Post-accreditation monitoring report: Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA)

August 2007

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Contents

Introduction

Regulating external qualifications

Responsibility for regulating external qualifications lies jointly with three regulators:

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

Following the accreditation of a qualification, the regulators 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 regulators 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 regulators and its implementation monitored.

The regulators 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.

Banked documents

As part of their awarding body recognition processes, the regulators require awarding bodies to submit certain documents to QCA for the purposes of 'banking' centrally. Information from banked documents will be used to inform monitoring activities and may also affect the awarding body's risk rating.

A suite of documents has been identified as suitable for banking and includes those that are considered to be those most crucial in supporting an awarding body's ability to operate

effectively. In order to maintain the currency of the banked documents, awarding bodies are responsible for updating them as and when changes occur. They are also reminded to review them at least annually at the time of completion of the self-assessment return.

About this report

This report is the outcome of a monitoring activity carried out on Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA) awarding body and was carried out by a joint regulatory team April 2007. This is the first post-accreditation monitoring activity across the whole range of AQA's provision covering both general and vocational qualifications.

The monitoring is focused on the sections of the regulatory criteria not previously covered by the awarding body recognition update (ABRU). It draws together the regulators' findings on areas of corporate governance, resources and expertise, quality assurance and control of internal and independent assessment, determination and reporting of results and registration.

Monitoring activities included desk research of information already held by the regulators, including:

- ABRU submission
- annual self-assessment return
- report on the performance of awarding bodies for general qualifications in 2006
- report on the monitoring of GCSE and GCE awards for the June 2006 examination series including observation at awarding meetings for the following subject areas:
    - GCE AS Science for Public Understanding
    - GCE Applied Science
    - GCE Dance
    - GCE Design and Technology: Product Design
    - GCE General Studies A
    - GCE Health and Social Care
    - GCE Leisure Activities
    - GCE Mathematics
    - GCE Polish
    - GCSE Applied ICT
    - GCSE Business Studies B
    - GCSE Chemistry
    - GCSE English A
    - GCSE French A
    - GCSE German A

- GCSE History B
- GCSE Humanities
- GCSE Mathematics A
- GCSE Media Studies
- GCSE Statistics.

Other monitoring activities carried out by the monitoring team focussed on AQA's VRQs in counselling and included:

- attendance at a meeting of external verifiers
- observation of a question paper setting meeting
- observation of an awarding meeting
- visits to five centres delivering VRQs in counselling.

The monitoring team visited AQA's Guildford office to conduct interviews with staff and review documentation on 16 and 17 April 2007.

About the AQA

The AQA was formed on 1 April 2000 following a merger between the Associated Examining Board (AEB) and the Northern Examinations and Assessment Board (NEAB).

AQA sets and marks general qualifications examinations including GCSEs and A levels, as well as offering a range of other qualifications such as key skills, basic skills and Advanced Extension Awards. AQA also offers VRQ qualifications in counselling at levels 2,3 and 5. For further information, visit the AQA website www.aqa.org.uk.

Corporate governance

This is subject to *The statutory regulation of external qualifications in England in Wales and Northern Ireland*, (2004), paragraphs 5, 6 and 7.

Findings

1. It was confirmed that the AQA organisation structure is the same as that currently banked at QCA. However, a new structure is proposed for mid-2007. The proposed structure will incorporate a new market strategy division. When appointed, the director of the new division will have a place on the executive board alongside the directors of the existing divisions of Qualifications Development and Support, People, Communications and Research, Finance, ICT and Examinations Services.

2. At the time of completion of the ABRU, AQA was in the process of reviewing its committee structure. Initially the aim of the review was to clarify and define the role of the council that oversees the work of the whole organisation. This then led to a larger review and full restructuring of the committees and their terms of reference.

3. The committees are separated into governance and advisory committees. The governance committees are decision-making committees covering the areas of finance, audit, irregularities and appeals, awarding standards and access management. AQA trustees chair the advisory committees and this provides an independent element to each. The advisory committees report to the executive board whose membership consists of the director general and the divisional directors as described in the first paragraph. The executive board reports to the council business group (CBG), which is a sub-group of the council, made up of the chairs of all the senior committees. The CBG meets more frequently than the full council so is able to react to any time-critical issues as well as acting as a 'think tank' for more strategic issues.

