

## **Getting it right**

Promoting confidence in GCSE and GCE exams in England: summer 2008



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## The summer exams

1. The summer exams period is the busiest time of the year for the GCSE and GCE awarding bodies based in England – AQA, Edexcel and OCR – as well as their counterparts in Northern Ireland (CCEA) and Wales (WJEC). During this period they process nearly 8 million entries from candidates who are sitting GCSE and GCE exams. To make sure that candidates' work is marked accurately the awarding bodies employ and train some 50,000 examiners to mark over 21 million exam papers. Specially trained moderators are employed and trained to make sure candidates' coursework is marked accurately and consistently. Awarding bodies also deal with around 150,000 queries from schools, colleges and candidates during this period.
2. If the public is to have confidence in GCSE and GCE results in England, it is vital that the awarding bodies have robust systems in place to deliver high-quality exams and to meet the needs of their candidates, schools and colleges.

## Monitoring the summer 2008 GCSE and GCE exams

3. The awarding bodies operate within a clear regulatory framework which is set out in the following documents:
  - *The statutory regulation of external qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (QCA, 2004)  
([www.qca.org.uk/libraryAssets/media/qca\\_04\\_1293\\_the\\_statutory\\_regulation\\_of\\_external\\_qualifications.pdf](http://www.qca.org.uk/libraryAssets/media/qca_04_1293_the_statutory_regulation_of_external_qualifications.pdf))
  - *GCSE, GCE and AEA Code of practice* (QCA/08/3563)  
([www.ofqual.gov.uk/files/Code\\_of\\_practice\\_April\\_2008.pdf](http://www.ofqual.gov.uk/files/Code_of_practice_April_2008.pdf))
4. These documents are designed to promote quality, consistency, accuracy and fairness in GCSE and GCE exams and in the grades awarded to candidates. They do this by setting out the processes and procedures that awarding bodies must put in place and follow.
5. Ofqual, the new independent regulator, will monitor the summer 2008 exams in England to make sure that they are delivered safely and securely, and that the quality of marking and results can be relied upon by learners, higher education and employers.
6. Drafting, distributing and marking the large number of exam papers required for GCSE and GCE exams is a massive undertaking for the awarding bodies. It is a very complex process involving large numbers of people and takes a great deal of organisation. Ofqual will work closely with the awarding bodies to make sure

that this process runs smoothly, that high-quality papers are delivered to schools and colleges, and that candidates' scripts are returned to awarding bodies and are marked to a high standard so that reliable results can be delivered on time. We will meet regularly with awarding bodies to monitor this process. Awarding bodies provide us with up-to-date information about any issues that arise. We work with awarding bodies to make sure they have appropriate contingency arrangements in place to deal with such issues. This allows us to reassure the public that all necessary steps have been taken by awarding bodies to deliver high-quality GCSE and GCE exams.

7. As well as safeguarding the delivery of exams and results, Ofqual makes sure that appropriate procedures are followed. Ofqual will monitor a sample of awarding bodies' meetings during the summer 2008 exams period. We will observe examiner training meetings (known as standardisation meetings) to make sure that awarding bodies train examiners to mark exam papers and moderate coursework accurately and consistently. We will observe a sample of awarding meetings, when awarding bodies determine the number of marks that candidates must gain to achieve a particular grade. Once the examining process is completed, we will visit awarding bodies to check that their actions and decisions have been properly recorded and have complied with the *GCSE, GCE and AEA Code of practice*.

### **Promoting confidence in GCSE and GCE exams**

8. In summer 2008, Ofqual will continue the routine monitoring of GCSE and GCE exams. However, as the new independent regulator, Ofqual is keen to extend the use of risk assessment to target additional areas for monitoring. Ofqual will monitor two specific areas:
  - awarding bodies' customer services arrangements
  - awarding bodies' use of new technology in exams.
9. This additional monitoring will allow the regulator to gauge whether the awarding bodies have appropriate systems and safeguards in place for these important areas and, if not, to decide what steps should be taken to promote public confidence in GCSE and GCE exams.

### **Awarding bodies' customer service systems**

10. Providing a high-quality customer service is an essential feature of any awarding body. It is vital that schools, colleges and candidates are able to contact awarding bodies to seek guidance and information, to clarify arrangements, to report any problems and to challenge decisions that have

been made. *The statutory regulation of external qualifications* (QCA, 2004), in criteria 32 and 33, requires awarding bodies to publish a customer service statement and to monitor their own performance against customer service targets.

