



**Qualifications
and Curriculum
Development
Agency**

National curriculum assessments

QCDA's response to Ofqual's monitoring report: 2009 key stage tests

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Introduction

The Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCDA) thanks Ofqual for the observations and feedback about the 2009 test cycle presented in their monitoring report. We are pleased that Ofqual has acknowledged the 'considerable success' achieved by QCDA during the 2009 national curriculum test cycle. We welcome the praise offered in the report and Ofqual's confirmation that QCDA was compliant with the *National curriculum assessments: code of practice 2009* (Ofqual/09/4122).

We seek to identify lessons that can be learnt from each test cycle and routinely undertake steps to continuously improve processes in the national curriculum test programme. We improve the test programme using self-assessment to ensure that we critically review each aspect of the test cycle. As part of this, we examine how well we have implemented any change initiatives. We also engage with our stakeholders before implementing new policies or operational processes to seek their feedback about how changes will work in practice. We review all changes closely, both during and after the test cycle, to ensure that changes are functioning as intended and that anticipated benefits have been realised.

Several of the recommendations made by Ofqual had already been identified prior to their report and action taken as a result of QCDA's own self-assessment process. Where possible changes have been incorporated into the 2010 test cycle and these will be evaluated as part of standard practices; these are detailed within this response to Ofqual's recommendations. Any other recommended actions will be considered and implemented as appropriate in future test cycles.

Recommendations and actions

Ofqual has provided recommendations on developing the tests and mark schemes and training markers and supervisors. QCDA welcomes these recommendations and is pleased to note that they broadly reflect the improvements made to the 2010 test cycle that were identified as a result of its own self-assessment process and shared with Ofqual. QCDA's response to these recommendations is provided below noting where improvements have already been implemented in the 2010 test cycle along with further actions to be noted for future test cycles.

1.1 Developing the tests and mark schemes

1.1.1 Ofqual recommendation

'Reviews of test materials should involve the test development agency and the senior marking team of the test operations agency to ensure that the combination of question papers and mark scheme forms a sound basis upon which the training and standardisation of markers can take place.'

QCDA response and action

Test development agencies have involved senior marking teams in the development of question papers and mark schemes for several years. However, QCDA is committed to continuous improvement and has already made significant improvements identified through self-assessment. These have been implemented in the 2010 test cycle to strengthen previous practice:

- Senior markers have marked pre-test 2 (PT2) scripts and have had more opportunity to comment on the mark schemes during the final stages of development.
- The same senior markers attended a marker review group meeting for English in September 2009. This was a new arrangement for the 2010 test cycle where markers discussed their experiences of PT2 marking and suggested useful mark scheme exemplars and issues for consideration in developing the training materials.
- A marker panel meeting was held, for each subject, in September 2009, attended by team leaders and high performing standard markers in the 2009 test cycle. This was

a new arrangement for the 2010 test cycle, and allowed markers to identify 'crunch' questions and suggest useful focal points for the training materials.

- Improvements were made to the script selection process. The Test Development Agency (TDA) selected twice the required number of test scripts for potential use in the final training material package. The marking programme leader and deputy marking programme leader attended the TDA offices to agree which scripts would be appropriate for use as training, practice, standardisation and benchmarking scripts. The purposes of each type of training script were clearly defined and the process was clearly documented.
- There was a longer period for handover of the mark schemes from the TDA to the test operations agency. The test operations agency attended mark scheme finalisation meetings as observers and, where appropriate, the TDA attended the first four meetings in the formal marker training cascade (meetings 1A, 1, 2, 2A and 3) to ensure that the training materials reflected the mark schemes.
- For the 2011 test cycle 'live test' markers have been more involved in pre-test 2 marking.

1.1.2 Ofqual recommendation

'The commentaries on the standardisation and quality assurance scripts should be explicit and show how the marks have been awarded in order to support and extend the markers' understanding.'

QCDA response and action

QCDA supports this recommendation. The commentaries associated with quality assurance scripts used in 2010 have been subjected to a full user acceptance testing process, conducted by markers not involved in the development of materials, to ensure clarity. This process provides additional reassurance that the commentaries support markers' understanding of how marks have been awarded. These materials have also been made available to markers electronically for the first time.

1.1.3 Ofqual recommendation

'When expert reviewers within the test development cycle indicate that there may be issues of minimising bias against groups of pupils such as EAL (English as an additional language), or disabled pupils, these concerns should be seriously addressed and such questions given extra consideration of their place in a test.'

QCDA response and action

Every element of the test development process is undertaken to the highest standards of professionalism. Any concerns raised about potential bias or accessibility issues are addressed.

QCDA collects a wide range of evidence throughout the test development process and evaluates a range of comments before reaching a decision about the suitability of test materials. Expert review panels, including test review groups, inclusion panels and teacher panels, review all test materials. The materials are also reviewed by QCDA's curriculum specialists, who comment on the extent to which the draft test materials appropriately reflect the national curriculum. Similarly analysis of pupils' pre-test scripts, through quantitative trialling, indicates the extent to which pupils can access the test content.

The large amount of statistical and qualitative information gathered during the pre-testing process demonstrated that there was no evidence of bias in the English writing tests.

