

Making a difference

Promoting confidence in A level and
GCSE exams in England: summer 2008



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Introduction

1. Ofqual is the new regulator of qualifications and exams in England. We want to make a difference by promoting public confidence in the exams system and making sure that candidates, parents, teachers and employers can depend on high quality exams and qualifications.
2. In May 2008, Ofqual published its first report *Getting it right* (www.ofqual.gov.uk/gettingitright/). This explained the steps we would take to monitor the summer 2008 A level and GCSE exams in England. The report explained the routine monitoring we would carry out and highlighted two areas of particular interest on which we would focus during the exams period:
 - awarding bodies' use of new technology in exams
 - the effectiveness of awarding bodies' customer service systems as a means of support to schools, colleges and candidates during exams.
3. Following publication of the A level and GCSE results for summer 2008 in August, the purpose of this report is to:
 - present our findings from this year's monitoring
 - draw attention to the steps taken by Ofqual to assure the quality of the exams
 - explain any further measures we intend to take.
4. As the new regulator of qualifications, exams and tests, Ofqual will examine the evidence and report publicly the facts about exams and qualifications. Where we find issues concerning the standard of exams, we will act to address these issues to maintain the integrity of the exams system.
5. This report and its predecessor, *Getting it right*, explain how we seek to ensure that appropriate standards are established and maintained. By presenting our findings and setting out any further measures needed, we aim to increase public confidence in A level and GCSE exams in England.

Summer 2008 results

6. In England, the summer 2008 results were published for GCEs (AS and A levels) on Thursday, 14 August. Compared to last year, there was an increase in A level entries for mathematics, sciences and languages and a small overall increase (0.3%) in the percentage of candidates achieving grades A–E to 97.2%. AS results showed a small increase (0.4%) in the percentage of candidates achieving grades A–E to 88.2%.
7. As usual, the publication of A level results generated substantial media coverage. This year's focus of media attention was on the rise in the number of A level candidates taking mathematics and languages and a move away from the so-called 'soft' subjects, regional differences in A level results, and continuing rising pass rates.
8. GCSE results in England for summer 2008 were published on Thursday, 21 August. There was a drop in entries of just over 150,000 due to a smaller cohort size and more candidates opting to sit their exams in earlier sessions. The percentage of candidates who achieved grades A*–C rose to 65.7%, which was an increase of 2.4% on last year.
9. This year, the media focused largely on the drop in entries for GCSEs. This was due to a decrease of about 6,000 in the number of 16-year-olds, an increase in the number of candidates entering for GCSE English and mathematics in the winter examination series rather than waiting until summer, and some learners moving to alternative qualifications. The rise in the number of candidates sitting GCSEs in the separate science subjects of biology, chemistry and physics was welcomed.
10. Kathleen Tattersall, Ofqual's chair, congratulated A level and GCSE candidates on their results. She praised them for their hard work, noting that both qualifications are highly regarded by the public, employers and those in further and higher education.

Ofqual's monitoring of the summer 2008 exams

11. Ofqual conducted a programme for monitoring the awarding bodies in England (AQA, Edexcel and OCR) to ensure the integrity of these examinations and results. During the summer 2008 exams period, we observed examiner standardisation meetings and grade awarding meetings at AQA, Edexcel and OCR for a range of A level and GCSE subjects.
12. Ofqual monitored 12 meetings to standardise the marking of examiners and 24 meetings to award grades to candidates. For many of these visits, we let the awarding bodies know of our intention to observe the meetings in advance. However, we attended just over one-third of the grade awarding meetings without giving advance notice.
13. Our observations of examiner standardisation and grade awarding meetings showed that awarding bodies followed the procedures set out in the *GCSE, GCE, and AEA code of practice*. Observers reported that examiners and awarding body officers carried out their duties professionally and thoroughly.
14. Ofqual also carried out an audit of A level and GCSE awarding documents at each awarding body. This enabled us to check that actions and decisions had been properly recorded across a wide sample of subjects in addition to those monitored in meetings. We were satisfied that all awarding bodies kept detailed and thorough records that showed grades had been awarded in accordance with the code of practice.
15. As in previous years, Ofqual held meetings with each of the awarding body accountable officers before A level and GCSE results were published. The accountable officers provided assurance that action was being taken to resolve any outstanding issues and that candidates could have confidence in their results.
16. Ofqual investigates and responds to a range of issues connected with the A level and GCSE exams system in England. During the summer 2008 exams period, there were a small number of incidents that could have affected candidates' results. Some specific incidents are described below.
17. A summer 2008 question paper for OCR's A level sociology repeated a question that had appeared in the January 2008 paper. Ninety-one candidates who sat both papers answered the same question on each occasion. The awarding body received complaints from centres that other candidates could have been disadvantaged by the repeated question. Candidates' scripts were all marked as usual. The effect on candidates' grades was considered carefully

