Awarding body monitoring report
University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations

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Introduction

Regulating external qualifications

Responsibility for regulating external qualifications lies jointly with three regulators:

- the Office Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual)
- the Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (DCELLS), the regulator for Wales
- the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), the regulator for Northern Ireland.

Following the accreditation of a qualification, the regulators systematically monitor awarding organisations against the requirements set out in the statutory regulations. The aim of this activity is to promote continuing improvement and public confidence in the quality of external qualifications.

Where an awarding organisation is found not to comply with relevant criteria, the regulators set conditions of accreditation. Even if an awarding organisation is compliant, the monitoring team may make observations on ways that the awarding organisation could change its systems and procedures to improve clarity or reduce bureaucracy.

Accreditation conditions and observations arising from this monitoring activity are specified at the end of each section of this report. Awarding organisations are required to produce an action plan to show how they will deal with accreditation conditions imposed as a result of a monitoring activity. The regulators will agree the action plan and monitor its implementation.

The regulators will use the outcomes of monitoring and any subsequent action taken by awarding organisations to inform decisions on the re-accreditation of qualifications, or if necessary, the withdrawal of accreditation.

Banked documents

As part of its awarding organisation recognition processes, the regulators require awarding organisations to submit certain documents to Ofqual for the purposes of ‘banking’ them centrally. Information from banked documents will be used to inform monitoring activities and may also affect the awarding organisation’s risk rating.

A suite of documents has been identified as suitable for banking and are those that are considered to be the most crucial in supporting an awarding organisation’s ability to operate effectively. To maintain the currency of the banked documents, awarding organisations are responsible for updating them as and when changes occur. They

are also reminded to review them at least annually as part of the annual self-assessment return.

About this report

This report is the outcome of a monitoring activity on the University of Cambridge English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) Examinations awarding organisation and was carried out by Ofqual on behalf of the regulators in August 2008. It draws together the regulator's findings on areas of:

- corporate governance
- resources and expertise
- qualifications development
- quality assurance and control of independent assessment
- determination and reporting of results.

This is the second post-accreditation monitoring activity on the University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations (Cambridge ESOL) activities.

The monitoring activities included desk research of information already held by the regulators. The monitoring team visited Cambridge ESOL's head office to conduct interviews with staff and review documentation. The monitoring team observed an item writer training day and a test construction event to check how the awarding organisation's quality assurance systems worked in practice.

About Cambridge ESOL

Cambridge ESOL examinations provide access to a range of vocationally-related qualifications (VRQs) from Entry to higher levels. All qualifications are independently assessed. For more information on Cambridge ESOL and the qualifications offered, visit www.cambridgeesol.org.

Corporate governance

This is subject to *The statutory regulation of external qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (QCA/04/1293), paragraphs 5, 6 and 7.

Findings

1. There have been no changes to the structure, ownership or legal identity of the awarding organisation since the previous post-accreditation monitoring activity in 2004.

2. Cambridge ESOL is one of three members of the Cambridge Assessment Group and is a not-for-profit department of the parent organisation, the University of Cambridge.

3. There is an overarching corporate board (CB) for the Cambridge Assessment Group. The chief executive from each member organisation and directors of group functions sit on the board, which reports to the group's chief executive. The CB meets eight times per year and has a strategic role across the three members of the group.

4. There are a number of groups that support the awarding organisation. The ESOL Management Group (EMG) meets monthly and is made up of the chief executive and senior managers from Cambridge ESOL. Its main role is to approve Cambridge ESOL's policy across all functions except business development. The Business Development Review Group (BDRG) has a remit that includes reviewing performance against targets and dealing with specific policy issues. Another group, the Test Administration Steering Group (TASG), meets regularly and reports to the EMG and BDRG through the director of assessment and operations. Its primary function is to oversee issues that may impact on the delivery of examinations in centres such as policies and procedures, timetable variations and complaints. The monitoring team is satisfied that these groups are supporting the work of the awarding organisation.

