

**Research into specifications, textbooks and
assessment materials to review potential impacts
on standards**

Final Report

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Executive summary

This research was commissioned as part of Ofqual's programme of work to gather evidence on how well the qualifications market is operating. The aim of the programme is to inform any regulatory actions that may be needed where the nature of the market is having a negative impact on qualification standards.

The purpose of the review is to determine whether the content of support materials developed or endorsed by awarding organisations validate concerns expressed in Ofqual's 'Call for Evidence' that textbooks and study aids impact on standards of candidate performance by encouraging more narrowly defined and/or more predictable assessments than is acceptable.

No assumptions are made about how much influence support materials exert on day-to-day teaching and learning. Rather, the review seeks to highlight potential 'warning signs' in the content of the materials.

On the basis of Ofqual's 'Call for Evidence', GCSE Science, GCSE Mathematics and GCE English Literature were selected as important subjects to review. For each subject, the specifications from **two** awarding organisations were selected to support a systematic comparative approach to the analysis.

The sample of textbooks and study aids focuses on those materials over which the awarding organisations have the most control. In addition to the support materials and associated specifications, assessment materials including both question papers and mark-schemes were reviewed.

Key findings from the review:

The extent to which the support materials matched the requirements of the specifications in terms of breadth of coverage and level of demand varies. For some of the qualifications reviewed there is a good correspondence but in others the breadth of coverage or level of demand is not always fully realised in the support materials.

In some qualifications the emphasis on modelling answers to questions and overt references to examination practice suggests a focus on examination preparation at the expense of developing a sound understanding of the breadth and depth of the subject.

Example questions were found in some support materials that re-appeared in almost exactly the same form in examination papers, though these cases were rare. There were also some occasions when the use of a very familiar context drawn from the support materials is also used in examination questions. In both of these cases students with access to the support materials might be at an advantage compared with those without access to the materials.

Of more concern was the way in which the use of a defined ‘house-style’ for questions, which appears consistently throughout both the modelled questions in support materials and assessments for some of the qualifications, could make examination questions more predictable even if the content of the question is technically ‘new’.

The extent to which the awarding organisations’ ‘own’ materials are promoted through specifications and across associated materials varies. There is concern about the extent to which the specifications themselves should be used to ‘promote’ the quality of associated support materials (for example by stressing that these have been “developed by examiners”).

Concerns are also raised about the impact of implicit claims within support materials that their use could increase the chances of examination success. Although such statements from awarding organisations may be accompanied by disclaimers, they suggest a potential conflict of interest in relation to the award of qualifications in accordance with their Conditions of Recognition.

The key conclusion of the review is that **some** textbooks and other teaching support materials do appear to increase the predictability of examination questions and give advantage to students with access to the materials. In addition, there is evidence that some materials provide a narrower interpretation of the relevant specification through an over-emphasis on ‘passing the examination’ at the expense of developing a broad and deep understanding of the subject.

It is also clear that good quality materials can be created by awarding organisations that accurately reflect the requirements of a specification and actively avoid the potential for conflict of interest. This ‘best practice’ should be used by all awarding organisations when developing and publishing materials in the future.

Recommendations arising from the review:

1. Ofqual and awarding organisations should consider whether explicit ‘marketing’ of support materials within specifications is appropriate under the General Conditions of Regulation.
2. Ofqual and other bodies involved in determining the mechanisms by which subject content for GCE and GCSE qualifications is specified in the future should consider carefully how content expectation should be defined. A lack of detail in specifications and criteria increases the potential for textbooks and study aids to have a direct (and potentially detrimental) impact on the content and quality of the qualifications.
3. Ofqual should consider how its monitoring programme could be developed to include scrutiny of support materials as evidence for compliance with Condition A4 of the General Conditions of Regulation.

4. Awarding organisations should discourage their examiners from drawing extensively on contexts used in examples within the support materials, when equally valid alternative contexts exist.
5. Ofqual, awarding organisations and other stakeholders involved in qualifications development in the future should take account of the impact of house-style and specimen questions on the predictability of examinations during the development and monitoring of assessments.
6. The General Conditions of Recognition should be amended to strengthen the requirements on awarding organisations to reduce the potential for conflicts of interest to arise during the production and marketing of support materials.

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