during the award meeting. The awarding body was mindful of the need to make sure that no candidates were disadvantaged as a result of the repeated question. Ofqual observed the relevant part of the award meeting and was content with the actions taken by OCR to ensure that the grading process treated all candidates fairly. The awarding body apologised to centres for this incident and reviewed its processes to make sure that such an incident will not be repeated.

18. In another incident, copyright acknowledgments included on the back of OCR's GCSE music listening paper inadvertently provided information that could have been used by candidates to answer questions worth seven marks in total out of 100. This resulted in a number of complaints and enquiries from centres. Again, OCR analysed the impact on candidates and took steps to make sure that none were disadvantaged as a result of the inclusion of this material. The Ofqual observers who attended the award meeting noted the thorough way in which this matter was handled. Close attention was paid to centres' correspondence and the wording of the examiners' report to centres. OCR wrote to all GCSE music centres apologising for the error and explaining the action taken.
19. A Parcelforce van was stolen, which contained question papers for 41 different AQA A level and GCSE exams. AQA replaced these with sets of new question papers. This involved printing some 3 million new exam papers. AQA also worked with Parcelforce to recover any exam papers that had already been delivered to centres so that the risk of students taking the wrong paper was minimised. AQA kept Ofqual fully informed of developments, and we were content with the way AQA handled the incident.

Awarding bodies' use of new technology in exams

20. Awarding bodies increasingly use new technology within the examining process. In summer 2008, AQA, Edexcel and OCR carried out 'remote' standardisation for some A level and GCSE subjects, and Edexcel and OCR conducted 'remote' awards. These activities differ from traditional standardisation and awarding meetings in that examiners work online at home instead of attending a face-to-face meeting at the awarding body offices.

Monitoring of electronic marking

21. In 2008 all three awarding bodies continued to expand their use of electronic marking of examination papers. Nearly 8 million examination papers for the June 2008 exams were marked electronically (3.3 million by Edexcel, 2.5 million by AQA and 2.1 million by OCR). This was nearly 40% of the total number of papers taken in 2008, a steady increase on the 6 million examination papers marked electronically in 2007 and the 5 million marked electronically in 2006.
22. Ofqual monitored electronic marking to ensure that marking and awarding processes were conducted in accordance with the code of practice. The increase in the proportion of examination papers marked electronically is likely to continue in 2009, and Ofqual will continue to monitor electronic marking at all three awarding bodies.

Remote standardisation

23. In the past three years, awarding bodies used new technology to allow them to carry out online standardisation. 'Standardisation' is the technical term for the process of training examiners to mark accurately and consistently. This summer, examiners for approximately 430 exam papers were trained in this way.
24. During the summer exams period, Ofqual monitored the online standardisation process at all three awarding bodies to assess whether the objectives of a face-to-face meeting were met. These objectives include:
 - providing examiners with an explanation of the standardisation process
 - guiding examiners on how to mark candidates' work accurately
 - making sure that examiners mark a common set of candidates' scripts to check that they are marking consistently.

