

# Five year review of standards

A level English literature

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# Introduction

Every summer, the publication of GCSE and A level examination results prompts public interest in the standards of those examinations.

In 1996, Lord Dearing in his *Review of Qualifications for 16–19 Year Olds* made several recommendations to ensure that ‘there is a basis and accepted procedure ... for monitoring and safeguarding standards over time’. In the same year, SCAA (one of QCA’s predecessors) and the Office for Standards in Education jointly investigated standards in English, mathematics and science (chemistry) in 16+ and 18+ public examinations over time.<sup>1</sup>

The outcomes of this work were published in *Standards in Public Examinations 1975 to 1995*. One of the recommendations was that there should be:

‘... a rolling programme of reviews on a five-year cycle to ensure examination demands and grade standards are being maintained in all major subjects. Physics, history, French and German should be included in the programme at an early stage.’

The five-yearly review of standards programme is a response to these recommendations. It is run by QCA in collaboration with the regulatory authorities for Wales and Northern Ireland, ACCAC and CCEA, and is designed to investigate the standards in A level and GCSE examinations. It aims to find out if:

the demand of syllabuses and their assessment instruments has changed over the last 20 years (examination demand);

the level of performance required of candidates at grade boundaries has changed over the last 20 years (grade standard).

Organised to run in five-year cycles, the programme was structured to cover every major subject during its first cycle. Each year, up to 100 independent specialists review around 2,000 exam scripts, drawn from all the awarding bodies, together with their associated syllabuses, question papers and mark schemes.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 16+ examinations cover GCE O level and Certificate of Secondary Education (up to 1987), and GCSE (from 1988).

<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this report, the general term *awarding bodies* is used to cover both the A level examination boards and the GCSE examining groups.

# Methodology

Each study was organised in two stages:

- stage one – investigating changes in examination demand;
- stage two – investigating changes in standards of performance.

Each covered two sample years: the year of the study and 1995, the year used for the SCAA/Ofsted study.

## Stage one: examination demand

### *Aim*

The aim of this review was to establish whether the demand of syllabuses and their assessment instruments changed over the period of the review.

### *Evidence base*

The awarding bodies were asked to supply, for each subject, copies of one major syllabus from the most recent year. They were also asked to provide the related question papers, mark schemes, examiners' reports, and details of the procedures in operation at the time of each examination. The materials used in the SCAA/Ofsted study were available for comparison.

### *The process*

A coordinator and three reviewers – independent experts from a variety of backgrounds – were appointed for each subject. Each coordinator was given a framework and asked to use it to describe the main differences between the syllabuses from the different years. This description was given to the reviewers, who were asked to study the syllabuses, question papers and mark schemes and independently judge whether the differences between years affected the demand of the examination. After the material had been reviewed, the team for each subject area met and discussed any issues. The coordinator then reported on the findings and identified any conclusions.

## Stage two: standards of performance

### *Aim*

The aim of the second stage was to find out if the level of performance required of candidates at grade boundaries has changed over the period of the study. The review focused on the performance of candidates at grades A and E at A level, and grades A, C and, sometimes, F for 16+ examinations.

### *Evidence base*

The awarding bodies were asked to provide 15 examples of candidates' work at the defined boundaries from the most recent year of examination. They were asked to

submit the complete examination work of candidates, including all examination papers, coursework and any oral examinations. The materials used in the SCAA/Ofsted study were available for comparison.

### ***The process***

A team of up to 12 reviewers was recruited for each subject. The reviewers came from a variety of backgrounds, including universities, selective and non-selective schools, maintained and independent schools, and further education institutions (including sixth form colleges). Some of them had backgrounds working for the various awarding bodies.

The coordinator from stage one was used again in this stage and the syllabus reviewers normally participated.

The review took place over two days. Before the meeting, each coordinator produced a general description of the standards expected for the grade boundaries in the study. Where these were available, published grade descriptions normally formed the basis of the performance descriptors. The coordinators were asked to take into account the fact that they would be looking at borderline performance rather than that comfortably in grade which is the intention of grade descriptions. The performance descriptors were discussed and agreed by the team at the start of the meeting.

Reviewers were each given a batch of scripts for a particular year, grade and awarding body. Working independently, they were asked to judge if the scripts matched the agreed grade description. They could categorise the work as:

- above the expected standard;
- slightly above the expected standard;
- at the expected standard;
- slightly below the expected standard;
- below the expected standard.

