estonian specifications are long-form, detailed, and maintain a consistent format across subjects. However, [cross-curricular topics](#) are addressed fully in a separate document that complements subject specifications.

Organisation of documentation

Estonian upper secondary course specifications are designed to provide a consistent and navigable reader experience. Documents use clear headings, subheadings, tables, and bullet points to structure content and assessment information. Guidance is largely embedded within a single comprehensive document rather than distributed across multiple resources, which makes the specifications longer than those in many other jurisdictions.

The documents are heavily text-based, with minimal use of graphics or colour, and are structured to support both educators and policymakers in navigating course content, learning outcomes, and assessment expectations efficiently. Unlike many other systems, Estonia integrates detailed curriculum content and assessment, ensuring the specification provides both curriculum content and expectations for assessment. The national curriculum and subject documents operate together to define expectations, with local school curriculums providing procedural detail.

Approach to subject-specific content

Estonian upper secondary course specifications provide detailed, subject-specific guidance, with clear articulation of learning outcomes, content coverage, and assessment expectations.

Across subjects, specifications also reference general competencies within the national curriculum framework, but references to skills are broad rather than systematically linked.

Language and Literature

The Language and Literature specification outlines comprehensive reading, writing, and oral communication outcomes. Learning objectives emphasise interpretation, critical thinking, creativity, and expression. Assessment expectations are specified.

Mathematics

The Mathematics specification is extensive, covering algebra, geometry, calculus, probability, and statistics. The document precisely defines learning outcomes and describes assessment expectations.

Social Studies

The Geography component of Social Studies emphasises spatial analysis, environmental literacy, and understanding of socio-economic systems. The document suggests that learners will engage with practical contexts where appropriate.

Physical Education

The Physical Education specification focuses on skill development, health, and wellbeing. While the document is shorter than other subject specifications, it outlines skills and competencies.

Assessment information

Assessment information is provided within the course specifications, and the documents outline the knowledge, skills, and general competences that are expected to be assessed.

Specifications indicate the areas of learning and competencies to be considered in assessment, guided by nationally defined learning outcomes and principles rather than prescriptive task-level instructions. While some subjects include external assessments, not all do; most internal assessments are designed by schools in alignment with these national expectations. The [General Part of the national curriculum](#) establishes overarching purposes and principles of assessment, emphasising diverse assessment methods, feedback, and learner rights.

Standardisation operates primarily at the level of learning outcomes, content specification, and structural format, with operational assessment procedures left to schools.

Volume and format characteristics

Estonian course specifications are presented in detailed, long-form prose, often complemented by structured tables to summarise content and assessment expectations. Key features include:

- extensive narrative text explaining course aims, learning outcomes, and assessment expectations
- tables summarising learning outcomes and course content
- minimal use of graphics, colour, or visual aids

Rather than relying on multiple documents or online elaborations, Estonian specifications consolidate most guidance within a single document, providing a comprehensive and integrated reference. While the format is detailed and prose-heavy, the overall length is comparable to the other jurisdictions we analysed. It reflects the focus on clarity, structured explanation, and guidance rather than visual presentation or modularity.

Consistency across subjects

Estonian course specifications maintain consistency in structure and detail. Each specification follows the same overarching format, with clearly defined headings for course overview, learning outcomes, and content. Subject-specific variation is largely limited to subject content.

Equality and inclusion

In Estonia, explicit equality and inclusion statements are largely absent from upper secondary course specifications. The documents focus on learning outcomes and content, with no dedicated guidance on supporting diverse learner needs or equitable access. Cross-curricular themes are present but are not explicitly framed in terms of inclusion. At a regulatory level, Estonia's [equality and inclusion policy](#) in education guarantees all individuals the right to education, emphasising inclusive, accessible, and adapted learning environments in mainstream schools.

Notable features

- Learning outcomes, content, and assessment expectations are combined in a single specification.
- A highly standardised format and structure ensure coherence and comparability between subjects.
- Extensive textual detail enhances clarity and precision but results in comparatively long, dense documents.

Summary

Estonia represents a highly structured, nationally regulated curriculum model. Subject syllabuses are embedded within a national curriculum framework and integrate course aims, learning outcomes, and content within the same document. Assessment expectations are described at a high level. A consistent structure is maintained across subjects, supporting coherence and comparability. Compared with more decentralised or digital-first jurisdictions, Estonia's approach is characterised by consolidated documentation, extensive textual detail, and a highly standardised structure and format across subjects.

New South Wales (Australia)

System context

In NSW, upper secondary qualifications are overseen by [NESA](#). NSW operates a largely [curriculum-driven](#) system, with syllabuses defining content, learning outcomes, and assessment requirements. These syllabuses serve both as curriculum frameworks and as qualification-specifying documents for the Higher School Certificate (HSC).

