

New GCSEs, AS and A levels: an interim evaluation of exam boards' events for teachers



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Contents

Introduction.....	3
Methodology.....	4
Phase one.....	6
Phase two.....	8
Findings.....	10
Understanding whether exam boards were giving information that was potentially misleading.....	10
Understanding whether exam boards were providing confidential information.....	11
Understanding the interaction between the resources market and qualifications market.....	11
Understanding the overall quality of events.....	11
Providing information which teachers reasonably require.....	12
Conclusions.....	13
Next Steps.....	14
Annex 1 – Relevant General Conditions of Recognition.....	15
Condition B5 Representations regarding qualifications.....	15
Statements regarding qualifications which are not regulated qualifications.....	15
Advertising and promotion of qualifications.....	15
Use of Ofqual's Logo.....	15
Condition G4 Maintaining confidentiality of assessment materials, including the conduct of specified training events.....	16
Annex 2 – Questionnaire sent to our subject experts.....	20
Guidelines for completing the observation of training and/or support events.....	20
Scenario.....	20
Observation template.....	20
Questions.....	20

Introduction

In February 2015 we published the report [Understanding awarding organisations' commercial behaviour before and after the GCSE and A level reforms](#). This highlighted that exam boards' marketing strategies and materials could mislead people taking and using new qualifications, if, for example, they implied qualifications are of a different standard to that required. The report identified a number of risks in this area but concluded

while all the above mentioned risks are possible, we did not uncover evidence pointing to any of these risks materialising or about to materialise. We also consider that it is in Ofqual's power to pre-empt these risks or at least limit their effect by appropriate regulatory intervention.

Another potential risk was confidential information about assessments could be given out at events, undermining standards and public confidence in qualifications. We introduced new and revised Conditions to guard against that possibility in September 2013.

Since 2015 we have attended a sample of exam boards' marketing and support events for their new and reformed subjects at GCSE, AS and A level. This work comprised two phases.

Methodology

Our approach was based on a 'mystery shopping' methodology. This is an established method of gaining intelligence on customers' experiences. This is the first time we have conducted a mystery shopping exercise. We drew on methodologies and ethics guides from other organisations such as the Crown Commercial Service's guide, and the Market Research Society's code of conduct.

We told exam boards we would conduct this exercise, although we did not tell them which events we would attend.

We assumed the risk that misleading information would be given was greatest at those events designed to help teachers decide which specification to teach.

We attended relevant events to identify whether exam boards' marketing messages were in compliance with our General Conditions of Recognition (our rules). We have rules on the representations exam boards can make regarding their qualifications (B5.2) and the way in which they maintain confidentiality of their assessment materials (G4.1, G4.2 and G4.3) when they hold such events¹.

We wished to monitor how exam boards provide information to teachers in line with General Condition D8.1 (Making available information to help meet teachers' needs). We also wished to gather information in order to assess whether exam boards were taking reasonable steps to ensure that the endorsement arrangements with publishers did not lead to an adverse effect (Condition C3).

We considered there was a risk that exam boards might not always comply with the conditions, and commissioned subject experts to attend a number of the events on our behalf. We asked the subject experts to focus on the overall quality and content of the events.

The experts who attended the events for us were teachers drawn from our pool of subject experts with no identified conflicts of interest. It was not possible for a single subject expert to attend multiple events because of their teaching commitments.

Annex 2 provides the guide and a short questionnaire we sent to subject experts. It emphasised the importance of their objectivity.

¹ These conditions are set out in Annex 1

We asked the subject experts to consider the following areas:

Intelligence theme	Related General Conditions of Recognition
Understanding whether exam boards were giving information that was potentially misleading - advertising or promoting qualifications in a manner that is likely to be misleading to users of qualifications (e.g. suggesting that certain GCSE specifications were of a different standard).	B5.2 + G4.4
Understanding whether exam boards were providing confidential information, or suggesting that they were	G4
Understanding the interaction between the resources market and the qualifications market	C3
Understanding the overall quality of the events	B5.2 + D8
Were exam boards making available information which, for the purposes of preparing Learners for assessments, a Teacher may reasonably require	D8.1

Phase one

We initially focused on events for GCSE maths, English language and English literature because these are the first of the reformed GCSEs, with the highest number of entries, and therefore competition between the boards for market share is likely to be strongest.

We identified the following events held by the exam boards during the spring of 2015. We chose to send our subject experts to a subset of these.

