

Ensuring the successful delivery of national examinations

Dealing with disruption and delivering new and revised qualifications

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Introduction

The scale of the examinations and qualifications system in England, Wales and Northern Ireland is huge, involving more than a million learners each year. It includes thousands of vocational qualifications which vary considerably in the type and timing of assessment, with many qualifications delivered to learners on-demand all year round. The focus of this report is the successful delivery of GCSE, GCE, principal learning and project qualifications which are delivered on a national basis within specific assessment windows. This requires each awarding organisation to coordinate significant resources to deliver assessments, complete marking and report results according to common timescales.

GCSE and GCE A level qualifications are offered by five awarding organisations in England, Wales and Northern Ireland: AQA, CCEA, Edexcel, OCR and WJEC.

The principal learning and project qualifications that can be combined to produce candidates' grades for the overall Diploma qualification will be awarded in England by AQA-City and Guilds, Edexcel, OCR and VTCT in summer 2010. WJEC-Edexcel in partnership offer principal learning in Wales, which is available as part of the Welsh baccalaureate qualification. WJEC also offer the project qualification to candidates in Wales and England.

Each summer examinations period requires these GCSE, GCE, principal learning and project awarding organisations to:

- process nearly 8 million student entries for examinations
- employ and train some 50,000 examiners
- mark more than 16 million examination papers
- deal with approximately 150,000 queries from schools, colleges and students.

For a system of this size to be successfully delivered it is vital that there is ongoing planning for successful end-to-end delivery of examinations and awards so that high-quality assessments and accurate results are delivered to learners on time.

This report on the delivery of GCSE, GCE, principal learning and project examinations is produced by the qualifications regulators in England (Ofqual), Wales (DCELLS) and Northern Ireland (CCEA). It aims to highlight the challenges for awarding organisations in delivering examinations and assessments, and to explain the role of the regulators in checking that candidates are treated fairly and the integrity of the assessments and qualifications maintained. It explains that there are common business as usual processes to deal with disruption to the delivery of examinations and a joint contingency plan to deal with any large scale disruption. It

also recognises that when there is disruption, such as the heavy snowfall in January 2010, the efforts of candidates and centre staff are vital in ensuring that examinations can take place as planned.

In addition, it is currently a period of significant change in 14–19 qualifications and this report also explains the work undertaken by the regulators and awarding organisations for the successful delivery of examinations and qualifications in summer 2010.

Ensuring that each examination series is successfully delivered

Ofqual, DCELLS and CCEA regulate the awarding organisations that offer these qualifications to monitor the successful delivery of assessments and examinations. The regulators also publish regulatory requirements, such as codes of practice, which state the minimum quality assurance checks required of awarding organisations for the marks and grades awarded to candidates.

The *GCSE, GCE, principal learning and project code of practice* aims to promote quality, consistency, accuracy and fairness in the assessment and awarding of these qualifications. The code of practice helps maintain standards, both within and between awarding organisations and from year to year. It lays down agreed principles, processes and practices for each awarding organisation that develops and delivers these qualifications.

Each awarding organisation is responsible for the successful delivery of its qualifications. The end-to-end delivery of each examination series involves several stages, from a centre entering a candidate for an assessment to the delivery of the result and resolution of any post-results enquiries. This includes:

- receiving and processing examination entries
- identifying necessary marking capacity
- recruiting and training examiners and moderators
- delivery of question papers and tasks, and collection of completed assessments
- completion of marking and processing of marks
- the awarding of grades and delivery of results
- the completion of post-results services, including any enquiries about results

In a changing qualifications landscape, in which the number of candidates taking particular qualifications and subjects fluctuates from one year to the next, each awarding organisation needs to ensure it has sufficient capacity in place for successful delivery. The unitised structure of many qualifications also means that centres now have more choice regarding when to enter candidates for the examinations for each unit. It is essential that each awarding organisation has plans and procedures in place to deal with any unexpected changes in the number of candidates entered for particular qualifications and to be prepared to deliver revised and new qualifications.

