



30 August 2019

Dear Responsible Officer

Ahead of the first awards for reformed Functional Skills qualifications (FSQs), I am writing to set out Ofqual's expectations in relation to setting and maintaining standards, following completion of the technical evaluation process. This follows discussions we have had with you and your colleagues at the FSQ Technical Group meetings and the Oversight Board. These discussions have considered the approach to carrying forward the standard from the legacy qualifications and the approach to facilitating the alignment of standards between awarding organisations. While these discussions have focused on level 1 and 2 qualifications, we think that some of the principles also apply to entry level qualifications and have noted where this is the case below.

Maintaining standards from the legacy qualifications

The reform of FSQs aims to ensure that the new qualifications better meet employer needs in terms of the knowledge and skills that learners achieve. The standard of the qualifications will be carried forward from the legacy qualifications, reflecting the absence of any contrary policy steer. We have discussed with you and your colleagues how this might be achieved at previous Technical Group meetings and the Oversight Board.

We know from our research for GCSEs and A levels that when qualifications change, there is generally a small dip in performance because teachers and students are less familiar with the requirements of the new specifications. This is termed the sawtooth effect.¹ We have therefore discussed the extent to which comparable performance or comparable outcomes should be prioritised when awarding the reformed FSQs. The former would aim to ensure that the level of performance at the pass threshold was consistent between the legacy and reformed qualifications, while the latter would aim to ensure that, all other things being equal, students achieved the same outcome regardless of which qualification they took.

During our discussions, there has been general agreement between awarding organisations that comparable outcomes should be prioritised in the early awards of the reformed FSQs, notwithstanding the potential challenges that this brings (for example, the uncertainty around the extent and duration of any sawtooth effect, particularly for on-demand assessments). This is also the view that we hold given the nature of the assessments and the uses to which results are put. To prioritise comparable performance might risk students being disadvantaged due to them being in the first cohorts to sit the reformed FSQs, and we do not think that this is fair.

Our expectation, therefore, is that as a principle, any dips in performance in the early awards of reformed FSQs should be compensated for. This is to compensate for teachers and students being less familiar with the requirements

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https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/549686/an-investigation-into-the-sawtooth-effect-in-gcse-as-and-a-level-assessments.pdf

of the reformed specifications, rather than to compensate for students being unprepared for the assessments. We think that this principle should apply to both level 1 and 2 FSQs, and entry level qualifications. This approach might mean that, in the first awards, a slightly lower level of performance is accepted at the pass threshold. We know from our research, however, that any dips in performance are likely to be very small, and we would therefore not expect to see a significant impact on the pass thresholds in the early awards.

We also know from our research that the sawtooth effect typically lasts around 2 to 3 years for GCSEs and A levels. The context of functional skills is different though, since many of the assessments are taken on-demand. This might mean that the duration of any sawtooth effect is shorter, since the assessments are taken more frequently. As we have discussed with your colleagues, it will therefore be important for awarding organisations to consider the implications of this for those on-demand assessments that are taken at different times – for example, it might be necessary to retire earlier test versions in a more timely manner.

Alignment across awarding organisations

Given the uses to which results are put, ensuring the alignment of standards across awarding organisations in the reformed FSQs is important. Our comparative judgement exercise relating to legacy maths FSQs identified differences between awarding organisations when considering the demand of the papers and the position of the pass thresholds. This is perhaps not surprising given the context within which these qualifications were awarded. We have previously shared the findings of this research with you and expect organisations to take this into account when awarding the reformed maths FSQs.

At the Technical Group meetings we have discussed with your colleagues the approach to awarding reformed FSQs to facilitate alignment across awarding organisations. Unlike some qualifications (eg GCSEs, A levels and Applied Generals), it is not feasible to generate a common form of statistical evidence that can inform the alignment of standards. This is due to differences in the cohorts sitting the qualifications, both between awarding organisations and over time, and because the majority of assessments are taken on-demand. We have therefore discussed alternative sources of evidence that might be used to support the alignment of standards.

Following these discussions, awarding organisations have collectively developed a set of grade descriptors that outline the expectations of students at the pass threshold for level 1 and 2 FSQs. These descriptors are necessarily based on student performance in the legacy qualifications, but will be updated as evidence of student performance in the reformed FSQs becomes available. The grade descriptors will be supported by a common archive, exemplifying the expected standard of work at the pass threshold. It is our expectation that the grade descriptors and common archive scripts will be used by all awarding organisations to support the setting of pass thresholds in the early awards. This aims to ensure that a common standard is being set across organisations.

Alongside the use of common grade descriptors and exemplars, we have also proposed holding inter-awarding organisation meetings to collectively consider the standard of work at the pass threshold. Following discussions with your technical colleagues in July 2019, it is our intention that these meetings will be

convened once all organisations have held their first awards – likely in early 2020. This will allow work on the pass threshold to be shared amongst organisations to consider inter-awarding organisation alignment.

It is our expectation that the appropriate individuals from all organisations who offer the reformed FSQs will attend any such meetings (ie those involved in the standard setting process, such as subject experts and technical colleagues). We are reflecting on the format of these meetings and will discuss this further with your technical colleagues. It is worth noting that these meetings may be the first in a series of meetings to support inter-awarding organisation alignment.

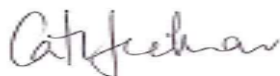
Awarding meetings and data collection

We have recently collected information from each awarding organisation about their proposed timeline for awarding the reformed FSQs, including when the first awards might take place. This will facilitate us in scheduling any inter-awarding organisation meetings. We may also wish to observe some of the early awarding meetings in each organisation to monitor the approach taken. We will be in touch with you further about this shortly.

We have also shared our initial thoughts about data collection relating to reformed FSQs and discussed this with your technical colleagues in July 2019. We intend to circulate a draft data request/template for comment by technical colleagues shortly.

We are due to meet again with your technical colleagues in the Autumn but if you have any queries in the meantime please get in touch with me or Rachel Taylor.

Yours Sincerely,



Cath Jadhav

Director of Standards and Comparability