

ofqual



Department
for Education

The sector subject area classification system in England

A joint DfE and Ofqual call for evidence

Launch date

14 December 2022

Respond by

3 February 2023

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Introduction

The Department for Education (DfE) and the Office of Qualifications and Examination Regulation (Ofqual) are calling for evidence about the use of the Sector Subject Area (SSA) classification system in England. This is to understand who uses the system, how it is used, and how far it meets current user's needs. This joint call for evidence also seeks views on whether the SSA classification system might be refined or amended in order to ensure it is fit for purpose for future new and emerging skills.

Who this is for

All parties with an interest in and who use the SSA classification system in England are encouraged to submit evidence. Responses are particularly welcome from education and training providers, employers, professional representative bodies, combined authorities, local authorities, academic and educational professionals and awarding organisations.

Issue date

The call for evidence was issued on 14th December 2022.

Enquiries

If your enquiry relates to the policy content of the call for evidence, you can contact Qualifications.Approval@education.gov.uk

If your enquiry is related to the DfE e-consultation website or the call for evidence process in general, you can contact the DfE Ministerial and Public Communications Division by email: Consultations.Coordinator@education.gov.uk or by telephone: 0370 000 2288 or via the [DfE Contact us page](#).

The response

The call for evidence closes at 23.59 on 3rd February 2023. The results of the call for evidence and the joint response will be published on GOV.UK later in 2023.

Depending on the outcomes of this call for evidence we may launch a joint formal consultation to set out any proposed refinements and/or amendments to the SSA classification system, and details of the timelines for implementation of any proposed refinements and/or amendments. Any such consultation will take account of the feedback collated from the call for evidence, as well as a parallel survey on the use of the SSA classification system that Ofqual are taking forward with awarding organisations.

Confidentiality of your responses

Information provided in response to this call for evidence, including personal information, may be subject to publication or disclosure under the Freedom of Information Act 2000, the Data Protection Act 2018 or the Environmental Information Regulations 2004. If you want all, or any part, of a response to be treated as confidential, please explain why you consider it to be confidential.

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

The Department for Education will process your personal data (name and address and any other identifying material) in accordance with the Data Protection Act 2018 and your personal information will only be used for the purposes of this call for evidence. Your information will not be shared with third parties unless the law allows it. You can read more about what the DfE does when we ask for and hold your personal information in our personal information charter.

Respond online

To help us analyse the responses please use the online system wherever possible. Visit www.education.gov.uk/consultations to submit your response.

Other ways to respond

If for exceptional reasons, you are unable to use the online system, for example because you use specialist accessibility software that is not compatible with the system, please email SSAC.CallforEvidence@education.gov.uk requesting a word document version, which you can complete and return by email, or by post to Qualifications Funding Approval Team, Department for Education, Cheylesmore House, Quinton Road, Coventry, CV1 2WT.

Deadline

The call for evidence closes on 3rd February 2023.

About this call for evidence

1. The SSA classification system is a system for classifying qualifications into business sectors or subject areas. It is owned by Ofqual and used widely across the education and skills system in England. There are 15 broad 'tier 1' subject areas and 50 more detailed 'tier 2' sub-sector subject areas. A full list of the tier 1 and tier 2 SSAs are included in [Annex A](#)
2. The SSA classification system has been in use for over 20 years and is accessed by a wide range of users for a wide range of purposes beyond the classification of qualifications. The starting point for this call for evidence is to establish who the wide range of users of the system are, whether the system meets all user needs and, if it does not, what refinements and/or amendments could we make to the SSA classification system to ensure it does meet all user needs.
3. In this call for evidence, we set out, at a high level, what the SSA classification system currently is, its main uses, and the areas where, from our initial work, there may be scope to refine and/or amend the system.
4. We would like all those who use/have an interest in the SSA classification system to submit responses to this call for evidence so that we can gather the fullest information. This can then inform any formal consultation we may publish (provisionally in the spring of 2023) setting out the detail of any amendments and/or refinements to the system we may take forward and the timeframe for introducing these changes.