4. The new committee structure was introduced in April 2006 and AQA has yet to undertake a formal review of its effectiveness. However, the director general told the monitoring team that it is working well and that the more clearly defined remits provide clearer divisional roles and responsibilities within the structure. The creation of the executive board, which has delegated authority from the council to make operational decisions, has enabled the council to maintain a more strategic role. The Irregularities and Appeals Committee has also been successful and there has been a significant improvement in the

decision making process. A formal review of the committee structure is likely to take place at an annual council event.

5.   The purpose and objectives of AQA's business are laid out in a *Manifesto*, which is made available to all staff and is displayed on notice boards throughout its offices. The *Manifesto* includes the five development streams that have been drawn out of the strategic aims. Each of the five divisional directors has a responsibility for one of the development streams and has to produce and work to an annual strategic action plan relating to it.

6.   The AQA executive board undertakes annual staff updates in January each year. The board members visit each of the three offices to carry out a series of meetings to which all staff are invited. These events provide valuable communication links with staff and aim to update them on national initiatives and involve them in all aspects of the work of AQA. For instance, the most recent events included workshops on AQA's development streams. Apart from the annual updates, there is a *Talking points* newsletter and regular lunchtime sessions where teams can inform other staff of the work they do. The monitoring team considers that AQA's efforts to communicate with its staff is good practice.

Accreditation conditions

There are no accreditation conditions for this section.

Observations

1.   AQA is reminded to submit details of its new organisational structure to QCA for the purposes of banking once it is agreed and in place. AQA is also reminded to submit the terms of reference for its committees for the purposes of banking.

Resources and expertise

This is subject to *The statutory regulation of external qualifications in England in Wales and Northern Ireland*, (2004), paragraphs 8 and 10.

Findings

1.   AQA has approximately 1,050 staff across three sites in Guildford, Manchester and Harrogate. Each site has a human resource office. There are regular meetings of department staff and this includes virtual meetings using the WEBEX virtual meeting environment to take account of the multi site working.

2.   AQA has very comprehensive procedures and policies for dealing with recruitment, selection and training of internal staff.

3.   AQA is aware that there is a need to retain a bank of examiners with sufficient expertise to make secure decisions and a need to develop and train new ones. Existing specialists are notified in the autumn and asked if they wish to be considered for the work. People who decline are asked to specify their reasons and these are evaluated. To encourage people, AQA offers 'taster sessions' and 'taster materials' so that individuals have a clear idea of what is involved. Specialists are given a formal offer of work that includes the fees and dates for which they need to be available.

4.   General markers may also be recruited for specific areas of non-specialist examinations, such as simple, short answer questions. These are often degree course students and they are provided with full training and are monitored in the same way as subject specialists.

5.   Following successful induction and probation all AQA internal staff take part in the performance planning, development and review process. This is a combination of reviewing performance, setting objectives and planning development and training. Staff meet with their managers twice a year for this process and are encouraged to maintain a staff development record.

6.   AQA provides its staff with a variety of training opportunities at all levels and there is an annual training and development programme across all three sites. Of particular note is the core business training that ensures staff are familiar with essential key areas such as

QPECs (question paper evaluation committees), standardisation and awarding. There is a detailed management skills training programme, covering issues such as employment law, managing overtime and flexible working, and recruitment and selection. There is also a leadership training programme for senior managers with topics such as project management, leading change, strategy development and performance management.

7. All training is evaluated. Training staff and managers meet regularly to review training, training programmes and the quality assurance of training both for staff and for examiners and moderators.

8. AQA also provides its examiners with a comprehensive training programme. For example, there are distance-learning packs for new senior examiners on QPECS and awarding. Training packs for new examiners include examination handbooks, exemplar scripts for standardisation and a self-assessment tool. New examiners also attend training events prior to standardisation.

9. Training for examiners including the 'taster sessions' and new examiner training is evaluated to assess the numbers of those dropping out, those appointed and those whose marking is stopped. The aim of the 'taster sessions' is to reduce the dropout rates of new examiners. All examiners and moderators used have an annual report and are graded A to E. Examiners who are rated grade D have their work reviewed and are provided with retraining but those at grade E have their contracts terminated.

