



Qualifications and  
Curriculum Authority

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# **QCA review of question paper setting and senior examiner training for GCSE and A level**

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QCA March 2008

QCA/08/3581

## Contents

Executive summary	3
1. Introduction	6
2. Senior examiner and reviser training	9
3. The question paper setting and production process	14
4. From commissioning to QPEC meeting	17
5. QPEC meetings	21
6. From QPEC meeting to printing	25
7. Making question papers accessible	27
8. Views about the quality of question papers	32
9. Next steps	39
Appendix 1. Question paper production timeline	40
Appendix 2. List of awarding body meetings observed and visits undertaken	41

## Executive summary

This review set out to investigate how awarding bodies meet the regulatory requirements for key aspects of setting high-quality GCSE and A level question papers and mark schemes, and for training senior examiners for these qualifications. These requirements are described in the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) document *The statutory regulation of external qualifications (2004)* (QCA/04/1293) and the *GCSE, GCE, GNVQ and AEA code of practice (April 2007)* (QCA/07/3082). The review also aimed to investigate the views about the quality of GCSE and A level question papers held by various interest groups, including teachers.

The review found that, overall, awarding bodies complied with the regulatory requirements for training senior examiners. Awarding bodies provided a range of training tailored according to need – for those new to senior posts and for new and experienced senior examiners at the introduction of new specifications or new awarding body procedures.

The mixture of subject-specific training and planning meetings for senior examining teams involved with new specifications was good. Training meetings and guidance materials addressed the targeting and coverage of assessment objectives well. Some guidance was provided on ensuring that question papers have an appropriate range of demand, but this tends to be developed through examining experience, rather than through training meetings and materials.

The review found that, overall, awarding bodies complied with the regulatory requirements for setting question papers and mark schemes. The question paper production process is complex, multi-layered, time-focused and vast. The review followed the process from commissioning the writing of a question paper to its printing and quality checks. Awarding bodies had different but equally effective ways of managing the question paper production process, while ensuring that regulatory requirements are met, including systems to ensure that papers are produced on time and that errors are kept to a minimum. Awarding bodies also had good structures in place for drafting and revising question papers and mark schemes, though with some potential for development of these.

QCA observed a small sample of question paper evaluation committee (QPEC) meetings as part of the review. All were conducted professionally and met the requirements of the code of practice. However, it was clear from the meetings observed that where collective pre-consideration of the assessment materials occurred, either in the form of a pre-QPEC meeting or through written feedback, the question papers and mark schemes reached the QPEC in a more refined state than where this had not taken place. Awarding body procedures for checking question papers and mark schemes after QPEC meetings and for finalising these were robust and in line with regulatory requirements.

The review investigated how awarding bodies ensure that question papers are accessible to the majority of candidates. Awarding bodies aim to address the regulatory requirement to consider accessibility when drafting papers through their various forms of training and guidance, including the use of the QCA document, *Fair access by design*, ([www.qca.org.uk/qca\\_7817.aspx](http://www.qca.org.uk/qca_7817.aspx)).

The involvement of language modifiers for deaf and hearing-impaired candidates during the drafting process and before final approval of unmodified papers is of great value. Input at this early stage reduces the need to amend the wording of questions after the unmodified question paper has been approved. At present, only language modifiers for deaf and hearing-impaired candidates contribute in this way, and only at two of the awarding bodies. It is of concern that, while awarding bodies are attempting to make greater use of early advice from language modifiers, the current shortage of modifiers means that not all question papers benefit from this input.

Once question papers have been approved, awarding bodies have procedures in place to modify them in various required formats and to provide reasonable adjustments to candidates with particular requirements. However, there is concern that, with the exception of one awarding body, amendments to the language of question papers are not checked in the first instance by a senior examiner with subject knowledge.

Overall, the views expressed about the quality of GCSE and A level question papers from teachers and other sources were positive. Although some concerns were evident, the general level of satisfaction was high, indicating that the process by which the question papers are produced is, on the whole, sound.

The findings from the survey of teachers conducted by Ipsos MORI during the summer 2007 examination session were overall very positive about the quality of GCSE and A level question papers, with none of the sub-groups interviewed, such as teachers of particular subjects, being consistently negative. However, it was evident from the findings that some of the areas addressed in the survey were perceived as more of a concern than others. That said, it was also noted that, as many of these areas were linked, respondents with negative views regarding one area were likely to have negative views about others.

The findings from QCA's supporting research into teachers' views were consistent with those from the survey with between half and two-thirds of the specifications or question papers addressed either not attracting negative comments from teachers or being complimented actively by them. The concerns expressed were fairly common between the sources, and were similar to those noted from students and the public.

# 1. Introduction

- 1.1 *The statutory regulation of external qualifications (2004)* and the *GCSE, GCE, GNVQ and AEA code of practice (April 2007)* state the principles and requirements for setting and approving question papers and mark schemes. They also require awarding bodies to provide training and guidance to their examiners on all aspects of their work, including setting and approving question papers and mark schemes.
- 1.2 Examiners must ensure that question papers provide a valid measure of skills, knowledge and understanding, are accessible to candidates and allow them to demonstrate their abilities, and that similar standards are carried forward over time. Mark schemes must be clear, in line with question paper requirements, and must allocate credit for what candidates know, understand and can do.

## Rationale

- 1.3 The rationale for carrying out this review came from a variety of sources:
- QCA's Regulation and Standards division's strategic direction to assert and exercise responsibility for guaranteeing the quality of tests, examinations and qualifications
  - QCA's *Report on the performance of awarding bodies for general qualifications in 2006* (QCA/07/3095), which noted the number of recommendations about the quality of question papers and mark schemes resulting from scrutiny of individual specifications
  - the need to investigate the substance of the anecdotal comments made from time to time about the quality of GCSE and A level question papers
  - the need for an in-depth investigation into the training and guidance given by awarding bodies to their senior examiners
  - QCA's *Review of GCSE and GCE access arrangements from 2004 to 2006* (QCA/07/3419), which highlighted the need for an investigation into how awarding bodies address accessibility and modification of question papers.

## Objectives

1.4 The review had the following objectives:

- to monitor compliance with the requirements of the *GCSE, GCE, GNVQ and AEA code of practice (April 2007)* and *The statutory regulation of external qualifications (2004)*
- to find out awarding bodies' policies and procedures for setting question papers and mark schemes, and for training senior examiners
- to investigate the views about the quality of question papers held by various interest groups.

## Scope of review

1.5 The review was carried out from spring to December 2007 and focused on GCSE and A level examinations. It addressed question paper and mark scheme setting, and the training of chairs of examiners, chief examiners, principal examiners and revisers. The review focused on the three unitary awarding bodies in England – AQA, Edexcel and OCR – and included the following activities:

- analysing awarding body documentation relating to question paper and mark scheme setting and examiner training
- visiting awarding bodies to interview staff about question paper and mark scheme setting and examiner training
- observing a sample of awarding bodies' question paper evaluation committee and examiner training meetings
- commissioning a survey of teachers regarding their views about the quality of question papers
- researching views about the quality of question papers from a range of additional sources.

## Background

1.6 During the review, awarding bodies were preparing for the introduction of new A level specifications with first examinations of AS units in January 2009. This review deals with the existing GCSE and A level specifications, as well as with the new A level specifications.

- 1.7 As there has been a move across all three awarding bodies towards online marking, the review considered any issues affecting the setting of question papers that are marked online.
- 1.8 Thanks are given to AQA, Edexcel and OCR for giving access to their staff and procedures documentation during visits to awarding body offices and at meetings. Similarly thanks are given to Ipsos MORI for its work on the survey of teachers, and to the centres who took part in the survey, including teachers at Chipping Norton School, and Kesteven and Sleaford High School for trialling the survey questions.



## 2. Senior examiner and reviser training

### Regulatory requirements

- 2.1 Paragraph 10 of *The statutory regulation of external qualifications (2004)* requires awarding bodies to have procedures in place to ensure that their 'associates' have access to appropriate training and guidance. For this review 'associates' are taken to be chairs of examiners, chief examiners, principal examiners and revisers.
- 2.2 Paragraph 1.2 of the *GCSE, GCE, GNVQ and AEA code of practice (April 2007)* states that awarding bodies should provide appropriate training and support to ensure that their staff can carry out the functions set out in the code. This statement is followed by an outline of the responsibilities for each type of examiner.