	Maths	English (language or literature)
AQA	10 standard events across the country	A programme of standard events across the country
Pearson	14 standard events across the country	30 standard events across the country
OCR	5 planning events, 3 developing resources events and 7 problem-solving events across the country	None advertised at outset of the project, although they were later scheduled.
WJEC	2 standard events across the country	6 standard events across the country

The standard events offered by AQA, Pearson and WJEC covered areas including planning and teaching resources, as well as an in-depth review of the new specification and sample assessment materials.

We arranged for seven subject experts to attend events on the new GCSE English and maths specifications from those listed above, between March and June 2015.

We sent subject experts to the following events:

Board	Subject	Event
AQA	Maths	GCSE maths: preparing to teach
Pearson	Maths	2015 GCSE: get ready to teach
OCR	Maths	GCSE maths: planning for the new GCSE
OCR	Maths	New reformed GCSE from 2015: OCR maths developing resources for the new GCSE
OCR	Maths	Approach to problem solving in GCSE
AQA	English	GCSE English language/literature: preparing to teach
Pearson	English	Getting ready to teach Pearson's new GCSE (9-1) English literature from 2015

In phase one, we were not able to include any WJEC/Eduqas events due to their timing and the availability of our subject experts.

Phase two

Building on our 2015 work, our subject experts attended events for other GCSE and A level subjects, across all four exam boards, during March to July 2016.

By this time in the reform programme, there was an extensive range of events covering a wide number of subjects. Again, our focus was on events for qualifications typically attracting the largest number of entries.

Our subject experts were current teachers, where possible. We also used a number of subject experts who had previously taught GCSEs and A levels, and who had a continuing interest in the qualifications.

We intended to send subject experts to events for each subject and each exam board.

We sent subject experts to the following events:

Board	Subject	Event
AQA	Physical Education	A level physical education prepare to teach
AQA	Religious Studies	A level religious studies prepare to teach
AQA	Computer Science	GCSE computer science prepare to teach
AQA	German	GCSE German: preparing to teach the new specification
AQA	History	Reformed GCSE history: preparing to teach
AQA	Physical Education	GCSE physical education prepare to teach
Pearson	German	Getting ready to teach Pearson's new AS and A levels in German
Pearson	Physical Education	AS level physical education prepare to teach
Pearson	Computer Science	GCSE computer science prepare to teach

Board	Subject	Event
Pearson	History	Getting ready to teach Pearson's new GCSE (9-1) in history
Pearson	Modern Foreign Languages	Getting ready to teach New GCSE in modern foreign languages
Pearson	Geography	GCSE geography prepare to teach
Pearson	PE	GCSE physical education prepare to teach
Pearson	Science	GCSE 2016 science launch event: introducing and implementing our new qualifications
WJEC/ Eduqas	Science	GCSE science prepare to teach
OCR	Computer Science	GCSE computer science prepare to teach
OCR	Science	GCSE science prepare to teach
OCR	History	GCSE history prepare to teach

Findings

The results are reported below under the key themes outlined above.

Understanding whether exam boards were giving information that was potentially misleading

In Phase One, the subject experts did not report any instances of misleading marketing messages being provided at the events they attended. The key information provided focused on the new specifications, assessment structures and the resources available to support teaching. One expert specifically said they did not feel they were being sold the specification (OCR maths), another said that overall the event was not a sales event (Pearson maths).

At some of the maths' events, course leaders did discuss other exam boards' specifications and other qualifications on offer. Our subject experts reported that this was "comprehensive and fair", "factual" and in one case another board's specification was praised.

At the English events, there was less discussion of other exam boards' specifications. One expert said the course leader talked about how similar the specifications were, while another said the similarities were limited to spelling, punctuation and grammar.

Where subject experts perceived course leaders to be highlighting the benefits of their exam board's specifications, the key areas highlighted were:

- Assessment structure (two events: OCR and AQA maths),
- Resources (two events: Pearson maths and AQA English), and
- Minimum change when compared with previous assessments (two events: OCR maths and AQA English)

In Phase Two, only two of our representatives reported specific references to other exam boards made by the presenters (without audience prompts). These two events were AQA's GCSE physical education and Pearson's GCSE computer science. The references did not raise any issues of concern.

At the other events presenters, when asked by the audience, made it clear that they were not there to discuss other exam boards and/or did not have sufficient knowledge of a specification to comment.

Understanding whether exam boards were providing confidential information

In Phase One, subject experts did not report that confidential assessment information was provided, or appeared to be being provided.

At one OCR maths event, participants were told that all areas were equally likely to be assessed. At other events, no indication was given about which areas of the specification (or texts) were likely to be assessed.

An expert at an OCR maths event reported the presenter as saying he “felt” a topic would not be examined under a particular assessment objective. The presenter was a principal examiner for a different qualification and was unlikely to have had confidential knowledge about when the topic could have been assessed.