25. Where examiners were to be trained remotely, all three awarding bodies held a face-to-face pre-standardisation or set-up meeting for the senior examiners who would each monitor the marking of a team of examiners. This is not an entirely new process, as pre-standardisation meetings for senior examiners are normally held when examiners are to be standardised in a face-to-face meeting. However, at the pre-meetings, we observed that in cases when the main standardisation was to be carried out remotely, greater attention than usual was given to making the instructions to examiners and the mark schemes clear and unambiguous and ensuring that these were supported by explanatory notes and exemplification.
26. At the pre-meetings, the awarding bodies also provided senior examiners with details of the process for monitoring marking, and checking that examiners were marking consistently and to the agreed standard. Before they could begin marking, examiners had to first mark a sample of scripts that was checked either automatically or by a senior examiner. When the senior examiner was satisfied that the examiner was marking to the agreed standard, he or she could begin marking.
27. The accuracy of marking was checked at regular intervals throughout the marking period, normally through the inclusion of 'seeded' or 'validity' items. When an examiner was found to be marking inaccurately, the awarding body's computer system alerted the supervising senior examiner. The system either ceased to provide the examiner with further items to mark or it notified the supervising examiner about the problem. The supervising examiner then contacted the examiner and gave further clarification of the mark scheme. If an examiner continued to mark inaccurately, the supervising examiner stopped the examiner from marking a question or paper permanently, and the work was reallocated to another reliable examiner. This process has the advantage of allowing greater continuous supervision than is possible with traditional standardisation, where examiners submit two samples of marking at two given points in the marking period.

Remote awarding

28. Historically, the awarding process, involved face-to-face meetings of the committee of senior examiners (known as awarders) and still does in the majority of cases. However, over the past few years, the awarding bodies have been exploring the use of new technology to allow this process to be conducted online with examiners working at home. The objectives of both conventional and online awarding, and the people involved, are the same. Senior examiners consider the performance of candidates on each paper and

look at marked scripts to decide whether the work deserves a particular grade. The committee then recommends grade boundaries to the awarding body accountable officer, based on the committee's judgements of candidates' work and a range of statistical evidence, to make sure that standards from previous years are maintained. However, in an online award, the people involved can make their judgements of candidates' work by considering the scripts online at home within an agreed period of time, without necessarily meeting face-to-face.

29. Nearly 100 subjects were awarded online in summer 2008. Edexcel has been using a remote online awarding system (ROLA) for the past three years and this year used ROLA, at least in part, for approximately 70% of its A level and GCSE awards. This year, OCR used scoris[®] to conduct the award of three GCSE specifications remotely and carried out a small number of A level and GCSE face-to-face awarding meetings at OCR's offices using scoris with examiners viewing scripts online.
30. During the summer 2008 exams period, Ofqual monitored remote and online awards at Edexcel and OCR by attending meetings, where convened, reviewing awarding documents at the awarding bodies' offices and, in the case of one Edexcel award, logging into the ROLA system in the same way as a member of the awarding committee.
31. Ofqual was particularly concerned to make sure that all those involved in awarding were able to participate in the decision-making process when setting grade boundaries. We found that the remote awarding systems worked well and that procedures followed were in accordance with the code of practice. The people involved had been able to make their judgements on candidates' work independently and had been given the means and opportunity to discuss and support or challenge grade boundary recommendations through emails and phone calls.

Conclusion

32. Ofqual is satisfied that the use of online and remote systems has so far proved a valid alternative to traditional methods involving face-to-face meetings. However, we recognise that many online processes have been introduced with experienced teams of examiners for well established specifications. In all the remote awards observed, those involved generally agreed with one another. Some of the systems described have not been tested in new contexts – for example to award new specifications – and it is too soon to know whether a process where those involved are not able to discuss and support or

challenge recommendations collectively would be appropriate under all circumstances.

