

Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual)

Report

to Parliament

1st April 2011– 31st December 2014

Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) Report to Parliament

For the period 1st April 2011 to 31st December 2014

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Foreword

We are pleased to introduce our second report to Parliament, covering our most notable work over the period from April 2011 to December 2014.

This report is in three parts. Firstly, we provide an overview of our work on standards, showing how we have prioritised and interpreted our statutory objectives, and delivered against them. Secondly, we deal with the reform of GCSEs, AS and A levels alongside vocational qualifications. In part three, we detail our regulatory approach, and the actions we have taken in progressing the detailed provisions in our enabling legislation, so as to maintain and, where necessary, enforce standards.

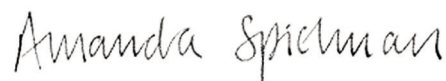
We believe we have developed effective regulatory approaches and dealt with standards issues immediately as they have arisen. What is more, we have spent an increasing proportion of our time and resource on detection and prevention rather than on more reactive work, while also implementing significant reforms to GCSEs, AS and A levels as well as to vocational qualifications.

As the Education Select Committee recommended in 2012,¹ we continue to build assessment expertise. We are particularly indebted to those external experts who participate in our Standards Advisory Group and Vocational Advisory Group,² who provide advice on qualification and assessment standards issues.

Even with the benefit of this expertise, we must inevitably prioritise our work, and we find there is always more that can and should be done. Our priorities for the future are set out in our *Corporate Plan*³ for the period 2014–17.



Glenys Stacey, Chief Regulator



Amanda Spielman, Chair

1. Education Committee (2012): *The administration of examinations for 15-19 year olds in England*. Available at: www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmselect/cmeduc/141/14108.htm

2. Membership of our Board, Standards Advisory Group and Vocational Advisory Group can be found here: www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofqual/about/our-governance

3. Our Corporate Plan for the period of 2014-17 is available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofquals-corporate-plan-for-2014-to-2017

Our role

Government decides the National Curriculum used by primary and secondary schools, the qualifications that can be offered in schools, and the accountability framework by which schools are evaluated. It also determines the vocational qualifications that can be taught in schools and colleges, and the framework for qualifications used in apprenticeships.

Our job is to make sure qualifications are of the right standard and that the qualifications system works well so that those who take or rely on qualifications can have confidence in them. The UK Parliament has determined that we shall be independent, and has set us objectives that require us to maintain the currency and worth of regulated qualifications.

We have five statutory objectives. These are set out in the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009. In brief, they are to:

1. secure qualifications standards;
2. promote assessment standards;⁴
3. promote public confidence in regulated qualifications and assessment arrangements;
4. promote awareness of the range of regulated qualifications and the benefits of regulation;
5. secure that regulated qualifications are provided efficiently.

In 2011, Parliament amended our first objective, requiring us to ensure that attainment in English qualifications was consistent with that in comparable qualifications in other countries, as well as over time in England. In the same year, Parliament increased our regulatory powers, most notably with the power to fine awarding organisations up to 10 per cent of their turnover.

4. National Assessment standards.

We regulate awarding organisations that offer qualifications⁵ in England and those that provide vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland.⁶ We do not regulate degrees. Education and skills policy is devolved and we are conscious of qualifications policy in each administration, as we regulate.

Awarding organisations and their qualifications

The number of awarding organisations we regulate fell from 183 in 2011 to 165 in December 2014 as a consequence of voluntary withdrawal and/or regulatory action. Only four awarding organisations are recognised as 'exam boards' providing GCSEs, AS and A levels. Individual awarding organisations offer significantly different portfolios of qualifications. Some offer only a handful of niche or specialist qualifications, whereas a few offer portfolios including several hundred qualifications, and two (City & Guilds and Pearson) offer thousands.

In December 2014, there were nearly 21,887 regulated qualifications available, a 35 per cent increase over the period covered in this report.⁷ The biggest change has been in the number of Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) qualifications on offer, which rose from 8,121 to 18,805.

5. A qualification is regulated by us if it is: (a) awarded by an awarding organisation we have recognised to provide the qualification; and (b) if at least some students are being assessed for the qualification in England or (if they are taking vocational qualifications) Northern Ireland.

6. In Northern Ireland, we regulate free-standing maths qualifications, English for speakers of other languages, key skills, basic skills, higher level qualifications, the QCF, vocationally-related qualifications, national vocational qualifications and occupational qualifications.

7. There were 16,169 regulated qualifications available at the end of April 2011.

Part 1

Securing qualifications standards

Assessment experts, exam boards and other commentators have suggested that this should be our primary focus,⁸ and we take the same view. Our enabling legislation does not define 'qualifications standards', leaving us to interpret the expression. We think of qualifications' standards in three ways:

1. the content standard – the subject content for the qualification;
2. the assessment standard – the quality of the assessment;
3. the performance standard – where the bar is set.

To be fit for purpose, qualifications must measure the right skills and knowledge sufficiently well, enabling people to trust qualification results, knowing that they are meaningful, useful and appropriate. This is known as **validity**. Qualifications and assessments are sufficiently valid if the results mean what they say, and can be relied upon.

Content standards

GCSE, AS and A level reform

The subject content of GCSEs, AS and A levels is set by government (in mainstream subjects) or else by exam boards. Our job is to make sure the content is of sufficient but not undue size, it represents a coherent programme of study, and it can be assessed sufficiently well, to produce valid and reliable results.

In 2011, we reviewed the extent to which content was sufficiently covered and assessed in a selection of established GCSEs. We chose to focus on GCSEs where competition between exam boards on content was most keen. We found shortcomings in English literature, geography and history, and we required the exam boards to make improvements to

subject coverage and assessment. Students were first assessed on the new content in summer 2014.

In 2012, in an initiative known as World Class Qualifications, the Government considered introducing alternatives to GCSEs, and we put standards comparison work on hold, pending developments. The Government subsequently decided to reform all GCSEs, AS and A levels, and therefore, we focused on the content proposed for the new qualifications. By December 2014 we had reviewed and accepted from the Government the proposed subject content for GCSEs, AS and A levels. In several cases, we recommended changes prior to the Government's public consultations, so as to ensure appropriate content size. For example, at GCSE, we recommended size reductions in English literature and history, and a reduction and other refinements in religious studies. All of our recommendations were accepted by the Government.

In 2013, we accepted exceptional content for the new GCSE in maths. There is more content than in its previous version, with more stretching content targeted at more able students, and consequently this GCSE is noticeably bigger than those in other subjects. We think this is necessary to make sure attainment in maths qualifications is consistent with that in comparable qualifications in other countries, and to prepare well those students who intend to study maths further.

Other qualifications

Government is not responsible for the subject content of other qualifications. Instead, it is determined by awarding organisations, usually in consultation with intended users and sometimes through sector skills councils. We find these arrangements wanting in some respects, and, in any event, sector skills councils no longer fulfil the role they once did. In 2014, we determined to change our regulatory approach so as to require all awarding organisations to demonstrate how they can make sure the content of their qualifications is fit for purpose and kept up to date. We also began auditing

8. Education Committee (2012): *The administration of examinations for 15-19 year olds in England*. Available at: www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmselect/cmeduc/141/14108.htm

awarding organisations, requiring evidence of their approach to determining and reviewing subject content.

Qualifications and Credit Framework reform

The QCF was launched in 2008 as a reforming framework for adult vocational qualifications. With its requirements for a uniform building-block approach to learning, qualifications and credit transfer, the intention was that it would improve the quality of vocational qualifications, support progression and enhance mobility. However, it has become clear that this centrally driven initiative has not worked. The QCF rules have often not delivered their intended outcomes, and sometimes stood in the way of the development of consistently good, valid and reliable qualifications.

In July 2014, we published a consultation about withdrawing the regulatory arrangements for the QCF rules in England and Northern Ireland.⁹ In preparation, we considered the reports commissioned by Government¹⁰ into vocational education, apprenticeships and adult vocational qualifications, and noted its comments about the QCF.

When we analysed the responses to our consultation, it was clear there were a range of views. Some respondents disagreed with parts of our proposals, but no-one identified significant barriers to our main proposal to withdraw the rules.

9. *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework*. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/371294/2008-08-15-regulatory-arrangements-qcf-august08.pdf

10. Department for Business Innovation & Skills (2014) *Getting the job done: The Government's Reform Plan for Vocational Qualifications*. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/286749/bis-14-577-vocational-qualification-reform-plan.pdf

UK Commission for Employment and Skills (2013) *Review of Adult Vocational Qualifications in England*. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/303906/review-of-adult-vocational-qualifications-in-england-final.pdf

Indeed, removal of the rules was welcomed by more than half of the 138 respondents, including many educationalists and awarding organisations. There was wide appreciation among the awarding organisations that removal of the rules would increase their flexibility to design more innovative and appropriate qualifications to better meet the needs of users.

In early 2015, we will publicly consult on our implementation plans, setting out the detail of any new Conditions and guidance needed to support the removal of the QCF rules.