The qualifications regulators meet with the awarding organisations regularly to confirm progress towards the successful delivery of each examination series. Each awarding organisation is required to submit data showing its progress in delivering examinations and results, and to inform the regulator if it perceives any threat to the successful delivery of examinations and results. In the event of any problems, the regulators check that the quality assurance of marking and awarding of grades is maintained and that no candidate is unfairly disadvantaged.

Awarding organisations must also have plans in place to deal with any incidents that may threaten the integrity of examinations or results. The distribution of thousands of question papers to hundreds of schools and colleges in advance of examination dates means that there is the potential, through error or intentional malpractice, for the security of confidential examination materials to be breached in advance of an examination. Such occurrences are rare but, when they do occur, the awarding organisation involved is required to liaise with the regulators and agree a course of action that maintains the integrity of all examinations. On rare occasions, this could result in an awarding organisation replacing an examination paper at short notice with an alternative paper for all the centres and candidates taking that examination.

The summer examinations involve the transport of millions of question papers and candidate scripts to and from schools and colleges, and then to markers and the awarding organisations. Despite the processes and checks that are in place to ensure safe delivery and receipt, there is the possibility that a small number of candidates' assessments will go missing. In addition, incidents such as fire or flooding at a centre can result in completed candidate work being destroyed before it is marked. On the rare occasions that scripts are lost, the awarding organisations do all they can to ensure they are recovered, marked and the results delivered. Where scripts cannot be recovered, awarding organisations are required to ensure that all candidates are treated fairly. Where candidates meet the relevant criteria, awarding organisations will apply 'special consideration' to candidates affected by incidents beyond their control; this may include generating an examination result using evidence of candidates' likely achievement based on factors such as their performance on other assessments in the same subject. Alternatively, candidates will be offered the chance to take an examination again during a later examination series where this is possible. This ensures that, in the rare event that a candidate has taken an examination but a result based on the completed script cannot be delivered, there are processes in place so that a result is delivered when expected.

Focus on the delivery of the summer 2010 examinations

In Ofqual's 2009 public report, *On your marks*, it was highlighted that it was the start of a period of significant change in 14–19 qualifications. The report gave details of how the regulators would monitor the awarding organisations' recruitment and training of the examiners and moderators required to accurately mark the new principal learning and project qualifications, and revised A level specifications. The June 2010 examination series represents the final stage of the end-to-end assessment process of the new A level, principal learning and project qualifications for those candidates who began these two-year courses when they were first introduced in September 2008.

The awarding organisations and qualifications regulators have undertaken considerable work so that appropriate standards are set in these new and revised qualifications. Some of this work was set out in Ofqual's November 2009 report, *Reaching the finishing line*. Since then the regulators have continued to work with awarding organisations to set appropriate standards in summer 2010 and will monitor closely the outcomes of the summer 2010 awards for GCE A level, including the new A* grade, phase 1 principal learning qualifications and GCSE science. Ofqual has also been working with awarding organisations to ensure appropriate standards are set in the phase 2 principal learning qualifications, some of which will be awarded for the first time in summer 2010.

Following the delivery of results, the post-results services offered by awarding organisations represent the final stage of each examination series. The regulatory requirements for this process are detailed in section 9 of the *GCSE, GCE, principal learning and project code of practice*. The 'enquiries about results' services provide an opportunity for centres that have concerns about the accuracy of specific candidate results to request that awarding organisations perform a clerical check, review of marking or re-moderation of the candidate's work. The code sets specific deadlines for awarding organisations to complete each of these post-results services.

The first award of new A levels (including the A* grade), the first units of new GCSE specifications and many candidates completing principal learning and project qualifications for the first time creates the potential for a significant increase in the number of enquiries about results submitted to awarding organisations following the publication of results. The regulators also recognise that the outcome of enquiries after the publication of level 3 GCE A level and principal learning results on 19 August could make a difference in decisions as to whether a candidate meets his or her university entrance requirements. Where a candidate's place in higher education is dependent upon the outcome of a review of marking, this service is available on a priority basis. Awarding organisations are required to notify centres of the outcome

within 18 calendar days of receiving the enquiry, although most priority enquiries are completed well within that deadline.