Background and context to this call for evidence

5. The SSA classification system has existed and been in use for over twenty years, but, in that time, has not been significantly updated. While we do not anticipate making wide ranging or significant changes to the current system, we do believe that it may benefit from some refinements or amendments to ensure that it can reflect new and emerging skills needs (such as digital or green skills) and that it can better align with developments such as the occupational standards and [maps](#) owned and developed by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE).
6. The sector and subject categories which exist now were created in 2001 (and revised a few years later) by the (then) Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA). The intention was to design a system which was comprehensive enough for a range of educational bodies across England, Wales, and Northern Ireland to use. The driver for the system was to introduce greater consistency so that organisations (including awarding organisations and education and training providers) would not need to translate data across different classification systems and in order that information about subjects and sectors could be reported consistently. The QCA and

other regulators in Wales and Northern Ireland, adopted the SSA classification system to support the development of the (then) National Qualifications Framework (NQF).

7. The SSA classification system is owned by Ofqual and is used to describe and understand what is happening in the regulated qualifications market in England. Ofqual also use the SSA classification system as a basis for ensuring that the awarding organisations (AOs) they recognise and regulate are competent to deliver the qualifications they want to. This is done through encouraging AOs to use the SSA classification system to describe their scope of recognition. Scope of recognition is used to define the sector or subject areas, as well as the types of qualifications an awarding organisation can develop and deliver regulated qualifications in.
8. AOs will assign their qualifications to a SSA, usually a second tier SSA. For instance, a plumbing qualification will be assigned to the SSA tier 2 of Building and construction which is part of tier 1 Construction, planning and the built environment. A qualification in equine care may be assigned to the tier 2 SSA Animal care and veterinary science which is part of the tier 1 Agriculture, horticulture, and animal care. Qualifications at all levels and all types of qualifications have to be assigned to a SSA as part of the information the AO needs to place on Ofqual's [Register of regulated qualifications](#). This applies to both academic qualifications such as A levels and vocationally related and technical qualifications.
9. Alongside its function in relation to regulated qualifications, the SSA classification system is also used by a range of other bodies and also used extensively in reporting and statistics. For instance, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) use the system to inform their education inspection framework of further education and skills provision in England. The system is used widely across the post 16 education and skills sector by education and training providers to inform curriculum planning, to forecast funding, for internal reporting, benchmarking, and planning. And across government, the SSA classification system is often used to report back on statistical trends across different kinds of learners and different kinds of provision. For example, the Department for Education (DfE) produces further education (FE) national statistics (which use sector subject area tier 1 data). This includes National Achievement Rate Tables (NART), which report on performance measures across the sector. In addition the [Further Education and Skills statistics](#) release regularly publishes statistical analysis of provision by subjects using the SSA classification system.
10. The Department for Education (DfE) and the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) make extensive use of the SSA classification system for funding purposes, using the classification of subject areas and sectors to assign funding bands and programme weightings. This approach recognises that, due to the specialist or

practical nature of some sectors and subjects, costs of delivery of provision may vary. Programme weightings or programme costs weightings (PCW) are used in both post 16 and post 19 funding of provision to recognise the relative costs of delivering education and training in different sectors and subjects. The PCW is attached to each subject sector area, and in turn this “weighting” then generates funding to training providers and colleges.