Assessment standards

Exam assessment

Under the arrangements we inherited from our predecessors, exam boards were free to develop and change their assessment styles and quality without sufficient transparency, with a consequential risk to standards. We now require assessment strategies from the exam boards and undertake greater scrutiny, not just at accreditation but as assessments are run. Essential to this is that assessments can actually be done.



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In 2011, some exam board papers contained mistakes in the way questions were presented, and in a few cases this made the question impossible to answer. We conducted a detailed investigation and required exam boards to take remedial action so that, so far as was possible, no student was unfairly disadvantaged or advantaged.

We identified a number of risk factors around the procedures in place for exam paper production.

These included insufficient focus on quality early in the question paper setting process, leading to changes being made late on and a lack of clarity around the roles, responsibilities and accountability for those involved in the production process. The investigation also found quality assurance issues in all exam boards. We required the exam boards to undertake actions to reduce the likelihood of future mistakes, including changes to systems, processes and working practices in exam paper production. The exam boards were also required to provide assurance on additional checking measures and submit regular progress reports.

Since 2011 the number of exam paper errors has fallen significantly.¹¹

We are particularly interested in the comparability of the demand and difficulty of exam assessments at subject level at GCSE, AS and A level. In 2012, we began the implementation of changes to the assessment arrangements for current GCSEs, to end modular sittings and re-sittings, and to introduce the assessment of spelling, punctuation and grammar in selected subjects. The transition was completed in June 2014.

In 2013, we removed January-series assessments from AS and A levels. Students in England were no longer able to sit A level exams in January in either their first or second year of A level studies.

Non-exam assessment

In 2010 we commissioned a survey of schools to gather evidence on the nature and scale of problems in controlled assessment. We found a mixed picture, with controlled assessment seen as more of a problem in some subjects than others. Some schools reported they were struggling with the practical issues of operating controlled assessment, while others reported they had put in place systems to manage it.

11. The combined number of GCSE, AS and A level question paper errors across AQA, OCR, Pearson and WJEC was 21 in 2012, 14 in 2013, and 16 in 2014.

In response to feedback, we reviewed controlled assessment from first principles. We needed to understand whether it was providing a valid assessment of elements that could not be conducted in a written exam, and whether it was helping to differentiate between students. The outcomes of our review were published in 2013.¹²

Many GCSEs were found to include content that could not be assessed in a written exam. But, in some cases we found that what was actually being assessed was not what was intended. For example, for students taking foreign languages, controlled assessment was encouraging them to prepare a piece of writing and memorise it. The writing task was predominantly a test of memory skills.¹³

We also found that the more specific controls, which were intended to provide greater consistency for students and teachers, had not always been effective. For example, where students were allowed to use their notes, but not an essay plan, to produce the final piece of work, it was difficult in practice to agree on the difference between notes and an essay plan. This placed a considerable responsibility on teachers to interpret exam board guidance, and led to concerns that they may be interpreting the guidance either too strictly or too loosely compared with teachers at other schools.

Based on our findings, we developed a set of principles to apply in reformed GCSE qualifications:

1. Non-exam assessment should only be used when it is the only valid way to assess essential elements of the subject.
2. Non-exam assessment must strike a balance between the valid assessment of essential

12. *Review of Controlled Assessment in GCSEs*. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/377903/2013-06-11-review-of-controlled-assessment-in-GCSEs.pdf

13. In future, GCSE modern foreign language exams will have 25 per cent non-exam assessment compared with 60 per cent currently.

knowledge and skills, sound assessment practice and manageability.

3. Any non-exam assessment arrangements should be designed to fit the requirements of the particular subject, including the relative weighting of written exams and other components.
4. Non-exam assessment should be designed so that the qualification is not easily distorted by external pressures.

Predictability of assessment

We reviewed a number of GCSE and A level subjects in 2012 to check the extent to which exam-board-approved textbooks could increase the predictability of their exam questions. We found evidence that some support materials appeared to increase predictability and potentially narrow the extent of the syllabus content being taught and then assessed. We required the withdrawal of some materials, and obtained undertakings from exam boards in relation to future materials.

Concordat with the Welsh Government

The devolution of education policy has meant that qualifications and regulatory policy has developed and diverged across England, Wales and Northern Ireland, in response to the respective needs of the jurisdictions. In recognition of the changes to GCSEs, AS and A levels, and the likely pronounced divergence, we signed a concordat with Welsh Ministers in 2013, setting out new ways working. The Welsh Government has more recently announced its intention to legislate to establish a new qualifications and regulatory body, Qualifications Wales.

Performance standards

GCSEs, AS and A levels

At the time of our inception, GCSE, AS and A level results had risen year on year for decades.

It was not known to what extent these rises represented real increases in attainment, as opposed to grade inflation, and this uncertainty led to public unease. Assessment experts now agree that students achieved more, and their achievements were

inflated a little, year-on-year.¹⁴ But it is not possible to determine the balance in any one year or over time.

In October 2011, we hosted a standards summit to stimulate and inform public debate. Speakers included the then Secretary of State for Education Michael Gove, Professor Robert Coe¹⁵ and Professor Jo-Anne Baird.¹⁶ This was a turning point which legitimised an ongoing and increasingly informed debate about standards.



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Since our inception, we have acted to contain grade inflation, while seeking to make sure student achievements are fully reflected in their results. We apply a variation of what is known as the 'comparable outcomes' approach (see box on grading exam papers on page 16). Since we first applied this approach in 2012, there has been a levelling off in the growth of the percentage of higher grades awarded to students (see charts 3 and 4 on page 15).

By applying this approach, year-on-year increases that are outside accepted tolerances and cannot be justified no longer happen. But if there is evidence to show that national student performance has genuinely improved, the proportion of higher grades awarded can increase.

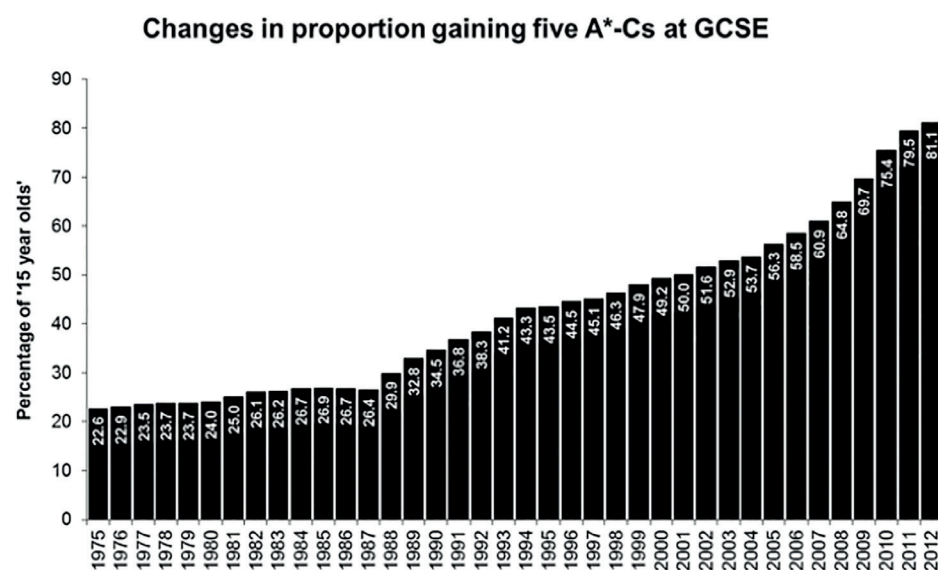
14. See, for example: Coe, Professor R. (2011) *Do rises in GCSE and A level grades reflect genuine increase in attainment?* Available at: www.slideshare.net/ofqual/do-rises-in-gcse-and-a-level-grades-reflect-genuine-increase-in-attainment

15. Director of the Centre for Evaluation and Monitoring, Durham University.

16. Director of the Oxford University Centre for Educational Assessment.

Chart 1:

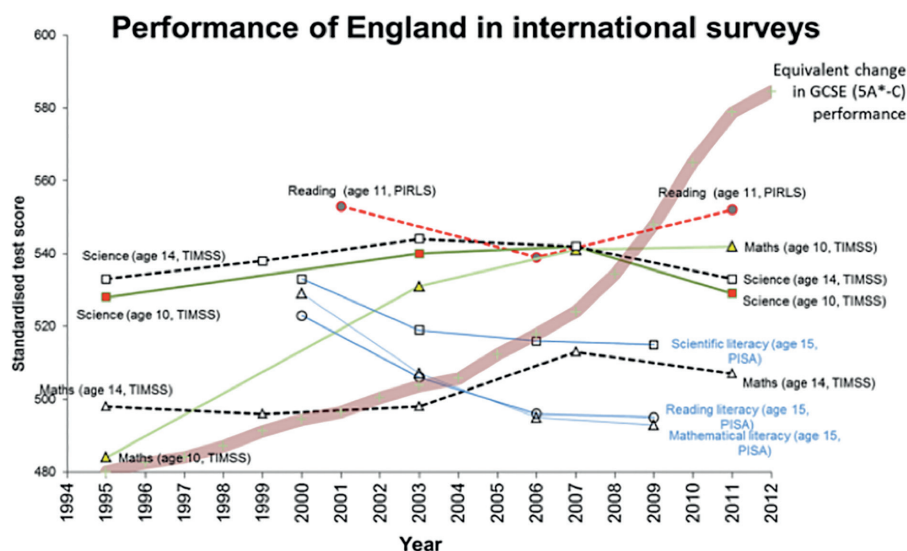
Changes in the proportion of students gaining five A*s to Cs at GCSE



