



Qualifications and
Curriculum Authority

Report on the performance of awarding bodies for general qualifications in 2004

2005

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Introduction

As the regulator of the public examination system in England, QCA is committed to securing a fair deal for learners. This means making sure that awarding bodies provide a high quality service so learners can be confident that examination results are accurate and reliable.

QCA has set performance expectations that awarding bodies must meet and a code of practice that awarding bodies must follow. These ensure that learners and centres receive the highest levels of customer service and that examination standards are consistent over time. If an awarding body fails to meet these requirements, QCA takes firm action to raise the performance of the awarding body. QCA regularly reviews the performance expectations and the code of practice to continue to improve awarding body performance.

This report details the performance in 2004 of the three awarding bodies based in England that offer GCSEs and A levels – AQA (Assessment and Qualifications Alliance), Edexcel and OCR (Oxford, Cambridge and RSA Examinations).

Quality of service provided to centres by awarding bodies

QCA has established performance expectations for the quality of service that awarding bodies should provide to centres. These performance expectations allow QCA to monitor and report on awarding body performance each year. For the June 2004 examination series:

	QCA expectation	Performance in 2004		
		AQA	Edexcel	OCR
% of question papers dispatched to centres on time	100	100 (99.2)	100 (99.9)	100 (100)
% of question papers without errors	100	98.7 (96.2)	97.5 (97.3)	96.7 (96.2)
% of examination results issued to centres on time	100	100 (100)	100 (100)	100 (100)
% of priority enquiries about examination results completed within 20 days	100	100 (97.9)	100 (100)	100 (100)
% of examination papers copied and sent out at least 10 days before the deadline for enquiries about results	100	100 (100)	100 (100)	97.8 (100)

Equivalent figures for June 2003 are provided in brackets. More detail about these requirements is provided in the appendix.

Providing question papers on time

QCA expects all awarding bodies to dispatch question papers on time. In 2004 all awarding bodies completed this successfully, which was an improvement from the very high figures in 2003. QCA also expects awarding bodies to have contingency plans in place that allow them to react swiftly if the security of question papers is breached before an examination. In the few cases where question papers were stolen before examinations, appropriate measures were taken to ensure that the integrity of the examination and the examination results was maintained.

Providing question papers without errors

QCA expects awarding bodies to make sure that question papers do not contain any errors that might affect candidates. If a question paper does contain an error that requires correction, awarding bodies are expected to send an erratum notice to centres before the examination to make sure candidates are aware of the error. QCA also expects awarding bodies to take any errors in the question paper into account when marking candidates' work and awarding examination grades.

In the summer 2004 examination series the awarding bodies produced more than 3,400 different question papers for general qualifications, and 2.4 per cent of these (83 question papers) contained errors that required correction. However, the awarding bodies informed centres about nearly all of these question papers before the examination. Centres were not informed about errors in nine question papers (0.26 per cent of the total) before the examination – seven for AQA and two for OCR.

Providing examination results on time

QCA expects awarding bodies to produce examination results on time for all candidates with valid qualification entries. As in 2003, the awarding bodies issued examination results for candidates on the agreed publication date for the June 2004 examination series. The accountable officer for each awarding body must notify QCA about serious problems with the processes for marking candidates' work and awarding grades. None of the accountable officers informed QCA about any issues for the June 2004 examination series.

Responding to enquiries about examination results

The awarding bodies provide a priority service for centres to enquire about examination results that could affect places at higher or further education. QCA reduced the target time for awarding bodies to deal with all enquiries of this type from 30 days in 2003 to 20 days in 2004. All three awarding bodies met this more challenging performance expectation in 2004, with a small improvement from 2003 for AQA.

If asked by centres, awarding bodies will provide copies of A level examination papers to help centres decide whether to enquire into particular examination results. QCA's requirement is for these papers to be copied and sent out more than 10 days before the deadline for enquiring about results. OCR did not quite meet this target in 2004 due to a one-day delay in posting out some examination papers.

In addition to priority enquiries about examination results, QCA is looking for awarding bodies to reduce the time taken to complete other enquiries about examination results. In 2005, QCA expects all post-results marking enquiries to be completed within 35 days instead of the current 40 days.

Changes to examination results as a result of enquiries, complaints and appeals

QCA will produce a report on the extent of changes to examination results as a result of enquiries, complaints or appeals once the appeals for 2004 have been completed.

Results of QCA investigations

QCA investigated three specific concerns where the integrity of results was judged to be at significant risk.