### Awarding body policies and procedures

- 2.3 Each awarding body has a section or team that deals with examiner training. The team identifies training needs for individuals and groups, organises examiner training programmes and produces centralised training and guidance materials. Decisions on the focus of wide-reaching training are made by training managers or committee, with provision decided on according to need and the internal funding available.
- 2.4 The awarding bodies base much of their training provision on the experience already held by examining teams and staff by building on good practice and sharing good ideas. Any centralised organisation of training within awarding bodies tends to relate to newly appointed examiners, in particular those connected with any major introduction of new or revised qualifications.
- 2.5 Each awarding body identifies training needs by reviewing issues relating to individual subjects or specifications. It finds out whether there are similar training needs across subjects and qualifications and makes decisions on what training and guidance will be most appropriate. Training issues are less likely to arise for established specifications that have operated with the same assessment structure for a number of years than for new or revised specifications.
- 2.6 Reports on the performance of examiners, as required by paragraph 4.33 of the code of practice, provide evidence of any specific training need required to improve the work of individual examiners. In addition, Edexcel has implemented a self-assessment scheme where individual examiners judge their own performance annually and highlight any training needs or further guidance they require. Edexcel reported that this

examiner self-assessment scheme has proved a successful means of obtaining feedback from examiners and helped with the monitoring and evaluation of their performance. These various reporting mechanisms help recognise good work, identify possible examiners for promotion opportunities, address any training needs and prevent any re-use of failing examiners.

- 2.7 Where a principal examiner is selected for an established specification with an otherwise unchanged senior examining team, training is provided but varies in format between the awarding bodies. In all cases, training needs are identified from evidence gathered during the selection process (which often includes an exercise in drafting questions), and also reflect the level of prior experience relating to the examining role. The training for a newly appointed principal examiner who has never acted in a similar role is different to that for a newly appointed principal examiner who has worked in a similar capacity for another awarding body.
- 2.8 It is general practice across the awarding bodies for newly appointed senior examiners to shadow meetings before taking up their post. Where possible and where time allows, a senior examiner will attend QPECs, standardisation meetings and awarding meetings for his or her specification to observe the procedures involved. Alternatively, the examiner may attend these meetings for similar subject areas. This shadowing experience is backed up to a greater or lesser extent by a mentoring system. AQA has a formal mentoring system with supporting guidance booklet, while Edexcel and OCR have an informal system involving guidance from senior examining team members.
- 2.9 All awarding bodies consider training a compulsory part of a senior examiner's role. The nature of the training varies between the awarding bodies but covers similar content. OCR has centralised induction packs and holds compulsory one-day training meetings for newly appointed senior examiners across subject areas and, sometimes, across qualifications. AQA offers training via distance learning packs to each newly appointed senior examiner. Edexcel offers smaller training events to introduce senior examiners to centralised aspects of their work, which are much more focused on the needs of the individual, the appointed role and aspects of the particular specification.
- 2.10 Feedback and follow-up activities are carried out by each awarding body. After OCR training meetings, examiners are asked to complete feedback forms on the quality of the training and to identify any further guidance needed. At AQA and Edexcel, awarding body subject staff contact senior examiners following despatch of distance learning materials or after any training meeting to check whether any further guidance is needed.

- 2.11 There is a general trend across all three awarding bodies towards providing interactive remote learning packs online or on CD/DVD, which can be more directly focused on an individual's needs.
- 2.12 When new specifications are introduced, such as for A level recently, awarding bodies have tended to use this as an opportunity to provide a fresh start to training across all the senior examining team regardless of experience. The aim of such training has been to provide an induction for newly appointed staff, as well as an opportunity to revisit the key aspects of the role for more experienced senior examiners. These training events have allowed awarding bodies to address particular issues relating to the new specifications, as well as to explain any revisions to awarding body procedures.
- 2.13 OCR organised a centralised, generic programme of training meetings for the new A level specifications. Senior examiners were encouraged to attend the events within their subject teams but this was not always possible owing to availability of examiners. Such events allowed some interaction within subject groups but this was rather limited given the amount of information covered during the day. Edexcel held 'kickstart' meetings for each of the new A level specifications. These meetings were subject-specific and allowed much more training and planning within newly formed senior examining teams than at the OCR meetings. Revisers also attended the Edexcel meetings.
- 2.14 The aim in each case was for these introductory meetings to be held before the first question papers for the new A levels were drafted. However, at OCR, revisers for the new A levels were not appointed until most of the AS question papers had proceeded to QPEC. Consequently, interim revisers, who were existing revisers of legacy A levels, had covered the first set of QPEC meetings. There was no evidence though of these interim revisers having training on the new A level specifications. The training meetings for newly appointed revisers took place in March 2008, when most of the papers for the first assessment of the new AS units had been set.
- 2.15 AQA did not hold generic training meetings for senior examiners involved in the new A level specifications nor was there a general policy of holding subject-specific training meetings for senior examining teams. Instead, all senior examiners were sent updated distance learning packs associated with their role. Subject-specific meetings were held only for those subjects with a majority of inexperienced senior examiners and/or for those subjects with major changes from the legacy to the new A levels. The subject team decided whether they were necessary, and just over half of the subject areas

held such meetings. As with Edexcel and OCR, the meetings were a mixture of training and planning.

- 2.16 When new initiatives had been introduced, such as online marking, awarding bodies held training meetings for all examiners affected. Senior examiners were expected to attend workshop training meetings to gain hands-on experience of any new software packages and to resolve any queries. Training was supported by remote learning packages containing trial exercises in the use of the online marking software. AQA provide additional training materials on CD for examiners unable to access the training available online.
- 2.17 The training materials varied according to the medium of delivery. Distance training materials used as the norm by AQA were very detailed and contained close reference to appropriate research evidence on mark distributions and use of language. Where training meetings were held, at OCR and Edexcel, materials were less detailed but were supported by explanations and question-and-answer sessions led by the presenters. They tended to cover the operational aspects in more detail than achieved through distance learning packs. Smaller meetings allowed materials to be much more focused on the specifications and any specific issues for the subject.
- 2.18 One important aspect of the question paper setting process is showing that question papers address the required assessment objectives using a specification or assessment grid. The distance learning materials provided by AQA included examples of assessment grids. OCR's centralised training meetings gave guidance on how to produce an assessment grid, and included an exercise where examiners were asked to work in subject teams, and review their specification grids against those used in other subjects. The guidance document that Edexcel provided to examiners included a generic assessment grid, and the completion of assessment grids was discussed at kickstart meetings.
- 2.19 Guidance on how to address differentiation and levels of demand within a question paper was less evident in this training. Principal examiners tended to be given advice on where within the range of available marks the key judgemental grade boundaries should be targeted. In addition, AQA provided a research paper on reasons for regression and ways to improve the spread of marks. (This paper is sent routinely to senior examiners on appointment, along with other distance learning packs, and has recently been reissued to senior examiners for the new A level specifications.) However, issues affecting demand often were not addressed through awarding body training meetings or materials, and usually awareness of them is developed through acting in the senior examining role and the experience of leading an examination.

- 2.20 Senior examiners and, where present, revisers were given detailed explanations of the revised assessment objectives and the implications of any changes for setting question papers. Materials from the subject-specific planning and training meeting for the new Edexcel A level geography specification, and from the new AQA A level biology and human biology meeting, demonstrated detailed guidance on the targeting of assessment objectives in questions.

## **Conclusion**

- 2.21 The review found that awarding bodies fulfil the requirements of the code of practice and the statutory regulations with regard to the training of senior examiners. They provide a range of training according to need, for example where examiners are new to post, where there are changes to specifications and where new awarding body procedures are introduced.
- 2.22 The timing and nature of training for revisers varied between awarding bodies, particularly with regard to new specifications. However, QCA is satisfied that awarding bodies have provided appropriate training for revisers.
- 2.23 The content of training is detailed and is backed up by support within subject teams. The mixture of subject-specific training and planning meetings for new specifications was good. The targeting of assessment objectives was addressed well in the materials from subject-specific training and planning meetings for the new A level subjects. Some guidance was provided on ensuring that question papers have an appropriate range of demand, but this tends to be developed through examining experience, rather than through training meetings and materials.

