

2001

Five year review of standards

GCSE German



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.¹

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.²

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

² 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 four sample years: the year of the study and its predecessors from five years, 10 years and 20 years earlier.

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 and its predecessors for the other three years in the study. 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.

In general, syllabuses and question papers were available from all awarding bodies for all years in a study. Unfortunately, prior to 1988, few mark schemes and few documented details about awarding procedures had been retained.

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 for each syllabus studied in stage one. They were asked to submit the complete examination work of candidates, including all examination papers, coursework and any oral examinations.

On the whole, the samples provided for the most recent year of each study were complete. However, the coursework was sometimes missing and work from modular syllabuses presented a problem, in that it was seldom possible to provide the entire work of individual candidates. Usually, several modules from one candidate were provided, supplemented by modules from other candidates to produce the appropriate overall result.

Samples of work from earlier years were much less complete. The awarding bodies could rarely provide work from enough candidates or did not have the complete work of candidates – coursework and orals were usually missing and the work consisted of individual components. No work from the earliest year of the reviews was available.

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 5.

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

In some subject areas, syllabuses and examination papers changed radically over the period of the review. For example, in assessing modern foreign languages the relative importance of the skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening has changed considerably. 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. The archiving practices of the awarding bodies vary, each keeping different amounts of evidence for any year. This applies particularly to examination scripts. What tended to be available from earlier years is work for separate components of the examination rather than the whole work of candidates. Coursework and any oral examinations were usually missing.

A national archive of essential evidence on examination standards has been established by the regulatory authorities. This should ensure that difficulties in this area are reduced in future studies.

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 1996	BOARD F, GRADE A	BOARD A, GRADE E
9:45	1996 7-1	1996 15-8	1996 1-7	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

GCSE German: review of standards 1977–97

Introduction

Changes in 16+ German examinations between 1977 and 1997 were influenced above all by the trend in foreign language assessment to make communication of messages the prime measure of success. Other main causes of change include:

- the development in 1985 of national criteria for assessing modern foreign languages (MFL) at GCSE;
- the introduction of GCSE examinations in 1988;
- the introduction of a national curriculum in MFL in 1991;
- the publication of revised national curriculum orders in 1995.

Examination demand

Materials available

The reviewers used syllabuses, question papers and mark schemes from German syllabuses in 1977, 1987, 1992 and 1997, although not all materials were available from earlier years. In some cases, examiner's reports allowed reviewers further insight into the expectations of the examination. Annex A shows in detail the materials used.

Between them, the syllabuses offered by the awarding bodies featured in this study attracted about 98 per cent of the 135,000 candidates entered for GCSE German examinations in 1997.

Syllabus content

One important change over time was in the increasing explicitness of the syllabuses. This change also increased the level of comparability across awarding bodies. In 1977 and 1987, syllabus content was usually not specified. Teachers and students had to study past papers for guidance on the range of vocabulary, structures and skills expected. By 1992, content was detailed in all syllabuses, along with clearly stated philosophies and aims. There was also considerable consistency between the awarding bodies in the demands the content placed on candidates. Explicit information on assessment methods enabled better candidate preparations, and by 1997 access to published mark schemes provided further guidance.

The weighting of the four language skills of writing, reading, listening and speaking changed over time. In 1977 and 1987, the weighting given to each skill varied between the awarding bodies, but, overall, writing was the major skill and speaking the minor. Individual question papers tended to assess performance in more than

one skill area. In GCSE, all awarding bodies gave equal weighting to each skill and usually assessed each separately.

Schemes of assessment

The schemes of assessment varied between awarding bodies in 1977. By 1992, there was more uniformity: the GCSE model resulted in the introduction of differentiated papers in all awarding bodies. Assessment was based on a two-tier system. The exception was OCR, which implemented a double higher-tier system. Under the two-tier system, candidates were required to sit all components in the Foundation Tier. However, access to the higher grades required Higher Tier components to be taken. Tiering provided greater flexibility and accessibility, giving candidates optimal opportunity for demonstrating their abilities. In the 1977 and 1987 GCE O level examinations, candidates had to sit all components, including a lengthy written paper not easily accessible to lower-ability candidates. However, under the GCSE system, candidates who in Writing sat only the Foundation Tier paper, but gained sufficient marks in the other skills, could obtain a grade C. This represented a lowering of demand.