10. The ICT staff at AQA are involved in a continuous improvement programme within AQA's Information Security Management System to ensure the network has a high degree of resilience and security. Currently the servers operate with built-in firewalls for website protection. The storage area network disks are maintained in secure, air-conditioned environments. Core systems are protected by UPS facilities.

12. ICT also provides input to the AQA's Information Security Management System arrangements, which support its ISO27001 certification, and the business continuity plans and disaster recovery procedures, which are developed and managed by the AQA Crisis Management Team.

Accreditation conditions

There are no accreditation conditions for this section.

Observations

There are no observations for this section.

The quality assurance and control of internal assessment

This is subject to *The statutory regulation of external qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*, (2004), paragraphs 13, 36, 38–42, 56, 57, 59, 60–62.

Findings

1. Specifications for all AQA qualifications are available on the website. Where qualifications include internal assessment, the specifications contain additional information detailing the requirements for centres. It was confirmed that additional guidance for centres is also provided in the form of teacher resource materials and examples of these are on the AQA website. There is also a network of AQA coursework advisers to support centres.

2. All specifications are produced to a formula with additions for variances in assessment for different subjects. The executive board takes the final decision to approve the specifications initially signed-off by the project boards.

3. Processes for internal and external standardisation are clearly stipulated. Specifications including internal assessment make it clear that all centres must undertake internal standardisation. AQA holds standardisation meetings for centres entering candidates for the first time and attendance is also mandatory for existing centres that have experienced problems in setting and marking coursework in the past. A centre must sign a 'centre declaration sheet' to confirm coursework marking has been standardised. Candidates and tutors must also sign declarations confirming work submitted for assessment is the candidate's own, has been conducted under specified conditions and detailing any additional assistance provided. No moderation sample is marked without the necessary documentation. Centres are required to retain all coursework until results have been issued. There is no requirement for them to retain an archive.

4. Tutors for the VRQs in counselling qualifications are required to attend an AQA standardisation event before they teach and assess candidates. Following this tutors are expected to attend at least one standardisation event in a two-year period to ensure continued consistency across centres. This standardisation is seen as vital for the integrity of the qualification but attendance is difficult for some tutors. The VRQs in

counselling qualifications are delivered as part-time courses with part-time tutors and are often run as an evening class. AQA is looking at different ways to assist tutors so that no one starts to teach the qualification without being standardised. Staff at centres visited and who had attended AQA standardisation had found it useful and it was of particular benefit for a centre where there was just one tutor. This tutor used guidance from the standardisation to help make a decision where candidate work was borderline.

5.   Where there is more than one tutor delivering the VRQs in counselling qualifications, centre staff are required to standardise. External verifiers review internal standardisation at the annual monitoring visit and are required to check that formal arrangements are in place. Staff from one centre that was visited stated that they did not hold formal standardisation meetings or record standardisation discussions. AQA staff said that the centre would have to provide other evidence to satisfy the external verifier but this was not recorded in the external verifier report so it is unclear what this evidence would be. Another centre visited stated that they had not received any annual monitoring visits since approval in 2003.

6.   AQA guidance for external verifiers and centres emphasises that annual visits should be 'helpful rather than inspectorial, that there are many different administrative models and that centres do not necessarily have to maintain complex documented systems'. However, annual monitoring of centres' systems and practices by external verifiers should provide AQA with an assurance that centre systems meet both its own guidance and the statutory regulations.

7.   AQA provided evidence of robust procedures for external moderation of general qualifications coursework including guidance booklets for teachers, moderators and senior moderators, and details of sampling, tolerance limits and additional sampling to ensure required standards are met. It confirmed that all moderators are expected to take part in the training as required by the code of practice otherwise they would not be permitted to moderate. Arrangements are in place to monitor the moderators and team leaders through samples of centre work moderated by them.

8.   The director of qualifications development and support stated that AQA took a corporate view that quality assurance and control of internal assessment normally worked well as few marks were adjusted.

9.   Feedback to centres on internal assessment is provided by a report written to a standard template.

10.   Sampling of the internally assessed journal for the VRQs in counselling is carried out by post at the start and the end of the life of the unit. A sample of five journals is taken at each level and each cohort. Although AQA guidance states that the external verifier should select the sample, at one centre visited staff said that they chose the sample to send. This issue was also identified in the *Chief external verifier report on EV procedures and documents 2005/6.*

11.   Some other coursework-specific issues for the VRQs in counselling are identified in the *Chief external verifier report on coursework assessment 2005/6.* These include a wide variation in the level of support given to candidates by tutors, a wide variation of suitable titles for essays across centres and difficulties for tutors in identifying where written work met the learning outcomes.