Over the last few years awarding organisations have successfully completed at least 99.9 per cent of the enquiries received within the deadlines set out in paragraph 9.5 of the code of practice. The regulators have therefore sought assurance that awarding organisations have adequate plans in place to continue this level of performance should there be an increase in enquiries about results this summer. Each awarding organisation has given us an assurance it has the processes and resources in place to deliver the enquiries about results services this summer and that, as in previous years, enquiries about results will be completed and the outcomes reported to centres within the required deadlines. Preparations include the ability to assign extra examiners, processing staff and customer service staff as required, utilising technology to improve efficiency, and using information management systems to provide accurate and timely data on the number of enquiries received and completed. One awarding organisation has gone further and shared more details of its contingency planning giving us some insight into its capacity monitoring.

As part of our monitoring of the delivery of each examination series, the regulators monitor the number of enquiries received by awarding organisations following results publication and the proportion of these completed within deadlines. This monitoring will continue in 2010 and, as in previous years, will result in a public report containing enquiries about results and appeals statistics for the June examinations series.

The Diploma

The Diploma is a composite qualification available in England and was introduced for first teaching in September 2008. It consists of a number of components, including principal learning, project and functional skills. In 2009, Ofqual reported on its work to ensure the successful delivery of the Diploma for the small number of candidates who had completed all of the requirements within the first year of availability. The *Diploma readiness report summer 2009* (www.ofqual.gov.uk/files/2009-06-diploma-readiness-report.pdf) outlined the requirements of the Diploma and described Ofqual's work in regulating it. As set out in Ofqual's second report by the chief regulator (December 2009), Ofqual continues to work closely with the Department for Education and the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCDA) to make sure that centres and awarding organisations are able to deliver Diploma assessments and awards in 2010.

The Diploma is designed to be completed over two years and it is expected that many of the candidates who started Diploma courses in September 2008 will complete the Diploma this summer. To ensure that all students who complete the requirements of the Diploma receive accurate Diploma results on time we have:

- continued to carry out checks on each awarding organisation's competence to deliver the constituent qualifications
- continued to monitor awarding organisations' delivery of principal learning, project and functional skills qualifications to check that appropriate quality assurance is in place and that accurate results are delivered on time
- continued our programme of qualification scrutiny to ensure constituent parts of the Diploma are fit for purpose and that standards are being set appropriately
- extended the remit of the GCE/GCSE code of practice to apply to principal learning and project qualifications so that the same quality assurance processes are required of awarding organisations for the delivery of each of these qualifications
- updated the *Regulatory arrangements for component and Diploma awarding bodies* to reflect changes identified to improve delivery of the Diploma (publication by end of May 2010)
- worked with awarding organisations to ensure that regulatory requirements are clear and are followed consistently
- continued to work with relevant organisations to make sure the interdependent IT systems in schools, colleges, government and awarding organisations

successfully deliver Diploma results for those candidates who have completed all of the requirements.

More work needs to be done to ensure that there is successful delivery for the increased number of Diploma students expected in future. Ofqual continues to work with the relevant organisations to ensure that risks to the safe delivery of results are minimised.

Preparations in the event of any large-scale disruption to examinations

Like other national operations involving and affecting thousands of people, there are agreed contingency plans in the event of any disruption affecting candidates, schools or awarding organisations on a large scale. The *Joint contingency plan for the examination system in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* has been in place since 2006. The plan is jointly owned by the qualifications regulators, awarding organisations, JCQ, DfE, DENI, QCDA and UCAS. Although operating a different qualifications system, the Scottish Qualifications Authority is also an owner of the plan. The awarding organisations offering GCSE, GCE, principal learning and project qualifications have their own established contingency plans in place and the joint plan is designed to complement these, not replace them. The plan is designed to ensure consistency of response in the event of major disruption and the contingencies aim to safeguard the interests of candidates while maintaining the integrity of the examination system and safeguarding standards. In the event of any large scale national emergency any decisions regarding the delivery of examinations and results will take account of wider government contingency planning.