11. For both government funded 16 to 19 provision and adult provision in England, there have recently been reviews of the funding approach and of programme costs weightings, including a focus on the funding for high value provision which is often defined through identification of key or priority sectors. In July 2022 the Department published its response to the consultation on a [new further education funding and accountability system](#) which included proposals to move towards a simple funding formula with a clear focus on high value sectors and subjects. In September 2022, the Department’s [report into its review of further education funding for high cost and high value provision](#) was published in September 2022, identifying changes to cost weightings applied to 16 to 19 provision.
12. In October 2019 the then Secretary of State for Education wrote to the Department for Education and to Ofqual asking that they take forward a joint review of the SSA classification system. The steer was that, against the background of the development of T Levels and other technical education reforms, the system used to classify qualifications should be comprehensive, robust, and adaptable (taking into the account the range of agencies and organisations using the system).
13. The commission to take forward a joint review identified that the current SSA classification system needed:
 - to be able to better integrate with the occupational routes and maps that underpin apprenticeship standards, T Levels and Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs) and will also underpin the technical occupational qualifications at level 3 and 2 which IfATE would approve as part of the review of post-16 qualifications at level 3 and below
 - to be able to accommodate new or emerging skills and that a review of the system could identify where there may be gaps currently or where there is a need for a change in the groupings or more detail
 - to support greater consistency in the way awarding organisations, assign their qualifications.
14. Although initially delayed by the pandemic, both the Department and Ofqual have since taken forward work on the review. We have informally engaged with a range of stakeholders to seek their views on the system. We have talked to and collected information from a range of users of system to gain their views, and we have talked

to other government agencies and departments (and the devolved administrations) who make use of the system.

15. Through our informal engagement there have been similar themes about the system which have emerged, these are set out below to give context and frame this call for evidence.

Next steps

16. This call for evidence is intended to offer all users of the system the opportunity to provide evidence on what aspects of the SSA classification system work well and what aspects may benefit from review or amendment. We also hope that respondents, where they identify there may be areas for review or amendment may put forward ideas as to where any changes we could make might be focused.

17. Should there be a case to introduce amendments and/or refinements to the SSA classification system, we will consult both on the nature of any changes and also on the timing for implementing any changes to the system.

18. We are aware that awarding organisations in particular will be concerned about possible changes to the SSA classification system alongside [the review of post 16 qualifications at level 3 in England](#) and [the review of post 16 qualifications at level 2 and below in England](#). Any changes to the SSA classification system we may introduce will need take account both of the post-16 qualifications reviews in England and the implementation of funding and accountability changes. Therefore, any refinements or amendments which may be introduced will be implemented on a transitional or tapered basis, over a period of time. This will be to minimize the burden on both awarding organisations and education and training providers. Should we seek to introduce changes, our joint formal consultation on these changes will also gather views on the phasing of implementation.

19. With regards to the call for evidence and the SSA classification system, we are seeking feedback on four principal areas (highlighted in paragraphs 27 to 34 below):

- the current system in terms of asking respondents how familiar they are with the system and how far the system meets their needs now
- the importance of the system, asking respondents what they use the system for, whether the system adequately accommodates both academic and technical learning and how far it can accommodate all levels of learning from entry level to level 8 of the regulated qualifications framework
- the relationship of the SSA classification system to other classification systems
- any areas possible areas where the system may benefit from refinement and/or amendment

20. Once the call for evidence closes on 3rd February 2023, there will be an analytical phase where all responses will be collated and processed, to identify themes and common areas and to consider whether any changes should be made and what those changes might be. This data will then be used to decide whether we should launch a formal consultation linked to whether there is a case to implement any refinements and/or amendments to the current system.

Information about the SSA classification system and examples of possible areas for refining the system

21. As indicated above, the SSA classification system is a classification system used widely across the post-16 education and skills system in England; used by awarding organisations in particular to categorise, as they design and deliver regulated qualifications. The system is also used by the Department for Education in the funding, monitoring and analysis of provision, and by education and training providers in the planning, benchmarking, and reporting of provision.

22. As a classification system the SSA classification system identifies sectors and subjects and groups them but does not offer a detailed description of the subjects or sectors it identifies. As a result, users of the system have to, in part, make professional judgements about the 'best fit' in terms of the SSA they are using. Sometimes, and as highlighted below, this can lead to some inconsistency within and across the SSA classification system and can pose problems in terms of how the SSA classification system can take account of and/or accommodate new or emerging skills areas.

23. Increasingly technical learning and skills are occupationally focussed, related to specific occupations as opposed to broad vocational areas. This can pose a challenge for awarding organisations assigning subject sector areas to technical qualifications where the qualifications are more occupationally focused. This is one area we are keen to have feedback on.

