



Qualifications and
Curriculum Authority



Llywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru
Welsh Assembly Government



Post-accreditation monitoring report: ABC Awards

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Introduction

Responsibility for regulating external qualifications lies jointly with three regulatory authorities:

- the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA)
- the Department for Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (DELLS)
- the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), the authority for Northern Ireland.

Following the accreditation of a qualification, the regulatory authorities systematically monitor awarding bodies 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 body is found not to comply with relevant criteria, the regulatory authorities set conditions of accreditation. Even if an awarding body is compliant, the monitoring team may make observations on ways that the awarding body 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 bodies 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 action plan will be agreed by the regulatory authorities and its implementation monitored.

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

About this report

This report is the outcome of a monitoring activity carried out on ABC Awards by QCA on behalf of the regulatory authorities and started in May 2006.

This is the second post-accreditation monitoring activity on ABC Awards' activities since its recognition as an awarding body. The report draws together the regulatory authorities' findings on the arrangements ABC Awards has for developing and supporting its qualifications.

About ABC Awards

ABC Awards provides access to vocationally related qualifications in a range of sector areas including languages, fashion and design, welding, and counselling. In addition ABC Awards offers national vocational qualifications (NVQs) at levels 2 and 3 in youth work. For more information on ABC Awards and the qualifications it offers visit the ABC Awards website at www.abcawards.co.uk.

Corporate governance

This is subject to *The statutory regulation of external qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (2004), paragraphs 5 to 7.

Findings

1. The awarding body is going through a period of change and is restructuring its management and operational activity. ABC Awards aims to have the proposed structure fully operational by 1 October 2006.
2. The new structure will retain the board of directors, supported by a newly formed executive team, a business development directorate and an operations directorate. Each directorate has specific functions. Business development has responsibility for research, qualifications development, marketing and sales. Operations has responsibility for assessment and for monitoring moderators, examiners and external verifiers. ABC Awards is using office managers instead of regional managers to head up each of the regional offices. The revised organisational chart shows clear lines of reporting and accountability.
3. Transitional arrangements are in place and staff are informed through regular team updates. They are encouraged to contribute to the strategic aims and objectives of the awarding body through workshops.

Accreditation conditions

1. ABC Awards must ensure that the regulatory authorities are kept fully informed of the changes (*The statutory regulation of external qualifications*, paragraph 6a).

Observations

There are no observations for this section.

Resources and expertise

This is subject to the *NVQ code of practice* (2001), paragraphs 35, 52(part), 53, 54(part), 55 and 57; and *The statutory regulation of external qualifications in England in Wales and Northern Ireland* (2004), paragraphs 8, 10, 97e and 98.

Findings

1. The awarding body has 40 staff spread across its four regional offices, and staffing is based on the level of activity and functions of each office. These staffing levels are sufficient to deal with the current registration and certification of candidates.
2. ABC Awards is in the process of amending and developing the existing quality assurance arrangements so that they are generic across the regional offices. The awarding body stated that there had been difficulties with IT systems development across its offices and a systems development manager has been appointed. The single database was implemented in October 2005 and is managed through the Nottingham office. All quality assurance arrangements are overseen and monitored by the quality manager.
3. To assist staff in understanding the new structure ABC Awards has organised training events, team days and specific office-manager training for staff heading up the regional offices. Managers also attend QCA seminars and pass on relevant information to staff.
4. The appraisal system for ABC Awards staff was revised in 2005 to ensure consistency across the four regional offices. This includes an interim and full review every year and is linked to strategic aims and targets. Contracted staff such as examiners, moderators and external verifiers do not have formal reviews.
5. ABC Awards has about 300 contracted staff. These include examiners, moderators and external verifiers, with nominated lead examiners, moderators and verifiers depending on the size of the qualification. There is usually only one examiner for small qualifications.
6. ABC Awards follows the assessment strategies of each award where applicable in appointing contracted staff and ensuring that they meet the minimum requirements. External verifiers, for example, must hold a youth-work qualification or equivalent.

