

Introducing Professional skills into the Options exams – Tutor FAQs

Why are we making changes to the Options Exams?

We'll be introducing professional skills marks into ACCA's Strategic Professional Options exams, to better prepare students for the role of finance professionals, asking them to demonstrate the critical professional skills required of a professional accountant now and in the future. These changes to the Options exams build on the recent changes to the ACCA Qualification, such as the introduction of Strategic Business Leader (SBL) and the Ethics and Professional Skills module (EPSM).

Students, with a better understanding of the professional skills needed in the workplace, will be better prepared for a wide variety of roles, enhancing their employability, and ensuring the ACCA Qualification continues to be relevant and meets the needs of the profession.

What are the specific changes?

The Options exams, Advanced Audit and Assurance, Advanced Financial Management, Advanced Performance Management and Advanced Taxation*, will all have 20 marks awarded for professional skills demonstrated throughout the exams.

These changes will be incorporated from September 2022 for all Options exams except Advanced Taxation which will incorporate the changes from June 2023 (due to differing examining years*).

The professional skills being assessed are based on those currently assessed in Strategic Business Leader but have been tailored to reflect the specialist technical content being assessed in the Options exams. The key professional skills being assessed were all identified as critical through the research undertaken for the Career Navigator, and are:

- Communication
- Commercial acumen
- Analysis and evaluation
- Scepticism (and judgement*)

You can find out how we define each of these professional skills and how they will be assessed, by visiting the exams pages on our [website](#).

* for AAA only

When will the Options exams change?

These changes will be incorporated from September 2022 in the following exams:

- [Advanced Audit and Assurance \(AAA\)](#)
- [Advanced Financial Management \(AFM\)](#)
- [Advanced Performance Management \(APM\)](#)

And from June 2023 in the following exam:

- Advanced Taxation (ATX)*

*Changes to ATX-MYS variant will come into effect from the December 2023 exam session.

If a student fails one of the Options exams in June 2022, will they have to sit the new format?

If a student is sitting any of the Options exams after the introductory date (see above for specific dates) then they will sit the exam in the new format, with professional skills marks. The technical content will remain the same (with applicable syllabus updates) but they should pay attention to how they present their technical knowledge and refer to the support available.

Will there be specific guidance on amending existing questions, for example an indication of which topics can be cut from the answers, in order to accommodate the professional marks?

A specimen exam and two further practice exams for each exam have been published on the [Education Hub](#) to provide guidance on the new exam format. These aim to demonstrate how the professional skills will be tested, illustrate exam length, and give examples of the requirements.

AFM – There is no specific further guidance however, you may wish to consider including questions in your material that have a balance between calculation and discussion elements. You may choose to retire questions that do not lend themselves to the professional skills marks, e.g. discussing exchange traded derivatives over the counter derivatives.

ATX – The ATX exam will be changing format moving from 4 questions to 3 questions from June 2023 (December 2023 for ATX MYS). Section B questions, which comprised of 20 marks, will go up to 25 marks. So, adapting these will not be too difficult. 5 additional professional skills marks must be included, whilst the technical marks will remain at 20 marks. Section A questions will require more work as there will only be one question in this section.

AAA – We recommend consulting the specimen exam and 2 published practice exams for guidance. These can be found via the [Education Hub](#). In writing these exams, we've considered if the balance of the question still works as a whole. We've kept the proportion of marks the same therefore, but the headroom for technical marks has been reduced.

APM – For APM, you should consider whether you can remove a requirement or amend existing requirements so that the number of marks attached to them can be reduced to allow for the professional skills. What is important is that the changes made still give sufficient scope for a student to achieve a passing answer.

In SBL, a specific professional skill is tested in each task, whereas in the Options exams, all of the professional skills are included in every question. Why is there this difference in approach?

The Options exams are technical integrated and specialist examinations in very specific areas of accounting.

We would like to give students as much opportunity as possible to demonstrate their professional skills when they are doing the things that we ask them to do in the Options

exams, e.g. evaluating proposals, offering advice, providing recommendations, or challenging decisions. They can demonstrate their professional skills whilst completing these activities, and that's why we have chosen to award professional skills marks at a question level as a whole, rather than at the task level, to give us flexibility when it comes to awarding credit for the answers produced. When considering the professional skills, sometimes they're not always entirely distinct skills, e.g. a student could demonstrate scepticism as part of an evaluation of a proposal. They might challenge the appropriateness of the proposal, questioning why it is suitable for the company, which also demonstrates an element of business acumen. We want to make sure we can give credit where possible which is why this holistic approach is being adopted.

In viewing the new exam format, the approach could be seen as a formalisation of what examiners have been asking students to do in the past. Could the questions and model answers from previous exams still be used, with a cut to the requirements? Can tutors continue to use past questions for student practice but apply the filter of the professional skills in teaching/debriefing/marking – i.e. the past model answers already exhibit all the professional skills?

Students who perform well and answer the question appropriately will earn professional skills marks as they earn the technical marks. With review and alteration, past exams can be used to teach towards exams taking place in September 2022 and beyond. We recommend consulting the specimen exam, 2 published sample exams, and content from [Approved Content Providers](#) to support your teaching.

Are the implications more/less significant for any specific exams? And is there anything that tutors teaching different exams need to watch out for – e.g. APM tutors who also teach SBL need to be careful because it's not the same approach in the two exams...?

For those that teach both APM and SBL, though these exams use some of the same models and theories, they take entirely different approaches. These are detailed in the examiner's approach articles available on the [ACCA website](#). APM requires students to think as a management accountant, so analysis and evaluation and commercial acumen skills particularly are very important. It is vital to have the technical knowledge and be able to apply it to the business scenarios in APM in order to be successful in this exam, however this is one thing that unfortunately students are not equipped with. Without the technical knowledge and ability to apply it, it is going to be very challenging to earn those professional skills marks.

Will a single point be able to earn both technical and professional skills marks? e.g. if a student commented that a calculation's accuracy depending on underlying assumptions, could this illustrate both a technical understanding and professional scepticism?

For AFM, if a student were discussing that the accuracy of a figure depended on particular assumptions, this may earn a technical mark. If they went on to discuss that that assumption might not hold or the kind of implication that the assumption has may affect x, then this is where they're demonstrating your professional skills.

For AAA, there's more than likely to be an overlap with earning those professional skills marks as a student is earning the technical marks. For example, if they're recognising that a

risk relates to impairment of some assets and go on to explain why this is the case relating it to the scenario, they're not only demonstrating knowledge, but applying that knowledge using their professional judgement.

What depth of answer will be expected to earn professional skills marks? e.g. if 5 marks were available for professional scepticism, would 2 – 3 good points be enough to earn those marks?

Illustrative student answers to the specimen exams have been provided as a guide for tutors to show how professional skills marks will be awarded and what is required to earn them. These can be found on the [Education Hub](#).

Will the marking guides separate the professional skills marks into the four awarding categories - communication, scepticism, analysis & evaluation and commercial acumen?

The marking guides will be produced to the same level of detail as with what has been provided for the specimen exam. The marking guide will state what the key points are under each of the professional skills and allow students to be awarded professional skills marks by demonstrating those skills in a variety of ways.

As the professional skills are examined as a separate requirement, would you usually be expected to refer to the technical elements of their answer to gain professional skills marks?

Professional skills marks are earned as students earn the technical marks. By preparing an answer to the requirements, there is opportunity to demonstrate professional skills (in communication, analysis and evaluation, commercial acumen, and scepticism (and judgement for AAA)).