They were then given another batch of scripts of the same grade, either from another awarding body or of a different year from the same awarding body. They categorised these scripts and compared them with the first batch to identify any significant differences between candidates' performance. A sampling framework ensured adequate coverage of the sample. A copy of part of one framework is provided on page 4.

At the end of the two days, a plenary session was held and the reviewers discussed their findings and any significant issues. As with stage one, the coordinator reported on the findings and conclusions.

### **Limitations of the study**

Comparing examination standards over time is a complex task, heavily dependent on the evidence available and the ability of reviewers to make valid judgements on it.

When considering the findings and conclusions, several limitations need to be kept in mind.

### ***Changes in syllabus and examination content***

Syllabuses and examination papers changed significantly over the period of the review. For example, in assessing GCSE science examinations, the three tiers of entry of 1995 had been reduced to two. Fundamental changes make it difficult for reviewers to make valid judgements about relative standards because they are not comparing like with like.

### ***Individual opinion***

Each individual places different values on each part of a subject. Agreed definitions of standards and frameworks show reviewers the standards they should work to, but it is difficult for them to avoid applying their own values. This can lead to differences in opinion about the same syllabus or piece of candidate's work.

### ***Lack of evidence***

While reviewers had syllabuses and examination papers (although not always mark schemes) for all the years in the study, they did not have all the evidence they needed to analyse standards of performance. This applies particularly to examination scripts. What was used in the SCAA/Ofsted study was work for separate components of the examination rather than the whole work of candidates. Coursework and any oral examinations were usually missing.

**Table 1: Sampling framework for part of a typical A level study**

**DAY 1**

8:30	BOARD A, GRADE A	BOARD A, GRADE E	BOARD F, GRADE A	BOARD F, GRADE E	BOARD C, GRADE A	BOARD C, GRADE E
10:00	1996 1-7	1996 1-7	1996 1-7	1996 7-1	1996 1-7	1996 15-8
10:10	BOARD A, GRADE A	BOARD A, GRADE E	BOARD F, GRADE E	BOARD F, GRADE A	BOARD C, GRADE A	BOARD C, GRADE E
11:30	1991 1-3	1991 1-3	1996 8-15	1996 7-1	1991 1-7	1991 15-8
11:50	BOARD A, GRADE E	BOARD A, GRADE A	BOARD C, GRADE E	BOARD C, GRADE A	BOARD E, GRADE A	BOARD D, GRADE A
1:05	1996 1-7	1996 15-8	1996 1-7	1996 8-15	1996 1-7	1996 15-8
2:15	BOARD A, GRADE E	BOARD A, GRADE A	BOARD A, GRADE E	BOARD B, GRADE E	BOARD E, GRADE E	BOARD D, GRADE E
3:30	1991 1-3	1991 3-1	1996 15-8	1996 15-8	1996 1-7	1996 15-8
3:30	BOARD B, GRADE A	BOARD D, GRADE E	BOARD B, GRADE A	BOARD D, GRADE E	BOARD D, GRADE A	BOARD E, GRADE A
4:45	1996 1-7	1996 1-7	1996 15-8	1991 4-1	1996 7-1	1996 8-15
5:05	BOARD B, GRADE E	BOARD D, GRADE E	BOARD B, GRADE E	BOARD D, GRADE E	BOARD D, GRADE E	BOARD E, GRADE A
6:20	1996 1-7	1991 1-4	1996 8-15	1986 4-1	1996 8-15	1991 1-3

**DAY 2**

8:30	BOARD C, GRADE E	BOARD E, GRADE E	BOARD E, GRADE A	EDEC , GRADE A	BOARD F, GRADE A	BOARD A, GRADE E
9:45	1996 7-1	1996 15-8	1996 1-7	1996 7-1	1996 8-15	1996 15-8
9:45	BOARD C, GRADE E	BOARD E, GRADE E	BOARD E, GRADE A	BOARD B, GRADE E	BOARD F, GRADE E	BOARD A, GRADE E
11:00	1991 1-7	1991 3-1	1991 3-1	1996 8-15	1996 8-15	1986 7-1
11:20	BOARD C, GRADE A	BOARD E, GRADE A	BOARD E, GRADE E	BOARD E, GRADE A	BOARD C, GRADE A	BOARD A, GRADE A
12:35	1996 7-1	1996 7-1	1996 8-15	1996 8-15	1996 15-8	1996 1-7
1:45	BOARD C, GRADE A	BOARD E, GRADE A	BOARD E, GRADE E	BOARD E, GRADE A	BOARD C, GRADE A	BOARD A, GRADE A
3:00	1991 7-1	1991 1-3	1991 1-3	1991 3-1	1991 15-8	1991 3-1