Source: Coe, Professor R. (2013) *Improving Education: A triumph of hope over experience*. Durham, Centre for Evaluation & Monitoring.¹⁷

Chart 2:

Changes in performance of students in England in international surveys, compared with changes in performance of students at GCSE

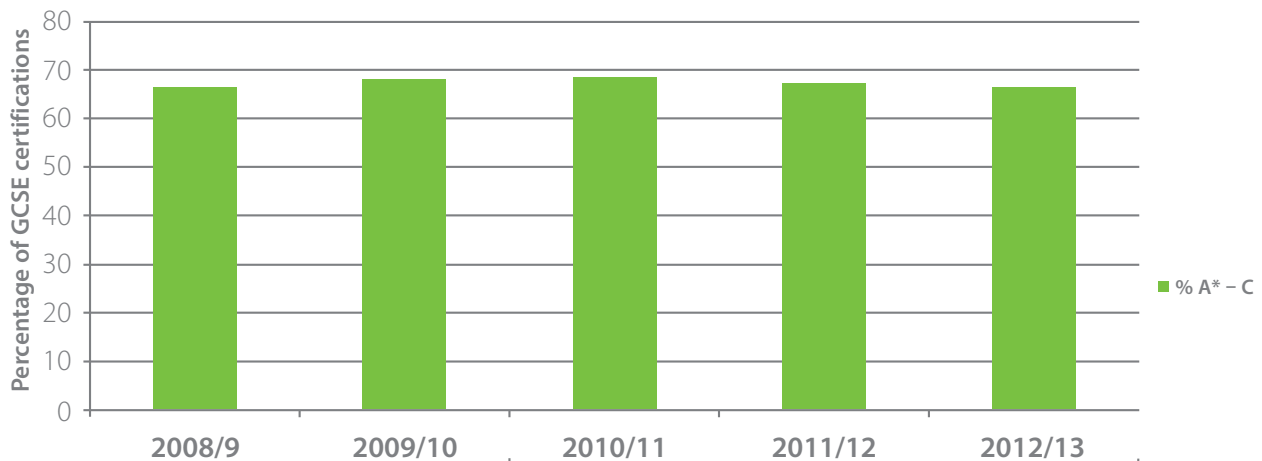


Source: Coe, Professor R. (2013) *Improving Education: A triumph of hope over experience*. Durham, Centre for Evaluation & Monitoring.¹⁸

17 & 18. Coe, Professor R. (2013) *Improving Education: A triumph of hope over experience*. Durham, Centre for Evaluation & Monitoring. Available at: www.cem.org/attachments/publications/ImprovingEducation2013.pdf

Chart 3:

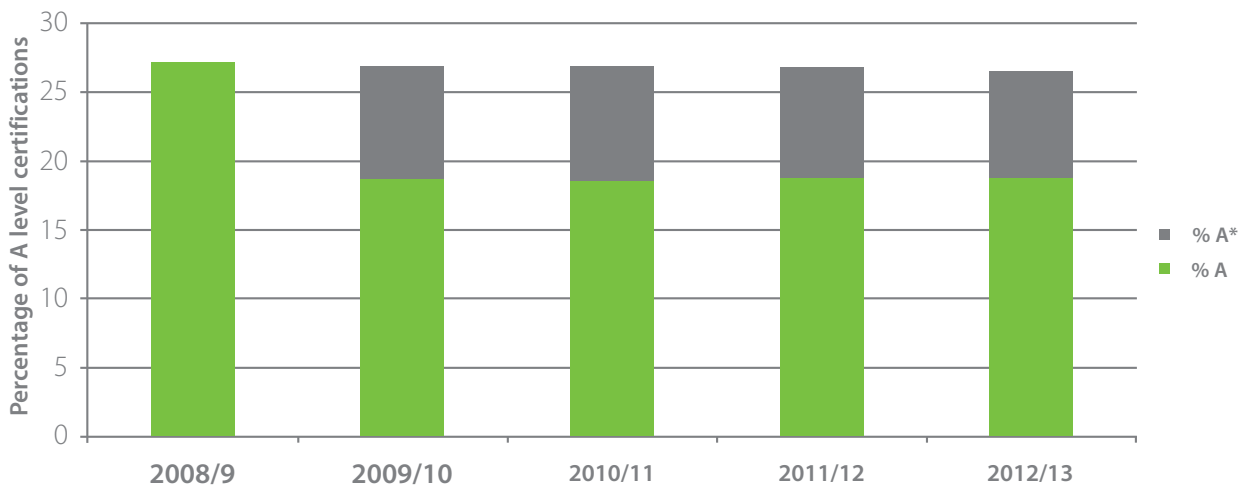
Percentage of GCSE certifications that are A* – C grades in England by academic year 2008/9 – 2013/13



- 2007–10 figures are final statistics published by the Joint Council for Qualifications;
- 2011–13 figures are provisional statistics published by Joint Council for Qualifications;
- GCSEs do not include applied GCSEs;
- grades classified as 'U', 'ABS' or 'N' have been excluded.

Chart 4:

Percentage of A level certifications that are A* or A grade in England by academic year 2008/9 – 2012/13



- 2007–10 figures are final statistics published by Joint Council for Qualifications;
- 2011–13 figures are provisional statistics published by Joint Council for Qualifications;
- A levels do not include applied A levels or AS levels;
- Grades classified as 'U', 'ABS' and 'N' have been excluded.

Grading exam papers

A small group of senior examiners (awarders) within each exam board decides, for each assessment, the minimum mark that will be needed for key grades towards the top, bottom and middle of the grade range. These are known as grade boundaries. Once these key grade boundaries are set, others are determined arithmetically.

Experience and research evidence shows¹⁹ it is difficult for awarders to make grade boundary judgements accurately and consistently simply by looking at students' work. Statistical information is crucial to the awarding process.

The exam boards aim to make sure the grade standards are in line with those in previous years, and across exam boards, so that it is not easier or harder to obtain a particular grade in one year or with one exam board. Statistical information is essential to secure that comparability. Exam boards use a variety of statistical evidence to guide the awarders' decisions. This includes how students have performed on the paper/task as a whole and at question level.

At our request, since 2010, exam boards have also used information about how the cohort of students performs in their GCSEs in order to set AS and A level standards. Since 2011 they have also used information about how students perform in their Key Stage 2 tests, relative to the performance of previous cohorts. This evidence indicates whether the cohort overall was particularly strong or weak compared with previous years, which could explain why its performance might be expected to be stronger or weaker than that of previous cohorts.

Each exam board creates predicted outcomes for the cohort of students for each of its specifications. Wherever actual and predicted outcomes differ beyond a given reporting tolerance, depending on entry size, the relevant exam board informs the qualifications regulators and other exam boards of the details. The tolerances in recent years have been: 1 per cent for specifications with an entry size greater than 3,001; 2 per cent between 1,001 and 3,000; and 3 per cent between 501 and 1,000.

The exam boards aim to set questions/tasks of similar demand year-on-year, but in practice a question/task might prove to be unexpectedly easy or difficult for the students taking the qualification. Therefore, the grade boundaries are set each year in response to evidence on the difficulty of the assessments. Grade boundaries are not automatically carried over from one year to the next.

19. See, for example: Baird, J (2007) *Alternative conceptions of comparability in Newton*, P.N, Baird, J., Goldstein, H., Patrick, H. and Tymms, P. (Eds). Techniques for monitoring the comparability of examination standards. London, Qualifications and Curriculum Authority.

Developing our approach

Evidence to show if performance has genuinely improved (or declined) is not always easy to find, or straightforward for exam boards. And, although our approach is accepted, some school leaders and teachers are concerned that it could mask genuine improvements in student performance. We appreciate these concerns, and have considered alternative approaches and looked at how others do it.

In 2014, we consulted on possible approaches to setting grade standards in new GCSEs.²⁰ Most respondents to the consultation favoured our current approach over the other known approaches (criterion-referencing, norm-referencing and their variations). We concluded that neither a criterion-referenced nor a norm-referenced approach was suitable. We aim instead to continue to develop and adapt the current approach.

In due course, the introduction of a national reference test will provide additional evidence to support awarding decisions, and address the concern that real improvements in student performance may not be reflected in the grades awarded. We aim to pilot the test in 2016, and use it in earnest from 2017 onwards. Our design has been influenced by a visit to Hong Kong in 2013 to see in detail how the authorities there had developed and implemented a similar test.