24. The SSA classification system is also not the only classification system used (as discussed below) and it has not been reviewed for a period of time. This can lead to some confusion over how different classification systems relate to, and interact with each other, and whether the SSA classification system itself can adequately still accommodate both academic and vocationally related and technical qualifications.

25. Although the SSA classification system is well established it is not, for instance, the main classification system for higher education. The [Higher Education Classification of Subjects](#) (HECoS) was implemented from, 2019 to 2020 as the new subject coding system for higher education, ensuring that courses and modules can be categorised in a consistent manner. The IfATE has developed and owns [occupational standards and maps](#). These employer-led standards exist across 15

occupational routes from level 2 to level 7. Occupational standards underpin apprenticeship standards, Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs), T Levels and new technical occupational qualifications at levels 3 and 2. They are developed by employers to describe the knowledge, skills, and behaviours for an individual to be competent in a specific occupation. Occupational maps group occupations with shared knowledge, skills, and behaviours into pathways and 'clusters', making clear the career progression pathways within a particular occupation and across different routes.

26. There are also systems such as standard industrial classifications (SIC) and standard occupational classifications (SOC) where [SOC](#) has long been used as a common classification of occupational information across the United Kingdom by the Office for National Statistics.
27. It is not the intention of this review that there should, going forward, be only one classification system. There are strong reasons why different occupational and subject classification systems exist serving slightly different purposes and many of these have a use beyond and outside the post 16 education and skills system. But, in the context of the post 16 education and skills system there needs to be better coherence across system and a clearer line of sight and agreed approach in terms of how we can link occupational routes and sector subject areas. The need to address this relationship is one of the main areas where we are keen to understand if users believe there is a case for some refinements and/or amendments to be made to the system.
28. A second area where we are seeking views in the call for evidence is the issue of the sector subject areas themselves. Given the system has not been reviewed for a significant period of time it is not surprising that some of the SSAs may not be up to date or be able to reflect new or emerging skills. For instance, it is unclear how far SSA 6.1 ICT practitioners can adequately reflect or accommodate new areas of digital technology. Or whether SSA 3.4 Environmental conservation is appropriate or the right terminology to accommodate environmental sustainability?
29. A third area is whether the relationships of tier 1 and tier 2 SSAs always make sense and whether some of the tier 2 classifications are too broad. For instance, SSA 1 Health, Public Services and Care, contains 5 tier 2 SSAs (medicine and dentistry; nursing, and subjects and vocations allied to medicine; health and social; public services; child development and well-being). But other SSA tier 1 categories are more limited at tier 2. For instance, SSA 6 Information and Communication Technology (ICT) only contains ICT practitioners and ICT users.
30. There is also the question of whether some the tier 2 combinations are appropriate. For instance, SSA 3 Agriculture, horticulture, and animal care. At tier 2 agriculture is on its own but horticulture and forestry are together; should horticulture be with agriculture?

