

Reaching the finishing line

Delivery of summer 2009 examinations in
GCSE, A level, principal learning and
project



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Introduction

Ofqual is the regulator of qualifications, examinations and tests in England. Our work ensures that learners get the results that their work deserves, that standards are maintained, and that the qualifications that learners receive count now and in the future. We promote public confidence in the examinations system and make sure that candidates, parents, teachers and employers can depend on high quality examinations and qualifications. Each year we monitor the summer examinations in England and report on the findings from our monitoring and the steps taken by Ofqual to assure the quality of the examinations. In the regulation of qualifications Ofqual works closely with regulatory colleagues in Wales (DCELLS) and Northern Ireland (CCEA).

In summer 2009, revised AS level qualifications and the principal learning and project qualifications that contribute to the grading of the Diploma were assessed and awarded by the awarding bodies for the first time. Ofqual recognises that the introduction of several new and revised qualifications in 2009 alongside existing qualifications presented challenges to awarding bodies in terms of the recruitment and training of a sufficient number of examiners and moderators. Earlier this year, Ofqual conducted a review of awarding bodies' progress in recruiting the required number of examiners and moderators, and in ensuring that they received appropriate training and support. A report, *On your marks* (<http://www.ofqual.gov.uk/2384.aspx>), was published in June and presented the findings of this review, which confirmed that Ofqual was confident that awarding bodies would complete the marking within deadlines and ensure that marking was appropriately quality assured before the publication of results in August.

This report details the findings of Ofqual's subsequent monitoring over the summer examinations period and explains how Ofqual has monitored the start of the two-year transition from legacy to new A level specifications and the first award of principal learning and project qualifications, to ensure that appropriate standards have been set. It also sets out our programme of monitoring to ensure the integrity of GCSE and A level examinations and results.

This report and its predecessor (*On your marks*) explain how we seek to ensure that assessments and results are safely delivered, and appropriate standards are established and maintained. By presenting our findings and setting out any further measures needed, we aim to increase public confidence in qualifications and examinations in England.

Summer 2009 examination results

In England, the summer 2009 examination results were published for GCEs (AS and A levels) on Thursday 20 August. Compared to 2008, there was an increase in A level entries for communication studies, law, physics, political studies and religious studies, and a small overall increase (0.3 per cent) in the percentage (97.5 per cent) of candidates achieving grades A–E. AS results showed a small decrease (0.1 per cent) in the percentage (88.1 per cent) of candidates achieving grades A–E.

GCSE results in England for summer 2009 were published on Thursday 27 August. There was a drop in entries of just under 200,000 due to a smaller cohort size and more centres entering candidates for examinations in earlier sessions. The percentage of candidates who achieved grades A*–C rose to 67.1 per cent, which was an increase of 1.4 per cent on last year.

There were 894 candidates who completed the principal learning qualification at levels 1 and 2 this summer, across the five available lines of learning. Most candidates taking principal learning will complete the assessment over two years. In addition, 3279 candidates completed the project qualification at levels 1 and 2 this summer, and 5881 candidates completed the extended project at level 3. These qualifications can be taken as components of the Diploma qualification, and together they generate candidates' overall Diploma grade. In total there were 178 candidates who achieved a Diploma qualification in summer 2009 at foundation and higher levels.

Kathleen Tattersall, Ofqual's chair, congratulated A level and GCSE candidates on their results, as well as the first students to achieve the Diploma. She praised them for their hard work, noting that candidates, employers and education providers can have confidence that these results are a fair record of the students' achievements and abilities.

Marking capacity for the summer 2009 examinations

Drafting, distributing and marking the large number of examination papers required for national examinations is a massive undertaking for awarding bodies. It is a very complex process, involving large numbers of people, and takes a great deal of organisation. In 2009 several new and revised qualifications were awarded for the first time alongside existing qualifications. These included revised AS level qualifications and the principal learning and project qualifications used for grading the Diploma.

To assess whether awarding bodies had sufficient marking capacity for the safe delivery of results this summer, Ofqual reviewed evidence of awarding bodies':

- recruitment of examiners and moderators
- training provided to examiners and teachers in relation to the new qualifications and specifications
- use of overseas marking and the quality assurance processes applied.

