

Board Paper

Paper 111/18

Date

27 March 2019

Title

Chief Regulator's report

Report by

Sally Collier, Chief Regulator

Paper for information and decision

Open paper

Recommendation

1. The Board is asked to note the matters reported and to:
 - a. Delegate to the Chief Regulator authority to (a) sign off the draft report referencing the Regulated Qualifications Framework to the European Qualifications Framework, before it is submitted to the EU's EQF Advisory Committee, and (b) sign off the final report prior to publication (para 7).

Overview

2. On 12 March, the Chair and I appeared in front of the Education Select Committee for an accountability hearing on the work of Ofqual. The Committee asked questions on topics including the use of International GCSEs in independent schools; on errors in exam papers modified for students with disabilities especially papers in Braille and large print; on reforms to BTECs; and on our role in the apprenticeship end point assessment external quality assurance (EQA) landscape. Coverage was largely limited to the trade press (with one article in the Daily Telegraph) and focussed on the exchanges on International GCSEs and Apprenticeships external quality assurance. We agreed to write to the Committee following our hearing with further details about our work on modified exam papers.
3. This month we also held our annual all-staff conference at a nearby conference venue. The central theme for the day was 'making a difference together, and we held sessions on improving personal impact through communication and on ways for staff to develop their own skills and careers. Ian Bauckham and Lesley Davies joined for a discussion on bringing alive the

impact of Ofqual in their schools and colleges. Overall feedback from staff was extremely positive.

EU Exit: Updating our report referencing to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF)

4. On 5 February we presented to the EU's EQF Advisory Group on our progress towards updating the 2010 referencing report. In that original report the qualifications frameworks in use at the time were referenced to the EQF. In the updated report we will reference the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) to the EQF. The report will also reference the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications to the EQF. The report is being written with CCEA Regulation (Northern Ireland) and the presentation was a joint one. Progress with the equivalent report for Wales was presented at the same meeting by colleagues from Qualifications Wales.
5. Members of the Committee were particularly interested in the format of the level descriptors used in the RQF and how these differed from those used in the EQF; the use of learning outcomes in regulated qualifications; the use of recognition of prior learning; higher level apprenticeships; the involvement of trade unions in the updating process; the transferability of qualifications within the UK, given the devolved nature of qualifications policy; and the inclusion on qualification certificates of the EQF level. We will ensure these issues are addressed in the report.
6. We are due to submit our report to the EU Advisory Committee in May and to present again to the Committee in June. The report will be finalised in light of comments from the Committee before it is published. Before it is submitted, a draft of the report will be scrutinised by our external Steering group and by our two international experts. We will also discuss the approach with awarding organisations at our AO conference this month.
7. **The Board is invited to delegate to the Chief Regulator authority to (a) sign off the draft report before it is submitted to the Committee, and (b) sign off the final report prior to publication.**

General Qualifications

National Assessments: Reception baseline

8. Since my last update, the Secretary of State has made a number of significant decisions about the reception baseline assessment. The Standards and Testing Agency (STA) has now constructed the assessment, published the [assessment framework](#) and opened the window for schools to register to take part in the voluntary national pilot from September 2019.

[Closed]

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

A level Science – research on practical skills

10. Our programme of research evaluating the changes to the practical work in science A level will conclude shortly with a publication of the final research report. Reformed A level sciences were first taught in schools in September 2015, introducing significant change to the assessment of practical work.
11. Previously, practical work assessment contributed towards the final overall A level grade, with students conducting coursework practicals and answering some questions about the practical. However, the assessments were undifferentiating between students (the majority of candidates received top grades), and there was also evidence that these arrangements did not necessarily promote regular science practical work and some schools and colleges narrowly focused on the coursework practical.
12. The arrangements in the reformed A levels assess practical skills through two approaches: direct assessment (through observation) by teachers of 12 'hands-on' practical assignments, and for which students receive a grade (Pass/Fail) alongside the main A level grade; and indirect assessment through examination questions within the A level examination papers, comprising 15% of all available marks.
13. In response to stakeholder concerns, Ofqual put together a programme of work to evaluate the impact on the teaching of practical skills.
 - a. Paper 1: Teacher perspectives after one year. (2017)
 - b. Paper 2: Pre- and Post- reform evaluation of practical skills. (2018)
 - c. Paper 3: Valid discrimination in the assessment of practical performance (2018)
 - d. Paper 4: A analysis of the functioning of examination items that indirectly assess A level science practical skills (2018)
 - e. Paper 5: Final report on the pre- and post- reform evaluation of science practical skills (forthcoming)
14. This final piece of research adds an additional year of data to Paper 2 and uses the same specially devised Practical Skills Measures for each science subject to gain a direct measure of practical skills for those who achieved pre-reform A level (the 'benchmark') and two years' of reform A level. The sample consisted of science undergraduates at a sample of UK universities.
15. The results suggest that overall there has not been a detrimental effect on the practical skills for reform A level students, with some differences between the sciences. For biology, the post-reform students outperformed the pre-reform students (with both 2018 and 2017 cohorts outperforming the 2016 cohort), and that practical skills for chemistry and physics remain stable. The reformed qualifications are still relatively new and it is possible that the teaching and delivery may change during their lifetime, so it remains important to monitor examination board arrangements around practical skills. We plan to publish the final element of the research project findings in April.