At the same time, the full assessment requirements in the GCSE model, involving eight components (or 12 with OCR), were much greater than with the GCE O level.

The emergence of the AQA/A GCSE modular syllabus in 1997 was a totally new development aimed at teaching German for practical use in modern and relevant contexts and providing candidates with regular feedback. Assessment was based on assignments set at different levels either by the awarding body or by the teacher following awarding body guidelines. Timing of assessment was flexible and could be repeated several times. Candidates were allowed to use dictionaries and other reference material. Candidates could be coached exclusively for the assignments instead of receiving a broad and well-balanced language course, and variation might exist in teachers' interpretation of their facilitating role. The demand of the assignments was considered high, but any teaching specifically towards the assignments would have significantly reduced that.

Demand across the skills

Writing

In 1977, writing was assessed through essay writing, dictation, translation and responses in German to listening and reading comprehension. The subject matter of the essay demanded a wide knowledge of unpredictable, sometimes unusual German lexis and the ability to write in a range of tenses using complex sentence structure. The texts used in the comprehension tests were of a literary nature and demanded manipulation of language. Translation from English into German required an understanding of the precise language of prose. There were signs in 1987 of a shift in emphasis towards more practical communication skills. Edexcel adapted its syllabus to increase relevance, accessibility and motivation. Knowledge of modern, everyday language was tested within a context likely to be familiar to most young people. Other awarding bodies had also started to move in this direction. Although most still expected evidence of language manipulation, the translation of text into German had become an option: the alternative being an essay-writing task that enabled candidates to use German language with which they were familiar. Only

Edexcel continued to include dictation as part of assessment. By 1992, communication skills had become the main focus of assessment. In the Higher Tier, accuracy was still an important factor: candidates were expected to demonstrate a high degree of expertise in both grammar and lexis in the writing of essays, reports, and informal and formal letters, but tasks were more open-ended.

Although aspects of writing required the same level of demand as the 1977 papers, the removal of dictation and the way essay writing was used were considered to reduce demand in 1987. In GCSE, the setting of the subject content in real-life contexts outside the classroom provided a clear focus for candidates and made the study of German accessible to the whole ability range. Overall, the demand of the papers assessing writing was considered to have been reduced over the period of the study.

Reading

In 1977, reading skills were mainly tested through translation into English, demanding a precise knowledge of vocabulary. AQA/N devoted 40 per cent of marks to translation and deducted marks for faults in style. AQA/A and OCR offered alternative reading comprehension papers with multiple-choice answers in German, requiring an extensive knowledge of German vocabulary. By 1987, reading comprehension was tested not only by translation into English, but also by comprehension questions in English set on a German passage (AQA/N and WJEC). In 1992 and 1997, long translation passages had been replaced by a wider range of topic areas and genres including jokes, cartoons, magazine articles and handwritten letters. Candidates not only had to comprehend the content in depth, but had to draw conclusions and to identify relationships between ideas. The authenticity of the materials used made particularly high demands.

The increase in breadth by 1992 was judged to balance any decrease in depth and length from the 1977 and 1987 passages. However, variation in the length of passages and time allowances created differences in demand between the awarding bodies.

Listening

In 1977, listening skills could remain undetected since they were tested only through the medium of written responses in German. Narratives, often extracted from literary sources, were read out and served as a stimulus to essay writing or as dictation for testing candidates' spelling. The passages were generally long, putting a heavy burden on memory, with outcomes also dependent on the manner of delivery of the speaker – usually the teacher. AQA/A and OCR offered alternative German multiple-choice papers to test listening comprehension, with similarly high demands to the reading comprehension tests. By 1987, listening comprehension was tested independently of other skills. AQA/A provided a pre-recorded tape of the narration, and questions about the text were asked in English. The degree of authenticity of any tapes used in 1977 and 1987 was hard to establish, since the reviewers had few actual tapes, only transcripts. In 1992, most awarding bodies used tapes. These were highly authentic, often using native speakers talking at nearly normal speed and including some hesitancy. Loudspeaker announcements, radio programmes and telephone conversations were also used to test candidates. The tests covered a wide

range of topics. By 1997, the use of authentic materials had been modified to improve clarity.

