

Syllabus and study guide

Strategic Business Leader (S2)

September 2027 to June 2028

Designed to help with planning study and to provide detailed information on what could be assessed in any examination session.

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1. Overall aim of the syllabus

The overall aim of the syllabus is to enable the integrated application of the technical skills, advisory capabilities and professional judgement required of effective and ethical leaders in directing organisations, developing strategy and leading change.

2. Introduction to the syllabus

The syllabus for Strategic Business Leader (S2), starts by introducing candidates to organisational leadership, organisational culture and the need for responsible and ethical conduct.

The syllabus then addresses the existence of an effective governance structure, which is linked very closely to effective leadership, focusing on the need for the respective roles and responsibilities of directors, the relevant committee structures and the effective scrutiny of the performance of senior management, demonstrating their accountability. The syllabus also considers governance in not-for-profit and public sector organisations.

Once the fundamental organisational leadership and governance structures are in place the syllabus moves on to determining organisations' strategies, evaluating strategic options and implementing strategies. Evaluating strategic options, making strategic choices and implementing strategy requires the organisation's leaders to fully understand the risks involved and so the syllabus then focuses on identifying, measuring, managing, monitoring and mitigating risks.

To support today's business environment the syllabus considers the use of technology and data to support both strategy and operations, including the use of big data, machine learning, ebusiness, cloud computing and smart technology. The syllabus also addresses the controls around and the security of technology and data.

Management of risk in the syllabus is further addressed in coverage of organisational control in its wider context, including internal audit, internal control, and appropriate reporting to implement and support effective leadership and governance.

To provide the organisation's leadership with appropriate financial information the next section of the syllabus begins by looking at transformation of the finance function itself. It then moves on to financial analysis and decision making, and cost and management accounting techniques.

The syllabus then focuses on enabling successful strategies and change management through organising for success, talent management, performance excellence and management of change.

The final section of the syllabus considers project management from planning to monitoring.

The professional skills section of the syllabus focuses on the range of professional skills candidates should be expected to demonstrate in the examination.

3. Main capabilities

On successful completion of this course of study, candidates should be able to:

- Advise on the qualities, professional values and responsibilities of strong, effective and ethical leadership and how this contributes to organisational culture and the public interest
- Advise on the governance structures of organisations to meet regulatory requirements and provide transparency and accountability to stakeholders
- Advise on the stages of developing strategy from strategic planning to evaluating strategic options, making strategic choices and implementing strategy
- Apply risk management frameworks to identify, assess and control risk as a key aspect of responsible, sustainable leadership and management
- Recommend how leadership should respond to outcomes from the review of internal control systems and reports from auditors
- Evaluate the strategic value of technology and data and the importance of its governance and security
- Advise on key strategic matters relating to finance, performance analysis and decision-making
- Recommend how an organisation can enable success through effective change management, talent management and project management
- Advise on sustainability as an integral part of responsible organisational management and how it needs to be included in governance, strategy, risk, technology and decision making

4. Intellectual levels

The ACCA Qualification syllabus is designed to progressively broaden and deepen the technical knowledge, skills and professional values demonstrated by the candidate on their journey through the qualification.

The specific learning outcomes within the detailed syllabuses and study guides are assessed at one of three intellectual or cognitive levels:

Level 1:	Knowledge and comprehension
Level 2:	Application and analysis
Level 3:	Synthesis and evaluation

Very broadly these intellectual levels relate to the three levels of the ACCA Qualification: Knowledge, Expertise and Strategic Professional.

Each learning outcome included in the detailed study guide is given a 1, 2 or 3 superscript, denoting its intellectual level. This gives an indication of the intellectual depth at which a learning outcome could be assessed within the examination. However, while Level 1 broadly equates with the Knowledge level, Level 2 to the Expertise level and Level 3 to the Strategic Professional level of the ACCA Qualification, some lower-level skills can continue to be assessed as the candidate progresses through each level. This reflects that at each stage of study there will be the requirement to broaden, as well as deepen, capabilities.