5. All Cambridge ESOL policies and procedures are quality controlled externally through BS EN ISO 9001.2000.

Accreditation conditions

There are no accreditation conditions for this section.

Observations

There are no observations for this section.

Resources and expertise

This is subject to *The statutory regulation of external qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (QCA/04/1293), paragraphs 8 and 10.

Findings

1. Cambridge ESOL has about 350 employed staff. Of these, around 60 are based in the regional offices worldwide and the remainder across three sites in the UK. Staff work in specific directorates and the awarding organisation function is based in the assessment and operations directorate.

2. The awarding organisation shares a number of functions with all members of the Cambridge Assessment Group. These include for example, information services, premises, printing and despatch, and human resources (HR), with responsibility for reviewing staff numbers and generic recruitment procedures. The director of assessment and operations confirmed that additional posts have been agreed for the current year for Cambridge ESOL.

3. There is a formal staff induction and performance management system in place for employed staff, which includes interim reviews and an annual formal appraisal.

4. The design and assessment of the accredited qualifications involve employed staff and commissioned consultants (working in the UK and overseas). The team is approximately 16350 strong and includes principal examiners, team leaders, assistant examiners, oral examiners and item writers. There is also a team of general markers.

5. Cambridge ESOL has a comprehensive documented programme (recruitment, induction, training, coordination, monitoring, evaluation (RITCME)) for recruiting and training consultants. In addition, the assessment team are given detailed guidance documents to assist them in their role.

6. Training for individual roles varies, but all members of the assessment team have to meet the minimum criteria specified by the awarding organisation. Potential item writers with suitable experience and expertise have to complete an activity before they are invited to the two-day training event. A member of the monitoring team observed one of these training days and was satisfied with the activities presented. Similarly, potential oral examiners attend training and then mark a series of sample tests. If marking is outside of the allowed tolerance, these examiners are not used. Writing examiners are generally trained face-to-face if they mark at home or on-site at a marking facility. General markers are employed on a short-term basis for tests that have set answers.

7. The awarding organisation engages consultants to act as professional support leaders (PSLs) and regional team leaders for UK and overseas centres. Their role is to train and monitor oral examiners. The PSLs attend training sessions every two years and cascade the information down to the team leaders.

8. Cambridge ESOL has suitable arrangements to store data. All data is backed-up daily and stored off-site.

Accreditation conditions

There are no accreditation conditions for this section.

Observations

There are no observations for this section.

Qualifications development – planning

This is subject to *The statutory regulation of external qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (QCA/04/1293), paragraphs 1–4, 43 and 44.

Findings

1. The awarding organisation has clear procedures for developing qualifications. These procedures are included in the awarding organisation's quality management system. Each stage is clearly documented, enabling Cambridge ESOL to undertake internal audits and self-assessment.

2. The process for developing new or revised qualifications has a number of stages. It usually begins with informal discussions with senior management and is followed by stages 1 and 2, which are formal proposals based on the results of market intelligence or post-examination evaluation. The outline proposal is approved by the BDRG.

3. A review of qualifications is undertaken at least every five years to take account of technological advances, changes in teaching methodologies and other qualifications in the market. This market research activity is supported through a range of consultations with key stakeholders, including teachers, centre exams managers and candidates.

4. Findings from initial consultations are acted upon. Specifications and assessment materials are developed and communicated to key stakeholders through a range of activities such as seminars. The specifications are reviewed with external consultants, chairs, examiners, subject officers and teachers.

5. Cambridge ESOL regularly consults with and seeks support from sector skills councils (SSCs). For example, the awarding organisation worked with Lifelong Learning UK (LLUK) and Asset Skills in relation to the development of its qualifications. During this time, there was ongoing commissioning of materials and task types as well as pre-testing and trialling of materials. Specifications were amended in the light of trialling and the final report. Revisions were presented to the project qualification steering group, which the chief executive attends.

6. If a qualification is withdrawn, information is sent to centres two to three years in advance. A programme of support is drawn up, informing centres of the replacement qualification.