Specific performance standards issues

Now our approach to overseeing awarding is established, we rarely experience standard-setting issues. Exam boards are increasingly familiar with the approach and have the opportunity to raise with us any issues or concerns in specific subjects or years, well ahead of awarding. We have never directed an exam board to change a provisional²¹ award. We have achieved our standards objectives through meetings

20. *Setting the Grade Standards of New GCSEs in England*. Available at: <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+/http://comment.ofqual.gov.uk/setting-the-grade-standards-of-new-gcses-april-2014>

21. Awards are provisional until agreed by us.

with and formal letters to exam boards, but we would not hesitate to direct should it be necessary.

When performance standards issues do arise, they usually relate to new qualifications. New and more challenging GCSE science qualifications were awarded for the first time in 2012. To reflect the more demanding qualifications, we made sure that students had to perform at a higher standard than in previous years in order to achieve the same grade. This contributed to a 2.2 per cent decrease in the proportion of students achieving grades A* to C in GCSE science in 2012. We took a similar approach in summer 2013 in overseeing awards in new and more challenging GCSEs in physics, chemistry, biology and additional science.



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GCSE English in 2012

New GCSEs in all subjects were planned from 2007 and introduced in 2009 and 2010. They were in many cases significantly different from those they replaced, and the changes to English were greater than for any other subject.

Previously, all students studied GCSE English and four out of five also studied English literature. The content of each qualification changed in 2010 when these two GCSEs were replaced with three GCSEs: in English, English language and English literature.

The changes brought added complexity for exam boards and schools, and concerns arose in 2012 when the first published results showed higher than anticipated variation.

We investigated²² and found that many of the problems experienced were linked to flaws in qualification design. Key features we highlighted included: the modular structure and high degree of flexibility; the high proportion of controlled assessment; and generous standard marking tolerances. These were combined with significant pressures from the school accountability system.

In our view, no single factor was responsible for the ensuing concerns about the results; instead, it was the combination of all these factors. Such was the concern, a consortium of local authorities, schools and students took judicial review proceedings against us and two exam boards (AQA and Edexcel), challenging (unsuccessfully) the GCSE English 2012 results.




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The judicial review concentrated on the probity of the grade awarding process and the way we and the exam boards dealt with problems once they had arisen, rather than examining the design features of the qualifications in depth. However, in his judgement, Lord Justice Elias endorsed our view, concluding that “it was indeed the structure of the qualification itself which is the source of such unfairness as has been demonstrated in this case,” rather than any unlawful action by us or the exam boards.

We took immediate action to address some of the problems. For example, we prevented the

22. *GCSE English 2012*. Available at: <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20140813095715/http://ofqual.gov.uk/files/2012-11-02-gcse-english-final-report-and-appendices.pdf>

publication of controlled assessment outcomes prior to final awards. We subsequently took the decision to separate the reporting of speaking and listening results, rather than consolidating these results as part of the overall student grade. We were aware that students generally performed better in speaking and listening units than in other units, whether in controlled assessment or written exams. Removing speaking and listening from grade outcomes without any regulatory intervention would have resulted in a 4 to 9 per cent drop in A* to C achievements, year on year. Following consultation, we applied a comparable outcomes approach to first awarding in 2014, so as to smooth the transition. National results remained steady, but those schools particularly dependent on speaking and listening results in the past will have had to make corresponding improvements in results on written controlled assessments and in exams to keep up their A* to C performance.

Performance standards in new GCSEs, AS and A levels

Performance standards for new AS and A levels²³ are to remain the same,²⁴ and standards will continue to be set using current methodology. The position is different for new GCSEs, where we are introducing a new grading scale and changing the way students are assessed in line with new more demanding exams.²⁵ It would not be possible for us to maintain consistency between the current and new qualifications, given the significant changes. However, we intend to protect the interests of the first students taking the new GCSEs, using our established approach to awarding.

When new AS and A levels were introduced in 2001 and 2002 as part of Curriculum 2000 it was

23. The first new AS and A levels are due to be taught from September 2015 and first awarded in summer 2017.

24. www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/278146/SoS_January_2013_ofqual_letter_alevels_v2.pdf

25. www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/278308/sos_ofqual_letter_060213.pdf

decided that, as a cohort, the first students should be awarded the grades they would have been expected to receive had they taken the old syllabuses. For example, about the same proportion of students would be awarded a grade A in the new qualification as had been awarded that grade in the previous version. This was achieved by statistically driven awarding. This approach is seen as the fairest way to treat most of the students, and has become known as the ethical imperative.

In early 2014, we consulted on our proposal to use this approach for new GCSEs, and we have subsequently confirmed that we will.²⁶

Performance standards in other qualifications

It is important that GCSEs, AS and A levels in each subject are sufficiently comparable with each other in key respects, including the performance standard. To enable this, we require exam boards to meet published qualification and subject criteria and to award in accordance with our rules. We do not regulate the many other regulated qualifications in the same way.

We have considered our approach to these other regulated qualifications and prioritised those competing with GCSEs, AS and A levels. It will be important, following GCSE reform, that incentives are not put in place for schools to choose potentially less demanding substitute qualifications. The decisions of schools would be influenced by the inclusion of competing qualifications in performance league tables. We have provided Ministers with our views in this area, in particular IGCSEs.

International standards

In June 2012, we concluded a comprehensive international study comparing the demand of pre-university qualifications available to students in England, Wales and Northern Ireland against a range

of broadly equivalent qualifications in other parts of the world in four subjects: maths, English, chemistry and history.

We found that A levels generally compared well to other qualifications in preparing more able students for university study.²⁷ We also found aspects of the international qualifications that we could learn from, such as the role of independent research and extended essays, and the use of different forms of assessment and question types. Our findings have influenced our decision-making on the tiering arrangements in GCSE maths, our approach to the assessment of practical science at GCSE and A level, and our approach to grading and standards setting in new GCSEs in future.

As part of our evaluation of the demand of new GCSE maths specifications, we have looked at how, internationally, others structure their qualifications. As the year ends, PhD maths students have been asked to judge the relative difficulty of questions from sample assessment materials for new GCSE maths specifications against questions from current GCSE maths papers and questions from a number of international jurisdictions.²⁸ Once these judgements have been made, we will evaluate which questions were perceived to be of greater and lesser mathematical demand, and how reliable the judgements were. These results, alongside those from a number of other strands of research, will then collectively inform our regulatory decisions in this area.

26. *Setting Standards for New GCSEs in 2017*. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/news/setting-standards-for-new-gcses-in-2017

27. *International Comparisons in Senior Secondary Assessment*. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/372211/2012-06-12-international-comparisons-in-senior-secondary-assessment.pdf

28. China, Hong Kong, Hungary, Japan, Korea, Netherlands, New Zealand, Canada, Scotland and the US.

Promoting National Assessment standards

We are required to promote valid National Assessments, and to monitor and report to the Secretary of State for Education any difficulties or concerns. Since our inception, both the assessments themselves and the responsibilities for their design and delivery have changed.

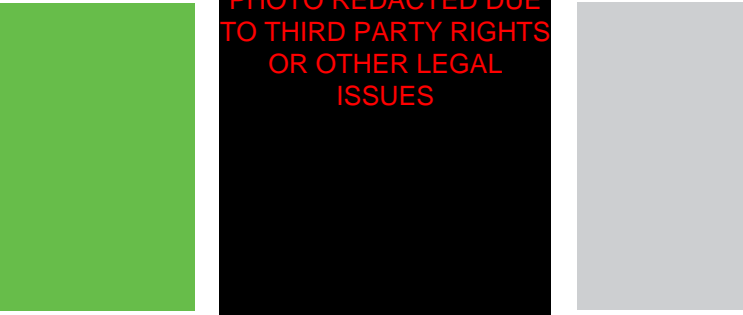


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Promoting valid National Assessments

Throughout the period covered by this report, we have provided Government with formal and informal advice on National Assessment development. Significant changes to National Assessments were proposed as a result of two independent reviews set up by Government. Dame Clare Tickell led a review of the Early Years Foundation Stage and Lord Paul Bew the review of Key Stage 2 testing and accountability. We contributed evidence to the Tickell Review and had observer membership of the Bew Panel.

Monitoring National Assessments

The 2011/12 school year saw considerable change to National Assessments with: the first use of the new Phonics Screening Check for all Year 1 pupils; the introduction of externally marked, optional Level 6 tests in reading and maths for the most able pupils at Key Stage 2; and, following the recommendations of the Bew Review, the end of the statutory Key Stage 2 writing test and the trial of arrangements for external moderation of teacher assessment in a sample of schools. We monitored the development and implementation of these changes.

Summer 2012 also saw the pilot of the revised assessment arrangements for the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage, as recommended by the

Tickell Review. We defined (with the Department for Education) both the purpose of the proposed new assessments – at age 2 to 3 and the end of Reception Year – and the intended uses of the outcomes. We gathered evidence from schools about their understanding of the new arrangements, analysed pilots carried out by the Standards and Testing Agency, and commented on the changes in relation to the criteria of the regulatory framework.