12.   Sampling of the practical role-play assessments is specified in AQA guidance at 20 per cent. However it is clear that this amount of sampling is difficult to maintain and is not fully met across all centres. One centre visited had never received a visit from a verifier to observe its practical assessments. AQA must either enforce its guidance or review it to consider whether the assessment criteria should be changed. This issue was also identified in the *Chief external verifier report on EV procedures and documents 2005/6.*

13.   The performance reports for 2005/6 are the first cycle of reports to be completed by a recently appointed chief external verifier. AQA intends that by the end of the 2007 academic year, the issues identified in these reports will have been addressed.

14.   AQA is aware that there are some weaknesses in internal assessment for the VRQs and has been waiting for the national occupational standards to be accredited and mapped to the qualifications before reviewing current arrangements and making any amendments.

Accreditation conditions

1. AQA must ensure that its centres delivering vocational qualifications use staff with the relevant competence and have systems that ensure consistency of standards (*The statutory regulation of external qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*, 2004, criteria 11d).

2. AQA must ensure that its systems and procedures for the delivery and management of vocational qualifications produce results that are reliable (*The statutory regulation of external qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*, 2004, paragraph 56).

3. AQA must ensure that the internal assessment requirements relating to vocational qualifications can be interpreted consistently (*The statutory regulation of external qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*, 2004, paragraph 60e).

4. AQA must ensure that internal assessment for vocational qualifications is externally moderated or verified in accordance with the assessment specification (*The statutory regulation of external qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*, 2004, paragraph 61).

Observations

There are no observations for this section.

The 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, 56–58.

Findings

1.   The monitoring team was provided with a variety of documents including the question paper preparation procedure file. These documents identify the administration and assessment requirements for each type of qualification including the externally assessed components of the VRQs in counselling. AQA also provides documentation on its website, which can be downloaded by the centres.

2.   Evidence was provided relating to question paper preparation and printing including the appointment of personnel, drafting and approval by QPEC, proofing and the simultaneous production of mark schemes and other associated assessment materials. Question paper revisers check the question papers against the syllabus to check for coverage and standards over time. There is tight control of the question paper production process with all proofs having to pass through processing and examining services and use of scrutineers and professional proofreaders who check that the language of papers is clear, simple and free from bias. Final sign-off is by the chair of examiners.

3.   Printing and despatch of question papers is carried out in bulk and is staggered using barcode technology to ensure the correct papers arrive at the correct centres on the correct day. Security of question papers in centres is part of the JCQ inspection regime that includes spot checks on examinations. Special measures are occasionally put in place for the dispatch and sitting of papers at particular centres.

4.   AQA provided evidence of robust procedures for standardisation of examiners including preparations prior to standardisation, standardisation of senior examiners, team leaders and examiners, and finalisation of the mark scheme. Staff confirmed that examiners have to complete all aspects of the standardisation process as required by the *GCSE, GCE, GNVQ and AEA code of practice.*

5. Procedures are in place to monitor the work of examiners. A first sample of marked scripts is sent to team leaders who provide feedback on performance or request further samples if necessary. Examiners are not permitted to mark beyond the first sample until their team leader has approved the sample.

6. Details were provided of satisfactory arrangements for the submission of marks and receipt and checking of scripts. Some candidates' work is retained for different purposes. Scripts at key grade boundaries are retained for one year to use at the next year's awards. A fuller archive is retained every fifth year by the research team to inform standards over time.

7. AQA implements an e-capture program for logging marks. This system does not allow a mark to be missed and calculates all marks thereby minimising human error.

8. Where electronic marking takes place, the allocation to markers is totally randomised as this is done on a question-by-question basis. This allows a single candidate's paper to be spread across a number of markers.

9. AQA offers a small number of general qualifications in Welsh and has systems in place to ensure that they meet the required standards and are consistent with qualifications offered in English.

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*, (2004), paragraphs 63–67.