As with the 'business as usual' contingencies in place to deal with any disruption to the delivery of examinations or candidate results in specific circumstances, there are agreed contingencies in the event of widespread disruption for every stage of the examination system, including when centres are unable to open for scheduled examinations or candidates are unable to attend the examination centre. The contingencies are designed to be applicable regardless of the cause of any disruption. For example, schools and colleges may be unable to open for a number of reasons: heavy snowfall; flooding; power failure, etc. It has been agreed that the qualifications regulators will act as the central point in coordinating a consistent response to any large-scale disruption.

In 2006, the widely reported threat of avian flu and potential threat to public services led the qualifications regulators and awarding organisations to consider the contingencies that would be put in place in the event of widespread illness leading to disruption to the taking of examinations and delivery of results. Concerns about swine flu in 2009 again led to the review of the contingency plan in the event of illness on a national scale disrupting business as usual activities. However, it has been the heavy snow fall across England, Wales and Northern Ireland in January 2010 and the travel disruption caused by volcanic ash in April 2010 that have so far presented the most significant concerns regarding the successful delivery of an examination series.

Weather disruption to the January 2010 examination series

The January 2010 examination series ran from 11 January until 3 February and involved more than 2.5 million exam entries for over 1,300 separate examination papers.

Before the start of the examinations, the UK was affected by heavy snow fall and freezing temperatures, causing serious disruption to schools and transport. When the qualifications regulators and awarding bodies met on 6 January to confirm preparations to ensure the successful delivery of the January examinations series, it was apparent that the weather would still be causing severe problems in some areas of the country during the start of the examination series. It was agreed that contingency measures would need to be implemented for those affected. In the event, the efforts of candidates and centre staff were vital in ensuring that the vast majority of examinations could take place as planned.

So that there was a clear picture of the scale of disruption to examinations nationally, we held a conference call between the regulators, awarding organisations and government education departments in England, Wales and Northern Ireland every morning during the first week of examinations. The awarding organisations reported that 14 centres across England, Wales and Northern Ireland had been unable to open or make alternative venue arrangements for their examination candidates. For most centres only one day of examinations was affected and in most cases fewer than 10 candidates were affected. These closures affected 190 examinations in total. Awarding organisations also reported that where schools or colleges had closed due to the weather, the vast majority were either still opening for examinations only or had been able to make alternative venue arrangements for candidates.

Communications for centres and candidates regarding any disruption to examinations were prepared and the awarding organisations and regulators liaised closely in the days leading up to the start of the examinations. The scale of likely disruption was evaluated and it was agreed that the arrangements outlined in the examinations contingency plan should be applied where appropriate. The decision on whether to open a centre rested with the head of each centre. Where a centre was unable to open on one or more days during the examination period, it was advised that it:

- should consider whether it could open for examinations and examination candidates only
- could liaise with awarding organisations regarding the use of alternative venues for the examinations (i.e. potentially sharing facilities with other examination centres or making use of other public buildings).

Where a centre was unable to implement either of the arrangements above or candidates had been unable to reach the centre or alternative venue for their examination, centres were advised to either:

- apply for special consideration for those candidates that met the eligibility requirements
- consider entering candidates for the missed examination at the next available opportunity.

Consistency of response to any disruption was vital in ensuring that all candidates were treated fairly regardless of the examination they were taking or awarding organisations they were taking it with. The qualification regulators remained active during the examination period in delivering clear and consistent messages regarding the contingencies in place for those affected by the weather.

Evaluating the effectiveness of the contingency planning

The examination system's Crisis Management Group meets twice a year to review the *Joint contingency plan for the examination system in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* and ensure the plan is still fit for purpose. The group met on 24 February 2010 and discussed the impact of the adverse weather on the January examination series, including the flow of information about centre closures, the media coverage and the effectiveness of the agreed contingencies. It was recognised that many centre staff had little or no knowledge of the examinations contingency plan and the steps centres could take in the event of disruption to the taking of examinations. It was agreed that the awarding organisations and regulators would increase the visibility of the contingency planning to ensure centres are aware of the contingencies that can be applied in the event of any large-scale disruption to examinations.

