

CORPORATE REPORT

Strengthening vocational and technical qualifications

ofqual

Contents

Summary	3
Background	4
Research findings	4
Implications	5
Next steps	5

Summary

In April 2018, we said in our corporate plan that we would be looking closely at those vocational and technical qualifications that play an important role in schools and colleges, many of which feature in the Government's accountability measures. We signalled that we intended to regulate these qualifications with the same seriousness and focus as we do general qualifications.

Part of this commitment was to evaluate the functioning of internal assessment in existing national technical and vocational qualifications. Against this backdrop, we have conducted research into grade inflation in some 'older style' Applied General qualifications, with a particular focus on those with 100% internal assessment that have been used for accountability purposes. It is important to note that this research did not consider the 'new' Applied General qualifications introduced in 2016 that were developed following changes to the Government's performance table rules to incorporate external assessment and a core set of mandatory content.

Our research identifies very strong evidence that grade inflation has occurred in the 'older style' qualifications that we looked at. Unlike GCSEs and A levels, many of these qualifications are criterion referenced; candidates need to demonstrate a level of competence against a set of criteria. This research shows that there was a significant rise over time in the numbers of students able to demonstrate the highest levels of performance that was not matched by either prior attainment or subsequent degree outcomes. This suggests that the issues identified are not a function of internal assessment alone, but also relate to the controls that awarding organisations use to maintain standards over time.

These findings are consistent with the Applied Generals User Survey¹ of 'older style' qualifications that we commissioned and published in 2017. The survey identified the importance of these qualifications, with the number of young people in England entering HE with an Applied General rising to around a quarter of all English university entrants. The survey also highlighted that Applied Generals provided many of the skills needed by undergraduates. Nevertheless, Higher Education staff considered that students with Applied General qualifications were generally² less well prepared for study than those entering through an A level and were less likely to achieve a First or 2:1 degree. They also considered that increases in the number of students achieving higher grades in 'older style' Applied Generals over time have had a negative impact on qualification integrity and made candidate differentiation more difficult.

There is a likelihood that qualifications with similar design features and controls could also be subject to some degree of grade inflation. We are clear that options to address this issue does not mean regulating these vocational and technical qualifications in the same way as GCSEs and A levels. We recognise that the nature of vocational and technical qualifications argues for different approaches to ensure assessment validity.

¹ Conducted by York Consulting and [published 21 November 2017](#).

² With some exceptions in subjects such as creative arts, sport and ICT.

Background

Government performance table designations such as 'Applied Generals' and 'Technical Certificates' have been in place for some time. New qualifications have been introduced by awarding organisations, primarily to meet new requirements of government performance tables that introduced mandatory external assessment. These revised qualifications were designed against the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) that Ofqual introduced on 1 October 2015. The RQF was designed to provide a single, simple system for cataloguing all qualifications regulated by Ofqual.

Although the RQF has been in place for 3 years, many 'older style' qualifications developed under previous frameworks such as the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and the Qualifications Credit Framework (QCF) continue to be offered. And the revision of qualifications to meet the new performance table requirements for external assessment has not been uniform. Many revised qualifications continue to comprise 100% internal assessment that makes them ineligible for performance tables but still able to attract funding.

We have looked at 'older style' qualifications and, in particular, the risk that standards might not be adequately maintained in some of them. We are particularly interested in the relative strengths of controls deployed by awarding organisations to maintain standards in relation to internal assessment. We also noted the increasing volume of externally published research reports that suggested grade inflation in these qualifications.

Research findings

Our research looked at qualifications with high enough numbers of entries to allow robust statistical analysis. Because Pearson are significant market leaders, the sample of qualifications are all 'older style' Pearson Level 3 BTECs. Although we were unable to conduct similar analyses for other similar qualifications, they have many common characteristics that present similar challenges to the maintenance of standards.

We defined grade inflation as unwarranted increases in outcomes over time; in other words, increases which do not reflect a genuine increase in the ability of cohorts of students. For these 'older style' qualifications that we looked at, we identified clear evidence of grade inflation. This evidence showed that the proportion of students achieving 'top grades' (distinction or distinction star) has increased substantially over time. The research suggests that this cannot be explained by a change in the general academic ability of the student cohort as measured by prior attainment at GCSE.

This change in outcomes was not accompanied by associated increases in degree outcomes or employment in managerial or professional occupations. Moreover, during the time period covered by the analysis, the gap in degree outcomes for BTEC students and A level students with a similar tariff became substantially

greater. It was also clear that students taking a mixture of qualifications were more likely to secure top grades in BTEC qualifications compared to A level courses.

In summary, the report identifies very strong evidence that grade inflation has occurred in these 'older style' qualifications. Moreover, there is a risk that qualifications with similar design features and similar controls around standards maintenance are also subject to some degree of grade inflation. Entry numbers into Applied Generals offered by other awarding organisations do not allow for similar statistical analysis. Appendix A to the report provides some data on changes in outcomes for other Applied Generals. But it is important to note that it is not possible to provide a direct comparison between the outcomes in 'older-style' BTEC and other qualifications.

We also know that some awarding organisations have taken some steps to mitigate this risk, for example by limiting the number of re-submissions for internal assessments. Nevertheless, this research evidence argues for a re-evaluation of how qualifications with a significant proportion of internal assessment function and what action needs to be taken to further address the risks to standards. This is particularly important as some qualifications, recently developed against the RQF, continue to exhibit many of the characteristics of the 'older style' qualifications in their internal assessments.

Implications

Our research demonstrates some underlying issues with the 'older style' qualifications inherited by Ofqual and delivered by schools and colleges. These long-standing issues continue to undermine the maintenance of standards in some qualifications. These problems are not simply driven by the use of internal assessment. Rather there are a number of typical features in place around the internal assessment that have served to weaken the controls available to awarding organisations to maintain standards. We think that these features include, for example, combinations of: criterion referencing; unitisation of the qualifications; the availability of multiple re-submissions for each unit; the practice of grading rather than marking these units; and weak methods of moderation or verification.

In this context, it is worth noting that, despite the introduction of external assessment to performance table qualifications, the majority of assessment continues to be conducted internally. This internal assessment often has similar characteristics to that in 'older style' qualifications. Conversely, the fact that a qualification is 100% internally assessed does not necessarily lead to the issues identified in the report; the structure of the assessment and associated controls over awarding appear to play an important role.

Next steps

Results from summer 2018 reflect that outcomes for the highest grades in 'new' (RQF) versions of BTECs have been recalibrated. The introduction of external assessment in Applied Generals provides the opportunity for all awarding organisations to partially mitigate the potential for grade inflation. However, even in qualifications that have been revised to meet performance table requirements, the

majority of assessment remains internal and with similar systems in place to those identified above. Awarding organisations are at risk of not implementing controls necessary to effectively maintain standards.

Recognising that these qualifications have just been revised substantially to meet government performance table requirements, and notwithstanding the Government's intent to conduct a review of funded vocational and technical qualifications, we nevertheless see a case for strengthening controls over internal assessment. There are a range of options available to all awarding organisations to address some of the issues highlighted by this research and we would want them to consider the implications of this report carefully. We will be working with awarding organisations to consider options, which may ultimately lead to the production of bespoke guidance or regulatory requirements. We will consult if we conclude such action is appropriate.



© Crown Copyright 2018

This publication is licensed under the terms of the Open Government Licence v3.0 except where otherwise stated.

To view this license, visit

www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/

or write to

Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU

Published by:

ofqual

Earlsdon Park
53-55 Butts Road
Coventry
CV1 3BH

0300 303 3344
public.enquiries@ofqual.gov.uk
www.gov.uk/ofqual