QCA conducted an investigation into AQA GCSE applied ICT due to the exceptionally poor results that candidates achieved on the externally assessed unit in January 2004. Ken Boston, QCA's chief executive, wrote to centres to inform them of this investigation and reassure them that steps would be taken to protect the interests of candidates. QCA's investigation uncovered problems with the mark schemes and the guidance for centres for this unit. The combination of these factors meant that candidates were unlikely to get more than 68 of the 100 marks available for the unit.

As a result of this investigation, AQA, with QCA's agreement, made scaled adjustments to the marks of candidates for the June 2003, January 2004 and June 2004 examinations to ensure a fair deal for candidates. QCA will continue to monitor the performance of this unit in 2005.

A courier vehicle stolen at knifepoint in south London contained AQA and OCR question papers. The question papers were not thought to have been the target of the robbery, and some were later recovered in a park in Croydon. As the security of these question papers had been breached, a decision was taken to issue replacement papers for a number of subjects. The replacement question papers were ones that had been prepared for future examination series. The replacement of papers for AQA GCSE English created particular logistical challenges as four different question papers had to be replaced for more than 427,000 candidates.

Despite the strategies used by the awarding bodies to ensure that all candidates sat the replacement question papers, a small number of centres issued the original papers to their candidates. The awarding bodies established separate but parallel arrangements for awarding grades to ensure that standards were maintained for different candidates, checking for any unusual trends or patterns in candidates' marks and the performance of centres. QCA monitored these processes closely and was satisfied that appropriate steps had been taken to ensure candidates' results were fair and accurate.

Question papers from different awarding bodies for a number of subjects were stolen from a private tutorial college in north-west London, and it was alleged that some candidates saw them before the examination. This incident attracted considerable media attention. In conjunction with the police, the awarding bodies investigated security arrangements at the centre and investigated any candidates suspected of involvement in selling or buying stolen papers. As a result of these investigations, a number of candidates were either disqualified from these examinations, barred from sitting examinations for a set period, or both. In addition, due to concerns about security, this centre has been deregistered by the awarding bodies and can no longer enter candidates for public examinations.

Compliance with QCA's code of practice for general qualifications

Some areas of the examination system cannot be measured against numerical targets. QCA monitors and reports on the performance of awarding bodies on these areas against the code of practice for general qualifications.

The code of practice contributes to ensuring quality, consistency and fairness in assessment and awarding for general qualifications. It sets out detailed requirements that awarding bodies must follow at each stage of the examining process. Where awarding bodies have not fully complied with the code of practice, QCA identifies and monitors any aspects of the examining process that require action in current and future examination series.

QCA monitoring programme in 2004

In 2004 QCA monitored the performance of AQA, Edexcel and OCR against the requirements of the code of practice in two main ways – the scrutiny programme and the observation of awarding meetings. QCA also monitored other aspects of awarding body performance, including on-screen marking, arrangements for candidates with particular assessment requirements, special consideration and cases of malpractice.

Scrutiny programme

The scrutiny programme is a series of in-depth studies across a range of specifications each year. In 2004 QCA completed scrutinies on the following general qualifications:

	Total	AQA	Edexcel	OCR
GCSE	9	4	3	2
GCSE in vocational subjects	7	3	2	2
GCE	6	1	2	3
Total	22	8	7	7

The scrutiny specifications were selected on the basis of an analysis of risk for each specification, including factors such as the number of candidates, the length of time since the previous scrutiny and the number and nature of complaints from centres.

Each scrutiny involves a detailed report on different stages of the examining process for each specification. This includes monitoring awarding body meetings, analysing question papers and mark schemes and reviewing candidates' work. QCA observed more than 150 awarding body meetings for the scrutiny programme in 2004, including awarding meetings for each scrutiny specification, over 80 examiner or moderator standardisation meetings, question paper evaluation committee meetings and training meetings for examiners, moderators and centres.

Observation of awarding meetings

The awarding process involves a meeting of a committee of experienced examiners who consider candidates' work to establish examination grade-boundary marks that maintain standards over time. In 2004 QCA monitored more than 140 awarding meetings against the requirements of the code of practice. The observed meetings included awarding meetings for the scrutiny specifications and other

general qualifications for both the January and June examination series. QCA also carried out post-awarding audit visits to each awarding body before the issue of results for the January and June examination series.

These monitoring activities were undertaken by teams of QCA staff, consultants with subject expertise and representatives from the teaching profession.

Monitoring programme findings

Overall, all three unitary awarding bodies demonstrated a high level of compliance with the requirements of the code of practice. There were some instances of non-compliance at different stages of the examining process for all awarding bodies, but these did not represent a significant threat to the integrity of the examination results.