## 3. The question paper setting and production process

### Regulatory requirements

- 3.1 For the purpose of this review, the main regulatory requirements for setting question papers and mark schemes are taken from the *GCSE, GCE, GNVQ and AEA code of practice (April 2007)*. Section 3 of the code of practice sets out the requirements for the key elements of the question paper drafting and approval process and the responsibilities of senior examiners. It outlines specific requirements to ensure that the question papers and mark schemes meet assessment criteria and are of a consistently high quality. Section 1 of the code of practice describes the overall responsibilities of awarding bodies and examiners, including some that relate directly to setting question papers and mark schemes.
- 3.2 The code of practice requirements do not extend to the logistical aspects of question paper production, such as typesetting and printing, which are governed by an awarding body's management structure and organisational operations.

### Awarding body policies and procedures

- 3.3 Approximately 21.1 million A level and GCSE question papers were distributed by the three unitary awarding bodies for the summer 2007 examination series. Around 7.3 million were distributed for A level and 13.8 million for GCSE. In addition to its huge scale, this process has fixed production dates by which the final approved and printed question papers must be completed so that they are available for candidates on the day of the examination.
- 3.4 In addition to the question papers for the main summer examination series, awarding bodies also have question papers in various states of production, from drafting to printing, for examination series in January, March and November within any one year, for future years' examinations and for other types of qualifications they offer. Some question papers have to be accompanied by other materials such as source booklets, formula sheets and practical equipment lists.
- 3.5 The scale of this operation requires complex managerial procedures and close control mechanisms to ensure that question papers are produced to schedule and to the required quality. Each awarding body has different operational arrangements for

producing question papers while ensuring that the requirements of the code of practice are met.

- 3.6 The main stages of the question paper production process are outlined in Appendix 1 of this report. Across the awarding bodies, the time period from commissioning the writing of a question paper until approval for print ranges from 55 to 71 weeks.
- 3.7 The code of practice requires mark schemes to be drafted at the same time as question papers. However, the mark scheme is not finalised until the examiner standardisation meeting to take into account examiners' comments from their preliminary marking of examination scripts about how candidates have tackled the question paper. This review looks at the development of mark schemes only up to the stage when they are considered by awarding body scrutineers.
- 3.8 Each of the three unitary awarding bodies has a central team to manage the overall question paper production process and ensure that each stage of it is completed to time. These members of staff work closely with staff responsible for the different subjects, with the latter having day-to-day contact with the senior examiners responsible for drafting, reviewing and checking question papers and mark schemes.
- 3.9 All three awarding bodies, through their heads of question paper production, look for ways to improve processes year on year and to ensure quality. Where new processes are introduced, timelines and procedures have been adapted accordingly. For example, papers that are marked online are checked for scanning issues. Each awarding body has a system for identifying and measuring areas of risk, which is monitored with action taken as appropriate.
- 3.10 AQA and OCR have procedures manuals as guidance for staff. Edexcel produces a detailed process flowchart for staff showing the different production stages, details of inputs, activities and outputs. All three awarding bodies have staff management structures with clear assignment of responsibilities to each post holder.
- 3.11 Awarding bodies outsource different parts of the question paper production process to varying degrees. Examples of outsourced activities include typesetting and printing.
- 3.12 Each awarding body has a set of procedures to keep question papers and mark schemes secure throughout the drafting and production process. These procedures were thorough and rigorously monitored. In the rare cases where security breaches occur, action is taken on a case-by-case basis with follow-up work aimed at minimising future risks of a similar nature.

## **Conclusion**

3.13 The question paper production process is complex, multi-layered, time-focused and vast. Awarding bodies have different but equally effective ways of managing the question paper production process, while ensuring that the regulatory requirements are met, including systems to ensure that it takes place within required timescales and that risks are minimised.



## 4. From commissioning to QPEC meeting

### Regulatory requirements

- 4.1 The regulatory requirements regarding the drafting of question papers and mark schemes before the QPEC meeting are described in paragraphs 3.1 to 3.6 of the code of practice. They relate mainly to:
- the roles of the chief examiner and principal examiner in ensuring the quality of the draft question paper
  - issues that must be addressed when drafting a question paper
  - the role of the reviser in reviewing the draft question paper
  - how the draft question paper should be revised before the QPEC meeting
  - procedures to be followed if the security of a draft question paper is breached.

### Awarding body policies and procedures

- 4.2 Each question paper and mark scheme is drafted by a principal examiner (or for a minority of examinations with, for example a large number of optional routes, a question paper setter). At each awarding body, these drafts are completed using an approved template.
- 4.3 The amount of time principal examiners are given to draft question papers and mark schemes varies between awarding bodies and across subjects within awarding bodies. For OCR it is up to seven and a half months, for Edexcel up to four months and for AQA six weeks on average.
- 4.4 Each awarding body produces guidance to assist principal examiners in drafting question papers and mark schemes. In each case the guidance addresses issues covered in the relevant sections of the code of practice, though there is some variation between the awarding bodies in terms of its content and format. The OCR guidance is provided to examiners electronically on CD, whereas that for AQA and Edexcel is provided as hard copy. The AQA and OCR guidance largely follows the wording of the code of practice, but for Edexcel this wording is often rephrased and illustrative examples are also provided. The guidance documentation is reviewed annually by AQA and OCR, and updated as required by Edexcel.
- 4.5 Edexcel and OCR issue their guidance to all principal examiners each year. However, AQA issue their guidance only to those who are new to the process, and not to those

being re-commissioned (though they may receive training regarding specific issues if required).

- 4.6 QCA has accredited new A level specifications for first teaching in autumn 2008, and this review considered the guidance provided to examiners setting question papers for these. The extent to which awarding bodies provided supplementary guidance to examiners on drafting question papers and mark schemes for the new specifications varied according to the extent to which senior examiners had been involved in this process. AQA noted that many principal examiners had been involved in the specification development process, were already aware of key issues and did not necessarily require any specific further guidance. This was not necessarily the case at Edexcel and OCR. (At Edexcel the principal examiner appointed was not always the same individual who had produced the unit content and/or the sample assessment materials.) Consequently, these awarding bodies organised meetings to discuss the requirements of the new specifications and produce subject-specific guidance materials. Edexcel stated that specimen assessment materials are provided routinely to principal examiners drafting question papers for these specifications.
- 4.7 It is anticipated that in drafting question papers and mark schemes, awarding bodies will make appropriate use of information about candidates' performance in previous examination series. At Edexcel the awarding body officer is responsible for this, whereas at AQA and OCR it is the chair of examiners.
- 4.8 For qualifications marked online, each awarding body indicated that it made use of the item-level data from previous series in setting question papers. AQA, Edexcel and OCR all said that this information is considered at QPEC meetings, while for OCR it is also considered by principal examiners before the QPEC, so that any issues can be addressed in advance of the meeting.
- 4.9 For qualifications marked traditionally, two different forms of information regarding previous series were used. AQA carried out research into how a question paper had performed, if required, and this could then be considered by the QPEC. At OCR the chair of examiners ensured that any relevant information was fed into the question paper setting process, but OCR did not specify when this would occur.
- 4.10 Each draft question paper and mark scheme produced by the principal examiner is reviewed by the reviser(s). At OCR there are normally two revisers, whereas for the other two awarding bodies this depends on the specification structure, being between one and three at Edexcel, and one or more at AQA. At OCR both revisers comment on each question paper in the specification. At Edexcel it is normally the case that each

reviser comments on each question paper, but this depends on the specification structure. At AQA each question paper is assigned to one reviser for comment.