7. The product development team is provided with comprehensive guidance relating to qualification development. The guidance explains each stage from the initial project proposal to the launch of the qualification. The monitoring team

noted that the process did not include a formal sign-off process that the qualification is ready to be delivered.

Accreditation conditions

There are no accreditation conditions for this section.

Observation

1. Cambridge ESOL should include a formal final sign-off process for each qualification developed.

Qualifications development – content and design of qualifications

This is subject to *The statutory regulation of external qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (QCA/04/1293), paragraphs 45–55.

Findings

1. To check the robustness of these arrangements, the monitoring team looked at the revision of two qualifications: the first Certificate in English (FCE) and the Certificate in advanced English (CAE). The review process for these qualifications commenced in 2004, with new exam specifications and sample exam materials available from December 2006 for first examination in December 2008. It is clear that revisions to these qualifications followed the Cambridge ESOL product development process and were formally approved at each of the initial development stages by the BDRG.

2. Cambridge ESOL's specialist development and research teams worked closely with external consultants and senior examiners to review these qualifications. They consulted with exam centres, teachers and learners around the world and the revised draft specifications and trial tasks were evaluated in consultation seminars. Additional research activity included validating and testing the exams by mapping to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

3. A programme of support for teachers and local secretaries commenced two years before the amendments to the specifications were due to be implemented. This support pack included specification details, online and sample materials (all available freely on the website), a handbook as well as a web support bulletin outlining all changes. This programme was launched at various conferences as well as at teachers' seminars. In addition, guidance materials for candidates are produced, which are clear and easily understood.

4. Cambridge ESOL qualification titles meet regulatory requirements, clearly stating that they are designed for candidates who are not native speakers of English, who wish to achieve an internationally recognised qualification that is available worldwide. Details of the content of the qualifications include the number of guided learning hours (GLH), the qualification structure, unit assessment methods, the overall grading system as well as opportunities for progression.

5. Those qualifications that have been developed for the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) have multiple units. Each of these QCF qualifications have details of the qualification structure in terms of mandatory units, the total credit and level value of the qualification, the minimum number of credits required at

the level to achieve the qualification, the qualification GLH, as well as details of individual units in terms of credit value, level, grading system, unit owner name, support from the relevant SSC, learning outcomes and assessment criteria.

6. Cambridge ESOL uses a range of assessment models, depending on the type of qualification. Item writer guidelines are produced for particular suites of qualifications for question paper production. A range of assessment tasks is devised to cover the specification components and reviewed by the product development team and senior examiners. These are trialled and reviewed in consultation with teachers, examiners and candidates. Assessment can include a range of task types to cover the qualification components and the range of learners. All assessment tasks are reviewed to ensure that they avoid bias.

Accreditation conditions

There are no accreditation conditions for this section.

Observations

There are no observations for this section.

Quality assurance and control of independent assessment

This is subject to *The statutory regulation of external qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (QCA/04/1293), paragraphs 13, 36, 38–42 and 56–62.

Findings

1. The monitoring team looked at the quality assurance and control systems in place to support the assessment of VRQs. Cambridge ESOL offers a range of accredited qualifications in language assessment, which are independently assessed. Each qualification is made up of components, including written tasks and/or oral assessment. Some qualifications are available through computer-based testing (CBT). Skills for life qualifications are available on demand provided that four weeks' notice is given. Examination components for other qualifications are on set dates or within specific timeframes.

2. The arrangements for standardising independent assessment are suitable. Centres are given comprehensive handbooks detailing the assessment criteria, assessment methods and tasks with exemplars. Handbooks are available in hard copy or can be downloaded from the website.

3. Assessment tasks for each component go through a review process and are independently evaluated. For example, item writers produce test items and answers. These are pre-tested with candidates and the marking guide amended if applicable. All item writers are given comprehensive guidance on the production of test items, including the use of plain English and avoidance of bias. The monitoring team looked at a sample of the guidance documents, which were very detailed and explicit. Information detailing these arrangements are also available on the website.

