

Ofqual Board

Paper 65/15

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Title:

Communications review

Report by:

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Responsible Director:

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Paper for discussion

Open paper



Issue

1. This note summarises the main corporate communications decisions, accomplishments and challenges of 2015, and looks ahead to prospects and workstreams for 2016.
2. All external communications reflect significant input and discussion with colleagues across the business, and the two Strategic Relationships teams in particular. Phil Beach and Naomi Nicholson and their colleagues have done much work behind the scenes to inform and influence key stakeholders in support of our communications. Our outputs over the year should be seen in that context, as opposed to being the products of the Communications team in isolation. However, this report focuses on developments in the structure of the Communications team and its approach to communications over the past year, as opposed to looking at wider stakeholder engagement in detail.

Recommendation

3. The Board is invited to note and discuss the work and issues set out in this paper.

Background – the Communications team

4. The organisational redesign, including the decision to create two new Strategic Relationship teams, has helped to clarify the Communication team's stakeholder responsibilities. I see these principally as: i) a cadre of interested journalists; ii) commentators and those seeking to interact with us on social media; and iii) subsets of the general public (including students, parents, teachers and employers).
5. The redesign also provided an opportunity to rethink the structure and responsibilities of the Communications team. As well as delivering the organisation's decision to restrict the use of contractors, we moved to a structure in which: i) more individuals think about and develop internal communications, and as part of a business partner structure; ii) those same individuals conduct external communications, again with business partner relationships; iii) the production/delivery team has fewer individuals, but each with a wider portfolio of skills; iv) and, we created the role of Coordination Officer, to more effectively collate and plan internal and external communications both within the team and across the business.
6. We also made the decision to speak more directly with our audiences, rather than relying heavily on the media to accurately transmit our words, and vary our outputs to better meet stakeholders' needs. In practical terms this has meant developing ranges of 'basic', 'intermediate' and 'technical' products and using our social media and other communications channels more effectively.
7. This drive to be more innovative, which has been supported by the senior management group, along with the recruitment of highly skilled individuals, has created a team that is highly motivated and seen as a facilitator working with others across the business to achieve the organisation's goals.

Accomplishments

8. Looking back on 2015 we implemented these new approaches in a number of different external contexts. For example, the production of our 'postcard' series was designed as a 'basic' product and posted directly to 8,000 headteachers¹, as well as uploaded and promoted on our Twitter and Pinterest social media platforms. We estimated that within one week of launch around 300,000 people saw at least one of the eight postcards; this represented our highest ever engagement on social media. We had a number of requests from schools for more postcards, and we received much favourable feedback. On the back of the positive feedback we produced additional postcards in both the GQ and VQ space.

¹ We also sent letters to teachers in relation to GCSE maths, the summer exam series and in relation to our proposed changes to the marking review and appeals system.

9. Other examples of 'basic' products are our various infographics, including our summary of the accreditation process, explanation of the proposed changes to the marking review and appeals system, and related policy options associated with inter-subject comparability. These have often been reused by media outlets, helping to spread our message.²
10. The key aim of our strategy with respect to GCSE maths was to provide as much information as possible and talk regularly. We issued letters, blogs, video updates and talked about developments in speeches. The evidence suggests that this approach paid dividends. Our materials were read and shared³ and our final conclusions received almost no coverage in traditional media outlets or on social media; it was a positive, non-story. Those who did choose to comment on our final report noted the thorough nature of our research, and even our harshest critics on social media agreed with our findings. As such, we achieved our aim and subsequently instigated a similar strategy for our supplementary GCSE science research.
11. We have few statistics at present to evaluate our overall performance, but during 2015 we have gained 3,500 Twitter followers, about a 40% increase. We issued 25% fewer tweets compared to 2014, suggesting that these gains reflect greater interest in our work or our posts. Perhaps corroborating that, 35% more tweets have been directed at us (@ofqual) this year.
12. At a team level, some of our other accomplishments over the year include: the organisation and delivery with colleagues from across the organisation of our inaugural conference; our developments in social media monitoring and responses to questions from the public; and initial steps to engage proactively with our main journalist contacts.
13. Internally, we worked with colleagues to reform a number of our communication channels and approaches. In general this included thinking more critically about the channels we use to communicate and ensuring staff receive more timely and detailed information, and certainly ahead of external stakeholders. In particular, we worked with colleagues to design and deliver a new intranet that is incrementally better than that which we had previously. We also launched a new, internal weekly 'magazine' (the regulator), made better use of the plasma screens in reception and the breakout areas, and refreshed the 'espresso' series of staff briefings. These have all been well received.

² <http://schoolswweek.co.uk/ofqual-launches-subject-comparability-consultation/>
<http://feweek.co.uk/2015/09/28/its-a-different-way-of-thinking-about-how-we-regulate/>
<http://schoolswweek.co.uk/schools-could-get-right-to-see-marked-gcse-papers-as-ofqual-consults-on-appeals-process/>
<http://www.theguardian.com/education/2015/jun/02/ofqual-survey-finds-wide-confusion-and-doubts-about-gcse-and-a-level-changes>

³ A summary is provided here: https://officequal-my.sharepoint.com/personal/chris_shadforth_ofqual_gov_uk/_layouts/15/WopiFrame2.aspx?sourcedoc={FE8A4420-09C6-47D6-8790-A40DE048CBD2}&file=Communication%20strategy%20evaluation%20-%20GCSE%20maths.docx&action=default&DefaultItemOpen=1

At a team level, we are seen to have an open door policy, are receptive to ideas, and are a source of expert and useful information.

Challenges past, present and future

14. While it is difficult to construct counterfactuals, we believe that the work of the Strategic Relationship teams – alongside our public communication outputs – have put us in a better position than might otherwise have been the case in a number of areas. For example, our marking review and appeals consultation was actually met with a relatively quiet reception in contrast to some of the past evolutions.
15. That said, strong opinions have been built among groups of stakeholders and collectively more work is required across the Communication and Strategic Relationship teams to deconstruct myths that have spread and become embedded in some cases, and otherwise build confidence in our policies and actions. In particular, we have arguably not gained sufficient traction with respect to marking, malpractice and marking result appeals.
16. We may also be perceived by some stakeholders to be good at making decisions, but poor at conveying the implications of those decisions. Or perhaps not being as considerate in the information we release than we could be.
17. Looking ahead then, we feel there is more specific work to be done externally in terms of:
 - a. providing more timely and accessible information to parents, students and teachers with respect to accreditation and reform more generally as new qualifications begin to be sat this summer;
 - b. augmenting our strategies with respect to marking, malpractice and appeals;
 - c. in general, being more considerate of the types of information that stakeholders might wish to access, rather than what is available;
 - d. making our consultations more easily digestible and increasing the number and breadth of responders;
 - e. working with colleagues to identify and produce research to more clearly support the rationale for our policy decisions (for example, Quality of Marking);
 - f. driving greater interest in the important work we are doing around qualifications other than GCSEs, AS and A levels;
 - g. and, develop metrics to better evaluate the impact of our work.
18. Internally, we commit to:
 - a. improving the cascade of information from leaders to the wider pool of staff;
 - b. giving colleagues more opportunities to ask the leadership team questions and engage in policy formation;
 - c. and refining our suite of communication channels.

Finance and Resource

19. N/a

Impact Assessments

20. N/a

Risk Assessment

21. N/a

Regulatory Impact Assessment

22. N/a

Timescale

23. N/a

Paper to be published	YES
Publication date (if relevant)	With meeting minutes