House of Commons
Education Committee

The administration of examinations for 15–19 year olds in England

First Report of Session 2012–13

Volume II
Oral and written evidence

Additional written evidence is contained in Volume III, available on the Committee website at www.parliament.uk/educom

Ordered by the House of Commons to be printed 12 June 2012
The Education Committee

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

Membership at time Report agreed:
Mr Graham Stuart MP (Conservative, Beverley & Holderness) (Chair)
Neil Carmichael MP (Conservative, Stroud)
Alex Cunningham MP (Labour, Stockton North)
Bill Esterson MP, (Labour, Sefton Central)
Pat Glass MP (Labour, North West Durham)
Damian Hinds MP (Conservative, East Hampshire)
Charlotte Leslie MP (Conservative, Bristol North West)
Ian Mearns MP (Labour, Gateshead)
Lisa Nandy MP (Labour, Wigan)
David Ward MP (Liberal Democrat, Bradford East)
Craig Whittaker MP (Conservative, Calder Valley)

Nic Dakin MP (Labour, Scunthorpe) and Tessa Munt MP (Liberal Democrat, Wells) were also members of the Committee during the inquiry.

Powers
The Committee is one of the departmental select committees, the powers of which are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No 152. These are available on the Internet via www.parliament.uk

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/education-committee

Committee staff
The current staff of the Committee are Dr Lynn Gardner (Clerk), Penny Crouzet (Committee Specialist), Benjamin Nicholls (Committee Specialist), Ameet Chudasama (Senior Committee Assistant), Caroline McElwee (Committee Assistant), and Paul Hampson (Committee Support Assistant)

Contacts
All correspondence should be addressed to the Clerk of the Education Committee, House of Commons, 7 Millbank, London SW1P 3JA. The telephone number for general enquiries is 020 7219 6181; the Committee’s e-mail address is educom@parliament.uk
Witnesses

Tuesday 29 November 2011

Martin Collier, Headmaster, St John’s School, Leatherhead, Surrey, David Burton, Deputy Headteacher, St Michael’s CofE High School, Crosby, Liverpool, Rob Pritchard, Headteacher, St Mary’s Catholic High School, Menston, Ilkley, West Yorkshire, and Teresa Kelly, Principal of Abingdon and Witney College, Member of Principals’ Professional Council/Association of School and College Leaders

Professor Nick Lieven, Pro Vice-Chancellor, University of Bristol, Anna Gutiérrez, Head of Student Administration, University of Bournemouth, and Anne Tipple, National Skills Executive, British Chambers of Commerce

Thursday 15 December 2011

Paul Barnes, Paul Evans and Steph Warren, senior examiners

Andrew Hall, Chief Executive Officer, AQA, Mark Dawe, Chief Executive, OCR, Rod Bristow, President, Pearson UK (on behalf of Edexcel) and Gareth Pierce, Chief Executive, WJEC

Glens Stacey, Chief Executive, Ofqual, and Dennis Opposs, Director of Standards, Ofqual

Wednesday 18 January 2012

Professor Jo-Anne Baird, Pearson Professor and Director of the Oxford University Centre for Educational Assessment, Dr Michelle Meadows, Director of Centre for Education Research and Policy, AQA, Tim Oates, Group Director, Assessment Research and Development, Cambridge Assessment, and Professor Alison Wolf, Sir Roy Griffith Professor of Public Sector Management, King’s College, London

Professor Stephen J Ball, FBA, AcSS, British Academy, Professor Sir John Holman, Senior Fellow for Education, Wellcome Trust, Professor Graham Hutchings, FRS, SCORE Chair, and Warwick Mansell, freelance journalist

Tuesday 21 February 2012

John Butterworth, Educational Writer and Chief Examiner, on behalf of the Society of Authors, Paul Howarth, UK and International Managing Director, Nelson Thornes, Jacob Pienaar, Managing Director of Schools and Colleges, Pearson UK, and Kate Harris, Managing Director, Education and Children’s Division, Oxford University Press
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4. The Wellcome Trust  
5. Oxford Cambridge and RSA Examination Board (OCR)  
6. Cambridge Assessment  
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11. David Burton, Deputy Headteacher CofE High School Crosby, Liverpool  
12. Robert Pritchard, Headteacher, St Mary’s Catholic High School, Ilkley, West Yorkshire  
13. Teresa Kelly, Abingdon and Witney College  
14. British Academy  
15. Jo-Anne Baird, Jannette Elwood and Tina Isaacs, Oxford University, Centre for Educational Assessment, Queen’s University, Belfast & the Institute of Education  
16. WJEC  
17. Society of Authors  
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19. AQA Centre for Education Research and Policy (CERP)
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The following written evidence has been reported to the House, but to save printing costs has not been printed and copies have been placed in the House of Commons Library, where they may be inspected by Members. Other copies are in the Parliamentary Archives (www.parliament.uk/archives), and are available to the public for inspection. Requests for inspection should be addressed to The Parliamentary Archives, Houses of Parliament, London SW1A 0PW (tel. 020 7219 3074; email archives@parliament.uk). Opening hours are from 9.30 am to 5.00 pm on Mondays to Fridays.

Supplementary evidence from Oxford University Press
Oral evidence

Taken before the Education Committee
on Tuesday 29 November 2011

Members present:
Mr Graham Stuart (Chair)
Alex Cunningham
Pat Glass
Damian Hinds
Charlotte Leslie
Tessa Munt
Craig Whittaker

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Martin Collier, Headmaster, St John’s School, Leatherhead, Surrey, David Burton, Deputy Headteacher, St Michael’s College, Menston, Ilkley, West Yorkshire, and Teresa Kelly, Principal of Abingdon and Witney College, member of Principals’ Professional Council/Association of School and College Leaders, gave evidence.

Q1 Chair: Good morning and welcome. Today is the day of the Autumn Statement—supposed to be a quiet, little-noted latest update on Government figures—a day of great Parliamentary drama. We will try and crack on through our sessions this morning to inform our inquiry into the administration of examinations for 15 to 19-year-olds. I am very grateful to you all for taking the time to come along today. We conduct inquiries, we write reports, we make recommendations; the Government are obliged to respond. Please do include in your evidence to us today any recommendations that you think should be in our report; that is the business end of what we do. Please do try to be clear with us if you think there are changes that can usefully be made in the system of examinations. I will start with a very general question: does the current examination system for 15 to 19-year-olds serve our young people well? I will start with you, Robert; you are well known for strong views.

Robert Pritchard: We should simplify it. There are too many already.

Q2 Chair: What should we do about it?

Robert Pritchard: We should simplify it. There are far too many examinations taking place in terms of different qualifications, so simplification would be good. The massive changes that are always taking place in terms of specifications would help, and going back to basics—

Q3 Chair: You said massive changes would help, or that there are too many already?

Robert Pritchard: No, the massive changes do not help at all. Going back to what examinations are about, it is assessing young people’s knowledge and understanding, and giving them the skills they need to go on to either A-levels or university.

Q4 Chair: That matches the Wolf report’s finding.

Teresa Kelly: I agree with that mainly, but the larger proportion of young people—16 to 18—are not taking AS and A2; they are taking vocational qualifications. The range of vocational qualification needs to be very, very specialised; they need to be very much what industry wants. While I would endorse some sort of simplification, I would not want to lose the specialism to a particular industry that some of the awarding bodies can give us, which is what the bulk of my students are looking to achieve. Certainly at level 1, and pre-level 1, there are too many qualifications that do not take the young person anywhere.

Q5 Chair: That matches the Wolf report’s finding.

Teresa Kelly: It does almost match the Wolf report findings. There is such a great emphasis on the English Baccalaureate within schools. I am very concerned that that is further lowering the status of vocational education. I would like to see a vocational baccalaureate with some real clout and status that puts us on a par with some of our European counterparts. I do not see that coming out of Government thinking at the moment.

Q6 Chair: David, does the system serve young people well?

David Burton: It serves certain people well, but we want an education and examination system that meets the needs of every single young person. The English Baccalaureate is far too narrow, and it has got the propensity to declare a 13 or 14-year-old not good enough; if they are not good enough to take those certain subjects, are they good enough for anything else?

Q7 Chair: No one is forced to take the English Baccalaureate; it is not part of the accountability
There is something about the child, Martin Collier: year-old point? is rising to 18, is there anything magical about the 16-should be examined at 16? Now the participation age at 18, children are examined, because in a sense they childhood into the next stage. It is also important that, a supporter of the idea that, at 16, children should be particular. You have to ask what GCSEs are for. I am I would agree with that last point in same level? I am not sure they are. That does not mean they made the wrong decisions at the age of 13 or 14. I think the narrowness of that is wrong.

The point about simplification is absolutely right: currently schools have a choice of many different exam boards for each qualification. GCSE English, for example, can take very many different forms. Are they really comparable? Do we have absolute clarity on that? As Bob says, when we are judging schools on that kind of measure, are we sure that the data we have got, or the source of those data, are reliable? Are all students who are passing GCSE English of the same level? I am not sure they are. Martin Collier: I would agree with that last point in particular. You have to ask what GCSEs are for. I am a supporter of the idea that, at 16, children should be examined, because that is an important passage from childhood into the next stage. It is also important that, at 18, children are examined, because in a sense they are passing into adulthood.

Q8 Chair: Can you explain why you think children should be examined at 16? Now the participation age is rising to 18, is there anything magical about the 16-year-old point? Martin Collier: There is something about the child, how they are maturing and changing. A lot of people in education do not believe in GCSEs, but it does something to aim for, for children at that age and for teachers who are teaching children at that age. Is the examination system fit for purpose? The answer in a sense is no now, because, as has been pointed out, it lacks coherence. There is no coherence at all to the system, and over the last few years we have seen significant fragmentation, as David said, within qualifications. Within GCSE you have a number of different kinds of GCSEs for history or English, but beyond that you also have IGCSEs, and at A-level you have IB and Pre-U. This is because there has been no overview; you have people going in different directions because they are looking for what they perceive to be better qualifications.

Q9 Chair: If we kept multiple examining bodies, would you rather they bid for a certain subject or suite of subjects, and one awarding body provided one examination in history, for instance? Would that be an improvement? Martin Collier: That is what happened last time when we went into Curriculum 2000, and it was not tremendously successful then. I am not a fan of multiple exam boards, so I do not think I can answer that question.

Q10 Chair: You would like to see a single body? Martin Collier: I think so. Even though we went down from seven to three—or whatever it was—in 2000, we have seen a proliferation that actually confuses rather than gives clarity. To pick up on what Teresa says, every child needs to have a clear pathway up to 18, and, currently, the pathways are very complex and confused. Nationally, with an examination system, we should be saying to schools, “We are going to provide you with an overarching examination system that is complex, does provide significant choice, but provides every child with that pathway through that suits their abilities and their interests, and also matches their aspirations.”

Q11 Chair: What would that look like? Martin Collier: If you have a national examination board, it can have as you would want it to, because within that, you can have a mixture of vocational and academic qualifications.

Q12 Chair: We have a mixture of vocational and academic qualifications? Martin Collier: We have, but it is all jumbled up, and there is no coherence.

Q13 Chair: Simply going to a uniform awarding body and saying it will be able to paint a perfect utopian picture with a pathway for all, diversity for all and opportunity to change track for all is just utopianism. That is not a practical guide to what it would look like, and, until we can see what it could look like, it is hard to say how you structure it in order to deliver it. Martin Collier: It is not utopian if the philosophy that informs it is practical, I am not talking about a utopian system; I am talking about one that would be informed by educational philosophy, and by the idea that the children come first. That is not utopian: that is practical if you are talking about creating an educational qualification system.

Q14 Chair: I am only giving you such a hard time—Martin Collier: No, no, please do. Chair:—because I find the picture you are painting so attractive, but we have to fill that out, give detail, and explain how we would get from where we are to there for it to be realistic rather than just a pipe dream. Any more thoughts? Martin Collier: Oh, you want me to do that?

Q15 Chair: I do. That’s what we’re here for. Martin Collier: I feel that it is wrong to put the children’s qualifications into the marketplace. Competition between examination boards is not healthy at all. Even the fact that we have three examination boards structured in different ways—one is a charity, one is a not-for-profit organisation and one is a business—means you have different reasons,
in a sense, for why they are producing qualifications and what they are after, which confuses the issue considerably. Where I am coming from with regard to national qualifications is as I just described, and also the concepts of professional standards with regard to how examinations work.

I cannot remember too much of the detail of Tomlinson—you smiled wryly when I mentioned Tomlinson—but I remember there was this idea that there was going to be a national standard, in particular for examining, and that there was going to be greater coherence, including for vocational, in how we set out our qualifications. How that is set up I do not know, but that was a vision shared by many at the time, and subsequent to Tomlinson, the further proliferation of problems potentially brings one back to those conclusions as something relatively attractive.

Chair: We now have the stillborn Diploma, which was supposed to offer some hope.

Q16 Craig Whittaker: You have answered the first couple of questions I had down here today. It was quite interesting what Robert said—that the GCSEs and A-levels were a method to judge schools. Interestingly enough, Martin said that it was wrong to put children’s qualifications into the marketplace. To be wholly blunt, surely the education system’s job is to make those children economically viable. When we have a million NEETs in the system, are the GCSE and A-level examinations fit for purpose?

Martin Collier: A-levels and GCSEs are academic qualifications, and that is, in a sense, where the tension is, because they were set up as academic qualifications, but the expectation is that whole swathes of children who are not academic will be channelled into taking these qualifications. Tension therefore was created in the exam boards, particularly in Curriculum 2000 at A-level, to broaden and dilute the academic standard, in particular the A-level, because more people were to take it. In particular, the AS in 2000 was opened up for that reason.

The tension of the A-level and GCSE is therefore that they have been broadened out and made slightly more academic qualifications, but the expectation is that whole swathes of children who are not academic will be channelled into taking these qualifications. Tension therefore was created in the exam boards, particularly in Curriculum 2000 at A-level, to broaden and dilute the academic standard, in particular the A-level, because more people were to take it. In particular, the AS in 2000 was opened up for that reason.

Teresa Kelly: Unless there is something to go alongside it that it is equivalent.

Martin Collier: A-levels and GCSEs are academic qualifications, and that is, in a sense, where the tension is, because they were set up as academic qualifications, but the expectation is that whole swathes of children who are not academic will be channelled into taking these qualifications. Tension therefore was created in the exam boards, particularly in Curriculum 2000 at A-level, to broaden and dilute the academic standard, in particular the A-level, because more people were to take it. In particular, the AS in 2000 was opened up for that reason.

Q17 Craig Whittaker: To be fair, that has always been the case, yet nothing ever gets done about it.

Teresa Kelly: We have never had a real drive. There was a glimmer of hope with Tomlinson, but it did not go through. We have never had a drive to give the status to that vocational route. If you look at some of our European counterparts, that is the case: it is not seen as the route for those who are less able and cannot do A-levels; it is seen as the route that those with the application, that applied knowledge, can follow. There is a huge opportunity here to do something about that.

Q18 Craig Whittaker: Talking about economic viability and looking particularly at the German
system, which has a huge employer input into curriculum and modelling children going forward. As headteachers, how many of you involve your local manufacturers and businesses in that scheme in your schools to help put those children on the right vocational route?

**Robert Pritchard:** We do to a certain extent.

**Q19 Craig Whittaker:** To what extent?

**Robert Pritchard:** To a certain extent for a small number of youngsters. Their input into the curriculum is more about work-related learning rather than input into the curriculum about what we are going to teach. We teach what is on the specification, because we are tied by the specification. If there was a greater link between employers or universities and the A-levels or qualifications at GCSE and age 16, that would help, because we teach what is on the specification. They come in and supplement that in terms of work-related learning and applying the knowledge.

**Q20 Craig Whittaker:** With all due respect, each one of you has mentioned vocational subjects, and to me the one way of doing vocational subjects, and the one beacon, is the German system. I am quite interested to tease out of you how much you involve your local employers in that process within your schools. I understand that you are set to a curriculum, but surely there is much more you can do.

**Teresa Kelly:** For our level 3 students, in the region of 20% of their delivery time is through our local employers. We have what we call a Professional Futures programme, which the employers have helped us build, and sitting in that are some of the qualifications. The programme is a good programme. We are fortunate, because we are just down the road from BMW; they have got that culture, so they are very involved with the delivery of that course.

**David Burton:** That is the ideal situation, very much to be sought after: to have as much employer engagement as possible. That was one of the good aspects of the Diploma courses; there were lots of other things wrong with them, but the multidisciplinary input was a really good feature. A lot of local companies are struggling to keep going at the moment and therefore have less time and man hours to help schools. But everyone you approach says it would be good.

**Q21 Craig Whittaker:** So there has been less time to invest in their future then?

**David Burton:** I think they are investing at the moment in making sure they have a future.

**Craig Whittaker:** Martin?

**Martin Collier:** My school doesn’t offer vocational qualifications.

**Q22 Craig Whittaker:** My last question is around what Robert has touched on with EBacc: what are the effects of linking the exam system for 16-year-olds so closely to the school accountability system? Is it a case of the assessment tail wagging the curriculum dog?

**Robert Pritchard:** It is. We have a philosophy of a curriculum that is right for the individual, but we are not naïve in terms of what we offer. We offer a broadly academic curriculum. Last year, when the options were open, the options night was on the same day the *Daily Telegraph* said that EBacc was the new standard for university. Our parents are the kind of parents who read the *Daily Telegraph*, and think, “That is the kind of qualification that is there for our youngsters.” We have not actively encouraged them. We have not got blocks in place that will force youngsters down an EBacc system. If I am brutally honest, the parental choice—as well as our not being naïve as leaders—is steering some youngsters down there that previously would not have gone down that route. However, we only put youngsters down that route who can achieve.

**Q23 Chair:** If you are only putting people down the route who can achieve there, for whom it is a good thing—they are facilitating subjects the universities like—and parents want it as well, then who are you to say this is not a great improvement? Who is it letting down? That is the most interesting point.

**Robert Pritchard:** The question was whether the assessment tail was wagging the dog: yes, these youngsters may have been doing something they are better at, rather than the EBacc subject. To quantify: last year 48% of the cohort were able to get the EBacc, and 42% did. This year, the number of youngsters who have opted for it has gone to 68%. That is a free option choice: parents and youngsters have seen that as the new option choice.

**Q24 Chair:** What’s wrong with it? Who is being let down?

**Robert Pritchard:** Do I think that doing a language after 14, and being able to achieve in that language, is a good idea? Yes. I did not get the EBacc; I did not do a language when I was 13, 14 and 15. From that point of view the EBacc would be a good idea if it encouraged more youngsters to do a language, and the same for humanities. However, 50% of the country’s population might not be able to access that qualification, so it is a question of what is in place for them. You have mentioned a different kind of route.

**Q25 Chair:** You are suggesting that somehow the EBacc damages. I try and understand: we have EBacc, we have five GCSEs, and the people who never feature in either of the scores for those particular sets of examinations are the lowest 20% of performers. The very people we are supposed to be changing our system to improve are entirely untouched by our main drivers of performance in the system: that seems a bit incoherent to me. I want you to explain to us, if you believe it, how people in that group are being harmed by the current accountability measures?

**Robert Pritchard:** It does not harm them in my school, but there are lots of schools across the country who, when the EBacc measure was brought in, changed the curriculum for their year 10, so that in year 11 they would have lots of time to do humanities and a language. A lot of schools did that, so as to hit the EBacc measure. We did not do that.
Q26 Chair: I myself would never be influenced in a malign way, but a lot of other people are: is that what you are saying?

Robert Pritchard: It depends on the context of the school and on the head. If the school is in particular circumstances such that it needs to do that, it will do that. A lot of our youngsters already do opt to do EBacc subjects, because that is the kind of school we teach in. There are a lot of schools out there with 0% on the EBacc.

Q27 Chair: Is the link between GCSEs and the accountability system leading to distortion? One of the classic charges is, again, that the biggest problem we have is not our elite, but those who are the lowest performing: they are getting inappropriate curricula, they are failing to get a pathway to a decent future, and our system of accountability leaves them out entirely. Therefore, the main drivers in the system are completely unmatched to what apparently are the main political objectives. Is that true, David?

David Burton: Yes, to an extent. One of the problems with EBacc is that, because the choice of subjects for EBacc are so narrow, anyone doing an EBacc who then wants to go to university has a narrowed list of subjects they can study. I am thinking, for example, of people who want to do design technology. Those kinds of subjects, which are not included in the EBacc, are perfectly good subjects to do at university, and would be good for our economy and employers. However, schools could potentially interview those students and say, “Well, maybe that is not the best choice for you as a university education”.

At my school we interview every single student who was capable of doing the EBacc in terms of their prior attainment data and ensure they are aware of all the choices. We do not force anyone to do it, because you do not want a 13 or 14-year-old feeling that they are being forced to do a subject against their will that is not good for them and nowhere near their interest. To go back to your other question about the problem 20%, we have to be careful that we meet the needs of those students but give them the sense that there is a long-term plan to it. We have said that for us as educational professionals it can be a very confusing system, so for parents and pupils it must be even more confusing. When we say, “They are equivalent”, I am not sure that what they are seeing on a day-to-day basis says to them it is equivalent. Unfortunately they think that means second-rate.

Q28 Chair: Is your focus truly on that? We are going to have free-school-meals children appearing in the league tables in future, but the only accountability measure is the five good GCSEs, and the lowest performing 20% do not appear in that. Are you incentivised to concentrate on the children who least need your additional focus and attention?

David Burton: From a league table point of view, of course we are incentivised. But I would hope that any school leader has their moral stance, as well as their leadership stance and thinks, “The most important thing for my school is that every single student has the best opportunity.” I do not necessarily think the answer is to think there are different paths for different people; we have also to ensure that every single person feels that their chosen path has progression they understand, that they can see a realistic chance of making that progression route, and that they feel that every day when they get up and go to school they are achieving something towards that.

Q29 Chair: Both you and Robert have suggested that that is not a problem: you are not putting people down for it inappropriately, and it is hard to see why it is a problem.

Robert Pritchard: I know schools that, for example, were putting lots of youngsters in for a BTEC Performing Arts 4 award, who were getting 11 to 16 GCSEs but then having no progression to post-16. Schools do that because, in a particular context, there could be a notice to improve, there could be special measures, and they need to get the points to go up as quickly as possible, so they have a simple fix in terms of vocational qualifications. That will change, because of the changes to the equivalencies in the league tables. I think that will be a positive change, because it will force schools and headteachers to enter for qualifications only youngsters who are appropriate for them. If you look at the league tables, a lot of schools have 100% five A*-C, but might have 30 to 40% A*-C with English and maths. That is because they are playing the system in terms of vocational qualifications.

Q30 Damian Hinds: You may not know the arithmetic mean, but give me an estimate: for the kids at your schools, or those you have coming in, who have done or will do the English Baccalaureate, how many GCSEs will they do in total?

Robert Pritchard: Yes, I would agree with that because we have an option system whereby they are able to choose a language and a humanities subject, and have three spare blocks for things that they like.

David Burton: Yes, but then we want to make the best opportunity for the student.
Q35 Damian Hinds: Okay. Even if they did triple science, it would still be possible to do options on top, yes or no? I think it would on the number you said.

Martin Collier: A point we have not made: I am in the independent sector, and we do not have to do the English Baccalaureate. You talk about the 20% that do not do it; the independent sector, as with a lot of education initiatives, has the independence to choose what it thinks are the best qualifications for their pupils—a bit of perspective.

Q36 Damian Hinds: We were talking earlier about the English Baccalaureate being the new standard for university entrants. In the independent sector, is that what you hear from your fellow heads, or do they talk about the old standards for university entrants?

Martin Collier: Not at all. I was Director of Studies at a school that, seven or eight years ago, was one of the first to introduce IGCSE maths and convince the exam boards that home schools could do it as well as the international schools. Since then, whole swathes of the independent sector have decided to take IGCSEs; they dropped to the bottom of every league table they could find, but it did not bother them. Now, looking forward, they know that universities are still interested in people with strong qualifications, English Bacc or IGCSE.

Q37 Damian Hinds: My question was about the subject choice: a phrase came up earlier that the English Baccalaureate was the new choice for university entrants. I was asking you, Martin, in your conversation with fellow independent school heads whether would they consider English, maths, humanities, language and science to be a new set of requirements to go to university or more of a traditional pre-existing set?

Martin Collier: In most, English, maths, and science are still the core, but not necessarily.

Q38 Damian Hinds: We talked earlier about the pressure from parents to take the English Baccalaureate. As MPs we get correspondence on all manner of topics: I have 85 emails and letters about the beak trimming of hens. I have yet to receive correspondence from any parent whatsoever about the English Baccalaureate. I am willing to believe it exists. I hear a lot of headteachers and teachers talking about it, but I do not hear a lot of parents talking about it.

Chair: Damian, we have done our English Baccalaureate inquiry: it would be quite nice to move on to the wider system.

Damian Hinds: Oh, come on. I accept that, but it is relevant to the wider system, because my question is how that parental pressure manifests itself.

Robert Pritchard: It is basically only in the choices the youngsters make. There is no problem in terms of the school; it is just interesting to see that, after the Daily Telegraph article, the number of youngsters who chose it in that year went up.

Q39 Damian Hinds: David, in your school, how does the parental pressure manifest itself?

David Burton: As we have said, there are now so many different subjects that people can study that we, as educational professionals, are trying to influence our children to get the very best future for them. If a student comes from a family that does not have a history of sending people to university, then to convince a parent that their son or daughter should take the tough subjects, and that is the best for their future, is sometimes quite a hard sell. Those informed parents, who are Daily Telegraph readers or whatever, are more convinced, because they are the subjects they studied themselves.

Our parents tend to be very well aware; they want their sons and daughters to get jobs in the local area, and sometimes say, "How will a GCSE in history help with that?" Simply because they haven't had the family history of it, we have that battle. The parents are great and very supportive, but clearly we are trying to change aspirations and perceptions. Sometimes they will say, "Hold on, do we do the French GCSE rather than design technology? Is that going to help them?"

We have got a two-edged argument in that we are trying to promote the best interests of the student, but that is in the quite long term: A-level, a university career, and then a job after that. Often parents want to see more impact slightly earlier than that, so that can be the conflict.

Q40 Damian Hinds: Obviously, in the exam system we have lots of change; schools do not like having as much change as we have, but I think probably there is also an acceptance that over time you need evolution. Who should drive change, both the pace of it and the actuality of it? Is it the schools themselves? Should it be universities, employers, learned societies, international benchmarking studies? What should it be?

Teresa Kelly: There are some very strong indicators from employers that there are skills gaps, certainly around science technician level. They should be a formal key driver, but we have to do that very carefully. We need to listen to the employers who really know what skills they are looking to embed far more then they are listened to at the moment, in terms of what they perceive they need for the future, and for the economy.

Q41 Damian Hinds: What of the role of international comparisons, higher education institutions, the Institute of Physics. Martin?

Martin Collier: This is where I come back to the lack of coherence and structure. If you have a proper structure, through that you can get a partnership with all the interested parties who can come up with a coherent plan that perhaps has a longer-term vision—because at present there is no vision at all—as to how qualifications should develop. All the different groups you describe should play a part in that.

Q42 Damian Hinds: All of them?

Martin Collier: All of them.

David Burton: Students and parents would be delighted to know that universities and employers were trying to help create a pathway for the young
person. That would give people immense confidence that they are not just taking these qualifications in isolation, to get a certificate, to move on to the next stage, but there is a pathway, with employers saying, “If you get this, we will give you that”. I think students would work their socks off to achieve that. That would be really helpful, and as parents we would want that as well. That is a positive step.

Within that, we have to create a simplified examination system, so the competition is not in how many qualifications we have for GCSE English, but how we get the best qualification, so we have one qualification that evolves in itself, rather than having one qualification going off in five or six different routes, five or six different students having a GCSE in English, and no one being quite sure if they are the same, or which one is best.

Q43 Alex Cunningham: You agreed with Damian that young people could take a qualification over and above the Bacc. Is that going to be applied to all students, or are some of them going to opt to put all their eggs into the Bacc basket, and lose the opportunity to do the things that they are probably better at?

Robert Pritchard: Not in my school’s case, and not in a number of schools that I know.

Q44 Alex Cunningham: Are young people able to do the additional work over and above the Bacc? Are you quite confident of that?

Robert Pritchard: Yes.

Q45 Alex Cunningham: So they will have that opportunity.

Robert Pritchard: Yes.

Q46 Alex Cunningham: What about those who might have less ability?

Robert Pritchard: The youngsters who have less ability, and are not able to get a C and above in the Bacc certificate, probably will not take it in the first place.

Q47 Charlotte Leslie: How will the advent of a quiet revolution in education affect the qualification system; that is University Technical Colleges, with the introduction of a curriculum break at 14, tackling, in many ways, an academic route—literacy, numeracy and other disciplines—through a vocational mechanism. How will that change the qualifications framework and what can we learn from that?

Teresa Kelly: We are looking at developing a University Technical College with some partners in Didcot at the moment, because Didcot sits in the heart of the Science Vale and the Science Corridor. We are working with Harwell and Diamond on that. The principle behind the developing qualification within the UTC movement is similar to the one I was talking about earlier. You have a route that does not have lower status; in some cases it might have higher status, or perceived by some to have higher status, but it is designed around the practical and applied skills of young people.

I have heard references this morning to the “lower achievers”. I would say that some of those are not the lower achievers; they just do not have the skills to fit in the system we have currently. In a different system they may be the higher achievers, and those who are getting straight As may be the lower achievers. That is the anomaly in the system. I am hoping that the UTC model, although it is small in its national context, will go a way to addressing that.

The downside of the UTC model is there could be an argument that it is too narrow; the curriculum goes too far the other way in terms of focusing narrowly on engineering or construction.

Robert Pritchard: I tend to agree. There is a limited number of UTCs currently, so time will tell on that. I agree that the curriculum I have seen from a couple of proposals is far too narrow for young people; just like the EBacc is too narrow for some, this could be too narrow for others.

David Burton: The narrowness is a particular concern if they start at 14. They may think at 14, “That is the area I want to go into,” but within the next year or 18 months that evolves, and they realise it wasn’t quite that area but another; we find that in schools. If it is too narrow then that could be a problem, with the students being forced through a system they do not particularly want in the end. The good thing is that the employers are massively involved in the UTC progression routes—as I said before, “If you can achieve this, then this is what is on offer for you” is going to be a huge motivational tool for students.

Q48 Charlotte Leslie: If the Committee were to make recommendations on the progress of the UTCs, because obviously UTCs are a work in progress, in terms of accessing the equipment from a different way—the method of access as opposed to what you want the employers and universities want, being the main consumers of our young people. Our young people need to impress them

Q49 Charlotte Leslie: I am getting the feeling that we do not think there is that much we can learn from the progress of UTCs in qualifications development. We talked earlier about what employers and universities want, being the main consumers of our young people. Our young people need to impress them
Robert Pritchard: I used to think modularisation was my opinion. I am a historian and modularisation has turned history into a bit-size project. You do not see that as an effective approach at all.

Martin Collier: I do. You have to understand where modularity came from: mathematics primarily. In a sense you can understand why it might suit mathematics and potentially some of the sciences as well. Then in 2000, it was imposed on all subject disciplines and it did not suit many, the humanities in particular. I have never been a fan of the idea of children being able to re-sit and re-sit again. The problem with modularity from my point of view is that it broke up the learning process.

There are attractive elements to linearity, in particular that, as with life, your skills build on skills, and your knowledge builds on knowledge. You can have a linear qualification and still have within it various knowledge builds on knowledge. You can have a modular system was not imposed on us; everyone has grown up with—the linear approach: two years and then do the exam—but personally I do not see that as an effective approach at all.

Martin Collier: My disagreement about the modular thing is that the modular system was not imposed on us; everyone has grown up with the linear approach: two years and then do the exam—but personally I do not see that as an effective approach at all.

My exam board in the last five or six years has gone from £70,000 to £130,000. It is just a massive machine that has overtaken everything, and the people who are benefiting are the exam boards, some of which are there to make money.

Robert Pritchard: If I were cynical talking about the system, in particular the last four years of a traditional period at school.

Q51 Charlotte Leslie: The argument for modularisation is to say, “Assessment at every level”. Do you think that that can be carried internally in the school, within the teaching structure?

Martin Collier: Assessment is an integral part of that learning process. You assess children all the time, every day; in every lesson the children are being assessed in some way or another. It is the formalisation of assessment, and the fact that assessment drives all, that, in a sense, has so distorted the system, in particular the last four years of a traditional period at school.

Robert Pritchard: I was used to think modularisation was a great thing: it was brought in with maths. It has been used as a method of youngsters re-sitting and re-sitting. At my school, we start modular exams on 10 January next year and finish on 2 February. Over that time we have some modular exams taking place every single day. I am a chemist, and I will disagree to a certain extent, because you can really understand a subject like chemistry at the end of a long-term process. If you are going to do something on molecular structure and then forget it, it is not going to make you a good chemist at the end of the day. I understand why it was brought in, but it has overtaken the exam system, and the assessment has overtaken teaching.

Q52 Chair: Are we going to move from too much modularity to too little because of central diktat, rather than allowing organic assessment of what is best for a particular subject and particular pupils at a particular time?

David Burton: That is a concern. We were talking about the 20% of young people, or the NEETs: the kind of young people who are going to struggle to maintain their motivation, their attendance and their efforts over a two-year course, without any feedback on how they are doing. We can have ongoing teacher assessment, but that does not have the same status as the final qualification at the moment. As you have
said, we need an education and examination system to meet more students' needs; we need more than one model of assessment, clearly: linear works for some, but modular works for others. I do not think we should be beyond a system that incorporates both.

Q53 Tessa Munt: When was the last time you changed your examining board?
Martin Collier: People change all the time; subjects change.

Q54 Tessa Munt: You changed at the beginning of this year?
Martin Collier: I changed school at the beginning of this year.

Q55 Tessa Munt: That is cheating.
Martin Collier: Subjects change all the time.

Q56 Tessa Munt: It would be normal to change examining boards once a year?
Martin Collier: Not necessarily. Subjects in a school might find an exam board they like and run with it for a long time, but in one subject—English quite often—they might be having problems, for example, with the assessment, and they chop and change.

David Burton: Yes, quite frequently, but what is more frequent is the exam board changing what the requirements. If you are choosing one board to do one subject, they may change the nature of that before you have changed it, if that makes sense. An exam board may say, “Right, for English we are no longer just doing this, we are now doing this and this.” The demands on the students and the teachers have changed even though you ostensibly have not changed, if that makes sense.

Teresa Kelly: We work with 39 exam boards and we change about 20% a year.

Robert Pritchard: We are very similar. The faculty leads look at the exam system and exam boards, and there are probably three or four changes in subjects per year. Often schools change because they have fallen out with the exam boards, something has gone wrong with the assessments or controlled assessments, and they are trying to find the best method for their youngsters. It is changed quite frequently.

Q57 Tessa Munt: It sounds like an awful lot of admin going on all the time.

Robert Pritchard: Absolutely.

Q58 Tessa Munt: What influences your decision to change?
Martin Collier: A subject leader will change because they had a rotten summer, have not got resolution from the exam board, particularly when they have the scripts back, feel that the children have been poorly done by, and therefore go with another exam board.

Robert Pritchard: I would echo that; sometimes you get the results back, you get the coursework back, and there are massive disagreements between the centre and the exam board, with no resolution. The only thing you can do is change.

Tessa Munt: Blimey.

Teresa Kelly: For us it is mainly about the curriculum content, and which of the exam boards are keeping up with the industry standards.

Q59 Tessa Munt: That is very much what I would like to hear.

David Burton: For us, it is very much more what is best for the student, but, within that, how the exam boards were responding to the needs of the outside world and making it more relevant to a young person’s life in terms of the self-assessment, in terms of the content, but also how exciting—for want of a better word—and engaging the curriculum content is.

Q60 Tessa Munt: I am quite alarmed, across all of you, to find that there are different things that are motivating you, and that you are not getting a response from the exam boards. That is not what I would want to hear at all.

Robert Pritchard: Once you write letters to the chief examiner, there is nowhere you can go. If you have a problem with an exam there is nowhere you can go.

Martin Collier: The only way you can go is if you can land a bit of a body blow on them, but it is extremely difficult to prove, and they do not give you any evidence of procedural failure. Now and again you can land a bit of a body blow on them, but it is rare.

Q61 Tessa Munt: You may end up having to go back to them if the next lot do the same thing. What should happen?

Robert Pritchard: There should be more transparency. There should be a method where we can communicate with them. You could know that something has gone wrong with a paper, you have asked for a re-mark, but there is no transparency in terms of what has gone wrong in the system. Sometimes some of the re-marks are bizarre in terms of going up by a couple of grades, going down by a couple of grades, but the big problem is that it is such a lengthy process. By the time you get a resolution somebody who was doing A-levels could have gone on to university, or young people could have gone on to do their A-levels, so it does not really matter any more. The response is slow, and the machine is so big; ironically I tend to agree that a single exam board would be a way, but I suppose the machine would be even bigger then.

Q62 Chair: It would possibly be even slower.

Martin Collier: It might be more transparent. The trouble is that the exam boards are very defensive because they are defending their market share, which comes back to the idea of the market.

Q63 Tessa Munt: It is not the best thing for children.

Martin Collier: Absolutely not.

Q64 Chair: Any thoughts on a recommendation today? Could Government legislate to say, “You can pay a fee to appeal against this and it is automatically sent out anonymously to some other examiners; the school pays if they are wrong, and the examination board pays if they are wrong”?
Q65 Chair: What could they do? You have an individual school with an individual teacher of English who thinks a number of their pupils have been poorly marked: what is this central quango going to do?

Martin Collier: The problem is systemic. The problem at the end of the line, with the school with the child who is disappointed on the day, is the end of the process. Exam boards have various procedures that they operate, and they are governed by Ofqual. In terms of recommendations, Ofqual looks at all of the procedures within the examination boards. For example, over the past 10 or 15 years—I know because I worked for an exam board as an examiner—in history, in particular, exam boards got rid of a review process that happened after scripts were marked and before the results were produced. I would spend days and days in Guildford or London sifting through scripts with other very senior examiners, using our skills to find where the problems lay with the examiners. The review process went, and it partly went with the introduction of on-line marking, but it also went because it was really expensive.

Therefore, the idea was that to shift the emphasis on to re-marks; not all the problems are resolved by the time results day comes; the child gets their result. Some schools can afford re-marks, but they are quite expensive, and others cannot. Some schools have a culture of accepting the results at face value, but other schools are very proactive in challenging the results of the exam board. To my mind, those discrepancies in the system do not give confidence, and that is why parents generally do not have confidence with exam boards, and why schools also have significant problems.

Ofqual needs to review and look at this system of examining, how exams operate, to ensure professional issues: it is a very complex exercise, as you know. Therefore, people have to be trained properly to examine. In my view, they should be properly to examine. In my view, they should be

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Ofqual needs to review and look at this system of examining, how exams operate, to ensure professional issues: it is a very complex exercise, as you know. Therefore, people have to be trained properly to examine. In my view, they should be
qualified and paid properly to examine. We should ensure that people do not examine unless they are ready to do so. On top of that, there should be the structure in place to ensure that the standards are high. We do not have that now.

Q71 Pat Glass: Does everyone agree with that?
Robert Pritchard: It used to be quite difficult to become an examiner, because it was a prestigious thing.
Martin Collier: Absolutely.
Robert Pritchard: Nowadays more or less anybody may.

Q72 Chair: You suggested earlier that the costs in your school nearly doubled in a number of years: that is a huge increase in the expense of the examination system at the same time as a reduction in the quality of the examining that is going on within it.
Martin Collier: Absolutely.

Q73 Chair: Do any of the four of you disagree with that?
Teresa Kelly: No.
David Burton: At the same time, an increasing number of courses rely on so much internal assessment by teachers. We are paying to enter a student into an examination, but are doing most of the work ourselves or being sent off to a computer with OMR readers. So we are paying more money and getting much less service back.

Teresa Kelly: I agree that the examiner’s brief is a very professional one, and it should be a profession, but they should not be the person writing the textbooks and getting the commission and royalties. The commercial arms of some of the examining bodies need to be detached.

Q74 Pat Glass: We need to have a separation of the publications from the examinations.
David Burton: It would be unmanageable to take the current situation, with so many exam boards, so many different qualifications, and try to recreate the review process to ensure that that quality assurance is there. If it went to a single examination body, with single qualifications all of which have a certain grey area.

Q75 Pat Glass: It has been suggested that Ofqual be given the power to fine up to 10% of a company’s profits. Do you think that would make the situation better or worse? Will they simply pass the cost on to you?
Robert Pritchard: The schools would pay; they would just pass the cost on to schools.
Martin Collier: The issue is not the ability for Ofqual to fine; it is the ability for them to get into the exam boards to ensure the systems work properly.
David Burton: The systems let down the students.

Q76 Pat Glass: Instead of fining these people, Ofqual should be getting in and doing a better job?
Martin Collier: Absolutely.

Q77 Alex Cunningham: Robert suggested that anybody could be an examiner these days, so there is clearly a shortage of skilled examiners in the system. What needs to happen to correct that situation, to have the experienced people, the quality examiners in the system? Do you encourage your own teachers to take on the additional role of examiners, for example?
Robert Pritchard: I do encourage teachers to take on that role. Maybe because there are so many examinations now, with modular exams taking place, the exam boards need far more examiners. I have some really inexperienced teachers becoming examiners. I remember when I first started teaching, you needed to be in the profession for a number of years before you could even start.

Q78 Alex Cunningham: Is it a bad thing for young and inexperienced teachers to become examiners?
Robert Pritchard: It is not a bad thing; I encourage all my teachers to become examiners. I am just saying that in the past it used to be experienced practitioners who were able to become examiners, chief examiners, etc.

Q79 Alex Cunningham: How do we make sure that we get the quality that is required in the market? I am not doing down young teachers; some of our young teachers are the best teachers in the system.
Robert Pritchard: Young teachers do it because of the pay. I do not know what the pay for examiners is now, but some of the experienced teachers do not do it because the remuneration is not worth their while.
Martin Collier: You have to recognise that there is a professional element to examining. Part of that means that you have to pay examiners accordingly, but part also means that you have to train them properly and recognise what are professional standards within examining. At the moment that has been taken out of the system. It is now a jobbing job; they put a body in front of the screen, and off they go.

Q80 Alex Cunningham: It is a failure of training?
Martin Collier: It is a failure of training. Over a period of time the professional standard has been reduced and reduced; there are still many good professionals in examining, but they are fewer and further between than they used to be.

Q81 Chair: David, would you agree with the description that Martin has given?
David Burton: Yes.

Q82 Chair: Do you think that Martin has gone over the top Robert, or do you agree with that as well?
Robert Pritchard: No. I do not think he has gone over the top.

Q83 Chair: Teresa, do you think that Martin is right?
Teresa Kelly: It only applies to a very small proportion of examinations—the academic. In the vocational you have to have five, six, seven years’
experience working in the industry before you can become an examiner in motor vehicle mechanics or engineering.

**Q84 Chair:** It is such a strong description, it would be interesting to hear from the panel.

**Teresa Kelly:** You must remember that the academic relates to only 40% of the cohort of young people we are talking about. It is very easy to give an academic answer because that is what most people’s experience is, whereas the bulk of young people are not following those qualifications.

**Q85 Alex Cunningham:** Is it realistic for teachers to take on that additional role? There has been some suggestion and evidence that they should not have that additional workload on top of a full teaching role.

**Teresa Kelly:** To teach something like motor vehicle mechanics, my staff must go out in to industry every two years to ensure they can keep up with what they need to be able to examine.

**Martin Collier:** The other side of it is that you can have examiners who have been out of the classroom or have little contact with children, but the reality is that the starting point for a good examiner is somebody who has an empathy with children, and an empathy with the child whose paper they are marking.

**Q86 Alex Cunningham:** I have some empathy with children when they feel upset about the deal they get when their papers are marked; mistakes can result in devastation for some young people. You talked about blips in the system, and said that mistakes are not widespread, but are you personally satisfied with the reliability of marking across GCSE and A-levels?

**Robert Pritchard:** No. There are far too many examples in this last series of individual subjects of people being dissatisfied with the service they have had. It is not just complaints about the results, because some of the results are bizarre in both ways. There is little satisfaction with a number of exam boards in my centre.

**Chair:** Alex, we need to move on.

**Q87 Alex Cunningham:** I just wanted to know if everybody agreed with that.

**Chair:** Teresa does not.

**Teresa Kelly:** I am generally satisfied.

**Chair:** So it is a split between the vocational and the academic; it is the quality of the examining in the academic subject that has gone downhill.

**Teresa Kelly:** We have a lot of AS and A2 students, and I am generally satisfied with that.

**Q88 Damian Hinds:** I have one two-pronged question. The analysis from Robert Coe and Peter Tynms on so-called grade inflation suggests that, between 1996 and 2007, the average grade at GCSE for students of broadly comparable ability rose by almost two thirds of a grade, and that for A-level, albeit over a longer period from 1988 to 2007, the increase was over two grades. My simple but two-pronged question is: does that ring true, intuitively? If so, what do you primarily attribute it to?

**Robert Pritchard:** It is a complex issue, due to the changing nature of the qualifications. I have wrestled with why this would be. Young people now work much harder than they used to; they are much better prepared for examinations. The teaching profession is working harder and doing a better job than it was. That is one part of the argument, but when I look back at some of the papers that were set a number of years ago, there does seem to be a discrepancy in the level of questions then and now. I am giving two contradictory answers here: the youngsters and the teachers are doing a better job, but, looking back at the papers that I used to set and mark years ago, there has been a shift.

**David Burton:** As a group of professionals, teachers get better over a period of time at preparing their students for examinations. That is partly because of what we said about the markers; the papers have to be set in such a way that the mark schemes can be fairly simple. I do not mean they are easy, but what is being looked for is fairly straightforward.

**Q89 Damian Hinds:** There are two ways you can be better prepared for the exam: better taught—development of the mind—and then teaching for the test. Are you erring more towards the second of those two?

**David Burton:** No. Generally it is both. What we are referring to is the stats that say the grades achieved in the examination have gone up, and there are two parts to that: being taught well, being enthused, being motivated. But also, I talk to my teachers and students about the tactics. We know when we go into the exam it is not just a blank face with a blank paper; we know what we have to do to pass that examination. That is an important part, and professional teachers are very good and getting better at doing that. What sometimes happens is that a new examination system or new qualification comes in, and it takes a few years for that to happen. Or, as sometimes seems to happen, a new qualification comes out and, lo and behold, that year the results are great; we can surmise why that is.

**Martin Collier:** We have to be careful, because young people do not like to be told it is getting easier. They work hard for their exams, they do well on the basis of that, and they need to be praised for that. I do not want to bang a drum, but one of the reasons why grades have gone up is the issue of market share. Having worked on the inside for an exam board, I know they are very wary of saying, “This year there will be fewer A grades”, because they fear that people will then go off to another exam board. That is one of the consequences of setting up the market in exam boards.

You may think that is a rather strange comment, but I have been on the inside of exam boards and heard the conversations. In some subjects it has got harder more than in others; in some, in particular mathematics or science, there are greater similarities with what you saw 10 years ago. In other subjects there has been a dilution. The cynical response to the whole things was to add an extra grade at the top, which is what happened with the A* grade at GCSE and then at A-level. They were all shunted on one.
Q90 Alex Cunningham: You are saying simply that examining boards are awarding higher grades than they ought to to students because they want to retain their market share.

Martin Collier: No; I said that what the exam boards are worried about and have been worried about is that, if they hit the children hard one year, and the number of top grades diminish, people will go elsewhere.

Q91 Alex Cunningham: Is that not the same thing?

Martin Collier: No.

Chair: It sounds like it to me, but I'm a simple person.

Q92 Tessa Munt: I have multiple questions again. We have talked about re-marking, and I want to have your comments on re-taking. When considering whether you are going to put a particular pupil in for a re-take, do you balance that against cost at all?

Martin Collier: In my school, no.

Q93 Tessa Munt: What do you do?

Martin Collier: They are only allowed one re-take per subject, because educationally more than that is not acceptable in our view.

Q94 Tessa Munt: It is a game.

Martin Collier: Yes, it is a game.

David Burton: Similar, but in individual cases sometimes there might be extenuating circumstances, in which case you think that that re-take did not count.

Q95 Tessa Munt: They get one re-take?

David Burton: Normally, yes. However, I can think of a girl who this summer had to do a number of the Functional Skills to get the Diploma, and I am delighted she did because she got through, but there were extenuating circumstances in her case. As a policy, we would not have three or four re-takes.

Teresa Kelly: We have similar reasons for how many re-takes we would allow the student, but generally speaking, students pay for re-takes in college.

Robert Pritchard: It is my only budget heading where I am not too worried if it goes up, unfortunately, so it is a similar picture: one re-take, and the cost is not an option at the moment.

Q96 Tessa Munt: I was going to ask, how do you do the re-take thing in the context of a reducing budget?

Robert Pritchard: At the moment it is the one budget heading that we have set, expecting that we are going to have so many re-takes. As time goes on, hopefully we will look at whether the students pay, etc. It is not an issue currently, but in the future it could be.

David Burton: I can see that being a problem: if students are asked to pay then realistically we are asking parents to pay. That means that parents in a position to pay will, and the others will not. That means we have a postcode lottery.

Martin Collier: That is the same with re-marks as well: it is the fear that some can pay and some cannot.

Q97 Tessa Munt: Do you find it easier to compare the costs of one exam board against the other when you are looking at the schedule of what they are offering?

Robert Pritchard: Generally. In choosing an exam board for a particular subject, we do not look at the costs, because they are comparable in terms of prices for the module entries.

Teresa Kelly: Same: we would not look at cost.

Q98 Craig Whittaker: We spoke earlier about endorsed textbooks. Do schools and colleges tend to over-rely on endorsed textbooks due to pressure to improve the examination performance of their pupils?

David Burton: No, I would not say we do particularly.

A lot of textbooks can be quite poor and often book writers have not taken into consideration the reading age of students. They are only concerned with the content of the subject, rather than the accessibility of the material they are writing. What has increased and improved in the last few years has been the number of resources produced via electronic means; they are much better quality, generally. The textbooks themselves are often not particularly good.

Q99 Craig Whittaker: Do they come from the examining boards?

David Burton: It is a mixture.

Robert Pritchard: To reiterate what was said earlier, chief examiners are writing books, and lots of my subject leaders want to buy the books because they are written by the chief examiner; they think they are going to get an inside line. It goes back to costs: with subjects that are changing specifications and exam boards, I get the subject leader coming to me again saying, “Well, I have changed exam boards, and this is written by the new chief examiner. Can I have some money for some new textbooks?” Often they get “no” as an answer, however.

Q100 Chair: Does the tail wag the dog? Are we going to have additional away strips?

Martin Collier: It does. I am in a position of having written some of these poor textbooks, but things change. With Curriculum 2000, in terms of A-level, the market was opened up, and a number of textbooks were produced because it was felt that the books for A-level previous to 2000 were too hard for some people. The real sea change and the problem has been with the badging of books, because then you get the scenario whereby, if you are doing a course, you are under pressure to buy the book that has been badged by the exam board. If you are talking about one exam board, it is the publisher/owner of the exam board who publishes the books. The danger is that you get into a cycle whereby the chief examiner feels that he or she has got to set questions that come out of the book. You are not providing a textbook: you are providing a course book. If you think that A-levels and other academic disciplines are about broadening the mind, reading around a subject and that sort of thing, those things are mitigated against by these branded books.

Q101 Chair: In terms of a recommendation?

Teresa Kelly: The set texts or course books should be separated totally from the examination board function.
Q102 Chair: Do you all agree with that?  
David Burton: I would agree with that.  
Robert Pritchard: I would agree with that.

Q103 Chair: David is saying yes, and also Martin, obviously.  
Martin Collier: I am not, because I have a vested interest. I withdraw.

Q104 Chair: Martin, we often have vested interests speaking at this Committee, but rarely so openly and honestly. Thank you for that.  
Robert Pritchard: It is the badging. Chief examiners have always had input into textbooks, for years and years.

Q105 Chair: All four of you agree that the badging is wrong and should stop. Excellent, thank you all very much for coming along and giving us such stimulating evidence this morning. We look forward to hearing from you at whatever length you consider appropriate.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Professor Nick Lieven, Pro Vice-Chancellor, University of Bristol, Ana Gutiérrez, Head of Student Administration, University of Bournemouth, and Anne Tipple, National Skills Executive, British Chambers of Commerce, gave evidence.

Q106 Chair: Good morning. Thank you very much for coming along to give evidence to us today. I am sorry we have a very short slot before we head off to the Autumn Statement, but I know we will pack in lots of valuable content, and I appreciate your taking the time to come along. As you probably heard me say to the last panel, we make recommendations to Government; we are always interested to hear from you clarity about what you think the recommendations in our report should be. I will warn you up with a general question before coming to my colleagues: are the examinations that 15 to 19-year-olds sit providing not only for the young people but for your purposes at the moment?  
Ana Gutiérrez: Thank you, Mr Chairman, for giving me the opportunity to come to the Committee on behalf of Bournemouth University. I have over two decades’ experience in UK administration, and I have overall responsibility at Bournemouth University for the admission of around 3,800 students a year. A-levels and vocational qualifications are very important for Bournemouth University: on a day-to-day basis that is how we admit our students. We believe that the qualifications prepare students for higher education. We have done a study looking at the correlation between tariff points and outcomes of the degree, and we see that correlation happens, not only for A-levels, but for vocational qualifications. Perhaps it is more an issue of methods of teaching or coaching for assessments that gives the students a shock when they come to higher education. There is anecdotal evidence that sometimes perhaps the method of teaching in schools is of spoon-feeding students, and therefore they do not have the intellectual capability for research and synthesis of information when they come to us.

Q107 Chair: Is that spoon-feeding a function of the examination system itself? You said that A-levels are a pretty good predictor of degree grade, so they are useful from that point of view.

Ana Gutiérrez: We were talking before about how pupils were prepared for exams, and whether there is too much emphasis on that. The way that students can re-take exams is not preparing them well for how examinations are run in higher education. We have students who come with different expectations: they think that that is the way they are going to be treated in higher education as well.

Q108 Chair: Anne, from a business point of view, is it delivering young people suitably educated?  
Anne Tipple: Sadly not, no. You will have seen a report that the British Chambers of Commerce compiled earlier this year. It was a large sample, 7,149 employers, of which just over 72% of the respondents said they did not feel confident in recruiting school leavers with A-levels or equivalent. We find this very concerning.

Q109 Chair: Do we have that over time? Employers have always moaned that the young people produced do not have the skills they should have.  
Anne Tipple: Absolutely. I spend my life going up and down the country talking to employers. Once we finished the research this summer, I went to five different employer focus groups to drill down into some of this information. Employers have always groused about the softer skills—the employability skills—but there is a serious concern about what appear to be declines in literacy and numeracy. It is very difficult to get underneath the anecdotal version of this, but I have two examples from larger employers, both employing over 200 employees. One is a commercial legal company and the other is a manufacturing distributor: they would not be named. They are in different parts of the country. Both of these companies take on a number of school leavers every year for apprenticeship, and they use the GCSE A-C Grades as a first sift, and then they do their own assessment tests. The commercial legal company uses an in-tray exercise, largely on the telephone, asking people to answer queries, respond to those queries,
compose simple e-mails and letters, and do simple arithmetic. They have a pass rate, which has declined year-on-year over the last four years, with a very low level this year. The manufacturing distributor does a similar thing; it does a written comprehension test. It has a piece of text and the applicants are then asked to answer questions on that. They are also asked to do a simple arithmetic test. Again, the pass rate has declined considerably over the last few years.

Q110 Chair: When you say considerably, how much?
Anne Tipple: I could not pin them down to percentages.

Q111 Chair: If you could write to us, we would be very interested to see that, if it is not already in your submission to us.
Anne Tipple: It isn’t, so yes, okay. Interestingly, the manufacturing distributor also does hand-eye co-ordination and aptitude tests for the production line, and the pass rate has not changed on that. That seems to indicate that intellectual capability or aptitude has remained the same; perhaps there is something else about the examinations. When we quizzed employers at the focus groups about what they felt was going wrong—the complaint was universal across all sectors; the difference was that larger companies with sophisticated HR functions were more accepting and equipped to deal with the problems and smaller companies were not—one of the issues that came up a number of times was raised by employers who were also parents, who observed that they felt examinations were more geared towards recall, rather than thoughtful analysis. I have no way of knowing whether that was true.

Chair: Nick, from your point of view?
Professor Lieven: It is a curate’s egg, really. The best students, without doubt, are just as driven and capable as they ever were: there is no question about that. There is a greater diversity. We need to go back to the fundamental issue that higher education, the sector I come from, has changed: 30 to 35 years ago, 8% of population went into higher education; now 43% do. The issue is whether the A-level qualification, which is the one that I am most familiar with, is fit for purpose. Increasingly, they are saying to a 16-year-old, “Start your A-levels here and we will not assess you for two years”. You do need to put some checks and balances in the system as you go through: it is good for motivation, apart from anything else.

Q112 Chair: Do you welcome Michael Gove’s direction of travel in reducing modularisation in exams?
Professor Lieven: Yes. There are advantages in modularisation. The group that I am primarily concerned with is the output from 16 to 18-year-olds who then come into university. It is unreasonable to say to a 16-year-old, “Start your A-levels here and we will not assess you for two years”. You do need to put

Q113 Chair: You would like to keep the AS Level?
Professor Lieven: The multiplicity of modules that students do can be condensed. There does need to be an element in the assessment that brings the synoptic element together. Michael Gove’s speech on 13 October was moving in the right direction.

Q114 Craig Whittaker: A chap called David Boyle, the Managing Director of Crosslee, the largest UK independent manufacturer of tumble dryers, happens to be in my patch, and was telling me last week exactly what you were saying. In his business they do a lot of production line work. He said exactly what has been pointed out about literacy and numeracy but, more importantly for him, social skills are necessary, because people work in a small group. On that basis, are A-levels and GCSEs fit for purpose?
Anne Tipple: Employers tell us they are not. There are vast numbers of complaints about the inability of young people to communicate effectively, and that means to listen actively, to engage in conversation, to ask relevant questions, to follow instruction. Employers universally tell us that the first skill that they require is an ability to listen, to follow instruction. After that, they are happy to train them in the skills that they require. Increasingly, they are finding that many young people cannot construct a simple letter or compose a simple e-mail.

Q115 Craig Whittaker: As a follow-up, the last panel of headteachers all indicated that they involved employers—although I am sure if we dig deeper we will find they did not in some cases—in the schools. Do you think that is important, or do you think it happens enough?
Anne Tipple: It happens. Our research showed that 66% of employers have been involved with some sort of school education activity. When you speak to employers about those activities—company visits, arranging work experience—they are happy and willing to do them, provided somebody facilitates them and tells them what they want and when. They are not involved in the design of the curriculum or of qualifications, in the majority of cases.

Q116 Tessa Munt: This is probably directed at Nick. I wanted to explore more about A-levels—the idea of independent thinking and in-depth, strong knowledge of a subject. Some of the evidence we have seen and various reports—such as the science report—suggest
that that is not coming through. Can you talk about that a bit more?

Professor Lieven: It goes back to the modularisation and synoptic element, particularly in the arts and humanities. In universities there is something called scholarship; that has almost become a four-letter word. It is about being able to solve hard, complex problems. A university education is about being able to solve problems that you have never seen before. I say to our students, when you leave us, 90% of what you do will not involve what you have learned at university; it is about solving things you have never seen before: we give you the toolkit to do that.

The independent learning is really important, and that requires being able to draw often tenuous links together to say, “This is the global solution to the problem”, which you have never seen before. The A-level system, through modularisation, simply does not equip students to do that. They are good at saying, “Here is a problem that has a discrete area to work on,” and solving it. That also leads to gaps in understanding. In the last session Martin Collier said, “We know what we need to do to pass the examinations that we are doing, or the qualifications that we are going through, are not necessarily what employers want, it depends how you phrase it. If you say to a parent, “Do you want your child to come out of school with qualifications that you feel are worth something,” and to be a success in the workplace?” they will say, “Yes. If you take out what is a success in the workplace and to be a success in the workplace?” They will say, “We need employer input here”, because schools do not have to answer to them directly. Anne Tipple: Schools are in a hard place here, because the schools’ customers are the pupils and the parents. Parents are forensic about what their offspring are doing at school, and want to know what the results are. They like fairly regular updates—we all do as parents—about the output from our offspring. That does not necessarily map on to the needs of the employer, so schools are immediately answerable to parents, and the headteacher’s door will be kicked down. This makes it extremely hard for schools to say to exam boards, “We need employer input here”, because schools do not have to answer to them directly.

Q117 Tessa Munt: Do we need to reverse some changes into the GCSE side of things, or is that completely different?

Professor Lieven: It is hard to do. For education it is cumulative: you need the building bricks, and GCSEs are segmented. It is quite hard to draw all these links together simultaneously, and this grows as your educational capacity builds. It does take time: GCSEs are segmented. We cannot put unreasonable demands on 16-year-olds: it is hard enough when you are 21 and getting a degree.

Q118 Charlotte Leslie: In terms of ensuring that our qualifications have some bearing on what employers and universities need and want, how could the Government ensure that the needs of universities and employers, which are essentially the same needs as those of the young people themselves, are much more embedded in the exam syllabus? Do you see a tension in that mission, with the competition between the exam boards?

Anne Tipple: Employers do not see a tension between exam boards, because they are oblivious to the fact that schools and colleges can choose exam boards; they do not know any of that. They are oblivious to most of the architecture of the curriculum and examination system. They are interested in outcomes. For employers, the needs are quite simple: they want people who can read and write, do simple arithmetic, analyse information, engage in conversation, and engage in society.

When I talk to employers and they host young people, they find that these young people are bright—that is the quote you get. “They are quite bright actually”.

They clearly have intellectual capability, but it seems that the examinations that they are doing, or the education that they are going through, are not currently equipping them for life in the work force today. We are dominated by the service sector now, and in many occupations in that sector the engagement that employees have to have with customers, suppliers and other stakeholders is more sophisticated than it used to be. I am not convinced that the education system has kept up with that level of sophistication.

Q119 Chair: What would you like to see?

Anne Tipple: I would like to see a much greater focus on conversation, questioning, listening actively and following instructions.

Q120 Charlotte Leslie: I see a danger in what you have said, that a well-meaning person would put all sorts of modules into a subject, saying, “This is where we learn about communication and listening; this is where we learn about teamwork.” It would all be done on paper, and still the young person would have no idea about how to listen, because they would not be doing it; they would not have any idea about teamwork, because they would not be doing it. Is it more to do with the method of teaching, what is expected in cultures in schools, than just shoving bits on to the curriculum?

Anne Tipple: It is exactly that.

Professor Lieven: Schools are in a hard place here, because the schools’ customers are the pupils and the parents. Parents are forensic about what their offspring are doing at school, and want to know what the results are. They like fairly regular updates—we all do as parents—about the output from our offspring. That does not necessarily map on to the needs of the employer, so schools are immediately answerable to parents, and the headteacher’s door will be kicked down. This makes it extremely hard for schools to say to exam boards, “We need employer input here”, because schools do not have to answer to them directly.

Ana Gutiérrez: Being one of the leading professional education institutions, we see the importance of blending vocational and academic qualifications. It is a pity that at Bournemouth University we do not have any opportunity to be part of the design of qualifications. We did so when the Diplomas were being designed, and a couple of our more flagship areas—creative media and tourism—were part of the design of that curriculum. It is a lost opportunity that universities such as Bournemouth, which have a mixture of vocational and academic qualifications, cannot be part of that design. The previous panel spoke about a partnership of all interested parties; that has to be part of the design, to ensure that those qualifications are bringing what is needed.

Q121 Charlotte Leslie: In terms of what parents want, it depends how you phrase it. If you say to a parent, “Do you want your child to come out of school with qualifications that you feel are worth something and to be a success in the workplace?” they will say yes. If you take out what is a success in the workplace and create a structure whereby that is ingested into the school system, can you then have a system whereby what employers want and what schools want are not two different things? Is that possible?
Ana Gutiérrez: At Bournemouth we like to prepare students for flexible futures. We do that by having a unique blend of education with certain professional practices. As Nick was saying before, it is not necessarily that they will go to the area of work where they have studied. It is about what is going to be the future: they have to prepare for that flexibility. Sometimes we put students into boxes: if they go for vocational or academic qualifications it is because of their intellectual capability. It is sad to do it in that way, because it may be a question of learning preferences—what is best for that student, how they will learn better—but we must ensure that doors are open for how they would like to take it. Sometimes it will be going to employment after that; sometimes they will see that it has opened their appetite to take them to higher education.

Q122 Damian Hinds: Following directly from Charlotte, I am very interested in how you systematise what employers want, which in a broad sense is what the economy wants, and what the young person really wants. How do you systematise that? We get lots of employers here saying, “We do not have enough team work, we do not have enough active listening”. You could add to the list—particularly in the service sector, which is my background—self presentation, smiling, customer empathy, service ethic, work ethic and the link between effort and reward, all of which seem to be, as we hear from time to time, somewhat undeveloped in the service sector here, compared to in other countries, and possibly here in the past. Apart from saying you want bigger, better, faster, more, how do you make it happen? Today’s session is about the exam system; I am not entirely convinced that question really is about the exams, but it is about how employers and the economy have an ongoing input to make sure those things are being delivered in schools.

Anne Tipple: They do not. How can they? It is about a better engagement in curriculum design, but frankly that is going to be very difficult when 99.9% of businesses in this country employ fewer than 250 people. In the current economic climate, they are running thin on the ground; there is very little fat in the lot where it does not happen, as well. Although you are posing the question how can that be done—there must be a route—our question as a Committee to you is how should it be done? If you had a free hand to make a recommendation to Government, with particular reference to examinations, because that is what we are here to talk about today, how should it happen?

Anne Tipple: We would like to see a greater engagement of business in the design of examinations. We would ask employer bodies to facilitate that, so that they corral employers to get involved.

Q126 Chair: Successive Governments, successive business people, have been saying this for the last 40 years. We can make a recommendation saying there must be more engagement of employers in the examination system; we will join academics who tell us all the time that that has been said before. How do we turn it from a wish to something more concrete?

Anne Tipple: Absolutely it is, but the education system is a very impenetrable place for the average employer. How do you engage? You cannot wander into a school and say, “I cannot get any young people who do this. What can I do to help?” They will say, “Well, I have my exam system”. As you have already said, schools are very driven by results—their exam results and Ofsted results—because otherwise parents are beating a path to their door. It is very difficult for employers to engage unless a route is made available to them.
At Bournemouth, although we have students, to release their percentile place, as happens, when it would make sense, for the top bracket of select on the basis of A-levels. Has the time come that it is harder and harder for universities to sort and education, and there seems to be a broadening view

Professor Lieven: Yes. There is a downside to it, which is that there will be a lot more appeals. We need to be aware that it is a fairly coarse-grain system; because the banding is fairly wide; if people embed within that, it reduces the numbers: we have seen a lot more appeals recently. There is a down side to it, but it would be a useful way of discerning where people fit in the band.

Dame Hinds: You could have a half way house, as happens on the GMAT, for example, where on the things that can be positively marked—multiple choice—you get a percentile place, and on the essay questions you get a grade. The employer or education institution get to see that detail and can make their own choices.

Craig Whittaker: A year ago I opened a new £2.5 million technology centre for one of my local high schools. Not one local business had been involved in setting that business up. HBOS, or Lloyds TSB as it is now known, up until six months ago when I intervened had never had a communication with the local college about supplying their 6,000 employees. The question goes back to what Anne said: how do we formulate it so that these large employers have an input into ensuring that that never happens at that high school, and we have much more integration of companies in designing exam processes? How do we physically do it?

Anne Tipple: There has to be an initiative that takes the businesses to the schools or the education system. Business exists to deliver its business and to make a profit; that is what it is there for. It will have other responsibilities, but it will not necessarily go out and seek that engagement voluntarily—it has other priorities—so facilitation is needed to make that happen, otherwise it will not.

Craig Whittaker: Nick, you are shaking your head.

Professor Lieven: I was at Lloyds TSB last night, and they have just introduced something called the Lloyds Scholars, which is to do exactly what you are saying. It is starting in two universities, Bristol and Sheffield, to widen participation and bring people with the right skills and qualities. They will do it through volunteering and secondments to the company as a pull-through to encourage people to go into industry and commerce with the right skills. Industry is starting to be aware that there is a need for them to engage as well. They are saying to these scholars, “We want you to go into schools as well”.

Damian Hinds: There is much talk about being able to sort and select students for higher education, and there seems to be a broadening view that it is harder and harder for universities to sort and select on the basis of A-levels. Has the time come when it would make sense, for the top bracket of students, to release their percentile place, as happens, for example, with the GMAT?

Ana Gutiérrez: At Bournemouth, although we have about 260 students coming in with A*, it is not an area that needs to have that granularity. Most of our students we require to come with 300 points, or three Bs equivalent—on our flagship courses in media, social care and tourism it is 340. We are still quite happy that the A-levels will produce that.
Q136 Pat Glass: We have heard some discussion today that what we need is one examination board. Would you support that?

Professor Lieven: As was said in the last session, Ofqual needs more teeth. Whether you have one examination board or 10, it is the checks and balances you have in the system that are important. We have a mechanism or body there to do it, but has it been tasked with delivering that? I do not know what its remit is.

Q137 Pat Glass: Thanks, that was really good. Ana, you get an opportunity to come back now.

Ana Gutiérrez: Thank you very much. You were asking whether the curriculum was skills-based or knowledge-based: for us it is really a mixture of the two.

Q138 Pat Glass: A more balanced curriculum?

Ana Gutiérrez: Yes. Bournemouth University has the largest number of sandwich students in England, Wales and Scotland. We see a big difference when those students come back from their placement year: they have become more mature, they have done the applied learning Anne talked about, they are enthusiastic about continuing to their level H and do their dissertation, because they can apply what they have learnt; they can see what is happening. We have very good feedback from employers in terms of saying that is what they need. They are involved in helping them develop, but also they are getting a lot back.

Chair: Thank you very much for coming in today.
Thursday 15 December 2011

Members present:
Mr Graham Stuart (Chair)
Neil Carmichael
Pat Glass
Damian Hinds
Tessa Munt
Craig Whittaker

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Paul Barnes, Paul Evans and Steph Warren, senior examiners, gave evidence.

Q139 Chair: Good morning. Welcome to this meeting of the Education Committee, as part of our ongoing inquiry into the awarding bodies, and specifically in response to the stories that have appeared in The Daily Telegraph in the last week or so. I am grateful to the three of you for coming along this morning to give evidence to us. I would be grateful if each of you made a short statement, of no more than five minutes, if I can be brutal on that. I would be happy to start the session with that. Mr Barnes, may I start with you?