The use of irony and sarcasm within the English reading test is legitimate as they are areas covered within the national curriculum. Had these materials been inappropriate, it would have been apparent at pre-test 1.

1.2 Training markers and supervisors

1.2.1 Ofqual recommendation

'QCDA should ensure robust mechanisms for quality assuring materials used in the marking process. Current methods of quality assuring the process of developing and delivering national curriculum assessments should be reviewed.'

QCDA response and action

QCDA is committed to self-assessment and to a programme of continuous improvement. The process of quality assuring the development and delivery of national curriculum assessments is designed to ensure compliance with the requirements of the Ofqual code of practice as a minimum.

For 2010, QCDA has gone beyond the requirements of the code of practice and introduced a formal user acceptance process where training materials (including materials used for standardisation, practice and benchmarking) are tried out by markers who have not been involved in the development of materials. These markers represent all ranks and have varying levels of experience.

This process has allowed a fresh perspective on materials early in the development process before live training begins. It has also allowed for amendments to be made within a controlled and measured environment. This new process has been very useful and successful in 2010 and will be continued in the future.

1.2.2 Ofqual recommendation

'QCDA should investigate the impact that quality assurance exercises for English and science may have had on the quality of marking and the numbers of stopped markers.'

QCDA response and action

QCDA conducted a full review of the quality assurance processes applied in the 2009 test cycle. This review was based on systematic statistical and qualitative analysis and indicated that the most likely cause of the issues around marker standardisation were overly-ambitious marking tolerances. For 2010, marking tolerances have been set on the basis of robust statistical and qualitative data and the quality assurance process has worked to expectations.

1.2.3 Ofqual recommendation

'QCDA needs to ensure that clear and consistent messages are disseminated to markers throughout the cascade.'

QCDA response and action

QCDA agrees it is important to provide clear and consistent messages to markers. In 2009, the relatively low number of calls to the marker helpdesk and feedback received from marker surveys after the marking period suggested that most markers were clear about the messages they received.

For the 2010 test cycle QCDA has reviewed the way messages are disseminated to markers to ensure consistency and clarity. We will continue to monitor the effectiveness of communications through surveys with and ongoing feedback from the marker community.

1.2.4 Ofqual recommendation

'The final version of the mark scheme should include all adjustments or clarifications. The efficacy of the mark scheme needs to be user tested by markers across a range of abilities before the commencement of the marker training process.'

QCDA response and action

QCDA welcomes Ofqual's endorsement of the improvements it has made to the quality assurance processes through the introduction of user acceptance testing (see 1.2.1).

The user acceptance testing process introduced in 2010 for the marker training, practice, standardisation and benchmark materials has provided another opportunity for feedback on the mark scheme before training the wider marker community. It has also provided an opportunity for refinements to training materials to be made before they are used within the 'live' environment.

Mark schemes were not changed after finalisation within the test development process and handover to live marking. However, training materials are used to provide further clarification of points within the mark scheme; for example, where user acceptance testing identifies a point that would benefit from further exemplification. In these circumstances it is legitimate for training materials to be amended. User acceptance testing has been introduced to ensure that any refinements are made as early in the training process as possible to minimise the impact of change as training progresses through the marking hierarchy. Where changes are required QCDA recognises the need for clear and effective communication.

1.2.5 Ofqual recommendation

'Particular consideration should be given to the structure and content of the training cascade for English, especially meetings 4, 6 and 8.'

QCDA response and action

QCDA reviews the training provided to markers after each test cycle and has worked with the test operations agency and senior markers to ensure that the structure of training delivered in 2010 is appropriate and allows sufficient time to cover all required content. Training materials for key stage 2 English in 2010 were trialled by markers of varying levels as part of the user acceptance testing process and the content was then refined to ensure thorough training delivery within the time available. Training has been delivered successfully within the 2010 test cycle and QCDA has received positive feedback about the training from English markers.

To optimise the amount of face-to-face time available for mark scheme training, much of the administrative training is covered by workbooks, which include tasks such as mark

sheet completion exercises. QCDA will keep the structure and content of training under review as part of its self-assessment and continuous improvement process.

1.2.6 Ofqual recommendation

'QCDA must ensure that the communication of marking messages and requirements between the test operations agency and marking personnel are clear. The interface between the test development agency and the test operations agency should be robustly managed by QCDA.'

QCDA response and action

As part of its ongoing improvements to quality assurance processes, QCDA has reviewed all planned communications between the test operations agency and marking personnel for the 2010 test cycle. Initial feedback regarding the clarity of communications and guidance has been positive. Evaluation exercises will be conducted for the 2010 test cycle to identify further improvements.

Additional processes have been implemented to further strengthen the interface between the test development agency and the test operations agency in 2010. The test operations agency attended mark scheme finalisation meetings and script selection meetings, and the test development agency attended additional training material development meetings.

These activities have extended the interaction between both agencies and early indications have shown that this extended handover period has impacted positively on the quality of materials and training provided to markers for the 2010 test cycle.

QCDA will evaluate marker feedback provided through the marker helpdesk and the online marker survey and will continue to identify and implement further improvements for future test cycles.