The GCSE format of listening comprehension constituted a genuine test of comprehension of the spoken word compared to previous patterns of testing. The latter had made heavy demands on memory and involved the use of skills other than listening. In 1992, demand was judged greater than in the 1977 and 1987 examinations.

Speaking

The assessment of speaking skills in 1977 generally played a relatively minor role: in some awarding bodies it represented only 10 per cent of the total marks available. The diverse styles used for assessing speaking and the varying levels of demand between different awarding bodies made any comparison difficult. Methods of assessment ranged from reading out a passage or holding a general conversation, to discussing a prepared topic or an oral composition using pictorial stimulus. Only a limited number of topic areas was sampled in assessment. However, AQA/A devoted 25 per cent of available marks to the skill, using an extensive oral test including role-play. In 1987, speaking tasks still tended to cover only a narrow range of topic areas. However, OCR also introduced role-play into the oral examination, while Edexcel developed an oral examination aimed at everyday language in a practical context. By 1992, most awarding bodies set role-play tasks. At the higher level, these included unpredictable tasks and required spontaneous responses to requests made by the examiner. The conversation covered a wide range of topics and required candidates to demonstrate their ability to discuss topics in detail, using complex language. OCR included a particularly demanding task, in which candidates had to narrate an event or series of events in the past tense using picture or word cues.

The greater variety of tasks meant that demand was judged to have increased over the period.

Overall, demand had increased in the two skills which had increased in weight and decreased only in writing.

Presentation of question papers

The size, font and the general layout of examination papers in 1977 and 1987 were not user-friendly when compared with their GCSE equivalents. Although the 1977 question papers used pictorial matter, it did not act as a useful tool for enhancing the text. By 1987, the pictorial stimulus for story writing had improved in clarity and occasional ambiguities had been removed. The presentation of question papers had changed considerably by 1992. Papers were presented in A4 format, using a larger font. Most papers included pictorial material which facilitated access, especially for weaker candidates.

Although not all mark schemes for GCE O level examination were available to the reviewers, the indications were that marks were deducted from a given total for each error made. Marking remained negative in 1987, with the exception of Edexcel in 1987, which adopted an approach whereby some marks were awarded for positive qualities in answers. Positive marking was used in all the 1992 and 1997

examinations, rewarding both successful completion of the tasks and the quality of the answers.

Summary

The nature of the examination demands had changed in all skills across time. The changes were considered to have reduced overall demand in the assessment of writing, to have been neutral in their effect on reading skills; and to have increased demand on both speaking and listening.

Standards of performance at grades A, C and F

Materials available

The reviewers considered candidates' work from all the awarding bodies in 1997, and in much more limited quantities from 1992 or 1993 and 1987. The details of what was used are provided in Annex A.

The descriptions of expected performance used in this exercise were developed from published grade descriptions, adjusted to take into account the fact that the work was from borderline candidates.

Standards expected at grade A

Speaking was not included in the exercise, so expected standards are not provided in this report.

In listening, candidates were expected to show understanding of short or extended texts, drawn from a variety of topics and registers and including familiar language in unfamiliar contexts. They should cope with the language spoken at normal speed and with interference and hesitancy. They should identify and note most main points and themes in extended monologues and conversations and most specific details, including points of view. They should identify attitudes, emotions and opinions and relationships between ideas in extended monologues and conversations, and be able to draw conclusions from extended monologues or conversations.

In reading, candidates were expected to show understanding of a variety of texts, imaginative and factual, and which include some complex sentences and familiar language in unfamiliar contexts. They should identify and note main points and most specific details and points of view. They should extract important information from short and extended texts, identifying attitudes, emotions and opinions and most of the important points and themes, and be able to draw conclusions.