# A level English literature: review of standards 1995–99

## Introduction

SCAA, QCA's predecessor body, together with Ofsted, conducted an enquiry into examination standards. The results of the work, published in 1996 as *Standards in Public Examinations, 1975–1995* (SCAA, 1996), included a series of recommendations concerning future examinations in each subject reviewed. The subjects included A level English literature, where changes were already in train at the time of the report.

The most significant of these changes were:

- a revision to the common subject core for first examination in 1996;
- a move from linear to modular examinations.

Syllabuses in 1999 were therefore those approved under the revised subject core, and had been approved prior to the 1996 investigation. Implementation of the 1996 report's recommendations has been effected for the specifications accredited for Curriculum 2000. This review offers, however, a chance to evaluate whether the last set of changes anticipated some of the recommendations or made them more urgent.

In addition, the Code of Practice for GCE examinations, introduced in 1994 and revised in the light of recommendations from the regulatory authorities' quality assurance measures, was in force. The code established a framework for greater consistency across different syllabuses and awarding bodies.

## Examination demand

### *Materials available*

Reviewers considered the syllabus documents, the question papers and associated mark schemes, and the examiners' reports for syllabuses from each of the awarding bodies in 1995 and 1999.

About 57,000 candidates took A level English literature in 1999. About 60 per cent of those entered for the syllabuses used for that year in this study.

### *Presentation*

Syllabuses in 1999 were in all cases more detailed than in 1995, including recommendations for previous level of study, requirements for coursework options, and more information about the ways in which the core and optional components addressed the assessment objectives. This increase in consistency of presentation

and requirements across syllabuses assisted the process of review of standards in 1999.

In general, the reviewers found that differences between and within syllabuses which could lead to variation in demand were significantly reduced in 1999. The most important change was the introduction of a maximum percentage of coursework within any syllabus of 20 per cent. This compares with a 1995 weighting of, for example, 50 per cent (AQA/A) or (a maximum of) 53 per cent for OCR. The variation between candidates in the balance of modes of assessment was thus reduced overall across awarding bodies.

### ***Options available***

Optional routes through syllabuses are one source of possible variation in demand both within and between awarding bodies. In 1995, the number of optional routes available in OCR was 64. This had been reduced to 10 in 1999. In other syllabuses too, the optional routes were far fewer: the CCEA syllabus used for the review allowed only one route in 1999 and AQA/A, WJEC and Edexcel two each.

### ***Assessment objectives***

In 1999, all awarding bodies were using the common core assessment objectives for English literature, improving the basis for comparison on previous years.

### ***Recommendations from Standards in Public Examinations, 1975–95***

Four particular areas of concern were raised by SCAA and Ofsted in the 1995 review of standards. These concerns are considered here.

### ***Range of reading***

The syllabuses in 1999 were more consistent across awarding bodies in the number of texts that candidates were required to study. In 1995, the minimum number ranged between six and ten depending on syllabus and optional route, whereas in 1999 the minimum number was eight. There was an overall standardisation of the range of period and genre required. Coverage of poetry, prose and drama was a requirement of all the 1999 syllabuses, as was the study of at least one pre-1900 text in addition to Shakespeare. Some Shakespeare texts set in 1995, such as *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth*, were considered insufficiently demanding at this level, and had been replaced in 1999 by more challenging texts.

It was noted that in two 1999 syllabuses the structure of options and examination papers did not in itself ensure that candidates had studied the required number and/or combinations of texts. A few instances were found in the script review of candidates who fell short of the requirements by one text. This may have marginally affected the level of demand of the examination for a small minority of candidates.