Paul Barnes: Yes. Good morning. First, I wish to challenge the issues raised by The Daily Telegraph article—last Thursday, I believe. It was alleged that, first of all, we gave specific information about the 2012 exam—that we actually leaked information. The second one was that advice given at the conference held in the Danubius hotel in London actually contravened the guidelines. So the issues are the breach of confidentiality and offering too much beyond the guidelines. The two allegations I refute. A little bit of background—I have actually taught the subject for 33 years; I am into my 34th year now. I have worked with the board since 1988, when GCSE began. I moved through the ranks to senior and then became principal examiner about four years ago.

The aim of the seminar in London was to give retrospective advice on the 2011 paper, to provide sort of future guidance and to equip teachers with an understanding of the new specification. It is my belief that my comments were edited and taken out of context. I would like to contextualise and even, perhaps, to offer the method of examining—even going as far as showing you the sort of exam papers—so you get a feel for how I can actually ask questions. My responsibility is for three outline papers—the USA, Germany and the Middle East—the most popular being the USA, 1929–2000. The paper itself is divided into three sections—changing life in America, the race issue and the wider issue in foreign affairs. Candidates have to choose two of those sections and answer an essay as well, all in just one hour. There is a huge volume of work to cover, and I can ask only four questions, which I shall come back to.

The legacy paper, in the last specification, ran from 1929 to 1990. When the new spec came about, it was suggested that we stretched it, to make it more of an outline study, and took it to 2000. The advice given at the time was that there would be very little detail on this period of the 1990s, and that was stressed at the CPDs. The outline paper focuses more sharply on concepts: we look at causation, change, continuity, the significance of events and the contribution of significant individuals. The 1990s is very much a peripheral sort of topic; it is not a major part of the specification. We could have a huge debate now as to whether events in the Gulf war are history or current affairs. The presidencies of Bush and Clinton are not yet significant. I would argue that Bush’s presidency was, not, in fact, that significant—it did not really achieve much. It is whether these current affairs have actually become history, and that is an issue.

The inference of The Daily Telegraph was that the topic area is a major part of the spec. In fact—I have the spec here—it is half of one bullet point; a very, very small part of the work itself. The structure of the paper will exemplify this, if I can just contextualise—Chair: Two minutes left, Mr Barnes.

Paul Barnes: Very quickly, here is the paper. Basically, I can ask just four questions in one section. Questions A and B are low tariff. Questions C and D are more challenging; they differentiate; they are harder and your better candidates score better on these two.

When I mentioned this word “never”, what I actually meant is that it is never an in-depth question; it cannot be. On an eight-mark question, I cannot be asking questions on Clinton or Bush—it has got to be on the peripheral sort of topic; it is not a major part of the specification. We could have a huge debate now as to whether events in the Gulf war are history or current affairs. The presidencies of Bush and Clinton are not yet significant. I would argue that Bush’s presidency was, not, in fact, that significant—it did not really achieve much. It is whether these current affairs have actually become history, and that is an issue.

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Resources were an issue as well. Only this year did we have a textbook published. It was published in, I think, May of this year, and the Welsh edition actually came out just last month. We told centres that, because of the lack of resources, there would not be anything specific on the 1990s. Again, that was actually given to people at the meeting. I made the point that candidates had to do an essay as well and that they would have to cover the 1990s in the essay section, so you have to teach it.

The allegation that this was a breach of confidentiality is therefore totally wrong. Everything that was said in the meetings is in the public domain. I have even brought in one sheet from my examiner’s report that said last year, “It is to be noted that the paper now runs to 2000 and centres should be encouraged to touch on events in the 1990s.” It is there in the public domain.

Chair: Can I bring you to a close?

Paul Barnes: Yes. Very quickly, as far as I am concerned, there has been no breach of my duties as a principal examiner. As a member of the WJEC, I have always tried to uphold the very high standards of the exam board, and I truly believe that I have been misrepresented by The Daily Telegraph.

Q140 Chair: Thank you. Mr Evans, may I continue with you?

Paul Evans: I am a chief examiner of history for the WJEC, and I set six study-in-depth papers. Those six papers count for 90 questions. I also supervise a team of our in-depth study marking papers and assistant examiners. I must stress that this is a part-time role, for which I am appointed on an annual basis. I am a full-time teacher and a faculty leader for humanities in a school in Wales.

I expect that members of the Committee will be aware of the widespread coverage in The Daily Telegraph of a seminar delivered on 11 November 2011. I am, however, recorded as having referred to section A as going through a cycle. The choice of the unit for the compulsory section of question A and the cycle are published on the WJEC website on page 9 of the teaching guide. I have a copy of page 9 here, where we actually record the dates and the years. This has been available on the website since March 2009.

Hence, when I referred to the compulsory question for the summer of 2012 focusing on the changing life of the German people ‘33 to ‘39, I was reporting what was already public knowledge. Indeed, WJEC is not alone in making the subject of a compulsory question public. For example, other exam boards, such as AQA, publish the cycle for the compulsory question for their history specification, which, because it is in the specification, would have been approved by the regulator.

In the seminar, teachers asked whether they should be teaching all three sub-units of the in-depth study. As teachers are informed which of the sub-units is to be the subject of the compulsory question, and as the pupils were given a choice in the second part, they need only be taught two sub-units in order to complete the exam. Whereas it might be thought appropriate for the full course to be taught, I am aware that time allocated to schools for the teaching of history at GCSE varies between schools, some having five hours per fortnight to deliver the course, and others four. In some schools, teachers do not have enough time to finish teaching the full specification, and it was in that context that I was answering questions about missing sections out. Hence, pupils could be taught only two sub-units of the three.

As a result of the publication in The Daily Telegraph, on which I had no opportunity to comment beforehand, I have been suspended by WJEC, which is currently undertaking an investigation. I am here to assist you as best I can, but I have been advised not to answer questions on my own position. I can say this: the word “cheating” was an inappropriate term to use. What I am saying is that the identification of a compulsory question was made clear in the teaching guide, but not in the specification. The specification will have been approved by the regulator. I do not understand that the regulator has any say in terms of the teaching guide that we issued in March 2009, and in speaking to other teachers I made the off-the-cuff remark that the regulator might tell us off.

I can say that at no stage during the seminar did I reveal any specific questions that were to be asked in the 2012 exam or in any subsequent exam; nor did I...
breach any confidentiality regarding the examination process itself. I am obviously happy to take questions on the broad issues raised, but as I say, on advice and because I am subject to an ongoing investigation, I am not prepared to say anything further regarding the specific words attributed to me, particularly as I have not yet seen the full transcript of the seminar to put my words in the full and proper context.

Q141 Chair: Thank you, Mr Evans, Ms Warren. Steph Warren: Good morning, everybody. I have something I would like to read out to you, please. I have been a geography teacher for 31 years and an Edexcel examiner since 1988. I became a principal examiner in 1999 and a chief examiner in 2009. I would like to thank the Committee for giving me a chance to make a statement about the press coverage I received last week. I do not even recall the conversation that has been the subject of all the press coverage in the past few days. I do feel that my views and the training session as a whole, which the reporter attended, have been misrepresented, and I want to put this on record.

It would seem from the video clip that the journalist approached me when I was talking to a couple of colleagues, not during the main training session. I had had a really exhausting day of training on one of the most difficult training days for teachers that I have ever done in my career. The students of some of the delegates found the exam very difficult and had not got the results they were predicted. I had spent much of the day defending the questions that had been set. I do regret the comments I made, which create the impression that the content of the specification is less, and therefore the specification is easier than other geography GCSEs. I did not say that the specification was easier—I am coming off my thing now. That has been reported incorrectly. My own daughter has transcribed what they said that I said, and it is not true. The comments were made as part of a conversation I was having with some colleagues and led from their comments. It appears that the video clip is not the whole conversation, and the comments made by the other people have been edited out. My comments were said in the heat of the moment, after a long training session. I do not think that the specification has less content. In fact, I had problems covering all of the content myself for the first cycle of the course, so there is no way that I can think that—I had a lot of problems.

I do not know why I made those comments. I have not read the other awarding bodies’ specifications or even Edexcel’s other geography specification, so I have no basis on which to compare them. It was an inappropriate comment that I deeply regret making. I am only human and we all make mistakes.

There were also a number of comments made about my integrity in the press. I have been a trainer for many years. In autumn 2010 and spring 2011, many of the training events were cancelled because there was so little demand from centres. I would like you to infer from that without me saying any more. It just shows that I do not give anything away, or else they would be queuing at the door. I have always maintained the highest integrity in my training sessions, and would never discuss the content of specific examination papers. This has been verified by the e-mails of support that I have received.

Training sessions are run to help centres improve student achievement. Therefore, comments are made in this light. In fact, one of the aims of the session is to share ideas and good practice. Any comments I made during the main session were made to share good practice and were based on the specification, not the exam papers.

I believe I was also recorded saying that I could not remember what was on specific exam papers. That is the truth, and an observation made by many principal examiners. The papers are written two years in advance and are not kept by anybody but Edexcel. If the papers are sent to us for checking, they are immediately returned. There is very tight security on those procedures.

I was also accused of saying that parts of the exam papers were easier than others. That is also a misunderstanding of an answer to a question from the journalist. I was discussing the specification, not the exam papers. I believe that the life experiences of students in a subject such as geography enable them to access the knowledge and understanding of some topics better than others. For example, a topic on coasts and, to some extent, rivers, is more familiar to students than, for example, a topic such as tectonics or glaciation, unless, of course, the students live in a seismic or glaciated area.

I would like to thank you again for giving me this opportunity to make the statement about the press coverage. I would like to add one final thing. No matter how difficult the media coverage has been for me, my family and my school, who have all been extremely supportive, the heart of examining is the children who are sitting the exams. They are working extremely hard and are very nervous about the exams they will sit in future. My concerns are for them, and how the coverage by the media affects them and their belief in themselves and the examination system. They are the most important people in all this.

Q142 Chair: Thank you. That is a good note on which to end. Is the overwhelming pressure within the school system to turn Ds into Cs leading to behaviour by schools and exam boards that is educationally counter-productive?

Paul Barnes: Of course there is pressure to raise achievement, yes, at the critical point from D to C, arguably as well from A to A* and from G to F. At the end of the day, we want to push our candidates to their potential. The fact is that there is the benchmark: the five A* to C as good passes. We take a critical look at what is needed to raise achievement from D to C. We live in a competitive world; we are judged by our results. As my colleague said, at the heart of all this is the candidate. If someone is predicted to get an E or an F and they achieve a D, that is a good achievement.

Q143 Chair: But are the teachers coming to your sessions focused on trying to turn Ds into Cs? Is that what they are hoping for?
**Paul Barnes:** It depends on the circumstances of their school. Perhaps at a school that does not perform well there is pressure to get to that C boundary. I know from re-marks that we re-mark lots of A grades looking for A*. I have re-marked this year G grades looking for that little bit better mark. A grade converts to a mark and those marks mean something even to lower-achieving candidates. They have achieved something. I wish years back that they had not made that line between the good pass of C and above. They virtually destroyed others back in 1988 when we first examined. I try to tell some of my candidates who I know will never get to a C, “You have done well; you have got an E or a D.” I do not feel under pressure to push things on. It depends on the individual centre.

**Q144 Chair:** You have said that it is a competitive world, well, not least among awarding bodies. When you are working for an awarding body, how much pressure are you under to help it maintain market share in the subject area in which you work?

**Paul Barnes:** This conflict, if it is one, is between the educational aims and standards, and the commercial. If you believe The Daily Telegraph there is “aggressive competition to win business”. WJEC, I think, is too small in that respect, relatively, because we are a small awarding board and we do not attract the big publishers. Our entries are quite often small. Luckily for us in Wales, we have the Welsh Assembly Government, which funded the textbooks.1 On the other route B, there are six topics that have never been resourced; until now because the money has been released. Teachers had to produce their own resources on that part.

**Q145 Chair:** But the Welsh board has been increasing its market share in particular subjects in England: English, I think, has gone from 7 to 18%. How is it doing that if it is not trading on schools’ desire to deliver results?

**Paul Barnes:** For the same reasons. It is a small board, it is accessible and you can pick a phone up and speak to the subject officer. You will have good contact straight away—it is not an automated system, as with some of the exam boards. From INSET as well, what has gone down really well is that we are practising teachers. Often we teach in these CPDs. We actually talk teacher to teacher, which is welcome. We are back in the classroom tomorrow.

**Q146 Chair:** So is there pressure on you?

**Paul Barnes:** I do not think so, no.

**Paul Evans:** We have never been given any information that we need to go out and market the course. The CPD units are advertised, people apply and attend. We never go out actively to market because it is not part of our role. We just receive it.  

**Steph Warren:** No, I have never ever been asked to market anything for Edexcel at all. If you want my opinion as to why people come to different specs—this is what my colleague said—it is because they like to have communication with an exam board. The exam boards that they like are the ones that have someone on the end of the phone who they can speak to if they are having a problem.

My comment on the C to D is that they are not looking at answers, questions or whatever. They are looking at interpretation of specifications so that they can improve their candidates. That is why I think they come to INSET training. The ones who speak to me at the end of it say, “Your hints on how you teach it yourself are the things that we want to hear. We want teaching ideas so that we can help our candidates understand.” I reiterate that I have nothing to do with marketing at all. It is my job to maintain standards on geography, not to market anything. So I know nothing.

**Q147 Craig Whittaker:** Good morning. Libby Purves in The Times on Monday said, “What more revolting in a society than cheating and manipulating the young, exploiting their anxieties and efforts while starving them of the proper mental nourishment they need to grow, think clearly, and face a complex world?” Was she right? In what context does that apply to The Daily Telegraph report?

**Steph Warren:** I have not read any newspaper comments. As you can imagine, I have kept well away. I do not actually understand what they are saying, to be honest. Are they saying that we are trying to factory farm the young in some way, or whatever? I do not believe it. I do not really understand the question.

**Q148 Craig Whittaker:** Well, basically what Libby is saying is that by cheating, such as has been alleged in The Daily Telegraph report, you are starving the young of proper mental nourishment with which to go out and face the world. Is she right, and how does that apply to The Daily Telegraph report?

**Steph Warren:** As far as I am concerned, she is wrong because we are not cheating. She is wrong because we have not cheated. We have not told them anything at all.

**Paul Evans:** The urge of every teacher in the classroom is to ensure that every individual in front of them achieves their best potential.

**Q149 Craig Whittaker:** With all due respect, we are not talking about teachers in the classroom; we are talking here about examiners and an examining board teaching the exam to teachers.

**Steph Warren:** We are not teaching the exam to teachers. I quite take umbrage at that. We are explaining a specification, a number of words, that some teachers will immediately pick up, grasp and get a hold of while others say, “What does this particular statement mean?” That is the way. That is how I see it, anyway. I do not know about my colleagues. We are explaining the specification, we never refer to exam papers at all.

**Paul Evans:** I have here a specification, so if a teacher wants to teach the WJEC history course, they can run through this—other courses are outlined—and that is the course to deliver. They come to the INSET to try to find out, “Right, what style of questions are going to be asked? What was the performance of students...
last year? Where were the strengths and weaknesses in the questions?” They want to ensure that their children do better in the classroom. We are always talking retrospectively—this is last year’s exam, and this is how it went.

Q150 Craig Whittaker: I appreciate that, but my specific question was whether Libby Purves is right in her statement and how does that apply to The Daily Telegraph piece?
Paul Barnes: The unfortunate term “cheating” was used again, and we have now made the point that that argument was not made. To go back to your point, maybe yes and no. To a degree, I think she is right because, laying no blames, these will come up from the teaching of a two-year course, lesson by lesson, 39 weeks a year with five lessons a fortnight. We develop the skills. The end product, of course, is in my case a one-hour exam where they have a volume of information, unlike maybe in some of the other subjects. That is the end product. We develop people through a course and we test them at the end of it.

Q151 Tessa Munt: Good morning. I am aware that sometimes students at university are used to mark papers. I understand that very often they will do this online and what they are searching for are key words or phrases in the more conversational or essay-type answers. Students will gain extra marks for picking up on key words and phrases. Is that your sense of how marking is done?
Paul Evans: In terms of the WJEC history course, we don’t employ any students to mark the papers and they are not marked online. The teachers attend a conference. The teachers have to have been in the classroom for two years before they are appointed as an assistant examiner.

Q152 Tessa Munt: So you are not aware of anybody, students or people being used to mark examination papers?
Paul Evans: Not in WJEC history.
Steph Warren: No. They are not at Edexcel either. It is all practising teachers who mark the questions for Edexcel. It is marked online. There will be questions that have only one word answers but you are not referring to those; you are referring to the longer ones. The longer answers are all marked by practising teachers. If you are saying that there are certain words—in geography we teach case studies so there would be specific points about a particular case study, but there are many, many case studies out there. So there is no way any mark scheme would ever say, “Only look for this. Only look for that.” It is looking for specific points. So no, not at all.
Paul Barnes: There is a sort of irony in a sense. We like to see people with two or three years’ experience teaching before they become markers. Yet in discussions with delegates in CPD quite often I have come across newly qualified teachers in their first year of teaching who, especially in a high turnover place like London, have been dropped with the job of head of department. As a newly qualified teacher in their first year of teaching they take on all the pressures of a job like that. They are so appreciative of the advice and feedback and the opportunities to liaise with other people at the CPDs. So it is ironic that we expect examiners to have two years’ experience but people with less than one year’s experience can be guiding these young people through exams.

Q153 Tessa Munt: What explicit instructions are you given by your boards about what you have to say when you are doing these training courses?
Steph Warren: I get sent an e-mail and it has in it templates that I am to use that are the official templates. I am sent the aims of the course which then tell me what I should be putting into the course.

Q154 Tessa Munt: When you say a template are you talking about—
Steph Warren: For PowerPoint and things like that and any other information. There are set templates that are sent to me.

Q155 Tessa Munt: What about guidance as to what you are meant to say and what you are not meant to say or is this implicit?
Steph Warren: I am a professional.

Q156 Tessa Munt: I absolutely understand that. I am just asking what guidance you get from your exam board, which is effectively your employer at that point, that is explicit about what you may and may not say while you on the training course.
Steph Warren: The aims of the course are to discuss the papers and it is quite explicit on there that that is what you should be doing in your training sessions. But there is also one at the bottom that is to share ideas and good practice. That is when I bring in my own teaching experience as well.

Q157 Tessa Munt: So are there statements of what you specifically may not say and do?
Steph Warren: Not that—well, are there? There are in the contract because the contract says that I may not refer to any future examinations. So in my contract it is quite explicit that that is not to be done.

Q158 Tessa Munt: Thank you. That is good. Can I ask the same of you, Sir?
Paul Evans: Only in the sense that you must not reveal anything that would dispute the integrity of the exams in the following year, so you do not reveal anything that will come up in future. As regards what you can or cannot say, you do not have any training or information.
Paul Barnes: I can quote from the terms and duties of the principal examiner: the need to respect and maintain the confidentiality of the examining and marking process—that is paramount. Training, in many ways, is informal, with the subject officer. We have a meeting before the round of CPDs and discuss the agenda. I think your question is: “Is there a code of practice, with a line?” The line is the professional line. As professionals, we do not breach confidentiality. In fact, BBC Wales news last night made the point that no exam paper has been compromised in the exam
board. There are 18 courses and 240 potential questions, and not one question has been breached.

Q159 Tessa Munt: I appreciate that. I just wanted to clarify exactly what you are given in the way of assistance, for guidance.
Paul Barnes: Basically, when you are elevated to principal or chief examiner, it is based on experience and expertise gained over a long period. On that basis you disseminate your acquired knowledge and expertise.

Q160 Tessa Munt: Do your contracts cover a certain number of hours?
Paul Barnes: No. Technically, we are not an employee, I read somewhere. We just kick into action at critical times of the year.
Steph Warren: I think mine might be slightly different; I have a contract for every event or job I am doing. I will have had a contract for training and for chief examiner. I get a new contract—I get lots of contracts.

Q161 Tessa Munt: Do you train in pairs or on your own?
Steph Warren: On my own.
Paul Evans: We do it as a team.

Q162 Tessa Munt: Explain to me what a team means. How many of you go to the event?
Paul Evans: The session would be led by the subject officer, who is a direct employee of the board. He will then delegate sections in the day, when we will do our specifics.

Q163 Tessa Munt: I see, so there might be three, four or five of you.
Paul Evans: In this case, there will be three of us present.
Tessa Munt: Fine.
Paul Barnes: It might be worth adding that at the London conference, the subject officer was taken badly ill. It was very short notice—the day before. As historians, we are supposed to be blessed with the skill of hindsight, and on reflection, it might have been a good idea to cancel; it was too short notice. My colleague, Dr Evans, covered the subject officer’s contribution and was on his feet for two hours, facing 60 or 70 professionals, which was quite pressured. I feel strongly that had the subject officer been there, he would have dealt with the issues of the exam board, procedural protocol and so on, and we would have just made our contributions as senior examiners.

Q164 Tessa Munt: How many times does the subject officer not make it? I accept he was very ill.
Paul Barnes: Never. 3
Paul Evans: He slipped two discs. He could not get out of bed—couldn’t walk, and we decided to run with it.

Q165 Pat Glass: I am aware of the systemic pressures in schools on how we deliver teaching. I have held long conversations with head teachers, trying to persuade them not to put their best teachers into years 10 and 11 and suggesting that years 8 and 9 need good teachers, too. I am aware of the pressures on D to C and A to A*. Again, I have tried to persuade head teachers that kids who are going to get Bs deserve good teaching as well. Are there equal kinds of systemic pressures that lead you to deliver training in a particular way?
Paul Evans: I don’t think there is any pressure. Our remit is to give some feedback on how the exam performed last year. How did candidates perform in comparison to previous years? This was a new spec—this was the first time it had been examined. Teachers came to the CPD event to find out how the paper performed. They were looking at whether their candidates did better this year or slightly worse than in the previous year, and finding out why. What can they do to improve their teaching in the classroom—to boost their pupils’ performance?
Paul Barnes: In my session, I simulate a marking conference. We go through the mark scheme. We then hand out three live scripts, if you like, with the marks taken off. In small groups, they mark and report back, and they find that very useful.

Q166 Pat Glass: We are politicians, and we understand that you can be taken out of context and misrepresented—believe me, we’ve been there.
Steph Warren: Can I make a comment on training? I’m butting in again, sorry. I don’t think I train any differently now from how I did in 1999, except that I might be a bit better at it because I have done it for longer. I do not think that there has been any difference—obviously I have been teaching for years and years and years—in my department in how I teach an A to A* or a B to a C. Yes, we are told to do this and that, but every child is important to me, so I try to look after every single one of them.

Q167 Pat Glass: Going back to the issue of what happened on that day and the issue of the specification—I understand, Paul, that you cannot talk about the details—there was no discussion about future exam papers, because, we can assume that, had anyone said something, The Daily Telegraph would have printed it.
Paul Barnes: Absolutely. The papers would have to be rewritten in light of that, and they are not being, as far as I gather.
Pat Glass: And you are clear that there are no systemic pressures on how you deliver teacher training. Thank you.

Q168 Neil Carmichael: I have a quick question to wrap this theme up. There is a perception now that pupils are being taught to pass exams, rather than taught a subject with an exam at the end of it. What steps do you think we can take to correct that perception and move back towards the public view that you go to school to learn the subject and, at the end of the day, you will get an award if you have done well?

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3 (Witness Addition) Please add that the London meeting on November 11th 2011 was the only CPD event that the Subject Officer has missed in the ten years that he has been in post.
Paul Evans: It has been alluded to earlier, but it is the pressure that the Government have put on us, and schools in particular, and the publishing of league tables. It is: “What are your results? How many A*s to C have you got? What is the benchmark?” That puts an awful lot of pressure on that school to get a particular percentage. The schools are then in bands, in band 3 or band 2, where there is pressure to move up to the next band. Subject leaders are called in by the governing body and asked, “What can you do to improve your subject? You need to get better.” With all that pressure, you tend to focus on the teaching of the exam unit and the exam technique, as opposed to history. At the end of the day, they should be coming in and doing history, and not having to think that they have to pass the exam. There is then the pressure of being asked, “How many A*s to C can you get?”

Q169 Neil Carmichael: By extension, of course, that means that you are yielding yourself to that pressure by allowing teachers to come to seminars and things to probe the possibilities.

Paul Evans: Well, professionally, these teachers are coming because they want to improve their performance in the classroom. It is like a training exercise, asking, “What are you expecting our children to do?” They would be remiss not to attend, I would have thought.

Paul Barnes: The point I want to make is that I object massively when I hear the term “dumbing down”. History is a gold standard subject. It demands a huge volume of knowledge, which has to be applied in a focused exam situation. If I go back to my time in school—maybe yours as well, Neil—I never got told how to improve a mark. I was given a grade for an essay. If you got 12 out of 20, you had to get 13 or 14 next time. We were never told how to do that. I went through university, getting degrees, and never got any sort of feedback.

We are helping these young people to realise the targets of the questions. Lots of young people have a real problem retaining and accessing the knowledge, so if they can combine their knowledge of history with the skills demanded and the target of the question, you have got it. That is what CPD is about.

Paul Evans: May I add to that? To obtain a GCSE in history now—for those studying WJEC in history—that child will have had to sit three one-hour papers, each carrying 25%, plus two pieces of controlled assessment within the classroom environment. When I sat history at O-level in the 1970s, you went in for one exam, wrote five essays and there was your O-level. They are publicly examined for three hours in three separate papers to get a GCSE in history. That is an immense amount of material.

Paul Barnes: And then multiply that by 10, 11 or 12 subjects.

Steph Warren: We are taught teaching now. We are teaching differently to how we used to years ago. I have seen many changes. One of the biggest changes, which I think has been for the better—I have been there a long time and I have seen them come in cycles—is assessment for learning. That is one of the things that we do in schools, which is taking a mark scheme, taking your own work and marking that work to improve it. That is one of the things: we teach differently, which I think is better for the children.

If you are talking about pressures, however, I did not notice it so much when it was just five A* to C. Since there has been all the pressure of five A* to C including English and maths, there have been major movements in a lot of schools to give less time to some subjects and more time to others. Pressures from league tables and the Government have meant that, if a volcano erupts, you cannot spend a lesson on a volcano erupting if you are not teaching that, as I used to do, because I know that I have only a certain amount of time, because my time has been clipped and clipped and clipped by pressures brought in by the league tables.

Q170 Craig Whittaker: What shocked me about the investigation, since we have been involved, is the sheer amount of e-mails and correspondence from people that indicates that the allegations made against the two of you are actually quite systemic throughout the whole process. It is not for us to judge whether that is right, but the question for me is very much, whether you guys are the scapegoats or not, what are your employers doing to put checks and balances in place to ensure that what is alleged does not happen?

Steph Warren: I know that Edexcel has put out a statement on its website to say that all training sessions from now on will be videoed or taped, there will always be a member of Edexcel staff there with the trainer—

Q171 Craig Whittaker: Does that mean that it has not had any checks and balances in the past to check?

Steph Warren: It has had checks. I have had people come in and watch me train; they were in a London session a couple of years ago. I also do online training and the online training is all taped, so there were checks in the past as well. I think that what it is doing is being more thorough—not, not more thorough; that is not the right word. I will take that back. It is putting in place things to help more; it is not more “thorough”.

Q172 Craig Whittaker: So up until this point, and this blowing up, there have been very few checks and balances in place from your employer to ensure that what has been alleged, does not happen?

Steph Warren: Well, there have been. I just said they have been in. I have been checked.

Q173 Craig Whittaker: You said two years ago.

Steph Warren: Well, I did not do any last year, did I? That is what I said. Do you remember that they were cancelled last year?

Q174 Craig Whittaker: So how frequently does your employer have checks and balances?

Steph Warren: I would not know for everybody.

Paul Evans: I can recall that about three years ago a regulator came to the INSET session, took detailed
notes and reported back, and said that we were fine. The inspection actually took place three years ago.

Q176 Craig Whittaker: So that is three years ago?
Paul Evans: It was three years ago, yes.

Q177 Craig Whittaker: So nothing in between from your employer to do checks and balances to make sure that you guys are not open to the allegations that have been laid at your door?
Paul Evans: Not that I am aware of.
Paul Barnes: You mentioned the volume of e-mails. I would like to counter that with the mass of e-mails in support of people like ourselves, who have been almost pilloried. It really is refreshing to see so much support coming in from practising teachers, ex-pupils and the whole spectrum.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Andrew Hall, Chief Executive Officer, AQA, Mark Dawe, Chief Executive, OCR, Rod Bristow, President, Pearson UK (on behalf of Edexcel) and Gareth Pierce, Chief Executive, WJEC, gave evidence.

Q179 Chair: Good morning, and thank you very much for joining us today as we continue our inquiry into awarding bodies, including the ones that you head up. Are your current GCSE and A-level procedures strong enough to bear the weight that the accountability system puts on them? Let’s start with you, Mark.
Mark Dawe: We have an enormous amount of procedures, conditions and requirements on examiners and on those running CPD events, so there is a lot in place. You are also right that an enormous amount of pressure is put on the exams, not only for student results, but because teachers and institutions are judged by results. There is an enormous amount of pressure on the system, but we believe we have the procedures in place to protect the integrity of our exams.

Q180 Chair: So is that yes, despite the weight put on the qualifications, you believe that procedures are strong enough?
Mark Dawe: Yes.
Gareth Pierce: Yes, I would agree. They have certainly been tested in periods of frequent change in specifications, for instance. There are some subject areas where we are going through possibly the third cycle of change even during the seven years that I have been in post. I think overall we have robust systems, however. As you heard earlier, we work with very experienced teams of principal and chief examiners, and the fact that we have experienced teams in those subjects helps us to bear that pressure of change and the accountability that goes with all that.

Q181 Chair: And yet there is so much, and it is long standing. Warwick Mansell’s book six years ago suggested that he had attended sessions, and he described “jaw-droppingly” bad behaviour in the sessions he witnessed. In some senses, there has been a lack of surprise at The Telegraph story and a sense that there is a complicit effort to allow schools to try to meet their A to C targets, which seems to have affected everybody in the system, from examining bodies to examiners to teachers. Are we going to get the message from you that everything is hunky-dory, procedures are good enough and The Telegraph is just barking up the wrong tree? It is quite hard for us to square that.

Gareth Pierce: I have attended sessions and been very impressed with the level of debate. Some of the sessions have formally led presentations, but within a day there would be a lot of dialogue, feedback, exchange of views and challenge from teachers. I have seen excellent debate on pedagogy, on assessment issues, and on standards and expectations. I have seen teachers being very challenging of examiners, and I have sat in there and heard examiners respond very professionally. That is the nature, in virtually every case, of our events. There are pressures, however, and there are ways of improving and tightening guidance in the light of what has come through from The Telegraph’s visits to some events.

Andrew Hall: I think, “yes, but” would be my answer, because your question is quite broad in terms of the pressure on the whole exam system. You cannot look at the last two years and say that systems and controls cannot be improved, because there have been other issues along the way, so you have to recognise that. If I turn to the point specifically of training, having listened to the previous session I have to say that we deliver and prepare for our training sessions in a very different way. You had representatives from other boards. We actually have a senior manager, who is a subject specialist and a CPD specialist, commission all the materials that are used for training purposes. They then review those materials with the presenters, and we conduct face-to-face training every year with every trainer. We have one of our senior staff attending to monitor one of each session for a subject so that we see what is going on.
I think this is about continuous improvement. Having seen what is there now, we have been investigating some of the allegations and we have written some very strong rebuttals to the regulator, which I am happy to share with you. You cannot say, however, that we found it difficult to know what precisely what went on in a session when we did not have a member of staff in that particular session. There is a logical improvement that says we should start to record that. I think it is about being honest about the need for improvement.

**Q182 Chair: The Telegraph** only today reports a case in which an examiner briefed teachers about questions on an exam paper, which they passed on to students. Even the school agreed that a student “clearly had insider information”. Mr Hall, why did you not consider that practice to be irregular and, consequently, not choose to refer it to Ofqual?

**Andrew Hall:** If it is the comment on law that you are referring to, which I saw in *The Telegraph* this morning, we did investigate that thoroughly. It is sad in a way that we have to have it, but we have a very large and experienced malpractice investigation team. We do not just have to investigate allegations such as that. Sadly we have to investigate situations where teachers act entirely inappropriately in their own school. It is very sad that the pressures create that for them.

We have to investigate allegations of students cheating. We also have to investigate unfortunate episodes such as when Parcelforce loses a series of examination papers. Only last week we had to replace for our January series a whole paper because one paper was found outside a school. We do investigate those incidents very thoroughly. If there is any suggestion about what we would do, in the past year we terminated the contract of an examiner and reported that to Ofqual.

**Q183 Chair:** But in this specific case, the school said that the student clearly had inside information, and you did not find that irregular.

**Andrew Hall:** We carried out the investigation. It was quite interesting that *The Telegraph* did not also carry the comment it was given by the regulator on the subject, whose opinion was, to summarise, “This looks like a case of teachers doing a good job of question spotting.” We did investigate it. I do not sit here, having read the paper this morning and heard about it last night, with every detail of the investigation. But I know and am confident that our team, which is experienced and investigates many things, will thoroughly investigate. We have no hesitation in taking action when we find a case.

**Rod Bristow:** I am deeply concerned about the revelations that appear to have come through from *The Telegraph* investigation. I take full responsibility for getting into it and understanding what has happened. We do need to investigate that.

There are two issues contained within your question. One relates to standards, and whether the pressures from the system, as you put it, have had an effect on standards; pressure on the system, competition and so on. To go back to the qualifications in history, English and geography that were exposed in *The Telegraph* investigation, we took action. We have done our own analysis and we are having an independent analysis done of the specifications in terms of their challenge, depth, breadth and demand. Those investigations, which are still ongoing, are basically telling us that there are comparable and that they conform to the guidance laid down by Ofqual.

We have also looked at a lot of very rigorous data analysis on what grades are awarded for these qualifications. Using an independently verified and rather complicated methodology, which I will not go into, the results were analysed against those given by other awarding bodies and there are absolutely no differences. The awarding is in line. You would not see that if those qualifications were easier to obtain. That data are available to all of the awarding bodies, and are what gave us confidence that standards between awarding bodies are the same.

On training, as you heard from Steph Warren, we have quickly put in place steps to ensure we have our own employees attending the meetings, that we are recording them, and next year we plan to make the videos publicly available. We want to enable teachers, if they wish, to view these events online and for free charge. We have also issued more thorough, detailed guidance than in the past. We are reviewing our training and we are going to make some changes to it for the long term. What the investigation from *The Telegraph* has exposed is that the things that we had been relying on so far are probably insufficient. We have been relying on the fact that our contracts make it very clear that examiners are not to reveal anything about what may appear in future examinations. All of our examiners sign up to a code of conduct that makes very clear what standards of behaviour are expected.

We also make sure that when these training events are given, we write the materials that are used for the delivery of the events. That is not left up to the individual trainers. Nevertheless, the events and videos that we have seen show that we need to strengthen the systems and processes that we have, and we are going to do so.

**Q184 Chair:** You said your examinations meet the specifications set by Ofqual. The quotes we saw in *The Telegraph* suggested that there was a surprise at the ability to steer a particular one through those specifications, and there was a suggestion that in order to get market share—after all, you are a profit-making company—the aim is to meet the specification with the lowest possible standard while doing so, in order then to be able to suggest that there is less to learn and you are more likely to get passes. That does not look like a healthy situation, however many procedures and formalities we see as a result of the news of last week.

**Rod Bristow:** If that were happening, that would be true, but it is not happening. What is happening is that more support is being given to improve teaching and learning, so that students can meet these standards. There is a world of difference between that and giving away information about what is going to be in the
exams. As far as I am concerned, that has not happened.

Q185 Damian Hinds: I am conscious that we have only a small amount of time, but I want to try and get to the heart of what makes your organisations tick, very briefly. Mr Dawe, Mr Pierce and Mr Hall, you are chief executives of your different organisations. What are the key performance indicators you discuss? And, does anybody have performance-related pay?

Mark Dawe: I am chief executive of OCR, and we are part of the University of Cambridge. My direct reports are director of operations and director of standards, who is the accountable officer. Actually, if that director has any concerns about pressure—

Q186 Damian Hinds: We can perhaps get into that later. We need to do this as a really rapid-fire thing. Who are your direct reports?

Mark Dawe: A director of partnerships, too, and there is a strategy director.

Q187 Damian Hinds: What about KPIs?

Mark Dawe: Our KPIs are around the general performance of the business. It is a big logistics business in particular, with millions of scripts going out and coming back in. We are looking at the awarding and where there have been issues. Obviously, that is in a cycle, depending on the time of year.

Q188 Damian Hinds: They do not sound like KPIs. Do you measure specific things? For example, the number of students you have taking your exams.

Mark Dawe: We look at the number of candidates and things like that, as well as where candidates may be going up or down in terms of entries.

Q189 Damian Hinds: What about performance-related pay?

Mark Dawe: Not at all.3

Q190 Damian Hinds: Not for you or any of your reports?

Mark Dawe: Correct.

Q191 Damian Hinds: Thank you. Mr Pierce.

Gareth Pierce: My job title is chief executive and there is no performance-related pay in the organisation at all. The direct reports are director of finance and estates, director of examinations and assessment, human resources manager, operations manager, chief information officer, marketing and communications officer and assistant director, strategy and planning. KPIs cover a whole range of matters on the exams and qualifications front. There are a lot of volume-related and performance-related logistics indicators that are very high level, because of the scrutiny and the importance of performance indicators.

Q192 Damian Hinds: When you say volume and performance indicators, can you just unpack that a bit?

Gareth Pierce: Volume is of interest obviously in terms of total volume of candidates and centres that we support and service, including through all the means of achieving that—the resources we have to support different schemes and the number of events. There are many.

Q193 Damian Hinds: Thank you. Mr Hall.

Andrew Hall: I am the chief executive of our organisation, and I am also the accountable officer, so I am personally responsible for standards. My direct reports are a chief operating officer, who looks after day-to-day operations, and a director of communications, who also looks after whatever marketing we do within that remit. There is a director of general qualifications and very recently, we have appointed a new director who is responsible for our non-exam business. I am always worried I am going to miss one in doing this.

Q194 Damian Hinds: They will be very upset. What about KPIs?

Andrew Hall: KPIs vary according to the needs of what is going on in the business. We have been very heavily focused on looking at quality of marking over the last year, because that is something I have been particularly interested in. We look at our cash flows, because clearly, any organisation manages its business. We do not focus on market share. We do not focus on market share. We look at where our entries are twice a year and we look at where we think they may go so that we plan appropriate resource.

Q195 Damian Hinds: When you say you focus not on market share but on where your entries are, do you mean you have a volume measure rather than a percentage measure?

Andrew Hall: It is a volume measure. What resource are we going to need to provide in the future?

Q196 Damian Hinds: And performance-related pay?

Andrew Hall: Not at all.

Q197 Damian Hinds: And Mr Bristow, I know you are not chief executive of the part of the organisation, but maybe you could talk us through it in rough terms.

Rod Bristow: Perhaps I can explain that the managing director of Edexcel reports to me. The way that the performance of the managing director and the team at Edexcel is judged is on the robustness of the delivery, on the quality of the delivery and on error-free delivery. So, essentially, it is about making sure that we really have a strong delivery, high standard of delivery and high quality of delivery.

Q198 Damian Hinds: So no revenue target?
Rod Bristow: There absolutely are financial benefits for achieving financial targets, but we mix those objectives. Basically, the way that our performance-related pay works is that it is a mix of financial goals and personal objectives. The personal objectives are the things that include these sorts of issues. I will say that we have made a big point of putting standards at the centre of our strategy in the last 24 months, which is one of the issues that people are measured on.

Q199 Damian Hinds: Another quick-fire round. You may not be able to do this accurately, but if you can give us a rough guide: how much of your income at the revenue line comes from examination entries versus materials, whether that is textbooks or other, versus training and consultancy or anything else?

Andrew Hall: May I go first so that I may correct something? I did exactly as I feared and missed something as well, director of research is sitting behind me and is going to kill me on the way out. We have a research organisation that is part of the executive but actually runs independently. I wanted to correct that because I do not want to be killed for that.

The great majority, something over 90%, of our income comes directly from examination fees. We have a small amount of revenue that comes from publishing, something like £400,000 of contributions from people who publish books that we have supported. We have been looking to move into supporting primary students. We have a philosophy that we should actually help students of primary age so that they have more chance. We are diversifying in that area to support more, which accounts for 3% or 4% of our turnover.

Q200 Damian Hinds: What are the areas of growth?

We know that the average maintained secondary school in 2003 spent £44,000 on exam entries and in 2010 it was £95,000. So there is huge growth, but presumably there is growth in other areas of your business as well. What are the key growing segments?

Andrew Hall: 1 am conscious that I have been there for a year and a half and that I have to look back. We have seen students doing two things. One, they are taking an increasing number of GCSEs, and it is an open question whether 10, 11, 12 is actually the right number—I think there is a debate about that. We have also seen students resitting exams many, many more times and being entered far too early. That is something that we as an organisation and I have publicly spoken out about. Without making a point, that goes slightly against the argument that we do this for profit and market share; actually we do it for education. So it has been students taking the same exam more times and just taking more GCSEs.

Q201 Damian Hinds: Other areas of growth? Textbooks? Licensing fees?

Andrew Hall: Not for us.

Gareth Pierce: Ballpark figures: entry fees—£30 million; events—£1 million; and resources—probably next to nothing. The reason for that is because our policy is to make as many of our resources available online and free of charge.

Q202 Damian Hinds: Do those resources include textbooks?

Andrew Hall: We do not produce textbooks.

Q203 Damian Hinds: Do you license your brand for use? You give an endorsement, do you take a fee for that endorsement?

Gareth Pierce: No fee. For example, here is a publisher and it is for WJEC specification and our logo is there. We will have given some advice and some level of scrutiny of the content.

Q204 Damian Hinds: To be clear, WJEC will receive no money whatsoever for the use of its name on the front of that book?

Gareth Pierce: Yes, that is correct.

Mark Dawe: The director of curriculum and qualifications I missed out.

Over 95% of our income is from qualification fees. You talked about areas of growth. In the last few years that has particularly been vocational learning where schools in particular have expanded their vocational learning offer. In terms of textbooks, we take no money. The only thing we will do is charge between £100 and £250 for books that we endorse. That is just the cost of someone sitting down and going through it and comparing it to the spec and making sure it meets requirements. There is no actual money made from that. It is just covering costs.

Rod Bristow: Within Edexcel the figures are very similar. By far the majority of the revenues come from qualifications.

Q205 Damian Hinds: But in the wider group?

Rod Bristow: In the wider group we do publish, of course. We publish resources not just relating to Edexcel qualifications. We publish for higher education, for primary schools and secondary beyond exams. They are our roots. Our roots are in publishing so consequently we have overall quite significant revenues in publishing, but the vast majority of it is not directly related to what we do in Edexcel.

Q206 Damian Hinds: If you could just give me one figure that would be great. I realise that this can only ever be an estimate and a very rough estimate at that. Of the people you employ as examiners—I realise that employ is not quite the right verb—but the people who are chief examiners and so on for you, what percentage of their income do you estimate comes from examining and being chief examiner versus doing consultancy and training, authorship and so on, Mark?

Mark Dawe: That is incredibly difficult to answer.

Q207 Damian Hinds: I appreciate that. Mark Dawe: About 75% of our examiners are current teachers and 25% are retired. Obviously the retired have more time to work with us.

Q208 Damian Hinds: So thinking of those at the very top of the pyramid, those who are setting questions, reviewing work and so on?
**Mark Dawe:** It really does vary. There are a number of roles they can fulfil. Some just do one role and some will say, “Yes, I am free for Inset.” Some won’t.

**Q209 Damian Hinds:** But at the very senior level, are we talking a quarter, a half, three quarters, 99%?  
**Mark Dawe:** Possibly a quarter. It just depends what else they are doing with their time.

**Q210 Damian Hinds:** We don’t need to go down the line but can anyone else have a stab?  
**Andrew Hall:** I could not give a more precise answer but I would argue that it is at the lower end because they do many other things.

**Q211 Damian Hinds:** They do many other things. Can anyone else have a stab?  
**Mark Dawe:** Possibly a quarter. It just depends what else they are doing with their time.

**Q212 Damian Hinds:** For each of your boards, do you measure the market share that you have among, for example, schools judged outstanding by Ofsted or among private schools?  
**Mark Dawe:** Those figures are available because they come out as part of the JCQ data. So we see that.

**Q213 Tessa Munt:** I want to know how many training seminars you run each year, how many teachers those cover, how many trainers you have at each event and, just to complicate it further, whether it is a cost or a profit and how that splits up for you.  
**Mark Dawe:** Yes and we see a fairly reasonable spread across all types of schools.  
**Damian Hinds:** I don’t know whether we have those numbers. In that case that it is the end of my questions.

**Q214 Tessa Munt:** Otherwise they run with one trainer?  
**Mark Dawe:** One or sometimes two. It varies, but not always with OCR-employed people at those events. They are generally contracted individuals.

**Q215 Tessa Munt:** And cost or profit?  
**Mark Dawe:** We make a loss. Over the past three years it has varied from a loss of £200,000 to £1.5 million.  
**Rod Bristow:** We run about 1,000 bookable events, of which just under 400 are feedback events of the type that the three examiners were talking about earlier.

**Q216 Tessa Munt:** What are the other 600?  
**Rod Bristow:** The others break down into two areas. There is “Getting Ready to Teach”, and there is one where we are launching a new curriculum. “Getting Ready to Teach” is for new teachers who are new to that curriculum, and then there is another category when a completely new curriculum is being launched. There are about 1,000 in total. We have a very similar number of attendees; on average, we would probably expect to get about 50 teachers at each event. Our costs of running these events are about £4.3 million, and the revenues that we realise from them are about £2 million to £2.5 million. We are running at a loss of about £2 million.

**Q217 Tessa Munt:** Just to clarify, who is present at those? I know you might have answered that in another life.  
**Rod Bristow:** We would typically have one senior examiner at those events, but we have our staff attend them on a rather more ad-hoc basis.

**Andrew Hall:** It varies considerably according to the level of specification changes in a year. Two or three years ago there were a lot of new GCSEs, so we ran considerably more courses. I make that point because it does vary. If I take the past 12 months, we ran just under 500 courses, from which we made a loss of something like £200,000. To put it in perspective, and I want to take the chance to do this, two years ago we ran 1,200 courses and our loss on that was something like £3.2 million. It is about supporting the specification change. We have 336 trainers we have used, some of whom are examiners and some of whom are not. Some are teachers we bring in, so they will not always have knowledge of future papers. The number of trainers at a meeting will vary depending on the size of the course and the number of attendees.

**Q218 Tessa Munt:** Do you know how many you have trained over the past year, at your 500 events?  
**Andrew Hall:** 12,000.

**Q219 Tessa Munt:** 12,000 at 500 events. And how many trainers at each training event?  
**Andrew Hall:** It varies: it will be one, two or three depending on the number of delegates.

**Q220 Tessa Munt:** Can I ask you all why you run these things at a loss? I am not including the occasions when there is a new specification. I want to know why you just trundle along at a loss on an ordinary year when there are no changes.  
**Gareth Pierce:** We see it as a service, and we are happy to provide it. We work in the public benefit as a charity. Also, schools and colleges face plenty of issues in getting their teachers to be able to attend, because they often have to pay teacher release costs,
or cover for a teacher who is released, and travel costs. Our day rate is about £120, which I think is quite modest, but we see it as a service. There are issues in terms of teachers accessing the events anyway, so we do not want to add another problem by charging a very high fee.

Chair: No one else needs to add to that unless they have something different to say.

Q221 Tessa Munt: I want to know how many of your examiners are involved in training. What percentage of your total number of examiners are involved in training?

Andrew Hall: The easy answer for us is a third of the very senior examiners.

Rod Bristow: For us it is 205 out of 690.

Q222 Damian Hinds: Inside your organisation?

Rod Bristow: Yes.

Q223 Damian Hinds: If it were shown on a Venn diagram there could, presumably, be another whole set of examiners.

Q224 Chair: Just on that, because you have raised it, do you prohibit training elsewhere? It has been suggested that some well-known examiners go off and run their own courses separately.

Mark Davie: We do not prohibit that, but we issue very strict guidance about what they can and cannot say about their position, and what they are disseminating.

Andrew Hall: We do exactly the same as that.

Q225 Tessa Munt: Do your attendees do evaluation forms?

All Witnesses: Yes.

Q226 Tessa Munt: Okay, fine, and you collate those and that is some form of management measurement tool.

Gareth Pierce: Yes, indeed, and part of the guidance for our people in preparing for the following year’s events is to take firm recognition of what has been said on the evaluation forms from the previous cycle. These tend to run in annual cycles, and therefore the evaluation forms are very important as a steer to quality and to content.

Q227 Tessa Munt: Do you tie the results in the schools to who has done those training events and that sort of thing?

All Witnesses: No.

Rod Bristow: Virtually all schools do them.

Mark Davie: We had 5,500 centres attend our events last year.

Q228 Tessa Munt: I think it was you, Mr Bristow, who said that you were going to put everything online, so everybody in the world could access it. Will you stop running these events now? If everything can go online and every teacher can just go online with their questions, there is no need for contact with examiners, which would remove the problem completely. If everything were online, it would be fair for everybody; they could all get exactly the same information and you could quality control that.

Andrew Hall: Currently, we put all the course materials that are used for this online anyway, and we have done that for some considerable time. The piece that is different therefore is the dialogue that you heard the two gentlemen and the lady in the discussions before me talk about. If you do not have a face-to-face meeting, one thing that we are looking at is, can you create this interactive web discussion? It is cheaper, and we have started running some webinars—I hate the phrase, but I do not have a better one. We run similar courses over the web with interactive discussion. We can run those more cost-effectively and the fee for that is £80.

Q229 Tessa Munt: I put it to you that exactly the problem that we are dealing with in The Sunday Telegraph would not occur if these face-to-face events did not happen.

Mark Davie: I would suggest the opposite actually. We are aware of private companies running these sorts of courses. We have very strict rules for our examiners and we monitor them quite carefully, so we have had examples that are clearly inappropriate in the press, but many examples that are not. We have controls in place that private companies would not have. I offered yesterday to Ofqual to stop all our training, but I know what would happen the next day; these companies would pop up and we would have far less control over that. It is in all our interests to keep those controls in place.

Q230 Tessa Munt: But you lot have the knowledge that is actually of value, don’t you? Do you think that you would have hundreds and thousands of teachers flocking to them?

Mark Davie: We have one of the most transparent systems in the world in terms of what we publish and what we are required to publish in terms of past question papers, mark schemes and sample assessments. It is all there for the teachers, but some people like to go to training sessions. We can all sit at a computer at home and look at things, but we would all also go to training sessions. It is a blended learning approach. All we are doing is giving what is already there face-to-face. We have a lot of controls in place to ensure that it does not go beyond what it should.

Andrew Hall: I am particularly keen that we do run the sessions, and we have to control them in the right way. I talked before about what happens—more courses—when the specifications change, but other changes happen along the way. Teachers change schools, and therefore start to take another
specification. We want to be there to support them. New teachers qualify and enter the teaching system, and they need the support. It helps them to get there. It creates the ability to change. Some people want that extra comfort and I think that that is really valuable.

**Rod Bristow:** I think that we should review all options, including the one that you have suggested, but we need to ensure that there are no unintended consequences of taking a quick decision like that. I think we should review all options.

**Q231 Tessa Munt:** I just think that you have answered it in a certain way, and, clearly, you are going to make everything done on your training courses available to everybody, so they will not need to pay. Why not have an even playing field where nobody pays?

**Chair:** Tessa, we will take evidence from the witnesses, rather than the other way round.

**Q232 Craig Whittaker:** I want quickly to ask a follow up to Mr Hinds’ question earlier. You all mentioned that you had volume KPIs. Can you quickly each tell me what tactics you use to drive those KPIs?

**Mark Dawe:** As we have all said, a lot of those KPIs are around standards and logistics.

**Craig Whittaker:** I am specifically talking about the one around volume.

**Q233 Chair:** Market share. If it drops markedly, you will do something. What will you do?

**Mark Dawe:** We are very proud of our standards. We are part of Cambridge university. We are proud of our rigour. We are a not-for-profit organisation. Those are the things we talk about with our customers. We talk about the available—legitimate—support that goes along with that. Our focus is on providing the best support to the teachers in the classroom so that they can prepare their students in the appropriate way. That is what we are looking at.

As a not-for-profit organisation, opportunities might come up that make us think, “Actually, this would help.” Our recent e-books initiative has made free electronic textbooks available to all A-level students, with over 300,000 registrations. That has no cost to the student or the teachers.

**Q234 Craig Whittaker:** So all those things drive that specific KPI for your organisation.

**Mark Dawe:** Absolutely. It is all about that service. New teachers qualify and enter the teaching system, and they need the support. It helps them to get there. It creates the ability to change. Some people want that extra comfort and I think that that is really valuable.

**Rod Bristow:** I think that we should review all options, including the one that you have suggested, but we need to ensure that there are no unintended consequences of taking a quick decision like that. I think we should review all options.

**Q235 Craig Whittaker:** I said earlier, and I think the Chair mentioned it too, that it seems evident that there is a widespread belief that the practice that has been alleged in *The Daily Telegraph* has been widespread for years. Have you guys known about it?

**Mark Dawe:** I have been in this job for a year, and I was a principal of a college before. Certainly, it was not what we sent our staff to training for. From both sides of the fence, I have not been aware of this.

**Q236 Craig Whittaker:** You have never been aware of it in the past.

**Mark Dawe:** No. We have had one or two instances, but those are where people have reported concerns, we have dealt with it, and those examiners have been removed from our books.

**Gareth Pierce:** I think that because our strategy is based on a small team, which almost always includes the subject officer, we have had high confidence. However, what has emerged now will cause us to review our reliance on that people aspect of our strength and see what systems improvements we need to reinforce quality in events.

**Q237 Craig Whittaker:** Were you aware of it before or not, or have you been aware? It seems widespread; it seems to have been going on for years. There does not seem to be an outcry about it because it appears that a lot of people in the profession have come to expect that this is the norm. My question to you, as the bodies, is: did you know it was going on?

**Gareth Pierce:** In terms of whether we know what is going on, we need to understand exactly what is being conveyed.

**Q238 Craig Whittaker:** There are allegations in *The Daily Telegraph* that that type of—

**Gareth Pierce:** My main point on that is that we are looking forward immensely to seeing the full transcript of one of these events—

**Q239 Craig Whittaker:** With all due respect, you are playing with me now. Please just answer the question: are you aware of this widespread allegation? Have you been aware of it in the past?

**Gareth Pierce:** No, because we have had confidence in our events.

**Q240 Craig Whittaker:** You are absolutely confident that you have not been aware of it in the past.

**Gareth Pierce:** No. However it has been drawn to our attention now, so therefore we are going to make improvements.

**Andrew Hall:** I must be clear that we refute the allegations about our organisation in *The Daily Telegraph*. I will make that point to the regulator and we will share that with anyone who wants it. We have been aware, from time to time, as I mentioned, that the odd examiner does something in an inappropriate way. We have a malpractice team, and we investigate it. Widespread—no.

**Rod Bristow:** The question is what “it” is. The issue that has been raised against us is that our exams are
easier, and that simply is not the case—all our rigorous analysis shows that. We utterly refute that.

Q241 Craig Whittaker: What will you do to make things better? Whether you knew it was going on or not, the evidence strongly suggests that it has been widespread for a very long period of time. You are the main guys who drive these events. What will you do to clean up your act?

Mark Dawe: Like the others, I am not sure that we can accept its being widespread and for a long time. First, we must clarify what is appropriate and not appropriate. There are actually guidelines there as to what is appropriate in these sessions, and some of the examples given in the press were perfectly appropriate. In our English one, at the end of the day, the examiner was saying, “Read the question.” That was the guidance and that has been going on for decades. “Read the question,” was the advice, and this was some terrible insight into the next question paper. Therefore, I think we have to be very clear about what is appropriate and what is not appropriate. If there a decision that that line needs to move, we will all agree to move that line. We certainly will, but at the moment we believe that the culture in our organisation is to give appropriate support and that is what happens. If that appropriateness is not appropriate any more, let us talk about what should be out there.

Gareth Pierce: We will certainly review the parameters and improve and clarify the guidance, especially for situations where examiners are not in the company of subject officers.

Andrew Hall: My position is the same. As I said, we actually believe that the courses that we run are properly run. I think my opening remark to the Chair’s first question was what we were going to do to improve things, and we talked about it. Our controls are good, but, yes, they need to be better now. That is about recording things, because we then have 100% vision, but that is actually too late to some extent. You actually need to fix it at the beginning. The point that I want to make is that we do have very rigorous training for all our people, and we have to build on that.

Rod Bristow: I do not think that it is that widespread or endemic, but nevertheless The Daily Telegraph has highlighted areas that we need to look at and where we need to improve. We have been clear, and we are being clear, in our determination to do so and the actions that we are taking. I think that is the important thing, particularly in these areas of training.

Q242 Craig Whittaker: Mr Pierce, have the actions of Mr Evans and Mr Barnes compromised the security of your summer 2012 GCSE papers?

Gareth Pierce: No, they have not. We have fully reviewed all issues to do with the GCSE history papers for the next series, which is the June series, and we are absolutely confident that there has been no compromise at all.

Q243 Craig Whittaker: What guarantees can you give to parents that that is the case?

Gareth Pierce: We have gone public on that finding. The guarantee is based on the fact that on one of the issues—namely the rotational cycle—all that information was already in the public domain, and it referred to sections of the specification not to questions.

On the other theme, which is to do with the OSA specification, the emphasis was already in examiners’ reports, and it is in the spec, but we are issuing a note of additional guidance to centres taking our specification just to confirm our position on that.

Q244 Craig Whittaker: Just for clarity, would it be fair to surmise that The Daily Telegraph’s allegations give you absolutely no cause for concern about the security and the integrity of each of your papers?

Gareth Pierce: That is right.

Q245 Craig Whittaker: So it is fine. No worries.

Gareth Pierce: The concern for me from The Daily Telegraph’s reporting of the GCSE history event is to do with the tone and the language, which were unacceptable. The content or the message behind that communiqué was in fact correct.

Q246 Craig Whittaker: So total denial.

Gareth Pierce: No. There were two aspects of the message. One was on the rotational cycle. That was in the public domain, and therefore—

Q247 Chair: So there was no revelation.

Gareth Pierce: There were absolutely no revelations.

Q248 Chair: “We’re cheating, we’re telling you the cycle. Probably the regulator will tell us off.” So basically it was one individual who was tired at the end of the day and actually it was wrong. Actually, the cycle was publicly available to anyone.

Gareth Pierce: Absolutely. So why on earth there was a need to describe that as cheating or say that the regulators would be unhappy about something that has been in the public domain for several years. I do not understand. I do not understand the need for that language or tone, but the message that was conveyed was actually correct as per the published guidance.

Andrew Hall: But there is a point that I will make if I can here. While we can look at this technically and provide the evidence to whoever wants it, this has clearly been something that is in the public domain. The earlier that the feedback comes back from this inquiry and the work that the regulator is doing then that will do something about the broader public confidence. There is a public confidence issue in this, which, as I run one of the awarding bodies, I am very conscious of. We have to convince people about this, and I think that is why the inquiries are important.

Q249 Chair: As you know, as part of the inquiry that we have been carrying out before this all broke, the Advisory Committee on Mathematics Education wrote to us and said “chief examiners...run paid-for training sessions which risk being focused on coaching participants on how to pass the examination, further encouraging ‘teaching to the test’ in schools and creating an incentive for the examiner to set questions in such a way as to reward those who attend the course”. That quite neatly sums up some of the
misgivings that people have and the Telegraph story simply brings that alive. Do you think that the Advisory Committee on Mathematics Education is fundamentally wrong?

Mark Dawe: The linking of seminars to questions is non-existent. There is no evidence of that whatsoever. Q250 Pat Glass: There is an awful lot of money involved in this, isn’t there? We have heard that the average secondary school is now spending £100,000 on exams. Tessa teased out that there were about 3,500 of these training courses. All of that means release and cover. Then we have got the CPD and then we have got the resources. All of this is money that is coming out of schools, that is not going directly into teaching and learning. If the Secretary of State decides after all this—there is an issue of public confidence here—that we are going to have one exam body, which will be in-house, where we will have a separation of examinations from publications, would that not give the public, parents, employers and young people themselves greater confidence in the integrity of the system?

Rod Bristow: I would say that it is worth looking back 10 years to see what the exam system was like then, when there was huge disarray in the system, with students routinely not getting their results on time or getting incorrect grades. A tremendous amount of progress has been made since then and that is worth bearing in mind. In fact, that was the time that Pearson became involved and Edexcel became part of Pearson. We made a significant investment at that time of £35 million into an awarding body where profitability was extremely low. As a result of that investment, we no longer send exam papers round the country in cardboard boxes between examiners and the awarding body in ways that they can get lost. We are able to monitor in real time the marking that is being done. We can double mark it, because the marking is done on screen. The quality of marking has increased tremendously. That improvement has come about as a result of innovation, which has been fuelled through competition through the awarding bodies.

We need to ensure that we do not discount some of the benefits that the current system provides. Nevertheless, it is the case that a lot of questions are being asked. We can see the performance of the UK in international league tables and we would all like it to be better. Mid-table is not where we want to be. It is absolutely right that we review all of the available options and whether there are ways that the system can be improved. The Secretary of State recently put a suggestion on the table and I would say that no suggestions that can be made to improve the system should be off the table.

Andrew Hall: My response would be that we need to very careful and think through the change we make. Before I came to AQA, my first leadership role in education was in running an organisation called QCDA, which I was asked to take over when the 2008 SATs had a challenge, which you may recall. I started to lead that. That was, in a way, a large national body delivering a large national test. There were many disbenefits of having one large national body that we could rehearse with you. I understand that we may be coming back on another occasion to do that. I do not think that it is entirely straightforward.

Gareth Pierce: My view would be that every model or system has some advantages and some disadvantages. In considering this, which is very important and has to be very considered carefully, it must be matched against the question of our key priorities. For example, whether the key priority is comparative standards within a subject, innovation, operational risk or costs, different models or systems would score better or worse against those key priorities. The debate has to be informed by the key priorities, as well as by what kind of regulatory framework, if any, would be needed for each of those models or systems. It has to be a holistic debate.

Mark Dawe: The important thing is that, when you talk about cost, it is still roughly 2% to 3% of the overall budget in a school or a college. As I have said, I came from college, where exam fees were high, but it was 2.5% of our overall cost. That was for external assessment of the success of our students and they walked away with a certificate that they could use with their employers. That seemed like a fairly reasonable fee to pay, actually.

In terms of having one board, I think that there are enormous risks with having one board. Maybe that it a future discussion, but it would be a false confidence for the public if we said that we would just create one board. There is a lot of talk around A-levels and involving higher education in A-levels, and they can bring along some of that confidence and say, “We’ve worked with the exam boards; we are comfortable with these A-levels as being robust, rigorous and progressing through to us.” That is the sort of thing that should give confidence to the public.

Q251 Pat Glass: How do you respond to the allegations? At the bottom of this there is the perception that some schools—some teachers—are paying for access to privileged information, and that a school that cannot afford it or chooses to go down a different route does not get the same access. How would you respond to that, because that is what is sitting at the bottom of these allegations?

Mark Dawe: That information is freely available. As I have said, it is this blended learning approach—some people like to read it online; some people like to have it face to face. We see a churn of people coming and going, and they come and go for the same reasons. As many people come to us, saying, “You are a better exam board”, as leave us. That gives me some confidence that there is some balance in the system between us all.

Andrew Hall: Likewise, we have put all those materials on our website, but only for teachers to access. They are secure—you have to register as a teacher. The one thing we do not want is young people coming in and potentially misunderstanding. You need a degree of expertise to understand the materials. So that is there, and any teacher can have it, whether they take our examinations or not.

Q252 Pat Glass: Can I move on to the competition between exam boards, because we have heard a lot about that as part of this inquiry? What internal
controls do you have to ensure that you do not compete on market share?

Andrew Hall: I had the embarrassment of leaving out one of my management team when I was talking. That is a key part in doing that for me. We look at our business. We absolutely would expect to compete and deliver better service than everybody else—that is what anyone would want to do. We believe we have standards and we have rigour. We look at how we are awarding.

There are two parts—I know you have some of the technical experts coming to see you later on—of what a standard is: there is the content and then there is the grading and awarding of that. The grading and awarding of that is where there is absolute scrutiny. We share data—we share it with the regulator—and we have a great leap forward for AQA, for a long while, has argued about statistical predictions being a really important part of judgment and now, for the last new GCSEs, the regulator has agreed that they will form the fundamental base. That means that you cannot compete on standards. It is then about the content, and that is how that interlinks. There are things like: are the reading ages in all our mathematics papers the same? I am not sure. But that is an area where we say that the awarding takes care of that, so there is no scope for competing on standards.

Q253 Pat Glass: The concern is that schools are shopping around to come up with the easiest paper. What systems do you have in place internally to make sure that your drive for increased market share does not lower standards?

Rod Bristow: I think that part of the review that is under way at the moment really ought to include this idea of what incentives can be put into the system to raise standards. I think that that is a very fair question to ask. There are great leap forward for AQA, for a long while, has argued about statistical predictions being a really important part of judgment and now, for the last new GCSEs, the regulator has agreed that they will form the fundamental base. That means that you cannot compete on standards. It is then about the content, and that is how that interlinks. There are things like: are the reading ages in all our mathematics papers the same? I am not sure. But that is an area where we say that the awarding takes care of that, so there is no scope for competing on standards.

Gareth Pierce: I think, as well, it is the fact that the standards theme is the one theme that brings us together. That is the one we work on collectively, as responsible officers or as technical staff within awarding bodies working through data, so it is the standards agenda that brings us into a collective, but we compete on everything else. We compete on quality of specifications; we compete on quality of teaching and learning resources; we compete on accessibility of our staff; and we compete on value for money. The standards agenda is what brings us together. We work collectively on that and we work with the regulators on that.

Andrew Hall: There are two points. There is the internal control. I go exactly back to the standards theme is the one theme that brings us together. That is the one we work on collectively, as responsible officers or as technical staff within awarding bodies working through data, so it is the standards agenda that brings us into a collective, but we compete on everything else. We compete on quality of specifications; we compete on quality of teaching and learning resources; we compete on accessibility of our staff; and we compete on value for money. The standards agenda is what brings us together. We work collectively on that and we work with the regulators on that.

Andrew Hall: There are two points. There is the internal control. I go exactly back to the standards point, because that is absolutely how we nail it. It is a matter of proven fact—we can demonstrate it. The other part is a culture in the organisation. We have just over 1,200 full-time employees, and a highly significant proportion of those come from the teaching profession; they are teachers. They are not driven—there is no reward for them—to build market share and to compete on standards. They are managed day in, day out around—

Q254 Pat Glass: In the system, there is the cost of failure of not reaching the data we say or not reaching the floor targets. There may not be incentives in that sense, but there are massive issues if they fail. Is that not the incentive?

Mark Dawe: Our long-term survival is based on maintaining standards. In our case, even if Ofqual told us we could drop our standards, I would have Cambridge on my shoulder, saying, “No, you won’t.” We have a research team that we have access to that does a lot of comparability work, monitoring standards across all of us within Cambridge, identifying where there may be issues. Ofqual fulfills the same role.

Q255 Chair: Where are there issues?

Mark Dawe: There have been issues in the past where an awarding body has been shown to be too hard or too easy and we are told to shift.

Q256 Chair: You are doing this work yourself and are looking across the piece, so tell us your list of the top three subject and board concerns based on that assessment. In relation to my earlier comments about looking at a budget and profit and loss report, you would look at the discrepancy. Where are the discrepancies in the past three years?

Mark Dawe: We had a sociology paper that was considered to be too hard and were told we needed to ease up on particular grade boundaries. Ofqual recently reported on English and a couple of other areas where they have identified some papers as easier.

Q257 Chair: Mr Pierce’s board has gone from 7% to 18%. It is suggested that that English GCSE might be easier. Is that borne out by your data, Mr Dawe, before we come to Mr Pierce to defend himself?

Mark Dawe: That was an Ofqual report. That suggested that that particular paper was slightly easier. I will let Mr Pierce talk about that.

Q258 Pat Glass: There are perceptions in the system that Edexcel is easier and that your board is unsuitable for children from private schools. Where do these perceptions come from if they are not real?

Mark Dawe: They are historical: there are decades back of Oxford and Cambridge. Our spread across schools is even: the percentage of schools and our market share is the same. It is perception. Nowadays you just can’t be that different, because of the rules that are put in place.

Q259 Pat Glass: We met lots of examiners yesterday. One criticism they made was that the cost has gone up and yet the amount of face-to-face quality assurance has gone down, in some cases to virtually nothing. They saw that as a major flaw in the system.
Mark Dawe: In terms of price per exam, the cost has been under inflation over the past five years. The volume of exams taken has gone up substantially. That goes back to the wider system and that pressure to do more exams and get more results. When we talk to universities they do not want more exams, but in the system there seems to be a pressure that they want more exams. The cost per exam has not gone up substantially.

Q260 Pat Glass: One of the recommendations made to us was that there needs to be more face-to-face quality assurance—what I used to call moderation—across boards and within boards. That is costly.

Andrew Hall: There is a debate around that—we call it standardisation, the words move. If you take a large subject such as English the number of people you need to standardise is immense. One challenge of having it as a face-to-face meeting is about human behaviour, about which you know more than I do, I suspect. You cannot have one person talking to 500 people and actually getting an effective message across. You therefore break it down into teams. When you break it down into teams you find, if you are not careful—and this is where we have quality of marking issues—you get different interpretations of one man’s or woman’s voice going through the system. Using online methods of sharing that information means you can have much more direct communication, with just the physical logistics to make it work. That also then gives you the ability to test and see more effectively how the standardisation works. If you have it on a face-to-face basis it is very difficult. That makes for more rigorous, proven standardisation. I do not know which examiners you have had in; they will have different views.

Q261 Pat Glass: They came from all the big boards and they all said the same thing.

Andrew Hall: I am not saying which board. One of the reasons some examiners do not like it—I am sure that would not be the senior people you had in—is because it finds them out. If I look at my e-mail box just after the results come out, one of the greatest criticisms is, “My students didn’t get the results I expected. Your marking is wrong.” That is I believe our biggest issue about the quality of marking.

