

Ofqual Board

Paper 40/17

Date:

20 September 2017

Title:

General Qualifications Update

Report by:

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Responsible Director:

Julie Swan, Executive Director for General Qualifications

Paper for information

Open paper - with closed sections



Issue

1. This paper updates the Board on the General Qualifications (GQ) Directorate's key work since the last Board meeting.

Recommendations

2. The Board is recommended to note the updates reported in the paper and give views on the direction of travel for the review of teacher involvement in exam question setting.

General Qualifications Directorate

3. The paper includes updates on the delivery of the summer 2017 series and, in particular, incidents of malpractice by teachers who are involved in the writing of exam papers. Also included is a summary of progress with the accreditation of reformed qualifications.

Summer 2017 Exam Series Delivery

4. GCE and GCSE marking was completed on time and results issued as planned. The qualifications appear to have performed well and the chaos and confusion predicted by some was not apparent.
5. We supported the communications campaign and engaged extensively with stakeholders before and when results were released to understand

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whether the results created any unforeseen reactions from schools and colleges. Feedback was broadly positive and outcomes considered to be in line with expectations.

6. It is too soon to know whether the number of requests for reviews of marking and, subsequently, appeals, is in line with previous years.
7. Inevitably, during an exam series on the scale of the summer, not everything went to plan. Our attention naturally focused on these areas and this paper does too. This should not detract from the timely delivery and marking of some 2,200 different exam papers and the awarding of almost 8 million qualifications.
8. The SRR paper provides an update on this summer's awarding and the maintenance of standards.

GCE maths breach of security

9. At its last meeting, the Board noted the criminal investigation involving a security breach of some of Pearson's GCE maths papers. The investigation is on-going. Pearson published its letter to heads of centre on results day.¹ It set out in the letter its view that the breach was contained within a small group of centres and students. Pearson explained it had used statistical and qualitative evidence to identify the small number of students that appeared to have had access to confidential information ahead of exams and that it had withheld their results. We monitored Pearson's approach throughout.

Error in GCSE English literature paper

10. The Board also noted at its last meeting how OCR was handling the error in one of the questions on Romeo and Juliet in its GCSE English literature papers. We closely monitored the steps OCR took to minimise disadvantage to students caused by the error. OCR published on results day its letter to heads of centres explaining these steps, together with technical information that set out its approach in more detail.²
11. Students who attempted either of the Romeo and Juliet questions were given the higher of either (i) the mark for their answer and (ii) a statistically calculated mark based on their performance in other questions (in both the affected and the unaffected paper).
12. OCR has provided free access to students' marked papers and a free review or marking.

¹ <http://qualifications.pearson.com/content/demo/en/about-us/news-and-media.news.html?article=/content/demo/en/news-policy/press-releases/2017/a-level-economics-and-maths-exams-update2>

² <http://www.ocr.org.uk/news/view/ocr-gcse-english-literature-paper-j352/>

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This section has been redacted, as its publication would be prejudicial to the effective conduct of public affairs.

Malpractice by teachers involved with writing exam papers - closed

14. There was prolonged media reporting of malpractice involving teachers at Eton College and Winchester College during the last week of August and into early September. This arose from teachers who set papers for, and taught, Pre-U qualifications in economics and art history disclosing confidential information about this summer's exams. The two teachers have left their respective teaching posts. Students who had been given confidential information ahead of their exams were awarded their qualifications, based on the marks from assessments that the exam board determined had not been compromised.
15. We have set up a project to review whether:
 - the current practice, whereby some question writers and exam paper reviewers³ are also teachers, is appropriate – whether the benefits outweigh the risks; and
 - if this practice continues, whether the current safeguards associated with this practice are sufficient.
16. The General Conditions of Recognition require awarding organisations to take all reasonable steps to secure the confidentiality of assessment materials such as exam papers. An awarding organisation must investigate any suspected or alleged breach of confidentiality. The Conditions also require an awarding organisation to take all reasonable steps to prevent malpractice, to take action against those responsible for malpractice in a way that is proportionate to the gravity and scope of the wrong-doing and to take all reasonable steps to prevent such incidents recurring. Our regulations do not prohibit teachers who set exams from teaching students taking those exams.

