

# **Awarding Organisation Seminars for Teachers**

A preliminary report to the Secretary of State for Education on allegations made in the Daily Telegraph, December 2011



December 2011

Ofqual/11/5114

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## Introduction

1. On 8th and 9th December 2011 the Daily Telegraph published extracts from seminars provided for teachers by four awarding organisations and reported that investigative journalists had attended 13 such seminars led by AQA, OCR, Edexcel and WJEC.
2. From the coverage, it seemed that hints and real information were being given to teachers about the style and content of some questions or exams, and some extracts suggested that exams from one awarding organisation are easier than those from another.
3. On 7<sup>th</sup> December 2011 the Secretary of State for Education asked Ofqual to investigate, and to report on a preliminary basis by Christmas. This report is produced on 21st December 2011. It sets out the facts as far as we have been able to establish them, the action we have already taken and our next steps.

## Background

4. Teacher seminars are an established feature of the exam system. Nearly 4,000 courses, events or other development activities for teachers were delivered by awarding organisations in 2011. There is also a private market for seminars: private providers run seminars on exams, using readily available past papers and mark schemes.
5. Teacher seminars have their place. We require awarding organisations to make sure that schools and colleges are given advice and guidance on the teaching and assessment of qualifications. Awarding organisations can hold meetings to do this if they wish, and they do.<sup>1</sup>
6. Advice and guidance is particularly relevant when a new version of a qualification is launched. It is important that teachers understand in sufficient detail the breadth of the subject to be examined. They also need to understand how what they are teaching will be assessed.
7. Awarding organisations need to make sure that in their seminars, lines are not crossed. Seminar leads should not stray into specifics about any future question or exam, for example, although it is legitimate to speak of the nature of assessment – in effect, what the chief examiner will be looking for by way of

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<sup>1</sup> GCSE, GCE, Principal Learning and Project Code of Practice (May 2011)

<http://www.ofqual.gov.uk/downloads/category/93-codes-of-practice?download=680%3Agcse-gce-principal-learning-and-project-code-of-practice-2011>

candidate knowledge, analysis and skills, and how he would expect to see them demonstrated by candidates in the exam. Using past papers helps exemplify this.

8. There is a fine line. Seminars (and any other guidance) should not signal any narrowing of the depth or breadth of the subject to be studied for an exam. Clearly they should not be making comparisons between the exams of one awarding organisation and another. These things undermine the integrity of exams.
9. In November 2011 we were sufficiently concerned about textbooks and training materials (including seminars) to announce our intention to review them and make recommendations. We attend seminars on a spot check basis, and find them well run, in our presence, but that is not surprising. We decided to give textbooks and training materials (including seminars) priority for review because of concerns expressed by others in the wider system. The Daily Telegraph exposé provides welcome real evidence for us.

## **Our Investigation**

10. There are two issues to consider. It seemed that hints and real information were being given to teachers about the style and content of some questions or exams, first of all. Separately, some extracts suggested that exams from one awarding organisation are easier than those from another.
11. We will consider the issue of comparability (whether some exams are easier than others) later. We already do work on comparability which we need not rehearse here, save to mention two things. Firstly, a recent report<sup>2</sup> we commissioned from The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) is particularly relevant here, as it provides statistical data showing the comparability of grading standards in A level subjects. It shows that any differences between WJEC and the England-based awarding organisations observed in the past have reduced over time.
12. Secondly, we are reviewing the geography specifications referenced by the Daily Telegraph, and if the allegations about comparability prove to be substantiated we will ensure the qualification is corrected.

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<sup>2</sup> *Investigating the relationship between A level results and prior attainment at GCSE*

<http://www.ofqual.gov.uk/files/2011-09-29-investigating-the-relationship-between-a-level-results-and-prior-attainment-at-gcse.pdf>

13. Comparability aside, our immediate priority is to secure the integrity of exams to be taken in January 2012 and then next summer, and we set out below our progress so far.
14. The Daily Telegraph sent undercover reporters to 13 seminars run by four of the six awarding organisations offering GCSEs and A levels (AQA, Edexcel, OCR and WJEC). The seminars were aimed at teachers preparing students for qualifications in certain subjects. We understand that the Daily Telegraph selected particular seminars based on information from teachers and others. The Daily Telegraph recorded these events surreptitiously.
15. We have been given by the Daily Telegraph some 52 hours of audio recording and some rough transcripts of short excerpts from the audio recording. We have reviewed the rough transcripts. The recordings were not of a sufficient quality to review fully. They are being transcribed professionally, and we have prioritised transcription based on our best assessment of risk. We aim to have reviewed all these transcripts for subjects affecting the January exams by the end of this week.
16. The Daily Telegraph coverage stated that they “found that teachers were routinely given information about future questions, areas of the syllabus that would be assessed and specific words or facts students should use in their answers to win marks.” Although there are instances where the evidence reviewed to date backs up some of the allegations, most of the material we have reviewed does not show such unacceptable practice. Nonetheless, this raises questions about the role of such seminars which we will need to consider.
17. We are forwarding transcripts to the relevant awarding organisations as they are ready, again based on our best assessment of risk. Awarding organisations need to review their exam papers in the light of the transcribed material. We sent material to WJEC first of all, given what we had already seen in the exposé and then in the further material we have reviewed.
18. Awarding organisations have taken action themselves, based on material already made public. Three examiners have been suspended, two by WJEC and one by Edexcel, pending further enquiries. As awarding organisations receive transcripts from us they will consider further steps.
19. The key issue is to secure the integrity of future exams. We are doing this in four ways.
20. Firstly, awarding organisations have reviewed their controls for seminars and agreed to put in place additional controls from now on.