11. To check their provision and performance in this area, Ofqual has requested information from awarding bodies about their customer service arrangements. Ofqual has checked their websites to identify the information and help they provide to schools, colleges and candidates. We have looked for information on:
  - contacts and resources available to schools, colleges and candidates
  - arrangements for dealing with customers' calls and queries
  - the level of subject expertise available to customers
  - customer complaints procedures.
12. During the exams period Ofqual will ask a sample of schools and colleges for their views on the effectiveness of the arrangements awarding bodies have put in place to support them. This will help us to gauge customer satisfaction with the awarding bodies' current systems.
13. Our review of awarding bodies' documents and websites reveals that awarding bodies:
  - have put in place a range of systems designed to provide customers with access to the information, guidance and support that they need. These arrangements include help lines, which act as a central point for dealing with telephone calls, and the provision of telephone directories that help customers to identify the correct person or team to contact
  - use websites to provide customers with information and support. All websites have 'contact us' pages giving guidance on appropriate contacts. They also have lists of frequently asked questions. All websites also allow customers to submit individual questions for a personal response if they have been unable to find the advice or answer they need
  - have clear procedures for dealing with enquiries, including timescales for responses
  - make sure that subject-specific queries are answered by a subject specialist and have specific facilities for teachers and exam officers so that these professionals can get the advice and guidance they need

- have published complaints procedures. These make it clear how long a school, college or candidate can expect to wait for their complaint to be resolved.

### **Awarding bodies' use of new technology**

14. Recent years have seen an increase in the use of new technology by the awarding bodies to modernise the way that exam papers are marked. In summer 2007, over 6 million exam papers were marked using new technology. The regulator welcomes and supports the use of new technology, where appropriate, as a means to develop new and better ways of examining candidates and marking their work. However, the regulator must be satisfied that the use of new technology does not undermine standards or damage the credibility of GCSE and GCE exams. Consequently, April 2007 saw the publication of *Regulatory principles for e-assessment* (QCA/07/3107) that must be followed by the awarding bodies. These principles can be found at:

[www.ofqual.gov.uk/files/Final\\_regulatory\\_principles\\_document\\_-\\_PRINTED.pdf](http://www.ofqual.gov.uk/files/Final_regulatory_principles_document_-_PRINTED.pdf)

15. In summer 2008, Ofqual will monitor the use of new technology by awarding bodies in two specific areas. These are:
  - training examiners to mark accurately and consistently
  - determining the grades that candidates should receive.
16. Ofqual will monitor awarding bodies' activities in these areas by analysing materials and information provided and observing any meetings or discussions where key decisions are made. These could be face-to-face meetings, online exchanges or telephone calls. In addition, we will require awarding bodies to provide a clear and documented trail of evidence for decisions and actions they have taken to make sure that they have complied with the *GCSE, GCE and AEA Code of practice*.

### **Training examiners**

17. In the last three years, awarding bodies have 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. New technology allows awarding bodies to deliver this training without the need for a conventional face-to-face meeting. Instead, examiners are standardised online, with awarding bodies making sure that all the usual objectives of a traditional face-to-face meeting are met during this process. 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.

Awarding bodies' systems allow senior examiners to provide guidance and feedback to their examining teams during training and subsequent marking.

18. This summer, examiners for approximately 430 exam papers will be trained in this way.

### ***Determining candidates' grades***

19. 'Awarding' is the technical name for the process by which the number of marks required for a particular grade is determined by senior examiners. Historically, and still in the majority of cases, this process has involved face-to-face meetings. However, the awarding bodies are exploring the use of new technology to allow this process to be conducted online. Nearly 100 subjects will be awarded online in summer 2008.
20. 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, based on their 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 within a set period of time, without meeting face-to-face. Nevertheless, the awarding personnel have access to all the information they would have in a conventional meeting and can judge candidates' work independently.
21. The decisions of the awarding committee are then passed as recommendations to the awarding body's accountable officer, who is responsible for ensuring the quality and standards of the awarding body's qualifications. The accountable officer reviews the committee's recommendations to make sure that the grades awarded are comparable to those made in previous years.

## **Public reporting**

22. Ofqual is committed to making sure that its actions and findings are clear, so that the public can have confidence in what we are doing. We will therefore report publicly on our findings about GCSE and GCE exams in October 2008.

Ofqual wishes to make its publications widely accessible. Please contact us if you have any specific accessibility requirements.

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