Scrutiny programme findings

The scrutiny programme identified instances of non-compliance with the requirements of the code of practice at different stages of the examining process. When an awarding body does not comply with code of practice requirements, QCA identifies actions the awarding body must take to reinforce the examining process and increase the level of compliance with the code of practice in future examinations.

For the scrutiny programme in 2004, there were required actions on the following stages of the examining process:

	AQA	Edexcel	OCR
Number of scrutiny specifications in 2004	8	7	7
Scrutiny specifications with required action(s) on:			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ the specification, question papers and mark schemes 	8	7	7
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ the marking and moderation process 	8	7	7
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ the awarding process 	7	5	5

There were five specifications with no recommendations about the awarding process where all the requirements of the code of practice were met. There were some common issues for all three awarding bodies, and QCA requires the awarding bodies to take action to ensure that:

- all question papers and mark schemes are of consistently high quality, for example with mark schemes that are easy for examiners to use consistently
- all examiners and moderators are fully trained on how to mark candidates' work, for example by marking a sufficient range of candidates' work either before or at training meetings
- all assessment materials meet the assessment objectives and the requirements of the specifications, in particular the assessment criteria for GCSEs in vocational subjects.

The scrutiny programme also identified specific issues for each awarding body to address in future examinations.

QCA requires each awarding body to produce action plans in response to each scrutiny report to outline how it will address the required actions. QCA will monitor how well awarding bodies implement these action plans in future examination series.

Observation of awarding meetings findings

QCA did not identify any serious instances of non-compliance that compromised the integrity of the awarding process. Overall, all awarding bodies established grade boundaries using professional judgement based on the quality of candidates' work and informed by relevant technical and statistical information.

One issue for all three awarding bodies was the lack of suitable samples of candidates' work at some awarding meetings, often for portfolio units for the new GCSEs in vocational subjects. This was sometimes due to the low number of candidates for the specifications, but in a few cases the problem related to obtaining examples of candidates' work from centres. QCA has required awarding bodies to ensure they have sufficient samples of candidates' work for all awarding meetings in 2005, and this will be monitored.

The post-award audits checked the awarding bodies' procedures for confirming the examination grade boundary marks established at awarding meetings. All changes to grade boundary marks at the post-award stage were made with the support of the relevant chair of examiners.

On-screen marking of examination papers

More than one million examination papers were marked on-screen for the June 2004 examination series by Edexcel, including a large number of examination papers for candidates for GCSE mathematics and GCSE science. QCA monitored on-screen marking against the code of practice to ensure it did not compromise the completion of marking and awarding processes. The number of examination papers marked on-screen is likely to increase in future examination series and QCA will continue to monitor this.

Arrangements for candidates with particular assessment requirements

QCA requires each awarding body to ensure that all candidates have an equal opportunity to demonstrate their skills, knowledge and understanding, for example by producing a modified question paper for a candidate with a visual impairment. However, any arrangements for candidates with particular assessment requirements must be based on the needs of individual candidates and must not give candidates an unfair advantage. Centres have to submit requests for arrangements to awarding bodies in advance of the examinations, although responsibility for some arrangements is delegated to centres, including the provision of additional time (up to 25 per cent) for eligible candidates.

Between September 2003 and August 2004 awarding bodies approved more than 100,000 requests for arrangements for GCSE, GCE, GNVQ and VCE candidates with particular assessment requirements, with an additional 80,000 centre-delegated arrangements for additional time, as follows:

	AQA	Edexcel	OCR
Awarding body–approved arrangements	41,673	32,625	29,520
Centre-delegated arrangements (additional time)	29,244	28,411	24,170

These figures are for the number of arrangements made rather than the number of candidates, as an individual candidate may require a number of arrangements and may take examinations from more than one awarding body.

In 2005, QCA will review each awarding body's procedures for the approval of arrangements for candidates with particular assessment requirements.

Special consideration

Centres can request special consideration from awarding bodies for candidates who were absent or disadvantaged as a result of a temporary illness, injury, indisposition or other unforeseen incident, either immediately before or during the examination period.

For 2004 more than 250,000 of these requests were granted as follows:

	AQA	Edexcel	OCR
Requests for special consideration granted	128,495	81,310	61,046

These figures are for the number of requests for special consideration granted rather than the number of candidates, as a centre may request special consideration for an individual candidate in more than one component or unit.

Malpractice by candidates and centres

QCA requires awarding bodies to have procedures for dealing with alleged and suspected malpractice. This includes any breaches of regulations that might undermine the integrity of an examination, from deliberate attempts by candidates to communicate with each other during an examination to inadvertent failures by centre staff to comply with awarding body instructions.

