

Ofqual Board

Paper 65/14

Date:
November 2014

Title:
Chief Executive's Report

Report by:
Glenys Stacey, Chief Executive

Paper for discussion and information



Summary

1. This report updates the Board on strategy and progress in delivering the Corporate Plan published in August. It updates the Board on Government policy developments, and sets out known strategic risks.

Recommendations

2. The Board is asked to note progress, including some important issues for discussion later on the agenda and to review the organisation's strategic risk register.

Considerations

Policy developments

3. Board members will see in the accompanying Board papers those current Government policy matters of strategic relevance to Ofqual. In particular, the subject content review arrangements for reformed GCSE, AS and A levels for first teaching in 2017 subjects are not yet settled; we await a decision on whether or not IGCSEs will be included in performance tables in future,

apprenticeship arrangements remain uncertain, and we are concerned about draft legislative provisions for regulation in Wales.

4. Turning to policy developments in other organisations, we continue to discuss with UCAS and higher education providers the extent and breadth of the feedback loop for the new tariff. UCAS presented the feedback loop to their higher education advisor panel on 25th November, and expect to make changes based on these discussions. We will provide the Board with a verbal update.
5. Lastly, given next year's General Election and known policy positions, we have set out clearly in a letter to the shadow Secretary of State for Education the options and timescales, should any new Government wish to revert to coupled qualifications. The letter is attached at appendix six.

Strategy

6. At this stage in the year, and following the August publication of the Board's corporate plan we do not propose any new strategic development. The Board is asked to note the work being done to deliver the strategies already agreed. An overall summary is attached in the closed report at appendix one, showing good progress overall. Matters likely to be of particular interest to the Board are set out below.

Functional Skills

7. We are finalising our report on Functional Skills qualifications in English and maths at level 2, for publication by the year end. By that point we will be able to report on the responses of the awarding organisations to our findings. Board members know already that we found these qualifications wanting, but remediable. We have welcomed the Minister of State for Skills and Equalities, Nick Boles' interest in them and are now requiring the AOs to do the substantial work necessary to get them in good order. The recently announced review of the English and maths standards that employers need is welcome and an opportunity to get better qualifications in the future.

Quality of Marking

8. The number of 'Enquiries about Results' (EARs) increased notably this summer, and more so than in earlier years, much as expected given the move away from modular assessment. We are requiring further information and analysis of summer 2014 EARs from exam boards, to get under the skin of the raw data, and will update the Board at the meeting. We will be publishing further information and analysis in December.

9. The increase in EARS does not necessarily signal a deterioration in marking but there was an increase in grade changes at GCSE and confidence in marking is falling. Building on our 2014 Quality of Marking report we are requiring exam boards to improve the quality of marking where it is needed, ahead of the 2015 series. Board members are referred to our published plans¹.
10. Our proposals for changes to the EAR and Appeals process are being refined in the light of helpful discussions with Standards Advisory Group members and amongst our own senior team. The considerations are finely balanced and we are giving them careful thought before public consultation.

Special considerations and access arrangements

11. The number of candidates requesting access arrangements and special consideration increased this year. With more exams sat this summer, the level of special consideration requests are in line with previous years, but we are considering the extent to which the current system is working sufficiently well. We will be asking exam boards to investigate the increase in access arrangements, talking to schools about what these figures represent, and considering the arrangements in practice. We have concerns about the quality of data captured by the JCQ access arrangements system which has hampered investigation of whether probity issues exist. Developments have been made to the system. We will be following up in the New Year to test the extent and effectiveness of the changes.

Malpractice

12. Our teacher survey of practices to maximise exam results is being revised ready for publication. Responses highlighted the opportunities for malpractice associated with teacher assessment. We will test the findings by interviewing teachers and pupils but they have led to us to devote part of our spring technical seminar to the use of sophisticated analytical techniques for identifying potential malpractice. These techniques could better target exam board attention. We will also be evaluating the provision of opportunities for teachers, pupils and parents to report malpractice.

Inter-subject comparability

13. We have produced a draft literature review covering the findings of previous inter-subject studies, the underlying theory, the techniques available and a description of policy options. We have also set out the outcomes of a sophisticated statistical method of aligning subjects and its implications. We have also described some of the relevant features of current practice such as the influence of accountability measures when schools and colleges direct

¹ <http://ofqual.gov.uk/news/enquiries-results-gcse-level-provisional-statistics-summer-2014-exam-series/>

students to particular subjects in KS4 and post-16. The three papers were extremely well received by members of the Board's Standards Advisory Group, who in recent discussions suggested further work we might do.

14. We are refining the three papers ready for publication in relevant technical journals. Board members interested in the detail at this stage can see the papers in current form on request. Board members will be asked to consider options and determine next steps in the New Year.