5. The syllabus

A Leadership, culture and ethics

1. Leadership
2. Culture
3. Ethics and the public interest

B Governance

1. Approaches to governance
2. Stakeholder management
3. Public sector governance

C Strategy

1. Strategic planning
2. External influences
3. Competitive forces
4. Resources, capabilities and competencies
5. Strategic change

D Risk

1. Identification, assessment and measurement
2. Management, monitoring and mitigation

E Technology and data

1. Strategic use of technology and data
2. Control and security of technology and data

F Organisational control and audit

1. Internal control systems
2. Audit, compliance and management reporting

G Finance in planning and decision making

1. Finance transformation
2. Financial analysis and decision-making techniques
3. Cost and management accounting

H Enabling organisational success and managing change

1. Enabling success: organising
2. Enabling success: talent management
3. Enabling success: performance excellence
4. Managing change

I Project management

1. Project planning
2. Project monitoring

J Professional skills

1. Communication
2. Analysis and evaluation
3. Scepticism
4. Commercial acumen

6. Detailed study guide

A Leadership, culture and ethics

1. Leadership

- a) Assess the role of a leader and the key leadership traits needed for effective strategy formulation, implementation and change management within an organisation.^[3]
- b) Advise on an appropriate style of leadership to manage a strategic change within an organisation.^[3]
- c) Evaluate the skills and qualities required of entrepreneurs and intrapreneurs to exploit strategic opportunities and innovate successfully.^[3]

2. Culture

- a) Assess the culture of an organisation and recommend suitable changes, using Johnson and Scholes Cultural Web.^[3]
- b) Assess the impact of culture on an organisation's purpose and strategy.^[3]
- c) Assess the role and responsibilities of leaders in defining and managing an organisation's culture.^[3]

3. Ethics and the public interest

- a) Assess the need for responsible, sustainable leadership and the creation of public value by acting in the public interest.^[3]
- b) Evaluate management behaviour against the codes of ethics relevant to accounting professionals, including the International Ethics Standards Board for Accountants (IESBA) code and professional body codes.^[3]
- c) Assess the nature and impact of ethical threats and recommend safeguards to prevent or mitigate such threats.^[3]

- d) Recommend ways to reduce and combat fraud, bribery and corruption to increase public confidence and trust in an organisation.^[3]

B Governance

1. Approaches to governance

- a) Apply the general principles of the International Corporate Governance Network's (ICGN) Global Governance Principles to an organisation's corporate governance.^[2]
- b) Evaluate the rules-based versus principles-based approaches to governance and advise when each may be appropriate.^[3]
- c) Advise on the influence that the model of organisational ownership will have on governance (family company, unlisted company, public limited company, joint venture, franchise).^[3]
- d) Evaluate the importance of appropriate governance for sustainable business strategy and operations.^[3]
- e) Advise on the appropriate board structure for effective governance of the organisation.^[3]
- f) Advise on matters relating to the board of directors, including:^[3]
 - (i) the roles and responsibilities of executive directors and non-executive directors (NEDs)
 - (ii) board diversity
 - (iii) board committees
 - (iv) remuneration
 - (v) induction and appraisal
 - (vi) continuing professional development
 - (vii) transparent reporting, including on sustainability matters using the integrated reporting (IR) approach

- g) Assess the role and influence of institutional investors in the governance systems and structures of an organisation.^[3]

2. Stakeholder management

- a) Evaluate stakeholders' roles and claims in relation to an organisation's strategy and operations.^[3]
- b) Evaluate stakeholder power and interest using the Mendelow model and recommend how any conflicts may be resolved.^[3]
- c) Advise on an organisation's policies on reporting to stakeholders, after considering their power and interest.^[3]