Gareth Pierce: I would like to comment on the point made. Yes, our growth in volume is notable in several subject areas, but it has all happened in an era when there has been very tight regulatory monitoring of standards through agreed statistical procedures. However, I would want to caution against being too comfortable as a country or countries. If we are couching our debate on standards increasingly in terms of prediction models and tolerances, that makes me uncomfortable as a statistician and as an educationist. I think standards in any nation's education system need to be based on quality of achievement, the quality of candidates' work, so I would caution against being too comfortable when our standards debate is couched statistically, especially in an international context where we want to make sure that our young people can have successful futures and can contribute to a successful economy.

Q262 Chair: The crude level is seeing that big increase in your market share and thinking, “First, is that because you are perceived to be easier? Secondly, are you actually easier and do the data back it up?” Are you more likely to get an A* in English from your board than you are from OCR, and do the data back that up?

Gareth Pierce: The answer is no, because we are working within this very tight—sometimes we might say too tight—statistical environment in terms of all our awarding data.

Q263 Damian Hinds: Gentlemen, I think we now better understand the business models that you run. It sounds like the vast majority of your income comes from examination fees. You do not make a lot of money out of textbooks, but you have to have a textbook to give some confidence to the schools and the teachers that it is going to guide them towards the said exam. You say you run training courses at a loss, especially when there are new specifications coming out, which I have to say sounds a little like saying that Procter & Gamble runs product launches at a loss. I put it to you that those things are marketing fees. In a business, an industry, where examination revenue has more than doubled in seven years, you do not need to grow market share in order to be very successful, you just need to hold your own. Is there anything fatally flawed in that assessment?

Rod Bristow: I would say there is because I do not believe they are marketing. I think they are actually providing a benefit—they are enabling teachers better to understand how to do their job.

Q264 Damian Hinds: I did not dispute that it was a benefit for teachers, but it is a cost of doing business, if you like. In order for people to go with you when the new specifications come out you need to have a training course.

Rod Bristow: It is a benefit for students.

Mark Dawe: It is a requirement.

Q265 Damian Hinds: You need to have a training course? It is a cost of doing business.

Mark Dawe: It is in our code of conduct from Ofqual that we should put these things on. It is a requirement.

Q266 Damian Hinds: Mr Pierce, in a previous inquiry this Committee did on the English baccalaureate, there was much discussion of your new qualification in Latin. There was some consternation among some of my colleagues that this qualification would not count towards the English baccalaureate and some marvelment at the remarkable growth rate that you achieved for this new qualification. What was the secret of your success?

Gareth Pierce: That is a very interesting individual case. A professional group, the Cambridge School Classics Project, came to us to explain that they felt there was a gap in the type of provision available in that curriculum area. We were not sure what to do because we were not expecting that approach. It came
Q267 Damian Hinds: Sorry. The gap was for what?
Gareth Pierce: The gap was for a curriculum offer in the Latin area. I think there was a time when there were two or three options available from different awarding bodies that had become just one available. In a way, this is an interesting microcosm of the question about a single provider. What they were saying to us was, “There is a single provider and there are schools and colleges that would like to provide but are not happy with that single offer.” Therefore, they engaged with us and we developed a model offer that was approved by the regulator, and it became an accredited level 1, level 2 qualification.

Q268 Damian Hinds: But it was easier.
Gareth Pierce: No, it could not be easier because it is at level 1, level 2. It is different, but it is at level 1, level 2. The regulators have accredited it, which is what confirms to us and gives us the assurance that it is comparable.

Q269 Damian Hinds: My final question. I would like a quick answer from all four of you if possible. When we spoke to the examiners yesterday they talked to us about seeing expected results. So when they were marking papers they would have some visibility of what that cohort of students, other things being equal, should score. What is the role of that? What do those examiners actually see?
Mark Dawe: There is statistical work done on the cohort to get those expected results, but then there is an enormous amount of judgment made by the examiners in the awarding.

Q270 Damian Hinds: Why should the examiners see that, rather than you just doing it as a post-analysis exercise?
Mark Dawe: Again, there is an expectation from the regulator that, to ensure that our spread of grades fits the expectation, we do that analysis. So it is just part of the process, but it informs; it does not give the final award.

Q271 Damian Hinds: To be clear, it is a requirement from the regulator that you tell examiners, in advance of their marking the papers, that overall—not for the individual student perhaps—this is the sort of average mark that the students should be getting. Is that right?
Mark Dawe: The examiners mark separate papers without any knowledge of what should or should not happen. It is when it comes to the awarding meeting at the end that discussions are had.
Gareth Pierce: It is at the awarding stage that we operate within guidance on what kind of information should be brought to bear on those awarding decisions and that can include a whole range of what we deem relevant. Usually the regulators are aware of what kind of information we use and therefore they can also give a view on whether it is relevant. So it is information on the cohort. It is information from these predictor models. It is information about the quality of work of candidates because the examiners will be very clued up on that. So it is a bringing together of data and quality of work information. I think the trick is making sure that it is in the right balance.

Q272 Damian Hinds: What does that information get used for?
Gareth Pierce: It is used for setting what are called the judgmental grade boundaries. At GCSE for example, the grade A boundary and the grade C are among the judgmental boundaries. The examiners have to debate that and they need to bring together their own view on the quality of work and the available background data.

Q273 Damian Hinds: Given that we are told that different cohorts can vary substantially and that is one reason why perhaps over time there may be what some people call grade inflation, have you known a time when your overall results have come in significantly below the level that you have been told to expect?
Gareth Pierce: It is quite interesting at the moment because we have some statistical data which are predictive. So for next summer’s exams we will have some predictive data about that cohort which will help the decision making at that time.

Q274 Damian Hinds: Sorry, can you explain that?
Gareth Pierce: In the lead-up to next summer’s awards there is a bringing together of data across awarding bodies which portrays the background characteristics of that cohort. The regulator has to have that kind of collective work, and so it gives us some indication predictively of what each of our cohorts looks like in terms of quality.

Q275 Damian Hinds: Do you find that the end results end up coming in remarkably close to that prediction?
Gareth Pierce: Well in a sense they have to because within this culture of working they have to be pretty close because we have to work within certain tolerance limits. But then there is also after the event. We do some collective comparisons, which is the screening stage after a summer series is awarded, when we again look at the data and there could be recommendations from that retrospective look. It is quite complex.

Andrew Hall: We use those in our organisation. As I am personally responsible and held accountable by my trustees for awarding the grade boundaries, if we do get them up and down from the guidance, we set ourselves a tolerance and it will vary according to the subject to some extent. I will have very detailed conversations with the chair of the examiners if they are either up or down—I think more than 1% is my broad rule of thumb, but occasionally I will go within that. You get all the reports and you sit and read them and study them. It is a really important way of controlling standards. I cannot stress that enough. Gareth and I might not be in quite the same place on this, but that statistical prediction is crucial.

Q276 Damian Hinds: Mr Pierce is a statistician. I do not know whether any of the rest of you are. I am not.
It sounds to me, however, from what you are saying that it is physically impossible to have an extreme year where the overall GCSE results would be, say, 5% or 10% down on a previous year, but within a certain tolerance level you can have variation. Lo and behold, it just so happens that over the last x number of years there seems to have been on average a small tolerance above the expectation and that is what has led to grade inflation but there have not been counterbalancing years when it has gone the other way. Is that a fair interpretation?

Mark Dawe: One of the issues is where you have continuous change in the syllabus and specifications. It is very hard to maintain standards year on year because you are starting with a new set. So some of the work that is done year on year becomes much more difficult if it is a new syllabus but also if the work is poor, if the examiners are sitting there and saying this is just not good enough, we will put it down and we won’t be within those tolerances and we will justify why we are not in those tolerances. So we have the opportunity to do that. I suppose it is exceptional reporting. If you come outside the tolerances you need to explain why.

Damian Hinds: I would love to pursue this more, but I know that I can’t.

Chair: Gentlemen, thank you very much for giving evidence to us this morning.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Dennis Opposs, Director of Standards, Ofqual and Glenys Stacey, Chief Executive, Ofqual, gave evidence.

Q277 Chair: Good morning, thank you for joining us today. Headmaster Bernard Trafford wrote in The Telegraph last Friday: “The public are outraged, but no one in education is surprised.” Were you surprised?

Glenys Stacey: Yes, I was. I was surprised by the nature of the comments and by the tone and tenor of some of the material I saw in those clips. I was not unaware of concerns about what happens in seminars. Indeed, you will know that I have been sufficiently unaware of concerns about what happens in seminars.

Q278 Chair: The awarding bodies referred to data showing that their standards are all in line, according to the statistics. Do you have that data? Do you feel that they show that? Or, are there persistent differences between boards on particular subjects, be it GCSE maths, English, or whatever?

Glenys Stacey: That is a big question. I will answer it briefly and see whether you want to explore any particular aspect of it. I know, Damian Hinds, that you were asking particularly about statistical modelling and really about grade inflation.

As you know, one of our concerns at Ofqual is grade inflation. We set out this year to control it, using a comparable outcomes approach. We did contain it at A-level and will continue to do so. That is a rather technical process of moderating across subjects, grade boundaries and awarding bodies. Yes, we have that data, and we get data in on a daily basis from awarding bodies throughout the summer examination season. It is a big task; some 15 million examinations are sat and scripts marked. We have that data.

Apart from that, we do comparability studies, as between awarding bodies and between subjects, and studies over time. We have about 50 or so of those on the record so far. One or two have been referred to— I caught the last bit of the last session. For example, we have data in relation to A-level English that gave us cause for concern.

Q279 Chair: What do the data show? Where are there significant differences? I know that Ofqual has only been going two years and that you have not been in post that long, but what is your early take?

Glenys Stacey: The early take is that we can and do moderate robustly across grade boundaries, as between awarding bodies; first of all, dealing with the grade inflation point. Awarding bodies co-operate in that they are increasingly using the statistical models, which we applaud. Examiner discretion and judgment means gradual grade inflation, so statistical modelling does help you to take a different perspective and see whether there is justification across the cohort for change. I think that does work quite well.

Q280 Chair: Given that schools are desperate to meet the accountability measure, which is overly fixated on A to C GCSE, and there may be a desire—it seemed to be expressed by people recorded by The Telegraph—for boards to make it easier through their exams for schools to do that, anyone who stands out from the others is likely to try to drag everyone else up in order to try to make sure that they are not perceived as much more difficult than the new, perceived easier one. That would itself contribute to grade inflation. Are there particular subjects where there is a link between, for instance, increase in market share by a particular board and data suggesting that you are more likely to get a higher grade?

Glenys Stacey: I would not necessarily say particular subjects. I think you need to refer to the NFER report, which looks at the broader picture across subjects and which gives us cause for concern in relation to, as I have said, CCEA in Northern Ireland and WJEC. It is
What is interesting to me as a teacher is the ability to try to understand what was going on. But that is not something I was able to do. As we have said, the main issue is that being followed up now is to do with the Northern Ireland board and the comparability of some of its A-levels with others.

Q281 Chair: Mr Opposs, anything to add to that?

Dennis Opposs: The NFER report was primarily commissioned to test out this statistical model—this approach to trying to ensure comparable outcomes—and it gave the method we are using a pretty clean bill of health. As part of that, there is a lot of data in there about individual A-levels. As we have said, the main issue is being followed up now is to do with the Northern Ireland board and the comparability of some of its A-levels with others.

Q282 Chair: Right. What about WJEC?

Dennis Opposs: That is in the report on the website, and all the data are there. The report covers three years—2008, 2009 and 2010—and it suggests that over those three years WJEC has come much more closely into line. We are planning to do a follow-up looking at what has happened in 2011.

Q283 Chair: So it was out of line, and that may have contributed to its growth in market share in certain subjects?

Dennis Opposs: In this A-level study, we have not looked at whether particular subjects and their grading relate to the market share.

Q284 Chair: If WJEC had gone from 7% to 18% in GCSE English, which is not exactly a minor topic, I would have thought that notwithstanding NFER reports and large-scale data assessment, I might have suspected that the movement underneath might be telling us something possibly about standards. We are very interested in evaluating the churn or movement data year on year between one specification and another to see what it might be suggesting to us, although not much is certain.

What I do know is that when I go out to schools and ask about particular movements—for example, as it happens, noting the increase in market share on the particular qualification that you mentioned, I was at an independent selective girls’ city school recently where they had chosen to move to that qualification. I asked why that move had taken place, and the teacher responsible said to me that she was very impressed with the levels of service that were provided in terms of the qualification, so I gleaned something about why one teacher in one school chose to make that change. You will recognise, I know, that many of the choices made about this board or that are made at the chalk face.

Q285 Chair: Yes, but it is at the chalk face that you have schools absolutely driven to a frenzy in their desire to meet the five A to C GCSEs. The floor target is going from 30% to 50% so the system, which is already over-fixated on one particular measure, is going to be cranked up even more. That is why we need you to check whether it is leading to perverse outcomes. When the head of Ofqual arrives, I do not know how many teachers will say, “I’m choosing that board because I think it might be easier. It’s an excellent service.” I do not want to be critical of that, but I don’t know how often they will fess up and say, “Actually, it’s because my head teacher is going to sack me if I don’t improve the percentage of people who get a pass, because apparently we are the worst in our subject—we’re the worst in the area. I’ve changed my board so that I don’t fit that category any more.”

Glenys Stacey: You touch on something that I have mentioned in correspondence—that is now public, actually—about how the wider system works. Our job in Ofqual is to secure standards in a delivery model with awarding organisations. That is our raison d’être, our determination and our intent, but that operates in a wider system, and you mention aspects of it there.

Q286 Tessa Munt: Do you think that the comments of individual examiners have in any way jeopardised future examinations, particularly next summer’s?

Glenys Stacey: Yes. Obviously, that has been a priority for me in the inquiry that we started just last week. We have had rough transcripts only of the material from the Daily Telegraph—"The Daily Telegraph—" and the copyright on those. We have looked through those and we do not see an immediate concern, but the evening before last, we received the audio tapes—some 54 hours of them. We are checking to make sure that there are not any more. We are having those 54 hours transcribed, and as soon as that is done, they will be passed to awarding bodies to check those examination papers that are already set and on the shelf.

We know now, I believe, that none of that material was covering examinations to be sat in the January series, so we are looking at examinations that might be set for the May or June series. We can get our awarding bodies to go through the process of looking closely at the material and evaluating the papers. Hopefully, that will give us the assurance that we need; if there is any doubt, papers will be pulled and replaced.

Q287 Tessa Munt: Is it worth changing the papers anyway?

Glenys Stacey: The paper has been set. We have seen nothing as yet that compromises it. Once we have looked at all the evidence, we will take a view on whether there is any sniff of a legitimate concern. We will also consider public confidence when we make a decision about this—rest assured we will—but we will make that decision in January.

Q288 Tessa Munt: It was only as a matter of public confidence—the perception is that this is tainted, so I wondered what action you might take?
Glenys Stacey: The issue is that *The Daily Telegraph* has done an excellent job in getting to these seminars and presenting this evidence, but it has covered only a small number of seminars, on subjects that may have been selected because of particular concerns expressed. I don’t know; I need to understand that better from *The Daily Telegraph*, and will do so.

There is a question of scale. We have not seen evidence from all the seminars across all the subjects. We need to think about whether you simply pull all examination papers, which would be quite destabilising, or whether you are driven to take a proportionate approach based on an evaluation of the evidence, but also taking into account public confidence. I have that very much in mind.

Q289 Tessa Munt: Are you doing anything to reassure students who are due to take their exams in the summer?

Glenys Stacey: We will be reassuring students when we have made a decision in early January, so we have time to do that.

Q290 Tessa Munt: What is your opinion on whether teachers are, effectively, paying for privileged access on a face-to-face basis?

Glenys Stacey: Obviously, I need to know more. I need to be given the opportunity really to look at the evidence. You will know from the correspondence I have already shared and exchanged with Ministers that I have sufficient concern about these seminars, and training aids generally, to make it a priority area of work for my organisation now. I also make the point that it is a wider system that is working—there is an extent to which our traditional approaches, not simply as a regulator, but in the system at large, are based on assumptions about the integrity of individuals wherever they are in the system. We need to take stock.

Q291 Tessa Munt: On the idea of questions coming around in a cyclical fashion, it has been said this morning that this is all open, and it is completely clear that it will happen, so if you are into gaming, you can go on the probability and work out what you might have done. What is your view on that, please?

Glenys Stacey: I am not sure it is quite as straightforward as that. I think what you are touching on there is that we have a transparent system here. It is not the same in every jurisdiction, but we have a long-standing belief in transparency—not just in the examination system, but culturally across the public sector provision of services. Examination papers are on the web and available, mark schemes are understood and so on. One can claw back from that if it is desirable to do so. Do not forget, though, that it is not simply at the moment the awarding bodies; there are private providers running similar seminars as well, and they are not regulated at the moment. So there is a balance to be struck. You do not want it to be formulaic; you want it to cover the syllabus with the right weight applied.

Q292 Pat Glass: I accept that your giving training sessions is a priority for you in the future, but would you therefore accept that in the past Ofqual has turned a blind eye to some of these long-standing issues?

Glenys Stacey: As the Chairman said, Ofqual has not been around that long. It did have a predecessor, and I am not responsible for that. What I can see is that, since having been at Ofqual from March this year, we have raised very quickly in the public domain our concerns about standards. We have encouraged people to speak openly and honestly about these issues when, even a year ago, the climate did not seem to be one where one could voice these concerns readily enough. We have taken a firm hand on matters of priority—for example, exam errors over the summer. We have run a standards debate with those who understand assessment and those who do not. We have been looking very closely at grade inflation; certainly at standards of demand in qualifications; at marking; and, yes, at what I call, loosely, the commercial behaviours of awarding organisations, because we have a market model at the moment. Like any regulator, I am prioritising my resources, and I am concentrating on those issues that I believe people are really concerned about in standards.

So far as these seminars are concerned, we have set a requirement for May 2012—a condition on all awarding bodies—that they demonstrate that they do not compromise the integrity of the assessment or the confidence of the subject matters that are covered in examinations. We have required awarding bodies to have conflict of interest procedures that deal with and control the role of examiners there or anywhere else. We have most certainly been monitoring those seminars on spot checks but, as the Chairman says, when the regulator turns up things seem all above board.

Q293 Pat Glass: Can I ask you about the conflict of interest procedure? Would you expect to be involved in that, either in drawing it up or particularly in monitoring it?

Glenys Stacey: The requirement is that they should have a conflict of interest procedure. They need to suit the particular conflicts and the size and scale of the businesses. Bear in mind that, although you are focusing on four or five awarding bodies today, there are about 180 of them, providing a wide range of qualifications, so there is a case of horses for courses when you are designing a conflict of interest procedure. Our job is, first, to specify that it should be there; secondly, to make sure it is there; and thirdly, to monitor its effectiveness.

We are in a year of transition here, moving to much tighter regulatory arrangements, which we have published for May 2012. We start our new monitoring arrangements in earnest in January. You would expect, I hope—certainly, we will be hoping—that so far as
the big players are concerned, our monitoring will be what I call close and continuous.

Q294 Pat Glass: In terms of monitoring, do you monitor how much exam boards charge for support materials, such as training and textbooks, as well as the exam entries themselves?

Glensy Stacey: We have not been explicitly monitoring that to date, but it is inevitably going to be part of our study now on textbooks, support services and seminars. There is bound to be an element of looking at whether a profit is made and, if so, to what extent. My understanding is that the seminars are not thought to be a cash cow, let’s put it that way. We will get to the root of it.

Q295 Craig Whittaker: As a follow-up to that, some people say that you lack teeth or the will to go and tackle the issue around textbooks, for example. I know that you have said that you have put some guidelines in place, but are you doing enough?

Glensy Stacey: Yes, it is interesting, isn’t it? On lacking teeth, first of all, we do not lack the appetite to deal with matters, but we do need the right sanctions and the right powers to do that. We have been making representations to the current and the past Government about that. I am pleased to say that this Government are giving us and have given us the power to fine. We are now going hell for leather to ensure that we can have those arrangements in place at the earliest possible opportunity.

Fining has its proper place and we have not had that sanction. We have got what one might call the ultimate nuclear option, which is taking an awarding body out of the market, but for the sorts of things that we are talking about today, one needs intermediate sanctions, such as fining, in order to bite, if you like. I am very keen to see the right powers for Ofqual. I will be advising the Secretary of State in the new year of any new powers we might think we might need in light of this. One, for example, is that whistleblowers to Ofqual are not currently given the same protection as those other public sector organisations where they might go. We need whistleblowers to have the greatest possible protection, so that we can directly hear the evidence that we need.

Q296 Chair: How sound are your systems on that? It is very anecdotal, but we had somebody say that they used it and that you never got back to them. If somebody goes to the trouble of trying to contact you and they don’t hear back from you, that does not sound very good. That is just one instance.

Glensy Stacey: Given the number of letters that I sign each day, I find that surprising. I would very much like to see the example, if that is the case. I see what we are dealing with, so it is not a concern of mine at the moment, but if there is evidence, please let me know.

Getting back to why we have not done something about this before—

Q297 Craig Whittaker: May I stop you and take you back to that last comment about the number of letters that you sign off and what you deal with? Are you therefore suggesting that it is commonly known that it is widespread?

Glensy Stacey: No. In the sort of letters that I am signing off, when people are writing to our organisation, raising queries about any aspect of examinations or qualifications, many of those inquiries will relate to a particular issue about the delivery for one person or the mark for one person. We are ensuring that the awarding bodies are dealing with those appropriately.

Q298 Craig Whittaker: How many more teeth do you need to bottom this out?

Glensy Stacey: I certainly need the fining power. I certainly need to be able to build the capacity of the organisation, which we are doing, sharing our plans with DFE and BIS. We will be working increasingly closely with other experts on assessment in the wider academic field, for example, to ensure that, when we are looking at and evaluating evidence, we are reaching the right conclusions and determining the right priorities. By building our capacity and looking afresh at our powers, we will get where we need to be. On powers, I think that fining power is the most significant thing. I am very pleased to see that coming. I am also keen to have a fresh look, particularly at whether—I think we are okay, but I want to check with our lawyers—we are able to extract from awarding bodies all of the data that we need, in a timely and dynamic way, to ensure that we understand some of the flux, churn and change in the system that we need to.

Q299 Craig Whittaker: Do you not do that already?

Glensy Stacey: Yes, we do get a considerable amount of data. I have just asked for more yesterday in relation to a particular detail on flux over the summer. I want to double-check that there is not data information that is available within an awarding body or across awarding bodies that we do not have access to. I am just getting my lawyers to check out statutory provisions to ensure that that is the case.

I think you asked why we did not deal with this before. I know that Warwick Mansell wrote a book—I think it was called “Education by Numbers”—maybe five or six years ago, and there are a number of issues there. I have read that book, it has been by night-time reading, and I have met Warwick Mansell to discuss the issues that are in there. Interestingly—I look to Dennis here—I am not aware of any direct evidence being presented to Ofqual, certainly not in my time, that this is an issue, but having read that and heard one or two noises, as I said, I have been sufficiently concerned about it to put it as a priority. I have shared that with Ministers.

Q300 Craig Whittaker: I am struggling as a parent, as well as a member of this forum, to really have confidence in the system. Are the Daily Telegraph allegations just a little annoyance? Speaking to the four guys we had on before you, I was quite ready to sign up to give them knighthoods—I thought everything was hunky dory. In reality I suspect it is not—I do not know because I do not have the evidence—but what is it? How do we put that faith
back in the system? How do we make students and parents really feel that, when their son or daughter is taking a GCSE or A-level, it is robust; it is setting them up for their future, because, at the end of the day, that is what it is about?

**Glenys Stacey:** I will try to answer that as concisely as possible, but it is a big question.

First, we do annual surveys of confidence in GCSEs and A-levels, and we look particularly at the confidence that teachers and students have in various aspects, including marking. Confidence there is remarkably sound—among teachers, I think it is about 80% confidence in A-levels and about 70% in GCSEs—that they are robust, valuable qualifications with currency. Confidence in GCSE and GCSE marking has dropped a bit over the last year, which really sharpens our interest in marking. We could get on to that, but, generally speaking, that is one objective measure, if you like.

Secondly, this year we have compared our A-levels with the equivalent qualifications internationally, and we are about to publish our study on those. Dennis can certainly talk about the detail if you are interested, but, basically, our A-levels are standing up pretty well when we compare them with their international equivalents. Because our A-levels, if you think about it, are designed as the appropriate gateway into higher education here, they look more fit for purpose here than some of the qualifications abroad, but there are some nuggets in that study that we want to reflect on and to look at whether they could be transferred into our systems here. That is very interesting, and we will progress that into GCSE comparisons in the next phase of international work.

So there are some good signs, but there was just a sufficient element of concern—this is a very emotional and emotive area for people—about grade inflation, about whether demand is sustained, about some of the specific aspects of it, it sounds as though the undermining of confidence in the system has become apparent. And, at the moment, I am just saying that there seems to be some bits that need to be twiddled with. Why are colleges checking every child?

**Glenys Stacey:** It might be a variance, or it might be just a different element of it. One has heard stories or views that the student is not actually demonstrating the abilities, skills and knowledge that one would expect, having looked at the qualifications that they have. One hears these tales now, but one also hears them from 30, 40 or 50 years ago. It is a common theme, so we need to recognise that.

**Q302 Chair:** So is public confidence higher now than it was? The data would seem to suggest that the general public have a lower confidence in the system than teachers and parents do.

**Glenys Stacey:** I would not know what the confidence was in qualifications during the era that I am talking about. Just to continue, when employers or higher education are talking about the student, they may be talking about the knowledge base, the ability to analyse or true skill. We need to get a better understanding when a qualification is constructed about the balance to be struck between assessing knowledge, assessing analytical skills and assessing true skill, so there is a conversation to be had.

There is a common view that certain core skills, such as the ability to communicate, to spell, to punctuate and to use grammar well have been falling short, and we have made changes this year to tighten up on that. You may be aware of them, but in GCSE subjects—some of the main topics now—there is a requirement for at least five marks to be allocated to the assessment of spelling, punctuation and grammar. Where we can see common skills across qualifications that employers and higher education are telling us are missing, we want to have that dialogue with higher education and employers. Where we find a common theme that we can correct, we are doing so.

**Q303 Damian Hinds:** One of the many letters that you signed the day before yesterday was to me, for which I am very grateful. I was looking for more detail on some of the research that your organisation had done, and it was a very full response, which I am very grateful for.

**Glenys Stacey:** Thank you.

**Q304 Damian Hinds:** One of the things that I found particularly striking was that in Ofqual’s own research on the quantitative study of attitudes, the proportion of people saying that the exam system was doing a good or very good job with no need for reform was 80% confidence in A-levels and about 70% in GCSEs—that they are robust, valuable qualifications with currency. Confidence in GCSE and GCSE marking has dropped a bit over the last year, which really sharpens our interest in marking. We could get on to that, but, generally speaking, that is one objective measure, if you like.

In summary, as a parent you need to know these are good qualifications that have currency. We will continue to secure it, but there is a little bit of correction to be done.

**Q301 Tessa Munt:** I just want to challenge you on that a little bit, because in my experience of my neck of the woods, which is the west country, colleges absolutely consistently test every student for their capacity, ability, literacy and numeracy—the whole flipping lot. It does not matter whether they have seven grade As or four grade Cs, whatever it is, every college tests every young person going in. We have also heard evidence on this Committee from employers and people involved in further and higher education who do not trust. They are not being given what they think they need. That is slightly at variance with your statement that all is fine, mostly, but there are some bits that need to be twiddled with. Why are colleges checking every child?

**Glenys Stacey:** It might be a variance, or it might be just a different element of it. One has heard stories or views that the student is not actually demonstrating the abilities, skills and knowledge that one would expect, having looked at the qualifications that they have. One hears these tales now, but one also hears them from 30, 40 or 50 years ago. It is a common theme, so we need to recognise that.
so widespread that some really radical changes may be needed. That is my hypothesis to put to you.

Glenys Stacey: My perspective on that is that we are identifying facets of the system that will undermine confidence. Grade inflation is one of those facets, and we have already outlined our intent and how we would actually deal with that. A second area of the system that I know is significantly undermining confidence with teachers is in relation to marking. Here, when I speak with teachers and teacher representatives, as I do, the issue seems to be not the generic systems now used for marking—I think the chief exec of Pearson explained the innovations there, and they have the real potential to increase the consistency and quality of marking—but how individual awarding bodies deal with issues raised about individuals’ marks or the marks of a class in particular examinations. That is an area where we will be working with awarding bodies to agree a common approach to the service that anyone would expect when they raise a concern about marking. We wish to promote a much greater consistency and transparency about that. Particularly, you will understand that we do not want any student advantaged or disadvantaged unfairly as compared with the cohort.

So, for me, as the regulator, I can see areas where a determined effort on our part, as we are now doing, should make a significant difference to confidence in the system as it stands. The question as to whether fundamental reform is required is a matter for the Government to consider. My view is that I am the regulator and I will regulate.

Q306 Damian Hinds: You talked about the international comparison and some of the analysis you have done. We know that in future the Secretary of State wants examination standards to be pegged to the best in the world—not the average. How is that going to work in practice?

Glenys Stacey: I will ask Dennis to outline our approach on that.

Dennis Opposs: As you know, as we have said today, we are carrying out this study at the moment looking at A-levels alongside qualifications used many jurisdictions around the world. We will be publishing a report on that early next year. What we then need to do, or what we are doing at the moment actually, is to try to draw from that what we can take in particular subjects that we can build into future A-levels in this country. One of the subjects we have been looking at is history; what can we learn from what we see around the world from the way history is taught and assessed that we can build in? We are still working on the details of how we will do that but at least at the moment we are building the evidence that we will need.

Q307 Damian Hinds: To be clear, you talk about the way it is assessed rather than saying, for example, a top grade in the United Kingdom should be in some sense equivalent to a top grade in say, Shanghai, Singapore or one of the other jurisdictions that is frequently mentioned. Is that right?

Dennis Opposs: We have had experts in the subjects looking at material. We have said that we want them to think about the sort of standard that is required to get into a selective university in this country. So we are looking at something around grade B. We have not yet looked and we may not look at students’ work but they are able to analyse the syllabuses and try to make some comparison about the expectations in these different countries.

Q308 Damian Hinds: So it does include attainment levels?

Dennis Opposs: When you link that with the exam papers and so on that we look at, we can get a hang on that.

Q309 Damian Hinds: Given that it seems that in some of these other countries, rather inconveniently, not only is the standard higher in some cases in the best performing system in the world, but it keeps going up. So if we adopt the comparable outcomes principle here—we have adopted the comparable outcomes principle here—is that somewhat in conflict with pegging to the standards and best systems in the world?

Dennis Opposs: We have just started using the comparable outcomes approach. This was only the second year with the new A-levels. One thing we are aware of is that you cannot just keep that going for ever. You have from time to time to step back and review. What you have described could be one reason for doing that. It could be there are other reasons that are coming through that mean that you need to set your targets higher in particular subjects. So when we put in place our full arrangements for this, one of the things we will have to build in is the opportunity to adjust from time to time. We cannot simply put in place the current standards and say, “And they shall be carried forward for ever and a day.”

Q310 Damian Hinds: In this Committee we hear frequently from businesses complaining that the qualifications people have are not equipping them for the jobs they want to be done. They find that people do not have employability skills and so on as well as core craft skills. We also know that some universities are finding it necessary to redo A-level maths or parts of it in the first year of a science course and frequently need to do their own test on top of the A-level system. If you were a man from Mars looking at this situation, wouldn’t you say, “Universities should be in charge of the standards of academic A-level qualifications and employers should be in charge of standards in vocational subjects”? And that would be without the need for some parallel system of awarding bodies, although I suppose you would need some intermediary body to pull it together.

Glenys Stacey: Can I deal with that because I am concerned about the distance between qualifications production and higher education and I understand the Government’s laudable desire to get higher education more closely involved in the design of A-levels? The practicalities of that are all in the detail. You will know that people in higher education have a great, diverse range of views about the subject matter within individual subjects and about the structure of the qualification, level, demand and so on.
For us, the key to success is finding a way to understand well enough—in a sufficiently granular fashion—the different views within higher education by subject type, by higher education college type and so on, so that we can see to what extent and how higher education will be properly involved. There is a danger in listening to a small cadre of voices in higher education; we need to look at it in the round.

Q311 Pat Glass: May I briefly explore something that Tessa was talking about? Throughout the system, we are checking at every point. When children go from infant to junior schools, the junior schools are saying that the key stage 1 results are not matching what they see. When kids go from primary to secondary school, every one of them is reassessed. It is the same at college and university. Universities are re-teaching maths and so on. How much of that is about the exam system? How much is it about the pressure in the system that we keep hearing about in this Committee? Schools, colleges and universities are getting their retaliation in first because there is massive pressure to get grades A to C, floor targets and so on. Is the examination system being corrupted by the massive pressures in the system—or blamed, even?

Glenys Stacey: I am not sure that I am the best person to answer that. We have a limited role in overseeing the assessment system, the SATs and so on, but the primary responsibility for those is with another agency.

Q312 Pat Glass: But you are dealing with the outcome of all this, aren’t you?

Glenys Stacey: We are responsible for qualifications and examinations. The ones that bite in the system that you are talking about would be those, first, at GCSE level—there is a fair number of qualifications alongside GCSEs—and then at A-level. We are responsible for the standard of those qualifications, and that is what we are really concerned about. I think the issues that you are pointing to relate to how the wider system works. I am sure that the Government take an overview of that and will take a view about it. The qualifications are simply one part of it. I am afraid that it is not really for the qualifications regulator to take a view or comment on the wider system.

Q313 Pat Glass: You are telling us that there is not too much wrong with the examination system, but that is very different from the public perception. Is what is missing from this the amount of pressure in the system?

Glenys Stacey: A number of things are missing from it. My concern is to make sure that a qualification, and particularly an examination, assesses the programme of study fairly and comprehensively and comes out with a reliable and valid result. When it boils down to it, that is my concern. I suspect that you are touching on the weight that is put on qualifications. Of course, GCSEs have been around for quite a long time. They had a stated purpose, but things change, and Governments need to look at how qualifications are used, relied on and all the rest of it. There is that aspect to it, for sure, but my job is definitely around securing the integrity of the qualification.

Q314 Pat Glass: Okay. Is there sufficient consistency across exam boards? Are universities, as has been suggested by the Secretary of State, secretly looking at a maths A-level from one board and comparing it to another?

Glenys Stacey: So far as consistency is concerned, we do our comparability studies, which I mentioned earlier. We have 50 or so, so far. We point out where we find any shortcomings or inconsistencies—I think A-level English from one of the boards was mentioned earlier—so we are looking closely at that. We accredit qualifications in the first place. If we see any shortcomings, we refuse accreditation and if you look at our record on GCSE science a couple of years ago, it took our awarding bodies two or three goes to get that right as we hiked up the standard, because we were concerned. So where we can see, if you like, that the level playing field is not correct, we can take steps to hike standards up.

As for what happens in universities to select candidates, I do think, as you would expect, that it is different for each university—entirely different—and some universities use quite sophisticated methodologies, of which A-levels and GCSEs are just one part. I do not have evidence at the moment to suggest that they are particularly differentiating one board’s English examination, for example, from another’s. That is not the information that we get as we talk with those in higher education, but, as I say, we are looking and we have a programme of work on at the moment to identify more closely higher education’s concerns and whether they see A-levels to be good, bad or indifferent, but in sufficient granularity that we can do something about it.

Q315 Pat Glass: The Secretary of State has said that some universities have begun secretly screening applicants to cherry-pick those who have passed the more rigorous test offered by some exam boards, so will you be asking the Secretary of State where the evidence for that is and looking at it?

Glenys Stacey: The evidence that I am aware of is from when I spoke recently to Professor Partington at Cambridge. He tells me that he is certainly looking at grades. He has very recent evidence that shows that where students have three or more A* grades, they do exceptionally well in their first-year examinations at Cambridge. He believes that the A* grade is a good predictor. I also know that universities such as Cambridge will use other things as well. They will look at other aspects of the student. They may conduct an interview. They may look at other work, work experience, projects or whatever that individual has done.

The point here is about the reliance that one might put on one qualification, which may have been earned through just a couple of examinations, and whether you are putting a heavy weight on the A-level or whether there are other aspects of the individual that you can properly take into account in differentiating
one student from another. My interest is in making sure that the differentiation by grade is robust.

**Q316 Chair:** Can I ask about your comparability work? Cambridge Assessment have been fairly critical of the methodology used by Ofqual in doing that, and that comes to the nub of a lot of what we are talking about here, which is the need to ensure that we do have comparability. If you do not have sound methodology, you will not get a sound result. That is my crude interpretation of what they have said. How do you respond to that?

**Glenys Stacey:** Okay. I will ask Dennis to deal with the detail in a minute, but, as an immediate reaction, we recognise at Ofqual that we are not the sole centre of expertise on assessment. In fact, assessment expertise is quite a rare thing. Clearly, it sits in the awarding bodies. They do have significant expertise. There is also expertise within some of the academic institutions. Our board is reaching out to that expertise. It is creating a standards advisory group, and we want those experts working with us, so that we are not insular in our approach and so that they are able to challenge and help us develop our approach to maintaining standards.

**Q317 Chair:** Did that not happen before? It was understandable that I was trying to invite anyone who wanted to do so to do so in one of the other awarding bodies, but there was a reluctance to do that. I would have thought, however, that behind closed doors people would be very happy to say, “Our data suggest that this other board is not comparable with us, and unless you want us to dumb down, you need to get them to smarten up.”

**Glenys Stacey:** You will understand that I am not entirely sure and cannot say how that might have worked in the past. What I am sure about is how it is working now and how we are going to get yet greater collaboration, if you like, across experts on assessment to ensure that our methodologies—be they research methodologies or comparability methodologies—remain robust.

**Q318 Chair:** And will you be open to them? As long as you are open to challenge and they have the opportunity to come to you, then hopefully we can have more confidence.

**Glenys Stacey:** The danger would be if we were not.

**Dennis Opposs:** Where we are creating methodologies for new bits of work that we have done, like the international work, our new approach is to produce what we think is our methodology and then to offer people the opportunity to comment on it, so that we can take account of criticisms before we finalise it.

**Q319 Chair:** This is something that I have asked you about before in the light of the Education Act 2011, as it now is. You are supposed to maintain standards over time, but you are also supposed to benchmark against the best systems in the world, which are all investing heavily, because we are a knowledge-based, global economy. How do you get the balance right between maintaining standards over time and moving against what might, if you benchmark with Shanghai and Singapore, be a very fast rising international standard?

**Dennis Opposs:** There will be tensions from time to time, yes. It may be that there is a qualification in Shanghai or somewhere that is at a much higher standard, and yet we have maintained our own standards and—

**Q320 Chair:** So which takes precedence?

**Dennis Opposs:** And at that point I think Ofqual would have to judge which way we go.

**Q321 Chair:** So have you got basically incoherent instructions?

**Glenys Stacey:** We do have not instructions on how we interpret our statutory objectives—

**Q322 Chair:** Are they in conflict then?

**Glenys Stacey:** And, indeed, we do not have that amendment to our statutory objective in place just yet, but we have been thinking carefully about our approach to that and our board has been considering it. The general approach that we propose is that, first, we continue to benchmark internationally and will have regard to the range of international tables and benchmarks, because they tell us something, but they do not tell us everything. For example, we know that our position in any one table might move down a dozen places, not because of any change here, but because a dozen other very sophisticated countries have joined the table. We need to have regard to and understand what those tables tell us—

**Q323 Chair:** So which one takes precedence? Is it stability? We have had grade inflation over the years and now there is a desire for stability. Is it stability or is it international benchmarking? Those two could be incompatible and I want to know which one you are going to jump on.

**Glenys Stacey:** The answer is that we want the best, so where we pick out, for example, from our A-level—

**Chair:** You should be in politics.

**Glenys Stacey:** That is an option I will bear in mind should things go pear-shaped, but for the moment I am a regulator. You have quite put me off my stride.

**Chair:** I think you have answered.

**Glenys Stacey:** No, no; I want to get this on the record. In looking at the international comparisons, we can look at the tables, but we need to know what they tell us, and we will take them seriously. On the benchmarking piece, when we look at how things happen in different jurisdictions, we need to bring back these nuggets, share them and debate them. For example, in relation to the A-level comparisons, there are just two things to mention: first, in other jurisdictions, generally speaking, there is a much greater reliance on and faith in teacher assessment. That is culturally quite difficult in this country. We like examinations. Secondly, in those jurisdictions that have examinations, there is greater faith in multiple choice questions and a much more sophisticated use of multiple choice in some subjects, because they can
really strengthen the breadth of coverage in the assessment. Again, that is a cultural issue for us, but we have learnt something from that. We are going to pick up these things, learn, play them out for people, discuss them and then take a view.

**Q324 Tessa Munt:** Michael Gove has suggested having one exam board for each subject to stop the race to the bottom. Do you agree?

**Glenys Stacey:** I read that in *The Daily Telegraph* on Saturday, and immediately asked for a meeting with the Secretary of State to understand his thinking better. I had that meeting yesterday afternoon—I was thankful for that. He has explained to me that he is entirely open-minded and understands that there is no perfect system—a point that I would make. I think sober reflection is required.

My job is to regulate the system. I have, at the moment, a system that involves a range of awarding bodies. There are 180 of them, so it is not simply the top players around the table today. If there is sufficient concern about the way the system works, yes, let’s have a look at it, learn, play them out for people, discuss them and then take a view.

**Q325 Tessa Munt:** We are not unique, are we? A lot of countries across the world have a single exam board, and it would allow a single comparison.

**Glenys Stacey:** A single exam board is not necessarily the solution either. I think we need to look at resilience. For example, in France, where there is a much more limited model, you may have noticed that there were difficulties this year. I forget which subject it was, but I think it ended up with the Minister having to decide which questions would get which marks. That is not a desirable position for a Minister or indeed, the system at large, so one exam board is not necessarily the solution. I think that however many exam boards you have, it is a market, and markets respond to incentives. Incentivising the race to the top is what I am interested in.

**Q326 Tessa Munt:** Yes, I presume that it would allow a national comparison of young people, in terms of their outcomes.

**Glenys Stacey:** It would allow a comparison against one specification. That may not meet higher education’s needs, or further education’s needs, or employer’s needs. It is a complex business.

**Q327 Tessa Munt:** Some evidence to the Committee suggests that, whatever happens with the organisation or reorganisation of the exam system, you need more powers. Is there anything that you would say to the Committee about that?

**Chair:** In addition to what you have said already.

**Glenys Stacey:** The Secretary of State has asked me to state whatever powers we might need. As I have said, I am reflecting on that. The whistleblowing issue is significant. I want to check that I have sufficient powers around data collection. I want the greatest range of sanctions—of course I do—and fining has a significant place in that.

**Q328 Chair:** We normally end our sessions by asking witnesses to send us information, but I confirm that we will send through to you the details we have on the whistleblower who was frustrated by your system.

**Glenys Stacey:** That would be very welcome. Thank you very much.

**Chair:** Thank you very much for giving evidence to us today.
Wednesday 18 January 2012

Members present:
Mr Graham Stuart (Chair)
Neil Carmichael 
Alex Cunningham 
Pat Glass 
Damian Hinds 
Charlotte Leslie 
Ian Mearns 
Tessa Munt 
Craig Whittaker

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Professor Jo-Anne Baird, Pearson Professor and Director of the Oxford University Centre for Educational Assessment, Dr Michelle Meadows, Director of Centre for Education Research and Policy, AQA, Tim Oates, Group Director, Assessment Research and Development, Cambridge Assessment, and Professor Alison Wolf, Sir Roy Griffiths Professor of Public Sector Management, King’s College, London, gave evidence.

Q329 Chair: Good morning. Thank you very much for joining us today. We have two sessions to get through this morning, so we probably have only about an hour. I am delighted that we have such a high-powered panel. I ask my Committee and the witnesses to try to keep their answers as succinct as possible so that we can get through as much as possible this morning.

The starter for 10 is whether the weight placed on our GCSEs and A-levels within the system is too great and more than any system of examinations, however organised. Is the weight put on it too great? Who would like to have a go at that? Jo-Anne.

Professor Baird: I think that that is a question about purpose really, isn’t it? We have lots of purposes for our qualifications. It is very difficult for them to meet all of those purposes well, so I guess that that would be my answer to the question.

Q330 Chair: How could we change systems of accountability so that we did put less weight on and fewer purposes were attached to current GCSE and A-level results?

Professor Baird: There has been a lot of discussion about performance tables and how that has affected the use of qualifications. There are real issues there.

Q331 Chair: Okay. Michelle.

Dr Meadows: I think it is about knowing the primary purpose. Qualifications can have secondary purposes, but let us have clarity about the primary purpose. Sometimes, what happens over time is that that primary purpose should surround as policies change, but there is a kind of lack of clarity about that decision making.

Q332 Chair: So the current Government have a lack of clarity about the purposes for which GCSEs and A-levels serve.

Dr Meadows: Not particularly this current Government. Generally, policy makers have a lack of clarity and communication. They might have clarity in their own minds, but it is the way that that decision is made and then communicated to those people designing qualifications.

Q333 Chair: Thank you, Alison.

Professor Wolf: I think that we expect too much of exams, in the sense that we expect every exam to do everything. We treat them all in the same way. It is not just about a lack of clarity of purpose, but the fact that we talk about exams as though they were all the same. In that sense, we expect ridiculous amounts of them.

Q334 Chair: What I am getting is that, if you are putting too much weight on the examination system and you sit there reorganising or coming up with radical ideas to change the examination system because you are asking it fundamentally to do something that no examination system could ever do, you are reorganising the wrong thing. I suppose that, before we move into the detail of what we could do with our examination system, we need to check that we have got the big picture right. Tim.

Tim Oates: It is incredibly naïve to assume that an examination system should only carry one purpose. When you look internationally, of course examinations are high-stakes and it is unlikely that a system where you try to establish low-stakes public examinations would work for any purpose. It is a question of looking at the purposes to which qualifications are put, and then to see what the effects of the combination of those particular purposes in that context are.

After all, with examinations you are often dealing with tiny decisions that affect long-term trends. You are deciding between 39 or 38 marks each year, in terms of a particular grade. You make that decision. If you make the decision in one direction over 10 years because of an overall spirit in the system, it will drive the system in one direction. If you decide the other way, it will push the system in a different direction. The point is that the functions combine to construct a complex mix of incentives and drivers. You have got to look to see whether those incentives and drivers are pushing the system over time in the direction that you want to go—in terms of over a policy.

Q335 Chair: Do you feel that, given statements of Government policy, those drivers are aligned with the policy outcomes which the Government desire?

Tim Oates: They certainly were not—and, chronically, were not for quite a long period of time. More sophisticated public policy purposes were being
attached to public qualifications over the last two decades. It is my belief that regulation is now beginning to assume a form where many of those problems are recognised and are starting to be acted upon by virtue of regulation and the action of all the agents in the system. Public concern derives from a period when those problems were acute, but I believe that many of the things that have been put in place are beginning to address those problems.

Q336 Alex Cunningham: Tim, you used the word “international”, so I shall ask a few questions about international comparison. Much has been made of the unusual features of the English exam system that differ from others: multiple exam boards, high-level transparency, lots of external assessment and close links to accountability. Does that reflect strengths or weaknesses?

Tim Oates: The UK system is not that unique. It is not as if there is a UK system and then by contrast absolutely everybody else has a similar system, which is a single-board system with the state having a very prominent or overbearing role. If you look internationally, you find huge subtlety in the variation of different systems. You find huge variation in terms of the role and influence of different agents. We see as well international trends towards greater complexity in the provision of qualifications in different nations. That is not judging the issue. In France, for example, you have a long tradition of the Ministry running examinations. It is not free of technical problems. In the States you have a very complex mix, from federal examinations and tests to monitor the system to provide intelligence on individuals, and you then have district arrangements and so on. Although we are unique in the particularities of what we have, it is not as if it is us against the rest of the world.

Q337 Alex Cunningham: But is it strong or is it weak in comparison to others?

Tim Oates: It has a particular blend of strengths and weaknesses, and again that is not dodging the issue. What is crucial in this discussion is, “Are the problems which are perceived to be emergent in the English system capable of being addressed within the current arrangements by changes in regulation, changes in procedures and so on, or is structural change necessary to remedy those problems?” That is the fundamental matter. If you are concerned about particular technical problems with measurement and particular problems with public confidence, you will find those problems emergent in all other systems, too, in different forms.

Q338 Alex Cunningham: Michelle?

Dr Meadows: I broadly agree with Tim, inasmuch as I don’t believe that the structure of the administration of the qualifications is what actually fundamentally determines quality. Different structures might support different aspects. Competing bodies offering qualifications has the advantage of supporting innovation. That is not to say that innovation could not happen in other structures, but it does support innovation. For instance, you get innovations such as electronic marking, which has led to more reliable marking.

With a one-awarding-body structure, you do not have to worry about whether there is competition on standards between awarding bodies. That perception can of course undermine public confidence, but it is not clear how a one-awarding-body structure would support innovation. Franchising is another possibility, but one might have concerns there that franchisees are competing on standards for the particular subjects that they are offering. You can imagine a debate around whether the organisation offering A-level media studies—I am going to pick on that, but do not read too much into that—is competing with the organisation offering A-level maths. Each of them has strengths and weaknesses, and I just do not think it is the sole determining factor.

Q339 Alex Cunningham: So you are suggesting we can almost learn from what exists in the English system. What about abroad—are there countries we could learn from? Are there particular things that we could learn from particular countries to improve our position here?

Q340 Chair: Shall we come to you, Alison? You are the only one of the four who is not sponsored by one of the awarding bodies.

Professor Wolf: This is absolutely true. I would also like to emphasise that I am also an academic. I work for what we call a recruiting university, where we have lots of people coming in. It actually goes back to one of the things that I said earlier about looking at different exams differently, and I want to say something specifically about A-levels. In this country, we have a system that relies very much on A-levels, because we have a competitive university system. Many countries do not: they do not have to worry about ranking people in the same way when they get their final qualification coming out of school. I would say the best university systems in the world are those which operate in our way.

It is also important to remember that, although we want to be able to rank people, we are also extraordinarily concerned about the quality of what they are learning in the sixth form. Even if we had a single exam board, it would not actually solve the problem, because an ever increasing proportion of our students come from abroad and from different systems anyway. What I would like to put on the record is that one of the key differences between us and most of the rest of the world is the nature of our university entrants, but the nature of those university entrants does not imply that all our problems will be solved by a single examination board.

Q341 Alex Cunningham: You talk about the quality of learning, but we have had some controversy around the way that different examination boards might not have been awarding grades appropriately because they do not want to lose their business. But we do—I suppose—have a transparent system. Do you think
that is why there is not very much public confidence in it—because of this sort of controversy?
**Professor Wolf:** As I think other people will be able to say, the interesting thing is that there is still quite a lot of public confidence in the system, fortunately. Again, wearing both an assessment and a higher education recruitment hat, I do not think that the quality of the awarding is actually what bothers us most, to be honest. We have had problems in the past in that the grades were so broad that you could not rank people, but we are at least as concerned about the quality of what goes into the examinations. This is obviously something that you are going to be addressing in detail, but there is an inherent conflict here between having examinations—again, I want to emphasise that I am concentrating mostly on A-levels—which place real demands on people and which are also responsive to changes in what is going on at the higher ends of a subject so that they can change quickly, and an extremely detailed accountability system of the sort we have. At the moment we have this strange, almost, classic of policy: the more you regulate the system and the more you go for accountability and transparency, the more you drive it down a road in which the questions become more and more banal.

Q342 Alex Cunningham: I see you are nodding there, Jo-Anne.
**Professor Baird:** Can I come back to the innovation issue? I think that there is not enough innovation, actually, in the system. What has squashed that is regulation, because we have become obsessed with a standardised model across all the exam boards so that we can guarantee this consistency. This is a real problem of our system—that we need a way of encouraging that innovation in curriculum and assessment models.

The main change driver across all of these things, such as the introduction of technology in marking, has been policy. Policy is what drives change in this industry. What would worry me here, in all this discussion about the structure of exam boards, is that this is a policy that could be changed, and I think we would actually miss the target.

What we need is to address the sorts of issues that people have about whether the qualifications are at the right standard for us internationally, looking at the content of them as well as the grading. Changing the exam board structure, which has been the main narrative so far in the inquiry, would cause all sorts of resources to be diverted to that, when really what we want to look at is whether the quality of our qualifications is right for our education system and for society more broadly.

Q343 Alex Cunningham: So do you think that there is a link between grade inflation and declining confidence?
**Professor Baird:** Grade inflation is a narrative in the media. There is less concern about grade inflation more generally among the public.

Q344 Chair: That is not because it does not exist, but because it does not actually concern the public that much?
**Professor Baird:** I think there is not a great deal of evidence for grade inflation. There is some, and I appreciate the work that Peter Tymms and Rob Coe have done in Durham, which is interesting, but all these studies have methodological issues. When you look qualitatively at the work of students, the question is whether it has improved over time, and we do not have a good answer to that. We can see that the results have gone up over time, but has the education system actually delivered better performance in those qualifications? People call that “teaching to the test”.

Q345 Alex Cunningham: But are the young people who are arriving at the door of the university better equipped to start their university education than they were 10 years ago?
**Professor Baird:** Well, do we have good evidence about that? That is what I am raising. We probably need better studies on that sort of issue.

Q346 Chair: Alison, you have clear views.
**Professor Wolf:** I am going to go out on a limb and say no, they are not better prepared. I am sorry—I am. It seems to me that when you have the level of consistency in answers from people about this, as we do from academics, and when you get the concrete evidence in some of the quantitative subjects that we are getting, you have to say—not necessarily because of the nature of the questions or anything—that, yes, they are certainly not better prepared.

Q347 Alex Cunningham: Are they less prepared?
**Professor Wolf:** I am not sure if they are worse prepared, but they are certainly not better prepared. I suppose your question is that, if we have this ever-increasing number of people with As, is there any indication that they are actually better than they were?

Q348 Alex Cunningham: My colleague is asking, “What is the evidence for that?”
**Professor Wolf:** What is the evidence for the fact that they are not better prepared? I think two things.

Q349 Chair: Surely academics should not go out on a limb. Academics should tell us what the evidence is!
**Professor Wolf:** Actually, I think academics should—

Q350 Chair: If we want an opinion, we could just bring anyone in!
**Professor Wolf:** I think there are two pieces of evidence. The first is that a large number of universities that teach quantitative subjects are having to do more lower-level work with students when they come in to bring them up to a certain level, particularly in maths and such particular subjects. That may be changes in content, but I think you also have to say that it is levels.

Q351 Pat Glass: Is that not true right across the sector? Secondary schools say that about children coming in at key stage 2. Colleges say that about
children coming in at key stage 4. Universities say that about children, and they always have.

Professor Wolf: No, but they have not always put on extra classes and they have not always changed their first-year syllabuses, and they are now doing both. I think that has to count as concrete evidence.

Q352 Damian Hinds: In what way does that say that children are not better prepared for the questions they are asked? Some might argue it suggests the opposite, that they were well prepared for the specific questions, but not so well prepared for the generality of the subject.

Professor Wolf: And this is when you immediately get into the sort of soup of whether we are talking about standards or are we talking about content? What is it that we are talking about? I think the answer is that children are extremely well prepared for the questions that they are asked in exams.

Q353 Ian Mearns: Teaching to the test.

Professor Wolf: They are taught to the test, and obviously, to the degree that the test is good, that has positive effects by and large, but in a sense it does come down at the end of the day to whether you believe that people are doing more than the classic “things were always better in the past” response. It seems to me that we do have some concrete evidence of that. Also, the nature of the complaints is so consistent that we have to take them seriously, and the nature of the complaints is consistent with a system in which we have made exam questions so transparent that we have narrowed children’s learning.

Chair: Charlotte, you wanted to come in—briefly.

Q354 Charlotte Leslie: It is very brief and it has mainly been covered. I am going to give you an anecdote, and I want your reaction to it and what it says about the exam system. My subject was classics—Latin—and not an awful lot changes in classics and Latin. There is a certain scope in its translations, but there is not an awful lot of innovation; you just need to be able to translate a piece of grammatical text. I remember when I looked at previous years’ entrance papers at my university, going back 10 or 15 years, those papers, for the kind of Latin that it was and the technicalities, were far more difficult than those that I was prepared for. Looking again over the years, the standard of Latin is not as difficult as that which I did. Certainly, when I was at university and was looking back over the previous entry level, it was very much more difficult.

What does that suggest?

Tim Oates: These matters are complex, in as much as a lot of things are happening simultaneously. Therefore your appeal to precision is very well founded, Chair. I will try to link all the points from the last five minutes.

We can look at an independent voice—Rob Coe’s work with the team at Durham, which was previously under Peter Tynms. It is interesting that they have raised questions about the trajectory of standards based on independent measures. They are concerned that there are difficult components of that increase in the numbers getting the higher grades. Components within that relate to grade inflation and not to improved performance in the education system. They have particular concerns about the standard of outcome going down in the sciences and approaching that of other subjects over a long period of time. They have raised that consistently in report after report. However, their conclusion is not that you need a single board; their concern, like Jo-Anne’s and Michelle’s, is very much that there are inadequate qualifications in certain areas. We do not have enough in some areas. That, again, is corroborated by independent work done at King’s by Jeremy Hodgson. We do not have enough maths qualifications, post-16, to meet the genuine needs in society and in the economy.

Q355 Chair: Sorry, I did not follow the link. You were saying that there is some evidence of grade inflations, but you then said that they conclude that there need to be more qualifications. I struggle to follow the link between those two.

Tim Oates: Okay. Taking all the evidence into account, their conclusion is that we have big gaps in our education system in some subjects. The link is this, and let us take physics, for example. In the time that you are talking about—this is another part of the jigsaw—how many people now aspire to go to university? Many more than did in the 1960s, when the percentage of those going into higher education was in the lower teens. Now, almost 50% go into higher education. Of course, the spread of ability will be greater. Higher education has accommodated that, often by curriculum changes and changes in demand in the first year. I shall come on to Alison’s concerns about number shortly. There have been changes in the cohort going through to higher education, and our notion of what we should assess and put in A-levels has changed commensurately.

Rob Coe’s work on physics A-level shows that the subject appears to have got significantly easier. The discourse around physics is, “We have to make it more accessible. We have to encourage more people to take it”—there are not enough as it is. Not enough girls are taking it. We have to do something about all that.” Accessibility has become a big issue, so everyone has striven hard to make physics accessible, and to change the nature of the questions and syllabus to get more people interested. The net effect has been to make physics easier.

Q356 Alex Cunningham: Is that because the exam boards are deliberately making it easier so that they can sell the exam to the school?

Tim Oates: This is the point that I am making; there are many things going on here. It is clearly the case, from the stats—I have them all here—that the proportion of people getting grade As over time has hugely increased in almost all subjects. It has increased hugely in areas like mathematics.

Q357 Chair: At the same time, the number of people taking A-levels has massively increased, too. You would therefore expect a diminution in overall quality, yet the percentage getting the top grade has massively increased, so exams must have become easier. One
could argue about whether they have or have not—and some people want to argue about it. The question then, I suppose, is: does it matter and is our system better as a result? We want to educate a wider number, therefore we need a metric that differentiates between people in lower achievement than previously would be bothered, because they were just going to leave school.

**Tim Oates:** This is to do with purpose. We Cambridge Assessment stuck our head above the parapet a couple of years ago. We said, “Look, a number of things have contributed to this rise in the number of people getting the highest grades. One of those things is more efficient teaching and more appropriate provision in schools.” People are selecting courses that they are more motivated to do, not least because they can drop one subject in the first year of sixth-form studies and concentrate, in the second year, on those that they are good at and that they are most motivated in, which is a good thing. We also said there are components in there that we are not content with, which are deep in the arcane processes of awarding and which could be removed by more assiduous technical focus and better regulation.

**Q358 Chair:** Could they be removed by a single examination board, so that we did not have the competition just referred to?

**Tim Oates:** Rob Coe’s conclusion is that these matters of inter-board, inter-specification comparison are highly technical. What you need is a good apparatus for ensuring inter-specification comparability. In a system where you had one awarding board, you would still need multiple specifications in mathematics, so the problem of having a good apparatus for comparability does not go away. The problem is that, if you change the structures, you may be left with exactly the same problems and have the same grade drift and problems of comparability.

The final issue that Alison raised was whether children are going to university as well prepared in key areas. At Cambridge, we have looked at the evidence at Cambridge and we think there are two areas where there are significant problems: mathematical and quantitative skills, and academic writing. Those are reflected in changes in the specifications and the nature of the questions being asked in qualifications and for which people are being prepared. The number of extended essays reduced dramatically over the past two decades but has begun to increase again, thank goodness. Candidates are still prepared in those two areas, we think.

**Q359 Chair:** And the reason for that—because we are looking predominantly at awarding bodies in this inquiry, with an insight into the wider system—is because of the specification in policy making rather than the nature of the way we organise exams?

**Tim Oates:** Modularisation had a profound effect. Everybody blames each other for modularisation.

**Q360 Chair:** So it was policy rather than structure that led to it. That is what I was trying to get to.

**Tim Oates:** Yes, precisely.

**Q361 Chair:** We have a lot more to get through, but I know Alison and Michelle are both waiting to come in.

**Professor Wolf:** Yes. We keep coming back to the issue of one awarding body. It would be really helpful to distinguish between the question of whether there are particular key examinations where you are very concerned to be certain that there is a very clear national standard, and the question of whether a single awarding body could usefully do everything. It is important to remember that we are a big country, given the level of specificity and reliability we demand of our examinations. If you had a single awarding body—a lot of the things that Jo-Anne and Tim raised the importance of—having new ideas and flexibility would be lost. I cannot think of any reason why, in the process, we would raise substantive standards in Latin, for example, which has probably plummeted more than any other single subject.

**Q362 Chair:** Thank you. Can I cut you off? Michelle.

**Dr Meadows:** All I wanted to say was that, where you have examinations that are testing a pre-defined set amount of subject matter, and you have question papers available and mark schemes, then outcomes will go up over time. Performance on those examination scripts will look better. We are calling that rise in outcomes grade inflation, which is kind of a negative terminology.

The other thing I wanted to say was that if one looks at one awarding body countries, such as Scotland, and how their outcomes have gone up over time in their equivalent qualifications, they almost match identically what has happened in England. So, one awarding body does not solve that.

**Q363 Alex Cunningham:** Are children going through the Scottish system better equipped than those in the English system when they get to the door of the university? Yes or no would be helpful.

**Professor Wolf:** Not obviously.

**Q364 Chair:** Jo-Anne, do want to say anything?

**Professor Baird:** Obviously, I am going to say yes.

**Chair:** Tessa, do you want to come in?

**Tessa Munt:** Michelle, could I ask you to move your bottle away from your microphone, because I am finding it hard to hear you?

**Q365 Pat Glass:** I think what I am getting from that is that none of you would suggest—or rather, you all agree that one awarding body is not the answer. Is that right? Anybody disagree?

**Professor Baird:** I actually don’t have a view about the number of awarding bodies. That is what I would say to that. I don’t think that is the problem.

**Dr Meadows:** It is not the answer to the problem that we seem to have.

**Q366 Pat Glass:** Given that the Secretary of State has said that he will look at this and that one awarding body is clearly on the agenda, what do you think are the key factors that he needs to take into account? Jo-Anne, you mentioned innovation, but there are things
like cost, comparability and so on, so what are the key factors that he needs to consider when he is looking at the whole question of having one awarding body or fundamental structural change in the exam system?

**Professor Baird:** If there is one awarding body, one of the key things that has been raised in many of the submissions to this inquiry is independence from Government. If we want to measure the quality of our education system through exams, which is another purpose to which it has been put, how we can guarantee that there will not be political influence, however indirect, upon a single awarding body?

**Tim Oates:** For me, the main problem is the issues that have given rise to concerns over public confidence. Would they disappear overnight if you had a single board? No, not at all. In fact, they would all be present in the system still. You would need elaborated statistical apparatus to ensure comparability over time between the specifications. That is the area that we really need to attend to. In addition, where have the biggest administrative failings occurred in public assessment in this country? The single problems that have affected the greatest number of pupils or schools have been failings in National Assessment (Key Stage tests). They operate on a contracted model to single bodies. That is a very salutary fact, I think. You focus risk, it is extremely expensive and you do not render yourself immune to the aim of stopping the so-called race to the bottom?

**Dr Meadows:** I was also going to make a point about the history of change in respect of qualifications. When one looks at the data, some of the points at which it has been most difficult to maintain standards in a way in which we consider to be absolutely watertight is during times of profound structural change: Curriculum 2000, modularisation of GCSEs and so on. The point is, where did all these policy changes originate? As you say, if there are not grounds emerging from the subject itself for fundamental change, I think that that change should be questioned. Many of the changes that have been introduced have been on grounds associated with other than maintaining probity in the qualifications and the subject, ensuring access to the subject and so on. If you repeatedly change qualifications, that is a principal threat to standards. The problem with a single board is that it makes it very prone to constant change in the structure of qualifications, which threatens content standards and, thereby, outcome standards. That is a really critical issue to which we have drawn attention repeatedly.

**Q367 Charlotte Leslie:** Just going back to the idea of having one exam board for each subject, to what extent, if at all, do you think that that would contribute to the aim of stopping the so-called race to the bottom?

**Professor Wolf:** I am not sure that there is any evidence of a race to the bottom fuelled by individual exam boards. What you have done is created a regulatory structure that infantilises the exams. You have created a regulatory structure that treats all exams the same, which puts all the emphasis on procedural matters, which demands a level of clarity, and supposed transparency and reliability in question setting, which forces all exam boards to set papers that, in a sense, become highly transparent and therefore force down standards. That is therefore not relevant. That will happen just as much with a single exam board if that is the policy-making impetus. I have to say that I think that it is impossible to have a system that is not under political influence. If you therefore have Governments that are determined to raise outcome measures and count qualification targets, you will also have a political system that tends to produce that kind of regulatory pressure on the system.

**Tim Oates:** Maintaining standards in times of change is one of the most significant challenges to any assessment system.

**Q368 Chair:** Is it the right thing to do? You have said that, because of the changes in the demographics and the numbers going to university, if there has been grade inflation in different components over time, as long as it is fit for purpose, who cares whether an A is a lot easier now than it was 20 years ago, if it suits the country, universities and employers better? If it was all right for it to happen in the past, why do we suddenly want to freeze it now and say that maintaining standards trumps every other social and economic need? I hope I am not putting words in your mouth.

**Tim Oates:** That is a point, absolutely, and one that was well made. I was also going to make a point about the history of change in respect of qualifications. When one looks at the data, some of the points at which it has been most difficult to maintain standards in a way in which we consider to be absolutely watertight is during times of profound structural change: Curriculum 2000, modularisation of GCSEs and so on. The point is, where did all these policy changes originate? As you say, if there are not grounds emerging from the subject itself for fundamental change, I think that that change should be questioned. Many of the changes that have been introduced have been on grounds associated with other than maintaining probity in the qualifications and the subject, ensuring access to the subject and so on. If you repeatedly change qualifications, that is a principal threat to standards. The problem with a single board is that it makes it very prone to constant change in the structure of qualifications, which threatens content standards and, thereby, outcome standards. That is a really critical issue to which we have drawn attention repeatedly.
They have had some problems with grade inflation, too.

Tim Oates: That is understating it. There have been massive problems with grade inflation in Sweden—massive.

Dr Meadows: In any franchising system there are two areas of expertise. There is the content—subject knowledge and examiner expertise—and then there is the assessment and test development expertise, and ensuring that there is sufficient of that to go round.

Tim Oates: But do not be fooled as to the possible savings and efficiencies that could be delivered. It depends on the different areas that you are describing or are interested in. The amount of marking that has to be done is just the amount of marking that has to be done. If you have that number of candidates and spread them across three boards, there is still the same amount of marking.

Q370 Chair: But the leadership would be concentrated. If OCR got English GCSE, every marker and every expert on examining English GCSE would be concentrated in that one board. Maybe you would have better leadership and more consistency. I think that was the question, so is there anything in that?

Tim Oates: You have to be very clear about where the benefits derive. I also think you have to be cautious. I absolutely agree with Alison about the notion of it benefits derive. I also think you have to be cautious. I absolutely agree with Alison about the notion of it being an imperfect market where market mechanisms do not necessarily drive in the direction you expect. You have a lot of minority subjects that do not generate a surplus at all. They are extremely costly for bodies to put on.

Q371 Chair: So one of the disbenefits of franchising would be that you could have a lot of orphan subjects that no one was prepared to do anymore. Is that right?

Tim Oates: Who would want them?

Q372 Chair: Three of you are nodding; Alison isn’t.

Professor Wolf: I do not understand why that is any different from now. If you put them on at the moment, why wouldn’t you put them on under franchising?

Tim Oates: You have to determine where you allocate those. That is correct, but it gives rise to a problem, which is the concentration of expertise. If you think franchising brings you a benefit in terms of choice as a person contracting, we have seen that the reality of National Assessment (Key Stage tests) is that your choices then become profoundly limited. Over a period of time, the expertise becomes entirely concentrated in individual institutions. If you are unhappy with the performance of that institution because of inefficiencies, costs and all sorts of things—the way they have behaved, perhaps, in terms of irrationality, or whatever—and you try to shift it, “Oh my goodness, there is nobody else available with the expertise.” That has happened. That is a reality with national assessment.

Professor Baird: That is absolutely true in terms of the logistics of the operation. What has been quite pleasing in the submissions to this inquiry is that the voice of the subject matter experts—the examiners themselves—has come through to a larger extent than we have seen for a long time in this industry. One of the benefits, perhaps, of franchising would be to concentrate and develop that expertise. A lot of these examiners, as you know, are part-time employees of the examining industry. They have other main jobs, and I think that they have felt disfranchised to some extent by the one-size-fits-all model, and by the concentration in logistics that has actually been a policy push on exam boards in the past decade or so. There could be a clear advantage in having more concentrated subject matter and expertise in the industry.

Tim Oates: But if you professionalise markers to a much greater extent than they are now in terms of regularising their roles and making marking a profession, I do not think that you would see a reduction in costs.

Professor Baird: I think that is absolutely true about markers, but there are thousands of markers for these large-scale subjects. It is the people who design the assessments.

Professor Wolf: Exactly, and you can only professionalise marking with a certain very limited type of question. I have to say that that idea fills me with horror.

Tim Oates: Exactly. I am not advocating it; I am saying that it is a very bad idea.

Professor Baird: It is a bit of a Taylorist model in terms of breaking down the job, but I think there is real expertise in designing the questions and the items in the syllabus, which really need better investment.