Reporting to the Secretary of State

We published annual reports on National Assessments in 2010/11 and 2011/12.²⁹ They contained recommendations, where appropriate. While there were areas where we voiced concerns to other agencies, there were no significant failings.

In October 2011, the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency's involvement in National Assessments ceased formally and the Standards and Testing Agency was established within the Department for Education. We agreed that we would leave in place our existing *Regulatory Framework for National Assessments*,³⁰ which had been published in February 2011, and we committed to review it once the Standards and Testing Agency had been in place for a reasonable period.

The first administration in 2012 of the Phonics Screening Check of all pupils in Year 1 went ahead without any significant problems. We observed the setting of the new national standard, considered the first results and provided comments on the

29. *National Assessment Arrangements 2010/11 Report*. Available at: <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20141031164038/http://ofqual.gov.uk/documents/national-assessment-arrangements-201011-report/>

National Assessment Arrangements 2011/12 Report. Available at: <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20141031164038/http://ofqual.gov.uk/documents/national-assessment-arrangements-201112-report/>

30. *Regulatory Framework for National Assessments*. Available at: <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20141031163546/http://ofqual.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/2011-regulatory-framework-for-national-assessments.pdf>

Standards and Testing Agency’s technical report. During 2012 and 2013, we looked at evidence and provided comments on new arrangements and guidance published by the Standards and Testing Agency. These related particularly to: the revised Early Years Foundation Stage Framework, which came into force in September 2012; the introduction of the new Key Stage 2 tests of grammar, punctuation and spelling, for which new standards were established in the summer of 2013; and the first statutory arrangements for the external moderation of Key Stage 2 teacher assessment of writing.

Future plans

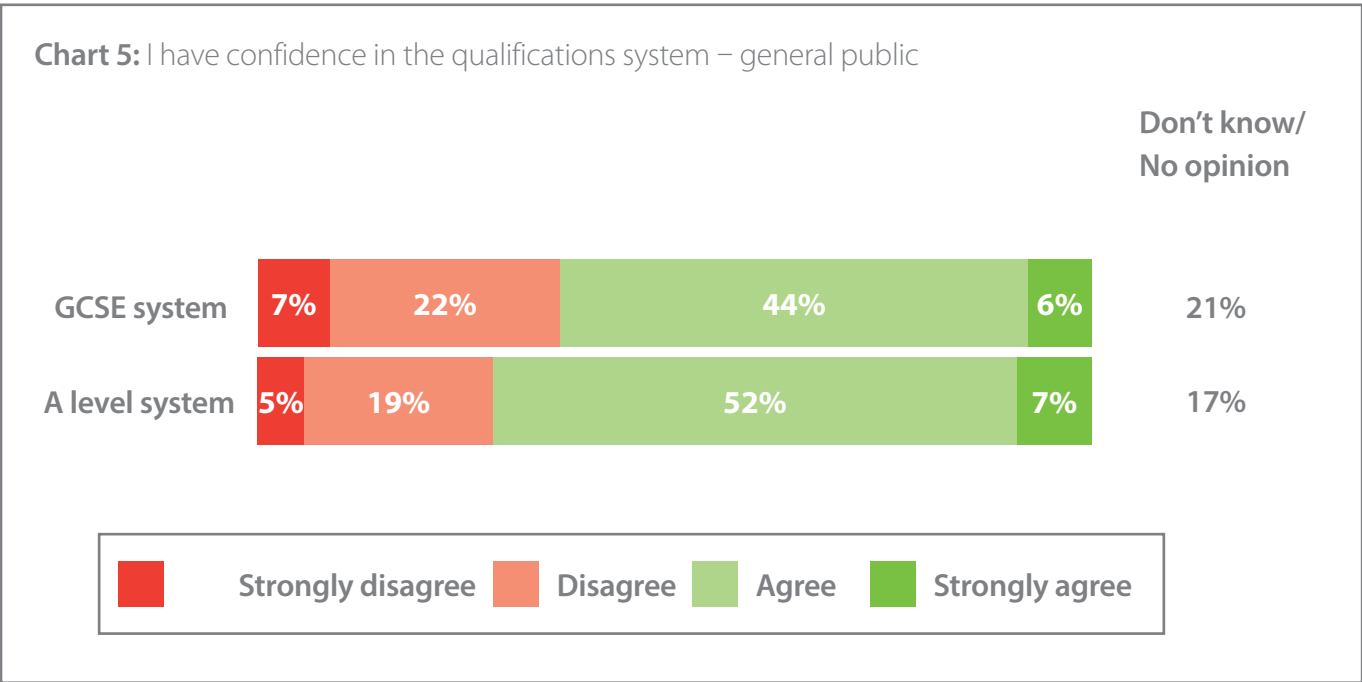
Parliament has made sure that our enabling legislation has reasonable oversight of National Assessment delivery, given the failings of the past. As delivery arrangements have changed and developed, with a non-executive agency responsible directly to the Department for Education, we have

proposed that we change focus, concentrating more on our statutory duty to promote valid National Assessments.

Promoting public confidence

We are seeking to promote public confidence by delivering valid and more reliable qualifications.

Public confidence is difficult to measure accurately as it is often influenced by media coverage and immediate events. Confidence in some aspects of qualifications can improve as it falls in other areas. Since 2003, a perceptions survey has been conducted to evaluate confidence in A levels and GCSEs. Over time, confidence in both has risen. In 2014, confidence in the A level system among all groups – those with direct experience and the public – was high. As in previous surveys, confidence in the GCSE system was somewhat lower (see chart 5).



Confidence in the content of qualifications

We anticipate public confidence in GCSEs, AS and A levels will rise as we regulate new, refreshed content much more tightly. This should be bolstered by our decision to require that the content in any subject offered at GCSE, AS or A level is sufficiently demanding.

For other qualifications, we anticipate public confidence in their content to increase as we remove rules and require awarding organisations to demonstrate how they will ensure good content for every qualification.



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Confidence in the performance standards of qualifications

We have taken steps ahead of awarding to explain to schools, the public and journalists the factors that are likely to alter results year on year even while standards have been maintained. We understand from school representatives that this has been welcomed and built more trust in results.

We continue to be open and transparent about awarding, consulting the public whenever appropriate. Over time, and as we continue to develop our approach, we believe that confidence in performance standards will build. Schools are rightly concerned whether or not small changes in achievement year on year can be detected, and we plan to further develop our approach through national reference tests.

Confidence in assessment standards

We are taking a principled approach to controlled assessment, removing modularisation and reducing the amount of GCSE, AS and A level re-sits. This should produce more reliable and valid outcomes and therefore build public confidence. However, the changes are challenging for schools and they affect some schools more than others, depending on their approach. Our removal of speaking and listening marks from grade calculations in GCSE English has been unpopular with many schools, although necessary to protect standards, and the changes we are making to practical science assessments divide opinion, although we believe our approach is more likely than others to deliver the National Curriculum.

Perhaps the most significant matter affecting public confidence in assessment standards is marking. In 2013, we published an interim report on the quality of marking, followed in early 2014 by a final report.³¹ It showed that in general, the quality of marking for GCSE, AS and A levels is good. Just 0.6 per cent of grades are changed following enquiries about results. However, the number of enquiries has been increasing in recent years and in 2014 there were slightly more grade changes than in previous years. We were concerned about that, and what might lie behind the increases.

The observed increase may reflect teachers' genuine anxiety about recent changes to qualifications and school performance measures. It could also reflect teachers' falling confidence in marking. A recent survey showed that confidence is down which reflects the number of appeals. However, the increases in enquiries about results and grade changes could also mean that marking quality is actually deteriorating.

31. *Review of Quality of Marking in Exams in A Levels, GCSEs and Other Academic Qualifications*. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/393832/2014-02-14-review-of-quality-of-marking-in-exams-in-a-levels-gcse-and-other-academic-qualifications-final-report.pdf

In October 2014, we published our improvement plans.³² In future, we will require exam boards to provide a detailed breakdown of the causes of any grade changes and to take swift action. All exam boards have been required to develop action plans and consider how the live monitoring of marking quality can be improved to prevent large grade changes. For the longer term, we are developing common indicators of marking quality where none exist, and conducting research on a mark scheme design to improve marking quality.

Promoting awareness

We maintain a register of all regulated qualifications (the Register), made available on our website. In 2014 we determined to improve the Register to provide more information and make it more useful to those making decisions on qualifications in which they are interested. Working with other interested parties, we are implementing changes that will come into effect in 2015.

Securing efficient provision

Our efficiency objective requires us to secure that regulated qualifications are provided efficiently and, in particular, that the fees payable to awarding organisations represent value for money.

The competitive qualifications market that we regulate provides awarding organisations with incentives to operate efficiently. We track fees for A levels and GCSEs, which on the whole have been in line with inflation over the period we have been in existence.

Further, there are indications that the GCSE and A level market may become increasingly competitive as new qualifications are introduced in schools and the focus of competition shifts more to factors other than price, such as training and support materials sold alongside these qualifications.