7. There are generic procedures for recruiting contracted staff. These include the use of application forms, references and selection days. ABC Awards recognises that there are differences in each of the roles and has separate handbooks for moderators/verifiers and examiners. Requirements for external verifiers will be incorporated into the handbook in a qualification-specific section.
8. All contracted staff have terms and conditions detailing their roles and responsibilities and have to declare any conflict of interest during the application process. However, there is no single documented external verifier code of practice explaining the roles and responsibilities, personal conduct and probity, and the appeals process if centres disagree with an external verifier's decision.
9. There is an external verifier register, but it does not record whether the external verifier has achieved V2 within 12 months of starting this role. The monitoring team noted from the external verifier files that some, including the lead external verifier, had been carrying out this role for three years without achieving V2. The awarding body stated that due to the small number of approved centres it was difficult for external verifiers to meet the requirements of V2.
10. Training and/or guidance in assessment is available to all contracted staff and this varies according to the type and size of the qualification. The minimum is a course specification with samples of completed assessment materials. ABC Awards runs specific training days for moderators, examiners and external verifiers, and item writers if applicable. All contracted staff have documented guidance to assist them in their role, such as *General instructions to examiners on question setting*, *External moderator guidance notes* and *External verifier guidance for NVQs in youth work* (draft).
11. Awarding body staff developing qualifications work with subject-specific specialists during the early stages. Subject specialists will be given documented guidance on developing units, but this is currently in draft format.
12. It is mandatory for all contracted staff to attend one meeting per year. ABC Awards also runs a series of events at which changes to procedures or qualifications can be announced. These events also encourage continuing professional development.

Accreditation conditions

2. ABC Awards must ensure that all unqualified external verifiers achieve V2 within 12 months (*NVQ code of practice*, paragraph 53 bullet point 1).

3. ABC Awards must develop a code of practice for external verifiers, including reference to appeals against external verifiers' decisions, so that the regulatory requirements are met in full. External verifiers must confirm in writing that they will work to the requirements of the code of practice (*NVQ code of practice*, paragraph 55).

Observations

1. ABC Awards should ensure that it maintains control of quality assurance arrangements across the regional offices.

Plan of provision

This is subject to *The statutory regulation of external qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (2004), paragraphs 1–4 and 43–44.

Findings

1. ABC Awards submitted its most recent biannual plan of provision in April 2006. This clearly identifies the sectors in which the awarding body offers qualifications, new qualifications it plans to develop and amendments proposed for existing qualifications, with timelines. The awarding body is working with relevant sector skills councils (SSCs) to offer qualifications that are being withdrawn by other awarding bodies and is adopting a credit-based system.
2. The plan provides a rationale for each of the qualifications and ABC Awards is following the regulatory authorities' requirements by taking into account, for example, market research on anticipated demand, progression routes and candidate take-up. There is clear reference in the plan to early dialogue with the regulatory authorities and support from the relevant SSC where applicable.
3. Qualification provision is normally reviewed when qualifications are due for redevelopment. However, because of recent changes to the SSC for teaching ABC Awards has brought forward the redevelopment of its teaching qualifications and intends to review its provision annually.
4. Once qualifications are accredited by the regulatory authorities, business-development managers work with the qualification development team to agree a marketing strategy. This includes speaking at events, attending exhibitions or publicising the qualification through its regional offices.
5. Each accredited qualification has a target income and its performance is reviewed to determine why targets are not being met. This includes checking trends in registration and certification, and feedback from moderators.
6. There is no formal documented procedure explaining how the awarding body will deal with the withdrawal of qualifications. However, staff gave examples and stated that when a qualification is withdrawn a letter is sent to centres. Registered candidates

are allowed to complete the qualification within the certification period.

Accreditation conditions

4. ABC Awards must have a rationale for withdrawing qualifications and develop suitable procedures so that candidates are not disadvantaged (*The statutory regulation of external qualifications*, paragraph 44).

Observations

2. ABC Awards may wish to consider developing guidance for staff to assist them in evaluating individual qualification performance. This should include the minimum take-up for a qualification to be considered viable, and the circumstances in which qualifications should be amended, rewritten or withdrawn from the National Qualifications Framework.

Content and design of qualifications

This is subject to *The statutory regulation of external qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (2004)*, paragraphs 45–55.