Q373 Damian Hinds: Jo-Anne, why are the improvements in GCSE and A-level results not reflected in international tables like PISA, even after adjusting for the usual things that everybody talks about, such as the number of countries in the survey?

Professor Baird: We have seen a very flat profile in PISA. That is true. We are average, and we have stayed average. In some of the other international tests, the results actually look pretty good in comparison with other countries. I think what we have really been saying is that learners and teachers are very strategic these days. We have made it transparent, and we talk about that as though it is a bad thing, but we are actually demonstrating to people what it is they have to do to get the grades in a particular subject. That is why we have seen what we are calling teaching to the test, but throughout our system there was always access to that transparency for some people, who had access to the examiners. It is now the case that it is transparent for everyone. That has its problems, but I do not think that we should be throwing out the baby with the bathwater here, because it also has advantages. My argument would be that it is likely that this has been produced by teaching to the test and the so-called ratchet effect that you see; Robert Linn has published on this. If you have an examination that stays stable for some time—Michelle Meadows referred to this earlier—you will see the results going up, because the whole system gears itself up to producing better performances in these examinations.
Q374 Damian Hinds: I only have one other question, Chairman, but it is long one. I hope you will forgive me, but I will stop after that.

It strikes me that rising grades are a bit like rising GDP. Part of it is cash inflation and part of it, underlying, is real growth. What you ultimately care about is your real GDP growth compared with other countries. Within that overall thing, the real growth elements could be things like brighter children, more engaged parents, better teachers, better teaching, including better recognition of special needs, and that sort of thing. Within the cash inflation part, you have elements of the syllabus content and breadth, modularisation of coursework, the number of resits, the actual questions set, the stringency of marking, and all sorts of other things like use of calculators, the number of children allowed extra time and so on. That is all within any subject, but at the macro level you could also add in equivalence and subjects and subject mix. Can I ask all of you to give me your top three of those elements—or any other that you think I have missed—that have most contributed to grade inflation?

Professor Baird: To answer the question directly, I would argue that teaching to the test has probably had a huge effect. The education system broadly is now very smart.

Q375 Damian Hinds: So that would be your No. 1?

Professor Baird: Yes, but if it is permissible, I would actually like to answer in a slightly different way. When the standards are set, we have a variety of sources of information, partly statistical and partly the judgment of the professional examiners—

Q376 Damian Hinds: You are losing me slightly. I do not mind you answering in a different way, but however you want to address the question of what the main component parts are, that is fine.

Professor Baird: When the standards are set, a committee of subject-matter experts sits around with statistical information and information about how the students have performed in a particular exam, so they can see students’ work and they make judgments about that compared with the previous year and so on. I have argued previously that we ought to have supremacy of the statistical information in that process. I think there needs to be quality to the judgment from examiners as well, but if that had been the case, we would have seen more—

Q377 Damian Hinds: Forgive me, Jo-Anne. I am not following you. You have said that teaching to the test is one key element in grade inflation. Are there others that you can identify?

Professor Baird: I am suggesting that I have not always been entirely convinced by the qualitative judgment of examiners when they have told me that their results should go up. I am talking small effects here year on year.

Q378 Damian Hinds: Can you explain that further? I am not understanding.

Professor Baird: I have had statistical information from examiners and qualitative judgments from examiners, and they do not always agree. What we have seen is a small rise year on year in examination outcomes, and this has often been explained by the qualitative judgments about students’ performances in exams.

Q379 Chair: The No. 1 reason, then, for the grade inflation, in your view, is that examiners each year get softer and softer? They see the same answer, and one year they say it is a C. A few years later, it is a B, and a few years after that, it is an A. Why would they respond like that?

Professor Baird: I am saying it is a small effect, and that qualitative judgments are not precise enough to detect small changes.

Q380 Damian Hinds: Is that a posh way of saying that they are getting a bit softer?

Professor Baird: I cannot answer this.

Tessa Munt: Do you—

Damian Hinds: Tessa, do you mind if we go through—

Q381 Tessa Munt: Yes, but I just need to understand something. Are you suggesting that if you took the statistical information about what happened last year away from examiners, and they only judged the quality of answers, you might not see the desire for them to make things marginally easier? If they do not know in broad form what has happened last year—

Tim Oates: Quite the reverse.

Professor Baird: We know the answer to this, and actually, the results would be all over the place. They would be wildly up and down year on year, so we know that without some quantitative component to this process, we would not see—

Q382 Chair: Cohort referencing—is that the term?

Professor Baird: No.

Chair: I knew I shouldn’t have dared to go into that.

Q383 Damian Hinds: Michelle, what are your top three?

Dr Meadowes: I would add to Jo-Anne’s list with when qualifications change structure and design. A really good example of this was Curriculum 2000, where the AS-level was introduced into the A-level. What happened there was that students would take generally four ASs, but go on to three A-levels, so they drop their weakest subject. So, we saw a huge increase there.

Q384 Damian Hinds: Would that be your No. 1?

Dr Meadowes: For A-level at that instance, and then what happens is that we carry forward that standard over time. As Jo-Anne has alluded, we get teaching to the test, and within the system of awarding the grade boundaries, the examiners want to give the benefit of the doubt, so they tend to lean on the generous side. Can I just clarify that very quickly? Increasingly over time, we have used far more rigorous statistical methods and hold the examiners far more to account in relation to the statistics, such that now, even if they are 1% away from what the statistics suggest the result should be, they have to produce reams of very good
qualitative evidence of why they think that is the case. So, we have tightened that up.

Q385 Damian Hinds: But that is based on the key stage 2 results of that cohort. Is that correct?
Dr Meadows: For GCSE.

Q386 Damian Hinds: Yes. At GCSE that expectation will be based on the key stage 2 results, and presumably, there is a tolerance either side.
Dr Meadows: A 1% tolerance generally.

Q387 Damian Hinds: Over time, has it tended to err toward the upside or the downside?
Dr Meadows: That is very astute, absolutely. So—Damian Hinds: You are very kind.
Dr Meadows: Within those 1% guidance limits, yes, there is a tendency to go slightly above.
Tim Oates: Your question has more sophistication, in terms of what you listed, than your requirement that we say three things. What we have said at Cambridge is you need to look at that list and see what research we have in place that tells us to what extent each has contributed. At the moment, we do not think we have enough in place to tell which are contributing in which way.

Q388 Damian Hinds: With the current stock of human knowledge, Tim, and your own skill and judgment, what is your considered assessment?
Tim Oates: I would say that once you have that list, you can then say, “Have we got the appropriate regulatory and technical mechanisms in place to prevent a particular factor that we are worried about from having an undue and inappropriate contribution?”

Q389 Damian Hinds: But Tim, you have spent many years working on all these things. You know more about it than the vast majority of people in the country. Give us a view.
Tim Oates: But I do not want to give a view that would lead the Select Committee in the wrong direction. The point is that 10 years ago, we did not have appropriate apparatus in place in respect of each of those things that you listed, and there are a few more. Therefore, public concern was legitimate over the increasing numbers getting the highest grades. Over the last three or four years, we have really tightened down our statistical processes. The regulator has increasingly said, “If you’re erring, err in this direction, not that direction.” But that’s been relatively recent.

Q390 Damian Hinds: Can I push you to give us an indication of what you believe—there is plenty of research on these things; research that your company and others have done—is likely? It doesn’t have to be three; it could be two or four.
Tim Oates: With all those caveats that you have to drive, I believe, sophistication in respect of these matters, change is the top. Change has driven the system in all sorts of directions, which has meant that standards have been technically difficult to control. Teaching to the test and narrow instrumentalism are right the way through the system, and there is a culture of increasing results and an expectation of increased performance in every respect. It kind of pervades the system and insidiously affects individual decision-making on a day-to-day basis.
Professor Wolf: I’m going to give you three. You do have to set priorities, and you’re likely going to reject mine. At GCSE, the most important thing has been schools giving all their attention to getting GCSE marks, so they are just spending more time on it than they were in the past.

The second thing, that is system-wide, is the whole constellation of changes, which have tightened reliability, made questions more transparent, introduced modularity and, in so doing, changed the difficulty and demands of the examinations.

The third thing is demographic changes, as you say. It’s a more middle class, more literate, more informed and more ambitious population out there.

Damian Hinds: Thank you.
Chair: Thank you. Ian.

Q391 Ian Mearns: Would you all agree with Cambridge Assessment that the system needs a more robust approach to comparability by the regulator, and that this is more important than the number of exam boards, for instance?
Professor Wolf: Yes.

Q392 Ian Mearns: Excellent. Is that general nods around? Fantastic. Are you satisfied that Ofqual is taking appropriate action to improve the methodology of its comparability work?
Dr Meadows: I think that Ofqual recognises that it needs in-house technical expertise to be able to run comparability studies to better effect, and to draw on expertise that’s out in the universities and awarding bodies. It is seeking advice when it puts together its studies and listening. I think there is a way to go before you see the robustness of design that we would like, but it is a journey that we are on.

Q393 Ian Mearns: So its methodology is not yet robust enough?
Dr Meadows: I think it is correct.

Q394 Chair: Does it have the capacity?
Dr Meadows: I think that there is recognition that it needs to generate some in-house research expertise to be able to design that kind of—

Q395 Chair: Does it have the resource to do that?
Dr Meadows: I don’t know. I think that’s a question for Ofqual.

Professor Wolf: It depends on whether it goes on being asked to do all the things it does at the moment. It seems to me to be perfectly feasible within its current budget to reallocate resources and that that would be the most useful place to reallocate them to.

Q396 Ian Mearns: Ofqual has told us that it is reaching out to assessment experts to help with its work on standards. Have you all had telephone calls from it?
**Professor Baird:** Can I comment on that? I take from what Michelle has said that it is reaching out. I noticed that Glenys Stacey said that it is considering setting up a standards committee. I think that would be a welcome move. But the problem really is, does it have the in-house resources to respond to the advice that is given—for example, on the methodological studies that it does on comparability? I think that currently the answer is no.

**Q397 Ian Mearns:** So it is getting the advice, but it doesn’t have the capacity to take the advice on board?

**Professor Baird:** That’s right. Partly because it does not have the staff with the expertise, but also partly because of what Alison raises—it has a lot of policy push on it to conduct studies in a particular time scale. These things do take time to design properly. It is also caught because there isn’t a lot of assessment expertise available. People are attracted to different conditions of working than having to conduct studies too quickly.

**Q398 Chair:** Ministerial diktat?

**Professor Baird:** I don’t know where the push comes from, to be honest, but I think these are the problems that they face. I also notice that they don’t have an assessment expert on their boards. I think that would be a welcome addition to the board membership.

**Professor Wolf:** I would like to clarify this. I don’t think it is just that they don’t have the resource because they don’t get the money; I do actually think they are doing a lot of things, not just because they are told to by Ministers, but because of the complex set of things that were set out in the old legislation, which are probably very low value-added at best and misconceived at worst. That is not the sort of context of this. Therefore, there really does—

**Q399 Chair:** Such as?

**Professor Wolf:** Oh, all right, since you’ve asked me, I think all these studies of pricing are completely nuts because this isn’t an ordinary market. I think all that stuff should just come out and then they would have the money to offer a decent salary and set up some sort of contact with the local university. If they get some statisticians they will learn the stuff quite quickly. They basically need some decent in-house statistical help, looking at comparability and technical issues and not wasting time looking at prices. That is my view.

**Q400 Chair:** Are we at a dangerous moment then?

We have the Secretary of State obviously being cross after The Daily Telegraph allegations and with a sense that maybe it does—But it is very hard to create a capacity like that overnight.

**Q401 Ian Mearns:** But I was picking up from some of your answers that really what Ofqual needs is some reinforcements in this area.

**Tim Oates:** Yes, precisely.

**Professor Wolf:** It needs some very clear re-structuring of its priorities and activities—this is a purely personal view—because in a sense what happened in December was a clear indication of the fact that it was so busy looking at the blades of grass that it was missing the forests.

**Q402 Ian Mearns:** But it was clearly detected that you believed that Ofqual does not yet have the capacity to do everything that is necessary.

**Professor Wolf:** It has not had time to. It clearly recognises the areas where it is weak—I think it really does—But it is very hard to create a capacity like that overnight.

**Tim Oates:** I agree absolutely with Alison about the importance of focus in terms of policy attention. We have had too many reforms and I could cite some like, for example, the Qualifications and Credit Framework. It was incredibly expensive. It resulted in a number of small awarding bodies that were servicing the economy in very interesting ways having to reform their qualifications to no good effect. It resulted in the closure of one of them. It cost them hundreds of thousands of pounds, and with no discernable public benefit. That was a structural reform intended to deliver public goods. It did not deliver any. Now some of those reforms are predicated on misconceptions about the system, so there is this mythical figure of 20,000 qualifications, which suddenly entered the discourse about a decade ago. If you look at the number of active qualifications that we had two years ago, it was comparable with Germany. The thing that drove the Qualifications and Credit Framework was a view that we needed to dramatically contract the number of qualifications that we had in our system. But it is quite clear from evidence from independent researchers that we have huge gaps in our qualifications provision in terms of high-quality vocational programmes from 16, in terms of maths qualifications for those for whom A-level is not suitable and who have already done GCSE. The list goes on and on, so some of these major structural reforms, such as the QCF, were predicated on
inaccurate and inappropriate analysis of the problems of the system, resulting in change that was dysfunctional.

Chair: We have very little time left, Jo-Anne?

Professor Baird: I would like to build on that briefly. The changes that we have seen have followed a political time scale and that is not good enough for the education system. We need to look at longer time scales to analyse what the issues are, look at what evidence we have for what works and look at more generational policies.

Q403 Chair: Alison, Tim touched on the number of qualifications. You were widely reported after your report for suggesting that there were thousands of rather poor ones.

Professor Wolf: Again, it is about where the policy decisions get made. It is crazy to have a target for the number of qualifications. What you may well want to do is say that there are parts of the education system where we only want a limited number. I was bound to say that, wasn’t I? That would certainly be in line with the needs of the economy and the needs of the education system. An absolute target is nuts.

Q404 Craig Whittaker: We have touched on grade inflation quite a bit, but do you think—yes or no—that Ofqual’s recent action to contain it was the right thing to do?

Dr Meadows: Yes.

Professor Baird: I’m not sure which action you mean.

Craig Whittaker: To contain grade inflation.

Professor Baird: I think it took appropriate actions, yes.

Q405 Craig Whittaker: Okay. Should somebody be ultimately responsible at national level for the outcomes of GCSE and A-level?

Professor Baird: I am wondering how that would work. Currently, the standards are set by subject committees, so there are thousands of these meetings up and down the country. To unravel that would mean a very different system.

Q406 Craig Whittaker: So no one person ultimately responsible, then?

Professor Baird: Currently no. We would have to radically rethink the system.

Professor Wolf: I can’t think of any country where there is one individual who is responsible for that. I am not sure how that could possibly work in a substantive way. It would probably just create a bureaucracy while you waited for that one person—

Dr Meadows: Currently, responsibility is held at various levels, so the chair of the examiners for a particular GCSE is responsible in one sense, and the responsible or accountable officer of an awarding body is responsible in another sense. I think that is appropriate in terms of how close they are to the awarding of that qualification and what they know about the statistics and judgment of performance for that qualification.

Tim Oates: Craig, an implication of your question is, “is it known who is responsible and how the responsibility is enacted in the system?” In current arrangements, it is distributed but known. Therefore, I don’t think there should be a policy concern about that. If, for example, there is major concern about the direction of what we call a thousand tiny steps over time in the decision about where to locate the standard—if there is concern that that is leading to grade inflation—do we have an understanding of what we need to do to reverse that trend or change it? The answer is yes, so I think one can offer reassurance on that.

In the past, has there been appropriate policy concern about suppressing grade inflation—that one component among many? I believe that no, there hasn’t, but I think it’s changed and that the combination of regulation and consensual processes in terms of the location of the standard in each year has meant that grade inflation can and could be contained in an entirely appropriate way.

Q407 Craig Whittaker: In your view then, what should Ofqual do if faced with a conflict between its international and standards objectives?

Dr Meadows: It depends on how that international objective is enacted. From what I have observed so far, it seems that what they are really looking at there is the content of the qualifications, and that is about content standards. That is looking at what our question papers assess, which is somewhat different from grading standards. One can change the content of the qualifications while controlling the grading outcomes, such that we get—

Q408 Craig Whittaker: Are saying that standards will drive the other?

Dr Meadows: I’m sorry, I don’t understand.

Craig Whittaker: If they are concentrating on one or the other, will the standards drive the international? Is that what you were trying to say?

Dr Meadows: Yes, sorry. I think there needs to be a clarity about that—which is the driver there. I am assuming that it is content standards.

Tim Oates: Is it sensible to encourage Ofqual to look at what the best in the world are doing? Absolutely. Is it right to make it a narrow technical requirement that it always tracks the standards of other nations? No. That would lead it into dilemmas and contradictions. It is the case that some other jurisdictions have recalibrated in both directions, depending on what their national circumstances are, so it is a finely judged decision. Alison’s point really obtains. If you are interested in getting the right skills and knowledge into the economy and into higher education, is that happening on the back of the qualifications that you have and where you are placing the standards? That is the key question.

Professor Baird: Interestingly, in all this, the curriculum is what we are interested in. Is the curriculum right? We are assessment experts. What Ofqual would need there is some curriculum expertise to make these comparisons between countries. So we have changed the design of Ofqual. It has moved away from a qualifications and curriculum authority.

Professor Wolf: I disagree very strongly with that. I think that it is much better for Ofqual to focus on
standards and on technical issues and not to try to second-guess the content of—

**Q409 Chair:** What about the international peg, which I think was in the Education Act?

**Professor Wolf:** About looking at things internationally? In a sense I agree with Tim. There are things that it can do and things that it cannot do. It is absolutely right that it should take account internationally. There may be times when you actually want, for policy reasons, to do a really in-depth comparability study on a particular subject and do that internationally. That is a very specific thing that you might want to do sometimes. The more general thing of taking account of it and having a holding brief to look at what is happening for the rest of the world is fine. I rarely disagree so strongly with Jo-Anne, but the idea of recreating a vast curriculum expertise up in Coventry—

**Professor Baird:** I do not think we are disagreeing, because I do not care who does this. There is a gap in the system for somebody to be looking at the curriculum issues, and I do not think that that gets enough focus currently.

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**Examination of Witnesses**

**Witnesses:** Professor Stephen J. Ball, FBA, AcSS, British Academy representative, Professor Sir John Holman, Senior Fellow for Education, Wellcome Trust, Professor Graham Hutchings, FRS, SCORE Chair, and Warwick Mansell, freelance journalist, gave evidence.

**Q411 Chair:** Thank you for joining us today. I hope that you were able to hear much of the evidence of the last session as well. We were talking about the Secretary of State’s appetite for radical change. Do you agree with his statement that the exam system is discredited and needs fundamental reform? What do you think was in the Education Act?

**Professor Sir John Holman, SCORE Chair,** freelance journalist, gave evidence.

**Q412 Chair:** I think it was Tim Oates who, when pressed by Damian in the last session to name his top three drivers of grade inflation, came out with politically driven change. Is that something you would agree with?

**Professor Ball:** In a sense, yes. Two would be at the top of my list. One, as the other witnesses emphasised, is the response of schools. The response in terms of the effort that is put into driving up the performance of students is absolutely incredible. The amount of ingenuity, effort, resources, time and energy that are being put into getting more students across the C/D boundary is stunning. From my point of view, that is unequivocally the major driver of the increase in performance, which I would not refer to as standards inflation. But there is a second effect, which is dependent on that, and related to it, but which has not been addressed at all in all this, and that is that that effort relies heavily on targeting some students and neglecting others. There is a systematic effect of concentrating attention on some students.

**Q413 Chair:** How do you evidence that?

**Professor Ball:** There is multiple evidence. You have to draw on different evidence—case studies of schools—because you are looking at the practice in institutions. There are multiple examples. Warwick has written about this in his book. I have just finished a study which has been looking at a small number of schools, and what I am saying is overwhelmingly evident in all sorts of ways. I could put together quite a long list of other studies that show that.
Q414 Chair: If that was an offer to provide such a list to the Committee, we would welcome it.

Professor Ball: I would be pleased to put it together. That issue is not unrelated to the nature of our international performance. The issue for me is not simply where we come in the rankings, but what our performance looks like. One of the striking things about our performance is our long tail of poor performance, and part of the reason for that relates back to the way in which, particularly in the last three years of compulsory schooling, more and more attention is paid to fewer and fewer students in an effort to drive up their performance.

Professor Holman: Taking the first point about whether the system is fundamentally flawed—yes, I think it is. We spent a lot of time at the Wellcome Trust preparing our response to you. We looked at the models you were discussing in the earlier session—the single exam board and the franchising—and, of course, at the situation as it is now. What we concluded was that if you were starting out now to design the system, you would not do it this way; you would probably go for a single exam board and take all the steps needed to remove the risks that were discussed earlier, but we are where we are. We concluded that the uncertainties about transitioning from where we are now to a single exam board or a franchising system were pretty huge, and the risks of unintended perverse consequences were very high. In the end, we have come down on the side of saying that the system is fundamentally flawed and needs radical change, but that should be done in the current framework, whereby there are three awarding bodies. There does need to be some very radical change, and I did not hear that discussed in the previous session.

Secondly, on your point about the Daily Telegraph revelations, this has just heightened an issue that we know has been going on for a long time. That was probably a fairly extreme example, but there is an enormous amount of sailing close to the wind in the way that those with inside information about the examinations use that knowledge, which, frankly, is in an unprofessional way. The example we saw was simply an extreme.

Warwick Mansell: If I can remember the question correctly, I think there are two things here. You are asking whether the exam system itself is discredited. I would say in general, looking at it, no. GCSEs and A-levels do a pretty good job at ranking candidates. There is an awful lot of technical expertise in the system, and probably a lot more than elsewhere. Also, international A-levels and international GCSEs are very popular abroad as well, so they must be doing something right. In that sense, it is actually quite a good job, if you simply look at the exam system. There are particular issues around what The Daily Telegraph was exposing, which I have also written about. I have sat in on some of those advice seminars. I chose only two to sit in on, and I found stuff which I think was at least as bad as The Daily Telegraph was reporting on. I think that is quite outrageous really. There is a clear conflict of interest between examiners both setting the exam and then advising people, for money, on how to do well in it; I just do not think it should exist. There are always issues about whether you can actually ban things, but it is morally wrong. I do not think it should happen.

The bigger issue is the pressure on schools to raise results. Having looked at this system for a long time now, I think the system that we have is essentially to set schools performance indicators, however you do that. There are various mechanisms, all still being used at the moment. You have league tables, obviously. The three most important are league tables, Ofsted inspections, which focus very closely still on results indicators, and the closure threats to schools and the various top-down targeting arrangements that are still going on.

Do I think that helps or hinders the system for providing a good education for children? I think it hinders it. It is very English, this system. You can argue the American system has a lot of similarities—and is worse in some places—but, generally, it is what is distinctive about our system: we tell teachers that what matters is this particular number or a set of numbers at the end of it. All kinds of evidence from people like learned societies—for example, the Society of Authors complaining about the issue of textbooks being very exam-focused—are talking about the effect of the learning experience of pupils. I just do not think it is helping our system at all. If you wanted a good system, you would not start from saying that we are just going to assess schools on a few statistics.

I think it goes deeper than what Professor Ball was talking about in terms of focusing on particular pupils. There are huge issues about saying that all that matters about what you learn is that grade at the end of it. I just think that that is a massive issue. What we are essentially saying to the system is that that is all that matters. That is why you get things like these exam seminars, where examiners are operating in a culture which says, “I know this is a bit dodgy, but ultimately all that matters is that grade. You know, that is what we are being judged on. That is what the whole system is being judged on.” Then you look at things like PISA, which finds that there has not been that progress when you change the measure. People acknowledge the side effects and then say that the answer is to look again at the measures and that we need to change the measures, because we cannot change this idea that we have to have statistical monitoring of some kind or put such emphasis on it. I think, actually, no, you need to look at the fundamentals.

Q415 Chair: We probably need to move on.

Professor Holman: Can I just say one quick thing about The Daily Telegraph thing? I think you have to be careful with that one not to throw out the baby with the bathwater. At their best, examiner feedback sessions are good. If they are done professionally, you get the examiner saying, “Oh, we found in question 3 that people didn’t show a clear understanding of the nature of bond breaking. It is very important that this is taught well and so on.” And the teachers go away and act accordingly. That is a professional way of doing it. There is a world of difference between that
and what The Daily Telegraph revealed, but I don’t think that we should say blanket-fashion that dialogue between examiners and teachers is wrong because, at its best, it can be constructive.

Q416 Chair: All the four examining bodies that came before us when we looked into that said that the provision of those sessions was loss-making. So it is not as if it is a profit driver. The quality of them may help sell their overall package, but in themselves those sessions are not some massive profit-maker.

Q417 Pat Glass: I think you all sat in on the earlier sessions and heard some of the evidence that we were given. People talk about the complexities that sit behind the grade inflation. I think that three of you are scientists, aren’t you? Do you see the conflict that exists? When we taught science and maths in the traditional way, huge numbers of kids were turned off. Yes, there are issues around the modular teaching of maths etc., but are there not children in our universities now studying maths and science who wouldn’t have been 10 years ago? We still been teaching in the same traditional way?

Professor Hutchings: I think the way in which children start being interested in science comes a lot earlier than where we are discussing the process before us today. Probably key stage 3 is the crucial area. If you don’t switch them on there, they won’t do key stage 4, and they won’t go through to A-level. That is where the battleground is. You could argue that putting science into the national curriculum and making sure that it was taught at primary level has made sure that we have a far better cohort of people interested in science coming through. I would take it right back. I became enthused as a scientist when I was 11, and that was the first time I was exposed to science.

Q418 Pat Glass: The point I was trying to make is that I have seen classes of children being taught maths when they don’t get decimals. Some of them don’t get it, so they move on and do fractions. Even more of them don’t get fractions, so they move on. The way in which maths is taught now is very different. Some people would call that dumbing down; others would say that it was more accessible.

Professor Holman: Can I just ask what the link is to examinations?

Q419 Pat Glass: Do we have increasing numbers of students achieving higher grades? Therefore, is it easier? The argument that was made earlier was perhaps it is easier, but does it matter? Does it matter because more students are staying with the course longer and are going on to study at high levels?

Professor Holman: If you think about what the situation was before GCSE a long time ago, the GCSE has hugely opened up the territory for people to study, for example, sciences. In particular, it has meant that girls have stuck with physics and boys have stuck with biology, and that has been very important. The same has happened with A-level. It has gone from a sort of minority thing for about 10% of the population to something that is successful for 50%. Those are both very good things.

Not surprisingly, there have been difficulties in going through that 30-year transition in maintaining standards, when you have gone, for example, at A-level, from an exam for a 10% elite who would have all gone to university to one for 50% of the population. There were bound to be difficulties. We heard earlier about the difficulties that accompany change, but the change itself was a good thing.

Q420 Pat Glass: So does grade inflation matter? Professor Holman: I think that it does.

Q421 Pat Glass: So how do you square that circle? Professor Holman: You must not let the best be the enemy of the good. It was good that GCSE opened everything up, as good as A-level opening everything up. We must do our best to make sure that grade inflation doesn’t happen because, at its worst, it really undermines confidence, particularly for employers. Universities can keep up with it, but often employers must have a 10-year-old out of date notion of what a grade C is. Inflation does matter, but we have to manage it and take steps to minimise it. We must not let it stop us making changes to the education system that are more important for fundamental reasons such as widening access to university from 10% to 50% of the population.

Professor Ball: This illustrates one of the issues that the previous witnesses talked about, which is that there are multiple functions and requirements of the exam system. If this Committee were focusing its attention on the number of students who were studying mathematics and science in higher education, the nature of the questioning in relation to assessment may be that the assessment needs to change in order to increase that number, but in fact you are looking at it the other way round, which is whether standards are being inflated. That puts into the background the issues of the participation, involvement and motivation of students and ensuring that we have large cohorts of maths and science students in higher education. You cannot square that circle. It is a policy question in terms of where you put the emphasis.

Q422 Chair: What are we looking at is the organisation of the examination systems. Of course we want to go out to these wider issues, but we come back to the organisation.

Warwick Mansell: I think it is quite revealing that we are even having this discussion about what the improvement of A-level results actually means. Because this is the kind of discussion that we have every August. In the media, there is massive debate about that. You are asking whether we have improved the quality of science education and whether we are offering it to more pupils in an attractive way. If you wanted to find the answer to that, you would not use A-levels or GCSEs, because too much has changed about the system. As we have been hearing, there are lots of reasons why those numbers might be going up. We cannot ever be absolutely sure, because there are too many reasons why we cannot be sure what the
answer is. Personally, I think that if you wanted national accountability in terms of actually finding out what is going on with education, you would not do it through the current system. You might have a system more akin to PISA, where children are set tests that do not change particularly over the years. There is nothing high stakes about that system, so you can retain questions between years. You could do it in a broader, more in-depth way than PISA by looking at a much broader range of subjects and getting much better information than you get from the system at the moment. That is why this debate continues every year and we never really get to an answer.

Q423 Pat Glass: If we did that, would we not simply start teaching to those tests? The education system is incredibly good at homing in on the accountability measure.

Warwick Mansell: No, because you would not be holding schools accountable through those tests, which is the point. That is part of the reason why the data you get at the end are not particularly good.

Q424 Pat Glass: The exam boards tell us that they do not compete on standards of attainment. Do you accept that?

Warwick Mansell: I have huge respect for all of the previous interviewees, but I end up with the same conclusions that a lot of people reach. I think that the risks and downsides of going to a single board outweigh the advantages, but I think there was not enough discussion about the pressures on schools and what the reality is. One of the main reasons why they look to choose between boards is because they are under huge pressure to raise their results, including the possibility of the head teacher losing their job. That is the case in virtually every school. If the results are not good enough, that will happen. I have seen examples of a particular exam board essentially sending messages to teachers, “Choose our exams because they are accessible and because a particular format is the right format to raise the results of your pupils.” I have written about history teachers who don’t have to sit down and be told, “Make your exam easier,” for it to happen. The pressures in the system are all tending to act in that direction, as long as we have a system in which boards compete for market share.

Q425 Pat Glass: So it is all unspoken, but it is there.

Professor Holman: Yes.

Q427 Pat Glass: We asked the earlier panel whether this grade inflation—these increased grades—make students better prepared for university. What is your view on that?

Professor Holman: I am not necessarily talking about grade inflation here, but the cause of it. The main thing that is driving grade inflation is that schools are very focused on exams now. They get very good at preparing for exams, spotting the questions, knowing what you have to say to get the mark and so on. That is making students less prepared for university, because they are being prepared to understand how to answer the question on, for example, chemical equilibrium, but they are not necessarily being prepared for how to understand it, so, when they come to me at the University of York and I teach them about the next stages of chemical equilibrium, I can’t be confident that their knowledge is secure enough, because they will have been prepared to pass the test rather than to have a deep understanding of it. I am not talking about every single school by the way, but this is the risk and that is the direction in which it is driven.

Professor Ball: Can I just say that there is a second order effect of that, namely the extent to which schools concentrate on exam performance. They are not doing other things, and some of those other things are the sorts of skills, thinking abilities and relationships that one would hope that students would be able to make use of when they come into higher education. Those are things that are not being done.

Professor Hutchings: I am in higher education—I am Pro Vice-Chancellor of a Russell Group university—and we have changed the way in which we teach
subjects at first year, which is a point that was made earlier, because of the quality of the students and cohorts who come through. There are a few points. One is that there is a legacy issue. Because students are taught to the test and they have the classic question, “Is this going to be in the exam?”, that means that we have a non-inquiring cohort of students being brought out from this education system now, compared with, “This is interesting; I need to know about this because I’m going to be studying the subject for a long time.” We have to somehow get that across to them very early on in their university career, and I think that that is a very sad thing.

Q428 Chair: Teaching to the test has led to a destruction of curiosity? Professor Hutchings: It has started—it has not gone totally. There are still very good students and there is not a total erosion, but it is there. As a university teacher, it causes me huge problems, because you are totally. There are still very good students and there is still a very strong cohort of students going to university in general. The number coming to university that is part of the top cohort of universities.

Professor Hutchings: It has started—it has not gone totally. There are still very good students and there is not a total erosion, but it is there. As a university teacher, it causes me huge problems, because you are trying to get something interesting across and they say, “Is this in the exam?” They just want to know that. I also want to go back to the point about grade inflation.

Q429 Pat Glass: Can I just ask you a bit more about that? How much of that is to do with the increase in the number of students going to university? In the past, in the ‘60s, it was 7% and they would be the brightest, the best and the most inquisitive. Now, we have 50% of students going to university, so there is bound to be some widening of the ability, skills and curiosity.

Professor Hutchings: That is true, but my comment was made from the perspective of a Russell Group university that is part of the top cohort of universities. We are taking the AAB students that we are meant to take.

Q430 Pat Glass: So you haven’t seen any difference. Professor Hutchings: I would say that, over the past few years, there has been a loss of curiosity.

Q431 Damian Hinds: Just to be clear, although the number of children going to university in general may have increased dramatically, the number going to Cardiff University has—

Professor Hutchings: It has gone from, say, 80 to 100. It is 20%, but it is not a huge amount. In fact, our grades, if we look at the grade points, have gone up during that time, but that is possibly part of the grade erosion that we have been talking about.

Q432 Chair: What about your involvement? The Secretary of State has said that, particularly for A-level, universities and learned societies should have more to do with the construction of the syllabus and so on. What role would you like to have and what needs to happen?

Professor Hutchings: Higher education is one part—this is a point that I wanted to make in relation to the previous part of the discussion. Although it is true that a lot of students coming out go into higher education, a lot do not. From my point of view, we want to have a scientifically literate community, because that is a great benefit to society as we go forward into the future. It is important that we get that scientifically literate society, but higher education is only part of it. They do need to be involved, but I would urge that we involve the professional bodies in the science or, where those do not exist, some sort of excellence framework where we bring together the key people in the subject area, so that you can have them involved. It is not just higher education.

Q433 Chair: Is this like a national subject committee then?

Professor Hutchings: Yes. That is what we would favour, because which part of higher education do you go to? There are at least four groupings. They all have their separate secretariats. Do they speak with one view? No, they do not. Whom you would go to is very difficult.

Professor Holman: In the previous session, you were talking about Ofqual and the question was being asked as to whether Ofqual has enough capacity. Unsurprisingly, the people who were sitting here, who were assessment experts, said that they need more capacity in assessment. Crucially, they need more capacity, or the ability to tap that capacity, in subject expertise. They just do not have it. Its part-predecessor, the QCDA, had a bit of it, but not very much. Predecessor bodies to the QCDA did have it; and there was a time when there were national subject committees, which were truly national and had a strong influence over the exam syllabuses. We need to get that back.

A-level needs to connect much more strongly with the main users of A-levels, which are universities and employers. The way to do that is through national subject committees. How could Ofqual possibly have the kind of depth of expertise to know, for example, what a modern history A-level would be like? You need to have this. In my view, they should be convened by the professional bodies. Any kind of system where you try to have a collection of university heads of departments sitting down together and working out A-levels would not work, but if you take a body like the Institute of Physics, for example, it has strong links to universities and employers and very good education expertise. They would be able to do that job. It would have to be much more than simply saying what goes in the syllabus. It would have to be about an ongoing monitoring of the live examinations. So the national subject committee does not just say what they want to have in the specification; it looks at the individual board’s interpretations of that list and says whether it is good or not. It looks at the sample question papers. It looks at the live question papers. It never stops working. It is always watching and monitoring. That is the way it should be.

Q434 Chair: How would it work for things like maths, where there are lots of bodies?

Professor Holman: Well, it is not going to be perfect. There is not an Institute of Physics for every subject,
and I absolutely accept that, but it is not impossible. Maths, for example, has an organisation called the Advisory Committee for Mathematics Education, which is very good.

When a similar question had to be faced about the standard of teaching in higher education, the quality body in some cases went to the Institute of Physics or the Royal Society of Chemistry where such bodies existed. Where they did not, they convened subject bodies to oversee the quality of teaching in higher education. An analogous approach could be taken in this sphere. By the way, such subject bodies should overrule not only A-level, but also GCSE, because the one needs to articulate very well with the other.

**Professor Ball:** The British Academy would align itself with both of those positions. The British Academy believes it has something to contribute, particularly in the area of humanities, social sciences and statistics. We would not want to see ourselves having too strong a role in the sense that what happens in higher education should not drive what happens at levels lower in the education system, but we would be attracted—

Q435 **Chair:** How do we address that? Ministers in successive Governments always talk as if everyone is going to get A-levels and go to university. Most people do not, and over 50% will probably continue not to, and yet we talk about the whole system being driven by universities, in part, where most people will not go. Are there dangers in that and how do we avoid them?

**Professor Ball:** There are clearly. We need a system to address the whole of the student population. The production of examination results, in my day not do that, they will be blamed for it.

Q436 **Ian Mearns:** I must admit that as this goes on I am becoming increasingly concerned that people could construe that, instead of producing young people with a good broad knowledge base and inquiring minds who are prepared to learn, we are actually producing—with what we are doing with league tables and the pressure on schools—educational automata who are programmed to answer particular questions in particular exams, and therefore get a result and move on.

John, you mentioned and touched on earlier that the Wellcome Trust has expressed the view that the best way forward to is to retain the current system but with substantial improvements. However, from everything we have heard today it sounds like we really do need substantial improvement.

**Professor Holman:** We do, but it is not just about the examination system. The results you are talking about are about the very strong accountability framework within which schools operate—league tables and Ofsted, in particular. Maybe you want to make an inquiry into that; I would greatly welcome it. That is what is driving this ever more intense focus on examinations.

Q437 **Ian Mearns:** I expressed the cynical view that we are not producing youngsters with a broad base of knowledge and inquiring minds who are ready to learn. Would you agree with that?

**Professor Holman:** You polarised it, which I noted. That is undoubtedly the way that the system is moving. Graham has described a situation that I encounter myself: “Are we going to get this in the exam at the end of this term, Professor Holman?” That is not what you want to go on in our universities. You describe the direction of travel, sadly.

**Warwick Mansell:** As I am fairly obsessed about this, I want to come back about the accountabilities system. You are talking about inquiring minds, and we have heard about worries from universities that they are not getting independent thinking. A lot of people talk about teaching to the test, but I think there is something quite fundamental going on, in that essentially what the accountability system says is, “We want schools to deliver better results for pupils, come what may.” That word “deliver” is often used, which I think is quite revealing. Essentially, if they do not do that, they will be blamed for it.

The production of examination results, in my day anyway, is a system over which teachers have only limited control in reality. I always viewed exam results as mainly a judgment on me, and not on my school or whoever is Prime Minister of the day. We have gone away from that; we have tried to judge all other kinds of people on those results. The reaction to that is that they seek to take more control over that process; they guide closely towards exams, particular exams and content of exams. They are strategic about who they enter for exams. Are those the outcomes we want from the system? I don’t think so; I don’t think that is what universities want. We hear from employers that they want independent thinking. Independent thinking—just letting the kids get on with it—is quite a risky thing if you are a teacher being told that your job is potentially on the line if these kids do not get their results on particular tests.

Having said that, A-levels in particular are reasonably good qualifications, and are certainly regarded that way around the world. That is fighting against that tendency, but it is there. I would say that the transparency of what is being required of students within mark schemes is potentially double-edged. I have seen studies that have shown students looking at the mark scheme and saying, “What I have to do is learn the mark scheme. I don’t need to worry about reading around the subject or anything.” The exam
board has told you what is going to be in the exam and you focus your attention on that. I don’t think that is the kind of experience that universities are looking for from sixth-form education.

Q438 Tessa Munt: It strikes me that this is just like British Rail in the 1970s, where you are trying to get a train from A to B without actually worrying about the passengers. There is a big similarity, in that what we are trying to do is get kids through exams to get them on to the next bit and not look at the people involved. What I really worry and want to ask you about is what happens when you then introduce wealth inequality, where somebody has the ability to buy cramming expertise. I was going to bring this up with you a little earlier. You were talking about the experience of people coming into top universities. Are there top students? I know that we are constantly trying to level the playing field, but if you introduce wealth and the ability to buy extra tuition—

Professor Hutchings: You can always cram. Any parent who is able to do that for their child is able to help them through the examination system in this country today—definitely. To broaden this slightly, if I am giving the impression that we are getting students coming to us who do not have inquiring minds and are not going to be the great scientists of the future, I want to stop that now—I think we have. We do get a good product out of the system.

Q439 Ian Mearns: I’m thinking of the headline rate, you see, that is the problem.

Professor Hutchings: I know. You talk about grade inflation. It is very small every year and it is perceptible, but is the product that is coming out fit for purpose? That is the question.

Q440 Chair: If we have this narrow, teaching to the test incentive for teachers to control the learning and to keep it focused on what will come up in exams, then it will surely have had the impact of reducing the intellectual curiosity and interest of young people. You have just suggested that that is not the case, and I am confused.

Professor Hutchings: I am just saying it is switched off. You can switch it back on. I do not think it is lost. If it is, then we are doomed as a society, aren’t we? We will have to import all of our top scientists and top innovators in the future, and that has clearly not been the case. We are producing top science still in this country. Clearly, the system is not helping—the system could be improved.

Q441 Chair: Is it that you are a Russell Group university at the top? When I go to an outstanding school or top public school, they ride over all this stuff and do not allow it to narrow everything, because they are self-confident and they know they are not about to be smashed and told they are a failure. If you are serving a very poor community somewhere and you are struggling to recruit the best teachers, however good a head you are, unless you are an absolute genius, the truth is that you are pretty worried. Could it be that the top is all right? The problem, as Warwick said, is what happens to the people at—

Professor Hutchings: We are losing a lot of probably very talented people at the bottom, definitely, that would have come through in the previous system—

Q442 Chair: You probably do not see them, so you are not seeing people who have been damaged.

Professor Hutchings: Nobody sees them, in a sense, because they do not come through.

Professor Holman: You said, “Could it be that the top is all right?” It depends what you mean by the top. Were you talking about the highest-attaining students or the best schools? I think you were talking about the best schools. The best schools will not focus relentlessly and exclusively on preparing the exam. They will, for example in science, do a lot of practical work and a lot of discussion. They will take people out on visits. They will do all those things that enable you to get a broad understanding and an interest, and that is what the best schools do. But you described, Chairman, a school that is firefighting, under pressure and being hammered. What do they do when they are not being measured by the number they get at GCSE A to C? They concentrate on the D grades at GCSE, because that is what any rational manager of a company would do in order to maximise the return. It does come back to the accountability system, but I would not like anyone to go away with the impression that the country is full of schools that are simply sitting children down and forcing exam fodder down them, because they aren’t. The best schools—I use the word confidence—know that if you teach well the exams will come.

Q443 Chair: Under Labour, 30% getting five good GCSEs, including English and Maths, was the floor for national challenge. This Government have said that they will move to 50%, although that is moderated. If you are below 50%, but you show more than average progress—however that is defined—it will not kick in. Is the raising of the floor a good or a bad thing in your view?

Professor Ball: There are two things happening. It is not simply raising the floor, it is changing the indicators that the floor level is based on. There is a narrowing of the range of subjects that are going to be included in the indicator, so there are going to be dual effects in terms of how that plays out in schools. The pressures will increase both to drive up performance, but drive up performance in particular subjects. You may see that as a good or a bad thing. This is one of the ways in which a performance management system is very effective. Perhaps in that respect, it should never be put in the hands of politicians. It is very powerful.

Can I add one other thing to the caveats that my colleagues have put in about what is happening in schools? Teaching for examination performance is not the only thing that teachers do. It may be particularly predominant in years 9, 10 and 11, and increasingly so, but there are other, counter trends. I am particularly thinking of PLTS. I don’t know how many of you have come across Personal, Learning and
Thinking Skills, which is a programme and approach that has made enormous progress. It was disseminated widely in schools under the latter period of the new Labour Government. It is aimed at developing the ability to argue and skills of logic, drawing in a programme of philosophy for kids to try to get them working together to think about what they are learning, with an emphasis on learning rather than on assessment. The problem is that that tends to disappear at the end of year 8.

Warwick Mansell: I have been going on a lot about teaching to test, but you have to recognise that Ofsted’s annual report, for example, says that more than 90% of parents answered positively the question, “Are you happy with your child’s experience at this school?” I do not think that accounts of huge numbers of schools being terrible are true at all. I would put that context in.

The floor targets are interesting. It is only one piece of evidence, but there was a report last year from the Advisory Committee on Mathematics Education on early entry patterns for GCSE mathematics. It was very concerned about that, and rightly so. It was worried that some schools in the system are putting children in early for maths. In the worst cases, they get the C and are not even given the chance to improve on that grade later on, which is absolutely scandalous. It looks as though the institution’s need for results is being put ahead of pupils’ needs. But then you look at which schools go in for that most, and a statistic shows that it is the national challenge schools, because the pressures on them to raise results are huge. As I said, judging a school on a couple of indicators will not necessarily produce beneficial education outcomes for the student. It incentivises schools to act in certain ways—sometimes those are in students’ interests and sometimes they are not.

Professor Hutchings: You asked about raising the level. It is likely to exacerbate all the problems that you have been hearing about today. You might want to go from 30% to 50% of a certain grade level, but awarding bodies do not compete on standards, as they say, but on market share. They want to get more of the share of that market.

Research that we have done at SCORE, which we referenced in the report, follows on from the point that has been made on mathematics. Mathematics is not evenly put into the science qualifications. It is not taught, so you can choose an awarding organisation that does not have much maths in its questions. This allows them to get through. This sort of thing is going to drive things in that direction. Having multiple awarding bodies for subjects allows that sort of thing to happen, unless it is regulated properly.

Q444 Chair: The last panel in general were saying that better regulation is the answer rather than changing the structure. What are you saying?

Professor Hutchings: What we want is one body bringing out a specific subject area.

Q445 Chair: For franchising?

Professor Hutchings: Franchising would be a way of doing it, yes. If we had a subject committee for each of the subjects, they would not have to deal with five awarding organisations. They would deal with one awarding organisation, and they could make sure that best practice was driven through. There was a comment in the earlier session about innovation. Innovation is not engendered in the current system because people aren’t encouraged to talk to each other in the old boarding bodies about, “Well, this is a really good idea to do this.”

Q446 Ian Mearns: Do you all agree, therefore, that we need some level of organisational reform?

Professor Holman: Absolutely. One thing that has not been touched on, either in the previous session or this one, is the quality of questions. If we have to accept, which we may have to, that we live in a test and exam-driven system, let us have really good tests and exams. Let us make sure that they are very high quality and fit for purpose and, as far as possible, that the questions are such that they lead to the teachers, if they are going to teach to the test, teaching to the test in a good way. Good questions can lead to good teaching. There is no question about that.

One of the problems is that there is such a huge dilution of expertise in question setting. Take science, for example. We have three awarding bodies that between them have five science specifications, each of which has a minimum of two science papers—science and additional science—at two levels, so there are 20 papers in science having to be set each year. It cannot be possible that the questions will always come out absolutely top notch. It cannot be possible, because they are trying to do it at great speed and there are all the things about competing as well. So, a very good reason for reducing the number of awarding bodies, or at least the number of specifications that they produce between them, is to concentrate expertise. This was touched on, but the point that I would want to stress is that perhaps the most important expertise of all is writing the questions that the candidates sit down to—writing, pre-testing, and trying to flush out the glitches and the unforeseen consequences.

Q447 Chair: Is that best served by franchising—giving a subject to an awarding body—or by the creation of a single awarding body?

Professor Holman: Both of those would help, because you would get your best people on to the act of creating the questions, but it is not impossible with the current system. I do not understand why awarding bodies do not collaborate more.

Q448 Ian Mearns: They are in competition.

Professor Holman: Exactly. Okay, let me put it a different way. I do not understand why we allow awarding bodies to carry everything out separately, without any collaboration and behind closed doors.

Q449 Ian Mearns: To be absolutely cynical, some of the exam boards are also owned by publishing organisations that publish the text books. Is there not a conflict of interest there?
Professor Ball: There are issues there. It is important to understand that it is not simply a market in examinations or a market in assessments.

Q450 Ian Mearns: It is a bit incestuous, though, isn’t it?
Professor Holman: It is worse than that.

Q451 Ian Mearns: It’s worse than incestuous?

Q452 Chair: Sir John is a very liberal man.
Professor Holman: I was not going to say there is nothing wrong with incest. It is one thing to say, “It’s insider trading; it’s incestuous; it must be bad.” Let us just think for a moment why and what is the risk. The risk is that if an examiner is writing a textbook, he or she may—going through their head when they sit down and write the exam—think, “I won’t put a question on that, because it is not in the book,” or “I haven’t done much on that.” They will, unconsciously perhaps, focus the exam on what they covered in their book. That disadvantages people who have not bought the book or schools that have not got the money to do it or whatever. Yes, it is incestuous, but the reason why it is a bad thing is that it carries a risk.

Chair: We have very little time, I am sorry, so we will have to move on.

Q453 Neil Carmichael: I want to talk about Ofqual, but first I want to go back to some of the answers that you have given. What I want to hear is whether or not you think subjects should be treated as a sector. Should there be some sort of structure for that subject, responsible for examinations in total?
Professor Ball: I think that that would be a direction in which some of, if not all, the problems that we have indicated could be addressed.

Q454 Neil Carmichael: Do you all share that feeling?
Warwick Mansell: Are you talking again about having a single exam board?

Q455 Neil Carmichael: For subjects.
Warwick Mansell: On balance, I would not favour that, because for me the disadvantages outweigh the advantages. A major disadvantage is that, in schools, when teachers are dealing with exam boards, if they have a bad experience with one board, they find it very useful potentially to change boards and have that as an exit mechanism.

Q456 Neil Carmichael: So you like the competition element.
Warwick Mansell: In that sense, it is good. There are worries about the standards element, but, in that sense, it is good. Secondly—I think this was mentioned in the previous session—there are massive risks of major structural change in this way and any change to that extent. Thirdly, again you have the risk of greater politicisation of the system—the greater degree of independence than would probably be likely against a system where boards were bidding for the custom, essentially, from the Government rather than from the individual schools. That has worries with it.

Professor Holman: I do not think that we should go for one exam board to one subject, for the various reasons that have been discussed, but I do think that the exam boards have to behave in a totally different way. They need to behave in a way that involves them in collaborating together to produce better examinations in the interests of better teaching. Ofqual, as far as I know, does not have the power to make them do that and I think it should.

Q457 Neil Carmichael: That is partly the next theme of my questions. You think that Ofqual should be completely restructured so that it does have that power effectively to bring about collaboration.
Professor Holman: Yes.
Professor Hutchings: If we default with the current system, then it has to be. I would argue that we should not stick with the current system, and I favour one body for one subject. We can have multiple bodies, but, for a period of time, you want one body for one subject.

The risks that were being pointed out I do not think really exist. I think that this competition between the boards is perceived, because once a school has selected an examining board in a particular thing, it buys the textbooks to go with that—the point about textbooks becomes critical and stops any competition. You have got to break the link between textbooks and the awarding bodies. That is critical. There need to be general textbooks, which schools can go to such that it does not matter if they shift. If we have to have multiple awarding bodies, then if the schools shift, there is real competition, but at the moment they do not because of what is in-built. Do you replace all your textbooks because you are going to go with a different thing? That is a huge cost.

Q458 Neil Carmichael: But what about the accountability mechanism for these sorts of subject areas?
Professor Hutchings: Sorry, I don’t understand the question.

Q459 Neil Carmichael: If you are going to have single bodies for each subject, would you say that Ofqual should be the structure to hold them accountable?
Professor Hutchings: There needs to be strong regulation, yes. But we have already discussed, and I think all of us have agreed, on these subject committees, which take the brunt of what is going on, that they need to be regulated, definitely.

Q460 Chair: What is your view, Stephen, or the British Academy’s view, on structure? I am not clear as to what you think we should do.
Professor Ball: I think the British Academy view is that there are some merits in plurality and that there are defences to freedom that lie in the possibility of choice. Perhaps it is that we need to find some kind of middle way, which may be with greater regulation and the role of the subject committees, balanced
against some degree of choice. We have to think also that the choice is not simply between boards in relation to different subjects, but is, in relation to subjects, what counts as a subject that is going to be examined. One of the things that exam boards have been doing for the past few years is creating new subjects that can be examined, which in part are being created in order for schools to notch up exam performance statistics. So there are all sorts of factors involved in how the boards operate.

It is also important to recognise that the market in examining is part of a much larger market in educational services, and that market is undergoing massive change in terms of acquisitions, mergers and consolidations, so that we are getting the development of larger and larger education and managerial services companies. The extent to which they would want to seek to compete for contracts for franchised examination systems would, in many cases, inevitably link their activities across areas like text book production, continuing professional development, and the management and improvement of schools. There are all sorts of possibilities for conflicts of interest.

Q461 Neil Carmichael: One or two of your answers just generally have referred to the importance of ensuring that universities and business have an influence in this process. Do you think the single subject route would help or hinder that?

Professor Hutchings: I personally think it would help it. In the case of science, which is what I am talking about, the professional bodies are there. They already have a broad base, as John has said, of representation in higher education, employers and so on. They already have those interests at heart.

Professor Holman: If it were to be a single board—one board, one subject—that would not be sufficient. As we have heard from Graham, it should be linked to a subject committee that had real powers. Might we even consider Ofqual giving all the powers for regulation to that subject body? If that was the starting point, I think you could make that model work. I don’t think the single body is the best model, for the reason I have said, but if you have it you still have to have this strong link with the subject community.

Q462 Neil Carmichael: So you are effectively saying strong subject structure, backed up by the sort of residual powers of Ofqual?

Professor Holman: Yes.

Chair: I think we have to move on. Are there any more questions? No? We are over our time in any case. Thank you very much, gentlemen, for giving evidence to us today. If you have any further thoughts, please be in contact with us because we will obviously be writing a report and making recommendations to Government, and it is important that those recommendations are as well founded as possible. Thank you very much.
Tuesday 21 February 2012

Members present:
Mr Graham Stuart (Chair)
Neal Carmichael
Alex Cunningham
Pat Glass
Damian Hinds
Charlotte Leslie
Ian Mearns
Tessa Munt

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: John Butterworth, Educational Writer and Chief Examiner, Society of Authors, Paul Howarth, UK and International Managing Director, Nelson Thornes, Jacob Pienaar, Managing Director of Schools and Colleges, Pearson UK, and Kate Harris, Managing Director, Education and Children’s Division, Oxford University Press, gave evidence.

Q463 Pat Glass: Good morning everybody, and thank you for coming. Graham Stuart, the Chair of the Select Committee, is going to be a little late this morning. I am stepping in until he arrives, but when he arrives I will move over. As you know, we are holding an inquiry into the examinations system in England and Wales at the moment, and one of the things that the Select Committee wanted to get out of today’s session, if we can, are recommendations, as part of our report for how things can improve. When you are giving your evidence, if you can remember to give us what you think would be snappy answers and recommendations.

I want to start off today by asking if things have become just a little bit too cozy in the examination system, with examiners writing textbooks and, in some cases, question papers, and textbooks endorsed by exam boards. Also, why do endorsements matter? I will kick off with that. Do you want to start, Kate?

Kate Harris: Thank you. First of all, thank you for asking me to come to the hearing today. The short answer to that question is probably yes.

Pat Glass: Could you speak up?

Kate Harris: Sorry, okay. The slightly longer answer is to say that where the same group of people are setting and marking examinations as well as publishing the resources for them, there are a number of risks around that for children’s education. Those risks fall into two categories. The first risk is that having quasi-official textbooks limits choice, because the implication is given that with this official textbook, and as not all teaching and learning situations are the same—you have teachers with different sorts of experience and confidence levels, and you have children with different learning styles—choice being skewed by those relationships is not in the interest of children’s education.

The other risk in those relationships—those exclusive partnerships or structural arrangements, where the people who set and mark the exams are the same group of people who create the textbooks—is that they can undermine trust in the examination system, because the implication is given that with this official textbook, it is in some way giving the answers, and the examination does not, therefore, have the same validity and integrity as it might otherwise have had, which is not in the interests of children.

Paul Howarth: From a competition perspective, the UK market has an awful lot of publishers operating in it, so there is a lot of choice, we think that that is good for teachers. Based on our experience, people make purchasing decisions for lots of different reasons, whether it is cost, quality or quantity. Therefore there are challenges in identifying examiners and using them as authors, the challenge for a publisher being that often the awarding body and the publisher want someone who really has in-depth knowledge of their particular subject. That is often limited; there is not a great deal of choice of people out there who make a good author and also understand the syllabus being published.

In a perfect world, what we would have is someone as an examiner who could identify and interpret the syllabus and a separate author. That is not always the case, but we try to identify that where we can. We worked very closely with AQA—when we had an exclusive arrangement—to make sure that there was an absolute separation between ultimately what happened from the exam perspective and what happened within a textbook.

Jacob Pienaar: I personally believe that what is extremely important for education outcomes is proper alignment and coherence between various aspects of education. In other words, what your curriculum says, what happens in the classroom, what will be in your teaching and learning resources, and what is ultimately assessed should be coherent; it should pull in the same direction. We believe that is the right thing to do. Therefore, we would not agree that necessarily these relationships have become too cozy.

However, as Paul has indicated, awarding bodies do two things: they will develop specifications, but they will also write exams, which they eventually award. We do believe that as much as we need coherence and alignment, you need to be careful when it comes to examinations. We would agree with that—the stakes and the risks are too high in terms of public confidence.

In terms of recommendations, what we should do is make absolutely sure that the examinations do not get compromised, while at the same time not fragment what we do to such an extent that you lose the
coherence and alignment that I was referring to earlier. I also agree with my colleague that choice is absolutely important. I was a teacher myself for many years, and I know as a teacher I did not want anyone to tell me exactly what I should be using. But I also know I had powers of discrimination as a teacher; I knew that I could exercise some choice. We have loads of evidence in this market that teachers do exercise their choice, and that they are not necessarily simply going one way because someone tells them to.

Q464 Pat Glass: The Society of Authors has been quite critical of this system.
John Butterworth: First of all, I am a member of the Society of Authors, but I do not have a script from the Society of Authors. They have asked me to relate my experiences; I like to think maybe I come into the category that Paul said was a “perfect” author, because I am both an examiner and an author.

However, I came to be an examiner by being an author first. I do not think it is true to say that all examiners of a syllabus are necessarily going to be the best authors for a textbook, except in the sense that they know the specifications inside out; it does not mean that they know the subject inside out, and it does not mean that they can write particularly well. From my experience, I know I have been given a commission to write a book without any real quality control first. I have also written books that I have submitted and had sampled in the proper way, and judged in the proper way.

But in the case of one publication that comes into the category of being a very specific textbook for a syllabus, I was chosen more or less automatically, because I was the Chief Examiner. I wrote it with a colleague, a co-author, who was a Principal Examiner. That is why we were chosen to do it. There may well have been authors out there who could have done a better job. Moreover, I do know that one publisher was interested, one with a very strong reputation in the subject I write and examine in. They were thinking of writing a book on the subject. They pulled out because they knew that there was going to be an endorsed book with a partner of the examination board. The two real concerns that the specification is delivering the examination, and the teaching is to the exam; therefore, there is a vicious decreasing circle that is limiting the curriculum. Secondly, the relationship is cosy and is also limiting the curriculum, because unless you are writing the endorsed book, it is not going to be picked up by teachers. Is this conflict of interest perceived in the system real or not? Who wants to go first? Kate? Quick answers would be good.

Kate Harris: I think that conflict of interest is real, and it comes not just from the examiner—the situation John was describing—but also from the way that companies present and brand their materials. I could, for example, show you a specification for an examination board, and then the book that is published for that specification, which is branded in exactly the same way; not just the same logo but the same cover design. Would it be helpful to show that quickly?

Pat Glass: Yes.

Kate Harris: That is the specification; that is the book that supports the specification. It takes a very brave teacher to say, “I am not going to use that book.” Jacob said he has lots of evidence of teachers being independently minded, and of course many teachers are independently minded. But we also have evidence of going in to schools to sell materials for particular specifications and teachers saying, “No, we are buying the official book.” When the official book is that clearly branded, I would say that the conflict of interest is real.

Jacob Pienaar: Once again, our view would be that obviously one should always look out for potential conflict of interest. What we all should be doing is managing it as appropriately and strongly as we possibly can, but there is a risk that it becomes a bit anecdotal, which might happen on teachers and might not be fair on examiners. There is a very wide variety of activities.

Another example would be where Pearson also publishes for other awarding bodies. We would publish for an awarding body like AQA, for example, that until very recently at least had an exclusive endorsement partnership. Two years ago we published in a major GCSE subject; in other words, we put an unendorsed text into the market, and at least half of the centres AQA centres selected that particular textbook. We should be careful not to generalise here and imply something about teachers that might not be true.

Q466 Neil Carmichael: Let us try to put this into perspective. Some evidence at the Committee has suggested that there is too much consistency between a textbook and exam situations. To what extent do you agree with that evidence? Can you put some scale to the problem?
John Butterworth: I am sorry, could you repeat that?

Neil Carmichael: Some evidence to this Committee has already suggested that there really is too much similarity between a textbook and exam outcomes, and this is limiting the opportunity for children to explore intellectual development and so forth. How do you feel that should be measured? Is it a big problem or not such a big problem?
John Butterworth: It is a big problem; I have come to feel more and more that it is a big problem and a growing problem. Some people have used the term “backwash”—I have only quite recently come across this expression, but it is in several of the written submissions—to refer to the effect that the exam is having on the way classroom practice takes place, in order to meet the exact requirements of the exam. I have come to the view that things are the wrong way round. There are very good books on subjects prior to the specifications being written.

In a better system we would have our awards based on the good books that are out there on the subject.
itself, on the broad subjects, meeting those as the syllabus, rather than an exam creating its subject, in effect, or creating a subject within a subject that is then exclusively matched by a textbook, which in turn becomes the book on that subject. I take it that is what this word backwash means, and it is a good analogy for what is happening.

To my mind the perfect model is the school library, where you have a selection of books on a subject. It is a long time since I was a sixth former, but I remember the excitement of going from being taught in a classroom to going to the library to study, and being able to browse and look at different books on the subject I was studying. To my mind, if you have a set of class books that is the only one the school can afford, or the only one they feel inclined to buy, that is all going to go. I do very much back the Society of Authors campaign to have the emphasis on retaining libraries in schools; that is where you have the centre of diversity in the material you have to place in front of the students.

Q467 Neil Carmichael: Jacob, would you like to come in?

Jacob Pienaar: Back in the '80s I was the textbook writer of a series, which was probably the most idealistic thing I have ever done in my life: it was meant to change the world. I fundamentally believe that we as publishers have that role. We have an absolute obligation to have depth and breadth in what we do. If it does not happen on occasion, it is certainly our responsibility to do something about it, because I think it is the right thing to do.

We have to remember, though, that what you put in your learning resources does not guarantee that is the way it will be taught. If at the end of the day a teacher does feel pressurised by maybe the system of accountability, or they are really nervous about the attainment of their learners, it might be that they choose to teach in a narrow way, and that would be sad and wrong. That is where our role is to try to enrich, which means to help teachers ultimately go beyond that narrow “teaching to the test” thing, which we are all worried about and we are all critical of when it happens.

Q468 Neil Carmichael: So you hope teachers will push out the boundaries, despite—

Jacob Pienaar: Absolutely, but when you look at the breadth of publishing in our industry, it is fair to say that there is some absolutely fantastic publishing, but if the temptation is there to narrow anything, whether it is in teaching or the production of learning resources, we should guard against that heavily, and we do have a responsibility in that as well.

Paul Howarth: We recognise that teachers very much teach to attain a position on the league table; they want to pass exams and make sure that their school goes up—or at least maintains if not goes up—on the league table. The pressure, and how we worked with AQA when we worked as their publisher, was to ensure that the text was written in such a way, and the ensuing exam questions were separate from the textbook, that there was not a link there. The rationale behind the exclusive endorsement that we had was to ensure that the smaller subjects were published for, which would not be profitable from a publishers’ perspective, and would probably drop off a school’s curricula because there just would not be this selection available. From our perspective, that is why exclusivity worked at that time.

The market has matured and moved on and away from that now, but we need to be very well aware that what is written in a core textbook does not ultimately go to answer the exam questions at the end. What is very nice is the fact that teacher communities are set up and there is a lot of free-to-air resource, which gives the extracurricular learning that was perhaps missing in some of the core texts.

Kate Harris: I agree with a lot of what has been said. The key thing one wants is a rich and diverse set of resources for teachers to choose from, so that they can choose the best resources for the particular children they are teaching. Some of the current relationships between awarding bodies and publishers do not mitigate for that because it does tend to have this quasi-official textbook. To perhaps put it another way, there is competition at the examination level—that is absolutely true—and then there is competition at the publisher level, where there are a number of people. Where that gets skewed is where the relationship between the awarding body and the publisher implies that there is an official textbook. As a parent, I want my children to have the best books for them in school; I do not want their teacher’s choice being skewed by exclusive arrangements, official books, or even semi-official books.

Q469 Pat Glass: If this Committee were to recommend that the relationship between the exam boards and the publishers should be separate and that there should not be endorsed books, you would see that as a good thing?

Kate Harris: What we would like to see is a guarantee of actual and perceived independence between awarding bodies and publishers. At one end of the spectrum, that might look like structural separation, although it would not necessarily deal with these exclusive partnerships. At the other end of the spectrum, it could be voluntary regulation, but the JCQ, the Joint Council for Qualifications, had a voluntary code of practice around this, and it manifestly has not worked.

Paul was saying that when AQA were working with Nelson Thornes that there was not that implicit or even explicit “these are the books that you must use”, but the previous Director General of AQA is quoted on the back cover of the Nelson Thornes AQA arrangement: “Using Nelson Thornes support materials means teachers and students can be absolutely confident that they are learning what we want them to learn and following the course as our examiners intended.” That is credited to the Director General of the awarding body. The voluntary code of practice has been pushed to breaking point. What we want to see is guaranteed actual and perceived independence between those setting and marking exams and defining specifications, and those who are publishing resources for them.
Q470 Neil Carmichael: With that answer, you presumably would not agree with Tim Oates in his assertion that a textbook should really be part of the assessment process, if you like—very tightly bound into it.

Kate Harris: I do not agree with Tim on that. I believe that plurality and choice are really important principles, and independence between publishers and awarding bodies is another really important principle, because not all teachers and learners are the same.

If I could give an example, I was speaking with the head teacher of a very selective boys grammar school—a state school. He was saying that he was doing a particular specification for A-level, and that A-level had, if you like, official endorsed partnership textbooks published alongside it through an exclusive arrangement with a publisher. He and his head of science chose for those boys books that were much deeper and richer, went much further, went way beyond the syllabus, because the young people he was teaching should be aiming for the A, A* grades. He had complaints from parents saying, “My child is being disadvantaged because you are not using the official book.”

I know that is deeply anecdotal, but it goes to illustrate that not all teaching and learning situations are the same. What I want is for there to be choice for teachers in choosing the best resources for the education of the children they are teaching.

Paul Howarth: But in that example there is choice, and he made the choice not to go with the endorsed text.

Kate Harris: He did, but he was under pressure from both the students and the parents not to do that. We do not think we should be skewing choice in that way.

Neil Carmichael: I am going to probe that issue in a moment, but Charlotte wants to chip in.

Q471 Charlotte Leslie: Thank you very much, Neil. You have half answered it, Kate; you said something quite interesting earlier on. You said, “I want what is best for my child, not for them to be constrained by a textbook.” Would you hypothetically—you have half answered it—prefer that your child had a greater in-depth understanding of the subject, yet perhaps more risk of not doing well in the exam because they had not been taught what hoops they were going to have to jump through, or would you prefer that your child had a more solid chance of jumping through the hoops of the exam and coming out with a better grade on their CV? Do you think that the accountability structures are at the heart of this, and even if we make structural changes around endorsement, because of the basic pressures in the system it would evolve back into something quite similar to what we have.

Kate Harris: That is a really good question, and I think my answer of course is “both/and”: I want them to have the best, deepest, richest education that will prepare them for whatever they are going to do afterwards, and I want them to get the good grades too. I think teachers should be able to do that, and the job of publishers is to create resources that help teachers to do both/and, with a situation where choice is not skewed, so there is a plurality of choices and teachers can choose what are going to be the best materials for their particular teaching style and the learning style of the children they are teaching.

Q472 Neil Carmichael: Following on from that question, we know the accountability system exists in schools and parents are using it. Are publishers using it? Are publishers looking at the strength that accountability might bring to focusing the sales of books?

Jacob Pienaar: Publishers will be aware of it, simply because the job of publishers would also be to go out and engage with teachers and hear their needs, and also be aware of parents and learners, because ultimately we have to remember that it is the learners that are the end-users of our products, although they might not be buying them themselves. Publishers will be aware of it, and they would probably, in one way or another, try to reflect the particular need that sits alongside the range of other needs that I think your question has summarised to a certain extent. Our job is to try to combine those two things. In other words, what a really good textbook will do is do both. You can do proper preparation for examinations and you can bring the depth, breadth and richness of the wider curriculum to that textbook. It is not an either/or.

Pat Glass: Ian wants to come in on that.

Q473 Ian Mearns: At a previous panel, I suggested to members of that panel that the relationship between examiners, publishers, authors and individual examiners could be seen as being a tad incestuous—that was the word I used—and a member of the panel said, “No, it is much worse than that.” Amusing, but serious, I think, I have a deep-seated concern about endorsed textbooks narrowing the educational subject knowledge for some pupils. I have a concern, and I am going to ask you outright: are endorsed textbooks in the best interest of exam boards and publishers, rather than the interest of young people and their well-rounded education?

Kate Harris: It is important to distinguish the nature of different sorts of endorsements. Again, at one end of the spectrum, you have the same organisation publishing resources and marking the exam. At the other end of the spectrum, you have generic textbooks of the sort John was describing that are not linked to any particular specification. In between, you have endorsements that say, “This is useful for our specification,” but not that narrow, limiting effect you might not be the interface that we deal with. That is the word I used—and a member of the panel said, “No, it is much worse than that.” Amusing, but serious, I think, I have a deep-seated concern about endorsed textbooks narrowing the educational subject knowledge for some pupils. I have a concern, and I am going to ask you outright: are endorsed textbooks in the best interest of exam boards and publishers, rather than the interest of young people and their well-rounded education?

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At OUP we publish materials in partnership with OCR; for every partnership publishing opportunity for each individual specification they go through a very rigorous tendering process, where publishers come before。“This is what we would do to support education in that area.” A few years ago we lost a tender to one of our competitors, which I was very upset about, obviously, and I said, “Why did we lose it?” The answer from OCR was that the other people
were more convincing about the enrichment they would bring to the publishing they were doing for that subject.