Centres' experiences of awarding bodies' customer service systems

Context

33. Coming up to and during the summer exams period, schools and colleges depend on consistent high quality customer service from the awarding bodies to deliver examinations safely to students. Expert and timely responses by awarding bodies to the queries and other issues from schools and colleges is essential at this stressful time.
34. The statutory regulation of external qualifications (QCA 2004) (www.ofqual.gov.uk/externalqualifications/), through criteria 32 and 33, requires awarding bodies to publish a customer service statement and to report on their own performance against this statement.
35. Earlier in the year we investigated awarding bodies' customer service arrangements and published our findings in *Getting it right* (May 2008). Following that report we sought the views of a sample of schools and colleges in England on the level of customer service and support provided to them just before and during the summer 2008 exams. We wanted to gauge whether awarding bodies' systems are effective and have appropriate safeguards in place and, if not, to identify what steps should be taken to reassure candidates, teachers and the general public that everything necessary is being done to support them. The outcomes of this second piece of work are summarised below.

The sample

36. A proportionate, random sample of 544 schools and colleges in England was drawn from the following categories: local authority (LA) maintained, voluntary aided, independent, special, 6th form college, and further education (FE) college. The age profiles of 11–16, 11–19, 16–19 and 'other' were selected. The overall response rate was 42% or 228 replies.
37. Almost 70% of the schools and colleges that responded were LA maintained, 11.5% were independent schools, 7.8% voluntary aided, 5% 6th form colleges and 7.3% FE colleges. No special schools responded. More than half the centres covered the 11–19 age range; 37% were for 11- to 16-year-olds, and 12% were for 16- to 19-year-olds.
38. For A level, almost 92% of schools and colleges that responded used AQA; 91% used OCR, and 88% used Edexcel specifications. For GCSE, 99.5% of

schools and colleges that responded used AQA; 95% used OCR, and 94% used Edexcel specifications.

39. For A level candidates, 37% of responding schools had between 0 and 100 candidates; approximately 37% had between 101 and 250; 17% had between 251 and 500, and 7.5% had more than 500 candidates. The number of GCSE candidates in schools that responded ranged from more than 500 in over 7% of the schools to between 0 and 100 for just over 12% of responding schools.

Customer service statement

40. The majority of respondents reported that they had seen awarding bodies' customer statements or charters, which set out their service levels, fee structures and provided contact information. Overall, respondents were satisfied with awarding bodies' performance against their customer statement or charter. Respondents also considered the information provided about organisational structures, fee structures, examination deadlines and general procedures to be appropriate.

Contact by phone

41. More than 90% of respondents needed to contact an awarding body by phone up to and during the exams period. Overall, the experience of this contact is reported as positive (79.1% for AQA, 52.3% for OCR). When contacting Edexcel, only 35.9% of respondents reported a positive experience.
42. Generally, respondents had to wait between 30 seconds and 2 minutes to talk to someone. Just over 46.6% of those who contacted OCR reported they had to wait longer than 2 minutes to talk to someone.
43. The majority of respondents reported that it was 'quite easy' to get through to a person who could help. For Edexcel, the responses were evenly balanced between those who thought that it was 'quite easy' and 'not very easy' to get through to someone, with responses at 38.8% and 38.2% respectively. For the other awarding bodies, a minority of respondents reported that it was 'not very easy' to get through to someone who could help (11.2% for AQA, 24.4% for OCR). The percentage of Edexcel respondents who reported it as 'not at all easy' was 16.3%, compared with 5.8% for OCR, and 1.1% for AQA.
44. Respondents were asked if they could get through to someone who could resolve their issue at the first attempt, or on a subsequent call. The majority reported that they 'usually' could for both questions. The remaining respondents reported that all three awarding bodies sometimes failed to

resolve queries on the first or second attempt. Edexcel had the greatest number of negative responses: 35.6% said 'rarely', and 14.4% said 'never' on first attempt; and 30.5% said 'rarely', and 5.3% said 'never' on subsequent attempt.

45. Awarding bodies' subject specialists generally did ring respondents back if they were asked, and this was done promptly if the issue was reported as urgent. The responses showed that all three awarding bodies sometimes failed to provide a subject specific response. For both AQA and OCR, over 7% of respondents reported that they were 'rarely' called back. Edexcel had the most negative responses; more than 24% reported that they were 'rarely' called back, and 9% reported that they had 'never' been called back.