- 4.11 The amount of time revisers are given to review draft question papers and mark schemes varies between the awarding bodies. For AQA it is four weeks, for Edexcel three weeks and for OCR two weeks.
- 4.12 At each awarding body, the reviser has a checklist of issues to consider in reviewing the draft question paper and mark scheme. The checklist addresses the types of issues covered in the relevant sections of the code of practice with regard to questions, rubrics, specification coverage and the question paper overall. The Edexcel and OCR checklists also address the mark scheme, but the AQA checklist does not. The AQA guidance document specifies the requirements of mark schemes, and is provided to revisers. AQA and OCR also provide some additional guidance to revisers with the checklist.
- 4.13 At Edexcel the chief examiner reviews the draft materials before they are considered by the reviser (and the chair of examiners reviews them if the chief examiner has drafted them). At each awarding body, it is not normally the case that another person reviews the draft materials at the same time as the reviser. However, AQA said that this might happen in certain circumstances (for example, the chair of examiners might review draft materials for new specifications). Also, for a number of Edexcel's papers, a language specialist or modifier will review the draft materials at the same time as the reviser.
- 4.14 At each awarding body, the reviser's comments are considered by the principal examiner, who then decides what changes to make to the draft question paper and mark scheme in the light of these. However, there is some variation between the awarding bodies in the degree to which the principal examiner is responsible for making this judgement. At OCR it is largely the responsibility of the principal examiner, whereas at Edexcel the principal examiner must consult with the chief examiner, and at AQA the chief examiner may contribute if necessary. The amended question paper and mark scheme are then reviewed by the QPEC.

## Conclusion

- 4.15 Awarding body procedures for drafting and revising question papers and mark schemes for consideration at QPEC meetings are judged largely as being sound and in line with regulatory requirements. Appropriate guidance was provided to examiners drafting papers for the new A level specifications. Awarding bodies also made use of information from previous examination series to feed into the development of new

question papers. Some variation is evident in awarding body practice, but it is appropriate in each case.

- 4.16 A potential area for development is the way in which draft question papers and mark schemes are reviewed. It was judged to be good practice where more than one reviser reviewed the draft question paper and mark scheme. As the revisers' comments are intended to give an objective view of the draft materials, it was also judged to be good practice where someone other than the principal examiner considered these comments before the QPEC meeting.

## 5. QPEC meetings

### Regulatory requirements

- 5.1 Paragraphs 3.7 to 3.12 of the code of practice outline the regulatory requirements for holding a QPEC meeting, including details of the committee membership and the tasks to be covered at the meeting to ensure the quality of question papers and mark schemes.

### Awarding body policies and procedures

- 5.2 As part of this review, QCA attended two pre-QPEC meetings (by AQA) and 15 QPEC meetings (four by AQA, six by Edexcel and five by OCR) for GCSE and A level specifications in the period from September to December 2007. The sample of subjects was taken from those covered by the survey of teachers (referred to in section 8 of this report). Details of the meetings observed are given in Appendix 2.
- 5.3 In contrast to awarding meetings, where the code of practice stipulates that all the principal examiners and principal moderators for a specification must be present, a sub-set of the senior examining team attend QPEC meetings. The code of practice requires the QPEC to consist of the principal examiner for the question paper being considered, together with the chair of examiners, chief examiner and reviser(s). The QPEC must also include one overlap member from the senior examining team for another specification in the subject (if the awarding body offers more than one specification in the subject area) and at least one member with expertise in Welsh/Irish (Gaeilge)-medium issues (if the specification is offered in these languages). In cases where the principal examiner is also the chief examiner, this can lead to relatively small QPECs involving only three senior examiners. However, in practice, most QPECs have more members than those required as a minimum with either more than one principal examiner or more than one reviser present and, in the case of AQA, including subject advisers from outside the examining team. In addition, language modifiers, who were teachers of deaf and hearing-impaired candidates, were present at some Edexcel meetings observed during this review to advise on the wording and accessibility of non-specialist language within questions.
- 5.4 Overall, the QPEC meetings observed were well managed, with good support from awarding body officers. QPEC members worked hard and were dedicated to ensuring that question papers and mark schemes were of high quality.

- 5.5 The QPEC meetings took place between 14 and 18 months in advance of the question papers being taken by candidates. For A level specifications where examinations are sat in January and June, the QPECs considered question papers for both examination series in the same year. QPECs addressed all of the question papers for a specification at the same meeting unless this was impractical.
- 5.6 The question papers presented at QPEC meetings had been revised by principal examiners in the light of comments received from revisers. Where comments had been received from more than one person (usually where there was more than one reviser or where comments had been received from other QPEC members) it was evident that this had allowed a greater refinement of the papers in advance of the QPEC meeting and led to fewer amendments being made during the meeting than in the few cases where there was only one reviser.
- 5.7 Generally speaking, awarding bodies do not convene formal meetings before the QPEC meeting to consider draft questions or to plan questions. Where one such meeting for GCSE English had been held, there was less rewording of questions, more overall evaluation of question papers and better time management at the subsequent QPEC meeting. Similarly a pre-QPEC meeting observed for GCSE French enabled consideration of potential questions and prevented the testing of the same content in all four skills at an early stage. A draft A level biology question paper written by a new principal examiner was considered at the end of the QPEC meeting for another question paper in the same specification. This allowed the principal examiner to revise the paper before the QPEC meeting for this paper, which was held at a later date.
- 5.8 In general, appropriate materials were presented at QPEC meetings. These included draft question papers and mark schemes revised by the principal examiners, revisers' comments and specification grids.
- 5.9 Despite the work carried out in advance of QPEC meetings to revise draft question papers, many questions needed to be reworded to a lesser or greater degree with some questions completely rewritten. Questions were carefully considered to ensure accessibility, an appropriate level of demand and differentiation, and to confirm that the subject content and assessment objective coverage were appropriate. Rejected questions were usually rewritten by the relevant principal examiner during a break or outside the business of the main meeting and then considered before the meeting finished or prepared for consideration at a later QPEC meeting.
- 5.10 Comparison was made at QPEC meetings to questions covered in past examinations and, for new specifications, questions contained in the specimen assessment material.

At some meetings, detailed statistical information was presented by the chairs of examiners showing how questions and question papers had performed in the summer 2007 examinations. This was used to help inform decisions about the papers under consideration at the meetings.

- 5.11 QPECs considered the level of demand and differentiation of questions through various means. For the structured mathematics papers, questions were targeted at the key grades according to grade descriptions published in specifications. For others, questions were classified in terms of low, middle and high level of demand or in more general terms. In most cases, however, little reference was observed to level of demand in comparison with the published grade descriptions and performance descriptors.
- 5.12 Specification grids showing which assessment objectives were addressed by each question were presented at QPECs. These provided a means of checking that question papers covered the assessment objectives in the required proportions. At some meetings, there were detailed checks to make sure that any amendments to questions did not alter the assessment objective coverage. However, this did not happen at all of the meetings observed.
- 5.13 Comparability between papers was addressed through a variety of means, including using the same questions to target common grades across tiered GCSE papers, setting questions with similar stems for optional content areas, and referring issues to the overlap committee representative where more than one specification was offered in a subject.
- 5.14 In comparison with papers for QPEC meetings for more established specifications, more questions were amended at QPEC meetings for new specifications (new A levels and, to a lesser extent, new GCSE mathematics). At two QPEC meetings for new A level examinations, principal examiners had not appropriately targeted the assessment objectives leading to amendments to questions and changes in mark allocations. The mark schemes for both papers were judged by the respective committees to require further work to ensure adequate discrimination and, in both cases, were revised outside the meeting.
- 5.15 The QPEC considered mark schemes and, in particular, what level of response was expected of candidates for the number of marks allocated. They also considered the appropriateness of the mark schemes, taking into account how papers would be marked, for example if the paper was to be marked online or by different types of markers, such as expert and non-expert.