That was really interesting: they were not saying we lost the tender because we were not going to follow the spec, because following the spec is the absolute baseline; it is what you do beyond that. That particular endorsement went to a company that demonstrated to OCR that they were going to bring richness to those specifications—to the teaching for those specifications. We must be a little bit careful; all endorsements are not the same.

Q474 Ian Mearns: But I was taken by your answer to the earlier question, Kate—that what you want is that any child has a well-rounded and full knowledge of a subject, as well as getting the grades. Of course, when it comes to progression, it is the well-rounded subject knowledge that is going to be of more use to them, but they have to get the grades to get into institutions that they want to get into. Sometimes there has to be a dilemma there in terms of what we are producing in terms of the youngsters and their progression through the education system. We have had scientists at the panel telling us that they were concerned with the lack of rigour and inquisitiveness of youngsters coming into their higher educational institutions: their lack of inquisitiveness in terms of how they wanted to study their subject matter. Are we in danger of narrowing down youngsters and just turning out a factory for passing exams?

John Butterworth: Could I come in on that question? The subject I both examine and at the moment write in is critical thinking, which is supposed to do that very thing of broadening and inculcating in the student an ability to think about what they know, as well as just containing the knowledge, but the system tends to narrow even a subject like that down into short-answer questions and very prescriptive mark schemes, and then books that encourage students to learn just what they need to know.

I have a textbook here that says on the back, “Developed with and exclusively endorsed by AQA. This is the only series to provide teachers with complete reassurance that they have everything they need to deliver AQA’s new A-level Critical Thinking.” Although I wrote that book, I am ashamed to see that on the cover, because I do not think that. It borders on trade descriptions, because this book is neither necessary nor sufficient. I would hate to think that any student or teacher really believed it would give them all they needed to deliver the subject.

Q475 Neil Carmichael: Doesn’t that remark on the back of the book reflect the problem, and that is the essential focus of this line of questioning: are the books there to focus on the exam or the enrichment?

Jacob Pienaar: They should be able to do both.

Q476 Tessa Munt: There are a couple of things that I would like to ask. If you publishers all just carried books there to focus on the exam or the enrichment?

Kate Harris: The nightmare scenario for me is a single national exam board with a single endorsed partner or same structural entity publisher.

Q477 Tessa Munt: I am not saying that there should be; I am saying that there should not be, so you do not get the situation where you can have the exam board or publisher teaming up. What you do is to say, “These are accepted experts in their fields of whatever it is; they are writing with expertise.” Then you have a body that says, “We are not tied to anyone; we are just a national exam board. What we want to do is check expertise, knowledge and skill and all the rest of it, so we are going to select from across the board of all of you authors questions that appear in any and all of your books.”

Paul Howarth: I think you will see specialisation. If you look at the three publishers represented here, I would say we have specialisms within certain subjects. Depending on what happens with the outcome of the exam, or the single national awarding body, you might see those specialisations becoming more acute.

Q478 Tessa Munt: Okay, fine. Can I just ask you one other thing very quickly? It strikes me there is a bit of a conflict with reality, in that young people use the internet and we are still sitting here talking about books. It is a slightly old fashioned and rather nice concept, I know. I just wondered how you see things developing into the future. My children are certainly developing into the future. My children are certainly encouraged constantly to search and check on the internet for this, that and the other. I have absolutely no idea of the quality of a lot of what they are accessing. Do you have any comments on why we are still discussing textbooks?

Kate Harris: To be honest, it is a both/and. We are all using—all my colleagues here—textbooks as a shorthand for learning resources. No significant piece of publishing that I, Paul or Jacob did nowadays would not have a digital dimension. That digital dimension might be online, or it might be on disk, depending on where we think the schools are in terms of their technology, but we are using textbooks as shorthand for learning resources.

The point you make about knowing what information children are accessing is very important, and I would argue that the digital resources that Jacob, Paul or I are publishing have the sort of guarantee of quality that just jumping off into the internet will not necessarily have.
What I am advocating is that we continue to have choice, and that choice is not skewed by the relationship between publishers and awarding bodies—to have actual and perceived independence between the awarding bodies and the publishers. But that is not just for textbooks; it is around the digital resources too.

**Jacob Pienaar:** The question highlights an important fact: the richness and diversity of what goes into classrooms and into the lives of students and teachers at the moment should not be underestimated, and therefore we should maybe not overestimate. Of course, we like teachers and schools and learners to use materials that we produce because we think it brings a certain stamp of quality. But you are right: there might be very different perspectives on that.

We should recognise that, but it also highlights the fact that it is a very free market, and there is a lot of free choice out there. Whatever we say here, at the end of the day teachers can use whatever they want: whatever we do or do not publish, they can, for that very reason. There is not a system of quality control, other, interestingly enough, than the endorsements. I am not talking about exclusive arrangements: I absolutely agree we should be very careful of those. But regarding endorsements, there might be a bit of a misunderstanding. Endorsements are also used as a baseline quality check to ensure that, for example, learning resources do in fact match a particular specification. It might not be perfect, but it could make some sort of contribution towards quality control. But in the wider market, any of you can produce learning and teaching materials and sell them to a school, and that is the reality of the matter.

**Q479 Ian Mearns:** There has to be a buyer, though: to have a seller and a buyer relationship, there has to be a buyer. It has to be said that it is easy to say you can sell a book to a school, but there has to be an initiative for them to buy it in the first place.

**Jacob Pienaar:** Absolutely, I agree.

**Tessa Munt:** I would just suggest that, regardless of not having a written endorsement, such as Mr Butterworth referred to, on the back of a book, the visual message in the clarity of the colouring, the design and everything is quite enough to persuade somebody, I am sure, that it is a resource they might be using. Thank you.

**Q480 Ian Mearns:** I am taken by Kate’s nightmare scenario of a single examination board, because we have just been to Singapore, and that is one of the examples that we are being exhorted to look at and follow. They do have a single examination board run entirely by the Government, and it is an interesting thing that we saw there, but I think you can draw your own conclusions.

**Kate Harris:** The nightmare for me is not necessarily the single examination board: it is the single examination board with a single tied-in, exclusively endorsed publisher. Regarding this single examination board, in a way we all publish for Key Stages 1, 2 and 3, and effectively what we have at Key Stages 1, 2 and 3 is a National Curriculum and no exclusive relationships between some part of that National Curriculum and the publishers, and we publish in free competition with each other without choice being skewed in Key Stages 1, 2 and 3. It is workable. I suppose for me, Ian, if you had that single national exam board, the risk is potentially the next step into an exclusive arrangement with creators of resources. If you were to do that, you really would have to guarantee independence between the publishers of resources and the single national exam board, otherwise choices for students and teachers would be ultimately limited.

**Q481 Ian Mearns:** One the lessons I learnt from visiting Singapore is we all have to be careful what we wish for.

Anyway, Jacob in particular: there is a relationship between Pearson and Edexcel in terms of its examination function. Do you think there is a conflict of interest between your examining and publishing functions? Are they too closely integrated?

**Jacob Pienaar:** As I said earlier, it is important to make a distinction between what the awarding body does in the area of specifications, which is linked to the curriculum, and what it does in terms of examinations. I would agree, and therefore in our particular case we have very strict firewalls between the people involved in textbooks and in the actual examinations, because we do agree that the risk is high. It might not help towards that bigger coherence we were talking about and the quote from Tim Oates that was referred to, but we agree that it is important. We make that separation.

**Q482 Ian Mearns:** Do you understand the concern, for instance of a member of the Society of Authors who suggested that “publishers have stifled initiative in their pursuit of materials ‘more or less guaranteed to get pupils through the tests’”?

**Jacob Pienaar:** It goes back to what we were saying about narrowness, yes, and we absolutely understand the fears about narrowness and teaching to the test.

**Q483 Ian Mearns:** Would members of the panel accept that self-regulation has led to these concerns? Has self-regulation been successful, or do we need to re-examine it?

**Kate Harris:** May I come back on some of the things that Jacob was saying about the separation? While I completely accept that there are very strict rules separating the people who are marking and setting the particular exams from the publishing arm of Pearson, nevertheless, in terms of the spec development, there are very close links. For example, a job of head of science, an advertisement from the internet says, is “to lead and manage the science team on business strategy planning and the execution of agreed strategies”—blah, blah blah—“qualifications, resources and new business development”. The specification development bit is very integrated with the publishing. Equally, this is an ad for a book, and it says in the advertisement, “This follows all the units of the specification.” The specification has not even been published, so how can it? Again, it is about those official textbooks; it is about that inside track—if you are advertising a book that follows all the units of
the specification when that specification has not been published, that is limiting choice, because it is the only book that can possibly know those units.

Q484 Ian Mearns: Kate, I could play devil’s advocate and suggest that you are just trying to protect your commercial interest by objecting to what Pearson do.

Kate Harris: Clearly, as you have heard, Ian, what I am looking for is plurality and choice, and the fact that teachers’ choice should not be skewed by exclusive relationships. If in free choice my books were the books chosen by teachers, I would of course be very pleased, Ian: I would be very pleased about that.

Q485 Pat Glass: Can I wind up this first section? Kate has very clearly said a recommendation for one single exam board is not one she would give. What about the rest of you? You said it was a worst-case scenario.

Tessa Munt: To clarify, I was not asking that; I was saying many publishers, one exam board. You said quite clearly your worst nightmare was one exam board, one preferred publisher.

Pat Glass: Specifically, leaving the publishers to one side, I am asking about the one exam board: what is your recommendation around that?

Paul Howarth: When I visit schools, talk to heads of department, deputy heads and head teachers, they like the fact that there is choice with the awarding body market. That is what they make their initial decision on, not the learning materials. That decision is made for 101 different reasons, depending on the school, its location, the subject and their position in the league table, and what ultimately they want to deliver to their students. I think they like the choice, so we should back what teachers and schools want.

Jacob Pienaar: We think it is probably possible to make the current system work, with some improvements, in terms of public confidence, but Pearson has also publicly stated that we believe that nothing is off the table and that we should consider the best possible system with the best possible outcome for learners in the UK.

John Butterworth: I have thought long and hard about this one; I am not really qualified to give a straight answer to it. I have worries that competition results in a gradual and almost inevitable—with the best will in the world—gradual inching down, or holding down, of challenge. But on the other hand, I can see the nightmare scenario aspect of having one exam board, particularly if it tended towards the Singaporean model, where the Ministry decided what should be published and not published in education.

Pat Glass: There are pros and cons in both systems.

John Butterworth: In a way the threat of having a single exam board imposed because of the danger of competition between exam boards is something that should make the exam boards very careful—and Ofqual too—about making sure that there is parity between the same award, the same subject, in different boards.

Q486 Pat Glass: So the current system is not perfect, it is far from perfect, but we need to be very careful about what we wish for.

John Butterworth: I would hate to see it go for the same reason I would hate to see only one publisher.

Tessa Munt: Damian has one last question.

Q487 Damian Hinds: Paul, you mentioned 101 reasons why schools made choice decisions between different exam boards. Can you give us the top five?

Paul Howarth: Gosh. I would probably struggle doing that. We work with a grammar school as a partner in Cheltenham, and they are looking at extension; they are looking at giving their top pupils a truly broad interpretation of the curricula and added learning on top of that. I have been in schools where we try to sell our textbooks and they say, “We cannot buy any resources; we are having to let half our department go.” They will go for cheap resources, they will probably go for the best way of getting as many students to a grade A to C or equivalent that they possibly can to maintain funding or whatever it is it might do. For me, those are the two extremes; that is where choice comes down, and ultimately what I mentioned earlier on is the fact that a lot of schools teach to get the exam. That is a challenge, and we need to be aware of that. I know from a resources perspective as a publisher that we try to cover the whole gamut from a base text that helps people achieve those aims through to extension, and also for those people that are unable to achieve the base aims because they have learning difficulties.

Pat Glass: Thank you very much.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Rod Bristow, President, Pearson UK, on behalf of Edexcel, Mark Dawe, Chief Executive, OCR, and Andrew Hall, Chief Executive Officer, AQA, gave evidence.

Q488 Chair: Good morning gentlemen. Thank you very much for coming today and appearing before the Committee. We have had an interesting time: we had the scandal before Christmas, and you came before us then, so we have had the pleasure of seeing you twice during the one inquiry. Ministers say they are open to radical reform and dissatisfied with the way you have been conducting yourselves. Is that what we need: do we need a radical structural change? Andrew?

Andrew Hall: No, I do not think we do, but we do need to move from where we are. It is impossible to look at what has happened in the past and say things are not perfect. I was quite fascinated to listen to the publishers in the previous session. To some extent I think actions speak louder than words, so if I take it from that perspective, we have changed. When I joined the organisation less than two years ago, I enquired about why we have this relationship,
Looking at it, it was probably the right decision my predecessor made five, six years ago to have that relationship, because there was not a breadth of resources for students. We did not have the internet in the way it is now. It was important to ensure something like the 150 specifications we offered were covered.

Times have moved on. The publishing industry knows, well before this inquiry started, that I made the decision we were not going to do that: we were going to work with all publishers and choose those that were best for each subject. We can have change.

We also need to have change in the way we look to structure some of our qualifications. I have been quite vocal that we need to change the way re-sitting is done in our examinations. We need to look at the structure of A-levels, the weighting in A2: there are a whole lot of changes we need to make. Radical reform is a very dangerous thing to look at, if you look at the change that is going on at the moment. I should probably stop there.

Q489 Chair: Are we spending too much money on qualifications? Is too much of schools’ budgets going on exams, Mark?
Mark Dawe: No, I do not think so; it is about 2.5% of the overall education budget for a quality assurance system that—

Q490 Chair: The massive increase we have seen in expenditure by schools on exams, all the re-sits and the rest of it, is all money well spent?
Mark Dawe: There is more money spent; the students are taking more qualifications and papers, so the budgets have gone up. You might want to look at re-sits and say re-sits are now being taken for GCSEs, and that will make a difference. Going back to your point, I do not think we have a problem. We are still the envy of the world: Singapore look to us for our system and what we do. Singapore celebrates when exam results go up; they do not say, “This is terrible.” But there is clearly public concern about the exam system and what is happening in schools, and that loss of breadth of learning. We need to put a solution in place to sort that. One of the ideas we have already come up with at OCR is the involvement of HE as the custodian of A-levels to ensure that you are getting that breadth and what HE wants. That is a one of a number of ideas we have put forward to resolve these issues.

Q491 Chair: But Singapore, of course, does not have multiple awarding bodies.
Mark Dawe: No, and Singapore is the size of the Isle of Wight with a population half of London and you get arrested if you drop chewing gum on the ground, so there are quite a few differences. We have to be careful about what comparisons we make.

Rod Bristow: This issue of standards and the need for change is key; I think there is need for change. We need to be careful about what we wish for, though, in terms of what that change is, but standards are incredibly important. There is nothing more important than the confidence young people have in what they are learning and what that will lead to: the credibility and integrity of the qualifications, and the reputation for quality that they have in terms of progression. That is why we have launched this consultation paper called Leading on Standards, where we have put out some very specific ideas about things that can be done to put an increased emphasis on standards. It is that focus on standards that is more important than the focus on the systemic issues—the system change.

Q492 Chair: Singapore told us they had not had a shift in the percentage of people getting A grades, for instance: they were pretty consistent over time. They had not seen the alleged dumbing down that we have. Might that not be a systemic issue?
Rod Bristow: There are many complex reasons why grades improve over time. There is no question that teaching and learning, the amount of energy and effort that goes into teaching and learning has improved.

Q493 Chair: But not in Singapore?
Rod Bristow: Well, we need to ask the question about the way the grading gets done. It is possible to mark papers entirely on a norm-referencing basis, where, regardless of what gets achieved, the grades will not improve.

Chair: That is not what they do.
Rod Bristow: But the issue is that we have operated in a system that has focused on comparability and compliance with what the regulator requires. It is absolutely time to focus much more now on what the absolute standard is that we should be aiming for, to work much more closely with higher education and employers, to look more at international comparisons; those are exactly the areas that we are focusing on, and we think that the wider debate should be focusing on: “What are the things we should be doing?” Then we can address the issue of what is the best system within which they should be done.

Q494 Chair: But if one’s analysis is that the system itself is driving the behaviour that one does not want, changing the system might be the obvious solution. Mark brought up the issue of Singapore: Singapore does not have norm-referencing as its central way of allocating marks. It has a single awarding body, and looking at the energy and drive and attention to education they have in Singapore, I find it hard to believe that their standards over the last decade have not risen with just as much energy and improvement as ours have, and yet they have not seen a drop in grades. Why should we not radically restructure the awarding bodies?
Andrew Hall: I am in a slightly different place to Rod on the standards point. It is a word that is capable of meaning two things, certainly: there are grading standards and content standards. In an earlier session when you had the technical people from our awarding body industry, they gave some very good explanations—nothing that I would fundamentally
Andrew Hall: I do not think that dumbing down is down or not? Has there been dumbing Q496 Alex Cunningham: change in content, specification to specification. What I am saying is there has been a Andrew Hall: dumbing down, as the Chairman suggests? of Ofqual did something about that two years ago. That was made clear: “No, we are going to reference back the statistical predictions to the first year of the specification.” That well and truly nails that point, and we have seen evidence of it in the A-level results last year: it was very, very clear. If you then look at the other part, the content standards, there is something where we as an industry—almost as a society—have seen a change in the content of qualifications. Again, I quite publicly said when I came into this industry—and indeed said when Ofqual was being formed, and I was the Accounting Officer in QCA and got into some trouble for saying it—that we needed a greater focus in regulation on content standards, not just on process. There has been change in content over time, and if we can start to really fix it—it goes back to the publishing point as well—we have to really be clear about the richness. I would like to see a change of broader syllabuses—syllabi, I think is the plural—to allow us to sample from a greater thing. There has to be a focus on how we develop content standards for examinations.

Q495 Alex Cunningham: So there has been dumbing down, as the Chairman suggests?
Andrew Hall: What I am saying is there has been a change in content, specification to specification.

Q496 Alex Cunningham: Has there been dumbing down or not?
Andrew Hall: I do not think that dumbing down is necessarily the right term.

Q497 Alex Cunningham: What would you use?
Andrew Hall: I would say there have been changes in contents. If you take computing A-level, which is one I happen to sit on and am awarding, what is examined in computing now is very different from what it was five, 10 years ago. If you take mathematics, certainly when I did my pure mathematics I learnt a lot of proofs, and I could recite them; I would fail miserably now. Mathematics now has more investigation. It is about what the appropriate content is for where we go, and it is changing. We need to think about how we determine the content.

Q498 Alex Cunningham: But if there has been grade creep, as you have described, surely it indicates that people are getting a higher grade for a lower content, lower quality exam paper.
Andrew Hall: The point I was trying to make quite clearly is to accept that, in a short run, you would not see the difference, but over an extended run—for all the reasons that the researchers explained to you last time, and I could happily repeat if you want—when we used statistical predictions, examiners in the past have always given the benefit of doubt. Whether there is a grade on 56 or 57 UMS, it has tended to go one way. When I first came here I kept bar charts for the first year of which ones were up and which were down, and there was a change. Our response to that has to be going back to reference it to a base year so you tackle that issue.

Q499 Alex Cunningham: I get a bit fed up with the achievement of our young people being done down. Are you saying that the grades our young people are getting today should not be as high as they are?
Andrew Hall: No, what I am saying is that the wrong question is to compare the grades now with 20 years ago, because there has been a change.

Q500 Damian Hinds: That is what people do, and they expect to be able to do it: employers expect to be able to do it, and universities expect to be able to do it.
Andrew Hall: No. I would argue that they should look at the grades over a five to six-year run. When I look at my A-level grades, I do not compare them with my children’s.

Q501 Alex Cunningham: So is an A-level awarded six years ago worth the same as one awarded today in the same subject?
Rod Bristow: I would agree with many of the distinguished academics that you have seen recently at this Committee, who said very clearly that it is quite impossible to say what has happened—whether there has been this dumbing down. If you look at it, there is no objective way of measuring that. The thing to focus on—rather than having a long debate about whether it has or whether it has not at a time of curriculum change—is to look at what universities are looking for, to look into what employers are looking for, to look outside, at the international comparisons—to look forward and outside—and to put our attentions into making sure that the standards we have now are fit for purpose and are serving our young people well. I would say that is where we should be focusing our energy now.

Mark Dawe: Changing the exam boards is not solving the problem. Standards are the vital thing; we have to define what standards we want. We have talked about international standards, then standards between boards, subjects and years: you get to a point where you cannot have everything. We have to define that very clearly. It is wrong to condemn students and teachers because they are working hard to understand what the exam system is asking of them and achieving it. I am a big cycling fan. Twenty years ago we got no medals; this year we are getting loads of medals at the world championships. Is that because it has all suddenly got easier, or is it because they have been training harder?

Q502 Chair: We have the effort on that, the PISA tables, which suggest that while we are handing out the medals at home, we are falling down the league tables abroad. Singapore, which has phenomenal energy in its education system and is lifting performance across the board, has not seen a massive change in the number of A grades, for instance. It is slightly frustrating: Rod, you just said the academics are not too sure. With a big increase in the percentage of people doing A-levels, and a massive increase in the number of those of a wider pool, thus on average
a lower quality pool than we had before when it was more of an elite pursuit, and a bigger percentage of them getting A-levels, it is quite obvious that an A grade at A-level has got a lot easier. Trying to deny the obvious truth because it is attacking our kids—it is not—does not get us anywhere if we effectively fail to notice what is the obvious elephant in the room.

**Rod Bristow:** I am not denying it; I am saying we must recognise the issue and the problem. It is true that whilst actual grades awarded have been going up, our performance on international league tables has not. It is true that we hear from universities that young people do not have all the skills and knowledge that they need for the courses they are now doing, and we hear similar things from employers. I am absolutely saying there is a need for us to look at this; there is a need for us to move forward. We do have to take this incredibly seriously, but I am suggesting we really focus on those issues, listen to higher education and employers, look at what is happening in other countries and take specific actions. That is what we are absolutely committed to doing.

**Mark Dawe:** We are worried about Singapore because their young people will take the jobs that our young people deserve. We have to work out what our young people should be learning; it is not even exams, but what the breadth of their learning is, the exams that fit that, and then the progression to university and employment. It goes back to the point that if universities are happy with what happens in the sixth form and beforehand, we should be happy with what is going on in the schools and the exam system that is supporting it.

**Q503 Ian Mearns:** So you believe it should be as in Singapore, with a regulated and centralised system, where their Ministry of Education has an ethos that says, “We want to produce young people who are going to be of benefit to the economy.” That is one of their top straplines.

**Mark Dawe:** Universities have a wide range of benefits they think they are contributing towards: economic, social, there is a range of things. We should listen to the experts in the universities. OCR—I think we have given you a factsheet on this—have 10 subject communities with over 100 university representatives. We are listening to them and understanding what it is they like, because they like a lot in the existing system. We must not forget that we do have a gold standard qualification—maybe we are looking for platinum now or something—and they do like a lot of it, but some bits they say are missing. It is often not the knowledge; it is the skills. That is common across all the subjects. It is not a knowledge issue; it is the critical thinking, the solving, which can be applied to every subject. That is what we are getting feedback on, and that is the sort of thing we are starting to work on: how can we embed it in our qualifications and ensure that the learning embeds it as well?

**Q504 Damian Hinds:** You are competitors, all of you. Mark, what is your elevator pitch on why you are better than the other two?

**Mark Dawe:** My elevator pitch for OCR is that we are a not-for-profit organisation. We are part of a university; we are part of a larger group that operates in 150 countries, which allows us to have a research team of over 60 researchers, so I can put ideas to them and understand what works and what does not work. We are at the core of the education system; we work within the education system, and have done for the last 150 years.

**Q505 Damian Hinds:** Thank you. Rod, why is your maths GCSE so popular?

**Rod Bristow:** Of the different GCSEs, maths is a very interesting subject, because the specifications between the awarding bodies are very similar, given the nature of the subject and the way the subject criteria are laid down. The reason why maths is so popular for Edexcel is because of the amount of support and the reputation for giving really good support to teachers in understanding the specification.

**Q506 Damian Hinds:** Thank you. Andrew, why is your single award English so popular?

**Andrew Hall:** It comes from a lot of history, when AQA many years ago created an anthology to provide lots of the set texts in one go to schools to save them buying lots of books. That became very popular, and that took on strength. That was many, many years ago, and from that, there have been changes. If you look at our share—I am not necessarily proud to say it, but I will here—it has decreased over time as people, particularly from Wales, have come and taken it.

**Q507 Damian Hinds:** I was just coming to that: how do you feel about that?

**Andrew Hall:** Mixed, I think is the truth.

**Q508 Damian Hinds:** Why has it happened? Why has WJEC stolen your lunch?

**Andrew Hall:** I do not think they have stolen our lunch. For me it is important that the students that take an English exam with AQA, or with these other guys, are capable of going on and progressing. When I enquired, having come in, it was quite fascinating; I do not claim the new boy thing at two years, but you do ask some questions when you come. I asked why this happened, and the anecdotal explanation I was given was that there was a time when the Welsh subject had significantly less poetry content in it, and a number of people moved at that time. Whether that is the reason or not, I do not know. That is certainly not the case now, but there was a move then.

**Q509 Damian Hinds:** I was at a JNB school: all my O-levels came on the same certificate. I have no way of knowing if that was common, but my assumption has always been that when I was at school, generally speaking you went to a school that had one exam board. That may be right or it may be wrong, and apparently the DfE records do not go back far enough for us to be able to tell. But we do know that today only one in seven schools use a single exam board for at least four-fifths of their subjects. Why?
Mark Dawe: It is down to teacher choice. You asked already why teachers change. When we talk to them, we are not talking to the principal or the head; it is the heads of department. If the teacher changes, they have a preference for what they want to deliver to the students and how they want to deliver. I was in a college the other day and asking, “Why don’t you do our maths A-level?” Apparently, integration and differentiation are in two different units in our qualification, and he wants to teach them together. I think it was AQA spec that put them together, and that was the choice. There are a lot of matters. Also, some of them have had bad experiences with exam boards, the admin and how we treated them, and they want to change. It is good that they have that opportunity to change and show their dissatisfaction.

Q510 Damian Hinds: Andrew and Rod, in the historical experience of your organisations, has there been a move towards schools taking on more, different exam bodies? The mean number of exam bodies per school is now over three, and as there are only four exam bodies, that is quite a lot. Has there been a change over time?

Rod Bristow: The interesting thing is that if you look at market share over time, it has been reasonably consistent.

Q511 Damian Hinds: But there has been movement between the subjects.

Rod Bristow: There has been movement between the subjects, which tends to happen at a time of curriculum change, when new specifications are issued. Very much for the reasons that Mark was outlining, teachers will then look at those specifications and work out which ones are the most suitable for their style of teaching or how they perceive the needs of their students. One of the things that has changed is that if you were to go back 20 or 30 years, most people would say definitely that different exams from different exam boards were either easier or more difficult, but the standards were not the same. That is not the case today. There is a general acceptance that the standards between the exam boards are very close.

Q512 Damian Hinds: Would it possibly be the case—speculating entirely—that exam boards used to have a suite of exams in which some subjects may have been easier, but that today it is more possible to pick and choose, and for each subject there is an easier exam board?

Andrew Hall: I looked before I came today at some of the churn, which is the word I would use: change in schools and colleges taking subjects with us. If your contention was right, you would see a general direction to it. If I take geography GCSE, for example, for which we awarded the spec for the first time in 2011, 27.6% of the schools taking that with us had not taken geography with us in the previous year.

Q513 Damian Hinds: What was it?

Andrew Hall: 27.6%. So we would say we won; 27.6% of the schools were new. But, to make the point, of the schools we had the year before, 21.3% went to other boards. There was a real significant change.

Q514 Damian Hinds: Where do they end, at the end of this journey?

Andrew Hall: We stayed about 4% up in total, but year on year something like 2% of the schools that take any subject with us, in the course of normal, no specification change, move away, and something like 2% or 3% move in, and there is that natural churn. When I look at the reasons why I believe that is, top of the list is generally dissatisfaction with the quality of marking, or they did not like their results. It is normally a dissatisfaction with us that has caused them to go somewhere else—that is the cause of change. The big change happens on curriculum review. We are just about coming up to a new national curriculum review. There will be change. You asked earlier about time, and my message is we need to be really careful about the rate of change we introduce in the National Curriculum. Beware of officials saying, “We need to get this done very quickly,” as you get poor product.

Q515 Damian Hinds: Mark, your 21st Century Science suite is said to be “proven to help improve grades”. How does that process happen?

Mark Dawe: Again, we worked with the science community to create that qualification. It was incredibly popular, and the resources that went with it were incredibly popular. It raised the number doing science, not just shifting to OCR; it raised the number that went to university doing science.

Q516 Damian Hinds: How does that improve grades? I understood part of that, but not all of it.

Mark Dawe: The universities then took those scientists and were happy with the achievement of those scientists, and they went through, did their degree, and UKCENV is saying the number of students coming out with STEM qualifications now is pretty much meeting demand.

Q517 Damian Hinds: Sorry, that has increased the numbers, rather than improving the grades.

Mark Dawe: Both happened.

Q518 Damian Hinds: What is the process that makes the grades improve? What are the key factors that mean the grades rise? I understood part of what you said: it is more interesting, it is more exciting and the content is more relevant. Is that it, or is there more?

Mark Dawe: The teachers understood how to teach, it gave them a better opportunity, a different approach to science, and that clearly worked for the teachers and the students.

Q519 Damian Hinds: Thank you. Rod, Pearson told us before that commercial pressures create pressure to raise standards rather than to lower them. How do those pressures manifest themselves?

Rod Bristow: There are some specific examples I can give you. For example, last year, we announced that we were launching a new generation of our vocational qualifications in schools, the BTEC. We have
essentially raised the bar: we have introduced external assessment; we have put a huge amount of extra quality control in there; we have integrated numeracy and literacy skills in there, because we had heard from higher education that these were concerns for people progressing into higher education. The reason we did it is because it is incredibly important to us that the BTEC has the reputation that it deserves, that it is seen by higher education, seen by employers, as something that is highly credible.

As a specific example—there are other examples—we have a relationship with the University of York; we have an A-level biology qualification with Salters-Nuffield that we have worked very closely with the university on. It is highly credible, and our competitors have similar schemes, with Cambridge Pre-U and AQA Baccalaureate. There are many examples of innovation around raising standards, recognising that is what young people want and that is what their parents want—they want them to have highly credible qualifications. If we can fulfil that need, then we will be more successful.

Q520 Damian Hinds: Can I just come back to finish on the terms of competition again? Rod, we heard from you on 15 December that the key terms of competition between you and your colleagues here are “price, service and support”. We know this is an oligopolistic, rapidly growing market, so to any student with A-level economics it will not come as a great surprise that you do not seem to compete very much. Why are you not competing? From you on 15 December that the key terms of service and support—in some ways this makes a difference.

Q521 Damian Hinds: We learnt in an earlier session that none of you makes a lot of money out of textbook endorsements, as far as we can make out, but what you have just said would not at all be inconsistent with seeing the textbook market, as it were, as a way—I am not saying this is what you were saying, but it is not inconsistent—of supporting making exams that much more accessible to the candidates taking them.

Rod Bristow: Let me distinguish between the exam and the specification. It is not the exam that is made more accessible: there are incredibly strong firewalls between exams and any other activities. The course, the specification, the curriculum and giving support for teachers to deliver that is the thing that—

Q522 Damian Hinds: But that is internal in your organisation. If I am a head of department I am seeing the two as two sides of the same—

Rod Bristow: But there is a very clear distinction.

Q523 Damian Hinds: Andrew, Mark, do you have anything to add on what service and support mean, other than helping you to improve your grades?

Andrew Hall: I have taken an increasingly clear view that it is more of a negative than a positive impact. I have talked about several things here: quality of marking—the confidence that teachers have in the marking, and bear in mind it is teachers that mark all of the exams. There is also the way that we deal with enquiries about results—those involved in education interests do have a positive outcome on learning. We learnt in an earlier session is that we do not have come out of the earlier session is that we do not have exclusive relationships with any publisher; we encourage as many publishers as possible to support our specifications, and we do it for good reason. The more publishers that support our specifications, the more teachers are going to feel supported—that they have that support when they are out there delivering the specification. These things do line up, and these interests do have a positive outcome on learning.

Q524 Damian Hinds: But forgive me, you would do that for all subjects presumably, and yet you have a markedly different record of success on some subjects: why is that?

Mark Dawe: It is often the story that you make a mistake in the specification. In one subject—it was design and technology—we talked to a lot of teachers, and they said, “We would really like it if it was like this,” and we changed it and made it like that. We managed to still fit it to the criteria, and then they all walked away, because they did not like it. You do make mistakes along those lines, and that is something you have to correct. The big issue is they want the right results, and most teachers are sitting there, ranking their students and saying, “Roughly, this is
the order we think our students should be in." When they do not get that ranking, they get very concerned, because they know those students. It comes down to the breadth of learning in the classroom and then giving the students the right results.

Most complaints I get when I am going around are, "Our biology students were all skewed." But that is one class in an enormous college; the rest they are quite happy with, and sometimes they say, "We will give you another chance," or they put an enquiry in and they get what they believe. Other times they walk away and say, "We are not comfortable with what you are doing; we are going to go to someone else," which is, again, the competition between us that allows them to move if they are dissatisfied with what they think is the quality of our marking.

Andrew Hall: If I can just come back on one point: ideally I would love the quality of service to be the same between each of our subjects. In any organisation that has the number of people we do, we have different strengths and weaknesses. Hand on heart, for transparency, we are better in some parts of our organisation than others. It is something we need to fix, but that is what we are doing. I think the others would be the same.

Q525 Chair: All the prices you charge seem to be about the same. If you were looking at a description of a cartel, it would be a small number of dominant players who, if they ever mistakenly put a price out of line with the others, learn not to, and then they all move as one. You look remarkably like that, from a price point of view. Are there some aggressive price competitors in the qualifications market that I am not aware of who offer a much lower price? A can of beans is a fairly standard product, but the prices for which a can of beans is available vary massively in the marketplace. Qualifications do not seem to vary massively in price.

Mark Dawe: Three years ago when I was a college principal I was interviewed by QCA. I think it was, and I said it was the most outrageous cartel I had ever seen. Now I am sitting on the other side.

Ian Mearns: And it still is.

Mark Dawe: We make a very small margin overall as an organisation, and we do look at prices. In GCSEs we are the cheapest; in A-levels, in the majority of cases we are the cheapest. That is one of the things about being a not for profit, and trying to bring the prices down as low as possible. In the vocation market it is far more competitive, and there are different margins that you claim. But in GCSEs we are also supporting a lot of minority subjects, so even though there may be money made because of volumes in one, there are significant minority areas like classics. I was looking at Classic Civilisation the other day: the entries as a whole would not sustain that GCSE, and there are 10 option papers in there as well, which makes it even more expensive to run, but we feel as an education charity it is our duty to provide that wide range of subjects. There are 2,000 students that benefit from that.

Q526 Chair: Can I pick up on a vocational qualifications issue? The Government has just done a massive cull of the vocational qualifications that count in the performance tables. Rod, just last year—funnily enough around the time that Alison Wolf came out with her report saying that a lot of qualifications were not worth the paper they were written on—you decided to raise standards in your qualifications. Was BTEC part of the problem that the Government and Alison Wolf identified?

Rod Bristow: Alison Wolf included a comment about BTEC in her report and how highly respected the BTEC qualification is. We have a lot of evidence about the economic return you get from that. We also have evidence in higher education of students who have done BTECs and how well they do in higher education. In fact, the thing that surprised me is that there are many, many courses in higher education where BTEC students will do better than students who have A-level. I was surprised, because often the perception is that students who are less able will do vocational qualifications. That is less and less the case. We took action on BTEC well ahead of any Government decisions about what would count for school league tables. We just think it is a really important thing to do.

Q527 Chair: How many of your BTECs were affected by the recently announced Government cull?

Rod Bristow: Virtually all of our BTEC qualifications will have been accredited, effectively: they are now eligible for funding and will count towards league table points. We are, however, going through a process right now for the new generation of BTEC qualifications, which we will launch in 2012, but they will become official from 2013. We are working very hard to make sure that students continue to have access to BTEC in schools.

Q528 Chair: Sorry, just to be clear: you have just said that the vast majority will still count towards the—

Rod Bristow: Yes.

Q529 Chair: So BTECs were not really affected by the—

Rod Bristow: No. That is right.

Q530 Chair: What qualifications were affected, the 3,000, whatever it was, coming down to 120-odd?

Rod Bristow: This is a really interesting point. I doubt that the changes that were made will make a substantial difference to what happens in schools. The kinds of qualifications that were cited in the media at the time—things like fish husbandry or nail technology—were not necessarily the bulk of the vocational qualifications that were being delivered in schools. The qualifications that are there and accredited are the ones that schools were tending to choose in any case.

Q531 Chair: Most of your income comes from vocational qualifications, doesn’t it, Mark?

1 "While now accredited by Ofqual, a formal decision is expected shortly from the Department for Education on what further qualifications will count toward school performance measures from 2013."
Mark Dawe: No, the opposite, and I have a slightly different view. Again, having come from a college, there are a lot of local schools running NVQs in this, that and the other and stacking up league table points. It was not appropriate: NVQs were not designed to be run in schools. In some of our collaborative work, we were doing NVQs at the college for the schools. I do not think that was not appropriate. I think a large amount of what has been taken out were the NVQs. The Cambridge Nationals and the BTECs are the predominant qualifications that are left on the list. There was slight tweaking required to meet the Wolf criteria, but only very slight. They are good substantial qualifications. We have the Cambridge Nationals 14 to 16 focus, and as Rod said, the dominant player in 16 to 19 is the BTEC full-time. I do not think that is right, and that is why we are introducing the Cambridge TEC, to bring in some competition. Again, it is a full-time, good, solid qualification that leads to progression. That is what it is about: it is giving students progression opportunities. Qualifications have no value in themselves; it is what they lead to. Is it a job? Is it progression to university or into further learning? If you can prove that is what they give you, they have some value.

Andrew Hall: If you had asked me 12 months ago I would have said it is not the last change. The much more important change that is being tackled is the equivalences between the qualifications, because they were clearly in my view—and in my organisation’s view—not of kilter. The fact that one of these gentlemen’s qualifications—be it a National or a BTEC—is no longer equivalent to four GCSEs but to one is a major step forward that we are really supportive of. I might stand accused of protecting commercial interests, but no—I will certainly speak out for what is right for students. That equivalence is now in ranking; it is important, going forward, though, that we make sure there is some equivalence in terms of standards within there. The job is not 100% done.

Q532 Chair: What is your view on the equivalence changes, Mark?

Mark Dawe: It was the right thing to do, and the standards are there. It comes back to the one thing we have not really touched on: Ofqual’s core role should be around those standards and comparability. That should be their focus. If they do that properly it gives us all the approval, in a sense, that our qualifications are appropriate, and it gives the public the confidence they are looking for. At the moment we are in this vacuum where we have not got Ofqual being very clear that “yes, we are very comfortable with that”, and doing the work that supports it and having the evidence that supports it and supports the whole system.

Q533 Chair: For the multiple awarding bodies system to work, we need a strong and capable Ofqual?

Mark Dawe: For any awarding body system to work—if you have one awarding body—you need someone to look at that standard. There has been a lot said about comparability between the boards; we can all be very similar, but at too low a level. The standards should be about where we want to pitch the level as well.

Q534 Chair: Just for the record, Rod, do you also agree with Andrew and Mark that the Government’s change on equivalences was appropriate?

Rod Bristow: I do agree. I support those changes, and I also agree with the point about the need for a strong regulator, and also a really collaborative debate about these issues and how we can ensure that we have incentives in the system that will drive up standards.

Q535 Alex Cunningham: You have all acknowledged the need for reform in the exam system, but I detect the view that it should be minimal rather than comprehensive. What evidence do you have that would suggest that fundamental reform is not necessary?

Mark Dawe: My view is that—we touched on this in the last session—it is around the transparency and the narrowing down. The concern seems to be the narrowing down. In some cases that is right: there is not the breadth of teaching going on because there is no targeting of exams. We need a debate about what it is we want in the classroom, and then how we achieve it. For the last 10, 20 years there has been an attempt to create much greater transparency, so the specifications are available to everyone—sample assessment materials, examples of question papers, examples of question answers—and the seminars, because we are trying to give every teacher the opportunity to understand what the exams are asking for. Twenty years ago people became examiners to find out. It was a lot less transparent, and you went into the exam hoping your question came up. Now there is much more of an understanding of what sorts of questions will come up. We need a debate about where we draw that line. That is the most important thing. It may involve some substantial change in how the central criteria are written—I will go back to my point about HE driving a lot of that—and then what that means coming through into the exam papers as well.

Q536 Alex Cunningham: So minimal or comprehensive change, Andrew?

Andrew Hall: You have to be really careful what you look for. My first leadership role in education when I moved out of industry was being asked to step up to sort QCA out. For those that were around when the SATs went wrong in 2008—which was, interestingly, a single awarding body model; I would draw attention to that—I found some things there when I was doing that that would make me steer very closely away from a single awarding body model. The risk it concentrates in one place, the ability to respond to change, and the complacency it can create is very dangerous.

Q537 Alex Cunningham: So you do not think it will eliminate some of the issues around standards and comparability.

Andrew Hall: It would tackle in some ways the public perception that we three compete on standards. If there was only one, we could not be competing
because we would not exist. It would help public perception, but it would bring very real system risk. It would put everything very close together, which may or may not be a good thing; that is a matter for debate. If you look at some of the other models that have been suggested—the franchising, one awarding body, one subject—that intuitively is more attractive than one awarding body, and you might again say “protecting interests,” but it is not that. It has less risk to it, but it still has some risk.

Again, I go back just to give examples of “be careful what we get”. When I was sorting out that National Curriculum test issue, I turned to my good friend here to help me redo it, as it happens, because Edexcel ran in. The reason that national awarding body got in a mess was because it wanted to change contractor for delivering at the end of the contract. There was no viable competition available because people had moved in different ways. The change was made, and then it cost an absolute fortune to put it right.

At the same time, you were not driving innovation and change. There is a menu here from which we can choose what we want. There is some real innovation that the competition drives: we have taken a view as an organisation that we really think there is a lot we can do with mathematics, so we have delivered some stuff to sit alongside A-levels to help students who want to study maths post-16. That would not come in a franchised environment.

The train example is almost where you get to: you get to the lowest cost service delivery for a tender and a massive infrastructure to decide how you create that—it is almost like QCA will come again, if we are not careful. There are real risks in either of those. The safest thing for delivering the most secure improvements for our students is to really tackle the content standards, which is where I started.

Q538 Alex Cunningham: You would agree that the idea to concentrate the best examiner expertise, particularly in shortage subjects, would work well within a franchise system?

Andrew Hall: I have a really different view on concentration of examiners. There is a real challenge that the country faces with the ageing nature of the examining population, because of the structure we created. What we need to be doing is finding a way to redefine the role of an examiner.

If you look at it now, it is like a pyramid: you have a chair of examiners, chief examiners, principal examiners, moderators. The burdens we put on those people to achieve what Mark talks about—bringing people out of HE and getting them involved—mean we need to redesign the roles of those examiners to make it possible for good teachers out of schools who have best current practice to give some of their time and come and be an examiner, and for university lecturers to give some of their time. If we concentrate the expertise into a few with a full-time job, there will be no progression. That modernisation is really important. I would say go the other way.

Q539 Alex Cunningham: Rod, would a stronger Ofqual be preferable to reform of the system? Assuming that is the case, in which ways?

Rod Bristow: To answer the question you asked my colleagues as well—is it minimal or comprehensive?—it is significant and we should be looking to embrace significant change. We should really take this head-on. It has to be the right change, of course; I will come to that. We have put together a paper that we have called Leading on Standards. We have contributed six ideas to the debate—some things we think should be looked at. I am sure there are others as well. For example, we have suggested setting up an independent standards board. We will do this ourselves; it could be done across the piece, but the remit of that board would be specifically to be looking at the future and looking internationally at whether we have the absolute standard right, rather than constantly looking just at things like comparability. The independent standards board is one idea.

Q540 Chair: Because you do not trust Ofqual.

Rod Bristow: It is not about not trusting Ofqual; Ofqual do a very good job on the issue of comparability. They will do a better and better job at that. There are probably other things that Ofqual could do and we could work with Ofqual on.

Q541 Alex Cunningham: What? What could they do?

Rod Bristow: For example, this issue around examiners: there are sensitivities with examiners. Examiners are excellent people: they are teachers, they bring real expertise, but I think with all the intensity of focus that there is on the system, the pressures on the system, and as we saw from the Daily Telegraph investigation, sometimes our examiners can be put into very difficult positions and some of the frailties there are exposed. Is there a way that we can collaborate together with Ofqual among the awarding bodies to make sure that we have some much more robust ways of working with examiners? Should we be looking to give examiners professional status? We have had some conversations with the Chartered Institute of Educational Assessors about that. I have written to my colleagues; I have had a conversation with Glenys Stacey about getting a discussion going about some of these issues that are really important.

Mark Dawe: We have had a standards board for 10 years, and we have had an Assessment Governors Board for 10 years doing what I have described. It is good to hear they are doing that as well now. As Cambridge Assessment, we raised the issue of standards two years ago in a debate, which was then followed by Ofqual as well. As I said, we have 60 researchers working on assessment and qualifications. That is their focus. I will pick one idea that Rod has put forward: the golden question. That was something I floated with our researchers a while back, and I have a big paper about why it will not work. I am happy to share that with you. You have to look at these ideas, but you also then have to challenge them and look at the evidence behind it.

Q542 Alex Cunningham: What needs to change, though, Mark? What needs to change? That is what I
am interested in. We are all giving plenty of anecdotal evidence, but what needs to change?

**Mark Dawe:** One thing that needs to change is we need to understand what we want happening in the classrooms day to day. That is what we want to achieve. It has nothing to do with the examination systems to start with; it is the breadth of learning in the classroom that is the concern. Then we need to make sure that the exam system supports that, and a lot of that at the moment is driven by detailed criteria that have been set by central Government quangos. We have the opportunity to break that now; as I said, using HE or something else, we have the opportunity to break it. That is what needs to change: define what you want in the classroom and then how the exam system could support that.

**Q543 Alex Cunningham:** National subject committees as suggested by SCORE, the Wellcome Trust and Cambridge Assessment would contribute to that. Would that be a good idea?

**Mark Dawe:** National subject committees are a good idea. It is important, and we believe that is our business. We have always consulted with people; we create subject committees as well, because it is important to have a range of options, again going back to what the teachers might want and then choose from, with someone driving it.

**Q544 Alex Cunningham:** But could a national direction from a national committee be—

**Mark Dawe:** The problem is we have had that in the past and we ended up with what were the QCDA criteria, which caused a lot of the problems we are suffering today.

**Andrew Hall:** At the risk of competing with Mark for who has had a standards board for longer, AQA has also had one and it has a research committee to dream for, because it has most of the national experts on assessment, and people from places like America, Sweden, Netherlands—not Singapore, but we will come to that.

I did a jig the other day; I am not prone to excitement about these things, but Ofqual have created a standards advisory board for their organisation, and if people have the misfortune to hear me talk in the press or publicly, they will know that a greater focus in Ofqual on standards is a really important thing. The fact that they are now taking that is really important. Interestingly enough our research committee is going to be decimated, but hey-ho, that is for the national good if people go there. It is a far better solution than awarding bodies setting up some sort of dialogue, because it will have greater public confidence and it will bring in broader stakeholders.

Ofqual is, in fairness, on a journey: the role of accounting officer in Government will be understood here. When Ofqual was formed I was Accounting Officer for QCA. I had to ask whether it had sufficient capacity. My answer at that time was that it did not have enough to tackle the standards issue. I have been encouraged to see the new regime of Ofqual focusing more and more on standards. It is on a journey, and that is a really important way that we will be truly regulated in that area, in a way that perhaps there has not been that technical understanding before. That is meant to be helpful.

**Q545 Alex Cunningham:** Has the current system really delivered innovation, though, that supports high quality teaching and learning? Why have some parts of the system—such as question paper setting—been relatively untouched when it comes to innovation?

**Mark Dawe:** The innovation is there, and it is happening. There are three areas of innovation that I can think of: one is the curriculum innovation. When we talked about science, we developed MEI Maths working with organisations to come up with something new and innovative. There is the IT side—the technology supporting the examining process—and enormous innovation there and enormous expense, particularly around electronic marking and the control it gives you over the standards of marking live time. We are investing tens of millions at the moment on systems around question paper production, and it is part of our discussion with Ofqual. These are the things we have done in the short time to try to prevent errors, and this is what is happening in the medium term. It takes time to put these things in place, and it takes an enormous amount of money.

**Q546 Alex Cunningham:** So you like it as it is, or there is still a long way to go?

**Mark Dawe:** There is still a lot of investment to go.

**Q547 Alex Cunningham:** You said investment; I said “a long way to go”.

**Mark Dawe:** The “way” takes money, and so the money that we have available, we will continue to invest in those improvements. It is a top priority for us to get that into place.

**Q548 Alex Cunningham:** If online standardisation makes for “more rigorous, proven standardisation”, as Andrew Hall suggests, then why are examiners not more enthusiastic about it?

**Andrew Hall:** I would suggest that some of them are less enthusiastic about it because it calls them to account. There is the good and the bad in this, and it is a more robust way of challenging and making sure progress is there. Something that gets lost in the process, and one of the things we have been considering, is the social side of a group of people who are interested in a subject being together to discuss the subject. That is something that has been lost through online standardisation. Recognising that and creating the communities to bring those people together—not for the purpose of standardisation, but to have their subject dialogue for their own professional development—is good. But it is that loss: that it is more challenging and demanding, but it is more accurate. The research evidence is absolutely clear that this makes for better quality of marking, which therefore makes for better assessments for our students, and the students getting the right results on the right day should be absolutely at the top of that.

**Q549 Alex Cunningham:** Your colleagues are nodding, so I will not ask them to address that.
question. If evidence suggests that the quality and reliability of marking has improved, why is that not reflected in increased confidence amongst teachers and the wider public?

Andrew Hall: I would argue it is because people now pay far more attention to the outcomes. It was always high stakes, but by golly, it has got more and more high stakes for schools and for students. There is more challenge, and we are more transparent. Students can now get access to their scripts so teachers review them in a way that never happened before. It is not perfect; the statistics say it is not perfect, which is why you have heard me talk about quality of marking, and those that are incorrect become more apparent and people remember the bad and not the good, and they should, and they should challenge us on that.

Matt Power: The qualification crisis we have been talking about, because it catches things we might have missed, but at the end of the day only 0.1% of grades are changed because of an enquiry.

Q550 Alex Cunningham: Finally from me, have developments such as online marking and standardisation increased or decreased the reliability of marking? If evidence suggests that the quality and reliability of marking has improved, why is that not shown that we can do that.

Rod Bristow: Yes, we have invested in those changes, which have improved our ability to invest. Certainly, in our case we invest very significantly in education.

It is important that we invest in efficiencies that do not just improve the availability of funding to reinvest but also improve quality. With technology, we have shown that we can do that.

Q551 Chair: Could you give us briefly your reflections on the accountability system, which is an abiding concern of this Committee? The obvious one for secondary schools is the five good GCSEs, and we had the Secretary of State here a couple of weeks ago. You provided the qualifications: do we need a more balanced scorecard and what do you think it could look like?

Rod Bristow: I would say that we do. It is another thing we included in our Leading on Standards paper.

We must not forget that qualifications are very high value, high currency. We should not be deceived into thinking that all these additional pressures coming into are all the fault of the school accountability system. Having said that, regarding a single measure of accountability—in effect, there is a single measure of accountability—if you look at the OECD studies of the most successful education systems, you will see that the most successful systems do tend to have a more rounded view of school accountability. In particular, thinking about progression: what are these qualifications? What is happening to young people when they have gone through their education? What do we know about that? In fact, if you look at the way that school accountability is approached in the independent sector, they take great pride in providing that more rounded view of education. That is something we should really embrace for all children in this country.

Andrew Hall: It is stating the obvious that any measure will have intended and unintended consequences. The idea of having no accountability would be abhorrent to me. What I have been really attracted to is not just the measure of five good GCSEs but the value added measure that alongside provides really meaningful data for people. How that gets prominence, time will tell, but we are going to have to have a measure, and it is about what you have alongside it to counterbalance it. In the end you have to reflect on the pressure it creates on the teaching community. Sometimes you can say, “We deliver the exams; some of the behaviours, are they ours, or are they people under pressure?” There is something about just how intense the pressure has been.

I went to Singapore about a year ago, ostensibly to look at how they use electronic assessment, but in the end I spent three days on a Singapore teacher training course, looking at how they develop formative assessment skills in teachers. The real investment in that teacher development in formative assessment as a tool for our teachers would help some of the pressures that the accountability measures create. It would ease the pressure—just a thought.

Mark Dawe: As a parent, I would worry if my child’s school was not getting five A* to C for their students. So as a baseline number we need about 50% A* to Cs. We worry about the other 50% who have not got five A*s to C. In a way we should be focusing on them, not the ones that are achieving it. A breadth of measurement always helps, because then you are looking at a number of things. But in English and maths, there is a fundamental problem that we need to sort out, particularly with maths. We have in our maths council and maths forums some ideas about broadening the time in schools, maybe, with two maths GCSEs rather than one, similar to English language and lit. That might be a way of doing it. It goes back to the education again, and what we are looking for.

But the other thing I worry about is the way we award at the moment and the rules we have to follow: we are never going to reach 80%, 90% getting English and maths A* to C like Singapore because our awarding system does not allow it, because we are fixing a curve each year predicted on the students’ ability. That restricts us. It does not matter how brilliant the teaching is for five years. At the moment, our system drives us to a set of A*s to Cs. We will not reach that; there are a number of issues there.

Rod Bristow: We recently carried out a survey of parents, asking them what they looked for in schools. It was quite interesting: the five A to C league table came out about number three. They are much more interested in, “Is this going to be the right school for my child? Will they be able to deal with issues that my children have and provide my children with the education that they need and that is relevant to them?” It is to do with things like quality of teaching, as you would expect. There are grounds for having another look at the accountability system to see what other measures could be included.

Q552 Chair: Do you have people with expertise to help in this regard? We are chewing away on this particular issue; we are quite clear that the current accountability system is perverse and has perverse outcomes and needs to be changed and made more
balanced. We are struggling to get a great deal of expert input into what a more balanced accountability system would look like that we could recommend to Ministers.

**Andrew Hall:** I am sure Mark and I could have a competition as to who has the most, but between us— I am sure that Pearson have the capability as well— we have these people that we develop over time. That is why we have our international research committees. That is why we have our standards committees that we have had 10, 15 years.

**Rod Bristow:** We would love to help.

**Damian Hinds:** If invited.

**Chair:** If you could jointly or separately present us with a beautifully gift-wrapped solution, we would be inordinately grateful.

**Q553 Charlotte Leslie:** I just want to ask a quick question on something to do with data before I return to the public’s perception of and faith in the system. It is just a simple question: do you collect, and could the Committee see, data on what percentage and number of children on free school meals take your qualifications?

**Andrew Hall:** I honestly do not know the answer to that. I will find out and write to you.

**Charlotte Leslie:** If each of you were able to submit that to the Committee, it would be fantastic. Thank you very much.

**Rod Bristow:** I think we will all do that, yes.

**Q554 Charlotte Leslie:** Returning to faith in the system, I am afraid I am going to play devil’s advocate here in talking about conflicts of interest, which I think is one of the things that hits the headlines and the public are concerned about. In one of the submissions to the Select Committee, a situation was described—and this is a situation described in evidence, so I would be very interested to hear your response to—it where Edexcel apparently blocked an endorsed publisher from attending a series of events where Edexcel presented an Edexcel-owned textbook by an individual who was alleged or said to be both a Pearson author, so producing materials, and also a chair of examiners for a subject, paid to develop the exams. Apparently, there was no other mention of endorsed textbooks, although an endorsed publisher had wanted to go to this event and was blocked. It was said that the individual’s textbook would be sent out with a specification and, from the evidence we have, the endorsed publisher thought there was no point in turning up to any more of these things. It feeds into this concept of conflict of interest, so I wonder just how you would respond to that.

**Rod Bristow:** I understand that. Just on that specific incident, I do recall hearing about it at the time. There was a mix-up and there were probably slightly two sides to the story as to what happened. I spoke to the chief executive of the company who made that submission and I just said at the time, “This is not our policy. This is a mix-up. If ever you hear about anything like this ever happening again, please let me know.” It is not in our interests to discourage other publishers from producing resources that schools require for qualifications, and we have very clear policies on this. In fact, if you look on our website you will see that we promote the textbooks from other organisations and we have very clear policies about making sure that we have complete even-handedness, including in the way the textbooks are endorsed. We make sure the process that is gone through applies equally to textbooks that come from other organisations as well as the ones that we produce. So we have very clear policies in place.

We also have very strong conflict of interest policies and firewalls to make sure that there is no chance of any knowledge of what is in an exam paper getting out to somebody who has a relationship with a school or a centre. There is no chance of anything that is going on in any publishing activity leaking back or influencing what is in the question papers. In addition to that, we introduced last year a new code of conduct for our examiners, whereby we said to them, “We no longer want you to be the main authors on textbooks,” because we feel—this is not just an issue for us—it is putting examiners in quite a difficult position.

We also last year made a change where we required our examiners to no longer be directly involved in the training of students for the same reason: that it was putting them into quite a difficult position. I think we can go further, and I think maybe if we do there is a way that we can do that collaboratively across the industry.

**Q555 Charlotte Leslie:** This is a question for all three of you: given the potential for certain biases in the system due to the financial incentive, with the best will in the world, do you think there is an argument to be made that the JCQ should be stronger and that self-regulation perhaps is not enough?

**Mark Dawe:** I am the chair of the JCQ and it is a membership organisation. We do a lot of work to have our code of practice and everything else, but it is a membership organisation of the awarding bodies. So I think it goes back to the role of the JCQ to try to find things that help all the schools to have common practice and the role of Ofqual as a regulator. I think we have to divide that very clearly.

On the textbook, I think this is the area where we are going to differ, and I do not support some of the things that go on in the market: you heard from OUP of a number of practices. There is advertising at the moment offering “come to our qualification and get our textbook half price as well”. Personally, I do not think that is appropriate. We work, as OUP said, with a whole range of publishers. We tendered out every subject, or sometimes bundles, again to make sure that the minority subjects got support. We make no money from those publishers and anyone can come along and say, “I have something that we would like to help support your students.” We take a look at it and say, “Yes, that would support the students,” and that is when it gets the OCR badge. It is saying, “Yes, we have had a look at it and it seems to meet what the students would need.” We are very comfortable with that process and think it is the way things should work.
Andrew Hall: I made clear at the beginning that is where I have certainly taken our organisation.

Rod Bristow: On that specific point, we do exactly the same thing. We make sure that no textbooks, including our own, will receive an Edexcel endorsement unless they have been through a very rigorous process. We are very even-handed about that and we are completely non-exclusive in the way that we have publishing relationships. Indeed, we publish for other awarding bodies as well.

Q556 Charlotte Leslie: From the concerns that exist, do you think that if the JCQ is not the body, perhaps, to do it, Ofqual needs some more teeth or more focus in that respect?

Mark Dawe: I think Ofqual has the teeth; it is about focusing their work on the results, and I think you heard from the researchers the other week that that focus and expertise is not all in there at the moment. I go back to the point that standards and comparison should be their focus and then everything else falls out of that.

Andrew Hall: Agreed.

Rod Bristow: Yes, but I think we should be open to a discussion with Ofqual about this and welcome Ofqual’s involvement, and I think Ofqual is looking at this issue.

Q557 Ian Mearns: Mark, you mentioned a code of conduct; is that available? Can we have a look at it?

Mark Dawe: Yes, it is on the website.

Q558 Charlotte Leslie: Going back to perception, it is the old “dumbing down” argument. In a simple sentence, do you think kids are getting brighter or better at passing exams, given the external things that are not changing, like PISA and feedback from universities and employers?

Rod Bristow: I would say they are getting better taught. I think the evidence is that if you really concentrate on practising doing exams you will get better at passing them, so I think there is a degree of that, and that is one of the things we need to look at.

Andrew Hall: I think they are becoming more skilled at taking exams. There is a focus on that. There is better preparation than there ever was, certainly in my day. I think there is also a greater understanding of the importance of them across the whole of society. I think that is a change, and the teaching is improving.

Mark Dawe: I support what was said and I go back to my point about transparency. In the past, a select few had the inside track and understood what was necessary, and now we all strive to make sure that everyone has that opportunity and not just the select few.

Q559 Charlotte Leslie: Just briefly to go back to data again, can I ask what data each of you share with Ofqual about grading and whether it is publicly available and, if not, whether the Committee could see it?

Andrew Hall: For every exam series, we share the outcomes for our results, and we share them with each other, not just with Ofqual. There is a degree of peer challenge, it would be fair to say, on occasions—of understanding why. We work to a certain degree of tolerances, and if a particular award is outside that tolerance, if the grades have gone up or down by too much, we have to be able to justify that; it is shared. We certainly provide that data to Ofqual regularly and also, after the series, our technical people between Pearson, OCR and AQA carry out some statistical analysis, and I know we have shared that with Ofqual. Speaking personally, I would be very happy for that to be shared with the Committee.

Mark Dawe: A key role of JCQ, I would say, is the technical stuff, and the technicians work very independently from us, so there is no fear of using the data in an inappropriate way. They use it to look at the data pre and post the awarding series.

Q560 Damian Hinds: Why do you share that data with each other?

Andrew Hall: It is part of the maintenance of standards— to be sure. I do not want to repeat the long lecture or the information you were given by the technical people, but one of the ways of making sure that the grading standards are maintained is to use the board, and the expertise to look at the challenge rests within the board. As I said earlier, Ofqual is getting more and more capability in that area, which is to be encouraged, but I think it is something that has been helpful to be sure that the boards were each confident in the other.

Mark Dawe: We have done a factsheet for you, which I think you have received. Factsheet number two explains the maintaining of standards and that explains the sharing of the data and how the data are used.

Q561 Chair: Mark, you said that you were ensuring that the information about how best to tackle the examinations was shared with everybody and not just the select few, but the gap between the select few, namely those in selective state schools and the independent sector, and those at comprehensive schools is widening. It does not paint such a benign picture when you look at the actual data for A Level results, for instance.

Mark Dawe: As an educationalist, I would go back to the point that was made in the earlier session that a broad education covering the whole topic area and not focused down normally guarantees the best results. That is what we need to ensure happens in all our schools.

Q562 Ian Mearns: Can I just quickly go back to the code of conduct? Is that your own within your own organisation or is it shared across?

Mark Dawe: There are shared codes and then, obviously, each organisation has their own codes and policies as well, often drawing on those shared codes.

Q563 Ian Mearns: I think we are trying to tease this out; there is widespread concern and disquiet about the relationship between examiners, authorship, publishing and the examination process itself. But the way that you have described it, Rod, in terms of the firewalls that exist, sounds much more like a virtuous circle than a conflict of interest. How are we going to...
get over the widespread concern about these relationships?

Rod Bristow: I think it is doing the sorts of things I was talking about, but I think we should be considering going further than that. It is important that if we do that, we do it collectively. I would say, because otherwise there will be imbalances, potentially, between the awarding bodies in terms of how examiners are dealt with or how we work with examiners, and that could be a problem. That is the reason I said I wrote to my colleagues but I have also raised this directly with Glenys Stacey, because I think it is an area that we should discuss and I think we can make more progress in this area.

Q564 Ian Mearns: Kate earlier on gave us some examples of endorsements on the back of textbooks and examination course preparation papers. We really have to get over that, haven’t we?

Mark Dawe: Between 75% and 80% of our examiners are existing teachers; 20%-odd are retired teachers. They are part of the system. We are all part of this education system and it is a shared issue for all of us to deal with. It goes back to a point that I think was made earlier. We need schools to say examining is important and we will support it. We are looking at providing examiner training, maybe using the teaching schools network as a way of encouraging people to look at examining, because it is not only external examining. They can take some of that back into the classroom in terms of assessment and what they have learnt about what good assessment is. So I think we have to raise this for the whole system, but I will emphasise the point: examiners are not our employees; they are the teachers. There are certain areas where I think we have all sat back, given what was in the Telegraph and other things, and said this whole system has relied on trust and, generally, they are very trustworthy people. But if that trust is evaporating, we have to put certain barriers in place, and it may be that we are reaching the point where anyone who has seen a question relating to the future cannot be involved in seminars or books, because they have that question in their head. We have trusted people, and whenever there has been a problem—and out of 13,000 examiners, you will get one or two—we have dealt with it rapidly, removed that examiner, so it is dealt with. But if the sacrifice we have to make is to put some of those things in place to regain the public’s trust, that is what we are going to have to do.

Q565 Ian Mearns: That level of trust you have talked about seems to have evaporated to a large extent, and therefore something does need to be addressed. In previous sessions with examiners themselves, they have talked to us about the training courses that teachers can go on run by the exam people, where 200 teachers at a time go through a process leading up to the exam. Is it correct to say that textbook endorsements and training courses are not significant income streams in their own right, but that you have to offer them to have a competitive offering in the exams system itself?

Andrew Hall: Can I talk about textbooks on that? Having looked at this for some while, I know what my real concern is. Rod’s organisation publish some perfectly good textbooks, some very good textbooks—

Rod Bristow: Thank you.

Andrew Hall:—that cover specifications we offer. Anybody can publish a textbook, and we have been talking to the teachers in schools over an extended period saying, “What do you actually want? What comfort do you want?” What they want to be sure of, if they are going to use a particular textbook—and I value choice, because different styles suit different teachers and suit different schools—is that they know that if they study the syllabus as outlined in this particular book, it is sufficient to cover the syllabus. The worry is if we do not, as OCR do and the way we are now wanting to go, provide that level of comfort to teachers—that we, as an organisation, have looked at this particular textbook and we are satisfied that it is fit for purpose—we leave particularly the newer, less experienced teachers exposed. That is a clear message we have had back. The more senior, experienced teachers will use generic textbooks. They might use an OCR textbook to study an Edexcel exam, because they have that level of confidence. So it is finding a way to protect that.

Some of the things printed on the back of the books make you just want to find a hole, crawl in and die, because they are horrible, and we do need to stop that.

Mark Dawe: With seminars, it feels strange that as an education and training community we are saying we are not going to educate and train our teachers. There should be support. My original job was an accountant, and when I joined a college I was trained in how to apply my accountancy skills to a college environment. Our training is about taking teachers and their broad teaching skills and explaining how the qualification relates to their teaching, and we get issues, even with the seminars, if there is someone who has taught the wrong book. We have spelling, punctuation and grammar coming in, terminal assessment in GCSEs. Are we saying we just leave the teachers to find out themselves, read a couple of things on the website and have a go at it, or are we saying we should support those teachers and give them something?

There is another important thing. I sat in an awarding meeting yesterday in English. The principal examiners interact with those teachers, and they are picking up messages about “this does not make sense” or “I do not like this”, and it goes in and that is part of the development of the whole system again, and we should not lose that interaction.

Q566 Ian Mearns: Why would examiners, who are also teachers, express those concerns about the sort of seminars that you have talked about?

Mark Dawe: I do not know. Clearly, the Telegraph identified some inappropriate wording and things that were wrong, but underlying it there was a lot made available. It goes back to a point I was making earlier about the transparency of the system, and if people do not like that, we need a proper debate and to make a decision about where that line is drawn. But it is a system that we are required to follow at the moment, and we do follow and we make it as transparent as we
Mark Dawe: Absolutely, yes.

Q569 Charlotte Leslie: Just quickly going back to the JCQ, given the roles and responsibilities and remit that it holds, do you think it is suitably accountable to the public? If you could just briefly—probably this is mostly directed at Mark—describe some of the activities, roles and remit of the JCQ, that would be very helpful.

Mark Dawe: The main function of the JCQ is to ensure that there is consistent practice across us all when it comes to general qualifications examining and that we follow a common timetable, and we make it as easy as possible for schools to run their exams in an operational sense, so we have some coherence between us so that they are not having to look at four or five different ways exam boards work. Then there is the technical work we have already talked about, ensuring that there is proper sharing of data so we can ensure across the boards that standards are maintained. I would say those are the two main functions.

If there is a common issue that has come up, we will look at it, but we are also very, very aware that we do not want to be seen as acting as a cartel. So there are certain things at the meeting where the chair will say, "No, we are not going to discuss this, because it is inappropriate."

Q570 Damian Hinds: Do you have lawyers present when you have a meeting of the JCQ as an American organisation would?
specialist team, because they are very challenging areas.

Q573 Damian Hinds: I think we understand from the JCQ letter—I am looking around me for confirmation—that decision had been devolved to individual examination centres. Again, there could be perfectly good reasons—I am not doubting that for a moment—but that in itself is a matter potentially of public interest, so even if that decision has been devolved, to whom is the decision to devolve accountable?

Mark Dawe: It goes back to this common operational system that we all operate and then we all operate in our individual organisations as regulated organisations. If Ofqual turned round and said, “We do not like how this is being done,” then as JCQ we would look at changing the common operation and then us all changing together, rather than one having one system, one having another. So it is just an opportunity where there should be no differences between us—that we can have that common system and all apply it, and if someone thinks it is not right, we, as a group, can look at it and change it without falling into the competitive issues.

Q574 Chair: You all want Ofqual to be stronger, so on that basis I assume you welcomed its power to fine you. You are nodding.

Rod Bristow: Yes.

Mark Dawe: I am not sure it is the best power to have in this market. It is one of many powers and, at the moment, we are all talking to Ofqual about undertakings we are making in relation to the exam areas. That is a power that is asking us, “What are you going to do about it?” and, basically, there is a timetable and things that we will be doing and a lot of money we will be spending. To me, that is what the focus should be and getting us to spend our money on the things that will make a difference. I am just not convinced, especially where it is predominantly not-for-profit organisations, that fining is the answer in this case. They can have the power, but I think some of the others powers are far more appropriate.

Andrew Hall: In my view, it is fine to have the power, but I am not sure it is the most appropriate sanction for everything and it needs to be used carefully, but you may as well put the power there. I go back to the point, and I kind of agree with Mark on this, that getting a real focus and building up the ability and the capability so there are a number of people that can really engage in the standards issues there is important, and there have been real improvements over recent months. The standards board is a major, major step forward, because that is bringing advice in.

Q575 Chair: Ofqual is consulting on how it should use its additional powers. Just to finish off, can you give us a quick summary of how you think Ofqual should behave in order to ensure that you are focused on what is most important and not focused on things that are not?

