

The story of the evolution of the ACCA exams

The ACCA Qualification continually evolves

The world doesn't stand still – and neither do we. Throughout our 100+ year history, we've worked hard to innovate – from basing our qualification on IFRS to introducing tax and law variants. We are always looking for ways to adapt and enhance our offer to meet the changing needs of the accountancy profession.

These changes ensure that the ACCA Qualification continues to offer a broad, relevant and complete skillset for accountants and finance professionals, with the skills that are sought after by employers. Because students are trained in all key areas, ACCA accountants have a complete skillset to strengthen the finance functions they work in and deliver enhanced value. It creates professional accountants who are capable of building successful careers across all employment sectors - realising personal career ambitions and unlocking the potential of the organisations they lead and advise.

We go beyond the technical and financial competencies expected of newly qualified ACCA members. Our qualification also delivers the professional competencies that are required and highly sought after by employers.

The need to meet employer expectations on digital skills

We asked employers their needs from finance professionals today as part of our major research programme, *Professional Accountants - the future*, and we translated this research into a number of practical changes to our qualification.

They told us, the role of the professional accountant is changing and it's essential for financial professionals to be skilled in using new technologies. They expect newly qualified ACCA members to have an awareness and ability to apply their skills using existing and emerging digital technologies, capabilities, practices and strategies from day one.

As a result of what employers told us we incorporated workplace tools into our computer based assessments and created a digital Ethics and Professional Skills module (EPSM) to develop students professionalism using gamification technology to expose students to realistic business situations.

Moving to computer based assessments

Moving to computer-based assessment has been integral to our long term strategy and a significant undertaking. We have transitioned our exams from paper-based to computer gradually to ensure we've had the infrastructure, processes and technologies in place to successfully develop and deliver the exams. We've also made sure our stakeholders have been kept informed and been able to prepare for these changes - all whilst ensuring the quality and rigour of the exams remain as high as ever.

Removing paper-based exams

As the working environment evolves, so must our exams and the way they are delivered. For example, 10 years ago, conducting a financial audit was largely a paper-based exercise; today it involves the use of multiple digital platforms such as spreadsheets, wordprocessing and email. As a qualification that continually Thinks Ahead, it's essential that we maintain the relevancy and value of the ACCA Qualification by moving all of our exams onto a digital format.

We first introduced computer based exams (CBEs) to our Applied Knowledge offering in 1998 and since 2015 we have been pushing boundaries in the use of technology for exam delivery with our Applied Skills CBEs.

The technology used for our Applied Skills CBEs reflect the workplace with students being required to use spreadsheets and word processing tools in answering questions in their exams. These exams assess whether a student is workplace ready – enhancing their employability and fulfilling employer expectations of providing immediate value.

We assess students in their knowledge of the technical aspects required of a finance professional across a range of disciplines through their application of that knowledge to scenario based exam questions. The syllabus and study guide for each exam contains a list of technical learning outcomes relevant to each subject area along with the intellectual level applicable to that area. To continually keep the Qualification relevant, these are updated each year to keep pace with the changing demands of employers.

As paper exams for Applied Skills have been withdrawn we have been able to adapt our assessment of these technical learning outcomes, and this is reflected in various ways across our exams, including:

- Using the digital capabilities afforded by our exams means that students are able to perform relatively complex calculations more quickly than they would have on paper, enabling us to allocate more marks to the value add analysis derived from those calculations and less marks to the calculative elements.
- In assessing topics which require a narrative based on analysis of data, students are able to use the tools available to them to embed their calculations within the text of their analysis, producing more professionally integrated responses and enabling them to more easily develop the key points in their answer; the mark allocation is designed to reflect this advantage.
- These assessment methods also allow ACCA to focus on testing students' technical and application skills, rather than, for example, their ability to perform simple calculations and, as such, the focus of the way we examine some syllabus areas has changed, moving away from calculative aspects to more discursive elements.
- In setting questions we are able to take account of numerous time saving aspects, which impact on the depth and breadth of responses students are able to achieve, with the mark allocation reflecting this, so, for example, students are able to copy and paste their answer plan from the scratch pad as well as copy and paste elements from the question into their response. The use of the word processing tool also allows students to produce more succinct and professional answers with the ability to review and edit answers as they progress.
- Although students are credited with marks for the technical content of their answers, the more professional those answers are, in terms of for example, logical flow, the higher the technical marks students are likely to achieve (whether professional marks are relevant or not) and again marks are allocated across questions with this advantage in mind.

In addition to the above, examining students via computer allows more scope in the way exam questions can be presented to the student, enriching the content of the questions and aligning them much more closely with what a student may face in the workplace, assessing students in their ability to assimilate complex data and information from different sources.

Timelines for removal of paper-based exams at Applied Skills and Strategic Professional

From June 2019 all of our main variant Applied Skills exams are delivered solely as computer based exams, with the remaining variants being delivered digitally by June 2020.

From March 2020, our Strategic Professional exams will start to be delivered solely by computer in certain markets with the evolution culminating in all of our exams being offered globally via computer only by 2022.

Similar to our Applied Skills CBEs, the question types used in Strategic Professional CBEs will require students to effectively mimic what they would do in the workplace. In addition to spreadsheets and word processing tools, students will also use presentation slides to apply their knowledge on technology used by today's finance professionals - offering ACCA the opportunity to focus on the application of knowledge to scenarios.

Changes met with approval

These market-leading innovations to the ACCA Qualification set a new standard and they're just one aspect of how we're shaping the future of the profession. Our move from paper-based to computer assessments has been fully approved by our regulators and endorsed by our network of employers. Through the evolution of the ACCA Qualification and continued through our Continuing Professional Development programme, our students and members are being equipped with the digital capabilities to thrive in the modern work environment.