- 5.16 The accessibility of papers was considered to varying degrees at QPEC meetings. In all cases, accessibility according to ability was fully explored. Accessibility for hearing and visually-impaired candidates was considered in great detail in some meetings but not at all in others. Practice varied even within an awarding body (particularly Edexcel). In two Edexcel meetings observed, a language modifier who was a teacher of the deaf attended. The modifier gave helpful advice on the wording and rewording of questions to ensure that they were accessible but did not compromise the use of subject-specific technical terms. However, this slowed down the proceedings as the input was made after the drafting stage. At one AQA meeting, a written report from a language modifier had been presented to the QPEC and, while this provided helpful advice, it did not allow the modifier to make comments on questions reworded at the meeting. At all OCR meetings, much consideration was focused on the use of source rather than stimulus material, with the latter being removed from question papers if not required for the assessment or if it made questions less accessible for some candidates.

## **Conclusion**

- 5.17 All the QPEC meetings QCA observed were conducted in a professional manner, and most covered the requirements of the code of practice, aiming to develop question papers that were of high quality. It should be noted, though, that the sample of meetings QCA observed is relatively small for the number of examinations offered.
- 5.18 It was clear from the meetings observed that where collective pre-consideration of draft question papers occurred at an early stage, either in the form of a pre-QPEC meeting or through written feedback, question papers and mark schemes reached the QPEC meeting in a more refined state than where this had not taken place. More amendments were made to questions at QPEC meetings for new specifications than at those for established specifications.



## 6. From QPEC meeting to printing

### Regulatory requirements

6.1 The regulatory requirements for finalising question papers and mark schemes after the QPEC meeting are described in paragraphs 3.13 to 3.17 of the code of practice. They relate mainly to:

- the role of the scrutineer in checking that the question paper is fair and accurate
- procedures to be followed when the QPEC makes significant changes to the question paper
- procedures for approving question papers
- procedures to be followed when a breach of awarding body policy has occurred.

### Awarding body policies and procedures

6.2 For each awarding body, question papers that do not require any amendment after the QPEC meeting are typeset, and then checked by awarding body staff and senior examiners. AQA and Edexcel also have the question paper checked by an independent proof-reader.

6.3 Where changes to the draft question paper and mark scheme have been agreed at the QPEC meeting, these are made by the principal examiner. The amount of time the principal examiner is given to do this varies slightly between the awarding bodies: for AQA it is seven weeks, for Edexcel up to six weeks and for OCR four weeks. Any changes made to the question paper and mark scheme are then checked. AQA and Edexcel staff check any minor changes, but a senior examiner checks more significant changes, while at OCR all changes are checked by senior examiners. The question paper is then typeset as described above.

6.4 The scrutineer checks the typeset question paper and mark scheme. Typically, there is one scrutineer for each specification, who considers all the question papers. The code of practice indicates that owing to the nature of the task, the scrutineer should not have been involved previously in setting the question paper.

6.5 The amount of time the scrutineer is given to check the question paper and mark scheme varies between the awarding bodies. For AQA it is five weeks, and for both Edexcel and OCR four weeks.

- 6.6 For each awarding body, the scrutineer completes a short report on the question paper and mark scheme using a template. The template addresses the requirements of the relevant sections of the code of practice: that it must be possible to answer question papers in the time allowed, that papers must be free from errors, and that mark schemes must be in line with question papers. However, for two awarding bodies, further issues are addressed – that question papers are clear (OCR) and that spacing in answer booklets is appropriate (Edexcel).
- 6.7 The process for finalising question papers and mark schemes varies across the awarding bodies. At OCR the scrutineer's report is considered by the chair of examiners, but at AQA and Edexcel this is done by a range of senior examiners and the awarding body officer. Edexcel carries out a further independent check by a proof-reader after the scrutineer's check. At AQA and Edexcel, several senior examiners consider finalised versions of the question paper and mark scheme, but at OCR this is done only by the chief examiner. At AQA and OCR, the chair of examiners gives final approval of the question paper, but at Edexcel this is done by a range of senior examiners (including the chair of examiners) and the awarding body officer.
- 6.8 Each awarding body reviews a sample of question papers after advance printing. Where a problem is found, awarding bodies either reprint the question paper or issue an erratum notice, depending on the scale of the problem and the time available.

### **Conclusion**

- 6.9 Awarding body procedures for checking question papers and mark schemes after QPEC meetings and for producing final versions are judged largely to be robust and in line with regulatory requirements. Although some variation is evident in awarding body practice, it is appropriate in each case.

## 7. Making question papers accessible

### Regulatory requirements

- 7.1 *The statutory regulation of external qualifications (2004)* and the *GCSE, GCE, GNVQ and AEA code of practice (April 2007)* require that question papers are accessible to candidates with particular requirements.
- 7.2 Paragraph 14 of the statutory regulations and paragraph 7.1 of the code of practice require awarding bodies to consider accessibility issues when drafting papers to minimise the need for adjustments for candidates with particular requirements. This is a guiding principle for question paper setting.
- 7.3 Paragraph 15 of the statutory regulations and paragraph 7.5 of the code of practice require awarding bodies to make reasonable adjustments for candidates with particular requirements, with the exception of adjustments that would compromise an assessment or competence standard. This requirement is made a legal right by Section 15 of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 2005, which contains a new Chapter 2A (Sections 31AA to 31AF) in Part 4 of the DDA 1995, extending the duty of disability equality to general qualifications as of 1 September 2007.
- 7.4 Paragraph 16 of the statutory regulations and paragraph 7.7 of the code of practice require awarding bodies to ensure that reasonable adjustments do not invalidate assessment requirements, reflect the needs of candidates, do not offer an unfair advantage to any candidates, maintain the relevance, reliability and comparability of the assessment and take account of legislation.

### Awarding body policies and procedures

- 7.5 Awarding bodies use three key strategies to ensure that question papers are suitable for the needs of candidates with particular requirements. First, they give training to principal examiners on accessibility issues. Secondly, two awarding bodies (AQA and Edexcel) invite input from language modifiers before or at QPEC meetings. Thirdly, after papers are passed for print, all three awarding bodies produce modified papers to meet the needs of particular candidates.

### Guidance and training to question paper setters

- 7.6 All three awarding bodies use *Fair access by design*, a document published by the regulators in October 2005, as their primary guidance document for producing

accessible papers. It sets out general principles and offers detailed guidance for producing specifications, question papers and mark schemes that are accessible to a wide range of candidates and are free from bias. All three awarding bodies give their principal examiners a copy of *Fair access by design* when they are commissioned to write a question paper.

- 7.7 In addition, awarding bodies provide supplementary guidance on accessibility issues through their respective training programmes. This guidance supports training on the general issue of appropriate wording of questions and addresses matters such as readability and accessibility for candidates across the target ability range. All awarding bodies explain to examiners the legal requirements regarding accessibility under the DDA. Tips, advice and instructions on how to eliminate bias are explored to a greater extent in face-to-face training meetings, rather than through written guidance. In particular, the type of modification required to visual source material and the need to move away from using non-essential visual prompts were explained better and more fully in face-to-face meetings.

### **Input from language modifiers for deaf and hearing-impaired candidates**

- 7.8 AQA and Edexcel invite language modifiers to give input on question papers before QPEC meetings. These modifiers are teachers of the deaf, mostly recruited through the British Association of Teachers of the Deaf (BATOD). They provide input at a pre-QPEC stage to reduce the need for later modification of the paper by ensuring that it is suitable for deaf and hearing-impaired candidates. Their comments are also intended to ensure that papers are accessible to other candidates with speech and language difficulties, though awarding bodies did not report using language modifiers other than those for deaf candidates. At Edexcel, modifiers' comments are submitted either by attendance at the QPEC meeting or, where the modifier cannot attend, by a report to the meeting. At AQA, modifiers submit written reports to the QPECs but do not attend the meetings. Modifier input at a pre-QPEC stage is more widespread in those subjects for which centres commonly request modified papers. OCR does not currently use modifiers at a pre-QPEC stage but intends to do so in the future.
- 7.9 AQA and Edexcel use the same pool of modifiers, and both use modifiers with subject knowledge of the papers being considered wherever possible. Modifiers are instructed that technical language must not be altered. Both awarding bodies supply the modifier with the same drafts of question papers and mark schemes as are sent to the QPEC.