Mark Dawe: We have said also with the fining there should be a commissioner there, because there is going to be a big debate about what the appropriateness of a fine for a particular issue is. We believe that if they are about regulating awarding bodies, let us make it regulating awarding bodies and not all the qualifications as well. Pick one, but then stick with it, and I go right back to the point that they need to be really robust about the standards, and if they have proper researchers in there and they do the research and say, “We are not happy with this qualification,” then action is taken quickly.

Q576 Chair: Haven’t you just said you do not want them to regulate qualifications? You said they should just regulate you guys and if they do that well enough—

Mark Dawe: But standard of qualifications is slightly different. In terms of regulating qualifications at the moment, we have to meet all these criteria to get a qualification approved and tick all the boxes. Standards are a different thing when reviewing across us and across different qualifications. Are they up to the standards expected and doing something about it if it is not felt they are?

Rod Bristow: I think for the purposes of public confidence in the system, the public would expect that the regulator would have the ability to fine. For that reason, given that public confidence is so important, I think it is right, and we wrote to the Schools Minister saying that at the time. It is important though, of course, that those powers are applied judiciously, appropriately and all of that, and that they apply to the relevant proportion of income of an awarding organisation, but those are the sorts of things we are in conversation with Ofqual about.

Q577 Chair: Moving away from the power to fine to the use of additional powers, how should Ofqual best use them to raise standards rather than become a bureaucratic irritant?

Andrew Hall: It is about where their focus of effort and attention goes. I think Alison Wolf in your earlier session with the technical people suggested that some of the work around economic regulation was of limited value; I am probably paraphrasing it, I suspect. I think it is about making sure that focus is there. To my knowledge, there have been three studies that Ofqual in its various forms has carried out into pricing and how the market works—we touched on that earlier—none of which reached any earth-shattering conclusions. I think it is about where the resource is supplied and it is, therefore, I think, about the content of the qualifications: what do the subject criteria look like, are they complied with, and running comparability studies across the board, because the devil in this is in the detail. It is not in the high level, so it is running really in-depth comparability studies that probably cost about £100,000 to do, but once done provide real evidence about where a standard is. It would enable some of the questions that over 10, 15 years are hard to answer to really be tackled and, taking Rod’s point, to be sure we are in the right place.

Rod Bristow: Glenys Stacey has asked a very good question, which is: what are the incentives that are in the system that drive standards up? I think that is the question that we need to be engaging on and that is where Ofqual could play a role in coming up with
some proposals—and we would support them on this—to see what incentives can be put into the system that would have an impact on standards. So, things like the degree to which the comparability data between awarding organisations show what they should show and, if there are gaps, what would be the consequences of that. There are other ideas like that. 

**Mark Dawe:** It is our job to maintain and raise standards, and it is Ofqual’s job to make sure that is happening.

**Chair:** Gentlemen, thank you very much for giving evidence to us this morning.
Q578 Chair: Good morning, and thank you very much for coming and giving evidence today to our inquiry into awarding bodies. May I begin by asking you to what extent the awarding bodies compete collude or collaborate in the different areas, and in which different areas do these behaviour patterns appear?

Glenys Stacey: Just briefly, Chairman, they compete for market share, most definitely, and they co-operate on standards and they share practice. There is a difference between the two, but there is also a link that you will understand.

Q579 Chair: Thank you very much. What is the most negative aspect of having multiple exam boards at the moment as opposed to having a single awarding body, or a single awarding body for each subject?

Glenys Stacey: Most negative aspect? My perception is that, historically, the sector has been under-regulated or not firmly regulated, and so I have regarded this as turning a ship. If you have four or five players, you have to get all of them to turn, and to turn together in the same direction. That at first sight appeared to be quite a challenge. In fact, I have found it easier than I first thought.

Q580 Chair: To what extent do you feel that Ofqual has to mitigate for the impact of the accountability system?

Glenys Stacey: When we talk about standards, the market and the effect of the market on standards, it is sometimes a temptation for commentators to think that standards are simply a matter for the market and market pressures, whereas when we look at it more closely, as I know you have been doing in recent months, there are other pressures—wider systems pressures. One of those is most definitely accountability mechanisms, and particularly the way that GCSE grades A to C are used to assess the performance of schools and indeed individual teachers. That is something that we very much wish to talk to Government about—all ways in which we can mitigate those pressures. It is not so much an issue between Ofqual and awarding bodies as between Ofqual, Government and those other players in the wider system.

Chair: I am delighted to hear that dialogue is taking place. We will continue to be interested in how a more balanced scorecard can be produced.

Q581 Damian Hinds: In the Chairman’s question about competing, colluding and co-operating, you said that the awarding bodies compete for market share. How?

Glenys Stacey: They compete on the totality of the offering, so, for example, the service levels that they provide and the support that they provide alongside the qualification—and that does include teaching aids and text books, something that you know we have a keen interest in. They will also compete in terms of the actual qualification itself, so, for example, the structure of the qualification and the knowledge content. If you take, say, a history GCSE, then in the current market model you can expect to see a number of different GCSE products that will cover different choices about the period of history one might be studying. They are able to get feedback from schools on what would be preferable, and indeed from others, and build a qualification to meet that.

An example of this is a conversation I had a while ago with Lord Baker, who phoned me about his view that we should have a GCSE history product that majored on the period of the Industrial Revolution, and that this would be a very helpful product, particularly for those who aspire to be apprentices or who are in apprenticeships. I know that he had a fruitful discussion with one of the awarding bodies about producing that product. There is an ability to react to those sorts of stimuli in the system at the moment. Competition occurs around that.

Q582 Damian Hinds: On the different axes of competition—price, operational performance, timeliness of delivery, right-first-time marking, support for the schools and, in the broader sense, for the pupils, in terms of textbooks and so on—which of those is to the fore in how the awarding bodies compete?

Glenys Stacey: I have not mentioned prices yet, and I would like to say something about that. The data and information that we have suggests that GCSEs are coming out at about £27 per GCSE, maybe around £30 for the modular GCSEs. Prices have stayed pretty stable over time, albeit allowing for inflation in recent years. I am aware that this is the list price, if you like. What we need to understand better, with schools and with further education colleges, is what deals are offered, in terms of three for the price of two and so on: what are the actual purchasing deals? I suspect that there is some competition there that is not
immediately transparent. We would certainly like to know more about that.
There is definitely what you would expect in a market, namely some healthy marketing of qualifications, around the support provided for them and around the pleasure, joy and ease of teaching them. Again, you would expect that. I am very aware of those two issues in particular.

Q583 Damian Hinds: So, as things stand—and I realise that Ofqual is a relatively new regulator—you do not know the prevalence of off-invoice discounting?

Glensy Stacey: Not yet.

Q584 Damian Hinds: That is indeed interesting. Still on the terms of competition, I can totally understand why, from the point of view of wanting smoothly operating markets, you would want to see—when I say “you”, I do not mean necessarily just mean Ofqual; I mean “one”—

Glensy Stacey: No, generally.

Damian Hinds: I can understand why you would want to see competition in terms of the operational delivery; it keeps people on their toes, it means that if people do a bad job with accuracy and so on, then they will be found out because they will lose share to somebody else. I can totally understand why we would want masses of competition in terms of textbooks and support materials to help children to realise their full potential. I cannot quite get my head around why we want competition in the setting of exams. Theoretically, you could split those two things: you can perfectly easily have four or five examining bodies doing the operational side of it, but one entity setting the exam, and the exam being the same for everybody. You mentioned the example of GCSE history and how you could have different syllabuses. Back in the old days, there were different syllabuses.

Glensy Stacey: Many more, yes.

Q585 Damian Hinds: What you described was my history O-level, doing from 1870 and so on at A-level, and then doing the Industrial Revolution and Agrarian Revolution before that. That was fairly standard fare. Presumably if it is right for one group of people, I cannot quite understand the argument that you hear quite a lot from different schools: “For my particular cohort of pupils and my particular set of staff, this is right.” I can understand on an individual child basis it might be that one thing is better, more appropriate or more accessible than another. But other than just meaning it is easier or harder, how can it be right for one school but not right for the school next door?

Glensy Stacey: I have something to say about that, but Amanda may chip in with this as well. From my perspective, I can understand that if you are a teacher, you want to be enthused by the specification you are to teach. If we take English as an example: if you do not get enthusiastic about the texts you are to teach, you may wish to move to another provider whose texts you really enjoy so you can enthuse your students with those texts. That is an individual teacher choice. It may not actually relate to the strength or otherwise of the cohort, but of course if you happen to have spoken with the cohort before about the book, or you have been there, done that, you might want a change. So that happens. It is also the case that, as teachers move through different schools, they will want to go with the product that they like and are familiar with and trust, so you get those sorts of changes as well. You asked why you cannot have assessment in one place. Of course, you can cut the model any which way, and you could do that; you could put assessment with one body. I am not sure that the benefits would outweigh the risks.

Q586 Damian Hinds: Sorry to interrupt: that was not what I was hanging out to dry. It was having the setting of the exams and the setting of the syllabuses and the specification in one body. I can understand why you would want to have the actual marking as a competitive activity.

Amanda Spielman: I think what you are getting at here is the essence of the particular curriculum compromise in this country, as compared with others. Where the national curriculum exists, it should ensure that everything that it is considered should be common to what is studied by every pupil is embedded in GCSE specifications. In a sense you are suggesting extending the national curriculum model to have a single agreed model, perhaps through A-levels as well. That is a curriculum policy decision rather than an assessment decision.

Q587 Damian Hinds: Perhaps, English and history are of course the two most obvious subjects to talk about in this regard. You can have a choice of English literature texts within a single syllabus. I hate to keep harking back to when I was at school, but that was what always happened: there was some Shakespeare, and a novel, and some poetry, but you would have a choice between them. If we extend this argument into physics, chemistry or maths, how does it work?

Glensy Stacey: I suspect it is a similar argument, in that if you are looking at how you construct a science specification, there will be a balance to be struck between coursework and other work, between experiment and core knowledge. Individuals will want to choose there. I know that in science in particular, some science teachers very much went for the Salters’ scheme, for example, which was actually a very rich assessment, and an expensive one as well, incidentally, so there was a trade-off between the richness and diversity of the assessment and the cost of the product. The same arguments apply; they might just be most obvious in history and English.

Q588 Damian Hinds: Should the brand of stamp that says, “You have GCSE maths,” mean something different depending on what school you went to?

Glensy Stacey: Where it is a national curriculum subject, it should mean first that a sufficient amount of the national curriculum was covered—in other words, that the syllabus, or the depth and breadth of study, that was required was sufficiently closely aligned to the national curriculum; secondly, that the assessment that occurred was sufficiently rigorous, so it was not narrowed, either through teaching or
The Committee has heard some possible questions and answers be as short and sharp as significant change. We have limited time so I would ask that for standards while you are going through that develop and deliver: what else you can do or not do and also what else you can manage to reform, change, bidders. So you will need to consider those matters, much harder to attract true competition and real you get towards the end of a franchise period, it is out for on that is, if you are going down that franchise and train services—that you can expect to see erratic patterns of investment during the life of the contract. That is just one of the many things.

My second piece of advice would be to truly evaluate the risks and to recognise the trade-offs. For example, we know from the train regulator model—train franchising and train services—that you can expect to make a very real and significant investment in getting the detail of the specification, the contract, and the bidding and tender processes right. Certainly, my advice would be to concentrate very hard on getting the legislation right, and getting the mechanics and technicalities of it right. It would be a significant and complex matter.

My last consideration in advising about what to look into is that, if you are going down that franchising and train services path, it is much harder to attract true competition and real bidders. So you will need to consider those matters, and also what else you can manage to reform, change, develop and deliver: what else you can do or not do for standards while you are going through that significant change.

Chair: We have limited time so I would ask that questions and answers be as short and sharp as possible.

Q590 Damian Hinds: Finally from me: were there to be a change in structure in the sector, either to a single examining body or to some sort of franchise or licensing system, with one per subject or one per key subject, what would be your advice to Government on how to enact that change to mitigate risk, and how long would such a transition take?

Glennys Stacey: Such a transition would likely require legislation, so we are talking about years. The experience of others in say, telephony or train regulation, or, indeed, in a much simpler way, in national assessment, would suggest that you have to make a very real and significant investment in getting the detail of the specification, the contract, and the bidding and tender processes right. Certainly, my advice would be to concentrate very hard on getting the legislation right, and getting the mechanics and technicalities of it right. It would be a significant and complex matter.

My second piece of advice would be to truly evaluate the risks and to recognise the trade-offs. For example, we know from the train regulator model—train franchising and train services—that you can expect to see erratic patterns of investment during the life of the contract. That is just one of the many things.

Certainly, one might expect that pricing would be a dark art, or would be lacking in transparency, anyway, from what I can see when I get on the train in the morning. Looking very carefully at the pricing and recognising also that there is likely to be an increase in pricing would be something that I would advise.

My last consideration in advising about what to look out for on that is, if you are going down that route, to put it simply, it is a one-way street. When you get towards the end of a franchise period, it is much harder to attract true competition and real bidders. So you will need to consider those matters, and also what else you can manage to reform, change, develop and deliver: what else you can do or not do for standards while you are going through that significant change.

Chair: We have limited time so I would ask that questions and answers be as short and sharp as possible.

Q590 Pat Glass: The Committee has heard some evidence that has been critical of Ofqual’s strategic role. SCORE in particular said that Ofqual is like a “crash scene investigator rather than an air traffic controller”. You have said that you want your regulatory arrangements to be “stronger and more strategic” in future, so what will that look like for examination boards, and do you currently have the powers to deliver a stronger, strategic role for Ofqual?

Glennys Stacey: All regulators need to deal with crashes when they occur. They do occur and we have to deal with them, but I will put that to one side. What you really want is a balance of activity, where the balance is much more on the strategic—being on the front foot. What that means for awarding bodies at the end of the market you are talking about is that we will monitor them closely and continuously; we will be crawling all over them; where we require them to change their behaviours, we will either persuade them or direct them; and we will fine them where we find errors where the awarding body is culpable in some way. It also means that, if necessary, we will direct them or even take them out of the market if we think that is in the interest of standards. I would imagine that, if you spoke to awarding bodies, as indeed you have, about the changes they have seen in our regulatory approach over the last 12 months, they would say that they have begun to sense the nature of that journey.

As to whether we have enough powers, we are shortly to be awash with them, thank you. The whistle-blowing power is to come in on Thursday. That will be very welcome.

Q591 Pat Glass: I know that you are consulting at the moment on your powers and how they should be used. When are we likely to see the results of that consultation?

Glennys Stacey: We have been working at the fastest possible pace to be in a position to implement and use our new powers. For fining, we are in the middle of a consultation as I understand it, but we expect to be in a position to be able to fine by the end of May.

Q592 Pat Glass: Do you feel you have sufficient assessment expertise on your board? That is one of the issues that have been raised with us. Glennys Stacey: On the board? As my chairman has been busy recruiting board members, it might be best that she answers that question, if you don’t mind. Amanda Spielman: We have, as you may know, been actively recruiting. We have just interviewed for five vacancies on our board. To answer your question directly, without a shadow of a doubt we need more assessment expertise in the oversight of Ofqual. The question for us is how we get it. We are interested in looking at how to bring it in at board level but we have also just started a standards advisory group, which we see as hugely important. There is a great deal of expertise in assessment in universities, in exam boards, in people who have recently retired from exam boards, like Mike Cresswell over there, who is advising you. We want to use this expertise. We have invited 16 people, every one of whom has said yes. We want to expose the thinking about how to maintain and develop assessment standards and qualification standards, and get the right fit with the education system. We want to have active and regular discussions. We do not want a car crash model, but a shaping model. We think that getting that flow of well-exposed thinking through to our board will strengthen us.
Q593 Pat Glass: So you do not have sufficient expertise in assessment yet, but you are working on it.
Amanda Spielman: Absolutely, we are working on it.

Q594 Pat Glass: Finally, the Secretary of State has had a lot to say recently about the exam system and how he is going to make exams harder, etc. How much ministerial direction do you get, and how much independence do you have?
Chair: The Minister is just behind you.
Ian Mearns: As always.

Glens Stacey: Chairman, I always know where the Minister is; there is no need to remind me, but thank you. The position is that Ofqual is an independent regulator but our work is of great interest to the Secretary of State and the Minister. Of course it is: assessments have a powerful impact on the education system. We have to consider and take into account ministerial views. Indeed, we have a duty to have regard to Government policy. I have received no direction whatsoever from the Secretary of State about our setting of standards, about GCSEs or A-levels, none at all.

Amanda Spielman: Ofqual’s role in the system is more complicated than that of many regulators because of the symbiotic relationship between curriculum and assessments. In this country, much of the upper secondary curriculum is embedded in assessments. There are aspects of the system that are completely Ofqual’s, where we are free to act as we see fit, and there are aspects where making changes to the assessment and qualification system actually implies major changes to curriculum. In those matters we have to talk to Government, to users of qualifications, to all the people with a legitimate interest, and build consensus as well as taking direct regulatory action. There are a number of dynamics.

Q595 Pat Glass: Do you have input to the curriculum review?
Glens Stacey: Yes. We are working closely with the national curriculum team. We are interested in making sure that the products that come out of that—the programmes of study—are robust and transferable across the board. Wherever they come out of a national curriculum review process needs to be assessable. We have lessons to learn there and to pass on from the current national curriculum.

Q596 Ian Mearns: Do you welcome the idea of national subject committees as a way of increasing the involvement of universities and learned bodies in GCSEs and A-levels?
Glens Stacey: I have had no personal experience of national subject committees unfortunately. I can very much see that they are one way in which you can get subject expertise, and hopefully consensus, in determining what the subject content should be for any standardised qualification, GCSE or A-level. It is by no means the only way. I hate to be a harbinger of doom all of the time, but I do know that one of the drawbacks of them would be that there would be a tendency for breadth rather than depth—everyone wants their bit put into the qualification and there is always a trade-off between depth and breadth.

Interestingly, what we have found in our international A-level studies is that sometimes we strike that trade here, giving breadth rather than depth the leading role. So there is a slight risk of that, but we will work with any model that will enable a consensus to be built around a subject and subject content.

I will just add—and this touches on the point from your colleague earlier—that when you look at how these things are agreed in the system, we have quite an organic system. I am quite a systematic person but I recognise that. To get this right, we need to work at it with subject experts but also with teachers, schools, colleges, and further and higher education. There is a healthy brokering around that to get to the right trade-offs.

Q597 Ian Mearns: Going back to Pat’s previous question about crash scene investigators and air traffic controllers, would it not be a good model in terms of looking at the breadth and depth that you have talked about if Ofqual were to convene those committees and manage them?
Glens Stacey: That depends on whether you want to keep Ofqual as a regulator or to extend its role. That is getting towards, although not quite, what our predecessors QDCA and QCA were doing. That is a discussion to be had.

Q598 Ian Mearns: I understand what you are saying. The problem is, if Ofqual does not do it, who should? That poses a question. That might be another car crash waiting to happen, if that is not put right.
Amanda Spielman: I think it is something that everybody in the system is aware of at the moment, and consideration is being given to it.

Q599 Ian Mearns: Would national subject committees provide a solution to Ofqual’s lack of in-house subject expertise? You have talked about the standards advisory group that you are establishing, so you have acknowledged that there is some tension there. Could there be a more transparent way for you to use experts in particular subjects?
Glens Stacey: It might be worth explaining that we use subject expertise a lot at the moment. We choose not to invest heavily in subject expertise in our staff at Ofqual. We need expertise at Ofqual in the things that we do: expertise in regulation, assessment, comparability, grade management—in all of these things. For subject expertise, we prefer to buy it in. We do that because in that way we can get the best experts when we need them for the period we need them. We also get experts who are kept up to date; sitting in Coventry with your subject expertise is not necessarily going to pay dividends over time. We choose to broker that in a way that we think is in the best interests of qualifications and standards.

Q600 Ian Mearns: So you are buying in that extra capacity as and when.
Glens Stacey: Absolutely. It is a purposeful decision to structure ourselves in that way.

Q601 Charlotte Leslie: We have heard from both an exam board chief executive and a senior DfE official...
about concerns about content standards. Does that suggest that you need to have a tighter accreditation system and/or a more transparent one?

**Glensy Stacey:** You will know that we at Ofqual have had the same concerns about GCSEs in particular. We have found issues in geography, history, maths and English language. Interestingly, we also had a good look at religious education and found that particular GCSE was fine; I am still pondering why that is, and what is different about that subject. We do have concerns about those GCSEs, and that has made us question how tightly the regulator needs to specify the requirements through criteria.

We have acted on that, firstly by meeting with chief executives of awarding bodies, who have been very responsive to our request to tighten matters in those qualifications and have taken the detailed feedback to do it. But we are also doing a robust piece of work with other experts on how we can best write qualification criteria to make sure we can make the requirement absolutely explicit. The current requirements are on our website. The enthusiast can find them.

**Q602 Charlotte Leslie:** SCORE told the Committee recently that you can accredit specifications without taking into account the accompanying assessment tools like question papers. Is that correct?

**Glensy Stacey:** The accreditation process is looking at the qualification as it is designed, and looking at example materials. It is not looking examination by examination. It is ahead of the game. A qualification will be accredited as it was, perhaps, in 2008, and will still be running now, but obviously the examination and the materials are different each year. That is the way it works.

The important thing is that accreditation is, in a way, our people at Ofqual trying almost to second-guess the experts in awarding bodies. The real game and the real control over standards should not, in the long term, be through an accreditation process. It should be by us placing requirements on awarding bodies that they must demonstrate they meet time after time in the close and continuous monitoring that I have spoken about, where—I have said it and I will use the term again—we are crawling all over these bodies, and the work to assess, much more than we do at the moment, be through an accreditation process.

We are just completing a piece of work on some subject committees to make sure that the subject committees are not unduly led by the scaffolding of a question. We know that there is more work to be done there. Indeed, there is more work for us to do in producing guidance to awarding bodies on how that balance is to be struck.

**Q604 Neil Carmichael:** Before I head in the direction of grading standards, can I revert back to the issue of national subject committees? It is really an important issue in terms of the direction of Government policy. It seems to me that, if you are thinking of a subject from its start, in terms of pupils’ learning, towards the outcome, it would be useful to have more involvement in terms of the careers structure likely to lead from that subject, and also the relevance of the examination. We have heard quite a lot of evidence in recent sessions from the university sector, which is quite interested in that direction of travel. Do you think that is something that the Government should be considering?

**Glensy Stacey:** We are just completing a piece of national research with the higher education sector on its detailed views, by subject and by structure, about A-levels. We will be able to provide that to the Committee shortly. We would very much welcome the chance to talk that through with you, to get to the detail. That research is showing us that there is an appetite in higher education to have greater influence over the subject and content of A-levels, particularly in some subjects. We would welcome that. We would most certainly welcome any arrangement that would engage the right level of higher education at subject level.

**Q605 Neil Carmichael:** That, of course, would also encourage a career pathway for teachers as well, wouldn’t it? It would also alleviate some of the pressures that you might have in terms of getting the right kind of experience in Ofqual for the task of checking the examination system itself.

**Glensy Stacey:** I do not know that subject committees would automatically result in that happening, but we very much welcome anything that actually encourages teachers and schools to recognise the value of assessment skills. If a teacher chooses to study and understand better the nature of qualifications and the nature of assessment, we welcome that and wish to promote it. I hope that headmasters who might be listening to this would hear that message: it is a credible, respectable, laudable thing for teachers to be encouraged and given space to develop that understanding.

**Q606 Neil Carmichael:** Absolutely. This whole Committee would endorse that. Hopefully that will be reflected in our report. I will turn now to grading standards. When you are monitoring the outcomes of
A-level awards, what kind of action can you take if you think action is needed?

**Glenys Stacey:** We can direct awarding bodies to set their grade boundaries as we would wish.

Q607 Neil Carmichael: Can you direct an exam board to change standards, essentially?

**Glenys Stacey:** We can direct an exam board to change its grade boundary. If, for example, it was setting a specific percentage or points score as the grade boundary, we could direct it to move that. That is one element of standards.

Q608 Neil Carmichael: In terms of monitoring the outcomes of A-level awards, you need a fair degree of technical expertise. Presumably you are going to say that you have an abundance of that within Ofqual.

**Glenys Stacey:** Do you mean with regard to comparability?

Neil Carmichael: Yes.

**Glenys Stacey:** That is one of the things that Ofqual does. To try to get that in proportion, we have done over 50 comparability studies at GCSE and A-level and have published them. Our predecessors have written the definitive text on how to do it. This is something I think we can be proud of. We know the different ways of doing it, and the current approach that we adopt is regarded as very good practice. You will be interested to know that the co-authors of that definitive text were Paul Newton, Jo-Anne Baird and Peter Tynms. I think that we can lay some small claim to knowing what we are doing in that department.

Neil Carmichael: We all need some extra bedtime reading.

**Glenys Stacey:** This copy is yours, most definitely. I will leave it for you.

Q609 Neil Carmichael: Thank you. I will have to declare that, no doubt, on some sort of list. Moving on to what we describe sometimes as commercially significant subjects—maths, English and science—do you tend to focus your resources more on those areas? How would you prioritise the question of monitoring?

**Glenys Stacey:** When you are monitoring awarding bodies, you are allocating a resource according to risk. Clearly there is a big bag of risks around GCSEs and A-levels, so inevitably a good amount of our resource on monitoring and regulating is placed there. It is fair to say that we have about 180 awarding bodies, and the majority of qualifications are not in that area; they are vocational or other types of qualifications, and we have regard to them as well. On monitoring and comparability, we are only really focused on GCSEs and A-Levels. We make sure that we cover a fair spread, but recognise that the larger volume subjects, where you have a large cohort, have first place.

Q610 Neil Carmichael: If we are going to have different organisational models—a single board, a franchise system or whatever—how would those models impact on your regulating and grading of standards?

**Glenys Stacey:** Regulating grading standards? The franchise model would not impact it very much. We would still have to do comparability, particularly where there is a choice as to whether you take the subject or not, because we would want to see comparability between those GCSEs and A-levels that were franchised and those that were not. Even if every subject was franchised—and I doubt whether that is ever going to be the proposition—we would still wish to see comparability across subjects. In the single-provider model, as far as I can see, we would still be very interested in comparability. It depends on whether the single provider was providing every GCSE, although, again, it probably would not be. On the comparability studies, our obligations would be the same. I think that the actual task would be more difficult than it is at the moment.

Q611 Neil Carmichael: Finally, what about the JCQ? How far should it be involved in monitoring standards? Is there an overlap between it and Ofqual?

**Glenys Stacey:** There is a grey area between us and JCQ. Others have said that we should regulate JCQ. I do not agree with that. JCQ has its role representing a sector of the awarding bodies, and that is quite right and proper. It also undertakes some tasks that need to be undertaken, for example, the setting of timetables for exams, which is obviously a complex business. There are some areas where we have a joint interest, where we need to discuss our approach and also whether the prime responsibility is with JCQ or with us. A good example of that is the proper controls over requests for special consideration or extra time, where we have a joint interest but we are the regulator.

Q612 Damian Hinds: What does JCQ do that Ofqual could not do, as opposed to what Ofqual does not do today?

**Glenys Stacey:** You will understand that I do not know everything that JCQ does. It acts as a representative body for the top end or key qualifications providers. In the past, it has done media activities for those bodies. It does some of the number crunching as well. The discussions we need to have with JCQ are about whether things are in the right place. A new chief executive is about to start at JCQ, and I am looking forward to having those discussions.

Q613 Chair: Would it be better if we had one or more nationally set specifications for an examination and then allowed the awarding bodies to set questions on the basis of that specification or those specifications?

**Glenys Stacey:** The national curriculum does that to some extent, Chairman, in that it sets out what is required and then awarding bodies interpret that.

Q614 Chair: Is there an incentive for the awarding bodies to come up with a specification that, whether this is a perception or otherwise, makes it easier to pass? Certainly that is what some of the examiners we called in before Christmas seemed to be suggesting. If we took away the control of the specification from the awarding bodies while still keeping the benefit and resilience of their different systems, could that tackle the issue—perhaps of public perception and perhaps a
 ...)
Q619 Chair: That is why I was wondering whether the OECD would be better off doing it.

Amanda Spielman: Our work is very much informed by international studies that have already happened. The OECD PISA study is clearly a very important one. In setting up our A-level work—which goes several levels further, I think, than anything the OECD puts out—the selection of countries majors very heavily on the dozen or so countries that stand out as particularly high performing on all fronts in PISA and other OECD work. We are building on it and going deeper in our particular areas.

Q620 Chair: Will this work genuinely come back through into your work and into the way our qualifications are structured and set, or is it just that the current Secretary of State had a particular obsession with international comparison and there is therefore a team of 12 doing entirely purposeless work?

Glenys Stacey: On the contrary, Chairman, this is really valuable work—really valuable work.

Q621 Chair: It is?

Glenys Stacey: It absolutely is. To give you one example of that, we now have questions to raise about the content of our A-level mathematics syllabus. We have some big questions to raise about assessment techniques across all of the subjects at A-level. One smaller example is the use of algebraic calculators. I suspect that there will be resistance to that, as it is rather alien in our culture and our country, but people tell us that people will be using them in their places of employment and it is commonly done in other jurisdictions. If you look across, then, yes, it is very complicated, but there are these nuggets that we can pick up. That is the great thing about being able to devote resource to benchmarking, not just internationally but nationally as well.

Chair: When we visited Singapore, one of the most impressive things was their openness: they were looking out and trying to bring in expertise from abroad, and they wanted to be open to the world’s best. I am sure that has to be the right way to go.

Q622 Damian Hinds: What is the transmission mechanism for that international benchmarking analysis to turn up in a classroom? I understand the thing about how the assessment processes work—multiple choice versus essays—is absolutely in your court. But how does the content of the syllabus of mathematics transmit from your work to what happens in the classroom?

Glenys Stacey: That is a very interesting question. We are simply the regulator and we do not control the whole system, but, like other regulators, we identify things that we do not control but would wish to influence for the greater good and for the purpose of standards. That is where we have conversations with those who have a greater responsibility for those matters. We start having conversations with universities, awarding bodies and Ministers about what we think we can glean by way of subject content that would make a material difference to the value of the qualification.

Q623 Ian Mearns: I understand that the Minister, who is sitting behind you, and also John Hayes, wrote to you at the end of last year, looking for assurances about the appropriateness of the level of fees being charged by exam boards. Are the fees charged by exam boards completely justified, and can they justify above-inflation increases for GCSEs, for example?

Glenys Stacey: Just looking at the crude facts, a GCSE at the moment is about £27 for the qualification. If it is modular, it is about £30. That includes marking, so the entire piece is a little short of £30. In 2002–03, schools spent £154 million on qualifications, and there were 1,459 different types of qualifications on the performance tables, so 1,500 for £150 million. In 2009–10 expenditure has doubled—it is £303 million—but there are 5,285 different types of qualifications on the performance table register. The cost drivers here are re-sits, late entrants—I believe there is an increasing tendency to enter candidates late, and awarding bodies charge for that—but also the cost in a number of vocational qualifications; that tends to be a real driver for the upward rise of costs in schools.

Whether those costs are currently justified is another question. I have to admit that my take in my first year has been that I have looked at the rate of inflation, I have looked at these core figures and I have looked at the real issues that we have to deal with on standards, and our focus has been very much on standards. The Minister is sitting behind me. I can recollect a conversation with him when I was first in post, where I discussed with him that our priorities would be in the standards arena in our first year.

Q624 Ian Mearns: Given the increase in terms of overall costs to the system from £154 million to £303 million in a relatively short space of time, that surely has to be an area of concern?

Glenys Stacey: It is interesting that, in A-levels, the cost has reduced. They cost less than they did three years ago. That is a technical issue around changes in the modularisation of those qualifications. As I say, the cost drivers are really what we need to focus on. A big one, as I understand it, is around the bag of vocational qualifications. Professor Alison Wolf’s report is helpful there. The Government have acted on that in making changes to the performance tables that will play through over time on the total cost of qualifications to schools and colleges.

Amanda Spielman: The other big driver has been the increase in the numbers of qualifications taken by the average pupil. The work we put out last winter suggested that, in general, cost by qualification was not a driver of the growth in cost.
Q625 Ian Mearns: Do you think that changing to a single board or franchise system would have an impact on costs and fees?

Glenys Stacey: If we look at single providers in other industries, BT, for example, was a single provider, and I did not notice my bills going down in that era. I do not see that there would be an incentive to reduce cost. One of the things that boards compete on now, which we discussed briefly earlier, is price: not only the list price but the deal.

Q626 Ian Mearns: Are you sure that exam boards would continue to offer minority interest qualifications that may be loss-making from their perspective?

Glenys Stacey: I do not see that we could guarantee that on a single-provider or franchise model. I suppose it would depend on the technical terms of the contract and the arrangement you are setting out. We know, and I am sure that you will have been told, about the cross-subsidisation of qualifications. Some qualifications, particularly at GCSE, that have relatively small but not insignificant intakes are definitely cross-subsidised by the bigger subjects—English, for example. It they were to be offered at their true cost, there would be a deep impact on schools.

Q627 Ian Mearns: Given your lack of certainty, do you think you need more teeth in that case?

Glenys Stacey: More teeth in what sense?

Ian Mearns: In terms of regulating cost and fees across the board and the availability of subjects for examination.

Glenys Stacey: I suspect we can and will do more when the time is right to understand better the cross-subsidisation economics. We simply know at the moment that they exist. We do not need more powers to do that. It is a question of prioritisation.

Q628 Damian Hinds: I would like to talk more about competition. I am not sure how much evidence there is of price competition. It would be interesting if we could find out the actual discounting and deal-making activity. From what we do know, it looks like a fairly price-stable market, where if you step out of line by putting your prices up you lose a bunch of share. There is not too much evidence of people cutting their prices in order to grab it.

Glenys Stacey: May I take the opportunity to write to the Committee with some examples that we are aware of as to how this actually works in practice? They will be anecdotal rather than a comprehensive evidence base, but they will be representative of how it works.

Q629 Damian Hinds: I am hoping that you are going to take a job with us soon, Damian, because you are always thinking as we are thinking. It will hopefully be a pleasure for you to hear that we are making some changes at Ofqual to build the capabilities that we need. We have spoken a great deal about standards and expertise here. Yes, all of that needs to happen, but there is also a requirement to establish a data-analysis hub. We have statisticians. We are bringing them into one place. A lot of data are provided to us by awarding bodies on switching, for example. We need to be on top of those data and interrogate them, and then talk with schools and understand, in a timely manner, what they are telling us. I am very aware of that.

Q630 Damian Hinds: You have embarked on that journey. This may be the invitation to provide anecdotes. The glaringly obvious example is the WJEC march to prominence in a small number of subjects. At the macro level there has not been that much movement in its share, but in GCSE English, short-course RE and A-level French, something is happening. What?

Glenys Stacey: I have two things to say about that. Firstly—and this is anecdotal—I recollect the English teacher in a very respectable independent girls’ school telling me that she had recently transferred to WJEC. When I asked why, she said it was because the levels of service were so impressive. There is a different model operating at WJEC in relation to the service offering around it.

Q631 Damian Hinds: Just to be clear, what is service in this case?

Glenys Stacey: It is responsiveness, particularly in relation to any concerns one might have about the nature of the assessment or the outcome. There is more to be picked at there.

Damian Hinds: No kidding.

Glenys Stacey: I am hoping that you are going to take a job with us soon, Damian, because you are always thinking as we are thinking. It will hopefully be a pleasure for you to hear that we are making some changes at Ofqual to build the capabilities that we need. We have spoken a great deal about standards and expertise here. Yes, all of that needs to happen, but there is also a requirement to establish a data-analysis hub. We have statisticians. We are bringing them into one place. A lot of data are provided to us by awarding bodies on switching, for example. We need to be on top of those data and interrogate them, and then talk with schools and understand, in a timely manner, what they are telling us. I am very aware of that.

Q632 Chair: Are the awarding bodies giving you all the data you want, when you want them?

Glenys Stacey: Yes. I had a meeting with awarding bodies chief executives just this week, on Monday afternoon—was that yesterday?

Chair: Two days ago.
Glenys Stacey: It is Wednesday, isn’t it? We were talking about data exchange. There is no doubt we impose a burden. We estimate the cost of that at the moment to be about £400,000. Much of that is to support requirements set by the National Archives or other places. We have agreed protocols for us in terms of asking for data—having an annual schedule, if you like—and also a protocol for requesting immediate data for those car crash moments. We do not have fundamental difficulties with the awarding bodies about that, but we are working to smooth out expectations. We have certainly made it plain, and they accept, that we can ask for data and they are required to provide them.

Q633 Ian Mearns: Exam board chiefs have called for a debate on the examiners’ role in training seminars and where lines should be drawn. Do you think you should have a role in facilitating this and seminars and where lines should be drawn. Do you think you should have a role in facilitating this? I have some notes that I want to refer to, because they reflect discussions that we have been having in Ofqual and, indeed, with awarding bodies. The bottom line for me is that we want all teachers to have access to information about examinations to support effective teaching, and not just those who pay. There is a clear fairness issue there. It goes without saying, but I will say it: teachers should not be given inappropriate information. Information needs to be exchanged in ways that reduce that risk to a bare minimum. There should be some two-way exchanges, because there is a need for dialogue and feedback both ways—the system does benefit from it—but the risks need to be reduced to a minimum. That is the bottom line. What we have been doing about that is to have a call for evidence, for which the period has just closed. We had 82 responses as at the end of last week, and we are now analysing them. We think we can make significant changes to the current arrangements to materially reduce the risk but not throw the baby out with the bathwater. We will take and are taking the lead on this.

Q634 Ian Mearns: You have called for evidence, but you do not think there is a need for a debate about this issue.

Glenys Stacey: I do not. No. 82 people have responded. We want to talk further with teachers, because any change will have a material impact on them and we need to understand what is valuable and why. We also need to talk more with the awarding bodies, but as the regulator we do not see this as a matter of simple debate and consensus. We need to draw these lines.

Q635 Ian Mearns: Publishing and exams are closely aligned, at Pearson, for instance. How close is too close, and are you satisfied that Pearson has sufficient firewalls in place, as it has told us it does, to prevent any conflict of interest?

Glenys Stacey: You will, I hope, be aware—and the Minister is behind me—that I wrote to the Minister in November last year in relation to the issue of teaching aids and textbooks. We have a programme of work that will complete this year looking at the detail of that and where the lines are drawn. For the moment, awarding bodies are required to have conflict-of-interest procedures in place. They need to confirm with us by May 2012 that they have those—i.e. in a couple of months. As I have said, we will be crawling all over them. But there is more work for us to do to get to the detail of this and get back to you on it.

Q636 Ian Mearns: I am waiting to see what crawling all over them looks like, Glenys. We have heard allegations that Pearson has not been even-handed in its promotion of its own and other endorsed resources to schools, both in terms of branding and links to resources on its website. Have you a particular view on that?

Glenys Stacey: My view is that there are no particular rules at the moment in the market around how products are to be marketed. That is an area of deep interest to us and we are setting out, in our corporate plan, to lift that stone.

Q637 Ian Mearns: That clearly can benefit some pupils and disbenefit others.

Glenys Stacey: Yes, but in a market, one needs to be able to market. The real issue is the integrity and nature of the marketing.

Q638 Pat Glass: There have been deep suspicions about the way in which we have used trust in the system, and it has led to conflicts of interest. We have seen examples in this Committee of branding of a syllabus and a textbook. Do you believe that those who set examination papers should also be able to give training to teachers and write textbooks?

Glenys Stacey: It is a very pertinent question, and there will be different views about it. There are some real benefits in examiners being able to write textbooks. Many examiners currently teach students, and students benefit from that. We are very aware that there is a risk with that, and our data hub and the data-analysis work that we want to do will help us identify where we think that risk is materialising. We need to know the extent to which the risk materialises and judge that against the real benefits of students being taught by teachers who are sufficiently competent, enthusiastic and understanding.

Q639 Pat Glass: One of the biggest risks is to public confidence in the system. Surely that is too big a risk to take?

Amanda Spielman: It works both ways. Many pupils and parents draw confidence from the co-branding of the exam and the textbook. Parents see it as giving their child the best preparation for the qualifications they need. We truly believe that there are no easy answers. We are digging into this and have been talking to exam boards about the precise model they use.

You have pointed out the example of Pearson. There has always been some anxiety about the way the different parts of Pearson interact. We are taking that interrogation to a different level. We have to start with the needs of the education system, of pupils and their teachers, and work from that to what is the best...
settlement that works for the system, rather than starting from what separates all the pieces so that no possible contact can ever occur. We have to start with the needs of education.

Q640 Chair: Thank you both very much. After the allegations and furore before Christmas, I am glad that our Committee is coming towards the end of its inquiry several months later, because, as you say, I do not think there are any easy answers. It is important, on something as fundamental to our education system as this, that we take a considered, cool look at every issue before coming to a conclusion. Your evidence today has helped us in that regard, so thank you both very much.

Glenys Stacey: If you would like to hear from us about our international research or national research at A-level, or indeed to go through our draft corporate plan for the next three years with us, we would very much welcome the chance to speak with you about those things. I will leave the textbook.

Neil Carmichael: Marvellous.

Chair: Neil will read it this weekend and bring it back for the rest of us on Monday.

Examination of Witness

Witness: Nick Gibb MP, Minister of State for Schools, Department for Education, gave evidence.

Q641 Chair: Good morning, Minister. Welcome to this meeting, on this historic day in Parliament, historic not just for the Budget but for your presence here talking about awarding bodies. My colleagues and I will probe you in detail about the awarding bodies and the structure of our examinations system. Can I start off by asking about the accountability system we have? Is there a danger, when we look at the awarding bodies, that we are failing to see the bigger picture, which is that we put too much weight on qualifications—GCSEs in particular—and that we need to recognise changes there, rather than thinking that we will find all the solutions in how we organise exams?

Mr Gibb: The primary purpose of GCSEs and A-levels is to accredit the hard work and the education achieved by the young people taking those examinations. That is the prime purpose. The secondary purpose—but an important purpose—is as an accountability measure for the schools where those qualifications are taken. Our view is that the best education jurisdictions around the world have very rigorous external accountability measures. It would be a mistake not to have such an accountability measure in our state education system.

Q642 Chair: Are you open to changing the accountability measures so that they provide a broader accountability for schools in particular?

Mr Gibb: We are definitely open to these issues. We have already made significant changes since we came into office. We have put significantly more data into the public domain, and there will be more to come. For example, there are now columns in the performances tables that show how well a school is equipping children of low ability based on their Key Stage 2 results and children of high ability based on their Key Stage 2 results—achieving level five or more. There are columns for children eligible for free school meals, showing how children from disadvantaged backgrounds fare in a particular school in their GCSE results. In the future, you could have columns that show the proportion of A and A* grades at GCSE, which addresses a concern that I know you have about the over focus on the C/D borderline in some schools.

We introduced the concept of the English Baccalaureate in order to try to provide a counterweight to the perverse incentive in the accountability measure to move towards what are termed softer subjects. Those subjects all have their value, but not if they are at the expense of some of the core academic subjects that are important for progression, the facilitating subjects, such as maths, English, science, modern languages and humanities. Those are important subjects, and there has been a decline in recent years in the take up of history, geography and, in particular, modern languages. The concept of the English Baccalaureate as an accountability measure has had a very real effect on the options that this year’s Year 10 have gone for.

Ian Mearns: Chairman, I cannot believe what I have just heard.

Chair: It was a slip, dear colleague, but you may want to press the Minister.

Mr Gibb: Sorry, it is a performance measure, not an accountability measure.

Chair: For the record, it is not an accountability measure, is it?

Mr Gibb: It is not an accountability measure.

Chair: I am delighted that is clear.

Q643 Chair: When we come to think about reforming the examinations system, what lessons can we learn from our experience of delivering national curriculum tests?

Mr Gibb: These are some of the issues that we are considering. You have been debating and questioning whether there should be one awarding body or whether we should have a franchise model with one awarding body being responsible for one particular qualification. There are arguments for and against that. One of the arguments against it—one of the concerns and risks that that would present—is the national curriculum problem that we faced as a country under the previous Administration in 2008, where the administration of the national curriculum tests went very wrong.

Q644 Chair: It takes us back to the earlier talk about air crash investigators and car crash investigators. When you have one system and one single awarding body, then the risk of having an air crash as opposed
to a car crash is somewhat increased, and that is what we had with SATS: it was a major national disaster as opposed to a smaller local difficulty.

Alex Cunningham: You are more likely to be killed in a car crash than in a plane crash.

Mr Gibb: You can take these metaphors too far sometimes. The argument on the other side, as you were discussing earlier with Ofqual when you had Glenny Stacey and Amanda Spielman before you, is that there is systemic risk element to having awarding bodies competing for market share. That is fine if they are competing on price or service level. It is not fine if they are competing in a way that means that they advertise, for example, that you are more likely to get a particular grade if you use their exam. That would not be what we would want to see in competition between awarding bodies.

Q645 Damian Hinds: How do you think competition in this market works, both the good bits and the bad bits?

Mr Gibb: That is something that we are carefully examining and looking at. You could argue that in this country we have developed and inherited a system that rewards awarding organisations with an incentive to provide the most accessible, in Charlotte Leslie’s term, examination in order to increase market share. That is why we strengthened the powers of Ofqual and I am pleased that we have a separate Ofqual, as an independent regulator, separate from the QCA, as it used to be. Since we came into office we have increased the powers of Ofqual, giving it a power to fine awarding organisations. I am delighted with the people who we have running Ofqual. They take a very forensic approach to regulation, and that is the direction that we need to be going in: looking at the evidence, being forensic about the data, and then coming to a considered opinion about what is actually happening in the real world.

Q646 Damian Hinds: At the risk of déjà vu all over again, I would like to ask you the same question I asked Glenny Stacey. I can understand why we want competition in textbooks, support materials and blah, blah, blah. I can understand why we want competition in exam questions?

Mr Gibb: That is a good question, and one we are considering. We were very shocked by the errors in marking that happened in last summer. We were also concerned about the Daily Telegraph revelations over the seminars. We are not ruling anything out or in. This is a system that has evolved over time. There were all the various examination boards—JMB and so on—that stemmed from the university sector. There were far more than the three or four major awarding bodies that we have now in those years. That is why we are where we are.

The question is, do we want to go one step further and reduce the three or four down to one? That is an issue that you are debating and that is why this inquiry is very welcome. We will look very carefully at your conclusions, but we are considering all these options and discussing them within the Department at the moment.

Q647 Damian Hinds: In terms of choice, within a subject, what are the arguments for having multiple bodies setting exams as opposed to one body with some choice and flexibility in the syllabus?

Mr Gibb: As Glenny Stacey said, it is about encouraging innovation—being able to adapt to new demands from the sector and from schools. That is an argument. It is about making sure that there is an incentive to innovate in terms of modern assessment methods, looking around the world at best practice and so on, and also in terms of price.

Q648 Damian Hinds: Do you think those incentives to innovate are there now?

Mr Gibb: Yes, I think they are there and the bodies do innovate. The awarding bodies are discussing and developing new syllabuses all the time. There is, for example, concern about ICT in the country and there is a demand for a high-quality computer science GCSE, so there are those kinds of innovations.

Q649 Damian Hinds: Is that based on looking at what the best examining bodies in the world are doing and what our competitors in China, Singapore, Germany and America are doing, or is it some other pressure creating that change?

Mr Gibb: I don’t know. That particular change, with regard to computer science, is coming from within our country: the fact that the numbers taking ICT GCSE are in decline, and the industry is telling us that we need more people who are equipped with computer science skills and knowledge. That is where that pressure is coming from. How the awarding bodies then develop the specification is more of a mystery. I hope that they look at international evidence. It is certainly something that we look at, and Ofqual now has a duty to look at it.

Q650 Damian Hinds: You have raised an important aspect that is new to our discussions today, although this Committee keeps coming up against it: whenever we have employers, they always talk about their concerns, firstly about a particular systemic risk. Why would we ever want to have competition in terms of setting the specification for the subject and setting the exam questions?

Mr Gibb: That is a good question, and one we are considering. We do not innovate. The awarding bodies are discussing and developing new syllabuses all the time. There is, for example, concern about ICT in the country and there are those kinds of innovations. In terms of choice, within a subject, what are the arguments for having multiple bodies setting exams as opposed to one body with some choice and flexibility in the syllabus?

Mr Gibb: That is a policy issue that rests with the Department and with Ministers. It is something that we are very concerned about. We are concerned that it is possible to get good grades at GCSE English and maths and still present problems to employers in terms of literacy and arithmetic and maths skills. To an extent, that is part of the curriculum: how the curriculum is drafted and then turned into a specification by the awarding bodies. It is also, to an extent, an assessment issue for Ofqual. It is a question
of whether it is possible to pass those exams and yet not be fully conversant with the whole syllabus—to have major issues with part of the syllabus and yet to do sufficiently well on other parts to enable you to secure a good grade overall.

Q651 Damian Hinds: Finally from me: if we were to move to, say, a franchise system, does that require primary legislation and how much upheaval and time do you think is involved?

Mr Gibb: I think it would require primary legislation. If I am wrong, I will write and correct that for the record. That is not the concern, however: the concern would be the risks involved in moving to one body, as we discussed earlier. There is an issue about multiple reform: if you are reforming the curriculum, putting in changes to modularisation, and looking at those issues and an increased emphasis on spelling, punctuation and grammar at the same time as a major restructuring of the awarding organisations, that presents risks.

Notwithstanding all that, we are looking at all these issues, because there are concerns out there in the country: concerns that arose from what happened last summer; concerns arising from the work that Durham University and Peter Tymms, who was mentioned earlier, have been conducting over the years; and the concerns of universities and employers. These are all issues that policymakers have to take into account when addressing these issues.

Q652 Neil Carmichael: Can I just slip in a question about national subject committees? We have heard Ofqual’s answer this morning. To be fair, we have discussed this in relative detail in this Committee recently. It does seem to be a possibility that such structures could bring together several strands of education policy, such as career pathways for teachers, the issue of curriculum development and examination marking, and also the interface with universities and business. What are your views about the possibility of using national subject committees as an instrument?

Mr Gibb: We have said on record that we want there to be a closer link between the development of A-levels and universities and learned societies, learned bodies, where the knowledge and specialist remain. That is important. In terms of developing a national curriculum, you need experts to help draft that, but once you have a draft of a programme of study that is ready for publication, we need to have maximum consultation, not just with subject specialists but with all the people who will use that national curriculum: teachers, parents, industry, employers and universities.

We need as wide a debate as possible when we come to discuss the development of the national curriculum. I would not want that just to lie with a group of experts in an ivory tower. It has to be as wide as possible. But certainly with regard to A-levels, we want there to be a very close connection between universities and learned bodies.

Q653 Ian Mearns: Some GCSEs introduced by the last Government are being awarded for the first time this summer. Since you have come into power, the Government have announced further changes that will take effect from summer 2014. Further changes will probably take place after the implementation of the national curriculum review. Is there too much going on in terms of Government involvement in changes to the system?

Mr Gibb: We have a duty as a Government to address the concerns that the country has. There are issues: we are ending modularisation of GCSEs. We think GCSEs are too small a qualification to warrant modularisation and it results in young people not necessarily connecting all the elements of a subject together. Moving to an end-of-course exam for GCSEs is the right approach. We are introducing spelling, punctuation and grammar as 5% of the marks in subjects that require written work, such as history, religious studies and English literature, as well as English language, where it already exists. That takes effect in exams taken after September 2012. These are important reforms. When the review of the national curriculum is complete, that of course will also feed in to the GCSE.

Q654 Ian Mearns: When do you expect that to be, Minister?

Mr Gibb: We have said that we want the review ready—for schools to have it in September 2013, with a view to teaching it the following year, so that they have a year’s lead-in.

Q655 Ian Mearns: Neil has already asked you about the idea of the national subject committees. Who do you think should convene them?

Mr Gibb: The learned bodies and societies are an important part of our educational infrastructure in this country—the Royal Society of Chemistry, the Institute of Physics, and so on. These are very important organisations and they are playing and will continue to play a very important role in the development of the national curriculum and also in the development of our A-levels.

Q656 Ian Mearns: There may be an element of laissez-faire there. Do you not think Ofqual should oversee the process, just to make sure that it is happening in a properly thought-out and structured way?

Mr Gibb: As you heard from Glenys Stacey, Ofqual is involved in the national curriculum review. We discuss these issues frequently with Ofqual, but what is in the national curriculum is ultimately a policy issue. Ofqual’s role is as a regulator, to ensure that standards are maintained over time and that they are comparable between qualifications. It also has the new objective of ensuring that they are in line with the best qualifications around the world.

Q657 Ian Mearns: In the way that you have portrayed it, is there not a danger that you might have competing national subject committees being established?

Mr Gibb: This notion of a national subject committee is a notion that you are discussing.

Q658 Ian Mearns: It is out there. We are discussing it because it is an idea that is out there.
Chair: It floated in.  
Mr Gibb: As far as the national curriculum review is concerned, we did not start from the line of establishing a committee of the great and the good in maths or physics to deliberate and come up with a programme of study. We have taken a slightly different approach, of having an expert panel, which has looked at the international evidence. We have published its report, and the report of the gathering of the international evidence. We have published a review of the consultation responses: there were nearly 6,000 responses to our call for evidence. We are trying to make this a much more outward-facing approach to curriculum development than in the past, where a closed group of people in the QCA would come up with something.

Q659 Ian Mearns: Some of the best comparators that you look at on an international basis have Government-controlled single awarding bodies.  
Mr Gibb: What, around the world?  
Ian Mearns: Yes.  
Mr Gibb: I agree, and we are unusual in this country in having a range of awarding organisations. None the less, being unusual does not make it wrong: there are downsides to the approach but there are also upsides to it, and that is what we are looking at.

Q660 Chair: Have you made an assessment of what would be required to change? You might decide that it would be better to have a single awarding body, but you might equally decide that getting from here to there means that the benefits you would get are offset by the cost of change. There is an excellent quote from Colin McCaig, who looked into the crises at the beginning of the last decade: “Change often has unexpected consequences, not least in education policy. Intentions do not always translate into the expected outcomes. Administrative change can produce unforeseen practical problems.” That is a perfect description of most of what I have seen while sitting on this Committee for the past number of years. How mindful are you of the risks of change?  
Mr Gibb: As a Conservative, I always think of Lord Palmerston: “Change!” Change? “Aren’t things bad enough already?” But all the issues that have been mooted around this Committee today are things that we are thinking about and considering: both the risks and advantages of changing our system. All these things are uppermost in our minds, and are actively being considered at the moment.

Q661 Chair: Could you share with us, just to inform us at this final session, what your concerns would be and what issues need to be considered if we were to move from where we are now to, say, a single awarding body?  
Mr Gibb: All the risks were, I thought, very well set out by Glenys Stacey. For example, if you have one awarding organisation and you come to the end of the franchise period or contract period and try to renegotiate, and there is really no alternative to that body to provide an alternative bid, you find yourselves, as a Government, over the barrel financially in terms of contract negotiations. You put in the risk of anything going wrong becoming a plane crash, rather than a car crash. I take the point of Mr Cunningham that fewer people die in air crashes than on the roads in our country and around the world, but I think that is a significant risk as well.

Q662 Ian Mearns: Would you rather be in a car crash or a plane crash?  
Mr Gibb: Our desire is to be in no crashes at all. Air traffic control is the right approach.  
Neil Carmichael: Absolutely.  
Mr Gibb: There is the issue of innovation, and so on. On the other hand, we worry about the seminars that were held, the problems with marking last summer and the systemic incentives within the current system in terms of obtaining market share. We continue to consider those issues and will have more to say in due course.

Q663 Chair: If we move to a single awarding body, in truth that would need a vast investment on the part of whoever was conducting it. It would either be within Government—although I assume that would be less likely to be implemented by this Government than by the previous one—or, if it was not conducted by Government, then if you look across the landscape of major awarding bodies in this country, probably the only one that could scale up and deliver would be the only one run for profit, which is Pearson. Do you think that analysis is correct or not?  
Mr Gibb: We are looking at all these issues. We have some very effective awarding bodies—OCR, Edexcel, AQA, WJEC and so on. There are a lot of awarding bodies that do an excellent job, providing very high-quality qualifications to hundreds of thousands of candidates every year, and I think that they are all capable of providing whatever it is that they are being asked to provide.

Q664 Alex Cunningham: So you do not agree that we should just hand the whole thing over to the profit-making sector, then? We must have it across different organisations but perhaps structured in very different way.  
Mr Gibb: I do not think it really matters what the structure behind the body is, provided that the bodies are properly incentivised to provide the kind of qualifications that we want. You could achieve Mr Stuart’s objective by splitting one specification among various awarding bodies to deliver it on the ground. There are a whole host of models, profit making and not for profit, and so on.

Q665 Alex Cunningham: That is what I meant by the structure: the way they deliver, not what they are being asked to deliver, whether it was for one subject or across different subjects.  
Mr Gibb: Yes, you could do either, and we are looking at all these models. You could have a very tight specification provided from central Government and ask the different awarding bodies to deliver it and mark it and so on.

Q666 Alex Cunningham: When will we know what the future model is going to look like?
Chair: After our report and not before.

Mr Gibb: Or maybe before. We are actively talking about these things. It is a pity I cannot be a bit more forthcoming, but decisions are taken at different times and that decision has not been taken.

Q667 Chair: Just to return to the earlier point about subject committees and the like, you have said that you want to see greater involvement of HE and learned societies, but you have not really spelt out very well how you would envisage that happening. Of the proposals we have put to you, you have suggested that the subject committees are not necessarily the right approach. I am trying to understand what is. The Government have been saying this for quite some time, so you would think they might have formulated some idea of how it could be implemented.

Mr Gibb: We are quite advanced in terms of our thinking, but we will announce these things when they are fully thought through. We are also waiting for some bits of research: Ofqual, as you heard, is doing some research into A-levels, and we are also doing our own research into the problems that universities feel A-levels are presenting at the moment. Those pieces of research will be coming out very soon, and we want to get their results, in terms of what it is we are trying to address as the problem with A-levels. We are talking to universities and learned bodies about the future. There is a lot of enthusiasm for the approach in the two sectors, and greater involvement of the universities and learned societies is the way ahead.

Q668 Chair: I am trying to square the general approach that you are setting out today with that of the Secretary of State. Before Christmas, he said that the whole system was discredited. That is very strong language. You are not sounding like a member of a team who thinks the whole thing is fundamentally discredited. You are sounding a little more cautious today. Is that fair?

Mr Gibb: There are problems with the perception of our qualifications. They are criticised heavily by employers and universities, and we have to address that as policymakers. But hundreds of thousands of young people take these qualifications every year who work very hard to take them, and teachers work very hard in preparing young people for GCSEs and A-levels. To achieve a good grade in either of those qualifications requires as much work today, if not more, than in Damians Hinds’ day, years and years ago, when he took his qualifications. So that is an important point to put on the record.

None the less, as policymakers, we have to address the concerns that have been presented to us by universities and employers that young people are no longer leaving our school system as well prepared for the world of work as they should be, or as well prepared in some of the fundamental skills of writing and arithmetic and the fundamental knowledge that they need to start a course at university as they should be. We have to address those issues. Some of that may well be the way that GCSEs and A-levels are structured. If you have fewer open questions and less demand in the exams for long essays, there will be less incentive for schools to ensure that young people are practised in those skills.

Q669 Chair: I suppose, whether you would use the word “discredited” or not about the system, the question is that if there are problems in our current examination system—and there are a number that people come up with—are they primarily driven by the structure of the way we deliver it, or have they been driven by policy? Is it policy and change of policy that has led to alleged dumbing down and examinations that do not encourage the broadest possible learning?

Mr Gibb: I think it is a combination of both. The reason why we are reviewing the national curriculum is that we are concerned about what is in its recent iterations. We think that it has become overblown and is trying to micro-manage every minute of the school day. We want to slim it down to a core body of essential knowledge in the core academic subjects that young people need. If we were to do that, it may go some way to addressing these problems. But there are also problems in the structure of the examinations. There is competition, if you like, within those who are devising these assessments, between reliability and the ability of a candidate to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in a more creative way. That is a tension that has led to some of the problems.

Q670 Neil Carmichael: Can I return to the national subject committees? You have quite rightly said how important it is to involve universities and indeed business, but of course not every school leaver goes to university, not every subject necessarily leads to a university outcome, and not every career requires a university degree. It seems to me that, nationally, the approach to a subject should be able to encompass the various different directions of travel that subject might lead to. That is why I am pressing this point: it is not just a university destination, is it? It has to be FE, for example, and so on. How would you incorporate the views of those organisations and of business?

Mr Gibb: Alison Wolf was very clear in her report that all young people need to achieve a certain degree of academic achievement by the time they are 16, regardless of where they then go on to. She is particularly concerned about maths and English, and that in this country too large a proportion are leaving compulsory education, and indeed leaving school at 18, still without having achieved a grade C in maths and English GCSE. That is very important. Wherever you are going—whether you are going into an apprenticeship or straight into work, or into FE or higher education—you need, as a young person, to have these skills well embedded. We need to do more to do that, and we are doing more to help young people who have not achieved those qualifications to achieve them after the age of 16.

Q671 Neil Carmichael: That is really my point. You need to be competent in maths and English whether or not you are going to university. If you look at the issues about employees, for example, in the hotel industry or in skilled labour, then, certainly in my constituency, I still hear about problems. A large
Mr Gibb: I share your view. Terry Leahy, when he was chief executive of Tesco, made very similar points. Education is not about getting a raft of certificates. It is about leaving school as educated as you can be. If our certificate-awarding process is hampering that, we need to do something about the certificate-awarding process. There is some evidence that the structure we have at the moment is not delivering the kind of education that Terry Leahy wants for his employees, that FE wants for its students and that higher education wants for its undergraduates.

Q672 Charlotte Leslie: Going back to the idea of change, and “aren’t things bad enough already?” lots of people have come to us and said that a stronger Ofqual would be more effective than organisational reform. Firstly, do you agree, and secondly, do you think there is merit in letting the strengthening of Ofqual bed down, to see what the new landscape looks like, before making any decisions about organisational reform?

Mr Gibb: It is a good question. We have strengthened Ofqual, because we agree with that element of your question. We need a strong regulator. There is no point in making a regulator’s task 10 times harder by having a system that provides all kinds of powerful incentives that Ofqual will find problematic and unable to regulate. It is better if you have a system that incentivises high standards in our education system, and then Ofqual could regulate that. I think that is the best approach.

Q673 Charlotte Leslie: In terms of Ofqual, do you think its focus should be on standards and comparability as opposed to economic regulation, as Alison Wolf said?

Mr Gibb: It needs to be both. When you have the state as the major purchaser of these qualifications, and when education is compulsory by law, there is an element of a captured market so far as the public are concerned. They have to buy these qualifications through their schools, and therefore there is an element of necessity in having a regulator on the economic side as well as a regulator for the standards. I think it can do both and has the expertise to regulate both sides of that.

Q674 Charlotte Leslie: I know that the Government have already strengthened Ofqual. What other areas do you think may need further strengthening? Do you think its assessment expertise is an area that could need further strengthening? Are there still areas in which you would like to give Ofqual more teeth?

Mr Gibb: We talk to Ofqual regularly. It would raise these issues with us if it felt that it did not have sufficient expertise and it felt it did not have the resources to provide that expertise. At the moment, it believes it can recruit people to the board. All elements of Whitehall have to perform within the financial constraints that the country is imposing at the moment on the public sector. But if there was a need, Ofqual would come to us and we would look at it very carefully.

Q675 Charlotte Leslie: In terms of teeth and providing challenge as opposed to reassurance, what kind of challenges has Ofqual presented to you so far?

Mr Gibb: It believes very much in an evidence-based approach, as we do, but that presents issues. When you look around the world at other qualifications, and say, “Let’s do a piece of work on A-levels,” that is easy to ask, but very difficult to deliver. We tend to have three or four subjects at A-level, whereas in other countries pupils may be taking a wider range of subjects up to A-level, and therefore the exams they take at 18 in a particular subject may look weaker than an English A-level in that particular subject, even though that country’s overall education system may be higher in the PISA table than ours.

There are all kinds of issues. It can become very complicated, as Glenys and Amanda hinted. You have to look not just at the actual grades and whether the pass mark is 28 or 29, but also at the syllabus, the textbooks, the curriculum and so on in making these judgments. That is a challenge to us. We set this objective. It was very easy to write into law. It is a very easy question to ask Ofqual, but the results coming back can be very challenging.

Q676 Charlotte Leslie: Returning to my first question, given that there will, rightly, be challenges that the Government and others respond to, and there will be a change in landscape as Ofqual finds its feet with a stronger role, what do you think is the time balance? If you are going to change things in science, you do so one variable at a time, so that you can measure action and outcome, and have a much clearer relationship between each outcome and each action. Can you give us any further clarity on the timing of how structural reform to exams will take place against the context of a changing and strengthened Ofqual?

Mr Gibb: In terms of reforms to GCSE, we have made some immediate changes to spelling, punctuation and grammar, and some changes to modularisation. Ofqual itself has made some changes in terms of geography. That was an urgent concern for it following some revelations. It has also made some changes to history, maths and French, I think, in modern languages. That is to ensure that the exams are structured in a way that does not enable a candidate to focus on a very narrow part of the syllabus and still be able to get a good grade.

Ofqual is also doing a larger piece of work about the health of our qualification system. That will probably take until the end of 2013. There are also all the changes that will have to be implemented as a consequence of the changes to the national curriculum. There is a lot of change going on and it will take a considerable period of time to implement everything.

Q677 Charlotte Leslie: One final question, which is slightly unrelated. I know that Damian has done a lot...
of work on this. How do you see the role and accountability of JCQ in terms of all this? I know that Damian has done quite a lot of work on what powers it actually has and its accountability to the electorate and to Government. Do you have any views on that?

Mr Gibb: I do not have strong views on this. It is a matter really for Ofqual. JCQ has an important role in all the issues that Glenys Stacey set out in terms of timing and co-ordination. It also plays an important role in investigating malpractice; if there are accusations that there has been bad administration of an exam in a particular school or setting, it has a role in investigating that malpractice. It plays an important role, but I think that is a matter for Ofqual.

Q678 Chair: For the record, I think the four subjects were English, maths, history and geography, rather than French.

Mr Gibb: Thank you.

Q679 Pat Glass: We have been conducting this inquiry for some months now, and it feels a little like being the person who comes to the crossroads to ask directions, and is told, “Well, wherever you are going to, do not start from here.” It appears that there is no perfect system: there are advantages and disadvantages with every system that we look at, and there are risks with all of them. What do you think? You have clearly been looking at this. I do not want you to give us the details of what you are going to come out with, but what do you think are the greatest risks that you want to avoid and the greatest advantages that you are looking for?

Mr Gibb: The biggest risk that we are trying to avoid is having a system that itself incentivises behaviour that is not what we want to see in our schools. That is not to say that I think there is grade inflation or a real dumbing down of the system, but it is very real. If you have a system that appears to incentivise that and it seems an odd thing to have created. That is the risk that I personally would like to see addressed. It can be addressed in a number of ways, by further strengthening of the regulator, for example, or all kinds of different approaches. But it is something that I think needs to be addressed. It evolved due to history and so on. In terms of the risks that might confront, there are the issues that I raised earlier: we do not want to put all our eggs in one basket. That is a very real risk.

Q680 Pat Glass: Do you think that the current system, where we have exam providers offering training and endorsing textbooks, is producing a dependency culture among teachers and narrowing the curriculum?

Mr Gibb: It is an issue, and Ofqual have had a call for evidence about it. That has now closed, and it will be reporting on it soon, which will be very interesting. When you see Mark Walport talking about the practice of awarding bodies endorsing textbooks directed at helping candidates to pass exams rather than to understand the subject in depth, which came out of his report the year before last, then that is a very real concern expressed by somebody who is very senior in the scientific world, and we have to address that concern. Textbooks should not be a step-by-step guide to getting a good grade in an exam. They should be all about the subject. If a candidate wants to go beyond the exam and read in depth, that should be available in the textbooks we give to young people in schools.

Q681 Pat Glass: Given that, do you think that the practice we have at the moment—we were shown, as I mentioned earlier, a textbook and a syllabus that looked exactly the same—is restricting inquisitive minds and restricting the curriculum? Can I ask the same question I asked earlier: do you believe that people who are setting exams should also be delivering training and writing textbooks?

Mr Gibb: That last question is something that Ofqual is looking into. To an extent we have to wait to see what it has to say. There is a case for an examiner being able to say what you should ensure as a minimum is being taught in your schools. What would be wrong is when the examiner starts to say how to get a good grade in a particular exam or what you should focus on or starts to give hints about what is in the exam. That would be very wrong.

Q682 Pat Glass: What about endorsed textbooks?

Mr Gibb: I have referred to Mark Walport. Other people have said similar things. It is an issue that I have a concern about. I would like to see young people reading textbooks in schools that go beyond simply what you need to get an A* in a GCSE.

Q683 Chair: On specifications, you said that your biggest concern is to get rid of the incentive to lower quality. Going back to Damian’s earlier question about how exactly awarding bodies compete, an obvious area would be to look at the specification, and to take away bodies’ ability to specify what is going to be in the exam and to engineer the lowest possible level while exceeding the regulator’s minimum standard. What do you think?

Mr Gibb: That is an option. We will wait to see what your Committee has to say about that. It is certainly an option. You could make the GCSE subject criteria far tighter than they are as another way of delivering that. You can make the national curriculum tighter in terms of subject content. There are a whole host of ways you can address that. Certainly the proposal that you have suggested is something that requires serious consideration.

Q684 Neil Carmichael: The Government have said they are concerned about the numbers of students getting higher grades—grade inflation. What do you think are the principle causes of that?

Mr Gibb: In terms of grade inflation, I am relying on the work of Professor Tymms at Durham University. He says that between 1996 and 2007 the grades of candidates of similar ability have increased by two-thirds of a grade. In A-levels, it is two grades. In some subjects like maths, it is a whole grade at GCSE. That evidence needs to be considered. What was your particular point again?
Q685 Neil Carmichael: I was wondering what you thought the causes of grade inflation were.
Mr Gibb: Some of it may not be grade inflation. Candidates are working very hard. Part of that two-thirds, or two grades at A-level, is, I am sure, because candidates are working harder. They may be being taught better. We cannot say that this is all grade inflation. We have a criterion-based grading system, and I am sure that an element of that will be because our young people are delivering a better outcome in their exams. But we cannot be sure that all of it is that, and we have to some research into that to make sure there is no inherent inflation in the system.