4. Cambridge ESOL uses a system of question banks. For each paper, these include the editing bank, a pre-test bank, a test construction bank, a question paper production bank, a live bank, and a bank for withdrawn items and items that can be released as exemplars. Subject officers and managers have access to the banks, but do not edit any items. The exams administrator makes any changes to items.

5. Tests are constructed manually or electronically. The awarding organisation can generate statistical reports about the pre-testing and usage of items, including records such as who wrote them. To ensure standards are comparable, the awarding organisation carries out equivalency checks on each test. Items have set target values and the pre-test stage either confirms that the value is within range or that it requires amending. The monitoring team observed one of the

paper construction meetings and is confident that these arrangements are robust and produce reliable results.

6. The security arrangements for developing test items, printing, the movement of examination papers to centres and CBT examinations are robust. Draft test materials from meetings are collected and shredded. Only the final version is retained and securely stored. The printing of examination papers is outsourced and quality controlled through the awarding organisation's ISO 9001 procedures. This includes the secure delivery and tracking of examination papers. Computer-based tests are encrypted and sent to a designated computer 48 hours before the examination. The monitoring team noted that an office sweep is done daily to check that confidential information is secure. This is good practice.

7. There are suitable arrangements for the security of examinations. Information on the procedures required for running examinations is provided in the handbook for centre managers. The guidance details specific instructions for each examination, including the checking of candidate identity and invigilation requirements.

8. Cambridge ESOL has different systems for marking examinations, depending on the type of component. Multiple-choice papers are put through an optical marker reader (OMR). There are two models for marking written tests: home marking or on-site marking. Examiners marking from home usually attend a coordination meeting and look at exemplar materials before marking live scripts. Examiners who do not meet the standard during the coordination meeting are not used. After training, examiners send a sample of their work to the team leader for checking. If marking is consistent, they can continue marking. Any marking outside of the acceptable tolerances means that these examiners will not continue marking. The second model involves examiners marking at specific venues over two days. Examiners are split into teams and team leaders monitor the marking of individual examiners for consistency. The awarding organisation confirmed that it requests additional scripts if required and has arranged for scripts to be re-marked by different examiners in the case of inconsistencies.

9. Oral examiners attend coordination (standardisation) meetings before the examination sessions. They observe videos of candidate performance and their marking is checked. All oral examiners are monitored during live examinations every two years. Any examiner with an unsatisfactory grade is monitored the following year.

10. Cambridge ESOL employs general markers for some components who are monitored daily by marking quality coordinators. All examiners have detailed guidance to assist them in their role. The monitoring team is satisfied that the arrangements for monitoring examiners are suitable.

Accreditation conditions

There are no accreditation conditions for this section.

Observations

There are no observations for this section.

Determination and reporting of results

This is subject to *The statutory regulation of external qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (QCA/04/1293), paragraphs 63–67.

Findings

1. Cambridge ESOL has formal awarding arrangements in place. These include determining pass marks and grade boundaries based on statistical evidence, and the confirmation of results. There is no set pass mark. Each component is equally weighted and where appropriate candidates must achieve specified grades to pass, for example in FCE grades A–C. There is no requirement for candidates to pass each component of a qualification provided that they achieve the pass mark overall.

2. Provisional pass marks and grade boundaries are determined by subject officers through a series of meetings and confirmed at the final grading management review meeting. The process is thorough. The validation stage includes checks for erratic examiner marking. Scripts may be re-marked at this stage or the marks adjusted if required. Adjustments to examiner marking are completed before final pass marks and grade boundaries are confirmed. The monitoring team looked at the minutes from these meetings and are satisfied that the arrangements compare standards year on year.

3. The awarding organisation has arrangements to adjust marks for special consideration. These are considered prior to confirming the final results.

4. Centres and candidates are given clear information on the grades awarded and how results are aggregated to arrive at the final result. This information can be found in the relevant qualification handbook and on the website.

Accreditation conditions

There are no accreditation conditions for this section.

Observations

There are no observations for this section.

The qualifications regulators wish to make their publications widely accessible. Please contact us if you have any specific accessibility requirements.

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