21. Secondly, we have instructed awarding organisations to review their published guidance and their seminar material. This is a big task, and awarding organisations are prioritising, based on their best assessment of risk and with the January and summer 2012 exams series in mind.
22. Thirdly, we will review seminars and their role for the future. Awarding organisations have welcomed that review. We have considered stopping seminars immediately, but this leaves the seminar market open to unregulated providers. We want to consider again the legitimate purposes of seminars, and the regulated and unregulated market in them. We want to consider whether the legitimate purposes of seminars are best met by seminars, or in some other way.
23. Last but not least, we have reviewed the material we have been given by the Daily Telegraph, concentrating first of all on exams to be run in January 2012.
24. Through our follow up activities, we have found that one exam has been compromised and we have instructed the relevant awarding organisation to withdraw the paper and postpone the exam. We are continuing with our review of the material as are the awarding organisations. Once this is complete we will be making a statement in January, ahead of exams starting, about what we find.

## **Compromised Exams**

25. At a WJEC seminar about a unit of a GCSE ICT qualification, attendees were told which areas of content would be assessed. This is in clear breach of regulatory requirements, and it compromises the planned exam. Some 450 candidates were due to sit the paper. It will be withdrawn, amended and sat at a later date when its integrity and quality can be assured. WJEC is informing the relevant schools and colleges.
26. The Daily Telegraph highlighted concerns about WJEC GCSE history in particular. There are no papers for this subject in the January series. We will investigate the issues relating to this qualification and other, later qualifications mentioned in the coverage when we have completed our work on the January 2012 series.

## **Next Steps**

27. We will continue to review the evidence provided by the Daily Telegraph and others, and require awarding organisations to do the same.
28. Once action has been taken on any issue identified for the January 2012 series we will focus on the summer 2012 exams.
29. We will monitor the effectiveness of the additional controls awarding organisations have put in place in relation to seminars. We will review the role of both regulated and unregulated seminars. We will report again when this work is concluded, but in the interim we will provide timely assurance that the exams that will run in January 2012 and in summer 2012 will be safe.

## Appendix A – Background

30. Ofqual is the statutory regulator of qualifications (other than degrees) and assessments in England. We also regulate vocational qualifications (other than degrees) in Northern Ireland. We were established in April 2010.
31. DfES regulate qualifications (other than degrees) in Wales. CCEA regulates qualifications (other than degrees or vocational qualifications) in Northern Ireland.
32. Ofqual regulates awarding organisations that wish to offer regulated qualifications. There are about 180 recognised awarding organisations at present, six of which offer A levels and/or GCSEs. In July 2011 we imposed on each awarding organisation a series of conditions with which they must comply.
33. The *Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act (2009)*, which gives Ofqual its powers, has just been amended by the *Education Act (2010)*. In the New Year Ofqual will, as a result, be given greater powers to take action against an awarding organisation that is not complying with its conditions. DfES will be given similar powers.
34. Where it is appropriate to do so, the three regulators work together to maintain the standards of some key qualifications – including GCSEs and A levels. We check that each awarding organisation that offers these qualifications applies the same standards. In November 2011, in response to concerns about aspects of the way the qualifications markets work, Ofqual announced a major investigation into the system. The system is complex. There are a series of interactions between the schools and colleges that in the main decide which qualifications they should teach and the awarding organisations that develop and award the qualifications.
35. Each summer exams period requires awarding organisations that offer GCSE and A level qualifications between them to:
  - set over 60,000 exam questions
  - employ and train 50,000 examiners and moderators
  - mark over 25 million separate exam scripts and items of coursework
  - issue over eight million GCE (AS and A level) and GCSE results.
36. Most of the GCSEs and A levels currently being offered were accredited by a predecessor organisation, before Ofqual was formed. The exception is the GCSE science qualifications that were introduced for first teaching in 2011.



These were accredited by Ofqual to replace the previous set of GCSEs which were insufficiently demanding. Our approach to considering whether these new qualifications were good enough was rigorous. We did not accept the first attempts of any of the awarding organisations designing these qualifications.

37. Much rests on GCSEs and A levels being properly and fairly awarded. In line with general expectations about transparency, there is information in the public domain about how qualifications work. Past papers are routinely made available. Awarding organisations publish information about their particular qualifications. The qualifications they offer vary legitimately, for example in the style of the assessments they use and in detailed aspects of the content. But the three regulators work with the awarding organisations to make sure the level of demand of the qualifications is comparable between awarding organisations.
38. As the regulator for qualifications in England it is our responsibility to ensure that A level and GCSE standards are maintained over time. Our reviews use an established methodology that is well tried and tested. Each review is carried out by subject experts and involves a study of the requirements of syllabuses and their related assessments, and the level of performance required of candidates at key grades. We publish reports reviewing standards every five years or so across all major subjects. Our aim is to establish any action we may need to take to safeguard exam standards.
39. It is also our responsibility to ensure that A level and GCSE standards are consistent between awarding organisations so that the system is fair for students. We carry out scrutinies of particular qualifications that involve comparisons between awarding organisations in a subject. As the summer awards are being made we collect emerging awarding data to ensure that there is proper consistency in the grades awarded by the different awarding organisations in each subject.
40. The healthy market investigation Ofqual has announced will be wide-reaching. In the meantime the regulatory controls and safeguards in place will be applied and enhanced if necessary.

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Any enquiries regarding this publication should be sent to us at:

Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation	
Spring Place	2nd Floor
Coventry Business Park	Glendinning House
Herald Avenue	6 Murray Street
Coventry CV5 6UB	Belfast BT1 6DN

Telephone 0300 303 3344

Textphone 0300 303 3345

Helpline 0300 303 3346