In writing, candidates were expected to show a wide range of vocabulary and use a range of tenses. Errors should be confined to *minor* lapses. There should be some attempt to use *more difficult* structures and idioms. Writing should be extended, with error-free sequences, and word order should be mainly correct. Content should be coherently sequenced and unambiguous and there should be little difficulty with self-expression, with attitudes and opinions being conveyed effectively. Candidates should respond fully to tasks set, being able to elaborate, and give full descriptions

and accounts. They should be confident, fluent, pertinent, purposeful and able to select a formal or informal register according to the task.

Performance at grade A

In 1997, OCR candidates performed well in all skill areas. The Higher-Tier listening and reading papers provided ample opportunity for candidates to demonstrate their higher-order skills of identifying attitudes, emotions and opinions, and drawing conclusions. Candidates made good use of these opportunities. In writing, candidates demonstrated high-order skills: producing long error-free passages, making good use of tenses and constructing complex sentences. Work from the AQA/A modular syllabus was on the whole also of a very high quality and judged to be of grade A standard. However, the very different conditions under which it was produced make any comparisons with linear examinations especially difficult.

In other awarding bodies, however, candidates did not meet the expected standard in any of the skills. This was considered to arise in part from the question papers. For instance, WJEC papers did not allow candidates to work at an extended level in listening and reading comprehension, while the CCEA papers were too long to allow candidates sufficient time to demonstrate their skills fully. Nor did the scripts from Edexcel and AQA/N provide sufficient evidence of grade A performance in writing, with work lacking in idioms and complex structures.

In 1992/3, the overall standard of the scripts was judged to be lower than in 1997. Candidates wrote error-free passages and made good use of the perfect tense when describing past events. However, in AQA/A there was a general tendency not to attempt more adventurous constructions nor to use unusual idioms, while the level of accuracy was lower in the WJEC scripts, despite relatively undemanding question papers.

Performance in writing in 1987 was judged to be above that expected for grade A. Candidates' performance was competent and confident with a high degree of accuracy across simple and compound sentences. A range of tenses was used and there was correct use of prepositions and adjective and case endings. However, in listening and reading tasks, comparisons with 1997 were more difficult. The 1987 papers tested a much more limited range of tasks than in 1997, providing little or no opportunities to demonstrate higher listening and reading skills.

Standards expected at grade C

In reading, candidates were expected to show understanding of a variety of straightforward texts and familiar language. They should identify and note main points and some specific details and points of view. They should extract important information from short texts and some information from extended texts; and identify attitudes, emotions and opinions and some important themes in short or extended texts.

In listening, candidates were expected to show understanding of short texts, drawn from a variety of topics and registers and including familiar language in unfamiliar contexts. They should cope with the language spoken at normal speed and with

interference and hesitancy. They should identify and note some main points and specific details, including points of view; and identify attitudes, emotions and opinions and some important themes in extended dialogues or conversations.

In writing, candidates were expected to produce continuous sentences that communicate appropriate meaning, which may in places be disjointed. Information should be largely relevant and sensibly and successfully sequenced; most of the ideas expressed should be readily comprehensible, with misspellings rarely a barrier to communication. There should be some evidence of correct use of gender; most verb endings should be correct; and there should be some awareness of tense and word order with some predicative use of adjectives. There should be a reasonable range of vocabulary, though attempts at ambitious structure may not be entirely successful. Answers may be a little repetitive but relatively accurate responding reasonably fully to tasks set. There should be some ability to describe, give accounts, and communicate attitudes and opinions.

Performance at grade C

In 1997, AQA/N candidates were considered to have met the expected standard in both listening and reading and in both tiers. Candidates for CCEA also demonstrated the required level of competence in writing, using a range of lexis and structures and achieving appropriate levels of accuracy. Edexcel, however, awarded a grade C for work below grade C standard in all three skills considered. AQA/A modular work also showed little evidence of solid grade C performance: marks were gained randomly from a variety of tasks in different skill areas over a period of time.