3. Public sector governance

- a) Assess the strategic objectives, leadership and governance arrangements which are specific to public sector organisations, charities, and NGOs and quasi-NGOs.^[2]
- b) Assess democratic control, political influence and policy implementation in public sector organisations.^[2]
- c) Advise on the obligations of public sector organisations to meet the economy, efficiency and effectiveness (3Es) criteria and promote public value.^[3]

C Strategy

1. Strategic planning

- a) Apply the elements of Johnson, Scholes et al model of strategic management – strategic analysis, strategic choices and strategic implementation – to an organisation.^[3]
- b) Assess the fundamental importance of strategy and strategic decisions within different organisational contexts.^[2]

- c) Advise on sustainability matters to be considered within the strategic planning and decision-making processes.^[3]

2. External influences

- a) Assess the macro-environment of an organisation using PESTEL.^[3]
- b) Evaluate the external key drivers of change likely to affect the structure of a sector or market.^[3]
- c) Apply Porter's Diamond to explore the influence of national competitiveness on the strategic position of an organisation and advise on how an organisation should respond.^[3]
- d) Evaluate scenarios reflecting different assumptions about the future external environment of an organisation.^[3]
- e) Assess the implications for strategic drift on organisational performance against expectations.^[3]

3. Competitive forces

- a) Evaluate the opportunities and threats posed by the competitive environment of an organisation using Porter's Five Forces framework.^[3]
- b) Advise on the usefulness of market and customer segmentation for an organisation's strategy.^[2]
- c) Apply Porter's Value Chain to advise an organisation on the value adding activities which create and sustain competitive advantage.^[3]
- d) Advise on the role and influence of value networks for an organisation's strategy.^[3]

4. Resources, capabilities and competencies

- a) Evaluate an organisation's strategic capability, its threshold resources, threshold competencies, unique resources and core competencies.^[3]

- b) Advise an organisation on the capabilities it requires to create and sustain competitive advantage.^[3]
 - c) Assess the contribution of organisational knowledge to the strategic capability of an organisation.^[2]
 - d) Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of an organisation using a SWOT analysis.^[3]
 - e) Evaluate the resources and relationships to be considered to meet strategic goals for sustainability.^[3]
- a) Assess the dynamic nature of risk and the ways in which risk varies in relation to the size, structure, industry, sector and stage of development of an organisation.^[2]
 - b) Assess attitudes towards risk and risk appetite and how this can affect risk policy.^[2]
 - c) Assess the relationship between organisational strategy and risk management strategy.^[3]
 - d) Evaluate the Enterprise Risk Management (ERM) approach to risk management and for establishing risk management systems.^[3]

5. Strategic change

- a) Evaluate the different strategic options available to an organisation and recommend the appropriate course of action.^[3]
 - b) Assess the opportunities and potential problems of pursuing different strategies of product/market diversification for an organisation.^[3]
 - c) Advise on how the 7 Ps, price-based strategies, differentiation and lock-in can help an organisation sustain its competitive advantage.^[3]
 - d) Apply the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) and public sector portfolio matrix models to advise an organisation on how to manage its portfolio.^[3]
 - e) Recommend appropriate development directions using the Ansoff growth vector matrix.^[3]
 - f) Advise on how internal development, business combinations, strategic alliances and partnering can be used to achieve business growth.^[3]
- e) Evaluate key risks, including environmental and climate related risks, and their impact on an organisation and its projects.^[3]
 - f) Assess the severity and probability of risk events.^[3]

2. Management, monitoring and mitigation

- a) Evaluate the importance of embedding risk management in an organisation's culture and values.^[3]
- b) Assess the role and responsibilities of a risk manager.^[3]
- c) Evaluate an organisation's risk register.^[3]
- d) Analyse how an organisation can spread and diversify risk and recommend when this would be appropriate.^[3]
- e) Advise on risk management strategies using the TARA model.^[3]
- f) Assess the benefits of incurring or accepting some risk as part of competitively managing an organisation referring to the 'as low as reasonably practicable' (ALARP) principle.^[3]

D Risk

1. Identification, assessment and measurement

- g) Apply the concept of assurance mapping to modern risk management using the ‘four lines of defence’.^[3]

