



House of Commons
Education and Skills Committee

Government Response to the Committee's Third Report: A Level Standards

**Third Special Report of Session
2002–03**

The Education and Skills Committee

The Education and Skills Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration and policy of the Department for Education and Skills and its associated public bodies.

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Mr Barry Sheerman MP (*Labour, Huddersfield*) (Chairman)
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Publications

The Reports and evidence of the Committee are published by The Stationery Office by Order of the House. All publications of the Committee (including press notices) are on the Internet at www.parliament.uk/parliamentary_committees/education_and_skills_committee.cfm.

Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are David Lloyd (Clerk), Annabel Jones (Second Clerk), Sara Eustace (Committee Specialist), Lisa Wrobel (Committee Assistant) and Catherine Jackson (Secretary).

Contacts

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Third Special Report

On 14 April 2003 the Education and Skills Committee published its Third Report¹ of Session 2002–03, A Level Standards. On 14 July we received the Government's response to the Report. The response is reproduced as the Appendix to this Special Report.

Government response

The Government welcomes the Select Committee's serious analysis of the origins of the problems which arose with A levels last year. Its detailed response is set out below.

The Select Committee's conclusions and recommendations are in bold text. The Government's response is in plain text. Some of the recommendations and responses have been grouped.

1. On the evidence presented to us, we conclude that the events of last summer were not caused by the manipulation of the examination system but by confusion arising from the introduction of the A2 exam without adequate trials.

The Government welcomes the Committee's conclusion that the events of last year were not caused by manipulation of the system. Mike Tomlinson's independent inquiry of last year reached the same conclusion. It nonetheless takes seriously the implication that more should be done to ensure that such problems do not arise in future with A levels or other qualifications. Our proposals published in January for reform to the 14-19 curriculum and qualifications emphasised the need for an appropriate timescale for implementation.

We are determined to do all we can to ensure that last year's problems are not repeated and that those students taking A levels, or coming up to A levels, can be confident that their work will be properly graded. Since Mr Tomlinson published his initial recommendations, on 27 September, QCA and others have been taking the recommendations forward as a matter of urgency. QCA have now produced simple and clear descriptions for AS and A-Level standards. In consultation with teachers and examiners, performance descriptions and exemplar materials have been produced by QCA for A-Level examinations using AS and A2 scripts from Summer 2002. The Code of Practice has been amended significantly, as recommended by Mr Tomlinson. In particular changes have been made to the Code so that in the setting of grade boundaries, the professional judgement of examiners will take precedence over technical and statistical evidence.

Piloting of A2 was not proposed. This lesson will also be learned.

¹ Third Report from the Education and Skills Committee, Session 2002–03, A Level Standards HC 153 (incorporating HC 862–11/111 of Session 2001–02)

2. We welcome the transitional role of external assessor of the examination system and are confident that this will assist in upholding the integrity of the A level qualification system

The Government welcomes the Committee's support of Mr Tomlinson's appointment as an independent observer on the 2003 awarding process. Mr Tomlinson's report on the January 2003 examinations said that the awarding process had gone well. Mr Tomlinson will report again publicly to the QCA board on the summer awarding process. This should provide additional confidence to schools, colleges and students in the summer examinations. Beyond 2003 QCA, with Teacher Association representatives, will audit the grading process. QCA are also establishing an independent group of experts to report on the maintenance of standards in selected groups of subjects from year to year.

3. We reject a knee-jerk change to the curriculum. The time and money invested in implementing Curriculum 2000 must not be wasted.

We emphasise the importance of supporting the current A level system. A period of stability is required, and further discussions about the future of the system should be undertaken with caution in order not to undermine the value of the current qualification.

Our first priority is to ensure the smooth running of A levels this year and beyond. Both the Committee and Mr Tomlinson found widespread support for the principles behind Curriculum 2000. All students, teachers and parents starting or contemplating their AS and A2 examinations must be confident that their work will be properly set, marked, graded and valued. We are working with QCA and others to give assurance to students and the wider community that the existing system is stable and effectively managed.