In Phase Two, none of our representatives reported that they had been given any information on the possible content of the first cycle of exams. However one expert reported a statement which might have been interpreted as assisting teachers to deduce information about the frequency with which certain aspects of the specification might be tested.

Understanding the interaction between the resources market and qualifications market

At nearly all events in Phase One, participants were told about free exam board resources, as well as those available to buy.

In Phase Two, all of our representatives reported the availability of textbooks and resources had been mentioned during the event. Three representatives reported that publishers were present at the events selling their products.

There was a split between presenters who promoted textbooks published or endorsed by the exam board and those who mentioned generic resources. As in phase one, almost all presenters made mention of additional, free, resources that their own exam board had available, while some made mention of free resources offered by other organisations.

Understanding the overall quality of events

In both Phase One and Phase Two, the majority of subject experts felt the event they attended met its objectives, and they would recommend attendance to a colleague. Those who would not recommend attending the event generally found it did not merit such a long time out of school.

The exam boards generally provided clear information about how to attend events. One expert had not been aware of the event (either through direct marketing by the exam board or through other means) before being asked to attend on our behalf.

Providing information which teachers reasonably require

The events provided information reasonably required by teachers. Some information about the detailed structure of assessment materials, and the structure of individual questions, was provided. This could potentially have given an advantage to those teachers who had attended the training sessions. This was most evident in subjects where the specification had not been accredited at the time of the event. It may have been mitigated by the publication of sample assessment materials which had not been available at the time.

At one event (AQA GCSE history), the trainer advised delegates that the content required for the Study of the Historic Environment could be taught in 5 hours rather than 12 hours. After a review of the information available, we felt that this could be misleading to teachers and learners. We asked AQA to review their materials to ensure they were consistent.

Conclusions

In the views of the subject experts, the events fulfilled their intentions. The subject experts did not feel they were being overtly sold the qualifications and course leaders did not inappropriately compare the specifications or sample assessment materials of different exam boards. The information gathered in this exercise did not so far suggest any breach of our conditions by the exam boards.

Our subject experts did not generally raise any concerns about the quality of information provided.

There were potential concerns that there could be an advantage for teachers who attended the training sessions. This was most evident in subjects where the specification had not been accredited. The risk may have been mitigated by the publication of sample assessment materials. These had not always been available at the time of the events.

Our subject experts did not report that qualifications were portrayed as 'easier' or 'harder' than those offered by other exam boards. There were few references to other exam boards.

Next Steps

The events we have monitored thus far have been events that helped schools and colleges to make decisions about which specification to choose. We will extend our mystery shopper work to look at different types of events and in other subjects. We will attend events designed to drill down into how the specification could be delivered. This type of event introduces different risks in relation to the provision of confidential information.

We have only attended free events so far, but intend to extend our monitoring to include paid for events.

We will continue to follow up any concerns raised by the subject experts attending these events.

Annex 1 – Relevant General Conditions of Recognition

Condition B5 Representations regarding qualifications

Statements regarding qualifications which are not regulated qualifications

B5.1 An awarding organisation must not (and must take all reasonable steps to ensure that any person connected with it does not) make any statement that would be likely to lead Users of qualifications to believe that a qualification it makes available is a regulated qualification when it is not a regulated qualification.

Advertising and promotion of qualifications

B5.2 An awarding organisation must not (and must take all reasonable steps to ensure that any person connected with it does not) advertise or promote its qualifications in a manner that is likely to be misleading to Users of qualifications.

Use of Ofqual's Logo

B5.3 An awarding organisation must ensure that its use of Ofqual's Logo complies with Logo Requirements and Certificate Requirements which may be published by Ofqual and revised from time to time.

Condition C3 Arrangements with publishers

C3.1 Where an awarding organisation has in place an endorsement process, the awarding organisation must:

- (a) take all reasonable steps to ensure that the endorsement process does not have an Adverse Effect, and
- (b) publish the criteria which it uses to decide whether or not to endorse a particular resource.

C3.2 For the purposes of this condition, an 'endorsement process' is a process by which the awarding organisation endorses resources which are designed to support the preparation of Learners and persons likely to become Learners for assessments for a qualification which it makes available or proposes to make available.

Condition D8 Making available information to help meet Teachers' needs

D8.1 In respect of each qualification which it makes available, an awarding organisation must ensure that there is available to each Teacher any information which, for the purpose of preparing Learners and persons likely to become Learners for assessments for that qualification, the Teacher may reasonably require to be provided by the awarding organisation.