31. There is also the issue of very broad tier 2 classifications. SSA 4.2 Manufacturing Technologies contains a range of qualifications encompassing bespoke tailoring, bakery, fire safety awareness, design and technology, quarry drilling. This does raise the risk that some SSAs could become a catch all for a disparate range of qualifications.
32. Linked to the above, a lack of detail and/or distinctiveness across some SSAs can lead to some confusion in how similar qualifications are assigned by awarding organisations. For instance, a qualification in media production can appear in Business Management while other similar qualifications may appear in Media and Communication. Some teaching support qualifications appear in the SSA 13.1 Teaching and lecturing, others appear in SSA 13.2 Direct learning support. This is also applicable on the subject as well as sector side. For instance, some psychology qualifications appear in SSA 2.1 Science, and some appear in SSA 11.2 Sociology and Social policy.
33. In some cases, this lack of consistency in assigning similar qualifications to the same SSA could be driven by robust reasons related to detailed content or pathways of individual qualifications. But there is an also a risk that the assigning of similar qualifications to different SSAs may be driven by other factors, such as seeking to maximise funding. Any inconsistency around assigning similar qualifications to the same SSA can cause confusion for both providers and funding bodies as well as risk adverse impact on statistics. In part this may be rectified by descriptors for the SSAs and clearer guidance on how qualifications and other provision may be assigned.
34. Finally, while the system identifies a range of subject and sectors, it also contains two tier 2 SSAs (14.1 Foundations for learning and life and 14.2 Preparation for work) in SSA 14 Preparation for Life and Work which do not identify subjects or sectors in the same way and could be seen to be more about descriptions of the purpose of provision or nature of programme. Whether these two SSAs sit comfortably both with other SSAs in the system and at all levels is again something we would be keen to hear views on.
35. In this section we have highlighted and given examples of a range of areas where there may be opportunities to refine the current SSA classification system in order to ensure it is comprehensive, robust, and adaptable but also consistent, with a clear line of sight to occupational standards. We believe any amendments will need to be proportionate. We are also conscious that there may be other areas which respondents to this call for evidence would wish to flag and we would welcome these.

Questions for the consultation (see response form)

36. We would therefore welcome your views on the following:

The background to the development use of SSAs

37. **Question 1:** How familiar are you with the Sector Subject Area (SSA) classification system?
38. **Question 2:** If you are familiar with the system, which tier do you make most use of? Tier 1 or Tier 2?
39. **Question 3:** Is the allocation of qualifications into SSA tier 1 and 2 accurate and consistent enough for your needs? If not, please describe the issues you have encountered.

The importance of SSAs – planning, reporting, and funding

40. **Question 4:** How frequently do you use the SSA classification system and what do you use it for? For instance: identifying local or regional skills needs, curriculum planning, monitoring, and reporting, financial planning
41. **Question 5:** To what extent do you feel the current structure of the SSA classification system adequately accommodates both academic and technical learning?
42. **Question 6:** To what extent do you feel the current system can accommodate all levels of learning from entry to level 8?

The challenges around SSAs and other classification systems in the sector (notably occupational routes and maps)

43. **Question 7:** Do you use any other education, sector, or occupational classification systems (e.g., Standard Occupational Classification, occupational routes, higher education classification of subjects) Please list them here and describe what you use them for.
44. **Question 8:** Do you use the SSA classification system alongside these other classification systems? If so, please describe how you do this and what you do it for.
45. **Question 9:** What are the barriers, if any, that prevent you from using the SSA classification system jointly with other classification systems?
46. **Question 10:** Are there any other areas of learning or levels of learning where you feel the current system is inappropriate or does not serve your needs? For instance, there are some SSAs which are not focussed on vocational or

occupational areas, but describe more preparatory learning or independent learning? How far do you feel these sit comfortably within a sector subject classification system?

47. **Question 11:** Do you feel that tier 2 SSAs provide a useful level of detail to the tier 1 SSAs?

a. If not, Which SSA tier 2 areas do you feel would benefit from revision or change and why?

48. **Question 12:** To what extent do you feel the current SSA classification system is able to identify qualifications related to the sectors and/or occupations you are interested in?

49. **Question 13:** Do you feel the current SSA classification system adequately takes account of new and emerging sectors and/or occupations?

a. If not, please describe which emerging sectors and occupations are not accounted for, and please describe how we could improve the system to better account for new and emerging sectors.

The possible areas for change in future

50. **Question 14:** To what extent do you feel we should keep the SSA classification system under review and if so, how often do you feel it should be updated?

51. **Question 15:** Please tell us of any other concerns you have regarding the structure or quality of the SSA classification system.

52. **Question 16:** How resource intensive would it be for your organisation to deal with any changes to the SSA classification system? Please give examples of any time, financial or other resource implications you have identified

Annex A – Call for Evidence: List of SSAs

There are 15 first tier Sector Subject Areas, broken down into 50 second tiers.