Our regulatory approach recognises this market dynamic. In 2012, we started a programme of research and compliance activity to manage the risks to standards and competition from the exam board practice of endorsing support materials for teachers and students. We have introduced Conditions and guidance to manage these risks, and we will monitor the impact of these new Conditions on the range and types of support materials they endorse. We have also strengthened our guidance on how exam boards should manage any potential conflict of interest arising from examiners writing resource materials linked to a specification for which they are responsible.

Marketing strategies and materials have the potential to mislead users of qualifications if they imply that standards are not comparable across different exam boards. Such messages also undermine confidence in the standards of qualification and the successful implementation of reforms. Therefore, we are undertaking an evidence-based review of how the reformed GCSEs, AS and A levels are being marketed, which will conclude during 2015.

Our *Corporate Plan*³³ explores whether it is necessary to intervene to secure efficiency in a market where purchasing decisions are made with less emphasis on price.

32. *Ofqual's Work on Quality of Marking*. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/378164/2014-10-21-ofquals-work-on-quality-of-marking.pdf

33. Our *Corporate Plan* for the period of 2014-17 is available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofquals-corporate-plan-for-2014-to-2017

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Part 2

Qualification reform

In 2013, the Government announced its intention to reform and redevelop GCSEs, AS and A levels. It set out its curriculum requirements for GCSEs in National Curriculum subjects, and following our advice, agreed that the first tranche of GCSE reform should focus on three key subjects – English literature, English language and maths – with the aim they should be ready for first teaching in September 2015. A larger range of GCSE subjects is being reformed for first teaching in September 2016, with the remaining subjects to be reformed for first teaching in September 2017.

GCSE reform

In 2013, we accepted the curriculum content in the first tranche of subjects from Government, and set about the reform of the design features that fall to us as qualifications regulator: modularisation, tiering, assessment and reporting results (grading).

Working with subject and assessment experts, we developed and tested our thinking on these matters, and consulted the public on our proposals. Following consultation we determined that new GCSEs will no longer be modular, and they will have a new and slightly more granular grading scale, to allow for greater differentiation and stretch. These principles apply to all new GCSEs.

We also determined that GCSE subjects will only be tiered when necessary because of the nature of the subject or cohort, and students will generally be assessed by exam, with non-exam assessment only for those aspects of the syllabus not assessable by exam.

New GCSEs are expected to be more demanding, and having determined their key design features, we went on to consider and consult on how standards should be set for the new qualifications. Our proposals were broadly accepted by those responding, and we are now laying the ground to implement them for first awarding in 2017.

AS and A level reform

In 2013, Government made arrangements for the review of A level content in many of the mainstream subjects. We provided technical advice and expertise to support the review, and accepted from Government the revised content in those subjects. We applied similar considerations to the reform of AS and A levels as to GCSEs, and determined (following public consultation) that AS and A levels will no longer be modular and an appropriate balance should be struck between exam and non-exam assessment, in the light of subject content. Unlike GCSEs, standards at AS and A level are to be set broadly as they are now, and we saw no reason to propose a change in the grading scale.

Delivering qualification reform

Decisions about the way key qualifications are designed, and how students' results are reported, are of deep interest to many, in particular those involved in education and those passionate about particular subjects. We have developed considerable technical expertise in assessment and have advised Government on the implementation of assessment-related policy objectives.

We have taken care to involve and consult interested parties as we have considered how best to design GCSEs, AS and A levels. Some of our decisions have been contentious, as we expected: for example our decision to implement new assessment arrangements for practical skills in A level biology, physics and chemistry. For all subjects, we have considered carefully the assessment and awarding arrangements most likely to deliver the best educational outcomes for students. In subjects assessed in part by non-exam assessment, we have

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considered in detail the nature of the tasks, and the appropriate controls exam boards must put in place to promote validity, whilst always keeping in mind that assessment must be manageable for schools.

Over the period of reform, we have kept the timetable for the first and subsequent phases under review, advising Government periodically of any need for change. To drive the delivery, quality and validity of the new qualifications, we have overseen and led work with exam boards to consider and agree the detailed requirements, providing clarity and certainty as to what is required. We have taken the opportunity to strengthen how we regulate as we have done so.

The reform is very much on track. As at the end of December 2014, we had accredited over 100 new specifications.

Vocational qualifications

In 2013, we considered carefully how to improve the quality of vocational qualifications where it was necessary to do so. We determined ways to regulate more strongly those awarding organisations delivering vocational qualifications, and, as Government policy developed in 2014, we determined how best to put those policy aims into effect. We are in the process of reshaping our organisation in order to devote sufficient and dedicated resources to the important task of reforming vocational qualifications.

In 2014, we undertook a review of the design rules that apply to the majority of vocational qualifications, set out in the QCF. We found they did not always deliver their intended benefits, and have resulted in some cases in poor rather than good-quality qualifications. Having spoken with fellow qualifications regulators in Wales and Northern Ireland and other stakeholders, we consulted on significant changes to the QCF and the way we regulate vocational qualifications. Our proposals are designed to implement the Government's emerging policy aims for vocational qualifications, and bring about improvement and a new focus on

quality and validity. We will regulate both vocational and general qualifications in similar ways, to ensure quality and validity in all regulated qualifications. At the time of writing, we are implementing these changes.

In early 2015, we will publish the final conclusions of a review into functional skills qualifications. The number of these qualifications taken in England each year has risen sharply since their introduction in 2009, and exceeded one million in 2013/14 (see appendix 1). Therefore, it is critical that we make sure these qualifications meet the needs of employers and students, and have consistent standards. During the review, we identified a number of areas where improvement was required by the awarding organisations. These areas were principally around improving the quality of assessment materials, reducing malpractice, strengthening standards, and evaluating user needs. Progress against these goals will be assessed later in 2015.



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Part 3

Regulatory activity

Awarding organisations

We are required by our enabling legislation to:

- set recognition criteria (s.133), and set and publish Conditions of Recognition – including General Conditions, and special, fee capping, and entry and inspection Conditions (s.134 to 137);
- recognise awarding organisations that meet our recognition criteria (s.132); where appropriate, withdraw an awarding organisation's recognition (s.152); and vary an awarding organisation's surrender of recognition date or make transitional arrangements for awarding organisations surrendering their recognition (s.147);
- prepare or revise the qualifications regulatory framework (s.153);
- direct an awarding organisation to take or refrain from taking steps to secure compliance with its Conditions (s.151); fine an awarding organisation and determine the amount of that fine (s.151A and 151B); and recover costs from an awarding organisation for undertaking the above actions (directing, fining or withdrawing) (s.152C).

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Setting recognition criteria and Conditions

In May 2011, we published recognition criteria³⁴ that came into force in July 2011. We updated the *General Conditions of Recognition*³⁵ in

34. *Criteria for Recognition*. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/371106/2011-05-16-criteria-for-recognition.pdf

35. *General Conditions of Recognition*. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/371266/2014-11-03-general-conditions-of-recognition-november.pdf

November 2012 to strengthen our regulatory framework, adding new Conditions relating to inactive awarding organisations and maintaining confidentiality of assessment materials. At the same time, we introduced a special Condition (H7.1) regarding GCSE English and GCSE English language.

Recognising awarding organisations

Some existing awarding organisations were given recognition status at the time of our inception. Since our commencement, we have regarded recognition as a key regulatory control.

We have accepted the surrender of recognition from nine awarding organisations over the period covered by this report, and withdrawn recognition from two awarding organisations found to be in serious breach of our regulatory requirements. Awarding organisations must be able to show they have the skills, resources and governance on an ongoing basis to award good, valid qualifications.

In 2012/13, Pearson took over EDI, and to facilitate the transfer in ownership of EDI's existing qualifications we issued a transitional arrangement, transferring the accountability and ownership of EDI's remaining qualifications to Pearson. We also obtained an undertaking from Pearson assuring us how it planned to manage this transition.

In 2013, we required all awarding organisations wishing to award new GCSEs to apply for re-recognition and demonstrate themselves capable for awarding the new qualifications in 2017. All four exam boards applied and were successful, but with each subjected to detailed undertakings. No other awarding organisations applied.

Preparing or revising the qualifications regulatory framework

After we published the *General Conditions of Recognition* in 2012, our senior representatives met with the governing body of every awarding organisation recognised at that time to discuss what we expected from them, and what they could expect from us. In November 2012, we published

*Guidance to the General Conditions of Recognition*³⁶

in a number of areas and, also in 2012, published an addendum to the *GCSE, GCE, Principal Learning and Project Code of Practice*,³⁷ so as to:

- make clear the limitation of the requirements in section 9 about enquiries about results and appeals;
- change grade D on GCSE higher tier from a judgemental grade to a calculated grade (appendices 2 and 3);
- remove the requirements for free-standing maths qualifications;
- enable us to direct an awarding organisation to take or refrain from taking steps to secure compliance with its conditions (s.151);
- enable us to fine an awarding organisation and determine the amount of that fine (s.151A and 151B);
- enable us to withdraw an awarding organisation's recognition (s.152);
- enable us to recover costs from an awarding organisation for undertaking certain functions (s.152C).