- 7.10 QCA's *Review of GCSE and GCE access arrangements from 2004 to 2006* (QCA/07/3419) identified a potential shortage of language modifiers for deaf and hearing-impaired candidates and all three awarding bodies confirmed that this is the case. The effect of this has been to prevent a greater input from modifiers at pre-QPEC stage and to hinder their attendance at meetings. All three awarding bodies have programmes planned or under way to recruit and train additional language modifiers for deaf and hearing-impaired candidates. It is unclear whether this will include language modifiers for candidates with other speech and language difficulties.

### **Modification of question papers for candidates with particular requirements**

- 7.11 The Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ)<sup>1</sup> produces a common set of regulations and guidance relating to candidates who are eligible for adjustments in examinations. These regulations include the following permitted modifications to question papers:
- modified enlarged A4 papers with 18-point bold text for visually-impaired candidates
  - modified enlarged A3 papers with 24-point bold text for visually-impaired candidates
  - unmodified, enlarged A3 papers for visually-impaired candidates
  - Braille question papers for visually-impaired candidates
  - tactile version of diagrams for visually-impaired candidates
  - modified language papers for hearing-impaired candidates.
- 7.12 The modification of question papers does not begin until the wording of the unmodified papers has been approved. It is common practice for awarding bodies to begin to modify papers before requests are received in high entry subjects that historically attract applications for modified papers. For other subjects, modifications are made to question papers only if a request for a certain modification is received from a centre.
- 7.13 Different types of modifications are made in different ways:
- Typographical modifications for visually-impaired candidates are carried out by awarding bodies' usual typesetters. AQA, Edexcel and OCR issue their typesetters

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<sup>1</sup> The JCQ includes AQA, Edexcel and OCR within its membership.

with the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) document *Best practice guidance for the modification and production of examination papers for candidates with a visual impairment* for use in preparing these papers.

- Unmodified, enlarged A3 papers are produced following the standard production practices used for other papers. Where centres have not requested these in time, they may, with permission, produce them using photocopiers.
- Braille papers are produced by specialist modifiers for the visually-impaired. Diagrams and pictures in question papers are classified by the principal examiner as either source or stimulus material. Source material is converted into tactile diagrams while stimulus material is replaced by a line of descriptive text.
- Modified language papers are produced by specialist language modifiers with experience of teaching the hearing impaired. These modifiers are recruited through BATOD. Where language modifiers have participated in the question paper before or at QPEC meetings, this type of modification is not necessary.

- 7.14 Currently, the JCQ is funding a project to train more modifiers of papers for visually-impaired candidates in collaboration with the RNIB.
- 7.15 Once papers have been modified for deaf and hearing-impaired candidates, awarding bodies check them to make sure that none of the amendments compromise the assessment standard. If such amendments are identified, the awarding body will reject them and invite the modifier to submit an alternative. Different members of staff are responsible for checking in each of the awarding bodies. At OCR, it is standard practice for language modified papers to be sent for checking to the principal examiner. At AQA and Edexcel, awarding body staff check language modified papers and refer these to the principal examiner only where there is a concern that the assessment standard has been compromised.

## Conclusion

- 7.16 Awarding bodies aim to address the regulatory requirement to consider accessibility when drafting question papers through their various forms of training and guidance, including the document *Fair access by design*.
- 7.17 The involvement of language modifiers for deaf and hearing-impaired candidates during the drafting process and before final approval of unmodified papers is of great value. Input at this early stage reduces the need to amend the wording of questions after the unmodified question paper has been approved. At present, only language modifiers for deaf and hearing-impaired candidates contribute in this way. However, it

is of concern that, while awarding bodies are attempting to make greater use of early advice from language modifiers, the current shortage of modifiers means that not all question papers benefit from this input.

- 7.18 Once question papers have been approved, awarding bodies have procedures in place to modify them in various required formats and to provide reasonable adjustments to candidates with particular requirements. However, there is concern that in some cases amendments to the language of question papers are not checked in the first instance by a senior examiner with subject knowledge.

## 8. Views about the quality of question papers

### Background

- 8.1 In recent years, the quality of GCSE and A level examinations has been the subject of much debate. For example, there has been a consistent tendency for the percentage of candidates achieving grades in these qualifications to increase slightly each examination session. Some argue that this indicates that the standard of assessment in these qualifications is declining. Others argue that this is owing to improved teaching techniques for the qualifications or that the basic function of the qualifications has changed.
- 8.2 A key part of QCA's work on GCSE and A level examinations, carried out every year, involves considering the quality of the question papers for a range of subjects. The work is completed by subject experts, and typically comprises:
- scrutinising the question papers offered by one awarding body in a given examination session, or
  - comparing the question papers offered by different awarding bodies and across different examination sessions.
- 8.3 To support these ongoing programmes of work, and owing to the importance of quality in GCSE and A level examinations, last year QCA initiated several discrete projects focusing specifically on different aspects of this issue. In addition to this review, these addressed:
- the predictability of question papers in GCSE and A level subjects
  - setting effective question papers at GCSE
  - concerns from teachers relating to quality of marking.
- 8.4 As well as considering the process through which GCSE and A level question papers are set, this review researched opinions from a range of sources regarding their quality. QCA wished to canvass and collate views based on actual experience of the question papers rather than on perceptions of them derived from other sources. To this end, it addressed the groups actively familiar with them – teachers and students. However, it should be noted that the information reported here is based on views – albeit informed views – and not on other more 'objective' methods, such as technical analysis of the question papers themselves (which forms part of the work mentioned previously that QCA conducts in this area). Nevertheless, the views expressed may



give some indication of the degree to which the processes described previously in this report are producing high-quality question papers that are fit for their purpose.

## Evidence

8.5 In spring 2007 QCA commissioned Ipsos MORI to conduct a survey of teachers' views regarding the quality of GCSE and A level question papers.

8.6 Using a questionnaire developed with QCA, Ipsos MORI interviewed 401 teachers by telephone. The interviews were focused on the summer 2007 question papers, and interviewees were required to have prepared candidates for this examination session for the subject in question. Forty interviews were completed for each subject.<sup>2</sup> The subjects selected were those with high candidate entry, representing a range of assessment types, and were as follows:

- GCSE English or English literature
- GCSE mathematics
- GCSE history
- GCSE French, German or Spanish
- AS or A level English language, English language and literature or English literature
- AS or A level mathematics
- AS or A level biology
- AS or A level psychology
- AS or A level geography
- AS or A level French, German or Spanish.

8.7 For A level subjects the interviewees were required to respond on either the AS or A2 question papers, and for GCSE subjects on the question papers for a particular tier. The interviewees were from a random sample of centres in England, which was selected by Ipsos MORI, and was representative of national trends in terms of type, size and geographical location. A maximum of two interviews (in different subjects)

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<sup>2</sup> GCSE mathematics was an exception to this, with 41 interviews completed.

was completed per centre. Of the interviewees, 98 per cent responded regarding question papers offered by AQA, Edexcel or OCR.

- 8.8 Overall, the teachers interviewed were very positive about the quality of GCSE and A level question papers. None of the subgroups interviewed, such as teachers of particular subjects, was consistently negative, and those with concerns represented a small, albeit important, minority.
- 8.9 The teachers interviewed were particularly satisfied with the various aspects of question paper structure. Some 96 per cent of respondents agreed that the general instructions in question papers were clear, while similar proportions agreed that the mark allocations for questions were suitable (95 per cent) and that these were in line with what candidates had to do (95 per cent). Continuing this positive trend, teachers agreed that the papers included a range of question types appropriate to the subject (94 per cent) and that the requirements of questions were clear (92 per cent). Just under nine in ten of those interviewed (88 per cent) felt that the question papers were presented in a way that was helpful to candidates, while a similar proportion (86 per cent) felt that the papers covered the specification content appropriately. Teachers were slightly less positive about the amount of time given for candidates to complete the papers, but as just over eight in ten (81 per cent) of them felt that the time given was appropriate, this was still an encouraging response. Of those who disagreed, more were concerned that candidates did not have enough time than felt that the time given was too generous.
- 8.10 More than eight in ten (81 per cent) of the teachers interviewed felt that the question papers were appropriately demanding for the qualification and level. Of those who disagreed with this, a similar proportion felt that the papers were not demanding enough (8 per cent) as felt they were too demanding (9 per cent). Regarding the accessibility of question papers to students of different abilities, 85 per cent of teachers agreed that they were sufficiently challenging for more able students. Half of the teachers (53 per cent) also felt that the question papers were sufficiently accessible to less able students, although 29 per cent of them disagreed that this was the case and the remaining 13 per cent were undecided on this matter. The majority of teachers (87 per cent) felt that the level of guidance in questions was appropriate, while similar proportions of teachers felt that there was either too little guidance (6 per cent) or too much (5 per cent). Some 17 per cent of teachers believed that the papers had discriminated on grounds other than ability in the subject, with the main type of discrimination suggested being that they required knowledge of issues not related directly to the subject.