The report published in June, *On your marks*, outlined the findings of this review. It confirmed that Ofqual was confident that awarding bodies would recruit and train sufficient examiners and moderators, and that the overseas marking activities would be appropriately quality assured.

Ofqual can confirm that the awarding bodies successfully appointed and trained examiners and moderators for more than 70,000 posts across approximately 1,700 A level assessment units and 900 GCSE components or question papers. For the principal learning qualification, awarding bodies recruited and trained examiners and moderators for approximately 1,300 posts across the five lines of learning. For the project, which is assessed by teachers before being moderated by an awarding body, 73 moderator posts were filled. The findings of Ofqual's monitoring of the summer examinations series confirmed that the awarding bodies had successfully implemented a programme of training and support to prepare examiners, moderators and teachers responsible for assessing the new qualifications and specifications. The marking of candidates' work was completed within deadlines and appropriately quality assured before the publication of results in August.

Ofqual's monitoring of the summer 2009 examinations

As in previous years, Ofqual conducted a programme of monitoring GCE and GCSE qualifications offered by awarding organisations in England (AQA, Edexcel and OCR) to ensure the integrity of these examinations and results. Ofqual works in partnership with the regulators of external qualifications in Wales (DCELLS) and Northern Ireland (CCEA) to ensure consistency in the quality and standards of qualifications. During the summer 2009 examination period, Ofqual observed examiner standardisation meetings and awarding meetings at each of AQA, Edexcel and OCR.

Examiner standardisation meetings are held soon after the examination is sat. At these meetings examiners are trained by the principal examiner to mark examination scripts to an agreed standard. The objective of the meeting is to ensure that all examiners understand the principles of the mark scheme and can apply it consistently.

Awarding is the process through which grade boundaries for each assessment are set. Awarding committees are responsible for maintaining standards from year to year and comprise the senior examiners for the specification and awarding body officers. Awarders consider the candidates' work, making comparisons with the standard of work in previous years and taking account of statistical evidence, before recommending grade boundaries consistent with the standards of previous years.

Ofqual monitored 7 standardisation meetings and 28 awarding meetings. Most of those observed were for new GCE AS level qualifications, but we also looked closely at GCSE science qualifications.

Following our observations of examiner standardisation and awarding meetings, we were confident that awarding organisations were following the procedures set out in the *GCSE, GCE and AEA Code of Practice* (<http://www.ofqual.gov.uk/191.aspx>). Observers reported that examiners and awarding body officers carried out their duties professionally and thoroughly, and where any issues were identified by observers, they did not impact in any significant way on the outcome of the meeting.

Ofqual also carried out a review of the awarding documentation for a significant proportion of GCE and GCSE qualifications offered by the awarding organisations in England (AQA, OCR and Edexcel). This enabled us to carry out a check on the actions and decisions made by awarding committees over a wide range of subjects, in addition to those awards that we had observed directly. Following these reviews we were satisfied that all awarding organisations had kept a sufficient record of the way in which grades had been awarded, and that awarding had taken place in accordance with the code of practice.

As in previous years, Ofqual held a meeting with the accountable officer responsible for ensuring the quality and standards of qualifications at each awarding organisation, prior to the A level, GCSE, principal learning and project results being published. Each accountable officer provided assurances that the results to be issued were fair, valid and reliable, and that appropriate processes and procedures had been followed.

In addition to monitoring the standardisation of examiners and the awarding of grades, Ofqual also investigates, and takes action, where an issue is identified that could put at risk the integrity of a particular qualification. During the summer 2009 period, there were two such incidents, which are outlined below.

A localised security breach led to one AQA paper being replaced at affected centres. The awarding process was adjusted to take into consideration all the circumstances and ensure fairness to all candidates. Ofqual is satisfied that appropriate action was taken to ensure the integrity of the assessment and awarding process in this case.

In another incident, an issue with the on-screen testing system used by Edexcel for their GCSE applied French listening and reading examinations meant that a maximum of half of the candidates on each examination were given the 2008 version. Edexcel adjusted the awarding process appropriately to ensure that candidates were not advantaged or disadvantaged. Edexcel have reviewed their on-screen testing system and put in place additional procedures and checks. Ofqual is satisfied that all appropriate measures have been taken to safeguard the integrity of candidates' results.