Awarding organisations have been required to submit to us on an annual basis a statement of their compliance with the *Conditions of Recognition* and potential compliance for the next 12 months. In 2012, seven awarding organisations submitted an intention to surrender their recognition, which rose to nine in 2013, and 13 in 2014.

Not all awarding organisations achieved full compliance with the Conditions when they submitted statements, and we have worked with these awarding organisations, as necessary.

36. *Guidance to the General Conditions*. Available at: <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20141031163546/http://ofqual.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/ARCHIVED-2013-09-02-guidance-to-the-general-conditions-of-recognition-september-2013.pdf>

37. *GCSE, GCE, Principal Learning and Project Code of Practice*. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/371268/2011-05-27-code-of-practice.pdf

By 2014 awarding organisations were reporting greater compliance with the Conditions, a welcome development, but nevertheless we remained concerned about the quality of some regulated qualifications. We have determined to develop our approach to regulation so as to focus on the validity of regulated qualifications as well as awarding organisation compliance.

Taking regulatory action (Directions, fines, withdrawal of recognition and recovery of costs)

Our approach to enforcement is set out in *Taking Regulatory Action*.³⁸ It was updated in May 2012 to include our power to fine an awarding organisation, which came into effect on 4th May 2012.

We have published all Directions given to awarding organisations to secure compliance with the Conditions and the majority of the Special Conditions imposed, and undertakings accepted, on our website. So far, we have issued 11 Directions and imposed Special Conditions on six occasions (other than at recognition) and accepted 17 undertakings. We have withdrawn recognition from two awarding organisations because of non-compliance. We have not yet fined an awarding organisation or sought to recover costs for any of the regulatory actions we have taken, but will not hesitate to do so when appropriate.

Qualifications

We are required by our enabling legislation to:

- decide which qualifications must be accredited and which do not need to be accredited (s.138); set and publish accreditation criteria (s.140); and accredit a qualification that meets our accreditation criteria (s.139)
- publish a Register of qualifications (s.148);
- keep under review all aspects of regulated qualifications (s.154).

38. *Taking Regulatory Action*. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/377014/2012-03-05-taking-regulatory-action-version.pdf

Accreditation

In the period to October 2014, we required all qualifications to be submitted for accreditation. We have accredited more than 3,000 qualifications in each of the three financial years covered by this report.

Although this appears to be the most thorough approach, in practice accreditation is only a good, up-front control for GCSEs, AS and A levels, because only these qualifications have detailed criteria. For others, there is little to check against. In 2014, we consulted on proposals to retain the accreditation requirement where there is good reason to do so, but in a targeted and specific way. In future, we will continue with the accreditation requirements for GCSEs, AS and A levels, and lift the requirements for other qualifications, focussing instead on how well awarding organisations are assuring the quality of all the qualifications they offer over the life cycle of their qualifications – as they are designed, developed, delivered and evaluated. We may impose an accreditation requirement on awarding organisations, including where we have specific concerns, or where the awarding organisation is newly recognised.

Keep under review all aspects of regulated qualifications

In May 2011, we published our evaluation of the *Regulatory Arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework*.³⁹ This identified areas of concern that we have used to inform other programmes of work that are in progress, including a review of the requirements around guided learning hours and on the number of qualifications 'not in use' available to view on the Register. We also used the findings to review the rules for the approval of units submitted on the RITS.

When we introduced the *General Conditions of Recognition*,⁴⁰ we reviewed, and where appropriate revised, the other regulatory requirements we had in place. Where possible, we withdrew some regulations in order to maintain the clarity of our regulation, and also to make sure we were not creating any additional unnecessary burdens on awarding organisations.

We undertake a regular programme of monitoring, comparability and scrutiny work, reviewing a range of qualifications and looking into whether standards are being met over time and across awarding organisations.

Among the work we have published are reviews of standards in A level English literature, art and design (GCSE and A level) and design and technology (GCSE and A level). We have also published outcomes of reviews into the standards of functional skills qualifications in maths and controlled assessment.

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Publish a Register of qualifications

The Register and the Regulatory IT System (RITS) went live in October 2010. This supported our vesting as a new organisation; until then we had been reliant on the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority's legacy systems. The Register contains all qualifications we regulate, and all awarding organisations recognised by us.

39. *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework*. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/371294/2008-08-15-regulatory-arrangements-qcf-august08.pdf

40. *General Conditions for Recognition*. Available at: <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20141031163546/http://ofqual.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/ARCHIVED-2012-11-20-general-conditions-of-recognition-november-2012.pdf>

General functions

Our enabling legislation requires us to:

- keep under review connected activities of recognised awarding organisations (s.149);
- investigate complaints or make arrangements for the referral of complaints to an independent third party (s.150);
- prepare or revise the qualifications regulatory framework (s.153);
- provide advice to the Secretary of State or Department for Employment and Learning (s.168);
- work with other public bodies (s.156);
- provide information to other qualifications regulators (s.157);
- carry out programmes of research (s.169);
- keep regulatory functions under review (s.170).

Connected activities

We keep under review awarding organisations' connected activities – that is, other services an awarding organisation might provide. We have required awarding organisations to have in place, and make changes to, governance arrangements to manage conflicts of interest, and to make clear that our role in relation to the standard of their products relates only to their qualifications and not to any other services they provide. Towards the end of 2011, the Daily Telegraph provided us with evidence that some examiners had been giving

teachers inappropriate information about future exams. The information had been given to teachers during training events or seminars run by the exam boards.



We investigated the approach of exam boards to such events. Our investigations showed that such malpractice was not widespread. Nevertheless, the isolated incidents were serious and could undermine public confidence in regulated qualifications. We published a report of our investigations in April 2012.⁴¹ We announced then that we would put in place new regulatory controls to reduce the risk that confidential information about assessments could be disclosed to teachers.

General enquiries

We have ensured that members of the public are able to make enquiries and receive a prompt response from us over the period of this report.

	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	Apr 2014 – Dec 2014
Total number of enquiries	9,247	9,970	7,801	4,288
Via telephone helpdesk	59%	56%	57%	52%
Via email	41%	44%	43%	48%
Call answered within	9.3seconds	13s	24s	14s
Lost calls ⁴²	3.6%	6.9%	7.5%	4.0%
Emails completed within five working days	99%	94%	95%	98%

41. *Exam Board Seminars*. Available at: <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20141031163546/http://www2.ofqual.gov.uk/downloads/category/98-inquiries?download=1384%3Aexam-board-seminars-report-april-2012>

42. Where the caller abandoned the call.

Complaints⁴³ and malpractice⁴⁴

The types of complaints we have received about awarding organisations have varied over the period of this report. A third of complaints in 2011/12 referred to controlled assessment, while in 2012/13 around 40 per cent related to GCSE English grade boundaries. In 2013/14 a third were with respect to the setting and delivery of assessments. Complaints regarding marking and issuing have tended to be a more consistent issue over the period.

Between April 2011 and December 2014, three complaints were escalated to the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman. One case was

dismissed and one case is ongoing. We have adopted process changes in response to the Ombudsman's conclusions in that case.

During 2012/13, we referred one complaint to an independent third party. This was a complex complaint concerning the appeals process followed by two awarding organisations. The complaint was partially upheld. Another complaint, referred in 2013/14 and which was partially upheld, concerned how we conducted a consultation. In response, we have reformed how we word our consultations.

	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	Apr 2014 – Dec 2014
Total complaints received	324	509	415	325
Complaints acknowledged within two working days ⁴⁵	100%	100%	100%	100%
Complaints closed within 20 working days	90%	86%	75%	87%
	(30 days)	(30 days)		
% complaints upheld (or partially upheld)	–	8%	2%	3%
		(12%)	(2%)	(1%)
Total malpractice⁴⁶			41	35
Centre malpractice			31	30
Awarding organisation malpractice			10	5
% upheld (or partially upheld)			15%	9%
			(2%)	(3%)
% not upheld or withdrawn			80%	66%

43. Complaints received from members of the public about awarding organisations that we recognise to offer regulated qualifications and complaints about our actions as a qualifications regulator.

44. Malpractice includes any breach of the regulations that might undermine the integrity of an exam, from attempts by candidates to communicate with one another during an exam, to failures by school or college staff to comply with exam board instructions.

45. We acknowledge all cases and complaints within two working days and aim to close with a final response within tens working days. If a case is complex and this is not possible we send a holding response at the ten-day stage and keep the complainant updated as the case progresses.

46. Comparable data for 2011/12 and 2012/13 are not available.

Providing advice to the Secretary of State or the Department for Employment and Learning

We have regular discussions with Ministers and their officials. Where necessary, we provide formal, published advice to Ministers, and use published exchanges of letters to provide a record of discussions we have had.