- 8.11 Of the teachers responding regarding papers that included optional questions, 81 per cent believed that these were comparably demanding to each other. Less than half believed that they required different skills (47 per cent) and even fewer (36 per cent) that candidates needed different knowledge to complete different optional questions. Seven in ten (70 per cent) teachers believed that the 2007 question papers were comparably demanding to those from 2006. The significant minority who disagreed that this was the case were more likely to think that the 2007 papers were more demanding than those from 2006 (14 per cent) than they were to think that they were less demanding (11 per cent). Only half of the teachers interviewed (51 per cent) had seen the 2007 question papers for a subject similar or related to the one for which they were responding, and only 43 per cent expressed a view on comparability between the papers. Of the teachers expressing a view, 55 per cent felt that the question papers for their subject were more demanding than those of similar or related subjects, while 40 per cent believed the papers were comparable, and only a small minority (5 per cent) thought their subject's papers were less demanding.
- 8.12 The interviews concluded with questions regarding the respondent's overall confidence in GCSE and A level examinations. The teachers were similarly confident in the qualification overall (88 per cent) and in the question papers for their selected subject (87 per cent). However, they were less confident in the wider systems, with just over seven in ten (71 per cent) expressing confidence for the A level system overall and fewer (65 per cent) expressing confidence in the GCSE system. It should be noted, that these levels of confidence were comparable to those reported from a survey conducted for QCA by Ipsos MORI in autumn 2006.<sup>3</sup> In addition, levels of confidence increased significantly where the teacher was commenting on the qualification that the rest of their interview had addressed (from 71 per cent to 85 per cent for A level and from 65 per cent to 74 per cent for GCSE).
- 8.13 Another source of evidence QCA considered regarding teachers' views of question papers was the correspondence about the subjects addressed in the survey that was received from centres by AQA, Edexcel and OCR in the period from mid-May to mid-July 2007.

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<sup>3</sup> Since 2003, Ipsos MORI has conducted a series of surveys on behalf of QCA regarding *GCSEs and A level: the experiences of teachers, students, parents and the general public*. In the most recent of these surveys, conducted in autumn 2007, the levels of confidence reported had increased slightly for A level, and by a greater margin for GCSE. ([www.qca.org.uk/qca\\_15732.aspx](http://www.qca.org.uk/qca_15732.aspx))

- 8.14 There are 59 specifications for the 10 qualifications listed in paragraph 8.6. For over half (54 per cent) of these specifications, awarding bodies received no correspondence in the period, suggesting that teachers had no significant concerns.
- 8.15 For the remaining specifications, 320 items of correspondence were received in total. Generally, there were about three items of correspondence per specification, concerned predominantly with features which teachers felt had disadvantaged candidates. In such cases, teachers tended to suggest that the issues should be addressed at awarding. The main concerns noted were regarding:
- confusing or misleading questions
  - papers that were not sufficiently accessible to less able candidates
  - papers that did not present sufficient challenge to more able candidates
  - papers with confusing layout
  - questions that required knowledge outside the specification content.
- 8.16 However, there were problems with two of the specifications in the summer 2007 examination session, and the correspondence about these accounted for 75 per cent of that received in total.
- 8.17 Although this evidence from centre correspondence gives some indication of the degree to which centres tend to have concerns about question papers, it does not necessarily illustrate their degree of satisfaction. To contextualise the findings, QCA analysed centres' views regarding the question papers for a particular specification, OCR A level mathematics (MEI).
- 8.18 For this specification, the project group ('Mathematics in education and industry') conducts a survey of centres after each examination session to gather feedback. Consequently, the information is different to that gathered from the centre correspondence as it is not from a self-selected sample of centres who wish to raise issues with the awarding body, but from the whole group.
- 8.19 Thirty-six centres completed the MEI survey in summer 2007, commenting on 18 different papers. Predominantly, centres were satisfied, with over half of them (61 per cent) actively praising the papers. The concerns expressed by centres tended generally to be similar to those noted from the correspondence discussed above. However, in contrast to this, concerns were also expressed in the MEI survey that mark allocations were not always in line with the demand of questions.
- 8.20 Although it cannot be assumed to be representative of centres' views of other qualifications, the information from the MEI survey nevertheless gives an indication of

the potential proportion of positive views held by centres, which would not tend to be captured through analysing their direct correspondence with awarding bodies.

- 8.21 To gather more evidence about teachers' views of question papers for the subjects addressed in the survey, QCA analysed the comments regarding these submitted by teachers to standing joint committees<sup>4</sup> (SJs) in 2005 and 2006.
- 8.22 Overall, teachers gave positive feedback to the SJs about almost half (45 per cent) of the question papers. The main concerns expressed were very similar to those noted in the centre correspondence:
- confusing or misleading questions
  - questions or papers that presented an inappropriately high level of demand
  - papers with confusing layout
  - papers with an imbalanced coverage of the specification.
- 8.23 A further source of opinion regarding the quality of GCSE and A level question papers is the candidate. QCA studied the discussions taking place at prominent internet websites used by UK students during the summer 2007 examination session.
- 8.24 Although only a minority of question papers were criticised specifically, there were several recurrent concerns, which were fairly similar to those expressed by teachers:
- questions where the number of marks allocated was not in line with demand
  - question papers that were of a different level of demand to previous ones
  - questions and papers that were too demanding
  - questions and papers that were not demanding enough
  - questions with either confusing or misleading wording
  - topics being either over or underrepresented in question papers.
- 8.25 It is part of the role of QCA's Regulation and Standards division to respond to queries from the public regarding qualifications. For GCSE and A level, 231 such queries were received between May and August 2007. The majority of these queries (85 per cent) did not relate to the quality of question papers, but to other issues, such as the quality

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<sup>4</sup> The SJs are independent bodies, administered by teacher unions, to which teachers are able to submit comments regarding the GCSE and A level question papers offered by AQA, Edexcel and OCR.

of marking. Where the quality of papers was raised, this tended to concern issues that could disadvantage candidates, such as:

- errors in question papers
- questions with inappropriate content
- questions with ambiguous or inaccurate content
- question papers that were not in line with the specification.