Q686 Neil Carmichael: In the context of the debate that we have been having—we have referred to the events just before Christmas with the Daily Telegraph revelations and so on—is there a danger that any reform of the exam system might end up being interpreted or promoted as a response to the standards problem, rather than what children are actually learning in a classroom and how they are being equipped for their careers?
Mr Gibb: It is all those things, isn’t it? It is a response to what has been happening and it is a response to assuring employers and universities that their concerns are being addressed. That is part of it. In terms of our general sense of direction, we want to look less to the past and more to what is happening in other countries. However good our education system is, it is now recognised internationally that education is the key to economic growth and to getting people out of poverty. We are slipping down the international league tables because other countries are moving faster, and we need to make sure that we keep up. That is why we are putting so much emphasis on international comparisons, and less, perhaps, on the past.

Q687 Neil Carmichael: I think that is absolutely right. International comparisons must be our guide, because, as we all know, there are examples of outstanding delivery elsewhere, which we need to replicate. The Secretary of State has said that the Government are going to make exams tougher. He has also said that it is important to make sure that they should leave school with at least a pass at grade C in English and mathematics, so tougher exams, but a higher benchmark. That is not necessarily compatible. How are you going to work through that?
Mr Gibb: We do not just want all young people to have a certificate with a C on it for the sake of having a certificate. We want them to have the underlying knowledge and skills that would give rise to a high quality GCSE in English and maths. It will mean that we want to do more to help those young people who have not managed to get a C in those two subjects by the time they leave compulsory education, and there is a whole range of policies in place post-16 in order to help young people achieve that. It may not necessarily be in a GCSE, if that is not appropriate for those young people. We also need to make sure that a C in those two subjects at GCSE delivers the kinds of skills that Terry Leahy wants for his employees, and that the FE sector wants for its students. These are challenging objectives for the education sector.

Neil Carmichael: Absolutely.
Mr Gibb: There is no short cut. We cannot just pretend that people are achieving these things by manipulating the GCSE. That is not what it is about. It is about the underlying education that those certificates are meant to validate.

Q688 Neil Carmichael: They are really just a signal of what has happened. What has happened in the classroom is actually the important thing. That is what is going to lead children to develop their careers in a much more surefooted way.
Mr Gibb: Exactly.

Q689 Neil Carmichael: Ofqual’s international comparisons of A-levels with other systems found that, as we heard just before, A-levels stood up, “pretty well”. Given what we have just been saying about slipping down the ladder in overall international comparisons, were you surprised by that?
Mr Gibb: That was the work conducted by Dennis Oppos, a senior civil servant within Ofqual. He made the point that comparing A-levels with similar qualifications around the world is very challenging. But there are also things that we can learn from those international comparisons, about multiple-choice questions, the use of extended essays, and so on. Those are the elements of that work that we can learn from.

Q690 Neil Carmichael: Presumably the Department is really focusing on those very questions now.
Mr Gibb: Yes, in conjunction with Ofqual, because ultimately assessment issues are for Ofqual. Our A-levels do stand up well in comparisons with other countries, but an element of that is that we do three or four subjects as opposed to six, seven or eight in other countries. You have to take that into account when you are comparing qualifications between one country and another.

Q691 Neil Carmichael: If A-levels are standing up as well as they are, why is it that we still have this overall theme of skills shortages, problems with recruitment and so forth? The difficulty for businesses and for most professions is recruiting people with the right skills. So if we are saying that A-levels are standing up quite well in international comparisons, are we saying that A-levels are doing well in terms of the way in which they are structured and marked, while avoiding the much more fundamental question of whether A-levels are the right thing?
Mr Gibb: That is the question. If the evidence is that the assessment process is not out of kilter, then, if universities are still complaining that somebody with an A-level in the subject that they intend to study at university requires a remedial year or remedial lessons in order to bring them up to the standard that the university wants, and a standard that they are finding in the undergraduates from other countries, we do have to address that issue. That may well be an issue
The Government talk Q693 Alex Cunningham: that will lead them to employment. Incentivising young people into the right qualifications world. The market is much more powerful in terms of one GCSE in order to do that. Post-16 it is a different removed the equivalencies of four, five, six or seven in the interests of the child, which is why we have be entering young people in the qualifications that are count towards the performance tables. Schools should particular needs, but it does mean that they will not of those are not valuable for particular students with league tables. That does not mean to say that some vocational qualifications that were available in the criteria—which are things like the size of the qualification, the element of external assessment, and whether a qualification leads to progression—96% of the vocational qualifications that were available in schools will no longer count towards performance league tables. That does not mean to say that some of those are not valuable for particular students with particular needs, but it does mean that they will not count towards the performance tables. Schools should be entering young people in the qualifications that are in the interests of the child, which is why we have removed the equivalencies of four, five, six or seven GCSEs for one qualification. They are all now worth one GCSE in order to do that. Post-16 it is a different world. The market is much more powerful in terms of incentivising young people into the right qualifications that will lead them to employment.

Q693 Alex Cunningham: The Government talk about improvements and changes to drive up performance. They talk about dealing with the issue of grade inflation and introducing the 5% for spelling and grammar across several examinations. Where do you expect us to be in terms of grades over the coming years? What is going to happen to our position internationally? Are you prepared to give us a prediction? Are we going to see continually increased grades but ones that will be more valuable? Will we see an improvement in our international league position? Mr Gibb: It is a very good question. These things take some time: not only do we have to raise standards in our own education system, we also have to work out what is happening internationally. They are not sitting around, around the world, thinking, “Well, we will just sit back for a while and wait for England to catch up.” They may well be pushing further ahead. I know that a lot of jurisdictions keep these issues under continual review, and are looking around the world the whole time to match the best. A lot of these changes will take time. It goes right back to the reforms that we are implementing in primary schools in terms of getting children reading early, getting that right, with the phonics check and so on, and the curriculum review, the changes to the exams and the whole move towards academies in this country. All those reforms are designed to improve education standards in this country. The Secretary of State said recently that he thought it would take 10 years before we see major changes in terms of our international standing. In the meantime, I hope that we will see some evidence of improvement along the way.

Q694 Pat Glass: On that particular issue, Minister, as a Committee we recently visited Singapore. What we have tried to do is look at some of the jurisdictions around the world with the highest qualifications standards. However, we have found that, even with those with the highest standards, there are trade-offs. When we went to Singapore, we saw a very limited curriculum. Children did English, maths and science and practically nothing else. In places like Finland we see very high standards but very high levels of NEETs. There does appear to be a trade-off with these things. We looked at the EBacc: you may not agree with me, but that does appear to bring some limiting of the curriculum. How far are the Government prepared to go in limiting the curriculum to drive up standards in English, maths and science? Mr Gibb: I think you are right that we have to take the international evidence and understand its context in how we apply it to this country. None the less, we can learn a lot. We can learn a huge amount from looking around the world. I am glad you went to Singapore.

In terms of narrowing the curriculum, I do not believe that the EBacc has done that. I think it has broadened the curriculum. It has ensured that more young people are taking a language or a modern language. The decline in 15 and 16-year-olds taking a modern language, which has happened since 2004, is regrettable. That is a sign of a curriculum narrowing, frankly, and now I think we are going to see it broadening.

Q695 Pat Glass: On that very issue of modern languages, there has been an increase in young people taking modern languages, but when we were in Singapore they were very clear in showing us that the education system there is to deliver jobs, and therefore they looked at what was needed in the world economy and the global market. You said earlier that we need an education system that underpins growth and takes people out of poverty. If that is the case, why are the Government not directing that in modern languages, which is happening currently and introducing its context in how we apply it to this country. None the less, we can learn a lot. We can learn a huge amount from looking around the world. I am glad you went to Singapore.

In terms of narrowing the curriculum, I do not believe that the EBacc has done that. I think it has broadened the curriculum. It has ensured that more young people are taking a language or a modern language. The decline in 15 and 16-year-olds taking a modern language, which has happened since 2004, is regrettable. That is a sign of a curriculum narrowing, frankly, and now I think we are going to see it broadening.
you to learn another language later or at the same time more easily. I do not think that we should resile from the importance of German, French and Spanish in our schools. They are still very important languages.

Chair: Minister, two weeks in a row you have come here and have answered our questions courteously and with some skill. Thank you very much indeed for attending again this morning. We can now look forward to PMQs and the Budget.

Mr Gibb: Thank you very much. See you next week.
Written evidence submitted by Martin Collier, Headmaster, St John’s School, Leatherhead

**Biography**

1. I write having had considerable experience in teaching, examining and publishing. I am currently the Headmaster at St John’s School, Leatherhead. I was previously at Oundle School holding the posts (at different times) of Second Master, Director of Studies and Head of History. Before moving to Oundle, I worked for 10 years in the maintained sector at Thomas Tallis, Weavers’ and Dunraven Schools. I examined A level History from 1995–2011 for Edexcel, the AEB and the Oxford Board (although not at the same time). I have served as a Principal Examiner on a number of papers and, as such, I have had experience of setting as well as marking examinations. For the past 14 years I have written and edited text books; I was the co-editor of the Heinemann HAH series and the more recent Edexcel/Pearson A level series. Because of my involvement as an editor and examiner, I sat on the QCA body which devised the structure for the new 16–19 history qualification.

2. I am an educationalist but also write as someone with considerable knowledge of both the examining and publishing world. Until this year, I taught a substantial timetable of History (mainly at GCSE and A levels) and, therefore, I have seen how changes in public examinations have had an impact on pupils. My experience is in examining and writing for A levels and it is in the context of understanding this qualification which I write about below.

3. The fundamental problem within the current examination system is that the examining/awarding bodies are businesses and their primary interest is to make a profit. Over the past few years, changes to specifications and examination structures have been suggested and made because it suited the financial interests of the examination boards rather than for educational reasons. A case in point was the relatively recent reduction of the A level from six to four units or, as in the case of History A level, the introduction of compulsory coursework in 2008. Market share is an important issue for every examination board as it is for all businesses. Indeed, this was a very important consideration in the shaping of A level specifications which were taught for the first time in 2000 and 2008.

4. Perhaps the most worrying consequence of the current system has been the erosion in examining standards. There are still some highly professional examiners within the system. But the examining structure has changed, partly because of the introduction of new technology but, more importantly, to reduce costs. Embedded in the pre-2000 examining culture was a desire to root out inconsistencies and errors in the examining process before grades were awarded. The emphasis now is on mistakes being rectified at the re-mark phase after grades have been issued to pupils. This is a highly unsatisfactory state of affairs for pupils, parents and schools. An appeal to have a re-mark costs money and is out of the reach financially of many schools and parents. Whilst some have the money to challenge the marking, others do not. For many, including myself, such a state of affairs is unfair and entirely unacceptable. Why was the pre-award/results phase in the examining process phased out? Because it was expensive. The attraction to the examination boards of post results re-marks is that the parents pay and it is an opportunity for the examinations boards to make money (or at least break even). On-line marking has its merits and does allow for the checking of scripts as they have been marked. But it does not lend itself to the considered, forensic investigation of marking inaccuracy which was built into the old system.

5. There is considerable merit in the idea of a national examining body. Above all else, such a body could act as the custodian of examining standards as well as the academic integrity of qualifications without the highly corrosive impact of “market forces”. An argument against introducing a national body has been that it would limit choice. This does not have to be the case; a national body could offer a range of options within a qualification. The integrity of a national examining body could be reinforced by creating close links between it and higher education institutions.

6. Another potentially attractive feature of a national examining body could be that it could be used to re-establish and ensure examining standards. The current level of training for new examiners is, as I understand it, minimal at best. Year on year, examination markers determine the future of the young people of our country. It is, therefore, quite extraordinary that we do not insist that they have any substantial training in how to be an examiner. Fees for marking are low, the main because of the examination boards desire to keep costs suppressed. It is my hope that the idea of there being an Institute of Assessment (as recommended by Tomlinson Report) be considered again. Such a body could be part of the national examinations body.

7. Another important role to be taken by a national body would be to ensure quality and year-on-year consistency in the setting of examination papers. The best examination papers emerge after a considered process of debate and reflection. It is also important that papers are scrutinised by as many people as is necessary before being approved.

8. I know little about examination fees and would, therefore, not wish to comment. However, I know enough about the relationship between publishers and examination boards to perceive a conflict of interest. With one examination board being owned by a publisher and all examination boards now having very close links with
the publishing world, a lucrative spin-off to the examination world has emerged in the past few years. It is in
the publishers’ interests that the examination boards chop and change specifications. Text books are now written
specifically for dealing with specific specifications. Whereas this is not so much of a problem at GCSE level,
it is an issue at A level. Pupils studying 16–19 now invariably use what are in reality coursebooks produced
by publishers with close links to the examination boards. The books are rushed into production and can be of
indifferent quality. Rarely do the pupils learn the independent skills necessary for university study through
relying on such coursebooks. In many cases, the people who set the questions on the examination papers
write or edit the books. All in all, the use of such books has the potential to very much narrow the pupils’
intellectual experience.

9. In conclusion, confidence in the examination board and the examining process is low. Driven by market
forces, they have prioritised profit over the quality of the service to schools and, most importantly, the pupils.
It is not surprising that confidence is low given the de-professionalisation of examiners and the lack of training.
The solution is to create a national examining body for all of the reasons stated above. The integrity of such a
body could be guaranteed by higher education institutions and would place the examining process back at the
heart of the education system. Such a body could also set and sustain the required standards for the examining
process from the setting of papers through to marking and awarding. It would ensure that there was not a
potential conflict of interests between publisher and examination board.

November 2011

Further written evidence submitted by Martin Collier, Headmaster St John’s School

In response to your questions:

1. The total teaching time we give at St John’s Leatherhead to each A level subject, over the two years,
is approximately 310 hours which compares with 360 hours, the recommended number of guided
learning hours. The teaching time for AS levels is approximately 145 hours (compared with 180
hours GLH). Teaching time for each GCSE subject is approximately 183 hours (compared with 180
hours GLH).

2. I have expressed my views regarding a central examination board in my written submission. I am
fully in favour.

3. I have no problem in examining children earlier in the academic year. However, this will only work
if linearity is restored at GCSE and A levels. To my mind, there would be no problem in examining
pupils in April/May of years 11 and 13 but it is essential that the summer terms of years 10 and 12
are cleared of public examinations to allow syllabuses to be covered and the learning process to take
place. Another benefit to examining children earlier in year 13 is it would allow for post qualification
application to university which is a good idea. One question which has emerged is whether elements
of coursework will remain as part of linear GCSE and A Level examinations. If they are allowed to
remain, then of course schools will continue to have flexibility as to when these examinations are sat.

4. We do not enter pupils into examination for GCSE early. I think that to do so is educationally flawed.
GCSEs should come at the end of a considered and structured learning process. If the GCSEs are
considered too easy for certain pupils then courses should be written to teach and educate beyond
the confines of the examination specifications. Some schools offer early GCSEs as a means of pupils
accumulating GCSE qualifications but such a “badge collecting” exercise does not necessarily
enhance the pupils’ education.

5. We do not enter pupils for A levels early for the same reasons as expressed in point 4.

January 2012

Written evidence submitted by the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA)

1. ABOUT AQA

1.1 AQA is an education charity and the leading provider of GCSEs and A-levels. We offer a portfolio of
general qualifications (65 A-levels; 64 GCSEs), to suit different teacher and student needs.

1.2 Examination fees are overseen by AQA’s Council, an independent body of trustees nominated by
education stakeholder groups (school leaders, teachers’ unions, employers and Higher Education). Fees are at
a flat rate for almost all subjects. Although some subjects aren’t commercially viable at this price (eg smaller
languages and sciences), we believe it is offering teachers choice based on their students’ needs.

1.3 Any surplus is reinvested to develop the next round of specifications and associated education services.

AQA’s fees for a GCSE in 2011–12 are £28.10 or £28.15, and £75.10 for a four unit A-level; understanding the financial pressure
on school budgets, the last increase in fees was below inflation at 1.2%, compared to the current RPI of c 5%.

For a very small number of subjects costs are significantly higher, and this is reflected in the fee.
2. **Multiple Awarding Bodies (ABs)**

2.1 Having multiple ABs promotes several benefits: innovation in assessment and service; risk reduction; choice; accountability to teachers and students; and the embedding of qualification development in the education community.

2.2 ABs thrive through innovation in response to market needs. Recent examples include the provision of: on-line data, giving sophisticated diagnostic feedback to teachers and students; electronic as well as paper results; the AQA baccalaureate with its on-line diary tool, and on-screen testing. A monopoly position discourages innovation, which would be viewed merely as risk; in a competitive market there are strong incentives. ABs take no risks in the awarding of grades but take managed risks in striving to improve ancillary services to teachers.

2.3 Competition reduces risk by driving up quality. Further, multiple ABs allow risk to be shared and spread. In the unlikely event of operational failure, not all students would be affected and another AB could intervene. The upheaval associated with changing systems or mergers poses a significant threat to the safe delivery of examinations.

2.4 Dissatisfied teachers can switch between ABs, thus driving inferior provision out of the market. Teachers can switch easily, especially when specifications are revised (normally every five years). There is no “tie in” and standardised administrative arrangements facilitate switching. This creates strong incentives to reduce costs and improve service.

2.5 While some fundamental aspects of general qualifications (eg articulation of their primary purpose) sit best with government, the subtlety of content and approach sit best closer to the education community. Historically, ABs have grown out of Higher Education and subject communities, partly explaining the relatively high levels of satisfaction with GCSEs and A-levels amongst teachers and other stakeholders.

2.6 There is an enduring collaborative relationship between the education community and ABs. ABs support grassroots developments, such as new qualifications and new specifications, thus enriching the assessment system. They take different perspectives on content depending on their relationships with different learned bodies, universities and expert groups, while the regulatory requirement to demonstrate equivalence of demand ensures comparability of rigour. Thus, teachers can select approaches tailored to the needs and interests of their students.

2.7 New Senior Examiners also require significant training in assessment techniques. Over time this would increase running costs and recruiting Senior Examiners is difficult and costly. Experience from national curriculum testing indicates that, where a contract moves between franchisees, disruption as staff are transferred or substantial TUPE/redundancy costs ensue, and significant delivery risk is introduced. Contracted markers and subject experts can move around more easily, although not all would move, and recruiting Senior Examiners is difficult and costly. Over time this would increase running costs and

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3. **Franchising as an Alternative**

3.1 Franchising is often introduced into monopolistic markets to create a proxy for competition. The benefits of introducing franchising into a market that already benefits from competition are unclear. While franchising has advantages over a single-AB system, it has none over the current system and would make the market less efficient. Significant disadvantages of franchising ABs to offer qualifications in particular subjects are outlined below.

3.2 AB expertise consists of subject and operations knowledge. Franchising would require this expertise to move between franchisees or be re-established from a potentially low level as each franchise was granted. Experience from national curriculum testing indicates that, where a contract moves between franchisees, disruption as staff are transferred or substantial TUPE/redundancy costs ensue, and significant delivery risk is introduced. Contracted markers and subject experts can move around more easily, although not all would move, and recruiting Senior Examiners is difficult and costly. Over time this would increase running costs and

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diminish the stock of assessment expertise available. Additionally, on each tendering process, the incumbent franchisee would be at an advantage over competitor franchisees in not having to bear these costs.

3.3 Currently, small organisations can enter the market, building up entries for their qualifications over time as they gain experience. However, as evident in national curriculum testing in 2008, entry into a substantial assessment market involves heavy start-up costs and risk of reputational damage. Developing, administering and awarding qualifications require a complex, interdependent structure, which doesn’t flex easily according to contracts won and lost. The need to flex would, therefore, leave the system open to very high levels of risk. Costly contingencies, such as those put in place for national curriculum testing, would be needed to mitigate the risk of delivery failure.

3.4 Bidding and contracting costs would be substantial and need to be weighed against any likely savings. Bidding costs are likely to act as a barrier to small providers entering the market. Such high costs are generated by the need for public and explicit processes, legal teams to negotiate contracts, and contract management to ensure obligations are met. The cost of establishing such a system would be high.

3.5 Moreover, franchising wouldn’t necessarily drive quality during the contract’s lifetime. It could support a culture of suppliers meeting contractual requirements but no more. Franchisees would have little incentive to innovate over the comparatively long term of the franchise, up to the point of considering whether to re-tender. Competitive tendering can also encourage potential franchisees to downplay estimated costs or overplay intended level of quality; and then, once the franchise has been awarded and the agreement entered into, reveal the true cost and quality of the contract, leaving the franchisor with the option of remaining tied into a lengthy, unattractive agreement or incurring the considerable expense of re-tendering.

3.6 Finally, in the current multi-AB system, teachers make the decision as to which AB to purchase services from. In franchising, this choice would be removed from teachers and given to a centralised government body with less direct knowledge of teacher and student needs, risking a loss of oversight and accountability.

4. QUALITY OF AB PROCESSES

4.1 While any process contains room for improvement, the quality of assessment at GCSE and A-level will be improved not by changing AB structure, but by increased research and innovation, including attention to international comparisons and hence competitiveness.

4.2 AQA’s question paper production, marking and awarding processes are documented, transparent, and follow the Regulators’ Code of Practice.16 There is, however, public concern that ABs compete by lowering standards and are delivering lower quality products because they are focused on other activities eg publishing. We shall address these concerns below.

5. QUESTION PAPERS

5.1 In 2011 AQA produced 1,365 question papers and mark-schemes, involving over 1,000 Senior Examiners and advisers.

5.2 These are subject to a detailed, auditable process of revision overseen by the Subject Manager. Production involves at least four subject experts, including practising teachers and lecturers: Chair, Chief (who will also be a Principal Examiner (PE)), Reviser and Scrutineer.17 Extensive training and peer support are provided to the Senior Examining teams.18 Including the Subject Manager and a Proof Reader, at least six people proof-read and check every paper.19

5.3 The PE produces a draft paper and documents how it meets AQA’s quality assurance criteria. It then goes to a Reviser, whose comments go to the Question Paper Evaluation Committee (QPEC) comprising the subject’s Senior Examining team. The QPEC rigorously reviews each paper. Following the meeting, a Scrutineer checks and works through the paper. The Chief and Chair give final approval, and further quality assurance checks are made before printing. External printers are appointed following due diligence and enter into a contract covering all aspects of quality and security.

5.4 Post examination, statisticians produce detailed analyses of paper effectiveness (including measures of reliability, question difficulty and discrimination).20 These analyses, together with teachers’ comments and Senior Examiners’ experience of how students answered the questions, are used to inform the setting of subsequent papers.21 Hence, an effective cycle of feedback and continuous improvement is established.

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17 See the Ofqual Code of Practice for definitions of these roles.
19 Senior Examiners are on one-year contracts, ensuring that any issues around quality can be addressed promptly.
Despite claims to the contrary, evidence suggests that question papers are high quality and not unduly predictable.22

5.5 In 2011, two AQA papers contained printing errors and three questions contained significant errors that impeded students’ ability to respond (0.01% of the total number of questions set). AQA’s investigation into these errors concluded that there was no systemic failure.23 Paper production is susceptible to human error which we work hard to minimise. Where errors occur, we have effective methods to ensure that students are not disadvantaged. These include examiner allowances, marking and awarding adjustments and special consideration provisions.24 We are also investigating the possible benefits of the innovative use of technology in this area, including producing papers using a secure on-line system and a question-authoring approach.25 While AQA pre-tests some questions, experience shows that routine pre-testing isn’t the most effective, economical approach to error-identification. Errors can be reduced by the proper functioning of the scrutiny process. We are reinforcing this by providing enhanced clarity regarding the Scrutineer’s role, and by strengthening the links between the Scrutineer and the other members of the Senior Examining team.

6. MARKING

6.1 Marking ranks scripts so that grade boundaries can be applied. Despite contrary perceptions, the marking reliability of general qualifications compares favourably with qualifications internationally.26 This is so even for assessments requiring relatively subjective judgements, eg English.27 Marking reliability could be improved by requiring less extended writing from students, but this would undermine assessment validity.28

6.2 Overall responsibility for marking, which is conducted by teams of examiners, lies with the PE. Examiners must normally have a relevant degree or equivalent, and at least three terms’ teaching experience.29

6.3 Following the examination, the PE identifies and marks a sample of scripts for quality assurance purposes. These are used to train examiners to mark at the same standard as the PE (standatisation) and as comparators for monitoring examiners’ ongoing marking.

6.4 Standardisation takes place on-line where possible, ensuring communication of the correct standard directly from PE to examiner.30 Where standardisation is face-to-face, the PE trains all examiners except where entries are large. Here the PE standardises assistant PEs/Team Leaders. They use materials marked by the PE to ensure the standard is communicated accurately.

6.5 On-screen marking is done question-by-question (rather than script-by-script) which improves reliability.31 Monitoring is through questions included in examiners’ allocations which the PE has already marked (seeds). Examiners are unaware which questions are seeds, allowing marking to be monitored throughout the process, in real time, identifying any deterioration in quality. Monitoring of paper-based marking is through sampling. AQA is rolling out on-screen marking for its examinations, supported by a programme of research evaluation.32

6.6 If an examiner’s marking is consistently severe or lenient and they cannot be re-standardised, their marks are adjusted. If, however, the examiner is inconsistent, they will be stopped and the scripts re-marked.

6.7 If there is doubt about an examiner’s marking, a partial or full re-mark will be undertaken by Senior Examiners. All examiners are classified based on the quality of their marking and administration. Reappointment is based on that classification.

6.8 Teachers may request a re-mark should they be dissatisfied with a student’s mark. While the number of re-mark requests increases year-on-year, evidence suggests this is due to the increasingly high-stakes nature of the qualifications, not deterioration in marking quality.33 Surveys of the users of general qualifications suggest high levels of satisfaction with the reliability of the marking and grading process.34

23 The full report can be found at: http://store.aqa.org.uk/news/pdf/AQA-W-SUMMER-2011-PAPER-ERRORS.PDF
24 http://web.aqa.org.uk/exam-errors.php
25 Rather than a single PE being responsible for an entire paper, a question authoring approach draws on numerous experts to produce a bank of questions from which papers can be constructed. The overall quality of a paper still rests with a named individual and they are free to focus attention on ensuring that quality, as they are not the sole source of all questions.
29 These requirements are considered more than adequate. See: Meadows, M, and Billington, L (2007). The Effect of Marker Background and Training on the Quality of Marking in GCSE English. Report produced for the National Assessment Agency.
7. Grading

7.1 After marking, grade boundaries are set to compensate for small year-on-year fluctuations in difficulty (eg a slightly more difficult paper requires slightly lower grade boundaries).\(^{35, 36}\) Boundaries are set by expert Senior Examiners, supported by technical staff, using statistical and judgemental evidence. This blend of evidence is essential to maintaining standards over time.\(^{37}\)

7.2 Statistical analyses measure how the general ability of a cohort of students compares with that of the previous year. For example, in setting A-level boundaries, the average GCSE performance of the students is compared with that of the previous year’s students to help predict likely outcomes. Predictions take into account any year-on-year fluctuations in national GCSE results and are made across large cohorts, making them highly reliable. Crucially, predictions are based on national outcomes and therefore align AB standards.\(^{38}\) Other forms of technical evidence used include comparisons of the outcomes of schools and colleges common to the two years, re-sitting rates and the performance of re-sitters, and teachers’ estimated grades.

7.3 The analyses provide a starting place for Senior Examiners to scrutinise the students’ work. Examiners review the students’ work on the previous year’s grade boundary, compare it with the performance of this year’s students, and so select the most appropriate grade boundary, taking into account any changes in the demand of the question papers. The complexity of this task makes the statistical input essential.\(^{39}\)

7.4 Aspects of student performance are carefully documented, particularly if it is believed that there has been a fall or rise in performance unsupported by the statistical evidence. Indeed, changes in outcomes exceeding 1% of statistical predictions trigger an even more robust investigation of both student performance and the reliability of the statistics. Occasionally this involves cross-reference to other ABs’ awarding experiences; an advantage of multiple ABs is the opportunity for illuminating comparison.\(^{40}\)

7.5 Joint Council for Qualifications post-award analyses identify any potential misalignment of inter-AB standards. If misalignment is suggested, research is undertaken before the next award so as to understand the causes and achieve future alignment.\(^{41}\) This research uses increasingly sophisticated student-level data, methods and analyses. Hence, the belief that teachers gain advantage by switching to “easier” ABs is unfounded,\(^{42}\) differences in demand are compensated for in the setting of boundaries, which is continually reviewed.

7.6 The progressively high-stakes nature of general qualifications\(^{43}\) partly explains the year-on-year increases\(^{44}\) in results, which amount to a handful of extra students in each school exceeding the grade boundary each year. Teachers focus intensively on supporting borderline students,\(^{45}\) aided by the increased availability of mark-schemes, past papers, information and support, and transparency as to the skills and knowledge required and how to demonstrate them. Examinations focus on tightly defined sets of skills and knowledge. As education becomes increasingly centred on passing examinations, outcomes go up while other measures of learning, such as those measured by international surveys, go down.\(^{46}\)

36 Full details of the awarding process are set out in AQA’s “A basic guide to standard setting”: http://web.aqa.org.uk/ovet/standards.php?id=03&pee=03
41 In 2008 a new suite of GCSE Science specifications were awarded for the first time. Inter-AB differences in outcomes were the first indication that standards had not been maintained across all specifications. This would have remained undetected for longer in a single AB arrangement.
43 Teachers often compare the raw results of ABs without understanding the extent to which the general ability of each AB entry varies.
8. Commercial Activities

8.1 AQA works with numerous subject and assessment experts who wish to develop and share expertise through high quality training, resources and support to teachers. AQA’s commercial activities extend to resources considered to be educationally robust, but optional. Resources considered fundamental to teaching a specification are made freely available. The majority of AQA resources are free.

8.2 We offer training courses to support the development of knowledge and expertise specifically in the context of specifications, and more generally across the key stages. The former are free when specifications change or for schools new to a specification.47 Some courses include feedback on examination performance and are designed to improve subject teaching with a strong focus on practical strategies. However, when Senior Examiners are used as trainers, they are contractually prohibited from using any material that would confer unfair advantage. Teachers’ feedback indicates that they find this support invaluable.

8.3 Other free support includes: teaching aids, eg schemes of work and resource lists; examples of marked work with examiners’ reports on student performance; personalised support from coursework advisers; and local network meetings for examinations officers. AQA also provides schools with subject advisers to give specification advice. For example, recognising the high proportion of non-specialists within the mathematics teaching community,48 we provide every school with a dedicated teaching and learning advisor. Teachers use this free service to ensure students are taught the right content at the right level, and to explore innovative ways of delivering the subject.

8.4 AQA doesn’t publish textbooks. It works with a range of publishers to quality-ensure endorsed resources for specifications, which helps restrain the most misleading market provision. Endorsement acts as a Kitemark; quality assurance ensures the text accurately interprets the specification and assessment arrangements. Specifications are, however, sufficiently detailed that there is no need to buy texts to understand what is required. Examiners are leading subject experts and usually practising teachers, so are well-placed to act as authors. However, contractually, they mustn’t make use of their association with AQA for commercial purposes or identify themselves as AQA examiners in texts. In our experience teachers and students value a mixture of texts, some written for specifications and containing examination advice, and some more general.

8.5 AQA offers free Teacher Resource Banks (eg All About Maths) which can be used to supplement texts. Further, through Teachit49 we provide an on-line forum for teachers to share best practice. Teachit offers on-line support materials produced by teachers for teachers. PDFs which provide content equivalent to textbook material are free; only interactive materials are chargeable. These materials are never AB-specific. They reduce the pressure on schools to purchase new texts after significant specification revisions or when changing AB, and so are cost effective.

9. Conclusion

9.1 A different AB structure wouldn’t solve the perceived problems with assessment quality and cost. A multiple-AB structure which encourages competition and innovation is most likely to improve quality and efficiency. Indeed, evidence suggests that a different AB structure would produce problems of its own. However, there are opportunities for improvement and for working with schools and colleges to eliminate costs. We would of course be keen to discuss these and any related issues.

November 2011

Further written evidence submitted by AQA (Annex A)

Examination Awarding Process

The setting of grade boundaries is necessary because question papers vary in demand between examination series and between awarding bodies. It is impossible to interpret differences in average marks over time or between awarding bodies. This slight variation is inevitable unless all examination questions are thoroughly pre-tested which would significantly increase the cost of the system.

Thus, grading (or awarding) is the process by which standards are maintained over time and between awarding bodies. Grading draws on a range of evidence from both sophisticated statistical analyses and the judgements of senior examiners, who are experienced subject specialists.

The statistical analyses measure how the general ability of the students entered for the qualification compares with that of students entered in the previous year. For example, in setting A-level grade boundaries, the average GCSE performance of the students entered is compared with that of the previous year. If the GCSE performance of the students across the two years is identical, the statistical evidence would suggest that it is likely that there would be no improvement in A-level outcomes.

47 For example, over the last year we have run more than 140 meetings for GCSE Science teachers and invested more than £500,000.
49 Teachit is part of the AQA family: http://www.teachit.co.uk/
If, on the other hand, the A-level had attracted an entry with a much lower GCSE performance than in the previous year, then some decrease in A-level outcomes would be anticipated. These comparisons take into account any year-on-year fluctuations in national GCSE results.

Crucially, these analyses are based on the national outcomes in any qualification and thus ensure that the different awarding bodies’ standards are aligned. If, for example, awarding body A’s A-level in Fictional Studies attracted an entry with lower GCSE results than awarding body B’s A-level in Fictional Studies, then awarding body A would be predicted to have lower grading outcomes than awarding body B. The setting of the grade boundaries would reflect this expectation.

Unfortunately, it is these legitimate differences in outcomes between awarding bodies that are misinterpreted to mean that there are differences in standards between the awarding bodies. It is impossible to compare the raw outcomes of awarding bodies. It is essential to take into account the relative ability of the awarding bodies’ entries.

It is important to note that these predictions are not made at the level of the individual student and a student’s past performance does not determine their grade. Instead, the predictions look at the whole qualification entry, that is, across tens to hundreds of thousands of students.

This makes them highly reliable. This is only one of many forms of technical evidence used to support examiners’ judgments about where to place grade boundaries; others include analyses based on comparisons of the outcomes of those schools and colleges common to the two years which have stable entry patterns, re-sitting rates and the performance of re-sitters, and teachers’ estimated grades.

The statistical analyses provide an extremely helpful context, but cannot detect whether there are actual changes in the performance of the cohort. They provide a starting place for teams of senior examiners to scrutinise carefully the students’ work.

The examiners review the work of students who fell on the previous year’s grade boundary, compare it with the performance of this year’s students, and so select the most defensible and fair grade boundary, taking into account any changes in the demand of the question papers. As noted above, this fluctuation in demand explains why grade boundaries need to change and is not pre-set.

Great care is taken to document aspects of the performance of the students, particularly if the examiners believe that there has been a fall or rise in performance that is not supported by the statistical evidence.

Indeed, any changes in outcomes that exceed just 1% of what we would expect based on the technical evidence trigger an even more robust investigation of both the performance of the students and the reliability of the statistics. This ensures that we can be confident that any changes in outcomes are fair and defensible.

A more complete description of the awarding process can be found in the Guide to Standard Setting.

February 2012

Further written evidence submitted by AQA (Annex B)

Nelson Thornes Background

For a number of years AQA exclusively endorsed a range of text books, from Nelson Thornes, for A level and GCSE courses.

The four-year contract expired in August 2011 and has not been renewed. It was originally entered into by AQA when it was felt essential to ensure that there were materials to support the full range of qualifications, at a time of major specification reform.

It is our view that with changing technologies there are other resources being made available in other ways to support teaching, which is of particular relevance in the less widely taught subjects that might not attract publishers on an economic basis.

We have been reviewing our links with the publishing industry since May 2011 and are planning to work with a range of publishers to quality-assure resources for individual subjects and levels on a non-exclusive basis.

The contract, with Nelson Thornes, that expired in 2011 had a number of run-out commitments in relation to existing material for existing specifications, which we will of course honour.
Further written evidence submitted by AQA (Annex C)

The first point relates to whether we hold data regarding those candidates in receipt of free school meals. The short answer is that we do not. This information is, however, held in the Department for Education National Pupil Database. It would therefore be possible for awarding body data to be matched to this data to allow investigations to be conducted. We have not conducted such analyses at AQA.

The second point arises from my concern that there is the potential for misunderstanding regarding the sharing of data between awarding bodies. Results data are shared between the awarding body technical teams and Responsible Officers solely to support the maintenance of standards over time and between boards. The key instances when data are shared are:

— during August, following the summer examination series but prior to the issue of results, when provisional results data are also shared with Ofqual, but not made more widely or publicly available. This allows the provisional results at qualification level (compared to statistical predictions based on the prior attainment of the entry) to be challenged by Ofqual and by fellow awarding bodies. This can very occasionally expose differences in the application of the standard which can be corrected before results are issued. Sharing between boards aids transparency and understanding. These data have not been published but would be available on request from Ofqual and were the subject of a previous note to the committee written by Michelle Meadows and sent on 26 January 2012;

— following the summer examination series but after results have been issued. This allows a post hoc analysis of inter-awarding body standards using a different methodology to that described above. As such it helps identify any instances of residual misalignment. Where differences are exposed these can be corrected before the next examination series. The detail of this analysis was also covered by the note to the committee written by Michelle Meadows;

— for the purpose of inter-awarding body comparability exercises. These often have a strong qualitative element involving experts’ judgements of the quality of candidate performance. These qualitative data are strengthened by analysis of quantitative data. For example, complex statistical modelling can be conducted to investigate whether differences in standards exist once school effects are taken into account; and

— to allow the evaluation of new technical or operational techniques, for example when a new grading structure is introduced (eg A* at A level). To conduct such investigations at a national, inter-awarding body level is more powerful than to use an individual board’s data. The technical expertise to conduct such investigations lies within the boards, which makes sharing necessary.

The sharing of data follows a strict JCQ protocol (a copy of which is attached here) which prevents their being used for purposes other than those intended. In particular, this explicitly rules out the use of data to gain an insight into an awarding body’s entry pattern, and the sharing of data with any commercial or marketing function of the board is not allowed. In AQA, strict divisions exist between the technical, standards and marketing functions.

A final point to make is that Ofqual can and does request any of the above data from the awarding bodies.

April 2012

Written evidence submitted by Pearson

SUMMARY

1. Getting the examinations system right is critical to securing the reputation of the English education system as a whole, and the success of the individuals passing through it.

2. This paper argues that English qualifications have a strong heritage and are held in high regard around the world. Similarly, features of our system-wide approach are influencing practice internationally.

3. Worldwide, spending on assessment is growing. Pearson have taken international best practice in standards-setting, curriculum alignment and technology as our guide in investing in the English system. We see this investment as critical to developing an education system which ensures British learners continue to be successful in the global marketplace.

4. There is an opportunity to build a position for England as the leader in modern, reliable, valid, globally-benchmarked tests, with all the benefits that will bring to learners both in terms of their experience of education, and in their success in the world of work beyond. Pearson’s strategy as a partner in the English examinations system is to help to deliver that.

INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

5. Since becoming involved in the English examinations system in 2003 through acquiring the awarding body Edexcel, Pearson has drawn on our international experience in education to define our strategic approach.
6. Pearson works in over 70 countries, with assessment being one of our core areas of expertise. We support governments, teachers and learners to use assessment to support educational improvement and reform. We are also committed to building a body of research to inform policy development in this area, sponsoring three global research centres including the Oxford University Centre for Educational Assessment.

7. In our experience, assessment is central to an education system’s broader success. Internationally, the approach taken to examinations varies widely. Everywhere the challenge is balancing flexibility for teachers and schools with consistent standards. This is achieved through many different methods. Often the chosen approach is built on historical, geographical and cultural reasoning.

8. Some countries set examinations centrally but rely heavily on teacher assessment, others set tests and mark papers regionally against a nationally defined standard, and a smaller number centrally define and externally mark all examinations. The approach taken at a system-level has many and various implications for the cost, risk and reliability, validity and accuracy of assessment; however there is no clear correlation between the approach taken to assessment and examination systems, and performance in international comparison studies such as PISA.

9. The world’s best education systems today:
   (a) Design assessments which test what students need to know and be able “to do” to progress in their lives in the 21st century.
   (b) Deliver examination results that are recognised as accurate reflections of candidates’ performance with respect to known empirical standards—not only over time or compared with their peers.
   (c) Not only monitor attainment, but actively improve learning.

10. Pearson have therefore promoted an integrated approach to developing curricula and assessments, by supporting teachers to develop their skills in assessment, and using attainment data to target classroom practice. We have also focused on using technology to improve the quality of high stakes assessments and their administration.

11. We believe that continuing this innovation and investment is critical, as globalisation drives increased labour market mobility and a demand for internationally recognised qualifications to support it.

12. This means continuing to encourage the embedding of international best practice in assessment and curriculum, and making even better use of formative assessment and technology. To do this successfully, we also need to manage the perceived or real risks to standards associated with these innovations.

CURRENT AREAS OF LEADERSHIP

13. Diversity and competition in examinations provision in England has led to investment which has put it on the leading edge of many global changes in assessment.

14. Over the last decade, the UK awarding sector has delivered increases in the quantity and range of qualifications and assessment support on offer, responding to government initiatives as well as changes in demand led by learners, teachers and end users. Alongside this, there have been vast improvements in the reliability and pace of examinations administration.

International reputation

15. A reflection of the health of the English system is the high regard in which its general and vocational qualifications are held globally.

16. English qualifications are well regarded and understood internationally, and are a thriving export industry—100,000 Edexcel and 300,000 Cambridge International Examinations A levels were awarded internationally last year. Vocational qualifications such as the BTEC are offered in over 50 countries, with the Higher National Diploma in particular growing as a result of strong recognition amongst employers.

17. England is also regarded as an exemplar in developing and administering assessments which go beyond the summative assessment of knowledge to focus on targeting specific labour market demands. The use of technology and data to improve rather than just report performance, already popular in English schools, is growing in momentum elsewhere. Pearson is working with a number of governments to meet these agendas, based upon our UK experience and reputation.

18. For example, India is seeking to mirror the English system in its vocational education reform programme, launching sector skills councils to help anticipate and respond to skills needs, and creating qualifications frameworks which standardise awards against one another. The Hong Kong Examinations and Assessments Authority is exploring how to use technology to embed assessment for learning into its curriculum, and Singapore is seeking to modernise examinations administration so teachers can access more granular assessment information.
Technology

19. Edexcel has taken advantage of Pearson technology to drive the quality of assessment and customer service across its qualifications in England. Our most significant investment has been in the use of onscreen marking technology. This allows for more accurate and timely marking, whilst giving absolute transparency over how marking is progressing in real time.

20. Other investments in technology-driven innovation have also resulted in increased reliability—through online examiner training, online grading, and computer based testing. Our investment in world-class processes and technology to scan and record all Edexcel examinations reduces the risk that results are lost, and enables greater opportunities for students and teachers to verify or query results should they be dissatisfied. Thanks to investment in online processing, the average turnaround time for priority GCE Enquiries About Results—those linked to university places—is now 2.7 days compared to 11.6 days in 2007.

Testing the right things

21. To ensure the ongoing value of our qualifications for learners, we invest in developing and trialling new offers to meet the emerging demands of universities and employers.

22. This also supports better outcomes: one of the most powerful motivators to raising student performance is understanding the purpose and relevance of the curriculum to their next step.

Use of data to enhance attainment

23. Onscreen marking has the added benefit of enabling detailed analysis of examination scripts at school, teacher, and learner level. Edexcel’s ResultsPlus service, provided free, allows teachers to gain an understanding of performance on questions and curriculum topics. This rich analysis—alongside national comparison data—provides the insight to personalise student learning and to help teachers and departments recognise their own areas of strength and weakness, driving systemic improvements to teaching and learning.

24. We are working to spread these benefits wider—this year we have introduced Mock Analysis, which means all secondary schools and colleges can benefit from using Edexcel’s library of past exam papers to gain greater insight into the progress of learning.

25. We have responded to lessons from services like ResultsPlus to focus our resource development on those areas of content or study where difficulty is most often evident, and develop flexible digital resources which take a more personalised approach. For example, ResultsPlusBooster responds to data feedback to provide focused tasks on areas in which a given student shows weakness. This means teachers are equipped to address gaps in knowledge and skills and ensure that no child is left behind, as well as stretch the brightest.

Additional support for teachers

26. Assessment is necessary to monitor performance and provide learners with qualifications that have currency. In the context of high stakes performance measures, assessment is also a high motivating factor for teachers. 91% of teachers told us they feel pressure to teach to the test due to league tables. The risk is that this narrow focus on performance can lead to a narrow teaching approach.

27. Given that examinations do influence teaching practice, we need to ensure that assessments reflect the breadth of what learners need to know at the end of the course, and that teachers are supported to deliver that content in its fullest. Achieving clear alignment between curriculum and assessment, and supporting teachers to develop their teaching and assessment skills—is therefore the final link in improving learning outcomes. This is explored in more detail in Tim Oates’ paper “Could do better”, in which he argues that this alignment should be one of the key organising principles of the current National Curriculum Review.

28. Reflecting this, Pearson draws on the best subject experts, teachers and authors to devise question papers and specifications, as well as support and resources.

29. We publish teaching resources as part of an integrated support package which is closely linked to our GCSE and GCE specifications from Edexcel. We have also focused on improving the clarity of our specifications, since understanding the scope of a course is a key factor in delivering reliable and valid assessments and raising achievement. Our feedback shows that over 60% of teachers think there has been significant progress in this area in recent years.

30. Public confidence requires that, alongside this, we act to mitigate actively any perceived conflicts of interest or risks that the confidentiality of question papers is breached. Pearson have a Code of Ethics outlining this for all our examiners, we do not allow publishing staff any knowledge of exam papers, and while we have agreements with all publishers, none of them are exclusive. We believe it is important for public confidence that these policies are adopted and communicated industry wide.

31. Enabling freedom and creativity in classroom practice requires a system where the goal and standard are specified, but there is flexibility in how these standards are achieved. Pearson aim to provide a range of resources and specifications which meet the standard defined by the regulator at each level. This enables teachers to make a confident choice which takes account of the preferences of their learners, without
compromising standards. We should also look to formative assessment as a tool which can provide for teachers the evidence they need to personalise learning and engage students.

Cost

32. Even with the additional services outlined above, examination fees have risen more slowly than inflation over the last five years. The awarding body system delivers results at a substantially lower cost than franchising approaches.

33. However, the volume of exams taken has increased substantially and as a result centres’ overall spend on examinations has risen in recent years. The growing role of qualifications in competing for progression to further study and employment, and emphasis on performance tables, has led to more people taking larger numbers of qualifications and rising numbers of resits. The move to modular qualifications also plays a role.

34. Given that resource is being allocated to this area by schools, there is a case to explore further the role of formative assessment and intelligent use of data, to ensure that assessments are worthwhile in driving up performance for schools and students, rather than merely accrediting it.

Areas for Reform and Investment

35. The role of the regulator is to ensure that in the context of innovation, standards and fairness are maintained across awarding bodies. Our research indicates that this approach is effective—with higher education and schools reporting that they regard differences between awarding organisations and specifications as being confined to pedagogical approach and the type of content covered, rather than relating to standards.

36. However, at system level, we are yet to use all the tools at our disposal to ensure England continues to lead the field.

37. If we are to keep pace with peers globally, we need to do all we can to support greater and quicker innovation, and ensure confidence in the quality of English qualifications and the learners who possess them.

38. Pearson recommends attention be focused on:
   — investing in new technology to improve examination administration;
   — using the most up to date research techniques to define and maintain standards; and
   — encouraging greater integration and alignment of curriculum and assessment, with teaching and learning.

Quality of awarding body processes

39. We support moves to ensure the most reliable and modern processes are adopted through public reporting requirements, incentives and penalties. This will drive all awarding organisations to invest in the technology and expertise that is available.

40. New, streamlined performance metrics should focus on quality. We are working with Ofqual to consider other metrics we could report publicly on to secure high public confidence in the standards of our processes, and encourage continued investment in the technology available to drive improvement. For example, a “quality grade” might aggregate question paper errors uncovered pre and post examination session, lost scripts, late entries managed, complaints, appeals, and Enquiries About Results, and the pace and nature of responses.

41. We support the introduction of reasonable fines as a penalty for poor performance. However, the size of fines does need to be carefully proportionate in order that it does not deter investment or new market entrants.

Setting and upholding standards

42. Standards in general qualifications are set by the regulator, with awarding bodies generating diverse specifications from the consistent criteria. Awarding of grades each summer is then managed collaboratively by awarding organisations and the regulator. This ensures that the number of awards made at each grade falls within an overall target percentage based on predictions of any given cohort’s prior performance, and on the results of the previous year. This eliminates the risk that awarding bodies compete on the standards of their assessments.

43. The numbers achieving high grades increases year on year since students tend to slightly outperform their peers year on year: teachers become more adept at supporting students as qualifications become more familiar, and more practice papers become available. The tolerance of a small increase for each grade has a cumulative effect until, as now, awards at the top grades are achieved by a greater proportion of students, creating the problem of identifying the very top performers in each cohort.

44. This has eaten away at confidence in exam results as a proxy for achievement, and the result is that when grades go up, we remark on the failure of the examinations system, rather than celebrating the success of young people.
45. Some steps have been taken to mitigate this grade creep—for example, the new A* at A level, and awarding organisations now predict performance for the lifetime of a qualification, rather than year by year. More significantly, the National Curriculum Review will “recalibrate” the standards learners are expected to meet at a given age, using international comparisons to check on whether what is being required of young people in England matches the rest of the world.

46. Beyond the Review, there is a need to restore confidence in the examination awards which run alongside the curriculum for the long term. The process for setting the levels of achievement that we test students against must be as rigorous as possible, so that where more individuals achieve high grades, we can be confident it is down to improvements in teaching and learning. Confidence in the examinations system needs to be high in order that where genuine improvement is registered; it is reflected in results and celebrated.

47. We should be emulating our international competitors by exploiting advances in empirical standard setting. Since 2008, Hong Kong have embedded within examinations an objective standardised scale for English, Maths and Chinese, defined by the test scores of a tightly controlled sample on specially devised test. This enables them to robustly defend the absolute standard and track change in performance up or down, year on year, and removes the need for an awarding process. Pearson are innovating in this area by developing a global linear scale for Mathematics.

48. There needs to be a more regular mechanism for ensuring that what we are requiring of students in assessments remains appropriate in its content and demands. This can be determined by drawing on end user feedback on skills gaps and international comparisons using benchmarks such as PISA. We ought also to consider changing assessments with a regularity which reflects the tendency for teachers to get better at preparing students for any assessment over time. Pearson are pursuing regular review and recalibration of standards in the vocational area.

Improving learning outcomes

49. Under a newly streamlined and more difficult curriculum, and tougher floor targets, it will be even more important to provide the right level of support to teachers to get learners to the required level.

50. Technology can enable more scalable, effective formative assessment. Formative assessment enables monitoring and raising of attainment throughout a course, and reduces the tendency to over-rehearse content towards a terminal exam. Recent advances in tablet and cloud technology present a new opportunity to explore formative assessment on a national scale, even linking it into computer adaptive testing. This would enable tests to respond to an individual pupil’s ability, unconstrained by the limits of a standardised test. Australia has set aside funds (around £50 million) to develop their capability in this area.

About Pearson

51. Pearson is the world’s leading learning company. For more than one hundred years we have provided teachers with books, learning resources, qualifications and assessment services, and support packages, through names including Edexcel, Longman and Heinemann.

52. Working in 70 countries, Pearson has built an international network of expert education practitioners and researchers. The scale and range which come from operating a publishing, technology and assessment business mean that Pearson is uniquely placed to provide joined-up support to improve outcomes and learning.

53. We believe learning should be personalised and engaging. It must be worthwhile too, underpinned by a rigorous approach which ensures high standards. These principles are embedded in our development of resources, qualifications and technologies at every educational level, across our offer in academic and vocational qualifications, work-based learning and professional education.

54. Pearson contributes to this inquiry as the parent company, since 2003, of the awarding body Edexcel. Edexcel is the UK’s largest awarding body offering academic and vocational qualifications and testing to schools, colleges, employers and other places of learning in the UK and internationally.

November 2011

Further written evidence submitted by Pearson (Annex A)

Code of Conduct for Assessment Associates

— All senior examiners are required to abide by a Code of Conduct (attached). This includes the provision that Pearson will ensure that “the writer of the assessment materials is never the main author of a textbook and vice versa.”

Further, our Examiners’ Current Terms and Conditions (Attached with Relevant Excerpts Highlighted) State that:

— Assessment Associates (examiners) may be authors but they may not state which awarding organisation they are associated with or what their position is. (5.4 and 5.4.1 relevant sections).
Further, they may provide private tuition, training or guidance to students and teachers provided that the performance of such services does not or is not likely to result in a conflict of interest between the performance of their services as an Assessment Associate for Edexcel, and their services for the other party or parties. However, they may not provide any form of private tuition, training or guidance to any students and/or learners in respect of any units whose pre-published content they have had sight of, or input on. (4.2 relevant section).

- If working for a third party training provider examiners may not state which awarding organisation they are associated with or what their position is. (5.4 and 5.4.1 relevant sections).
- Examiners are required to inform Edexcel which school or college they teach at so that we can prevent them from marking work from their own students and monitor this as a potential conflict of interest. (4.1 and 4.1.2 relevant sections).

**Changes Effective in 2012**

- In March 2011 we informed all examiners that examiners who have been involved with the development of examination papers will no longer be permitted to offer students any training or advice whatsoever for those examinations.
- This change was introduced to all new AA appointments from 1 March 2011 but we supplied a 12 month grace period for existing AAs who had already made commitments to deliver training up until end of March 2012.
- In addition, we are establishing a policy whereby examiners who are writing question papers may not write textbooks. We are piloting different approaches to this issue on new commissions with a view to developing new guidance as soon as possible.

**February 2012**

Further written evidence submitted by Pearson (Annex B)

**Edexcel Actions Update**

**February 2012**

There are several internal work streams we are now pursuing as part of our response to the Daily Telegraph’s investigation, the details of which are included below. These activities are designed to enhance quality assurance processes and transparency across our business to address head on any perceived risks or conflicts. This will protect our reputation, that of our examiners, and most importantly that of the wider education system in the future.

**Training**

We have conducted a root and branch review of our training activities and are making a number of changes which will increase their transparency and give us an appropriate level of control and accountability for the information being shared.

As of now all training events will be recorded, archived and audited for quality control purposes.

This is in addition to the existing Code of Conduct all examiners are expected to sign as part of their relationship with Edexcel.

From August 2012:

- We will create a new team of Standards and Quality Officers. These will attend all face-to-face and online interactive events to manage the event, audio record the event (where deemed appropriate) and mitigate any risk of conflict of interest.
- Any Assessment Associate (examiner) involved in live examination paper development will not deliver face to face training to teachers or students. Where an Assessment Associate stops being involved in live paper development, they should not deliver training to teachers until after these papers have been sat.
- A training quality assurance division will be set-up within our Business Assurance Group to take responsibility for inspecting and regulating our training provision. This team will be independent of the Edexcel training team.
- The responsibility for preparing and approving all materials used for events will be signed off by the Standards team.

**Other support and resources**

In addition to offering training, we also publish a wide range of resources (closely integrated with Edexcel specifications) that are designed to support teachers and students to improve learning. Like other Awarding Organisations and publishers, we currently restrict access to the content contained within these resources to
those that pay for a licence to use it. It is our intention to make content within future resources available in
disaggregated form to all stakeholders free of charge.

We are now working through how to achieve this, with a view to piloting with some content before the end of the year. That will entail making sure we own all the intellectual property rights to these resources so we
can make them available in an accessible format.

Specifications

Ofqual have requested that Geography GCSE specifications of all awarding organisations be resubmitted for accreditation. We are taking this forward as a matter of urgency to ensure the new specification is available to
teachers as soon as possible to prepare for teaching.

We have commissioned an external team of assessment and subject experts based at the Institute of
Education, University of London to review independently our specifications and external assessments at GCSE
and A-level against those of other awarding organisations and Ofqual’s subject criteria, to reassure us of their
comparability and compliance.

In addition, we have asked the same team to look at the content from the perspective of a subject expert
involved in higher education to give their view as to whether—notwithstanding regulations—they consider the
specifications to be at the appropriate level of demand and challenge.

Should issues be uncovered in the former case, we will seek reaccreditation from Ofqual of a revised
specification and/or make the recommendation that this request is made of other awarding bodies.

As to the latter, we will make the recommendation to Ofqual that subject criteria needs to be reviewed to
ensure it reflects the standard demanded by higher education. We would expect to work with them and other
boards to implement this change swiftly.

Examination papers

Concerns have been raised about the possibility that question papers associated with specifications may
become predictable if that specification has been available for teaching for a certain length of time. We are
working with University of Nottingham to consider whether there are methods we can use to track or metric
predictability to ensure a more rigorous, data driven approach to this issue.

Examiners

We are reviewing the scope, nature and contracting arrangements for our Senior Examiner roles as part
of the path to operationalising our proposal on making Assessment a Profession, which is described in our
consultation paper.

February 2012

Further written evidence submitted by Pearson (Annex C)

The note below sets out in more detail how our awarding organisation, Edexcel, interacts with publishers,
including our own Pearson imprints.

CONTEXT

Pearson UK is a significant contributor to the delivery of education in the UK, offering qualifications through
the awarding organisation Edexcel as well teaching and learning resources and technology to schools, colleges,
higher education and employers through Pearson publishing.

Our goal is for courses to be supported with teaching and learning resources which enable them to be
delivered to the highest possible standard—giving students coverage of the areas which will be assessed and
providing a gateway to go beyond. We do this by working within our organisation and with other organisations
to develop support materials, textbooks and digital learning which meet with the learning objectives and
expectations of our courses.

1. Endorsement

In our experience, teachers in schools value choice between resources to suit their teaching style and the
needs of the children in their classes.

Given the emphasis on qualifications, many teachers also ask for assurance that the resources they are using
cover off all of the content on which students may be assessed.
We support the above in three ways:

1. Pearson develop resources which support Edexcel qualifications, and seek endorsement for them.
2. Edexcel endorse other publishers who produce resources in support of their qualifications.
   Appendix 1 provides an indication of the range and number of titles we endorse.
3. Pearson produces resources which support qualifications from other awarding organisations. Where possible, we seek endorsement for these books.

All books intended to support Edexcel qualifications go through an independent process of endorsement, whether they are produced by Pearson or not.

— This endorsement team and its activities are strictly firewalled from all Pearson publishing staff.
— We never present the purchase of an endorsed resource, be it published by Pearson or anyone else, as necessary to offer an Edexcel course.

2. Pearson resource share in Edexcel resources

— Resources developed in support of Edexcel qualifications make up £13.4 million of Pearson’s £116.2 million educational publishing business in UK and about 3% of our overall Pearson UK education revenues.
— Across all subjects, about 60% of Edexcel centres also buy resources from Pearson (we do not know how many of these also buy resources from other publishers). However, Pearson’s market share in resources does not match our share in qualifications—strength in a subject area in qualifications is not always reflected in strength in the resources for that subject. For example, in A level Geography our qualifications share is 37.3%, but for resources it’s only 12.2%. In English GCSE our qualifications share is just 4.4%, but our publishing share is 45%.
— In some subjects, we do hold full market share. This is in subjects where no other publishers choose to produce resources because the numbers studying the course are too small. These lines are typically loss making for Pearson. We see one of the benefits of Pearson’s integrated business and scale as our ability to offer teachers the support they need for these courses and maintain choice for pupils.

3. Edexcel promotion of resources from other publishers

Excluding Pearson products, there are over 400 endorsed resources for Edexcel qualifications on the market. We have endorsed more than 10 different publishers in the last five years.

Edexcel actively promote these resources to schools through subject experts who support schools who offer Edexcel qualifications. In addition, all endorsed resources are listed on Edexcel’s website.

4. Commercially sensitive information

Pearson have staff who input both to curriculum and specifications for qualifications as well as the resources which will support them.

We seek to ensure a level playing field by issuing notice of new specifications coming to market to other publishers well ahead of release, during development phase.

This is in our interests since we want as many resources as possible to be available to support Edexcel qualifications once they are accredited for teaching.

5. Examiners and authors

Pearson staff may not be authors for Pearson.

At present, our contracted examiners may be authors for any publisher, including Pearson, provided they are not the main author on a book supporting the course for which they set question papers.

We are piloting approaches to preventing examiners from having any involvement in writing any resources for courses they examine.

We will need to explore legal implications and work with other publishers and awarding bodies to devise a watertight solution to this, but that is the direction we wish to take.

APPENDIX 1

PUBLISHERS ENDORSED BY EDEXCEL

— Cambridge University Press = about 5
— Chaloner Publishing = 3
— Harper Collins = 100
— Hodder Education =100
— Nelson Thornes =50
Further written evidence submitted by Pearson (Annex D)

Pearson no longer uses a shared cover design for resources produced by Pearson’s publishing imprints in support of specifications produced by Edexcel.

This is for two reasons:

— We believe that a shared design can unhelpfully overstate the link between the examination specification and the book—which will very often go beyond the specification and be suitable for broader purposes.
— Secondly, through our endorsement policy we work very hard to ensure a choice of books for teachers, so they can pick their resources in accordance with their own teaching styles, class context and preferences, and maximise engagement. We want to make this clearer, as our research indicates to us that engagement is the most important factor in teacher choice.

We currently endorse well over 300 books from other publishers that support our qualifications. All of these are entitled to and do make prominent use of the Edexcel logo to make it clear to teachers that these are resources that they can feel confident to use as alternatives to texts that we offer. Some examples of how they are put together are included in the attachment. Given some of the quotes from jackets shared with members in the Committee session, and the language on some of the books in the attachment around success in examinations, how this should be managed industry wide in the future is something we would urge the Committee to consider. Pearson are keen to collaborate on this.

Further written evidence submitted by Pearson (Annex E)

The practice outlined below is set down by the regulators and therefore common to all awarding bodies. The attached document is the guidance issued to us by Ofqual last year.

— We share with the regulators all our outcomes data for GCSE and GCE weekly throughout the summer examinations series, with all outcomes reported by a given date in the first week of August.
— Alongside the outcomes data we also state whether the actual awards we have made fall inside or outside of “tolerance” against predicted awards. Predicted awards are based cohort’s performance based its previous performance. For GCSE, we use KS2 data to draw up predictions. For AS and A level we use GCSE performance.
— Awarding bodies and the regulator meet formally early in August to pool data and ensure Maintenance of Standards and comparability in the first week of August. Ofqual provide the awarding bodies with documentation which includes all our data for this meeting.
— As far as we are aware, the regulator does not make this documentation publicly available.
— We could (and would) share own outcomes and tolerances data publicly, but that of other awarding bodies would not be ours to share.

Written evidence submitted by the Wellcome Trust

KEY POINTS

1. The key messages of this response are:
— There are significant problems arising from the current model of multiple awarding bodies for academic qualifications for 15–19 year olds.
— If we were establishing the examination system from scratch, a single awarding body would be most favourable. However, in the interest of stability the current model should probably be retained, but only with substantial improvements (paragraph 33), specifically:
(i) There needs to be greater consistency across awarding bodies in the process of awarding grades, and much more openness about how it works.

(ii) Awarding bodies must communicate better with each other, especially in sharing best practice and introducing innovations.

(iii) National subject committees should be established to oversee the standard of examinations of major subjects across all awarding bodies.

(iv) The changes to specifications every five years should be discontinued and awarding bodies given the ability to make incremental changes to examinations as and when needed, under the guidance of national subject committees.

— The Government should use Ofqual’s Codes of Practice to stop awarding bodies endorsing textbooks (paragraphs 28–29).

— The value of STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and employers should be made more evident, to ensure that pupils are not put off taking them due to perceived difficulty in achieving higher grades as compared to other subjects (paragraphs 25–26).

— Awarding bodies must be held to account for the standards of the examination system. If substantial improvements are not seen in the short term, Ofqual must take action.

**INTRODUCTION**

2. An appropriately run examination system in England is vital for qualifications across the breadth of education. Confidence in the system is essential, yet the perception from teachers, the general public and other stakeholders, is that the standard of grades has fallen over time; this can be particularly difficult for students who have worked hard to achieve their grades and whose future is at stake.

3. There are many findings to support the perception of “grade slippage”. The Chief Executive of Ofqual recently noted that of their approximately 50 studies, standards were in many instances maintained, sometimes increased, but that most recent studies tended to show that standards are on the slide. She specifically cited studies that had found declining standards in mathematics, chemistry and design and technology.\(^{50}\)

4. It seems likely that grades have reduced in part because the awarding bodies are competing for custom and teachers are likely to choose those qualifications that will yield the best performance for their schools and for their students. This process could happen without conscious direction from the awarding bodies. However, this process may be more explicit, as suggested by the fact that at least one awarding body uses grade improvement in its marketing, stating that its science GCSE course is “Proven to help improve grades...” backed up by a teacher’s comments that she had “seen a big 18% increase in C+ grades”.\(^{51}\) Furthermore, Sir Mark Walport, chair of the Science and Learning Expert Group observed that, when giving evidence, awarding bodies openly admitted that they struggle to avoid competing with each other on grade standards.

5. Other serious concerns arising from competition across awarding bodies include:

   (i) Variation in awarding processes across the bodies, and lack of transparency about how grades are arrived at;

   (ii) Errors in examination papers and the quality of the questioning in exams;

   (iii) Endorsement of textbooks by awarding bodies;

   (iv) The low level of teacher, HEI and professional body engagement in development of examinations.

6. The issues associated with multiple awarding bodies are not new. However, many recommendations to improve the system, such as those from the Science and Learning Expert Group report in 2010, have clearly not been implemented. The high-profile errors evident in examinations in 2010 and 2011 highlight the urgent need for vital improvements.

7. Given the remit of the Wellcome Trust, we are particularly concerned with examinations in STEM subjects, including the insufficient mathematics content in science GCSEs and A levels. This response focuses on academic rather than vocational qualifications. In a recent speech, the Secretary of State for Education acknowledged concerns from the business community, universities and professional bodies over declining standards in school science.\(^{52}\)

8. Another apparently conflicting concern is the relatively greater difficulty of achieving high grades in science and mathematics.\(^{53}\) While we would absolutely not wish to see a “dumbing down” in the quality of science qualifications or assessment, this issue needs to be addressed. Either grade boundaries need to be raised in some of the less stringently marked subjects, or there needs to be much greater and more overt recognition

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\(^{51}\) http://www.twentyfirstcenturyscience.org/?q=content/faqs


of the high value of the skills and knowledge developed by science and mathematics. Without these steps, students may be discouraged from post-16 science and mathematics, exactly the opposite of what the UK needs, as highlighted in a recent report from the Royal Society.\textsuperscript{54}

Arguments for and against having a range of awarding bodies and the merits of alternative arrangements

9. We set out arguments for and against a number of different models for awarding bodies below. We then consider these arguments, along with international comparisons, to inform our position on the best way forward.

Model 1: The status quo: a range of awarding bodies

10. A range of awarding bodies (currently AQA, Edexcel and OCR for academic qualifications) competing for custom has existed for many years in England.

For:

— Allows for a diversity of provision, delivering a range of skills and knowledge in the population (although, individual students are rarely matched to examination).
— Gives capacity for the large number of examinations required in England, reducing the associated risk (ie a problem with one body would only affect a proportion of students).
— Can promote innovation.

Against:

— Limits the transparency of awarding bodies leading to variation in grade standards and reduced comparability across and within subjects.
— Arguably drives down the rigour of examinations (paragraphs three to five).
— Limits the spread of innovations and best practice.
— Requires an examination (and often more than one, due to multiple syllabuses) to be set for each subject, thereby diluting the expertise of examiners.

Model 2: A single awarding body

11. For:

— Removes competition on standards.
— Increases confidence in comparability across subjects.
— Gives better economies of scale including simplifying the incorporation of changes in curricula into examinations, and reducing the workload and therefore dilution of examiners.
— Provides a single point of contact for external partners such as HEIs.

Against:

— Any problems would affect all students.
— Could reduce the diversity of provision unless the body offers a range of examinations within individual subjects.
— Could reduce innovation, unless clear drivers were in place.

Model 3: Contracting subject groups to different awarding bodies

12. Ofqual regulates the work of awarding bodies, allowing them the exclusive right to run examinations for different groups of qualifications for a time—awarding bodies would have to bid for each subject contract and then run the examinations in their contracted subjects for, say, five years.

For:

— Gives many of the advantages of a single body model, with inbuilt innovation and some risk reduction.
— Eliminates competition in examinations for each subject and external drivers for variability in standards.
— Allows each awarding body to concentrate on one particular area of education at a given time, drawing upon all expertise available.

Against:

— May be difficult to assure continuity over transfer of groups of examinations to another awarding body after the lifetime of a contract.
— Could reduce comparability of grades across subjects set by different awarding bodies.

— Could be financially challenging for awarding bodies given that the profits generated from a small number of large entry subjects (eg English and mathematics) currently offset any losses incurred from smaller subjects.

International comparisons

13. The Government has put much emphasis on international comparisons since coming into office. We therefore thought it appropriate to highlight the model of working in other countries. We have yet to identify a country, other than England, that operates a model of multiple competing awarding bodies. Countries such as Finland, Singapore and Korea, who are all higher that England in the PISA standings for science and mathematics, operate a single awarding body model. 55

14. Scotland also has a single awarding body, the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), and due to its cultural similarity should be used as a key comparator with England (notwithstanding the difference in educational structure). Having one body running all examinations arguably allows SQA to:

(i) Incorporate new curricula into examinations more easily and make incremental revisions to examinations more regularly to reflect progression in subjects.
(ii) Facilitate interactions with stakeholders who only have to consult with one body.
(iii) Ensure stability of grade standards.

Observations

15. A single awarding body for England could solve many of the problems associated with variability in standards and grade slippage that we currently experience. However, moving to a single body system would require overhaul of the entire examination system in England. In a time when the English education system is changing with, for example, the review of the National Curriculum and the Academies Act, such disruption may not be wise.

16. Given the considerable problems associated with having multiple awarding bodies, this would not be the model of choice if we were designing the system from scratch. However, the best way forward may be with resolving the problems within this system.

17. The contracting model seems like a good idea in principle. However, the practical implications of awarding bodies bidding for subjects every five years could have a detrimental impact on their ability to run examinations effectively. It would be difficult to ensure continuity in subjects when contracts are changed, as well as comparability across the subject groups.

Ensuring accuracy in setting papers, marking scripts, and awarding grades

Accuracy in setting papers and marking scripts

18. The quality of the examination system can never be better than the quality of examination papers. Appropriate expertise in setting papers is essential for the delivery of high quality examinations. The sheer scale of the examination system in England, and the need for awarding bodies to each produce separate examination papers, produces a dilution of expertise in setting examination questions. This could reduce the quality of the questions and even result in errors. However, proposals to reduce the number of re-sits, including examination papers, produces a dilution of expertise in setting examination questions. This could reduce the scale of the examination system in England, and the need for awarding bodies to each produce separate examinations.