Findings

1. The monitoring team looked at the generic processes in place for developing qualifications, their content and the design of assessment methodology.
2. The awarding body has documented procedures for developing new qualifications. ABC Awards uses a flow chart detailing the stages from the initial idea and development of the qualification through to its submission to QCA. Each phase explains the process to be followed, and identifies the teams and/or stakeholders to be consulted. For example, ABC Awards enters into early dialogue with QCA and the relevant SSC at the beginning of the process and at later stages. The monitoring team noted the recording of these phases and supporting evidence such as dialogue with SSCs. This is good practice.
3. While the process does not formally show how the views of end users such as centres are taken into account, relevant feedback collected during moderation visits is fed back to the qualification development team.
4. The flow chart, dated May 2005, indicates that the decision to proceed is given by the management team, but this will change in the proposed structure. ABC Awards stated that it had discussed using an approvals panel to formally sign off qualifications. However, although the qualification-development process is documented, it will need to be reviewed in light of the imminent restructure.
5. ABC Awards uses external specialists to write specifications and these are sent to the relevant SSC for support, and to an independent reviewer to ensure that the content, size of units and assessment strategy is fit for purpose. There are specific forms for recording and detailing the activities carried out for these phases.
6. ABC Awards uses generic titling conventions for all qualifications and unit titles where possible. The qualification specifications follow the same format and meet the requirements of the regulatory authorities, including mapping to key skills and the relevant national occupational standards where applicable.

7. ABC Awards uses a range of assessment methodologies relevant to the qualification, including internal and independent assessment. There is evidence to support ABC Awards reviewing the use of external assessment because of comments from centres. The regulatory authorities have accepted the existing assessment models submitted by the awarding body for each of the accredited qualifications.

Accreditation conditions

There are no accreditation conditions for this section.

Observations

3. ABC Awards should review and amend its qualifications development process so that it takes into account changes imposed by the restructure.
4. ABC Awards should have an evaluation process for its accredited qualifications that includes feedback from end users such as centres and candidates, and should take account of this when determining if revisions or amendments are needed.

The quality assurance and control of internal assessment

This is subject to the *NVQ code of practice* (2001) paragraphs 22–33, 36–51, 52(part), 54(part), 56, 58(part), 59–65, 66(part) and 67–69 and *The statutory regulation of external qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (2004), paragraphs 13, 36, 56, 57 and 59–62.

Findings

1. The monitoring team looked at the quality assurance and control systems in place to support the assessment of NVQs and vocationally related qualifications.
2. ABC Awards provides centres with the ABC directory, which covers awarding body policies and procedures, the award-specific standards, centre guidance for NVQs, and the standard-setting body's assessment strategy where relevant. Details of the responsibilities of assessors, internal verifiers and moderators, the specification for assessment and the awarding body's requirements on maintaining records for vocationally related qualifications are included in this documentation. However, guidance on the records required for NVQs is not yet finalised.
3. The awarding body is developing NVQ-specific guidance for centres, assessors and internal and external verifiers to support the NVQ code of practice. The monitoring team noted that the draft versions, although not finalised, have suitable content. Guidance for vocationally related qualifications is established and includes, for example, *Guidance notes for assessors of ABC candidates*, dated March 06. However, the guidance does not include information on redrafting work or on how much assistance candidates can have with work before it is presented for assessment.
4. The requirements for assessors and internal verifiers are included within the assessment strategy for youth work. They must hold or achieve A or V units within 18 months, and the decisions of unqualified staff must be countersigned. The awarding body does require centre personnel to inform them of any staff changes for all qualifications.

5. The arrangements to deploy external moderators and external verifiers are suitable. Systems are in place to ensure that there are no potential conflicts of interest when allocating centres.
6. The awarding body provides external moderators with a comprehensive handbook and additional guidance notes to assist them in their role. External verifiers do not have such detailed information, but the awarding body recognises this as an issue and is developing NVQ-specific guidance.
7. ABC Awards visits both NVQ and vocationally related qualifications centres as part of its quality assurance arrangements to ensure that assessment decisions are correct and that centres are complying with its requirements. The arrangements for planning visits are suitable and meet the regulatory requirements.
8. Centres that offer vocationally related qualifications are visited annually and NVQ centres receive two visits a year. Written reports, with action plans where applicable, are given to all centres. The monitoring team noted that the external verification reports for NVQs are not mapped to the approved centre criteria. There is clear evidence from the sample of reports scrutinised that candidate work is reassessed or additional evidence requested if standards are not being met.
9. External moderation reports are monitored by the administrators for any issues relevant to the qualifications run from their offices. Any specific issues are discussed with the external moderator and if generic dealt with during training. The lead moderator completes an annual report, and it was noted in the 2005 report that internal moderation was raised as an issue and that centres needed to develop effective strategies.
10. The lead external verifier reads the NVQ verification reports and completes an annual report. However, no report was available for 2005. The report for 2004 concentrated on the review of paperwork and minimum number of observations required for the NVQs rather than the performance of external verifiers.
11. At the time of the monitoring activity the quality manager did not have access to all the verification reports across the regional offices. It would therefore be