[Closed]

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

Vocational and Technical Qualifications

Reform

22. This section has been redacted, as its publication would be prejudicial to the effective conduct of public affairs
23. **Digital Skills.** The combined policy and technical consultation on our proposed Conditions and Guidance for Basic Digital Skills qualifications closed on 11 January 2019. The Board is asked to consider our recommendations in a separate paper. Separately, we have now received a Ministerial steer to work with the Department to introduce new Functional Skills Digital qualifications, which are expected to replace Functional Skills ICT qualifications. The planned first teach date is 2022 and much detail is still to be developed, though the Department has begun working on the qualification content.
24. **T Levels.** The first three contracts for Wave 1 Technical Qualifications have now been awarded to Pearson (Construction, Digital) and NCFE (Education). The Institute has held inception meetings with the Awarding Organisations and is adopting a very collaborative approach to qualification development. We now have in place an Operations Manual that sets out ways of working with the Institute at key stages in the design, development and delivery processes, particularly the approvals stage where we will be making an accreditation decision. The Invitation To Tender (ITT) for the seven Wave 2 Technical Qualifications is scheduled to launch in the week beginning 18 March.
25. This section has been redacted, as its publication would be prejudicial to the effective conduct of public affairs

Regulation

26. **Accountability for Awards.** Our consultation on Accountability for Awards (awarding organisation controls of moderation and verification and arrangements with centres) was successfully launched on 25 February, accompanied by supportive comments from the Association of Education and Learning Providers (AELP) and the Federation of Awarding Bodies (FAB).

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

27. **Qualification Reviews.** The Department's consultation on its review of qualifications at Level 3 and below is now expected to be published at the end of this month; our work on strengthening VTQs, discussed in detail at the Board Strategy day on 28 February, is referenced. To support our analysis, we have let a contract to YouGov to conduct quantitative research on the factors that drive centre decision-making in relation to the qualification subjects they offer, and the awarding organisations they work with. This should provide a substantive part of our response to the Department's consultation.

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

Strategic Relationships

28. **AO Conference.** [Closed] we have secured [closed] regular BBC commentator to host (Priya Lakhani, a member of the government's Entrepreneur Forum and a regular contributor to BBC News' review of global headlines). We are looking forward to a well-attended event with a focus on employer engagement, innovation and lessons from our research.

Communications

29. Coverage of the Education Select Committee in mid-March hearing focused on the exchanges regarding comparisons between International GCSEs and GCSEs, confusion between old and new-style BTECs, and student anxiety. Most reporting was contained to the trade press, although the Telegraph did comment around public trust in International GCSEs. SchoolsWeek and TES both provided live social media updates from the hearing, which additionally focused on potential extension of our EQA role. Beyond these, only around three dozen people responded to the hearing, with most reflecting on student stress.
30. Our weekly blog series has continued to attract thousands of readers. In particular, publication of our student guide on coping with exam pressure reached more than 25k people on Facebook in its first weekend, which is around three times what we would normally hope to see. In addition, our tweets reached an estimated 100k people. Subsequent posts have generated further pick-up.
31. We published our consultation on awarding organisation controls for centre assessments in late February.

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

32. Other key outputs over the period included a new document collection webpage to explain changes to Functional Skills qualifications. Our products included a podcast and animation, designed for different audiences. We also provided more information ahead of this year's National Reference Test being conducted. Our consultation on reform of the Exam Procedures Review Service was published in early February. There was widespread coverage of the BBC's report on declining GCSE MFL entries. We reacted by re-tweeting our blog about teachers' views of the new specifications but were not contacted for further comment.
33. We held our annual staff event on 6 March, at which we were joined by Ian Bauckham and Lesley Davies. Feedback indicates that the day partially or fully met expectations of 98% of attendees, the same as in 2018. Overall, 88% of colleagues were satisfied or very satisfied with the event, broadly the same as in 2018 (90%).

Forward Look

34. Following review by the Board, early next month we will publish our 2019-2022 Corporate Plan; our attention will then turn to the preparation of the 2018/19 accounts and annual report ahead of our external audit in May, and before presentation to the Board in June.
35. The first sift of applications for the Ofqual Board has been undertaken by the relevant expert Associate and Executive Directors and their counterparts in the Department. In total we received 100 applications to fill five roles. [Closed] [interviews] will take place during April, with the intention to appoint in July or September.
36. By the time of the Board's next meeting in May, the 2019 summer series will have begun in earnest. We will resume our social media monitoring and regular events meetings to keep abreast of any issues. Ahead of the beginning of exams I will continue to meet with Responsible Officers and Chief Executives of the exam boards to ensure their readiness for the series ahead.

Paper to be published	YES
Publication date (if relevant)	
If it is proposed not to publish the paper or to not publish in full please outline the reasons why with reference to the exemptions available under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), please include references to specific paragraphs	