Senior secondary study is organised into Preliminary (Year 11) and HSC (Year 12) courses, providing a structured progression. Assessment in NSW combines externally set HSC exams with mandatory school-based internal assessment, with weighting and task requirements specified in the syllabuses. This model balances comparability at the state level with educator discretion in the design and delivery of internal assessment tasks.

NSW syllabuses set clear expectations for knowledge, skills, and competences while allowing educators to adapt delivery to local contexts. References to broader skills and general capabilities exist, but the primary emphasis is on subject-specific outcomes.

For this paper, we analysed specifications for Years 11 and 12 English, Mathematics, Geography, and Health and Movement Science.

- [English](#)
- [Mathematics](#)
- [Geography](#)
- [Health and Movement Science](#)

Structure of course specifications

NSW course specifications (syllabuses) follow a consistent architecture, comprising:

- overview — summarising rationale, aims, and context of the course
- aim and rationale — setting out broad goals and purposes of the syllabus
- outcomes — statements categorised by codes specifying the knowledge, skills, and understanding learners are expected to demonstrate
- content — detailed syllabus content linked to outcomes
- assessment — identifying assessment components, HSC weightings, and principles for internal and external assessment; schools design specific tasks within these parameters
- glossary — definitions of key terms
- educator and learning support — links to supplementary resources, teaching guidance, and exemplars

NSW separates support materials and exemplars from the main syllabus rather than embedding all guidance in a single document. This approach provides flexibility but requires users to consult multiple sources to access the full set of guidance. The outcomes-driven design links curriculum intent, teaching focus, and assessment expectations, prioritising structured articulation over extended narrative course descriptions.

Organisation of documentation

NSW syllabuses are primarily digital-first, designed to support layered navigation across interconnected sections. The main syllabus provides core course expectations in a concise format, while elaboration, exemplification, and procedural guidance are accessed via linked resources, including:

- [assessment and reporting](#) advice — guidance on internal and external assessment, reporting procedures, and HSC weightings
- standards materials — marking guides, HSC standards, and exemplars
- sample exam materials — past papers and illustrative assessment items
- teaching resources — optional lesson plans, work programmes, and instructional guidance, typically developed by the NSW Department of Education or schools

The syllabus separates content and outcomes from extensive exemplification and procedural guidance. This approach requires users to consult multiple sources for comprehensive understanding and implementation. Core syllabus content and assessment requirements are published by NESA, while teaching and programming resources are developed separately by the NSW Department of Education and are not embedded within the formal specification.

- [English support materials](#)
- [Mathematics support materials](#)
- [Geography support materials](#)
- [Health and Movement Science support materials](#)

Approach to subject-specific content

Although the NSW syllabus framework is consistent across learning areas, subject-specific characteristics shape how outcomes and content are expressed.

Across subjects, distinctions between knowledge and skills are embedded within outcomes rather than separated into discrete transferable skill categories.

English

English syllabuses (Standard, Advanced, Extension) emphasise textual analysis, composition, and interpretation. Outcomes focus on critical reading, effective communication, evaluative thinking, and the crafting of texts. Content is organised into modules that integrate conceptual understanding with analytical and creative processes.

Mathematics

Mathematics syllabuses (Standard, Advanced, Extension) articulate outcomes spanning reasoning, modelling, problem-solving, and communication. Content domains are structured progressively, moving from foundational concepts to advanced applications.

Geography

The Geography syllabus highlights inquiry processes, spatial thinking, and investigation methodologies, including fieldwork. Outcomes integrate conceptual knowledge with analytical, evaluative, and problem-solving skills applied to environmental and socio-spatial contexts.

Health and Movement Science

The Health and Movement Science syllabus combines theoretical health science with applied movement contexts. Outcomes encompass analysis, performance, and evaluation, reflecting the dual academic-practical nature of the subject.

Assessment information

Assessment in NSW syllabuses is articulated through a combination of outcomes, assessment requirements, and standards frameworks, rather than through prescriptive task-level instructions. The syllabus typically:

- identifies the outcomes to be assessed
- specifies mandatory assessment components and relative weightings for internal and external assessment
- indicates which syllabus outcomes are assessed in the HSC exam
- aligns outcomes to achievement standards at a broad level

The syllabus establishes what must be assessed and the structural parameters for assessments. Schools design internal assessment tasks within these mandated components and weightings, in line with NESA assessment principles. For HSC courses, external exams are derived directly from syllabus outcomes and content. The syllabus functions as the curriculum

and standards anchor, while operational exam papers, marking guidelines, and performance band descriptors are published separately by NESA.

Volume and format characteristics

NSW syllabuses are typically moderate in length and highly structured. They are characterised by concise language, extensive use of tables and bullet points, explicit outcome codes, and digital-first hyperlinked navigation. The presentation prioritises clarity and usability over extended explanatory prose.