4. We urge the Government to encourage the acceptance of the new AS and A2 levels by our universities.

AS and A2 will continue to be among the main awards available for students to demonstrate their suitability for admission to Higher Education for some years to come. We have supported the Universities and Colleges' Admission Service to publish "Changes to Post-16 Qualifications: a briefing for Higher Education on changes to the post-16 curriculum in England, Northern Ireland and Wales", which sets out the value of the new awards fully. Departmental officials have visited admissions officers and tutors to explain the awards and encourage their take up in offers. We are also planning to hold seminars for university admissions officers and tutors this Autumn in order to encourage them to make the most effective use of the awards currently on offer.

5. Our evidence has shown that the QCA was not solely responsible for the issues arising this year. The DfES presented a timetable to implement Curriculum 2000 which was not properly thought through and placed considerable pressure on all those in the examination system from the QCA to students themselves.

On the subject of implementation of Curriculum 2000 the Government acted on advice from QCA following an extensive consultation. The A level reforms have their origins in the Dearing Review of Qualifications for 16-19 year olds published in March 1996. Before introducing the reforms we published the consultation document Qualifying for Success in

October 1997. In the light of the response to that document QCA advised that it would not be practical to implement many of the proposals before September 2000. We accepted this advice. The possibility of delaying implementation of the reforms beyond September 2000 did not enter in the discussions.

The AS was piloted before its introduction as QCA recognised that it was a new qualification and that a new standard would need to be established. The possibility of piloting the A2 exam was not contemplated at the time. We accept that this would have been desirable.

We recognise absolutely that there are lessons to be learnt for the future about the way in which we implement major reforms of this sort. Detailed planning and extensive trialling is essential so that we can be confident that all systems are in place and that teachers and examiners are fully trained in new requirements before they are introduced. In particular, there needs to be clarity among teachers and examiners about the standards against which an individual's performance will be assessed.

We have accepted the implications of this in relation to changes already in hand. For example, the revisions to the Vocational Certificate of Education (VCE) recommended by David Hargreaves in his first report into Curriculum 2000, and commented on by Mike Tomlinson in his first report into A Level standards, will only be brought in after a period of trialling. The changes will not take effect before September 2005 at the earliest.

Mike Tomlinson's Working Group on 14-19 reform is also considering this issue as part of its work on longer term reform and is very much aware of previous problems. We can assure the Committee that any future reform will be fully developed, piloted and tested with all the necessary supporting guidance and exemplar material available before implementation.

6. It is significant that none of the evidence we received argued that the answer to problems of consistency is to have a single awarding body; on the contrary, the diversity provided by the three boards was welcomed. All three will continue to have an important role to play, not least because it is by no means certain that there are other bodies keen to enter this market.

The accreditation of an awarding body is a matter for QCA. The Government notes the Committee's conclusion. We have not proposed change in this area.

7. We recommend that the QCA's regulatory function be given more independence in a similar way to OFSTED, and that it should be directly accountable to Parliament. Independent advice should be seen as an asset, not as a problem. The DfES should make greater use of the wealth of expertise within QCA; if it had accepted guidance and allowed the A2 examinations to have been piloted, this report would almost certainly not have been necessary.

The Government agrees that the independence of QCA in its role of regulator must be clear and beyond question. We are open to the debate about greater statutory independence. However, any debate needs to take account of the disruption that would arise from institutional change and which would be a distraction from the immediate priority of managing the delivery and standards of A levels.

As recommended by Mr Tomlinson we have now agreed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the QCA which describes the relationship between the Department and QCA. The MoU sets out the core responsibilities of the DfES and the QCA in relation to the QCA's remit. It covers the formal conduct of business between Ministers and QCA as well as the day to day arrangements between QCA and the DfES officials. We will continue to keep the relationship under review. The MoU is available on the QCA website, and a copy has been placed in the Library.

8. We recommend that the DfES and QCA take a more proactive role in making the examination system more transparent to parents, schools and colleges.

The Government agrees that more needs to be done to make the examination system more transparent. We have been actively pursuing this with QCA in the run up to this summer's examinations. As part of the A level communication programme QCA have:

- Included a guide for teachers in the Times Educational Supplement in April; a colour reprint was distributed at various teacher conferences;
- Published a free A Level Guide for students available from any branch of WH Smith – 100,000 extra copies have been ordered by schools;
- Launched a campaign to emphasise students' achievements, entitled A Level of Pride, featuring advertisements in the national press.

In addition QCA also held a targeted briefing for MPs in the House of Commons on 13 May.

Department for Education and Skills

14 July 2003