Condition G4 Maintaining confidentiality of assessment materials, including the conduct of specified training events

G4.1 Where confidentiality in –

- (a) the contents of assessment materials, or
- (b) information about the assessment,

is required in order to ensure that a qualification which an awarding organisation makes available, or proposes to make available, reflects an accurate measure of attainment, the awarding organisation must take all reasonable steps to ensure that such confidentiality is maintained.

G4.2 In particular, an awarding organisation –

- (a) must take all reasonable steps to ensure that such confidentiality is maintained where it (or any person connected or previously connected to it) provides training or training materials in relation to such a qualification,
- (b) must not provide or endorse any prohibited training, and
- (c) must take all reasonable steps to ensure that any person connected or previously connected to it does not provide or endorse any prohibited training.

G4.3 For the purposes of this condition, 'prohibited training' is training –

- (a) provided to Teachers in relation to such a qualification,
- (b) at which a number of persons are present (whether physically or remotely by means of simultaneous electronic communication),
- (c) where any one of those persons holds information in relation to the content of assessment materials or information about the assessment for that qualification, and
- (d) where disclosure of the information to Teachers would breach such confidentiality.

G4.4 An awarding organisation must, in respect of any training it provides to Teachers in relation to such a qualification (and, in relation to any such training provided by any person connected to it, must take all reasonable steps to) –

- (a) ensure that the training is reasonably available to all Teachers preparing Learners, or persons likely to become Learners, for assessments for that qualification,
- (b) advertise to Teachers the availability of the training, including in particular by publishing details of the training, and

(c) publish the content of any training materials which have been provided to Teachers in connection with the training, as soon as reasonably practicable after the training has been held.

G4.5 An awarding organisation must take all reasonable steps to ensure that no person connected to it, or previously connected to it, offers to disclose information about any assessment or the content of any assessment materials where that information is (or is said or implied to be) confidential.

G4.6 Where any breach of such confidentiality (including through the loss or theft of confidential assessment materials) is either suspected by an awarding organisation or alleged by any other person and where there are reasonable grounds for that suspicion or allegation, the awarding organisation must:

(a) investigate that breach,

(b) ensure that such an investigation is carried out rigorously, effectively, and by persons of appropriate competence who have no personal interest in its outcome, and

(c) so far as possible, establish whether or not a breach of such confidentiality has occurred.

Annex 2 – Questionnaire sent to our subject experts

Guidelines for completing the observation of training and/or support events

Scenario

In order to make sure you provide the information we are looking for please place yourself in the following scenario.

In your school you are responsible for choosing which exam board's specification your department will teach for the new 9-1 English or maths GCSEs. You are attending the event primarily to understand whether or not your school would be interested in the exam board's offer (including specification, customer service, resources and any other factor or information they provide). We don't ask you to make a decision, but simply to interpret the information they provide with this in mind.

We are interested to understand how the exam boards are differentiating themselves in terms of their specifications (content, mark schemes and assessment materials), as well as the package of teacher and student support materials they provide, customer service and price.

Observation template

Event	
Exam board	
Location	
Date	

Questions

During the events, please listen carefully to what exam board representatives say and collect relevant evidence by taking notes, whenever appropriate, to address the following questions.

Question 1. What did you understand the key messages of the event to be focused on?

Answer here

Question 2. Did the course leaders make comparisons to other exam boards' specification and if so, what did they say?

Answer here

Question 3. What, if anything, did you understand the unique selling point for the board's specification to be?

Answer here

Question 4. Did the exam board staff (or course conveyor) provide additional details on the assessment structure? Please give details

Answer here

Question 5. Did the exam board staff (or course conveyor) provide additional information (and texts for GCSE English) on the areas of the specification which were likely (or not) to come up in the exam? Please give details

Answer here

Question 6. Did the exam board staff mention resources or textbooks? If so what were the key messages you took away as:

A) Someone who is trying to decide whether you are interested in teaching this board's specification

Answer here

B) Someone who is considering which resources to buy

Answer here

Question 7. Overall assessment of support and training events

[TO BE COMPLETED AFTER THE EVENT]

7.1 Following your attendance to event; in your opinion, did the event fulfilled its intended outcomes? Yes No

Answer here

7.2 Would you recommend this event to your colleagues? Yes No

7.3 To what extent do you agree/disagree with the following statements?

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Don't know/no opinion
Prior to being asked to attend this event I already had information about supporting events offered by the exam board					
It was easy for me to book my attendance to the event					
I was able to find the relevant details of the course, including objectives					
I have been able to access all training materials related to the new GCSE specifications required to prepare learners at my centre					

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