Compared with more text-dense or narrative-style jurisdictions, NSW adopts a modular and outcome-centred format. Conceptual depth and exemplification are largely located in linked standards materials, exam papers, and assessment resources published separately, rather than embedded within the core syllabus document itself. This produces a specification model that is structurally clear and navigable but distributed across multiple interconnected documents.

Consistency across subjects

NSW syllabuses follow a common structural template, ensuring consistency in overall architecture, terminology, and sequencing (overview, rationale, aim, outcomes, content, and assessment). This structural uniformity supports comparability across subjects. However, the expression of content and outcomes varies according to subject demands. Differences, therefore, arise primarily in the nature and framing of outcomes rather than in the specification architecture itself. The system maintains a consistent structural model while allowing variation in how knowledge, skills, and application are expressed.

Equality and inclusion

Equality and inclusion are addressed both at the system level through NESA policies and within syllabuses themselves. Within the syllabuses, inclusion is reflected through:

- integration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in content examples
- glossary terms and content descriptors that address diversity, accessibility, and cultural identities
- Life Skills outcomes and differentiated content designed to meet the needs of diverse learners.

Procedural and operational detail for [inclusive assessment](#) and access arrangements is provided via NESA assessment policies and supporting documents such as those on [learners with a disability](#), [English as an additional language](#), and [multicultural education](#).

Notable features

- discrete documentation model — core syllabus supported by separate assessment, standards, and resource materials
- subject-centric structure — strong emphasis on subject knowledge, skills, and outcomes
- standards-referenced design — outcomes explicitly linked to performance standards and achievement bands
- concise, highly navigable format — extensive use of headings, bullets, and tables

Summary

NSW provides a structured approach to course specifications through its syllabuses. Syllabuses are consistent in format across subjects but vary in depth. Operational assessment guidance is provided through linked NESA resources, including assessment advice, sample exam materials, and standards packages. Assessment is structured to balance state-level standardisation — through external HSC exams and mandated internal assessment requirements — with local autonomy in task design. While syllabuses clearly define subject-specific knowledge, skills, and outcomes, and some include explicitly labelled Life Skills outcomes for targeted learning needs, they do not systematically present a universal framework of transferable skills for life, learning, and work across all subjects.

New Zealand

System context

In New Zealand, upper secondary qualifications are administered by the [NZQA](#) and aligned with the [New Zealand Curriculum](#) (NZC). The system is outcomes-based and integrates subject-specific learning with broader competencies articulated in the NZC.

Senior secondary qualifications (NCEA Levels 1–3) are structured around achievement standards. Each achievement standard defines a discrete assessable outcome, associated performance criteria (Achievement, Merit, Excellence), credit value, and assessment mode (internal or external).

New Zealand does not publish consolidated course specifications. Instead, curriculum intent and assessment expectations are distributed across NZC subject guidance and NCEA achievement standards. NZC subject pages provide conceptual framing (for example, Big Ideas and Significant Learning statements), while achievement standards set up assessable outcomes through explicit criteria.

Big Ideas and Significant Learning statements provide the conceptual framing for each subject, describing enduring understandings and the progression of learning across levels. These statements inform how educators interpret and sequence achievement standards within courses, guiding coherent curriculum delivery while remaining separate from formal assessment specifications. In addition, NZC includes [Key Competencies](#) (thinking, using language, symbols and texts, managing self, relating to others, and participating and contributing) that describe broader capabilities learners are expected to develop across all subjects. These competencies are embedded across curriculum guidance and support the interpretation of standards, even though they are not explicitly repeated within individual achievement standards.

Assessment combines internally assessed standards (school-delivered and externally moderated by NZQA) and externally assessed standards (set and marked nationally), ensuring national consistency while allowing local delivery.

For this paper, we reviewed achievement standards for NCEA Level 3 English, Mathematics, Geography, and Physical Education.

- English — [NZQA](#) and [NCEA](#)
- Mathematics — [NZQA](#) and [NCEA](#)
- Geography — [NZQA](#) and [NCEA](#)
- Physical Education — [NZQA](#) and [NCEA](#)

Structure of course specifications

In New Zealand, there is no single course specification document. Instead, course expectations are constructed through NZC subject-level guidance, which provides conceptual framing (including Big Ideas, Significant Learning statements, and associated subject learning descriptions) and individual NCEA achievement standards, which define specific assessable outcomes and performance criteria. Conceptual curriculum framing sits alongside, but separate from, the formal assessment documents.

Achievement standards define discrete assessable outcomes and associated performance criteria, forming the core of assessment expectations. Full assessment specifications, including operational guidance, conditions, and exemplars, are provided through accompanying assessment specifications and supporting resources.