## **Conclusion**

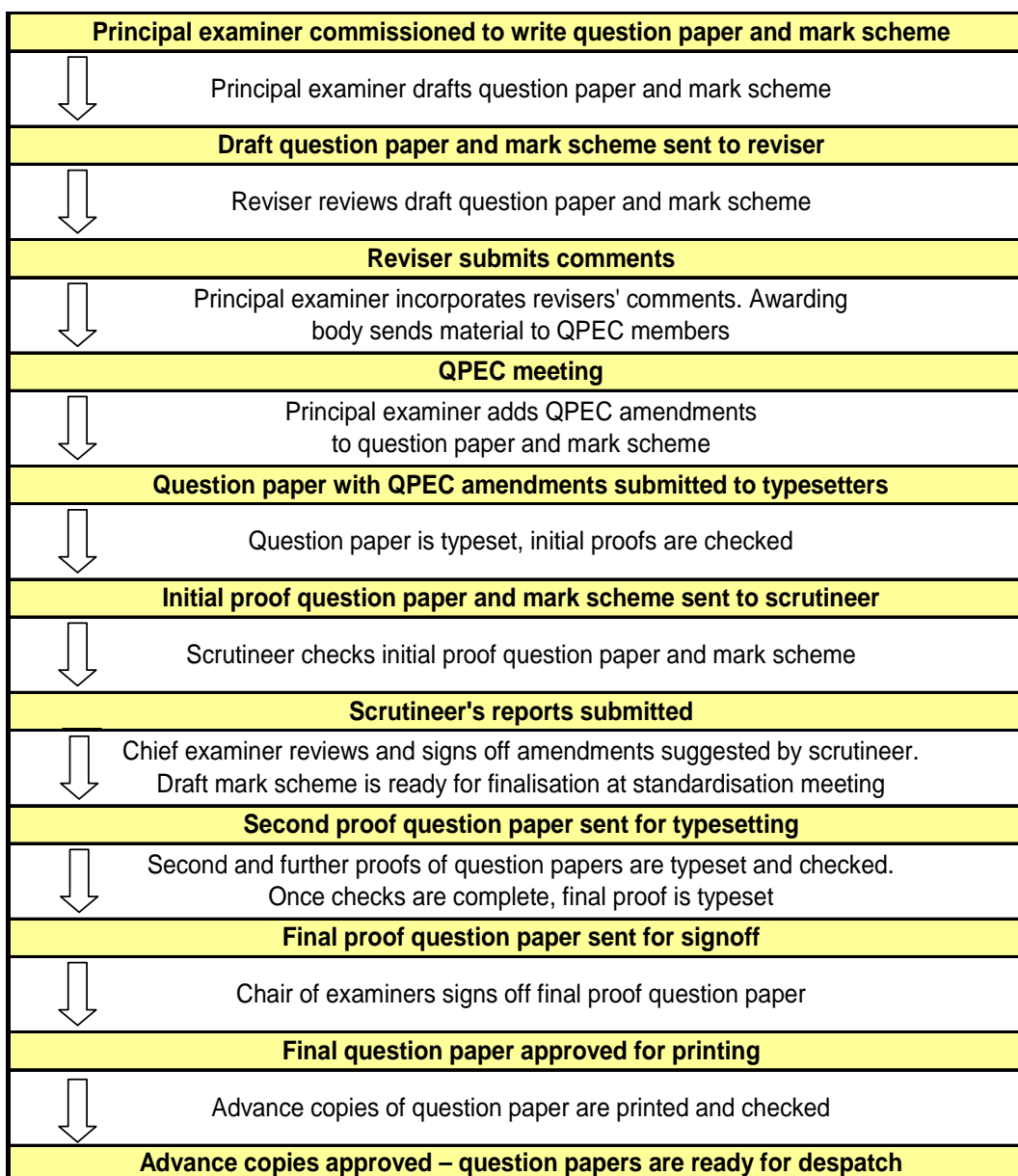
- 8.26 The findings from the survey of teachers conducted by Ipsos MORI during the summer 2007 examination session were overall very positive about the quality of GCSE and A level question papers, with none of the sub-groups interviewed, such as teachers of particular subjects, being consistently negative. However, it was evident from the findings that some of the areas addressed in the survey were perceived as more of a concern than others. That said, it was also noted that, as many of these areas were linked, respondents with negative views regarding one area were likely to have negative views about others.
- 8.27 The findings from QCA's supporting research into teachers' views were consistent with those from the survey with between half and two-thirds of the specifications or question papers addressed either not attracting negative comments from teachers or being complimented actively by them. The concerns expressed were fairly common between the sources, and were similar to those noted from students and the public.
- 8.28 Overall, the findings regarding the quality of GCSE and A level question papers were very positive. Although some concerns were evident, the general level of satisfaction was high, indicating that the process by which the question papers are produced is, on the whole, sound.

## 9. Next steps

- 9.1 The review found that, overall, awarding bodies complied with regulatory requirements when training examiners and setting question papers and mark schemes. The views expressed about the quality of the resulting question papers were positive.
- 9.2 However, given the importance of producing high-quality question papers and the fact that among the views expressed there were some concerns about the quality of papers:
- awarding bodies should continue to ensure that their procedures address relevant issues, and that these procedures are followed consistently
  - the regulator should continue to monitor GCSE and A level QPEC meetings and to conduct qualitative analysis of question papers as part of its monitoring of qualifications, to promote ongoing improvement in this important area.
- 9.3 In addition, some areas for improvement were identified from the review. QCA will ask the awarding bodies to respond to the report, indicating how they will review their practice in the light of its findings in the following areas:
- ensuring that the process for reviewing draft question papers and mark schemes is sufficiently thorough and robust to allow high-quality materials to be presented to the QPEC
  - ensuring that early advice is taken from appropriate language modifiers when setting question papers
  - ensuring that, where the language of question papers is modified, amendments are approved by a subject expert.

## Appendix 1. Question paper production timeline

The timeline below illustrates common practice at key stages of the question paper production process. However, question paper production procedures do vary between the awarding bodies. For an account of the differences in the production process across the awarding bodies, see sections 4, 5 and 6 of this report.





## Appendix 2. List of awarding body meetings observed and visits undertaken

In 2007 the following visits were undertaken to review awarding bodies' examiner training and question paper setting processes.

<b>Awarding body</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Date</b>
AQA	Manchester office	26 November
OCR	Coventry office	4 December
Edexcel	London office	7 and 11 December
OCR	Cambridge office	12 December
AQA	Guildford office	20 December

In 2007 the following examiner training meetings were observed.

<b>Awarding body</b>	<b>Meeting</b>	<b>Date</b>
AQA	Electronic marking and mark capture training for senior examiners	17 April
OCR	New principal examiner and principal moderator training	18 April
OCR	On-screen standardisation set-up senior team training	21 April
Edexcel	Online standardisation	3 May
OCR	Training for the principal examiners of the new A level specifications	16 June
Edexcel	A level geography kickstart meeting (9GEO1) – new specification	28 November

The following question paper evaluation committee meetings were observed.

<b>Awarding body</b>	<b>Specification</b>	<b>Units/papers</b>	<b>Series</b>	<b>Date</b>
AQA	GCSE mathematics B (4302)	43005/1F, 43005/2F, 43005/1H, 43005/2H	November 2008	11 October*
Edexcel	GCSE statistics (1389)	1F	June 2009	11 October
Edexcel	GCSE mathematics (1380)	1, 2, 4	June 2009	12 October
Edexcel	A level mathematics (8371)	C1, C2	June 2009 and January 2010	15 October
AQA	A level mathematics (6360)	MPC1, MPC2, MPC4	January 2009	23 October
OCR	A level mathematics (MEI) (7896)	Mechanics 1, Mechanics 2	January and June 2009	2 November
AQA	GCSE French pre-QPEC (3651 and 3657)	Speaking, writing	June 2009	8 November
OCR	GCSE English ( <i>Opening minds</i> ) (1900)	2433/1/2, 24S1/1/2, 2432/1/2	January and June 2009	9–10 November

<b>Awarding body</b>	<b>Specification</b>	<b>Units/papers</b>	<b>Series</b>	<b>Date</b>
OCR	GCSE mathematics C	B271, B272, B273, B274, B275, B276, B277, B278, B279, B280	June 2009	12–13 November
AQA	GCSE French (3651) and GCSE French (short course) (3657) pre-QPEC	Listening, reading	June 2009	15 November
OCR	A level mathematics (MEI) (7895 and 7896)	Core 3, Core 4	January and June 2009	22** November
Edexcel	GCSE history A (1334)	Paper 1	June 2009	28 November
OCR	A level biology (H021) – new specification	F211	January and June 2009	29 November

<b>Awarding body</b>	<b>Specification</b>	<b>Units/papers</b>	<b>Series</b>	<b>Date</b>
Edexcel	GCSE English literature (1213)	1213/2F, 1213/2H	June 2009	6–7 December
AQA	A level geography (2030) – new specification	Unit 1	January and June 2009	7*** December
Edexcel	GCSE English A (1203) and English B (1204)	3F, 5H	June 2009	14 December
AQA	A level psychology A (2180) –new specification	PSYA1, PSYA2	January 2009	20 December

All meetings were observed for the entire duration with the exception of:

\* second day of two-day meeting

\*\* first day of three-day meeting

\*\*\* first day of two-day meeting.