For the June 2004 examination series, the number of confirmed cases of candidate malpractice for each awarding body was:

	AQA	Edexcel	OCR
Candidate malpractice cases	1,608	847	1,118

These figures are for the number of cases of candidate malpractice rather than the number of candidates.

Effective procedures for dealing with malpractice are essential for learners, schools, parents and employers to have confidence in the examination system. QCA has investigated awarding bodies' procedures and collects information about malpractice from each awarding body. QCA will use this information and work with awarding bodies to ensure that centres and candidates fully understand the penalties for malpractice.

Actions for QCA in 2005

In 2005, QCA will continue to monitor and report on the performance of awarding bodies for general qualifications against the expectations set out in this report and the requirements of the code of practice. In particular, QCA will:

- monitor awarding bodies' performance against the new requirement for the completion of all post-results marking enquiries
- monitor the action taken by awarding bodies in response to scrutiny programme findings in 2004
- review awarding bodies' processes for the approval of arrangements for candidates with particular assessment requirements
- work with awarding bodies to ensure that centres and candidates fully understand the penalties for deliberate and inadvertent malpractice.

Awarding body self-assessment

In addition to QCA's monitoring programme, awarding bodies are required to evaluate and report on the quality of their systems and arrangements for general qualifications. As part of this self-assessment process, each awarding body must develop an action plan to promote continuing improvement and to address any weaknesses that have been identified.

QCA will consider and review findings from self-assessment reports alongside other monitoring programme findings to inform the monitoring programme in following years.

Appendix

Terms used in this report

general qualifications	GCSEs, GCSEs in vocational subjects, GCE AS and A levels, VCEs, AEAAs and GNVQs
awarding body	an organisation recognised by QCA for the purpose of awarding accredited qualifications
centre	an organisation (such as a school or college) accountable to an awarding body for the assessment arrangements leading to a qualification
question paper	all assessment materials used in a timetabled examination. Question papers are dispatched by secure courier and securely stored at schools and colleges until the examination
examination paper	a candidate's response to a question paper
priority enquiry	a priority service for candidates whose place in higher or further education depends on the outcome of an enquiry about an examination result

Performance expectations used in this report

Queries from centres answered within 10 working days: Queries from centres responded to by an awarding body, either with a full response or a response giving a timetable for when a detailed reply will be given, together with a reference number and named contact. This does not include acknowledgement letters.

Question papers dispatched to centres on time: Assessment materials for use in timed examinations that were received at least a week before the timetabled date of the examination.

Question papers without errors: Question papers with no significant typographical errors, missing or invalid information. This does not include question papers with minor typographical errors (such as missing full stops) or sporadic printing errors that will not have implications on the content of the paper or any influence on candidates' responses.

Examination results issued to centres on time: Examination results at unit and/or qualification level issued to centres on the agreed publication date. This target only relates to results for candidate entries submitted by centres on or before the agreed closing date for entries. It does not include examination results for candidate entries submitted by centres *after* the agreed closing date, for example late or 'pirate' entries.

Priority enquiry about examination results completed within 20 days: A priority service is provided for enquiries about examination results for candidates whose place in higher or further education depends on the outcome of an enquiry about a result. The services available include clerical checks and re-marking of candidates' work. Enquiries about results may result in candidates' grades being confirmed, raised or lowered.

Examination papers copied and sent out at least 10 days before the deadline for enquiries about results: A service is available to allow centres to receive copies of examination papers for GCE and VCE qualifications after the publication of results for the sole purpose of deciding whether or not to request an enquiry about a GCE or VCE examination result (at unit and/or qualification level).

Requests for examination papers must be dispatched in time to arrive at the awarding body no later than eight days after the publication of results.

Qualifications covered in this report

AQA, Edexcel and OCR are responsible for providing nearly all general qualifications for candidates in England. For the summer 2004 examination series these three awarding bodies produced:

- 5.35 million GCSE examination results (AQA 59 per cent, Edexcel 21 per cent and OCR 21 per cent)
- 700,000 GCE A level examination results (AQA 47 per cent, Edexcel 26 per cent and OCR 27 per cent)
- 959,000 GCE AS examination results (AQA 49 per cent, Edexcel 24 per cent and OCR 27 per cent).

In addition, the awarding bodies also produced:

- 110,000 GCSEs in vocational subjects examination results
- 440,000 short course GCSE examination results
- 39,000 double award VCE examination results
- 42,000 VCE examination results
- 18,000 AS VCE examination results
- 7,000 AEA examination results.