### ***Detailed knowledge and informed understanding of texts studied***

There was concern in 1995 that the increase, over the previous 20 years, in emphasis on 'personal response' should not outweigh the need for detailed knowledge and informed understanding of texts. The core assessment objectives used in 1999 (and since 1996) required the 'ability to produce informed, independent opinions and judgements'. Other assessment objectives, 'Knowledge of the contexts in which literary works are written and understood' and 'an ability to discuss their own



and other readers' interpretations of texts', also required students to base judgements on information outside personal response.

There were some very good examples in 1999 of examining practice which enabled candidates to show understanding of the literary and social contexts in which works are written and understood. This was exemplified by AQA/A Paper 3 (*Literary Themes, Time and Place and Ways of Telling*) and OCR (Topic Paper) covering types of writing and literary traditions. Both these optional papers made effective use of comparison and links between texts to enable candidates to explore contexts. The more general picture, however, was that understanding of contextual factors, and of wider critical opinion, was not built into assessment strategies.

### ***Appropriate tasks and clear expectations***

In 1995, the recommendation was that there should be a clearer relationship between particular assessment modes (such as open book examining and coursework) and the focus of the tasks set. The 1999 syllabuses were more explicit about aspects of examining and included, for example, detail about coursework requirements and assessment criteria. However, the lack of a thoroughgoing approach to the assessment of all the core objectives left some of the examining and coursework task-setting unclear in aims and focus. For example, open book examining allows detailed exploration of language and technique within the constraints of timed examinations. However, questions that focus on passages and detail were in most cases set as alternatives against questions which encouraged consideration of a whole text. This increased choice for candidates, but weakened the focus of examining and the consistency of demand.

Syllabuses in 1999 were more likely than in 1995 to state objectives. However, the content of the subject was still characteristically stated in terms of the texts to be studied rather than the aims of studying particular texts for a particular component. The exceptions to this were papers or coursework that required a thematic or comparative focus, where the skills and processes were more apparent.

### ***Mark schemes and writing skills***

The quality of mark schemes was in most cases better in 1999 than in 1995. There was greater consistency of approach between components within syllabuses. The better mark schemes were focused upon assessment objectives and skills. However, this was still a relatively weak area of examining practice. Some mark schemes showed little change in style between 1995 and 1999 even though assessment objectives had altered substantially. Weaker mark schemes failed to show the relationships between individual questions and the assessment objectives of the subject.

In 1995, it was recommended that mark schemes should be clearer in their expectations of writing skills. The treatment of writing skills in 1999 mark schemes was very variable. In those syllabuses where there was an identifiable and common approach to writing skills across components, these skills were overweighted, at least in terms of their heavy representation within summary marking templates.

## Summary

The revised common subject core led to a more comparable system, certainly at the level of stated range of reading and expectations of types of achievement. However, in the light of the prescribed common core introduced in 1996, more changes in the kind of demand were to be expected, with a clearer focus on all the common assessment objectives. None of the 1999 syllabuses presented an entirely coherent strategy for ensuring either detailed comment on parts of texts, or a wider understanding of the structure and meanings of whole texts, especially in relation to cultural or literary contexts. Nor were there examples of an attempt to incorporate critical reading, or other ways of ensuring that candidates engaged with other readers' opinions of texts.

There were some excellent examples in 1999 of examination papers which used comparative study as a way of addressing the assessment objective requiring knowledge of the contexts in which works are written and understood. It was regrettable that these papers were optional and therefore not entered by all candidates.

Despite improved frameworks for rigorous and consistent assessment, there was in practice a lack of coherent attention to the full range of assessment objectives in the 1999 examinations. The examination of A level English literature in 1999 still tended, as in 1995, to be dominated by relatively miscellaneous selections of texts, rather than by the acquisition of clear methods of study and approaches to critical discussion.

## Performance at grade A and grade E

### *Materials used*

Reviewers considered candidates' work from all the awarding bodies in 1998 and the materials from the 1996 enquiry for comparison. One awarding body submitted material that was securely in grade, making direct comparison of standards more difficult.

As far as possible the performance descriptions were based on those for the new subject criteria for English literature (for courses being taught from September 2000) to facilitate comparison of grade standards with future specifications.

### *Standards expected at grade A*

Candidates demonstrate an informed, detailed knowledge and understanding of a wide range of literary texts, and of the critical concepts associated with literary study. Their discussion of texts shows insight and some depth and independence in response to the tasks set and they analyse the ways in which form, structure and language shape meanings. Where appropriate, candidates identify the influences on texts of the cultural and historical contexts in which they were written and they are sensitive to different interpretations of texts. Their material is well organised, and sustains a coherent and relevant argument, making effective use of textual evidence. Written expression is fluent and precise, and shows confident grasp of appropriate terminology.