The Diploma

The Diploma is a new composite qualification, consisting of a number of components, including principal learning, project and functional skills. They are designed, with the help of employers and industry groups working with the education sectors, for 14- to 19-year-olds and bring an innovative approach to teaching and learning. Delivery of Diploma results is dependent on a number of interdependent IT systems in schools, colleges, government and awarding bodies. In June 2009, Ofqual published the *Diploma readiness report* (<http://www.ofqual.gov.uk/2383.aspx>), which outlined the requirements of the Diploma and described Ofqual's work in regulating it. The report identified risks to the first delivery of awards in summer 2009 and provided Ofqual's view on the readiness of the system to deliver those awards.

Ofqual worked closely with relevant organisations throughout the summer to minimise risks and to make sure that all students who completed the requirements of the Diploma this summer received their awards on time. We carried out checks on the competency of the awarding organisations delivering the constituent qualifications, and monitored the consistency of processes for the awarding of grades. We ensured that delivery of the Diploma was effective and on time, and that all organisations involved in Diploma delivery had established procedures to deal with any incidents that could have affected the delivery of results. As a result, fair and accurate results were delivered on time for those candidates who completed the requirements of the Diploma in one year's study.

There remain some issues that will require further work to ensure delivery of much larger numbers of awards in future years. Ofqual is already working with the relevant organisations to ensure that risks to the safe delivery of future results are minimised.

Principal learning and project qualifications

Principal learning and project are both qualifications in their own right as well as being component parts of the Diploma. Both were offered for the first time in 2008/9. Ofqual conducted a programme of qualifications monitoring, including both general monitoring and more detailed scrutiny of three subject areas (lines of learning): engineering; society, health and development; and creative and media. The main objective of this work was to determine if the component awarding body processes were fit for purpose and rigorous, and would generate reliable and secure results.

Ofqual also attended standardisation and awarding meetings run by the component awarding bodies delivering principal learning and project qualifications. We also conducted a number of audits to determine the appropriateness of the actions taken by component awarding bodies following awarding and before results were issued. Ofqual was satisfied that awarding body processes and procedures were appropriate and in line with regulatory requirements. It was also our view that awarding bodies adopted appropriate strategies to deal with setting standards in units where there were very small entry numbers.

As well as checking that the awarding bodies are following agreed procedures for marking work and awarding grades, Ofqual is also monitoring the standards of the principal learning qualifications. However, Diplomas are designed to be delivered over two years. We will therefore continue to monitor the principal learning and project qualifications in 2009/10 so that the evidence on which we base our judgements comes from a representative cohort of learners. We will publish our interim findings in early 2010 and a final report early in 2011.

Maintaining standards in new GCE AS qualifications and GCSE sciences

The introduction of new specifications and assessment structures presents challenges to ensure that grade standards are maintained over time. Ofqual and the regulators for Wales and Northern Ireland worked with the awarding bodies in England, Wales and Northern Ireland to maintain standards in the new AS qualifications and to address the recommendations made in the March 2009 Ofqual report *The new GCSE science examinations – findings from the monitoring of the new GCSE science specifications: 2007 to 2008* (<http://www.ofqual.gov.uk/2220.aspx>).

New AS qualifications

With some exceptions, including biology, chemistry, music and physics, the new A level specifications comprise four units instead of six. These changes were introduced to reduce the burden of assessment on candidates and to ensure scope for greater stretch and challenge in A2 assessments. In monitoring these new specifications, Ofqual's aim was to make sure that standards in the new specifications were consistent with those on the previous specifications in that, all things being equal, candidates with the same knowledge, skills and understanding would achieve the same result, regardless of which specification they entered. Ofqual agreed with awarding bodies a monitoring process so that we could be confident that students taking the new specifications were not unfairly advantaged or disadvantaged in relation to those taking the previous specifications in 2008. We reviewed the outcomes of the grade awarding meetings before results were published. We were satisfied that consistent standards had been applied and that students could have confidence that their results in 2009 were in line with those issued in 2008.

Ofqual has also conducted a programme to monitor in greater detail a sample of AS specifications in design and technology, English literature, geography, history, physics and Spanish. We will continue to monitor these specifications through to the first award of the A level in June 2010. We will publish our interim findings in early 2010 and a final report in early 2011.