Regulatory strategy implementation

15. Awarding organisations were introduced to the developments in our regulatory approach at the FAB annual conference in October, through a Chief Regulator speech (now published²). The changes have been broadly welcomed by FAB, awarding organisations and other commentators³. Whilst producing guidance to assist awarding organisations we remain alert to Ofqual's role as regulator, rather than improvement agency.
16. We are delivering the changes to plan, completing our first audits of validity and removing the general accreditation requirement for most qualifications, as expected. We haven't experienced an opportunistic or noticeable increase in entries on the qualifications register following withdrawal of the requirement. In paper 72/14 we ask the Board to agree to remove the QCF rules, the next important step.
17. Following the Board's away day discussions we are refining how we describe validity, in ways that are meaningful and practical, to underpin our guidance and audit frameworks and to communicate clearly and consistently with awarding organisations and others. We have held briefing sessions for staff on validity and on the new aspects of our regulatory strategy, and we are now prioritising the further training of our staff responsible for audit and for enforcement.
18. We have developed working arrangements to enable the two qualifications directorates to agree priorities and commission work (for example, risk and random-based audits) from the regulatory operations team. Decisions are underpinned by the risk model, now being used in earnest.
19. Paragraph redacted - release would be prejudicial to the effective conduct of public affairs.

² <http://ofqual.gov.uk/news/glenys-staceys-speech-federation-awarding-bodies-conference-14-october/>

³ <http://www.157group.co.uk/news/157-group-responds-ofqual-announcement-vocational-qualifications>
<https://news.tes.co.uk/further-education/b/news/2014/10/14/vocational-qualifications-to-come-under-greater-scrutiny-in-ofqual-shakeup.aspx>

GQ reform

20. We have accredited specifications for all subjects for first teaching in September 2015, save Chemistry A level. Exam boards have struggled to meet the new maths requirements within Chemistry. We expect to accredit some if not all Chemistry specifications before the calendar year end, but cannot be certain. We are doing further, detailed work with all exam boards on assessment details for GCSE maths, with a focus on the problem solving requirements, albeit specifications are accredited from three exam boards. Otherwise, there are no particular matters to alert you to. We will be advising all schools of the current position across all 2015 subjects shortly, and with the term-end in view.
21. The work done with exam boards ahead of and through accreditation has paid dividends: subject content and assessment requirements are significantly different to existing requirements in most subjects, yet exam boards have met those requirements with a lower number of resubmissions than in the past.
22. The subject content agreed for the new qualifications is expressed in different styles, subject by subject. That is not in itself a problem: in each case the Board has accepted it as the basis of a good qualification. Overall, content is more specifically described and up to date, and there is more 'common' content for each subject – content that all specifications in that subject must cover, limiting the scope for adverse exam board competition on content and protecting better the curriculum aims in each subject.
23. Subject content proposals in Religious Studies and in Citizenship are out to consultation⁴. We remain concerned about the size of RS content, and welcome the Department for Education (DfE) consultation question on that. Given the optionality in the content proposals, we are discussing with exam boards the approach we will adopt to ensuring (so far as possible) inter-board comparability.
24. We are discussing with the DfE the possible arrangements for the development of subject content for 2017 subjects, recognising the complex interdependencies: the likelihood that any particular 2017 subject will be developed depends on the arrangements for subject content development (not yet settled), the application of our brand principles (consulted on earlier in the year) and the willingness of individual exam boards to offer particular subjects. We are working with the department and with exam boards to settle subject content development arrangements as quickly as possible.

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/gcse-and-a-level-reform-religious-studies>

25. We are about to consult on proposals for the design of GCSEs in the sciences. We aim to improve students' experience of practical science and experimentation, and to improve the reliability of results. We propose arrangements not dissimilar to those science A levels, and we expect mixed and vocal reactions. There is no perfect assessment here, and we will welcome consultee views.

Other matters

26. We have provided an update to the Education Select Committee on progress on qualification reform and other matters (attached at Appendix three). The Committee plans to see the Secretary of State in December.

Capacity and capability

27. Implementation of the new operating model is proceeding well. Board members are referred to the COO report for details.

28. Board members are asked to consider proposed refinements to board level governance in paper 73/14. Changes to our executive governance are also outlined for the board's reference. These changes devolve decision-making further down into the organisation in line with our new operating model.

29. Professor Paul Newton and Dr Beth Black have joined our research ranks, respectively specialists in validity and the quality of marking alongside other qualifications, assessment and research expertise. Other level one and two recruitment is progressing well.

30. Implementation of the new operating model is a key priority for the senior team.

Strategic risk

31. Board members are asked to review and comment on Ofqual's strategic risks and mitigations, as shown in the updated strategic risk register attached at appendix four.

Future Look

32. The forward planner for the Board is included at appendix five.

33. We will begin consultation with our staff in the New Year on the impact of the operating model at a team level.

Impact Analysis

Internal stakeholders

34. We continue to make appointments to the new leadership team, including internal promotions. Relationships with the union are positive, and will be a particular focus as we engage union colleagues in our formal consultation process.

External stakeholders

35. We are refreshing our strategic stakeholder management plans for the next few months. Relationships with external stakeholders remain generally positive, and there is nothing in this report seen as likely to affect those relationships adversely.

Paper to be published	YES
Publication date (if relevant)	After the meeting

Appendices list:

Appendix one: Bi-monthly Corporate Plan Progress; November 2014 (closed paper)

Appendix two: appendix withheld - release would be prejudicial to the effective conduct of public affairs

Appendix three: Written Evidence to the Education Select Committee, November 2014 (closed)

Appendix four: Strategic Risk Register (closed)

Appendix five: Board forward planner (closed)

Appendix six: Letter to shadow Secretary of State for Education (closed)