E Technology and data

1. Strategic use of technology and data

- a) Advise how information technology and data can be used to inform an organisation’s strategic planning.^[3]
- b) Assess the data required for strategic decisions on development of new products, marketing and pricing.^[3]
- c) Advise on whether an organisation has gaps in the technology and data it requires and recommend solutions.^[3]
- d) Evaluate the opportunities and risks of adopting new technologies for an organisation, including smart technology, cloud computing, artificial intelligence, robotics and machine learning.^[3]
- e) Evaluate the opportunities and risks for an organisation of using big data and data analytics.^[3]
- f) Advise on the application of information technology in supporting e-business in areas such as acquiring and managing suppliers and customers.^[3]
- g) Evaluate an e-marketing strategy using the 6 Is of interactivity, intelligence, individualisation, integration, industry structure and independence of location.^[3]
- h) Assess the importance of online branding in e-marketing compared to traditional branding.^[2]
- i) Evaluate the need for appropriate systems and tools to capture data required for sustainability related activities.^[3]

2. Control and security of technology and data

- a) Evaluate the adequacy of information technology, data and systems policies for an organisation and recommend improvements.^[3]

- b) Evaluate the adequacy of information technology, data and systems security controls for an organisation and recommend improvements.^[3]

F Organisational control and audit

1. Internal control systems

- a) Assess the key features of effective internal control systems such as those included in the Committee of Sponsoring Organisations (COSO) framework.^[2]
- b) Assess whether information flows to management are adequate for the purpose of managing internal control and risk.^[3]
- c) Evaluate the effectiveness of an organisation’s internal control systems.^[3]
- d) Advise on the consequences to an organisation of poor control and regulatory non-compliance.^[3]
- e) Recommend new internal control systems or changes to the components of existing systems to help prevent issues such as fraud, error, waste or harmful environmental impacts.^[3]

2. Audit, compliance and management reporting

- a) Assess the need for an internal audit function in the light of regulatory and organisational requirements.^[3]
- b) Advise on the typical contents of a report on internal control and internal audit, including environmental and sustainability audits.^[3]
- c) Assess the appropriateness of an organisation’s responses to auditor’s recommendations.^[3]

G Finance in planning and decision making

1. Finance transformation

- a) Evaluate alternative structures for the finance function, such as business partnering, outsourcing and shared or global business services.^[3]

2. Financial analysis and decision-making techniques

- a) Evaluate alternative sources of short and long-term finance available to an organisation to support its strategy and operations.^[3]
- b) Recommend whether investments should be selected or abandoned following the application of investment appraisal techniques.^[3]
- c) Evaluate strategic and operational decisions taking into account risk and uncertainty and recommend appropriate courses of action.^[3]
- d) Assess the broad financial reporting and tax implications of taking alternative strategic or investment decisions.^[2]
- e) Assess organisational performance and position using financial and non-financial key performance indicators (KPIs).^[3]
- f) Assess the development of a sustainable business model by reviewing existing strategy and operations and recommend actions.^[3]

3. Cost and management accounting

- a) Evaluate, from a strategic perspective, the continuing need for effective cost management and control systems within an organisation.^[3]
- b) Assess forecasting, budgeting, standard costing and variance analysis methods used to support strategic planning and decision making for an organisation.^[3]

H Enabling organisational success and managing change

1. Enabling success: organising

- a) Advise on how organisational structure and internal relationships should be re-organised to deliver a selected strategy.^[3]
- b) Advise on the implications for an organisation of collaborative working and partnering, including franchising, joint ventures, process outsourcing, shared services, global business services and the platform economy.^[3]

2. Enabling success: talent management

- a) Advise how talent management can contribute to supporting an organisation's strategy.^[3]
- b) Evaluate opportunities for organisational improvement using the four view POPIT (people, organisation, processes and information technology) model.^[3]