GCSE sciences

In 2007 and 2008, Ofqual monitored the standards in new GCSE science and additional science specifications offered by AQA, Edexcel and OCR. We made recommendations to each awarding body and published a report in March 2009 detailing the main findings.

In the report Ofqual highlighted several concerns: the complex structure of some specifications, the high weighting given to objective tests (multiple choice questions) in some specifications, the lack of challenge and demand of some question papers and internally assessed tasks, and the standards set in some papers at grades A and C.

Ofqual asked the awarding bodies and their senior examiners to take action to address the problems. Among the changes they made, for the 2009 examinations and beyond, were:

- improvements to the quality of questions, to challenge all students
- work, including further training for senior examiners, to improve the quality of objective tests
- tighter marking criteria to ensure that only the answers deserving of the marks are credited
- the revision of some internal assessment tasks to ensure better challenge to students and a closer link to the practical work
- the reduction, where possible within the existing specifications, of the number of options available to candidates.

Rather than maintaining standards in line with 2008, Ofqual asked awarding bodies to tighten their standards, particularly at grade C, to bring them into line with the most severe award in 2008. This involved asking awarding committees to be very circumspect and critical in their use of the archive material from the 2008 examination, which our report noted was generally too lenient. As part of our follow-up work, we attended the grade awarding meetings for GCSE science and additional science. In all these meetings reference was made to our report on science, and we are satisfied that appropriate action was taken to tighten grading standards, where this was necessary to align standards more appropriately. Ofqual also reviewed the outcomes of the grade awarding meetings for science, additional science, biology, chemistry and physics before the results were issued.

As Ofqual has previously reported, one of the complications of a unitised specification is that many candidates may already have the majority of their unit results when they enter for final certification. Therefore, while the work that has taken place this year has gone some way to bringing standards into line with previous years, there is still work to be done. Ofqual will continue to monitor both candidate work and statistical evidence in 2009/10.

Further work

In 2010 the first awards of the new A level specifications will be made, including the first awards of A* at A level. Ofqual will continue the detailed monitoring of specifications in design and technology, English literature, geography, history, physics and Spanish. We will also continue to work with awarding bodies to review the outcomes of the new A2 units and the first A level results, in advance of publication.

Ofqual will continue to monitor the standards of candidates' work in GCSE science. In autumn 2009 we will be reviewing candidates' work from across the three England-based awarding bodies, as well as reviewing statistical evidence. We will continue to attend meetings for science and additional science, and to review the outcomes of grade awarding before the results are issued, so that we can be confident in the integrity of those results. We are also planning to make available on our website (www.ofqual.gov.uk) some of the data that we used in monitoring GCSE science and additional science in summer 2009. We hope that this will help stakeholders to understand some of the complex issues faced by awarding bodies and Ofqual in this area.

Ofqual will start a two-year scrutiny programme looking at new unitised GCSE specifications. This will be the first time that the majority of GCSE specifications will have been unitised. In addition, many specifications include controlled assessment instead of coursework. Our monitoring will focus on making sure that the demands of the new specifications are comparable with those of previous years.

In 2009/10 the Diploma monitoring programme will expand to reflect the new lines of learning that are being taught for the first time in September 2009, and the new awarding bodies offering some of these. Ofqual will continue its detailed monitoring of level 2 principal learning specifications in engineering, society, health and development, and creative and media in order that we can report in 2011 with confidence on the standards in those qualifications. We will extend this scrutiny to include level 2 hair and beauty studies, and level 3 specifications in construction and the built environment and information technology. In addition to this detailed work on standards in principal learning qualifications, we will also continue to monitor all awarding bodies' processes for marking, moderation and awarding grades.

Principal learning and project are qualifications that can be taken as components of the Diploma and combine to generate candidates' overall Diploma grade. To ensure consistency of practice in the assessment of these qualifications, across the awarding bodies and over time, the current regulatory requirements of the *AEA, GCE and GCSE code of practice* will be extended to cover the delivery of principal learning and project from April 2010.

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Office of the Qualifications and Examinations Regulator
Spring Place
Coventry Business Park
Herald Avenue
Coventry CV5 6UB

Telephone 0300 303 3344

Textphone 0300 303 3345

Helpline 0300 303 3346

www.ofqual.gov.uk