difficult for ABC Awards to identify quality assurance issues across qualifications or have an overall view of the performance of its centres or external moderators and external verifiers.

12. There are no formal arrangements in place to monitor or compile reports on the performance of external verifiers as required by the *NVQ code of practice* (2001).

Accreditation conditions

5. ABC Awards must review the assessment guidance for qualifications where case studies or assignments are the major assessment component so that centres and candidates are clear about the rules for redrafting work and about how much assistance can be given before work is assessed (*The statutory regulation of external qualifications*, paragraph 60c and 60d).
6. ABC Awards must inform NVQ centres of the assessment records to be kept with timescales (*NVQ code of practice*, paragraphs 27 bullet point 3, 48 bullet point 2, and *The statutory regulation of external qualifications*, paragraph 61a).
7. ABC Awards must ensure that the report form used for external verification is mapped to the approved centre criteria (*NVQ code of practice*, paragraph 56, bullet point 1).
8. ABC Awards must develop and implement a strategy for monitoring the performance of its external verifiers. The monitoring must include supervised visits and written reports on performance (*NVQ code of practice*, paragraph 54 part).

Observations

5. ABC Awards should issue the draft guidance for NVQs in its current format and amend these documents when changes to the existing *NVQ code of practice* are finalised.
6. ABC Awards should review its existing *External moderator handbook* to see if generic information on policies and procedures can be used to supplement the draft guidance for external verifiers.

7. ABC Awards should ensure that its systems enable the quality manager to access external moderation and verification reports across all offices.

Quality assurance and control of independent assessment

This is subject to *The statutory regulation of external qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (2004)*, paragraphs 13, 36, 38–42 and 56–58.

Findings

1. ABC Awards uses independent assessment for some of its accredited qualifications such as hospitality, motor vehicle, arboriculture and pastry cooks awards. The format of independent assessment is not generic and may vary from short-answer questions to practical examinations depending on the qualification. ABC Awards provides its examiners with a handbook containing information on setting and marking questions, and awarding-body-specific policies and procedures.
2. The quality assurance arrangements for managing independent assessment include, for example, the retention of candidate work and the re-allocation of examiner's work if assessment decisions are incorrect.
3. All tasks are devised, set and marked by ABC Awards but the standardisation process varies depending on the qualification. For small qualifications the lead examiner will be the only examiner and will set and mark the assessment tasks and devise the mark schemes. Lead examiners write the assessment tasks, questions and mark schemes based on the relevant specification for each qualification. All assessment tasks are reviewed separately to ensure that plain language is used and the full requirement of the specification met.
4. The awarding body uses standardisation where applicable to ensure that assessments are reliable and the activities are documented. There are generic procedures across qualifications but in some cases some lead examiners provide additional guidance to examiners on how to award marks. The monitoring team noted the detailed guidance available to examiners in the practical languages qualifications. Standardisation usually takes place by post although the examiners for the pastry cooks awards use meetings to reach a consensus on marking.
5. The monitoring team noted that if candidates attempted more questions than the required number, examiners were directed to mark all answers and take the highest

mark. This is not good practice as it may give those candidates an unfair advantage.