3. Enabling success: performance excellence

- a) Advise on how an organisation can achieve and maintain business performance excellence using the Baldrige approach.^[3]
- b) Advise on how an organisation can be supported to reach its strategic goals, improve its results and be more competitive by focusing on its critical success factors.^[3]

4. Managing change

- a) Assess the effectiveness of current organisational processes to determine if change is required.^[2]
- b) Recommend an appropriate scope and focus for organisational process change using Harmon's process-strategy mix.^[3]

- c) Evaluate possible redesign options for improving the current processes of an organisation.^[3]
- d) Recommend how to manage change in the organisation using Lewin’s three stage model.^[3]
- e) Assess implications of change in an organisation using Balogun and Hope Hailey’s contextual features.^[3]

I Project management

1. Project planning

- a) Advise on the distinguishing features of projects and the constraints they operate in.^[2]
- b) Assess the implications of the triple constraints of scope, time and cost on projects.^[3]
- c) Assess the importance of developing a project plan and its key elements.^[3]
- d) Evaluate the costs and benefits of a project.^[3]
- e) Advise on the importance of preparing a business case document and project initiation document.^[3]
- f) Assess the contents of a business case document and/or project initiation document and recommend improvements.^[3]
- g) Assess the roles and responsibilities of the project manager and project sponsor.^[3]

2. Project monitoring

- a) Advise on the monitoring and control of project risks and slippages and recommend improvements.^[2]
- b) Advise on the benefits of a post-implementation review.^[3]

- c) Advise on the benefits of a post-project review.^[3]

J Professional skills

1. Communication

- a) Inform concisely, objectively and unambiguously, adopting a suitable style and format, and using appropriate technology.^[3]
- b) Advise using compelling and logical arguments, demonstrating the ability to counter argue where appropriate.^[3]

- c) Clarify and simplify complex issues to convey relevant information in a way which adopts an appropriate tone and is easily understood by and reflects the requirements of the intended audience.^[3]

2. Analysis and evaluation

- a) Investigate relevant information from a range of sources, using appropriate analytical techniques, to establish reasons and causes of issues, to assist in decision making and to identify opportunities or solutions.^[3]
- b) Consider information, evidence and findings in a careful and structured way, reflecting on their implications and how they can be used in the interests of the individual business function, division and the wider organisational goals.^[3]
- c) Assess and apply appropriate judgement when considering organisational issues and problems, taking into account the implications of such decisions on the organisation and those affected.^[3]
- d) Appraise information objectively and logically with a view to balancing the costs, risks, benefits and opportunities before making decisions and recommending solutions.^[3]

3. Scepticism

- a) Explore the underlying reasons for issues and problems, applying the attitude of a questioning mind, beyond what is immediately apparent.^[3]
- b) Question opinions, assertions and assumptions by seeking justifications and obtaining sufficient evidence for either their support and acceptance, or rejection.^[3]
- c) Challenge and critically assess the information presented or decisions made in a professional and courteous manner, where this is clearly justified to be in the wider professional, ethical, organisational or public interest.^[3]

4. Commercial acumen

- a) Demonstrate awareness of organisational and wider external factors affecting the work of an individual or team in contributing to the wider organisational objectives.^[3]
- b) Recognise key issues in determining how to address or resolve problems and use judgement in proposing and recommending commercially viable solutions.^[3]
- c) Show insight and perception in understanding work-related and organisational issues, including the management of conflict, demonstrating acumen in arriving at appropriate solutions or outcomes.^[3]

7. Approach to examining the syllabus

The Strategic Business Leader (S2) examination builds upon the technical knowledge and skills developed at the previous levels of the ACCA Qualification. At the Strategic Professional level, candidates will be expected to demonstrate an integrated approach to the subject combined with professional skills to evaluate the strategy, governance, risk management and decisions adopted by organisations to enable organisational success. The study guide specifies the wide range of contextual application which is required to achieve a satisfactory standard at this level.