Code	SSA Code 1	SSA Description 1	SSA Code 2	SSA Description 2
Medicine	1	Health, Public Services and Care	1.1	Medicine and Dentistry
Nursing	1	Health, Public Services and Care	1.2	Nursing and subjects and vocations allied to medicine
Health	1	Health, Public Services and Care	1.3	Health and social care
PublicServices	1	Health, Public Services and Care	1.4	Public services
ChildDev	1	Health, Public Services and Care	1.5	Child development and well-being
Science	2	Science and Mathematics	2.1	Science
Maths	2	Science and Mathematics	2.2	Mathematics and statistics
Agriculture	3	Agriculture, Horticulture and Animal Care	3.1	Agriculture
Horticulture	3	Agriculture, Horticulture and Animal Care	3.2	Horticulture and forestry
AnimalCare	3	Agriculture, Horticulture and Animal Care	3.3	Animal care and veterinary science
Environmental	3	Agriculture, Horticulture and Animal Care	3.4	Environmental conservation
Engineering	4	Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies	4.1	Engineering
Manufacturing	4	Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies	4.2	Manufacturing technologies
Transport	4	Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies	4.3	Transportation operations and maintenance
Architecture	5	Construction, Planning and the Built Environment	5.1	Architecture
Building	5	Construction, Planning and the Built Environment	5.2	Building and construction
Urban	5	Construction, Planning and the Built Environment	5.3	Urban, rural and regional planning
IctPract	6	Information and Communication Technology	6.1	ICT practitioners
IctUsers	6	Information and Communication Technology	6.2	ICT for users
Retail	7	Retail and Commercial Enterprise	7.1	Retailing and wholesaling
Warehouse	7	Retail and Commercial Enterprise	7.2	Warehousing and distribution
ServiceEnt	7	Retail and Commercial Enterprise	7.3	Service enterprises
Hospitality	7	Retail and Commercial Enterprise	7.4	Hospitality and catering
Sport	8	Leisure, Travel and Tourism	8.1	Sport, leisure and recreation
Travel	8	Leisure, Travel and Tourism	8.2	Travel and tourism
PerfArts	9	Arts, Media and Publishing	9.1	Performing arts
Crafts	9	Arts, Media and Publishing	9.2	Crafts, creative arts and design
Media	9	Arts, Media and Publishing	9.3	Media and communication
Publishing	9	Arts, Media and Publishing	9.4	Publishing and information services
History	10	History, Philosophy and Theology	10.1	History
Archaeology	10	History, Philosophy and Theology	10.2	Archaeology and archaeological sciences
Philosophy	10	History, Philosophy and Theology	10.3	Philosophy
Theology	10	History, Philosophy and Theology	10.4	Theology and religious studies
Geography	11	Social Sciences	11.1	Geography
Sociology	11	Social Sciences	11.2	Sociology and social policy
Politics	11	Social Sciences	11.3	Politics
Economics	11	Social Sciences	11.4	Economics
Anthropology	11	Social Sciences	11.5	Anthropology
BritishLang	12	Languages, Literature and Culture	12.1	Languages, literature and culture of the British Isles
OtherLang	12	Languages, Literature and Culture	12.2	Other languages, literature and culture
Linguistics	12	Languages, Literature and Culture	12.3	Linguistics
Teaching	13	Education and Training	13.1	Teaching and lecturing
LearnSupport	13	Education and Training	13.2	Direct learning support
LearnFoundations	14	Preparation for Life and Work	14.1	Foundations for learning and life
WorkPrep	14	Preparation for Life and Work	14.2	Preparation for work
Accounting	15	Business, Administration and Law	15.1	Accounting and finance
Admin	15	Business, Administration and Law	15.2	Administration
Business	15	Business, Administration and Law	15.3	Business management
Marketing	15	Business, Administration and Law	15.4	Marketing and sales
Law	15	Business, Administration and Law	15.5	Law and legal services

Alternative flat text version of the above SSA descriptors can [be found here](#).



Department
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