6. Examiners mark a sample of scripts – usually three, although this does vary as one lead examiner requests five scripts. If the qualification is graded, one example from each grade is sent to the lead examiner for comment. Examiners receive feedback on their marking and are either cleared to mark the remaining scripts or offered extra training. Marked scripts are forwarded to ABC Awards and a clerical check applied for numerical errors.
7. No further standardisation or checking of examiner marking takes place. The regulatory authorities recognise that for small awards using one or two examiners this is not an issue and discussions with lead examiners on the process confirmed this. However, the monitoring team is not confident that sufficient standardisation of scripts is undertaken for awards that have a large number of examiners, as inconsistencies in examiner marking after the standardisation process may not be identified. There does not appear to be a consistent approach to standardisation across all qualifications, and the awarding body will need to review the guidance issued to examiners.
8. There are no formal arrangements in place to monitor the work of examiners post-standardisation. Discrepancies in marking may be identified at this stage but the awarding body does not use statistics to check the accuracy of marking across its examiners.
9. Lead examiners write annual reports on the examinations taken and some hold meetings to discuss issues. One of the 2005 reports gave a breakdown of how well candidates performed in the assessment tasks and noted areas for improvement. It also commented on how the standardisation meeting contributed to the consistency of marking by examiners.
10. Clear instructions for the security of examination papers are included in the document *General instructions relating to the conduct and invigilation of examinations*. The awarding body also carries out spot checks to ensure that its examination regulations are complied with. However, the regulations do not require centres to check the identity of candidates prior to examinations.

Accreditation conditions

9. ABC Awards must ensure that its examinations guarantee fair assessment for all candidates (*The statutory regulation of external qualifications*, paragraph 9c).

10. ABC Awards must review its procedures for standardisation so that it is confident in the effectiveness of the process, particularly for qualifications where there are large numbers of examiners (*The statutory regulation of external qualifications*, paragraph 56).

11. ABC Awards must formally monitor the work of its examiners (*The statutory regulation of external qualifications*, paragraph 36).

12. ABC Awards must ensure that centres check the identity of candidates prior to examinations (*The statutory regulation of external qualifications*, paragraph 58f).

Observations

8. ABC Awards should review the guidance given to examiners for standardisation so that there is a common approach across qualifications.

Determination and reporting of results

This is subject to *The statutory regulation of external qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (2004)*, paragraphs 63–67.

Findings

1. ABC Awards does not use formal awarding meetings to determine and report results. Lead examiners are responsible for determining the final results but there is no documented guidance to support the process.
2. The pass mark and grade boundaries if applicable are determined during qualification development and noted in the specification. These will remain constant for the lifetime of the qualification except for arboriculture and the pastry cooks awards when meetings are held to determine the results for borderline scripts.
3. There is no aggregation of assessment components within qualifications. Each specification states how the overall award is achieved and gives information on pass marks.
4. Chief examiners are responsible for ensuring the accuracy and consistency of results, and there is evidence to support that decisions of examiners are changed. It was noted that an examiner for modern languages who had marked too harshly was offered extra training and the chief examiner re-marked the scripts.
5. Results are discussed between examiners where applicable, usually by telephone or email, and are compared to results from previous years. ABC Awards provides its lead examiners with statistics to support the awarding activity and scripts are kept for five years. However, the monitoring team is not confident that applying this principle to all qualifications will produce accurate and consistent results.
6. If special consideration is requested because of environmental issues such as excessive noise the invigilator attaches a note to the scripts. Examiners make the decision to apply special consideration but are not given any specific guidelines apart from using their discretion.

Accreditation conditions

13. ABC Awards must review its awarding process and document the procedures so that examiners have more detailed information on determining

results and how to apply special consideration (*The statutory regulation of external qualification*, paragraph 63).

Observations

There are no observations for this section.

Registration

This is subject to *The statutory regulation of external qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (2004), paragraphs 11 and 12.

Findings

1. ABC Awards has suitable procedures in place for centre approval and qualification approval. These have been revised with the aim of streamlining the process, and the awarding body is adopting the principles of common centre recognition being developed by the regulatory authorities. The centre-approval process considers resources and expertise at centres but does not ask for a single named point of accountability for the quality assurance and management of qualifications. There are also arrangements to approve venues for examinations.
2. Centres and candidates are systematically registered. The existing process for candidate registration is under revision as ABC Awards intends to introduce online registration in September 2006. The database automatically generates a unique lifetime registration and candidate identity number.

Accreditation conditions

There are no accreditation conditions.

Observations

9. ABC Awards should ensure that all centres nominate a single named point of accountability for the quality assurance and management of qualifications.