In 1992/3, scripts from AQA/A and WJEC (the only awarding bodies to have scripts reviewed) were both judged to meet expectations for grade C. Candidates wrote at a fairly basic level with some accuracy. In reading and listening, they provided sufficient evidence of the ability to extract information.

In the 1987 scripts, performance in writing was considered well above the standard expected for grade C. Gender and case usage, word order and subordinate clauses were often correct and tenses were used confidently. In general, the scripts conveyed an awareness of grammar and syntax not found in the GCSE samples at this grade. In reading, performances also met the expected standard. There was only one passage for listening comprehension, with which candidates coped well. However, there was insufficient evidence of some listening skills required for the GCSE grade C.

Standards expected at grade F

In listening, candidates were expected to identify and note main points and extract some details from simple language spoken clearly at near normal speed.

In reading, candidates were expected to identify main points and extract some information from short, simple texts, both printed and handwritten.

In writing, candidates were expected to write short sentences and respond to written texts by substituting words and set phrases. Although there would be mistakes in spelling and grammar, the main points of the message were communicated.

Performance at grade F

There was a good deal of agreement that the work of most candidates in 1997 (AQA/N, OCR, Edexcel, WJEC) was at the standard expected for grade F. Candidates managed to extract some information from simple short or long passages of spoken or written language, but had problems with interpreting pictorial material. There was also evidence of communication in writing at a very basic level. Candidates performed better in communication skills when substituting a German word for an English one than when required to complete open-ended writing tasks. In the former, only one or two correct German words were required but in the latter, candidates often wrote sentences containing many English words, which put in doubt whether genuine communication had taken place.

There was not much evidence of grade F work in the AQA/A scripts. They failed to show achievement over the whole breadth and depth of the syllabus. Most candidates showed positive achievement in the earlier modules of the course only, and even then not in all skill areas or at a convincing level.

Only WJEC provided scripts for grade F from 1992. There was evidence of sufficient listening and reading ability at this grade. The reading comprehension paper contained much undoctored authentic material, which posed a problem for candidates at this level and reduced their performance in reading compared to 1997. The level of writing skills again only showed the correct use of single words and not complete sentences or phrases. As in the 1997 papers at this grade, communication relied to a large extent on the inclusion of English for a successful outcome.

Summary

The review focused to a large extent on standards of writing and reading across awarding bodies and over time. There was some variation in the standards set by the different awarding bodies in 1997, although there was little evidence of a pattern either across skills or grades. Standards at grade A were judged to be higher in 1997 than in 1992, but highest of all in 1987. At grade C, 1987 was again judged to show the highest standards, but here 1992 performance was considered better than that in 1997.

Evidence of listening comprehension was limited by incomplete material. The absence of listening tapes made it difficult to assess a possible increase in demand, which could have arisen from the use of native speakers in authentic settings and a broadening of the topic areas tested. The exclusion of the oral component made overall conclusions difficult, since this skill has increased considerably in weighting and demand over time and is a component in which weaker candidates often perform well. The conclusion that standards in writing had fallen over time, especially in A-grade performance, must be seen in this context.

Annex A: materials used in the review

Table A1 shows the materials available for the review of examination demand.

Awarding body	AQA/N	AQA/A	CCEA	EDEXCEL	OCR	WJEC
1997						
Syllabus	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Question papers	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mark scheme	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
1992						
Syllabus	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Question papers	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mark scheme	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
1987						
Syllabus	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Question papers	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mark scheme	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
1977						
Syllabus	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Question papers	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Mark scheme						

Table A1: materials available for the syllabus review

Table A2 shows the materials available for the script review.

Year and award	Grade	AQA/N	AQA/A	CCEA	EDEXCEL	OCR	WJEC
1997	Grade A	15	12	10	15	15	13
GCSE	Grade C	14	11	10	15	13	15
	Grade F	15	11		13	15	15
1992/3	Grade A		5				6
GCSE	Grade C		5				6
	Grade F						
1987	Grade A						6
O level	Grade C						5
1977	Grade A						
O level	Grade C						

Table A2: Numbers of scripts available for the script review

Key to the awarding bodies

During the period of the reviews, the number of awarding bodies operating fell². 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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