Findings

1. In order to provide support to awarding meetings, there are members of the research team dedicated to awarding across all AQA qualifications. There are mechanisms for providing a trained support officer with the relevant technical and statistical information at each award. Software requirements for each subject are discussed and projections for results can be made by taking forward the cumulative percentage outcomes from the previous year and/or by analysing the relationship between the candidates' prior achievement and the subject (or unit) outcome in the previous year and then predicting forward to the current year.

2. There is comprehensive awarding guidance documentation for relevant internal staff, including subject officers, in each of AQA's three offices. There are also briefings and a distance learning pack available for chairs of examiners and new senior examiners. New awarding personnel are encouraged to observe an awarding meeting as part of their training. An awarding coordinator in each office oversees the routine process, enabling the director and the principal manager to deal with any problems as soon as they occur.

3. Awards are made using both professional judgement and statistical evidence. All awarding documentation is retained and these, together with the provision of appropriate statistical information at meetings, are used as methods of ensuring that standards over time are maintained. Grade boundaries are keyed in immediately after awarding and research staff also have arrangements in place to review outcomes between awarding and the publication of results to enable changes to be made if necessary.

4. Booklets containing a summary of the awarding process and an outline of the uniform mark scheme (UMS) are available for centres. Candidates are made aware of the way in which qualification results are reported for the relevant specification. Grade boundary marks and the grade distributions for each specification are made available on the results statistics webpage.

5.   Awarding for the VRQs in counselling is achieved by ensuring the results of all the external and internal components are complete. A formal awarding meeting is held to establish the grade boundary marks for the written papers at each series. Candidates are marked as pass or refer when each component is assessed and in order to achieve the full award, candidates must have a pass for all components.

Accreditation conditions

There are no accreditation conditions for this section.

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.　Potential AQA centres are sent an information pack containing standard documentation, examination regulations etc. AQA staff review completed applications particularly if the centre is outside the remit for state funding, i.e. a training provider. Representatives from the JCQ inspection service, operated by AQA on behalf of the unitary awarding bodies, make pre-approval visits to ensure appropriate criteria are met. Applications judged by staff to meet the agreed criteria are seen by the assistant director - centre support for authorisation.

2.　The same centre approval process is followed for centres wishing to deliver the VRQs in counselling qualifications and these centres are also subject to annual verification visits by the centre's allocated external verifier.

3.　This generic approval system has some weaknesses in providing for individual vocational centres, such as small training providers, that may require specialist advice and guidance. For example, all centres are required to have their own internal appeals process. The JCQ inspectors check for the existence of this procedure but are not required to look at its content. External verifiers for the VRQs in counselling qualifications also check the internal appeals procedure at annual monitoring visits and should be able to provide additional support to centres. However, AQA has no principles or guidance that explains to verifiers or to centres what constitutes an acceptable internal appeals procedure. One centre visited by a member of the monitoring team had a procedure in place but it was insufficient in that it did not provide a course of action should the appeal remain unresolved, i.e. that it could be escalated to the awarding body.

4.　This situation is confused further as the majority of AQA qualifications are taken by students at schools or colleges where an internal appeal is dealt with entirely by the centre and the awarding body does not become involved. For the purposes of the VRQs in counselling, there is an issue around a duty of care to the candidates and whether AQA should be responsible for looking after their interests.

5.   AQA does not register candidates as they are 'entered' to take examinations and assessments. Again, this system works for students taking general qualifications who are the responsibility of the school or college, but it is less satisfactory for adults taking the VRQs in counselling qualifications. Centres register the course with AQA in September but only provide an indication of candidate numbers at this stage and do not include individual details. Candidates are entered in October and March for assessments in January and June to tie in with the assessment dates for the general qualifications. However, it is likely that some assessments for the VRQs in counselling are taking place before these entries are made. For example candidates starting the counselling course in September and not entered until the June session will have had their journals internally assessed before then. Because candidates are not effectively 'registered' with AQA at this time, it is unclear who is looking after their interests should a dispute or other situation occur.

Accreditation conditions

5.   AQA must have published guidance that centres or candidates involved in vocational qualifications can follow to enquire about or appeal to AQA against internal assessment or other decisions (*The statutory regulation of external qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*, 2004, criteria 23).

Observations

2.   AQA should review how it looks after the interests of candidates undertaking its vocational qualifications and whether there is a need to 'register' them or some have some other form of acknowledgement.