In 2011/12, we provided advice to the Secretary of State for Education on short-term changes to GCSEs, and we also wrote to him about our investigation into the Daily Telegraph allegations (see page 33). We wrote to the Ministers for Schools and Further Education about our plans to assess and encourage the health of qualifications' markets.

In 2012/13, we wrote several letters to the Secretary of State for Education about his plans for reform of GCSEs and A levels. We also wrote to him about GCSE English results in summer 2012.

In 2014, we wrote to the Minister for Skills in relation to the contribution we could make to the regulation of apprenticeships, and also about the preliminary findings from our review of functional skills qualifications. We provided advice to Ministers on the development of accountability measures, and on the comparability of GCSEs and IGCSEs.

Work with other public bodies

We have been committed to working with other public authorities to support the operation of the qualifications system and other systems relying on it. We have signed memoranda of understanding with the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education and the Office of Fair Trading, and have an ongoing memorandum of understanding with the Skills Funding Agency.

We provide key information to the Skills Funding Agency, the Education Funding Agency and the Departments for Education and Business, Innovation & Skills. We also work closely with both departments to provide advice and our regulatory opinion on their policy intentions and decisions.

We have built relationships with agencies including the UK Border Agency, the UK Commission for Employment and Skills, the Information Authority, and UCAS.

Our work with public bodies has not just remained in the UK. We have also built relationships with education departments and agencies overseas, including in Korea (where we now have a memorandum of understanding with the Korea Institute for Curriculum and Evaluation), Australia, Switzerland, France and Canada, as part of our work on international comparability.



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Provide information to other qualifications regulators

Where relevant, we liaise with the qualifications regulators in Wales and Northern Ireland. We meet on a regular basis with representatives so as to maintain standards. In response to a request, we provided advice to the Welsh Government as it reviewed awarding in GCSE English in January 2014.

Carry out programmes of research

A number of our research programmes are discussed in more detail throughout this report.

In summer 2011 we completed a programme of research into reliability. We subsequently published a *Reliability Compendium*,⁴⁷ bringing together all the undertaken research. We have continued to research reliability as an aspect of validity, and will publish further in this area.

47. *Reliability Compendium*. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/collections/reliability-of-assessment-compendium

In 2013, we launched a review of the quality of marking of exams in A levels, GCSEs and other academic qualifications in England.⁴⁸

The study aimed to improve public understanding of how marking works, identify where marking arrangements worked well and recommend improvements, where necessary. Further information is provided in part one of this report. In 2013 and 2014, we published research on the quality of marking and A*/A grade standards in modern foreign language A levels. We have acted on our findings, requiring exam boards to ensure their question papers differentiate in a more reliable way between more able students and address concerns regarding the design and underlying principles behind their mark schemes. These changes, which will be required for summer 2015, are being requested to achieve greater fairness in the grades students receive.

As the year ends, we have launched a programme of research to assess the level of demand of new GCSE maths specifications. The research is made up of three strands and their combined conclusions will inform our future steps in this area.⁴⁹

Keep regulatory functions under review

The introduction of the *General Conditions of Recognition* enabled us to review our other regulatory requirements, and to withdraw some regulations where we could.

In 2014, we undertook a more fundamental review of our regulatory approach, and began implementing changes designed to increase our effectiveness.

Details are set out in our Corporate Plan for 2014–17, but in summary we are:

- removing regulations and requirements that do not deliver valid qualifications, for example, the QCF, and the indiscriminate use of accreditation;
- imposing new requirements that are focused on the quality and validity of qualifications offered by awarding qualifications, alongside the general requirements that awarding organisations must meet.

48. *Review of Quality of Marking in Exams in A Levels, GCSEs and Other Academic Qualifications*. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/393832/2014-02-14-review-of-quality-of-marking-in-exams-in-a-levels-gcse-and-other-academic-qualifications-final-report.pdf

49. *GCSE Maths: Summary of Research Programme*. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/gcse-maths-summary-of-research-programme

Appendices

Appendix 1: Attainment levels

Entries

Total number of entries	2011	2012	2013	2014
GCSE (full course, all UK)	5,151,970	5,225,288	5,445,324	5,217,573
AS qualifications (all UK)	1,411,919	1,350,345	1,345,509	1,412,934
A levels (all UK)	867,317	861,819	850,752	833,807

Grades

GCSE (full course, all UK)

Grade	2011 (Cumulative %)	2012 (Cumulative %)	2013 (Cumulative %)	2014 (Cumulative %)
A*	7.8 (7.8)	7.3 (7.3)	6.8 (6.8)	6.7 (6.7)
A	15.4 (23.2)	15.1 (22.4)	14.5 (21.3)	14.6 (21.3)
B	21.7 (44.9)	21.7 (44.1)	21.5 (42.8)	21.9 (43.2)
C	24.9 (69.8)	25.3 (69.4)	25.3 (68.1)	25.6 (68.8)
D	15.1 (84.9)	15.9 (85.3)	16.6 (84.7)	16.3 (85.1)
E	7.8 (92.7)	7.7 (93.0)	8.0 (92.7)	7.6 (92.7)
F	4.1 (96.8)	4.1 (97.1)	4.1 (96.8)	3.8 (96.5)
G	2.0 (98.8)	1.9 (99.0)	2.0 (98.8)	2.0 (98.5)

AS qualifications (all UK)

Grade	2011 (Cumulative %)	2012 (Cumulative %)	2013 (Cumulative %)	2014 (Cumulative %)
A	19.3 (19.3)	19.8 (19.8)	19.8 (19.8)	19.9 (19.9)
B	19.3 (38.6)	19.8 (39.6)	20.0 (39.8)	20.3 (40.2)
C	20.8 (59.4)	21.0 (60.6)	21.0 (60.8)	21.2 (61.4)
D	17.0 (76.4)	16.7 (77.3)	16.5 (77.3)	16.6 (78.0)
E	11.8 (88.2)	11.1 (88.4)	11.0 (88.3)	10.8 (88.8)

A levels (all UK)

Grade	2011 (Cumulative %)	2012 (Cumulative %)	2013 (Cumulative %)	2014 (Cumulative %)
A*	8.2 (8.2)	7.9 (7.9)	7.6 (7.6)	8.2 (8.2)
A	18.8 (27.0)	18.7 (26.6)	18.7 (26.3)	17.8 (26.0)
B	25.6 (52.6)	26.0 (52.6)	26.6 (52.9)	26.4 (52.4)
C	23.6 (76.2)	24.0 (52.6)	24.3 (77.2)	24.3 (76.7)
D	15.1 (91.3)	14.9 (71.5)	14.7 (91.9)	14.8 (91.5)
E	6.5 (97.8)	6.5 (98.0)	6.2 (98.1)	6.5 (98.0)

Other qualifications (England, Wales, Northern Ireland)

Achievements by level, number

Level	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13
Entry Level	776,990	887,425	932,360
Level 1	2,035,953	2,288,723	2,402,310
Level 2	3,947,853	4,366,273	4,345,267
Level 3	1,073,826	1,154,672	1,283,485
Levels 1–2	7,973	47,900	177,700
Levels 4–8	129,633	129,333	125,803
Total	7,972,228	8,874,326	9,266,925

Achievements by qualification type, number

Type	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13
Advanced extension award	384	408	337
Basic skills	611,571	512,948	101,770
Diploma	9,232	10,853	2,771
English for speakers of other languages	273,930	275,894	287,625
Entry level	160,116	114,749	102,544
Free-standing mathematics qualification	25,486	22,941	23,143
Functional skills	566,567	664,682	864,599
Higher level	30,292	16,827	7,583
Key skills	618,399	659,204	545,585
National vocational qualification	587,768	128,844	28,740
Occupational qualification	17,478	4,579	553
Other general qualification	767,623	536,670	668,904
Principal learning	17,067	17,217	5,167
Project	50,461	49,757	43,935
QCF	2,836,220	5,283,347	6,235,824
Vocationally-related qualification	1,399,634	575,829	348,160
Total	7,972,228	8,874,749	9,267,240

Sources:

GCSE and Entry Level Certificate Results Summer 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014 www.jcq.org.uk/Download/examination-results/gcses/gcse

A, AS and AEA Results Summer 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014 www.jcq.org.uk/Download/examination-results/a-levels/a-as-and-aea-results-summer-2012

Annual Qualifications Market Report May 2012 <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20141031163546/http://www2.ofqual.gov.uk/downloads/category/99-market-reports?download=1401%3Aannual-qualifications-market-report-2012>

Appendix 2: Expenditure

Expenditure, £000

	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14
Permanent staff	8,757	8,435	10,267
Personnel overheads	482	525	314
Other staff costs	911	2,532	2,552
Accommodation	1,393	1,229	1,052
Non-cash items, for example depreciation	874	908	908
IT costs	1,496	610	1,063
Operational spend	2,749	3,034	2,526
Capital spend	602	11	87
Total expenditure	17,264	17,284	18,769

Further detail can be obtained from the *Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation Annual Report and Accounts* available on our website.⁵⁰

50. www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofqual

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