Organisation of documentation

Course specification documentation is distributed in New Zealand. Course expectations and assessment requirements are located across:

- individual achievement standards (defining outcomes and grading criteria)
- assessment specifications for external exams
- conditions of assessment for internally assessed standards
- assessment schedules (marking guidance)
- assessment reports
- NZC subject learning pages (conceptual curriculum framing)

This structure requires educators and schools to consult multiple linked sources for a complete picture of curriculum intent, assessment design, marking requirements, and progression. Achievement standards define the assessable outcomes and grading criteria, while curriculum pages and accompanying assessment documentation provide interpretive and operational guidance.

Approach to subject-specific content

Subject learning is assessed through discrete achievement standards. Curriculum framing (such as Big Ideas and Significant Learning) is presented on NZC subject pages rather than within the achievement standards themselves.

Across subjects, achievement standards define discrete, assessable components rather than holistic course outcomes. Conceptual coherence is provided through curriculum-level guidance.

English

NCEA Level 3 English standards assess analytical interpretation, creation of texts, and critical engagement across reading, writing, speaking, and viewing. Each standard defines a specific outcome and associated criteria. Big Ideas emphasise the power of language, construction of meaning from text, and critical communication. Significant Learning statements guide progression from understanding text to generating and evaluating complex ideas across reading, writing, speaking, and viewing.

Mathematics

NCEA Level 3 Mathematics standards assess algebraic reasoning, calculus, statistics, modelling, and problem-solving through discrete standards with defined performance criteria. Big Ideas highlight reasoning, problem-solving, and modelling across mathematical contexts. Significant Learning statements situate standards in a coherent progression of skills and concepts, supporting both procedural competence and applied problem-solving.

Geography

NCEA Level 3 Geography standards assess geographic inquiry, analysis of spatial patterns, and evaluation of human-environment interactions. Big Ideas provide context for inquiry, analysis, and evaluation tasks in standards. Significant Learning statements describe how understanding of systems, processes, and sustainability develops progressively across levels.

Physical Education

NCEA Level 3 Physical Education standards combine theoretical analysis and performance-based assessment, including evaluation of physical activity, movement analysis, and understanding of wellbeing concepts. Big Ideas and Significant Learning statements shape the assessment of both theoretical knowledge and performance skills.

Assessment information

NCEA Level 3 achievement standards define the formal expectations for assessment. Each standard:

- specifies a discrete observable outcome
- identifies whether it is internally or externally assessed
- includes Achievement, Merit, and Excellence criteria
- is supported by assessment schedules and exemplars

Achievement standards do not embed Big Ideas or broader competence statements within their wording. They specify the outcomes to be assessed and associated performance criteria (Achievement, Merit, Excellence). Additional documents, including assessment specifications, marking schedules, and exemplars, provide operational guidance for assessment delivery and interpretation.

Volume and format characteristics

NCEA achievement standards are concise documents categorising assessable outcomes by code and providing grading criteria. They are supported by separate, text-rich online resources (including assessment specifications, schedules, and exemplars) which provide the operational guidance needed to deliver assessments consistently.

Consistency across subjects

Achievement standards across subjects follow a consistent structural format (coded outcome, credits, assessment mode, performance criteria). However, conceptual curriculum framing varies by subject and is located on NZC learning pages rather than within the standards themselves. Variations in emphasis reflect subject differences.

Equality and inclusion

Equality and inclusion are articulated primarily at curriculum and system level rather than within individual achievement standards. The NZC includes principles relating to [inclusion](#), [cultural diversity](#), and commitments under [Te Tiriti o Waitangi](#). Māori perspectives are embedded as a curriculum priority, and broader cultural responsiveness is supported through curriculum guidance. Accessibility and accommodations are implemented through NZQA [Special Assessment Conditions](#) and related system-level policies rather than through statements within standards.

Notable features

- Achievement standards define discrete assessable outcomes and associated performance criteria.
- Curriculum framing and assessment documentation are structurally separate.
- Marking schedules and assessment reports support national consistency.
- Broader competences are embedded at curriculum level rather than within standards.

Summary

In New Zealand, NCEA achievement standards define discrete, assessable outcomes, including associated performance criteria (Achievement, Merit, Excellence), credit value, and mode of assessment. Broader curriculum intent and subject coherence are articulated separately through NZC subject learning pages, including Big Ideas and Significant Learning statements, which frame the purpose and progression of learning across levels. Although these curricular elements are not embedded within the achievement standards, they inform how standards are interpreted, combined, and sequenced within courses. There is no single consolidated course specification document; instead, expectations are distributed across achievement standards, assessment specifications, marking schedules, and supporting guidance. Collectively, these materials define learning aims, assessment methods, and how performance is judged, resulting in a nationally consistent but modular approach to subject specification.