The disruption to examinations had been largely a localised issue that affected a small proportion of the candidates taking examinations during the January series. Whilst it is unfortunate that a small number of candidates were unable to take some of the examinations that they had spent months preparing for, the Crisis Management Group agreed that under the circumstances it had been the correct decision to continue with national examinations as planned using business as usual contingencies that ensured that the system was fair to all candidates.

For every examination series, there are a small proportion of candidates who are entered for an examination but, for a variety of reasons, do not sit the examination as planned. Awarding organisations reported that the proportion of absences from examinations for the January 2010 series was very similar to those for the January 2009 series. Collated data shows that exam absences for January 2010 represented 3.6 per cent of the total examination entries, only 0.6 per cent higher than in January 2009. Similarly, for each examination series, centres are able to submit requests for special consideration for any candidates who have not been able to demonstrate attainment because of exceptional circumstances. Requests for special consideration for the January 2010 series represented 1.4 per cent of the total examination entries for this series, just 0.2 per cent higher than in January 2009. Whilst it is known that some candidates were unable to attend their examinations it is apparent that, despite concerns, the efforts of candidates and centre staff ensured that the heavy snowfall affected a very small proportion of the total exams that candidates were due to take during this period.

The qualifications regulators and awarding organisations are confident that they have agreed contingencies in place to ensure centres and candidates affected by similar disruption in future are treated fairly while maintaining the integrity of the

qualifications concerned. We will continue work to raise awareness of those contingencies to centre staff, candidates and parents.

Travel disruption as a result of volcanic ash

Only a few weeks before the publication of this report, a volcano eruption in Iceland led to a ban on air travel from 14–20 April 2010. This disruption occurred just as many candidates and teachers were due to return from the Easter break, leaving some stranded abroad as teaching and learning recommenced in the final few weeks before the summer examination series.

The GCSE, GCE and principal learning summer series of examinations was not due to commence until the 15 May but concerns were raised that the inability of some candidates and teachers to return to schools and colleges promptly would impact on the completion and marking of internal assessments. In addition, a number of oral and practical assessments in subjects such as French, drama and physical education were scheduled for the period between 19 April and 15 May, raising concerns that candidates and centre staff would not return to schools and colleges in time for these assessments. On 19 April we issued a statement to confirm the regulators were monitoring the situation and that centres should contact awarding organisations if they had concerns regarding delivering assessments or meeting deadlines.

The regulators met with awarding organisations on 21 April to confirm arrangements for those affected by the travel disruption. Although the flight ban had been lifted the previous day, it was noted that for some of those affected it could still be several days before they could return to the UK. It was agreed that awarding organisations' business as usual contingencies would be applied where the delivery, taking or marking of assessments had been disrupted. Where a centre anticipated problems in meeting deadlines for the submission of internal assessments, they were being advised to contact the awarding organisation concerned. Awarding organisations would consider requests for extensions to their internal assessment deadlines on a case-by-case basis depending on the circumstances. It was also confirmed that where teacher or candidate absence meant that practical or oral assessments could not take place as scheduled, the assessment could be rescheduled within the available assessment window. Where this was not possible, the centre could apply to the awarding organisation for special consideration for any candidates who had been stranded abroad at the time of the assessment.

Awarding organisations also reported that a small number of centres had reported that their examinations officer was stranded overseas. Awarding organisations confirmed that they were providing support to these centres to ensure assessments could go ahead and internal assessment processes could be completed as planned.

The qualifications regulators are satisfied that these processes will ensure that as far as possible candidates are not disadvantaged by an event beyond their control. It is also recognised that in such circumstances the great efforts of teachers and other centre staff in facilitating teaching and learning by other means and ensuring the rescheduling of assessments is vital in maintaining the fairness and validity of the assessment of these qualifications. The regulators continue to monitor the impact of any disruption to air travel on the delivery and taking of examinations and assessments.

Next steps

The qualifications regulators will be monitoring the summer examinations series in England, Wales and Northern Ireland to check that it is delivered safely and securely, and that students, further and higher education institutions and employers can be satisfied with the integrity of the results. In the event of any disruption to the delivery of examinations or results, the qualifications regulators will work closely with awarding organisations and other relevant organisations so that there is a consistent approach that provides fairness for candidates and maintains the integrity of the qualifications affected.

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