### **Standards expected at grade E**

Candidates demonstrate some knowledge and understanding of a range of different texts and comment on them in response to the tasks set, sometimes supporting their views by reference to the links between meaning and authors' uses of form, structure or language. Candidates may note the possible relevance of the context in which a text was written. They may show an awareness that texts can be interpreted in various ways. Their written work is generally clear in conveying statements and opinions, sometimes supported by reference to the texts, and shows the use of some appropriate terminology.

### **Findings**

Performance at grade A broadly matched expectations. However, there were some general points about the match between expectation and performance:

- the critical concepts appropriate to literary study were evident, but more likely to be implicit in the way the answer was structured, rather than explicit in candidates' discussion;
- the analysis of form, structure and language was not consistently evident in all candidates' answers, and the amount of evidence of such analysis depended on particular question and component choices;
- written expression at this level was precise enough for the word 'generally' to be omitted from the threshold description.

At grade E, some aspects of performance fell below expectation in both years. Knowledge and understanding were demonstrated predominantly through narrative and descriptive approaches, and references to links between meaning, form, structure and language were only occasionally evident. There was no evidence of awareness of any variety of interpretation. There was clarity in making statements about texts, but a tendency to assertiveness in expressing opinions. The written expression was sufficiently controlled and accurate to convey the essential ideas within answers.

The changes seen over the five years, at both grades, were fewer than might have been expected, given changes in assessment objectives. There were few examples of effective reference to the contexts of literary works, and even less evidence of knowledge of wider critical opinion. This lack of evidence repeated the finding of the syllabus review, that syllabuses did not sufficiently realise the new assessment objectives in practice. However, the quality of language at both grades was more positively rated in 1999 than in 1995.

Standards were questioned by some reviewers in relation to very open-ended questions which made it possible for candidates to rely heavily on prepared material. These were felt actually to disadvantage candidates since their answers were more likely to lack focus. There were fewer instances overall of such open styles of questioning in 1999 than in 1995, but the style remained characteristic of WJEC Paper 2.

The general quality of coursework task-setting exemplified within the samples was considered disappointing. Tasks were in some cases heavily focused on plot or

character. Tasks focusing on assessment objectives which could be most effectively covered in coursework, such as knowledge of the contexts in which literary works are written and understood, and discussion of other readers' opinions of texts, were very hard to find.

## Summary

Standards of performance were carried forward from 1995 to 1999, although at grade E this represented a level of performance that sometimes fell below expectation. Some types of question and the quality of many coursework assignments did not help candidates show what they could do.

# Key to the awarding bodies

During the period of the reviews, the number of awarding bodies operating fell. There are currently five: AQA, CCEA, Edexcel, OCR and WJEC. However, the three English awarding bodies came together through a number of mergers and a government requirement for unitary awarding bodies which could offer the range of GCSE, A level and GNVQ/VCE qualifications. This means that the qualifications used in the reviews came from a number of earlier examination boards and examining groups.

For the purposes of the reports the following abbreviations will be used:

AQA/A, AQA/N, CCEA, Edexcel, OCR and WJEC.

AQA/A covers AQA legacy A level syllabuses offered by AEB; legacy GCSE syllabuses offered by SEG; and O level syllabuses offered by AEB.

AQA/N covers AQA legacy A level syllabuses offered by NEAB, NEA and JMB; legacy GCSE syllabuses offered by NEAB and NEA; and O level syllabuses offered by JMB.

CCEA covers A level and GCSE syllabuses offered by CCEA, NISEAC and NISEC; and O level syllabuses offered by NISEC and NIGCEEB.

Edexcel covers A level and GCSE syllabuses offered by Edexcel, ULEAC and ULSEB; GCSE syllabuses offered by Edexcel, ULEAC and LEAG; and O level syllabuses offered by ULSEB.

OCR covers A level syllabuses offered by OCEAC, OCSEB, UCLES and UODLE; GCSE syllabuses offered by MEG; and O level syllabuses offered by OCSEB, UCLES and UODLE.

WJEC has retained the same name throughout the period.

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