Contact via email

46. Contact via email was a less popular method of communication. The percentage who reported that they used email to contact Edexcel during the exams period was 59.1%, while 44.6% reported emailing AQA, and 36.4% reported emailing OCR. We do not know whether this was in addition to or instead of contacting the awarding body by phone. The majority of respondents reported that each awarding body generally responded and resolved issues within its stated service level. There was rarely any need to follow up an email by telephone for a response.

Use of website

47. Awarding bodies' websites were considered a useful tool in the provision of information and examination materials. AQA had the most positive response, with 55.5% reporting its website to be 'very useful'. Other awarding body websites were reported as 'quite useful'. Information and materials were reported as 'usually' being accessible, clear and sufficient.

Complaints

48. The majority of respondents had no need to complain to an awarding body coming up to or during the exams period. Those who needed to complain were 'quite' satisfied with the way the awarding body dealt with their complaint. AQA was reported as 'usually' responding to and resolving complaints within its stated service level agreement, while 'don't know' was reported for Edexcel and OCR.

Issues

49. The most common issues raised with awarding bodies coming up to and during the summer exams period were about entries (82.7%), access arrangements (81.6%), and missing exam papers (60.7%). Other issues reported included errors on exam papers, incorrect or missing candidate data, wrongly supplied exam papers, and issues with invigilation arrangements. Respondents also reported some minor issues, such as missing or wrongly dispatched labels, incorrect or missing stationery, lack of communication about missing coursework marks, and exam clashes.
50. Respondents were asked to provide examples of other concerns or issues about awarding bodies' customer service and how they were handled. Some of the general issues reported included the following:
- switchboard systems were unhelpful; it would be much better to have direct access to a named person
 - correct contact phone numbers should be on the websites, as email correspondence takes too long
 - phones should be answered quickly; waiting and 'on-hold' times are too long
 - staff should be properly trained and polite
 - there should be a dedicated phone line on the day of exam
 - communication between awarding body and centre is very important; awarding bodies should be approachable and supportive
 - awarding bodies should call back when they say they will and resolve issues promptly
 - information provided should be correct
 - awarding bodies' systems differ – more consistency would be helpful.

Conclusions drawn from the survey

51. Overall, respondents reported that awarding bodies did a good job, and most had positive experiences this year. Comments ranged from: "The Boards are getting much better at informing and responding. It is only occasionally that problems arise," to: "Generally I find that all of the awarding bodies do a very good job in dealing with a myriad of issues and protocols that surround the whole examination procedure, and rightly so in view of the importance and

responsibility that is attached to it. An organisation is only as good as the people who work for it, and in my experience the people I have dealt with have more often than not been pleasant and supportive."

52. Our survey revealed good practice and a general level of satisfaction with the service provided by the three A level and GCSE awarding bodies in England. Nevertheless, we identified the following issues that merit further consideration by both the awarding bodies and Ofqual. There is a need for:
- centres to be able to contact a relevant person in the awarding body who can help them promptly, particularly on the day of exam; a dedicated 'exams line' would be helpful
 - awarding bodies to ensure that they have a sufficient number of experienced staff who are properly trained to handle a range of queries.

Making a difference in 2009

53. We will discuss our findings on customer service with individual awarding bodies and make sure that, where appropriate, changes are made to improve the quality of service they provide to candidates, schools and colleges. Each awarding body will receive their individual report with findings from the customer service survey. Ofqual will agree with them a plan for any actions that may be required.
54. During 2007 and 2008, Ofqual has been monitoring the new GCSE science specifications. We will publish a report of our findings in March 2009.
55. Ofqual is currently reviewing performance indicators for awarding bodies to ensure they remain fit for purpose. It is possible that the scope of indicators may be changed through the addition of new indicators, or that their use will be extended to cover a wider range of awarding bodies. Ofqual will consult with key stakeholders to reach an informed decision.
56. A level specifications are changing, and the first awards of revised A levels will be made in January 2009. Ofqual will ensure that close monitoring of this area contributes to a successful transition from legacy to new specifications. We will focus on the new AS specifications, covering a range of subjects, and on the phase 1 diplomas, including principal learning, functional skills and projects.

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