The syllabus is examined using a 100% integrated case study, examining across a breadth of organisational functions. Each examination assesses both the technical capabilities and professional skills which potential leaders need to demonstrate in senior positions within organisations.

The syllabus is assessed by a three-hour 15-minute computer-based examination.

The examination will provide information (pre-seen information) that is released two weeks before the examination sitting which contains background and contextual information on the fictitious organisation which the exam will be based on and the industry in which it operates. Candidates are expected to familiarise themselves with the pre-seen information in advance of the exam, making sure that they understand the terms and concepts that are included within the pre-seen. Candidates are not expected to conduct further research into the industry that is covered in the pre-seen.

The examination itself will contain further information relating to the fictitious organisation in the pre-seen. The information could be from a range of sources, such as extracts from meetings, board reports and spreadsheets.

Each examination will contain three tasks with a varying number of marks. These tasks require the candidate to assume a specified role and sometimes may require them to take on different roles, depending on the task. The number of marks allocated to all these tasks will total 100 marks.

Each examination will comprise 80 technical marks and 20 professional skills marks. Tasks may contain professional skills marks for one or more of the skills required as appropriate to the task.

8. Guide to ACCA examination structure and delivery mode

The structure of examinations varies, depending on the level of the qualification.

The Strategic Professional level is comprised of Essentials and Options examinations. The Strategic Professional examinations contain 100% compulsory questions to encourage candidates to study across the breadth of each syllabus.

The Essential examinations are S1 Business and Sustainability Reporting and S2 Strategic Business Leader.

The S1 Business and Sustainability Reporting examination contains two sections and is comprised of 80 technical marks and 20 professional ethics and professional skills marks.

S2 Strategic Business Leader is ACCA's case study examination and includes pre-seen information which is released to candidates two weeks prior to the examination sitting. The pre-seen information contains background and contextual details in order for candidates to familiarise themselves with the fictitious organisation which they will be examined on and the industry in which it operates. This examination contains 80 technical marks and 20 professional skills marks.

All Options examinations have two sections and contain a total of 80 technical marks and 20 professional skills marks.

All Strategic Professional examinations are assessed by three-hour 15-minute computer-based examinations. ACCA will provide permitted reference materials for candidates to use during the examinations.

The pass mark for all Strategic Professional examinations is 50%.

9. Guide to ACCA examination assessment

ACCA reserves the right to examine anything contained within the study guide at any examination session. This includes knowledge, techniques, principles, theories, and concepts as specified.

For specified financial accounting, audit and tax examinations, except if indicated otherwise, ACCA will publish examinable documents once a year to indicate exactly what regulations and legislation could potentially be assessed within identified examination sessions. Regulation issued, or legislation passed on or before 31 August annually, will be assessed from 1 September of the following year to 31 August of the year after. Please refer to the examinable documents for the examination (where relevant) for further information.

Regulations issued or legislation passed in accordance with the above dates may be examinable if the effective date is in the future, unless explicitly stated otherwise in the syllabus and study guide or examinable documents. The terms 'issued' or 'passed' relate to when regulation or legislation has been formally approved.

The term 'effective' relates to when regulation or legislation must be applied to entity transactions and business practices.

The study guide offers more detailed guidance on the depth and level at which the examinable documents will be examined. The study guide should therefore be read in conjunction with the examinable documents list, where applicable.

10. Learning hours and education recognition

The ACCA Qualification does not prescribe or recommend any particular number of learning hours for examinations because study and learning patterns and styles vary greatly between people and organisations. This also recognises the wide diversity of personal, professional and educational circumstances in which ACCA candidates find themselves.

As a member of the International Federation of Accountants, ACCA seeks to enhance the education recognition of its qualification on both national and international education frameworks, and with educational authorities and partners globally. In doing so, ACCA aims to ensure that its qualifications are recognised and valued by governments and regulatory authorities and employers across all sectors. To this end, ACCA qualifications are currently recognised on the educational frameworks in several countries. Please refer to your national education framework regulator for further information about recognition.