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³ It is important to note that many teachers mark exams. Markers do not have access to exam papers or questions before the exams are sat. Exam boards use different terminology to describe the roles of the people who write or check questions/exam papers before they are taken.

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20. Such cases are not common but neither are they unprecedented. In 2016 four allegations/suspensions of a similar nature arose. Of these, one was substantiated.
21. In 2015 six allegations/suspensions of a similar nature arose. Of these, three were substantiated.
22. In 2014, we anonymously surveyed teachers about their experiences of malpractice. Respondents did not mention this particular form of malpractice, although they reported (often with great frankness), other forms, such as inflating coursework marks. This suggests that this form of malpractice, while corrosive to public confidence, is rare.
23. We do not have exact information on the number of examiners who are serving teachers. As an indication, one exam board has told us approximately 250 of its examiners, who have access to question papers before they are taken, are currently practising teachers. A second has told us that members of its Senior Associate group have access to live papers before the exams are sat - of the 930 so far contracted for summer 2018, some 350 are active teachers, most of whom are likely to be teaching the qualifications. A third has said approximately 20% of its Assessment Specialists involved in question paper production teach the qualification for which they prepare assessment materials.
24. There are significant advantages to the involvement of practising teachers and trainers in the question paper setting process. They are uniquely placed to predict how students of differing abilities will respond to questions, supporting the appropriate targeting of papers. Further, teachers are a readily available source of subject expertise, from which to recruit on a flexible basis. This avoids awarding organisations bearing the cost of employing permanent subject experts (which would be need to be recovered in their fees).
25. However, these benefits need to be weighed against the risk of malpractice and the threat to public confidence that this brings. It is clear that we need to review our rules in this area. We will need to judge the system-wide impact of any changes, including any associated increase in the cost of qualifications.
26. We plan to invite the Board to contribute to the review at its Strategy Day in October.
27. We will publish a progress update before the end of the year. This may not be the conclusion of the work.

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28. We will use our work with other bodies with an interest in this area, such as Ofsted and National College for Teaching and Leadership to exert influence on the system and reduce the likelihood of malpractice.
29. We will be able to introduce additional guidance quickly. Any more radical changes could only be introduced over an extended timeframe. We would likely need to consult on any changes. Of course, the production of exam papers for 2018 will already be under-way and concluded in some cases.
30. Although the media focus has been on general qualifications, some teachers and trainers delivering vocational and technical qualifications also have access to confidential assessment materials. For some qualifications, teachers develop the assessment take by their own students. The project group will initially gather information on the safeguards in place to stop disclosure of confidential information in general qualifications, but will also consider whether any changes should be introduced across the range of regulated qualifications.

This section has been redacted, as its publication would be prejudicial to the effective conduct of public affairs.

Accreditation of qualifications for first teaching in 2017

36. All specifications to be taught from this academic year are now accredited.

Accreditation of qualifications for first teaching 2018

37. We continue to consider the specifications developed for the outstanding modern foreign language qualifications and biblical Hebrew. At the time of writing, one has been accredited. We will provide an update at the meeting.

Finance and Resource

38. We continue to operate within agreed budget.

Impact Assessments

39. Equality Analysis

We have not identified any specific equality related issues in any of the matters covered in this paper.

40. Risk Assessment

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Risks are included within the risk register.

41. Regulatory Impact Assessment

The potential regulatory impact of any changes to the arrangements by which active teachers contribute to the development of live assessment materials could be significant and will be evaluated as options are considered.

Communications

42. An update on communication of GQ related issues is included in the Chief Operating Officer’s report.

Paper to be published	Yes – but not the section on the summer series
Publication date (if relevant)	After the meeting