19. The role of awarding bodies in recruiting and training examiners is very important in ensuring that examination questions are of high quality. 57 This is particularly important in the sciences, where a recent report has shown that incorporation of “How Science Works” into awarding bodies” specifications at GCSE has been variable. 58 The need for continuing professional development of examiners should be explored.

20. Another problem lies with the rotation of specifications by Ofqual every five years. This is disruptive to schools and unhelpful for awarding bodies as it usually requires major changes to examination papers. This puts more burden on examiners setting a new range of questions (including sample questions). In addition, not enough time is given for accurate incorporation of the new specifications. Critically, although lip-service is paid to consultation, it often amounts to inviting subject experts to rubber-stamp near-final proposals. We therefore urge Ofqual to discontinue the rotation of specifications every five years.

21. We also propose the establishment of national subject committees to provide expert input for incremental revision of examinations (further remit of these national subject committees is outlined in paragraph 33).

56 http://www.education.gov.uk/16to19/qualificationsandlearning/gcses/a00191691/changes-to-gcses-from-2012
Awards should be required to use this expertise to regularly revise examination specifications and papers to keep up with progress in the subject and its teaching. This might involve small changes, more often, but would increase the quality of examination questions, give more continuity, and keep pace with developments in the subject and its applications in industry and research.

Awarding grades

22. It is important that the public, employers and universities understand and have confidence in the process by which grades are arrived at. Yet little is known publicly about how awarding bodies proceed from marked scripts to final grades.

23. All boards use a combination of criterion referencing (setting a fixed standard for each grade) and cohort referencing (comparing individual performance against that of the overall cohort). Although criterion referencing is attractive, in practice there are serious difficulties, arising from the fact that—in contrast to, say, the national driving test—it is well-nigh impossible to write down statements of attainment criteria that are not wide open to subjective interpretation. In practice, all boards resort to moderating criterion-referenced marks statistically. The Secretary of State recently suggested that A* grades could operate entirely on a norm-referenced system, with a fixed percentage of students receiving the grade within each subject, and that there could be more information on ranking to sit alongside the grading system.

24. Ofqual should be charged with identifying the best system of grading, which can recognise when students have reached a certain standard, can reflect if there is a marked increase in standards but guard against grade drift, and that delivers comparability across years and subjects. This system should be implemented across all awarding bodies and clearly communicated to the public.

25. It is apparent that some A levels are marked more strictly than others. For example, a study undertaken by Durham University concluded that science and mathematics A level were significantly more severely marked on average than many non-science subjects, with A level Physics, for example, being some two grades harder than A level Art. This was also seen in science and mathematics at GCSE, but to a lower degree.

26. Perhaps even more problematic, is the fact that students perceive it to be harder to get high grades in science and mathematics and this perception is likely to be factored into their subject choices. It is therefore vital that the high value of studying science and mathematics is overtly recognised and communicated so that student uptake is not affected. Pupils should be made aware that taking these subjects would provide them with skills that are highly valued by HEIs and employers alike—a recent report by the Russell Group provides a useful starting point.

Mathematics content in science specifications and examinations

27. A specific area of concern is the low mathematical content of science specifications and examinations at GCSE and A level, highlighted by the report of the Science and Learning Expert Group. Mathematical content should be strengthened within the science specifications and, most importantly, required in the actual examination questions. This is something that Ofqual can and should demand as a matter of urgency.

The commercial activities of awarding bodies, including examination fees and textbooks, and their impact on schools and pupils

28. The danger with any examination system is that learning becomes directed towards achieving the best examination results rather than giving students a broad understanding of a subject—"the tail that wags the dog". Textbooks have increasingly become "examination guides" instead of providing broad and deep knowledge. The endorsement of textbooks by awarding bodies exacerbates this problem by promoting teaching to the test. Of particular concern is that examiners are commissioned to write textbooks that are endorsed by an awarding body. This carries the risk that examinations could be used to maximise sales of books rather than in the public interest.

29. In Scotland, the SQA does not endorse specific textbooks, but supports a wide range of resources, including electronic resources, that can be used to teach the courses effectively. This is a sensible approach that does not unduly influence teachers or schools when purchasing appropriate materials. We therefore urge the Government to take action to stop awarding bodies endorsing textbooks through inclusion in Ofqual’s Codes of Practice.

References

69 http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/mortarboard/2011/oct/21/a-levels-based-on-gcse
74 http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/mortarboard/2011/oct/21/a-levels-based-on-gcse
University Admissions Process

30. Although not directly asked about in this inquiry, we would like to comment on the recent proposal from UCAS to move to Post Qualification Admissions, a model where the decision on admission to full time undergraduate courses is made following the award of A levels.65 We support this proposal and believe moving to a process like this would:

(i) widen participation, as admission would be based on actual results rather than predictions;
(ii) reduce the pressure on students to take more and more GCSEs as admission to university would be based on actual A level results; and
(iii) limit the need for multiple examinations throughout the two year A level course.

31. However, advice and support for students going through the application process is already variable. It will be essential to ensure that schools sufficiently support their students through the process, even if this is occurring over the summer holidays.

Conclusions

32. Now is the time for real action to improve the examination system in England. If we were establishing a new examination system from scratch, a single awarding body would seem the most favourable. However, we are not in this situation, and unless there was wholesale overhaul of the education system, the disruption required to move to a single body would not be worthwhile.

33. We believe that the range of awarding bodies that are currently in place for academic qualifications should remain, but with urgent improvements. These essential improvements must ensure transparency, comparability and consistency in examinations across the awarding bodies, and promote raising standards. To achieve this we recommend that:

(i) All awarding bodies must be transparent about their process of awarding grades, and there should be consistency across boards in these processes.
(ii) Awarding bodies must communicate better with each other, especially in spreading best practice and introducing innovations in the system. Commercial confidentiality should not be used as an excuse for withholding information that would act in the interest of improving the quality of the whole examination system.
(iii) National subject committees should be established for each major subject to oversee standards across all awarding bodies. These committees should be convened by professional bodies and contain representatives from HEIs, employers and practicing teachers.
(iv) The rotation of specifications every five years encourages wholesale changes to examinations and is disruptive for schools. Instead, awarding bodies should have the ability to make incremental changes to examinations, keeping them up-to-date with developments in the subject. The national subject committees should provide expert input to this process. This is particularly important in science subjects where developments are seen continuously.

34. Awarding bodies must be accountable for the performance of the examination system and should be given a strict timeline for reform. They should be in no doubt of the seriousness of the situation they are in. Should they fail to make these vital improvements, Ofqual must take decisive action, including consider the other models discussed.

35. Finally, if an improved system produces higher standards there must be a mechanism of acknowledging these improvements so they are not perceived as “grade slippage”. Real improvements would produce better grades, and how this is achieved must be communicated to the public effectively.

November 2011

Written evidence submitted by the Oxford Cambridge and RSA Examinations Board (OCR)

Introduction

1. OCR is a major, not for profit, UK Awarding Body and part of the Cambridge Assessment Group.

Ensuring Accuracy of Setting, Marking and Awarding

2. The select committee inquiry uses the concept of “accuracy” in setting, marking and awarding and we have focussed our evidence accordingly. Nevertheless, there are important wider principles of assessment design, especially, validity and reliability. These are enshrined in “The Cambridge Approach” which sets out the fundamental principles of assessment followed by OCR. The approach links validity and reliability closely:

While validity relates to whether the assessment is assessing what it is intended to assess, and whether the inferences drawn from the results are well-founded, reliability relates to the stability of

65 UCAS (2011). Admission process review consultation. http://www.pages02.net/ucas-charityneek/apr/LPT.url?kn=358612&vss=ZmUxMWVjNDktNDIwMS00YjdjLTg1MjctMDcwNDVhOTQzNzRhOzsS1
the assessment, for example, whether on different occasions or using different markers the same outcomes are related in the same way. If validity is poor, reliability in the assessment will be to little effect. If reliability is poor—and results are unstable—validity is compromised.

3. Getting the design of assessments right and ensuring the fairest possible outcomes for learners are fundamental, but so is deciding what should be assessed in the first place. The syllabus or programme of learning is key to qualification development. No amount of precision in print, or accuracy in marking will deliver a good education.

**ACCURACY OF SETTING**

4. During the summer, three OCR papers included errors, which were not identified until the examinations were being taken and had the potential to unsettle candidates during the examination. Although the errors should be seen in the context of an industry which sets over 60,000 questions a year, we accept that everything must be done to prevent such errors in the future.

5. OCR conducted a thorough internal investigation into its processes for developing and quality assuring exam papers. A report of that investigation and its conclusions can be viewed at http://www.ocr.org.uk/download/news/ocr_62383_news_qp_errors.pdf. We also set out publicly on our website the steps taken during the awarding process to ensure that any candidates affected received the grades they deserved. This process involved analysis of individual scripts and the way that an error may have impacted on overall performance. We also took into account the achievements of candidates on other papers. These practices are long established and have been developed over years to account for occasions when, for example, severe weather, have prevented candidates from sitting an exam.

6. The errors and the publicity surrounding them generated many enquiries from anxious parents and students; our arrangements for double checking and then appealing against results were widely shared. However, the number of formal inquiries did not rise dramatically and the number of formal appeals seems to be fewer than last year.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>14 October 2011</th>
<th>15 October 2010</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of appeals accepted</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>120</td>
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<td>Number of appeals finished at stage 1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of appeals progressing to Stage 2</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of appeals closed at stage 2</td>
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<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total closed</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of completed/logged</td>
<td>30.5%</td>
<td>44.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Result Enquiry appeals competed within QCA timescale (50 days)</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
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</table>

7. Results enquiries:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Enquiry Type</th>
<th>Number of Enquiries June 2011</th>
<th>Number of Enquiries June 2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Priority Service 2—for candidates entering HE</td>
<td>4,553</td>
<td>3,901</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service 1—clerical re-check on the script</td>
<td>456</td>
<td>623</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service 2—clerical re-check and a review of marking</td>
<td>34,817</td>
<td>33,154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service 3—review of moderation</td>
<td>691</td>
<td>638</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>40,517</td>
<td>38,316</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Increase of 5.74%

8. Ofqual has carried out its own investigation, and it concurs that there was no evidence of non-compliance with established processes or of any systemic breakdown in processes. The evidence shows that each error occurred at different points in the process with no single root cause. We will work with the regulators to ensure we adopt more finely tuned risk management and clearer lines of accountability in the checking process. We may conclude that current regulations, set out in the Code of Practice, tie us into particular processes that do not allow us to eliminate risk through alternative processes.

**ACCURACY OF MARKING**

9. Where a candidate or school is surprised by an exam result, they are likely to suspect that something has gone wrong with the marking of the paper. Indeed, the vast majority of inquiries and appeals are about marking reliability. Much effort has been spent in securing consistent and reliable marking across examiners, and approaches have been developed and refined over many years with substantial investment in new technologies considerably increasing the ways in which performance of individual examiners can be monitored and quality and consistency of marking improved.
10. Marker-related reliability has been an important strand of Ofqual’s Reliability Programme. As part of this programme, Cambridge Assessment carried out significant research into marker agreement (Bramley & Dhawan, 2010). The study confirmed the view that the level of marker reliability depends on the nature of the subject. Examination units/components consisting of structured, short answer questions with more constrained mark schemes were marked more reliably than those consisting of longer-answer essay questions with more open-ended mark schemes. Using both data collected in the “old” paper-based system and the “new” on-screen marking system, comparisons with previous research studies dating back to “O” Levels supported, or at least did not run counter to, the claim that marking of public examinations has become more reliable over the years.

11. The increasing use of on-screen marking technology for both paper and computer-based assessments has made it possible to introduce significant improvements. These include the ability to monitor the quality of marking of each examiner against a set of common, “definitively” marked scripts on an on-going basis; the ability to anonymise and randomise the allocation of scripts; the availability of more detailed evidence upon which to decide whether an individual examiner’s marking is “aberrant”; and the ability to allocate re-marking immediately without the delays caused by the need to despatch paper scripts.

12. But there is a philosophical point about how far we seek to design papers which elicit absolute reliability from examiners. This can lead to detailed, prescriptive mark schemes that reward compliance over originality, and encourage teaching to the test. Evidence from OCR’s Higher Education forums indicates a concern that schools teach highly formulaic approaches to writing essays. Mechanistic assessment may be accurate, but it doesn’t always encourage deep learning.

QUALITY AND SUPPLY OF EXAMINERS

13. We monitor the quality of examiner performance closely using processes already outlined. Any examiner not marking to standard is stopped from marking, and their marking is remarked. The performance of the remaining examiners is measured and graded on a scale of 1–5. Currently:
   — 80% of examiners are graded 1 and 2; and
   — 15% of examiners are graded 3.

Examiners graded 4 are offered additional support and are closely monitored. The small number graded 5 are not invited to mark again.

14. The sourcing of sufficient, high quality examiners is critical to the success of the examination system and often identified as an area of potential risk. Annually, OCR engages 13,000 examiners of which the vast majority are practising teachers (appendix A).

15. Our planning and recruitment consistently secure sufficient, qualified examiners but we are dependent on the support and encouragement of schools and colleges in promoting the benefits of examining to their staff.

ACCURACY OF AWARDING

16. The awarding process involves expert judgement informed by comprehensive statistical and qualitative evidence. During awarding meetings experts review evidence including: exam papers from past series, archives of past scripts, information about mark distributions, estimated grades submitted by schools, and details of previous candidate performance. The full range of evidence that must be used in awarding is set out in the Ofqual Code of Practice, provided as appendix B. During awarding meetings the grade boundaries are set, subject to review and sign off by a named accountable officer

17. Consistency of awarding between awarding bodies is, in part, secured by common design criteria, at qualification-type and subject level. Also, JCQ reviews percentages of grades achieved across Awarding Bodies by subject and informs them of any variance. As the regulator, Ofqual monitors any variation between boards.

18. The increasing use of new technologies provides much richer data and the capacity for complex algorithms to assist judgements.

RECOMMENDATIONS

19. The awarding body industry needs to strive to be as open and transparent as possible about the workings of the exam system, its virtues and its limitations.

20. It is critical for teachers to be involved in the assessment system. We recommend that Heads and Principals release teachers more easily and more frequently to allow their individual development and better system integrity.

21. Awarding Bodies must continue to invest heavily in new technology. We believe such major investment is best managed by the awarding bodies; there is no evidence that this major development would be better managed as a government IT project.

22. Ofqual should concentrate on the core function of monitoring standards as this is critical to securing an effective market in qualifications.

COMMERCIAL ACTIVITIES

23. This section sets the context for the commercial environment of the exams system and provides information about our fees, our relationship with publishers and our support for teachers.

QUALIFICATION FEES

Context

24. The scale of the examination system is vast. OCR alone despatched 8.5 million question papers this year, scanned more than 60 million pages of candidate scripts, processed 95,500 requests to access scripts, allocated and monitored, trained and remunerated 16,000 assessment personnel (appendix C).

25. OCR has developed new technologies to support these activities and technology will continue to be a major source of investment for OCR—we have embarked on an ambitious five year programme to develop capabilities which anticipate a transformation in the way learning and assessment will look in the future.

26. We also face costs from government intervention and an increasing regulatory burden. Over recent years we have been subject to numerous initiatives including:

— the introduction of the A*;
— the breaking of A Levels into six units and then reducing them to four;
— fluctuating apprenticeship frameworks;
— literacy and numeracy qualifications yoked to GCSE maths and English and then unyoked at the last minute;
— the introduction of a complex and flawed Qualifications and Credit Framework;
— the redevelopment of about 50 GCSEs to a modular structure, awarded the first time this year and to be replaced, as an interim measure, with more linear versions, alongside new Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar requirements (although Wales and Northern Ireland may opt to continue with the modular GCSE, doubling the number of GCSE examinations awarding bodies would have to run);
— new 14–19 Diplomas complete with a new IT system to support it;
— the introduction of “controlled assessment” to replace coursework;
— fluctuating rules on re-sits;
— a stalled Foundation Learning Tier;
— a fudged withdrawal of NVQs; and
— the advent and passing of GNVQs.

27. Meanwhile we are preparing for completely new GCSEs to accompany a new National Curriculum in 2014. Some of these developments are entirely reasonable or, like a new National Curriculum, hold out the prospect of greatly improving our education system, others have been highly misguided. But the main point here is that this level of flux brings with it high operational and development costs and potential risks to the system. At the same time, government is rushing through legislation to give Ofqual powers to fine awarding bodies should anything go wrong.

28. We have been subject to some form of regulation for nearly 20 years. The past is littered with organisations such as the Schools Assessment and Curriculum Authority (SCAA), the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ), QCA, QCDA and now, Ofqual. Each iteration has added new burdens and layers of criteria and codes of practice. Ofqual plans to be a strategic, high level regulator, but, with its 52 “general conditions of recognition” incorporating 161 criteria, it is mired in detail.

29. Fortunately, the market for qualifications has been strong in recent years: public funding policies and school performance indicators have rewarded qualification achievement; the modular design of qualifications has increased the amount of assessment that leads to a qualification. This has enabled us offset costs and to keep its prices in line with inflation (appendix D). However, it is clear that limits on public funding, changes to funding models and a shift away from modular assessment mean OCR is budgeting for a loss over the next few years. At appendix E we also provide tables to indicate the proportion of income generated by re-sits and a comparison of charges between OCR and its main competitors at appendix F.

ARRANGEMENTS WITH PUBLISHERS

30. OCR’s focus is syllabus development, and assessment. However, we recognise the importance of support materials and text books in supporting teachers. Therefore we ensure, through partnership, and for no financial gain, that a full range of the best publishers develop and make available this support.
31. OCR works with publishers in two ways:
   — Formal partnership.
   — Endorsement.

Publisher Partnerships

32. The arrangement is simple—for subjects covered by partnership, formal partners have access to OCR staff and the qualifications they are developing from the start of qualification development through to completion.

33. There are benefits to both partners: the publisher can get to market early, having had early sight of the qualification; OCR is assured that it can launch a new qualification complete with quality support materials.

34. There is a further benefit to learners. In agreeing partnerships, OCR is able to negotiate with publishers the range of subjects they will cover. This guarantees that there are support materials for all the range of qualifications on offer, not just those high up-take subjects likely to provide publishers with a high return.

35. OCR currently has formal partnerships with three publishers. The partnerships were originally awarded in 2006 after a formal process involving expressions of interest from 33 publishers. The number of large educational publishers has declined significantly in recent years due to mergers; without being definitive, about six remain independent of each other. One belongs to a competitor, another had, until recently, an exclusive deal with another competitor.

Endorsement

36. There are benefits to publishers in having their materials endorsed by OCR. At the same time, OCR wishes there to be a strong and varied range of support materials for all its qualifications. That is why we actively promote the endorsement process and charge minimum costs.

37. OCR will “endorse” text books and other support materials where they provide appropriate support to an OCR qualification. Endorsed materials are allowed to carry the OCR logo.

38. For a publication to be endorsed, it must go through the endorsement process. This process is used to confirm that the content has sufficient coverage of the OCR qualification at the appropriate level.

39. Any publisher or individual author can submit materials for endorsement. OCR charges a small administrative cost and for the time taken to review the materials. The average charge is £230.

40. Publisher partners must also use the endorsement process before any of their materials can carry the OCR endorsement.

E-books

41. OCR recognises that the cost of text books is a big issue for our customers so, in a recent initiative we are providing e-text books free of charge to schools and colleges. There is no charge to schools taking up the offer, nor do we require them to be a customer of OCR’s to access the free books. The arrangement involves us paying a fee to the relevant publisher for e-books provided. Since we introduced the offer in September we have had orders for over 150,000 e-books from about 1,500 schools and colleges.

Training for Teachers

42. OCR provides around 1,200 training events for teachers annually, serving approximately 20,000 delegates. We have four kinds of events, Get Ready—compares a previous OCR specification to a new OCR specification, Get Started—an introduction to an OCR specification, Get Ahead—for teachers already experienced in teaching the qualification and Lead the Way—training designed to improve and inspire teachers with new approaches to teaching subjects (not necessarily qualification linked).

43. We recognise the importance of supporting teachers in starting out with new qualifications so our policy is to provide free training for teachers during the first 18 months of a new specification. This means that about half of all our events are provided free of charge and overall our programmes of training run at a loss.

Conflicts of Interest

44. We take potential conflicts of interest very seriously. When we contract with examiners we require them to sign up to a set of rules which prevent them from exploiting their position as an OCR examiner in any way. For example, if they have authored a book they are not allowed to use the fact that they are an OCR Examiner in publicising the book. Nor are they allowed to publicise any training they might offer privately to teachers as coming from an OCR assessor. We have similar rules to control the risk of disclosure of any confidential
information about exam papers under development. Any breach leads to dismissal. The relevant clauses in examiner contracts are provided in appendix G.

November 2011

Further written evidence submitted by OCR Examinations Board (Annex A)

APPENDIX A

BREAKDOWN OF EXAMINER CHARACTERISTICS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date appointed</th>
<th>% Currently Teaching</th>
<th>% Never Taught</th>
<th>% Retired/Left Teaching</th>
<th>% Supply Teacher/Tutor</th>
<th>% Lecturers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>October 2010</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2011</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 2011</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

APPENDIX B

EXCERPT FROM OFQUAL CODE OF PRACTICE

Qualitative Evidence
(i) copies of question papers/tasks and final mark schemes;
(ii) principals’ reports on how the assessment functioned;
(iii) samples of current candidates’ work distributed evenly across key boundary ranges for each component, with enough representing each mark to provide a sound basis for judgement so far as the size of entry and nature of work permit. The material should be selected from a range of centres and/or consortia where work has been marked/moderated by examiners/moderators whose work is known to be reliable;
(iv) archive scripts and examples of internally assessed work (including, in appropriate subject areas, photographic or videotaped evidence) exemplifying grade boundaries for previous awards, together with the relevant question papers and mark schemes; and
(v) in the case of a new specification, pertinent material deemed to be of equivalent standard from other examinations in the subject or other relevant subjects may be considered.

Where Available
(vi) any published performance descriptions, grade descriptions and exemplar material.
(vii) any other supporting material (such as marking guides for components where the evidence is of an ephemeral nature).

Quantitative Evidence
(viii) subject-level expectations, when available;
(ix) information on candidates’ performance in at least two previous equivalent series, where available;
(x) details of changes in entry patterns, choices of options and prior attainment, where available;
(xi) information about the relationship between component/unit level data and whole-subject performance, where available;
(xii) technical information, including mark distributions relating to the question papers/tasks and individual questions for the current and previous series, where available;
(xiii) item-level statistics; and
(xiv) information on centres estimated grades for all candidates, including:
— qualification-level estimates for linear (including linear unitised) specifications; and
— unit-level estimates for externally assessed units in all other unitised specifications.

Instructions from the Regulators
(xv) any written instruction from the regulators specifying particular evidence that must inform the awarding process for a particular series; and
(xvi) relevant evidence from the regulators’ monitoring and comparability reports.
# APPENDIX C

## OCR METRICS

Figures below are “rounded” and taken annually, unless stated otherwise.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Three sites: Birmingham, Cambridge, Coventry</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>600+ employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessors</td>
<td>16,000 examiners, moderators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customers</td>
<td>7,600 schools, colleges and other institutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualifications</td>
<td>470 general</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turnover</td>
<td>£116 million</td>
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### CENTRE APPROVAL AND VISITS

<table>
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<th>Centre approval requests</th>
<th>244 general</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>190 vocational</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>142 asset</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interchange centres</td>
<td>8,000 (90% of active centres)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CPC inspections</td>
<td>270</td>
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<td>CAST visits</td>
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### ENTRIES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Entries</th>
<th>7.7 million (general)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Candidates</td>
<td>1.9 million (vocational)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centres making entries</td>
<td>1.3 million (general)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.5 million (vocational)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pirate candidate investigations</td>
<td>6,500 (vocational)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior achievement requests</td>
<td>126,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transfer candidates</td>
<td>1,500</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### ASSESSORS

| 14–19 and post-19 assessor agreements | 12,500 |
| Active (allocated) assessors (VQ)     | 1,200  |
| Allocations made (VQ)                 | 40,000 |
| Centre/assessor amendments processed (VQ) | 7,000  |
| Awarding and marking review-related meetings (GQ) | 910 (attended by 3,690 assessors) |

### ASSESSMENT PRODUCTION

| Assessment materials produced and published | 6,500 items (including Post-19, 14–19 and Asset) |
| Assessment materials printed               | Over 3,000 print orders placed for ~9.5 million copies |
| Mark schemes produced and published        | 2,000 items |
| Examiner reports published                 | 1,000 items |
| scoris® zoned papers                       | 770       |

### EXAM STATIONERY PRODUCTION

| Personalised attendance registers        | 400,000 |
| Examiner mark sheets                    | 160,000 |
| Personalised internal assessment mark sheets | 145,000 |
| Forecast Grade forms                    | 600,000 |
| Examiner address labels                 | 100,000 sheets |
| Candidate answer sheets                  | 30,000  |

### LOGISTICS

| Question papers despatched              | 8.5 million |
| Non-confidential items despatched       | 17 million  |
| Orders for publications received        | 6,500       |
| Publication items despatched            | 45,000      |
SPECIAL REQUIREMENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Request Type</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Special consideration requests</td>
<td>86,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access arrangement requests</td>
<td>9,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>260,000 modified paper requests, referred access arrangement requests</td>
<td>4,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

PROCESSING

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scripts marked traditionally</td>
<td>2 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple choice answers keyed</td>
<td>27,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supplementary marks keyed</td>
<td>260,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre authentication forms processed</td>
<td>3,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coursework mark adjustments and moderator reports processed</td>
<td>60,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEM forms (checks on examiners’ marking) processed</td>
<td>9,850</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visit reports processed (NVQ and Nationals)</td>
<td>14,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pay claims checked and authorised (VQ)</td>
<td>24,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ESM

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scripts for e-marking</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scripts scanned and marked on screen</td>
<td>3.75 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scanned (A4) images</td>
<td>&gt;60 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>scoris® concurrent user peak</td>
<td>1,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peak marking/marks return (per day)</td>
<td>&gt;100,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

RESULTS AND CERTIFICATES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement Type</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Statements of results issued (GQ)</td>
<td>2.23 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certificates issued (GQ)</td>
<td>1.3 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results issued (VQ)</td>
<td>3.4 million</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

POST-RESULTS SERVICES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service Type</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enquiries about results</td>
<td>49,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to Scripts requests</td>
<td>95,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing or incomplete results requests</td>
<td>4,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late certification requests</td>
<td>12,200</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ARCHIVES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Request Type</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Certifying statement requests (GQ)</td>
<td>7,351</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Archives requests (VQ)</td>
<td>22,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

APPENDIX D

RPI AND HISTORICAL OCR Fee CHARGES—GCE & GCSE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>RPI</th>
<th>OCR Fee</th>
<th>% Variance</th>
<th>Actual Fee</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>GCE 6 Unit</td>
<td>GCE 4 Unit</td>
<td>GCSE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007–08</td>
<td>4.10%</td>
<td>3.75%</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>4.35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008–09</td>
<td>4.80%</td>
<td>3.61%</td>
<td>-10.04%</td>
<td>3.33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009–10</td>
<td>-1.30%</td>
<td>3.10%</td>
<td>2.98%</td>
<td>4.84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010–11</td>
<td>4.70%</td>
<td>3.01%</td>
<td>2.89%</td>
<td>3.08%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011–12</td>
<td>5.20%</td>
<td>3.65%</td>
<td>3.65%</td>
<td>3.73%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Annual RPI quoted is for August, calculated based on the difference from August of the previous year.
APPENDIX E
OCR GCE/GCSE Entries 2010 & 2011
Proportion of Resits versus First Sitting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>GCE</th>
<th>GCSE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>81.3%</td>
<td>18.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>78.9%</td>
<td>21.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>93.2%</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>89.4%</td>
<td>10.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## APPENDIX F

**FEE COMPARISON BETWEEN AWARDING BODIES**

### Selected A2 Full Certification Fees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Unit Req</th>
<th>2009–10</th>
<th>2010–11</th>
<th>2011–12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>AQA</td>
<td>OCR</td>
<td>Edexcel</td>
<td>AQA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chemistry</td>
<td>70.20</td>
<td>79.80</td>
<td>101.40</td>
<td>74.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>70.20</td>
<td>69.20</td>
<td>79.60</td>
<td>74.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>70.20</td>
<td>69.20</td>
<td>82.40</td>
<td>74.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design &amp; Technology</td>
<td>70.20</td>
<td>69.20</td>
<td>155.20</td>
<td>74.20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Selected GCSE Full Certification Fees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>2009–10</th>
<th>2010–11</th>
<th>2011–12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>AQA</td>
<td>OCR</td>
<td>Edexcel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chemistry</td>
<td>26.10</td>
<td>27.80</td>
<td>28.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>26.00</td>
<td>26.80</td>
<td>28.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>26.00</td>
<td>26.80</td>
<td>28.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design &amp; Technology</td>
<td>26.00</td>
<td>26.80</td>
<td>28.10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:**

AQA, OCR and Edexcel all quote unit fees for GCE. Unit fees shown are “std”, although there are exceptions to these for specific subjects where the assessment method warrants a higher fee i.e. visiting examiner etc.

Sep 2008 saw the introduction of the “4 unit” GCE with the exception of some subjects that remained as 6 unit quals (Sciences, Music). Fees for the newly introduced “4 unit” specifications were reduced by 10% from previous spec fees charged in 2007–08. Those subjects remaining as 6 unit quals were increased by 3.61%.

Analysis of 2011 Advanced GCE unit revenue shows that 20% (circa £6.2 million) was generated from resits.

Following the unitisation of many GCSE Short Courses in 2009 OCR opted to reduce the overall cost of gaining a Short Course where as competitors typically charge an additional £5 to £6 to certificate.
APPENDIX G
EXTRACT FROM TERMS AND CONDITIONS FOR ASSESSMENT TASKS

CONFIDENTIALITY AND DISCLOSURE

5.4 The assessor shall not, without the prior written permission of the Head of Assessor Management of OCR, use his/her name in association with that of OCR whilst carrying out the assessment services. The assessor will not use the OCR name for the assessor’s own commercial or non commercial purposes or whilst carrying out services under any other agreement with OCR, or allow it to be so used, whether expressly or by implication. For the avoidance of doubt this restriction shall apply during the agreement and at any time after the termination of the agreement howsoever the termination comes about.

5.5 To ensure the integrity of OCR’s assessments the assessor is required to make written declarations if the assessor has any interest in or with any person taking or involved in any way with an OCR assessment to the Head of Assessor Management at any time during the period of this agreement and for two years following expiry of this agreement. The assessor has an interest in a person if that person is a close relative, or is a person where the assessor’s interest (whether professional or not) could compromise the integrity of OCR’s assessments, or the assessor’s integrity, if the relationship were not disclosed.

5.6 The assessor is required to notify OCR of any potential conflicts of interest or any previous or existing relationship with any OCR centre in which the assessor as an individual has been required to provide any services in any capacity.

5.7 The assessor is required to disclose in writing whether the assessor is preparing candidates for the specification for which the assessor is providing assessment tasks to the Head of Assessor Management at any time during the period of this agreement that this becomes relevant.

5.8 OCR retains the right to determine whether a conflict of interest exists and any such judgement shall be final.

November 2011

Further written evidence submitted by OCR (Annex B)

A brief description of the data you share with Ofqual about A level and GCSE grading, the timing of this and an indication of whether it is publicly available or not.

During the summer awarding session, weekly teleconferences are held between the JCQ awarding organisations and the regulator. Prior to these meetings, data for awards that have been completed are sent to the regulator, and copied to other JCQ awarding organisations. These data are provisional, and are not publicly available.

By a given date in August, all awarding outcomes are sent to the regulator, and copied to other JCQ awarding organisations. Face to face meetings (or occasionally teleconferences) are held for GCE and GCSE separately at which the outcomes are discussed.

The data for each specification are sent in two formats: full award outcomes for all candidates; and outcomes for those candidates for which we have predictions. At GCE predictions are based on the relationship between mean GCSE score and A level performance; whilst for GCSE they are based on the relationship between mean KS2 score and GCSE performance. The second format always contains fewer candidates than the first, as not all candidates can be matched to their prior attainment (be that KS2 or GCSE).

In the autumn, a post-hoc screening analysis is undertaken. It is similar to the predictions used for awarding, but is based on the actual outcomes from the summer series, rather than from a previous series (ie a year before). The other difference is that the GCSE outcomes are measured against mean GCSE, not mean KS2. These were shared with the regulator in 2011.

There are also other occasions when data are shared with the regulator, such as data required for investigative work (eg the ABDA work), or when proposals are made to change the Code of Practice that may impact on grade outcomes. In such circumstances, the regulator will want to see the impact of any changes that are proposed. This would not be publicly available.

March 2012
Written evidence submitted by Cambridge Assessment

Cambridge Assessment is the brand name of the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate, a non-teaching department of the University of Cambridge. It is a not-for-profit organisation formed from the examination boards established in the 1850s by the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, The Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce as well as various Midlands-based exam boards.

It was established to raise standards in education and its mission continues to be to promote educational excellence, and to leverage the University’s societal impact by reaching out to a broader educational constituency than that which is accessed through the University’s core undergraduate teaching and research activities.

The organisation delivers the widest range of qualifications in the world, examines more than 8 million candidates a year and operates in over 160 countries. It employs over 1,800 staff, uses approximately 30,000 examiners and has a turnover of around £270 million, just under half of which is derived from its UK operations.

Additionally, the Group provides a range of educational services. These stretch from advising governments on major educational and curriculum reform programmes to teacher development to helping improve standards of taught English in state primary school systems overseas.

The Group also invests heavily in operational and theoretical research, supported by a total of 63 staff. This supports its core assessment activity, contributes to the development of understanding about the impact of assessment on education and has enabled us to contribute constructively to public discussion and policy debate about educational reform.

In this evidence we address the Committee’s point “the arguments in favour of and against having a range of awarding bodies for academic and applied qualifications…and the merits of alternative arrangements, such as having one national body or examination boards franchised to offer qualifications in particular subjects or fields”.

Summary

Typically, concerns focus on four key areas: risks in the system, standards, costs and efficiency. Our evidence shows that a system of multiple awarding bodies offering a range of competitive qualifications—when properly regulated—(A) reduces risk in the system, (B) maintains standards, (C) is cost effective, (D) is efficient, (E) promotes innovation and choice for learners, and (F) generates competitive pressures that ensure constant system modernisation. Covering each of these issues in turn, we have attempted to provide the committee with concrete examples which reflect both past UK experience and best practice abroad. In order that current arrangements might achieve their full potential we have also supplied recommendations for improvement in the current system for the committee to consider.

The evidence from overseas requires careful understanding of the nature of the checks and balances within those systems. Some nations such as Singapore, Hong Kong, France and Finland operate a “single board” model. Conversely, assessment in Queensland, Norway and Sweden is highly devolved. Many of the most successful jurisdictions are of similar size—around 7 million people. This gives a scale which enables high levels of consultation, accountability and engagement—all of which are much weaker in England with its 51 million population.

Meanwhile, other nations are designing systems similar in approach to the UK. The USA has no federal public examinations system and is in the process of developing standards akin to A level criteria. Germany is in the same position, with school assessment operated on a regional state basis and is developing overarching qualification criteria.

A. Risk Reduction

1. Put simply, multiple awarding bodies spread risk.

2. The most error-prone system giving poor outcomes has proved to be the national curriculum assessment tests (SATs). Effectively, a “single board”—a Government department contracting with various agencies for different parts of the process—has delivered serial failure in data collection with severe crises in 1997, 2004 and 2008. The 2008 failure created a crisis of confidence in National Assessment with all 600,000 pupils adversely affected with some schools and young pupils particularly compromised by the failure.

3. In Scotland in 2000 the newly formed single exam board established by the Scottish Executive suffered a systems failure resulting in over 147,000 exam results being rechecked and 120,000 appeals received whilst UCAS warned that 5,000 university places were at risk. Newspaper headlines told of “Scottish exam chaos”, “Exams chief resigns” and “Cross words as exam accusations fly”. The most interesting headline was “Galbraith accused over exam powers” as the Scottish Executive sought, when it could not deliver, to distance itself from the machine it had created.

67 (as judged by outcomes in TIMSS, PISA and PIRLS).
68 http://www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmchilsch/1037/103704.htm
4. By contrast multiple awarding bodies spread risk in the system and avoid single points of failure. For example, while deeply regrettable, the errors in Summer 2011 GCSE and A level question papers afflicted much smaller numbers than would have been the case under a single exam board structure as there is a spread of candidates across all three boards. Contrast this with the problems with a maths paper in this year’s French Baccalaureate, where there is a single provider, which caused problems for 165,000 candidates.69

5. GCSEs and GCEs are delivered by different organisations operating under the same regulatory requirements regarding both quality of service and standards of assessment. With a sound regulatory regime, quality and choice is maintained whilst risk is reduced.

B. STANDARDS

6. Creating a single Awarding Body does not of itself secure standards. There remains the issue of the need to ensure standards over time and standards between syllabuses in the same subject. For example, it is almost certainly the case that there will need to exist a range of syllabuses at level 2 and level 3, particularly in Maths.70 Even if there existed only a single board, or one contract for each subject, a variety of syllabuses would still be needed in order to meet genuine variation in needs. A single board therefore does not eliminate the demanding task of managing comparability between syllabuses in the same subject, at the same level, and between different subjects.

7. The system needs a robust approach to comparability, not administrative re-organisation. Without a sound methodology for comparability, the creation of a single board, of itself, would not help resolve this deeper problem of maintenance of standards and management of equivalences. If there are robust methods in place, the system can handle syllabuses from a variety of bodies. The role of the regulator should be to use such robust methods continually, regardless of the number of boards.

8. Recommendation: Regulators should expand the number of comparability studies they undertake, using generally accepted methodologies and people generally accepted as experts in comparability, in line with their principal objectives.71

9. In fact, the English regulator Ofqual’s objectives are to maintain qualification standards, regulate assessment practices and standards, promote public confidence in the system, promote awareness of the qualifications landscape and ensure efficiency and cost effectiveness within the system.72 Two of these objectives deal directly with standards; however Ofqual spends much of its efforts servicing the more diffuse public confidence objective through general media and PR programmes. The objective would be better served through the programmatic delivery of robust comparability studies that investigate whether boards are maintaining standards.

10. We believe the public confidence objective is much too general and diffuse and that it should be dropped, so as to make it clear that Ofqual’s principal objective should be the maintenance of standards.

11. Recommendation: that Ofqual’s public confidence objective is removed allowing it to deliver public confidence by performing its fundamental task.

12. Constant reform, re-structuring and reorganisation of the qualifications system is a major threat to standards. This interference also applies to the reaccreditation cycle for some qualifications. This is where qualifications are only accredited for a limited number of years and then have to be reaccredited, whether or not they need updating.

13. The UK has a long history of serial political interventions. By contrast, in France, education is broadly regarded as a critical structural institution which should endure and should not be prone to politically-motivated change. The checks and balances are subtle, but the separation of day-to-day and strategic policies from the rational strategic management of education is acculturated into the system and national consciousness.

14. Democratic governments have an entirely legitimate interest in control of education and training systems—but ill-founded serial intervention in examinations does nothing to enhance the quality of provision. The point of maximum risk in maintaining standards year on year is when a qualification changes.

15. Recommendation: The frequency and scope of change in qualifications should be reduced.

71 128 (1) Ofqual’s objectives are—
(a) the qualifications standards objective,
(b) the assessments standards objective,
(c) the public confidence objective,
(d) the awareness objective, and
(e) the efficiency objective.
72 http://comment.ofqual.gov.uk/regulating-for-confidence-in-standards/overview/ofquals-statutory-objectives/
C. Cost

16. The primary purpose of examinations is to evaluate what students have learnt and been taught. Education expenditure in England was around £70 billion (2008), with some £27 billion being spent on secondary education.73 It is estimated that some £625 million (including Ofqual costs) is spent on examinations in England, including many of those outside the scope of this Inquiry, mostly in secondary education.74 Similar ratios exist in the other nations of the United Kingdom. This represents a not unreasonable quality assurance cost of around 2.5%.

17. The economic rationale for merging exam boards rests on the belief that it would achieve significant economies of scale. However, at best the impact would be minimal as the number of candidates, exams and examiners would not decrease, though there would be some reduction in overhead costs. However, it is not evident that this would justify the level of operational risk associated with such consolidation; the historical experience shows that exam board mergers in the 1990s failed to yield significant savings.

D. Efficiency

18. In its terms of reference the Committee explicitly identifies franchising, and the specialisation of exam boards in specific fields, as an alternative to current arrangements. The underlying assumption is that this is a more efficient way of utilising available resources. This section deals specifically with that issue.

19. It is argued that in certain subjects (eg maths) there are not enough specialist teachers to deliver sufficient examiners at all levels of experience and expertise to a multiplicity of boards. Therefore, by franchising for individual subjects, all subject experts will move to the winning board which will be in a position to use only the best, allowing the sub-optimal to fall by the wayside. As a result quality and efficiency in examining would improve.

20. However, concentrating expertise in this way would eliminate any possibility of competition in future years, because no other board would be capable of bidding when the contract came up for renewal. This is the situation with the Government’s Key Stage tests. For some years now, Edexcel has been the only credible bidder for the delivery of the contract.

21. This arrangement is fine only while the Government is happy with its chosen supplier. In 2007 the Government sought to reintroduce competition and international testing company, ETS, was given the contract. In July 2008, around 1.2 million pupils heard that the results for their National Curriculum tests at Key Stage 2 and 3 would be delayed. Considerable blame was placed at the doors of both the Department for Education and its “arms-length” operator, the QCA. The political storm and public outcry resulted in both the Sutherland Enquiry75 and an investigation by this Committee’s predecessor76.

22. While the “pool” of available examiners in certain subjects is not as deep as all boards might wish, there are alternatives to franchising which do not inhibit competition. Very many fine teachers are prevented from becoming examiners by their senior management who are reluctant to give time off for training, standardisation and administration. To accept that the way to deal with an artificial minimisation of expertise is to focus it in one place seems to us to be placing the cart before the horse.

23. What is needed is for the teacher leadership to encourage those with expertise to engage with awarding bodies at all levels of examining. This not only makes a significant contribution to the health of the whole system but also improves the expertise of the teacher and hence the school. In this way the total number of potential examiners can be expanded, with any number of boards being able to recruit the best.

24. Recommendation: That Head teachers and Principals of colleges be encouraged by government to support teachers who wish to do so to become examiners.

E. Innovation and Choice

25. Innovation can be driven centrally or through competition. Historically the most successful qualifications innovations have emerged from awarding organisations successfully triangulating the needs of government and society with the needs of, on one hand, universities and employers, and on the other, educators and trainers wanting to offer individuals satisfying, stimulating and manageable learning. Examples from 1980 onward include Suffolk, Nuffield and Salters in the Sciences, Ridgeway History, Cambridge History Project, MEI Maths, Critical Thinking, OCR Nationals and CLAIT with integrated Microsoft units. This period saw schools and universities develop “curriculum projects” to raise achievement and participation and then turn to awarding bodies to supply appropriate, high quality assessment and certification.

26. Innovation and choice go hand in hand. A multiplicity of exam boards enabled these school groups and universities to approach several different boards, some of whom saw the opportunities for different syllabuses, whilst others did not. If only one exam board existed a single negative response would terminate an innovation

73 http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/d/pesa_2010_chapter5.pdf
75 The Sutherland Enquiry, December 2008 http://sutherlandenquiry.independent.gov.uk/
before it saw the light of day. In contrast, under the present system, the production of a new syllabus which was successful has served to encourage other boards to enhance their syllabuses to meet the clear demand. Such contestability rarely arises where only one producer exists.

27. By contrast centrally derived innovation has given the country Diplomas, GNVQs and NVQs; the first two ultimately failed and the third is subject to a persistent lack of public credibility.

28. Looking abroad, even those countries with highly centralised systems, like France and Singapore, find themselves having to open up their systems to outside providers. They do this to enrich the curriculum, using syllabuses not otherwise available in the national curriculum, to ensure that the national curriculum is exposed to ideas from abroad, to check the quality of their own examinations and drive improvement. Countries may even go on to design their own version of the examination, as in Colombia,77 but the fact remains that these countries are aware of the need for some form of mechanism help drive innovation, choice and standards.

29. **Recommendation:** UK regulators should give force to their general duty to “have regard to the desirability of facilitating innovation in connection with the provision of regulated qualifications”78 by more flexible application of regulatory requirements for public qualifications.

### F. Modernisation

30. Assessment and public qualifications have become technology-intensive, requiring very high levels of investment in e-assessment, logistics, e-marking and so on. This is a direct result of competitive stimulus. Schools and centres demand increasingly detailed, complex information on attainment in order to more accurately match students to programmes. Demand is rising for tests to be taken when the student is ready which requires enhanced computer-based testing (CBT). Exam boards are, rightly, under pressure to improve the quality of marking and grading, best achieved through on-line applications which allow entirely new forms of quality assurance including real-time monitoring of marker performance. Whenever one board achieves an advance, the others compete vigorously to catch up and overtake. A single body, or a franchised body, would be under no such pressure.

### G. Improving the Current System

31. Different learners learn in different ways and different routes through the education and training system requiring different forms of assessment and certification. With young people compelled to participate in learning programmes from 5–18, it makes sense in personal, economic and social terms to provide programmes which maximize the engagement, motivation and attainment of learners. A rich qualifications catalogue is needed to achieve this, enabling education providers to develop optimized learning programmes.

32. Although it is often argued that there are too many qualifications, the total number of active qualifications (5,500) was comparable to countries such as Germany in 2006–07. Since then, as a direct result of Government policy action designed to decrease the number of qualifications, there has been a massive increase, with Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) qualifications increasing from zero to 1,700.79 This contrasts with the figure commonly used figure of “around 20,000” qualifications which is a myth.80

33. A diverse range of qualifications can only happen with multiple, competing, exam boards innovating and working with schools, HE and employers. However, the UK system is not operating optimally. Although Ofqual originally set out to regulate the overall system for delivering qualifications, it has re-introduced the micromanagement of “public qualifications” in addition to high-level regulation, thus increasing the regulatory burden and stifling innovation.

34. **Recommendation:** Regulators should focus on high-level definitions of needs and be flexible in accrediting assessments that reach the same goal using alternative methodologies.

35. The efforts of the regulator, like those of the Committee, have concentrated on what might called “high stakes” assessments ie those giving access to the upper levels of education or employment produced by five UK exam boards.81 However, there are in fact 160+ registered awarding bodies which in turn offer a multitude of assessed (most vocational) qualifications. These in turn are viewed as “low stakes” qualifications.

36. We believe a differentiation of “High” and “Low” stakes is fundamentally wrong. All exams impact upon those taking them. Cambridge Assessment research indicates that seemingly “low stakes” assessment can have a powerful effect on learners’ self-esteem and dramatically affect their decisions about the things at which they choose to excel.82

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77 In Colombia the Ministerio de Educación Nacional launched a National Bilingual Project designed to equip the population with English skills for work and higher study. Cambridge was invited to help with a benchmarking project and to assist in producing a new series of state exams linked to international standards. Following on from the project, the government again requested support to develop new national English language tests, to be incorporated into the Examen de Estado, the national school exit exam in Colombia, taken by more than 500,000 school-leavers in 2007.

78 http://www.ofqual.gov.uk/legislation/section/129


80 http://www.ofqual.gov.uk/legislation/section/92

81 http://www.ofqual.gov.uk/standards/92-articles/594-available-qualifications

82 This figure derives from a request by Sir William Stubbs (then Chief Executive of FEFC) to the FEFC data unit, prior to the formation of QCA in 1997. It was simply the total number of qualifications known to FEFC. Crucially, it did not exclude duplicate entries on the database (errors); the same qualification offered by a different awarding body; old versions of revised qualifications; and completely redundant qualifications.
they are “good” and “bad”. In turn, this can affect their decisions about which directions to take, altering the life chances of a candidate sometimes by a greater factor than a “gifted and talented” candidate failing to get the grade they wanted at GCSE.

37. Ofqual’s concentration on “High” stake qualifications effectively prevents it from being a rigorous regulator in relation to the protection of candidates taking “Low” stakes qualifications.

38. **Recommendation**: UK regulators must not narrow their regulatory focus to “High stakes” qualifications only.

39. The interrelationship of England’s qualifications system with those of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland has never been seriously addressed. It is notable, for instance, that arguments for centralising are seldom applied to the exam boards under the control of the administrations in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland but only to the three “English” boards.

40. More importantly, similarly titled qualifications (eg GCSEs) offered in any country of the UK must be of an equivalent standard if learners are to enjoy employment and higher education mobility throughout. There are already serious doubts as to whether English GCSE standards are diverging. It may no longer be tenable for the English regulator to accept by proxy decisions made by the other UK regulators and vice versa.

41. **Recommendation**: Serious consideration should be given to the arrangements for ensuring UK-wide comparability of standards, starting with a new consultation on the issue and the appointment of an intra-country comparability “czar”.

November 2011

**Further written evidence submitted by Cambridge Assessment (Annex A)**

*The role of high quality textbooks in raising educational standards—how we need to link textbooks to curriculum and to assessment—the evidence from transnational analysis.*

**Background**

Discussions in Select Committee have confronted key issues relating to the link between textbooks and examinations; the quality of textbooks; and the factors influencing quality. This is the right territory, but it is vital for our system that the Select Committee influences the system in a manner which is consistent with what we know from international research.

**Preamble**

This paper was prompted by my recognition of the importance of making available to the Committee the evidence from the international research which has been undertaken as part of the current review of the National Curriculum.

I am writing the paper from my perspective as Chair of the Expert Panel advising the Secretary of State, on curriculum reform. However, I also lead research activity at Cambridge Assessment, and a natural question is: does that not mean there is an interest in a specific form of relationship between examinations, textbooks and other resources? The answer is simple: the Cambridge Assessment Group contains three awarding bodies, each of which maintains very different sorts of relationship with providers of materials—Cambridge ESOL has a tight linkage with CUP for some of its provision; CIE has very specific commercial relations with outside publishers, but also operates in jurisdictions where there are state-approved textbooks; while OCR commissions from a very wide range of providers depending on the strengths of the provider in meeting specific requirement. This highlights a key issue for this paper: it is not the form of the relationship or the legal relationship between publisher and examination body which determines quality. Quality is dependent on other crucial factors, and it is this which is the main focus of this paper.

**The Nature of the Problem—and there is indeed a Problem**

The Committee has received and reviewed evidence which suggests that a narrow instrumentalism has crept pervasively into the textbooks which are linked to specific examinations in the English system. Concerns have been expressed that this has tipped into having the effect of restricting and narrowing learning programmes. At worst, the close ties between certain books and examinations constitute a form of “teaching to the test” which undermines the values of fair and accurate assessment. These have been described as “unhealthy” even “incestuous” relations. I believe that this evidence does indeed indicate that something is seriously wrong with current relations.

But international studies make clear that introducing policy which breaks the link between textbooks (or key learning materials of any form) and examinations—and indeed the various producers of these different things—is simply contrary to what is happening in systems which have radically improved their performance. At its most extreme, a reaction against the current forms of linkage in England might be “there should be no link between text books and examinations”. This is patently absurd. Textbooks should help the delivery of a high
quality curriculum. Examinations should provide fair and accurate assessment of the outcomes which are attained through the learning to which this curriculum gives rise. The fact that we currently have the wrong sort of linkage between textbooks and examinations—and we are thus unhappy with the current set of texts and examinations—does not mean that there should be no link.

This immediately gives rise to the question “so what sort of linkage should we encourage?”. I believe the history of our system and evidence from other education systems holds the answer. Some of the most important innovations in secondary school programmes of the 1970’s and 1980’s—such as SMP maths, Nuffield science—were predicated on a very close link between learning materials and examinations. The educational integrity of these programmes derived very much from this linkage; the combined materials conveyed with greater precision than previously the desired learning outcomes and the concepts which pupils should develop as a result of teaching. But there was no outcry regarding “narrowness”, or “reductivism”, or “cheating”. No departments complained that they felt “forced” or “blackmailed” into adopting a textbook linked to a specific examination. Far from it, the linked materials and examinations charted a clear course through the concepts and knowledge at the heart of the programme, gave a clear structure around which teachers could design engaging lessons, and did not encourage restrictive teaching.

What has changed since this form of linkage was used to improve maths and science teaching? Comments to the Select Committee highlight the extent to which narrow instrumentalism has pervaded the whole education system—textbooks and exams have not been immune to this insidious tendency. Rather than being the cause of the problem, the linkage which we now have between textbooks and examinations is most likely a symptom of a deeper structural trend in the system. Failure to recognise this may mean that new policy in this area attends to surface features of the textbook-exam relation and at best has no impact; at worst, an inappropriate policy response could reduce our capacity to use the linkage to raise system performance.

**Textbook Quality as a Key Instrument of System Improvement**

Singapore has lists of state-approved textbooks. So does Hong Kong, Alberta, Massachusetts, Japan and France. Finland, now characterized as a highly autonomous and non-centralist system, used approved textbooks as a key instrument during its period of deliberate and sustained improvement, when it moved from moribund to superlative performance in the 1970s and 1980s. The precise status of “approved” texts and the processes which are used for approval vary, but these and other systems all used the textbook-curriculum-assessment linkage as a key policy instrument in system improvement. I am not arguing that we should move, in England, to a formal process of State approval for textbooks. There are different approaches to achieving the same relations as are used in other high-performing jurisdictions, as I shall outline later. I believe that, on the basis of understanding the role which the linkage has had in these other systems, it would be a terrible error, in England, to diminish the linkage between textbooks, curriculum and assessment without ensuring that the FORM of the linkage is optimized. We need high quality resources coupled to the curriculum and to assessments.

“Curriculum coherence is important; it is a key principle of the current National Curriculum Review. The following extracts makes clear the role of the linkage between curriculum content, assessment, materials (including textbooks), teacher and teaching quality, accountability etc (see annex 1 for full list of ‘control factors’. Curriculum coherence results when these factors are be in alignment—the insight derives from compelling work by Schmidt and Prawat on high performing system, investigated through the results of the transnational TIMMS data. High performing systems possess curriculum coherence, moribund systems do not):

… on the concept of control; Schmidt’s work suggests that a level of control must be exercised in a system in order to promote a necessary level of curriculum coherence. Once again, it is vital to recognise that the National Curriculum cannot, by itself, guarantee curriculum coherence in the system. A system is regarded as ‘coherent’ when the national curriculum content, textbooks, teaching content, pedagogy, assessment and drivers and incentives all are aligned and reinforce one another. For this to be the case, a certain level of control is necessary. Crucially, Schmidt and Prawat’s comparative work suggests that this level of control need not necessarily derive from top-down measures. It is more that the system must exercise control, not that individual agencies should take control.

Their analysis suggests that the existence of curriculum coherence through curriculum control is essential; the precise institutional and system form to achieve this can vary. The list of 13 policy control-factors should be interpreted in the light of this. An effective approach to improving education in England will not be associated with slavishly adopting isolated aspects of other systems. Rather, we should be concerned with scrutinising other high-performing systems in order to understand how different aspects of education policy in England can be adjusted to deliver curriculum coherence, using a pattern of control and governance which is both suitable and effective in the English setting. As with the problems with using a single overarching structure for different subjects within the formal statement of the National Curriculum, it may well be that, at the current time, different mechanisms for curriculum control are necessary in different subjects. A greater supply of specialist teachers may be essential in some subjects. Just as Finland’s current success can be traced to highly centralised control in previous decades, including control of textbooks, provision of highly specific learning materials and staff development may be required in certain subject areas
and phases—without any necessary pre-judgment about which agencies may be best placed to manage such provision. Critically, if the National Curriculum is to be refined, in order to facilitate high-quality approaches to contextualisation, task design etc, then other measures (across the list of 13 factors) will be required to ensure that such developments are realised in the system—perhaps associated with initial teaching training, or with continuing professional development, or with a new generation of textbooks—or all three of these. Without this, curriculum coherence and entitlement will not be attained…."

Oates T 2010 Could do better—Using international comparisons to refine the National Curriculum in England pp5–16

POLICY RESPONSE AND COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

One policy response which has been suggested by others is to ensure separation of producers of textbooks and producers of examinations. This would fail to produce a desired result, and would encourage dysfunctional “evasion” of restriction—eg by setting up subsidiary companies and complex deal structures. Firstly, it is important to note that some of the problematic linkages have been created by tie-in between separate organizations. Thus, administrative separation does not address the quality problem. Secondly, existing joint bodies could simply “hive off” the different operations, but retain the existing linkages between textbooks and examinations—again, the quality issue would not be addressed.

There are naïve assumptions by different groups as to how and why we have got into the position we are now in. Teachers frequently have said “publishers love to make money out of constantly changing the texts”. But publishers do not share this view. The kind of textbook genuinely liked by publishers is a key textbook which is used by large numbers of people and is in print for thirty years. Likewise, publishers are highly sensitive to market demands. The narrow “guide to the examination” is produced by them because this is precisely what an accountability-trammelled profession asks for (please note that this paper is not arguing for a system in which there is no school accountability, but there are questions about the impact of the current form of arrangements—see Cambridge Assessment 2007). Publishers investigate in detail what teachers are asking for, and then produce exactly the things for which the market is calling. And as for “constant change”—this is due to the constant change in examinations; a pace of change driven principally by changes in State bodies could simply “hive off” the different operations, but retain the existing linkages between textbooks and examinations—again, the quality issue would not be addressed.

In Conclusion

In working through the potential policy associated with raising the quality of textbooks the following has emerged in discussions with researchers and publishers:

1. textbooks are of depressed quality due to narrow instrumentalism across the education system—emanating principally from the behaviours stimulated by high stakes accountability arrangements;
2. publishers are very aware of the narrow instrumentalism of many materials—but they are very efficient at providing the kinds of materials for which teachers are asking;
3. publishers do NOT seek to constantly change textbooks nor do they profit from this. Constant change in state regulation regarding the form and content of curriculum and qualifications is considered, by publishers and researchers, to be a principal threat to quality;
4. researchers and publishers recognise the importance of the international evidence on “curriculum coherence” and the latter actively want to increase the quality of textbooks and materials. There are examples, from the recent past, of very high quality materials which linked closely to examinations—SMP maths, Nuffield science—but we have moved away from this;
5. very high quality materials exist in high performing jurisdictions—eg maths text books in Singapore and Hong Kong—and these are “close coupled” to the curriculum and to examinations—but lack the instrumentalism present in narrowly-framed UK materials. We should use these as reference points for development of high quality materials in our own system;
6. teaching beyond the syllabus in respect of qualifications enhances examination grades. Textbooks which support this further exploration of, and reflection on, subjects should be encouraged; and
7. many high performing jurisdictions use “approved” lists and State approval of textbooks and materials to ensure curriculum coherence. This is not currently a structural feature of the English system, and approval systems are not free of complications and problems. Commercial restriction should be approached with caution. But approaches such as this should be considered and discussed, as should “kite-mark” and lighter-touch approval systems. It is important to note that approval of a likely future “tidal wave” of electronic materials would present any formal system of approval with huge, if not insurmountable, challenge. In the face of these realities, a culture of high quality—using the highest quality domestic and international materials as benchmarks—would be far more effective in ensuring that poor quality materials (including internet-based materials) are not used, and are given short shrift by education professionals.
In line with the analysis in this paper, I would contend that the key issues are: recognizing the importance of textbooks in improving the performance of the education system; and securing the right relation between textbooks and learning—rather than diminishing the relationship.

This last point is crucial. Improving the relationship almost certainly involves tightening the linkage between textbooks and the aims and content of the curriculum and qualifications rather than artificially separating them. Attempting to administratively or constitutionally separate the design, production and operation of textbooks from the aims and content of curriculum and qualification (eg by banning certain organizations from producing textbooks) would only work if it went hand in with an effort to ensure greater curriculum coherence—ie greater linkage of higher quality—in the form and content of textbooks, curriculum and qualifications. And this therefore feels like policy pulling in two different directions at the same time. Far better to concentrate on the need for linkage and the quality of the materials.

Tim Oates
Cambridge
March 2012

REFERENCES
Cambridge Assessment 2007 Alternative approaches to National Assessment at KS1, KS2 and KS3
Oates T 2010 Could do better—Using international comparisons to refine the National Curriculum in England pp5–16

Annex 1

CONTROL FACTORS

A critical approach to transnational analysis suggests that we should use international comparisons to understand how different aspects of the system are subject to control and development, rather than engage in crude “policy borrowing”. These “control factors” exist in complex relations and balances:

1. curriculum content (national curriculum specifications, textbooks, support materials, etc);
2. assessment and qualifications;
3. national framework—system shape (eg routes, classes of qualifications);
4. inspection;
5. pedagogy;
6. professional development (levels and nature of teacher expertise);
7. institutional development;
8. institutional forms and structures (eg size of schools, education phases);
9. allied social measures (such as that which links social care, health care and education);
10. funding;
11. governance (autonomy versus direct control);
12. accountability arrangements; and
13. selection and gatekeeping (eg university admissions requirements).

These are very useful categories for looking at other nations’ policy arrangements. Studying the relation between them in different countries allows us to understand the operation of our own system. It is important to understand that, despite comparatively low rates of pay (OECD 2010) Finnish teachers enjoy high social status, and all have a high level of formal qualification (to Masters level). The importance of teaching quality, approaches to learning and task design is strongly reinforced in the work of Hattie (Hattie J 2003), Wiliam (Black P & Wiliam D op cit), Watson (Watson A undated; Watson A & Ollerton M 2005) Andrews (Andrews P 2007; Andrews P 2010) and Stigler & Stevenson (Stigler & Stevenson op cit). This is an important factor in national success, amongst others. A country’s national curriculum—both its form and content—cannot be considered in isolation from the state of development of these vital factors. They interact. Adjust one without considering development of the others, and the system may be in line for trouble (Green A 1997). Of equal importance, transnational analyses can provide evidence-based design principles which were absent from the 2007 revisions to the National Curriculum. Key amongst such work is Schmidt and Prawat’s analysis of “curriculum coherence” (Schmidt W & Prawat R 2006). This is strongly grounded in evidence from TIMSS, and argues that “curriculum coherence” is vital, and is associated with high performing systems. This is not just a trivial, common-language use of the term “coherence”. A system is regarded as “coherent” when the national curriculum content, textbooks, teaching content, pedagogy, assessment and drivers and incentives all are aligned and reinforce one another. “…Curricular materials in high-performing nations focus on fewer topics, but also communicate the expectation that those topics will be taught in a deeper, more profound way…” (Schmidt W & Prawat R 2006 p1). Their analysis of mathematics emphasises that “curriculum coherence” should also be demonstrated through arranging concepts in an appropriate age-related hierarchy. Their more extended analysis of the nature of national control suggests that there is no rigid association between a system
possessing curriculum coherence and being subject to tight, “top down” control, nor it being devolved—the group of countries which exhibit curriculum coherence includes examples of both.

April 2012

Written evidence submitted by the British Chambers of Commerce

About the British Chambers of Commerce

The British Chambers of Commerce (BCC) is the national body for a powerful and influential Network of 52 Accredited Chambers of Commerce across the UK; a network that directly serves not only its members businesses, but the wider business community.

Representing 100,000 businesses who together employ more than 5 million employees, the British Chambers of Commerce is the Ultimate Business Network. Every Chamber sits at the very heart of its local community, working with businesses to develop and grow.

British Chambers of Commerce Position

The British Chambers of Commerce welcomes this opportunity to give evidence on examination boards in the England. Whilst we do not have specific comments to make on the technicalities of the examination system, this is a useful opportunity to bring forward concerns that businesses have raised regarding exam procedures.

Recent research by the British Chambers of Commerce entitled “Skills for Business; More to learn” surveyed over 7,000 companies, and found that businesses lack confidence in the English education and training system, and particularly in qualifications.

Some of our key findings are:

—— Only 28.6% of 5,800 companies surveyed would be very or fairly confident in recruiting a school leaver with A-Levels or equivalent.
—— Low business confidence is largely the result of poor levels of soft skills in school leavers. This often includes poor levels of literacy, punctuality and ability to concentrate.
—— The education system works best when businesses are able to work closely with schools, colleges and the wider training system.
—— The BCC thinks the question being asked by the Committee is the wrong one. The salient question is not whether the current exam board system is maintained, combined to create a single board, or reformed to make boards more sector-specific. We believe that employers and educators must instead work together to create the most effective exam system.
—— Business confidence is proportional to employee size with larger businesses being more confident than smaller firms. However, only a minority (36.8%) of businesses with 250+ employees would be very or fairly confident in recruiting a school leaver with A-Levels or equivalent.
—— Only 20.1% of businesses with 1 to 4 employees would be very or fairly confident in recruiting a school leaver 23.5% of businesses with 5 to 9 employees, 32.6% of businesses with 10 to 49 employees and 35.5% of businesses with 100 to 249 employees.
—— The hotels, restaurants and leisure sector is the sector that has the most confidence in the education system however only a minority (37.4%) of businesses are confident in recruiting a school leaver with A-Levels or equivalent.
—— The marketing, media and research sector has the lowest levels of confidence with only 19% of businesses in this sector being confident in recruiting a school leaver with A-Levels or equivalent.

The BCC’s work with businesses—including focus groups, policy meetings and large scale surveys—suggests that companies do not see the education system in its current form as providing young people with the “employability” skills they require. Providing young people with a fundamental understanding of business and enterprise will serve them well in later life—and needs to be at the heart of the education system.

From our experience, education is most effective when businesses, schools, colleges and the wider education system work closely together. This engagement, however, must not simply be limited to work experience and school visits, but extended to wider business involvement throughout the education system, from the writing of curriculum to decisions on how qualifications should be awarded within the education system. This relies upon engagement with the exam boards.

Companies have not told us that they are concerned with whether exam boards are merged into one body, or whether bodies are divided into sector specific exam boards. Instead, they are worried about outcomes—and ensuring that they have an appropriate relationship with both the education system as a whole and with those that set and award qualifications in particular. The BCC argues that whether the Government decides to combine the current boards in one or maintain a multiple board system, there should be a single point of
contact for businesses to engage, making it as simple as possible to create the most effective education system, producing highly skilled school leavers that can contribute to the economic growth of the UK.

November 2011

Further written evidence submitted by the British Chambers of Commerce following on from Oral Evidence given 29 November 2011

In order to validate the research findings of Skills for Business—More to Learn; BCC and local Chambers hosted a number of focus groups across the country where groups of around 12–20 employers met to discuss general skills issues as well as the findings of the research.

At one of the focus groups a commercial legal company employing over 200 people related their experiences of recruiting young people over recent years. They recruit a number of young people each year to their Apprenticeship programme. They invite applications and use GCSE A–C grades as a first sift. They then invite all qualifying people to sit an assessment test. The assessment test takes the form of an In-Tray exercise. Applicants are asked to receive and make a series of phone calls to perform a series of actions. They are then given a letter and asked to identify grammatical and spelling errors. Finally they are asked to complete a short arithmetical test. The company have used this test with minor tweaks for a number of years; they have reported a significant decline in the numbers of people passing this test in the last three to four years. No further information is available.

At another focus group elsewhere in the country a manufacturing/distribution company employing over 250 people also use their own assessment test when recruiting. Some new recruits are engaged to an Apprenticeship programme but not all. Again GCSE A–C grades are used as a first sift, the assessment test consists of a comprehension test which measures an ability to analyse information, grammar, spelling and sentence construction. There is also a arithmetic test. Again the company reports a decline in the pass rate amongst young people coming out of full time education. Interestingly the company use a hand/eye co-ordination test for applicants to the manufacturing line and pass rates remain stable.

January 2012

Written evidence submitted by SCORE (Science Community Representing Education)

1. SCORE is a partnership of organisations, which aims to improve science education in UK schools and colleges by supporting the development and implementation of effective education policy. The partnership is currently chaired by Professor Graham Hutchings FRS and comprises the Association for Science Education, Institute of Physics, Royal Society, Royal Society of Chemistry and Society of Biology.

2. The current examinations system is not fit for purpose and SCORE welcomes this timely inquiry from the Education Select Committee. The assessments are not testing the specifications; therefore, even students with high grades are not prepared for the next stage in their career or education—despite the fact that the specifications suggest that they should be; and consequently, consumers of qualifications have lost confidence in the examinations system. This has come about because the five main Awarding Organisations (AOs) which cover England, Wales and Northern Ireland are competing for market share on the basis of enabling more candidates to get higher grades rather than on the basis of high quality assessments or high quality curricula specifications. We ask that the Select Committee recommends significant changes that include drivers for quality in the examinations system and bring an end to the “race to the bottom”.

3. In summary this SCORE response:

   — Sets out the characteristics for an effective examinations system and analyses these in respect of failings of the current system.

   — Sets out alternative models for examinations systems including some in which competition is not for market share within a qualification.

   — Calls for it to be a formal requirement of the regulator to review assessment material prior to use, to prevent problems in the quality and accuracy in examination papers.

   — Raises serious concerns about the management of conflicts of interest between the awarding functions of an AO and any other activities AOs (and their related companies) undertake.

82 AQA, CCEA, Edexcel, OCR and WJEC.
Characteristics of an Effective 15–19 Examinations System

4. An effective 15–19 examinations system should:
   
   — Set and maintain standards — Assessment results should be comparable as far as is reasonably possible from year to year in order to maintain confidence in the system (the results being the public face of the summer examinations). This allows employers and Higher Education Institutions (HEI) to compare fairly two people who took the same qualification years apart. It is fine for grades to improve so long as this is a result of better teaching and learning rather than through schools changing specifications.

   — Produce fair and effective assessment tools — The assessment tools must effectively measure a learner’s ability in a subject. They must also be designed to differentiate fairly and reliably between the excellent, good and weak candidates.

   — Engender high quality teaching and learning — There will always be an intrinsic link between assessment and the teaching and learning of a subject. Assessment must therefore test all levels of Bloom’s taxonomy83 to encourage high quality teaching and learning.

   — Authentically represent the subject being assessed — Specifications and assessment should not lose the character and ethos of a subject in the practicalities of setting and marking assessments. Examinations in biology, chemistry and physics should assess the subject-specific capabilities of candidates rather than generic abilities such as being able to recall facts.

   — Encourage and allow for progression — Learners obtaining any qualification should be equipped with the necessary subject knowledge and skills to progress to the next relevant level in that subject.

   — Embrace subject expertise — The two previous points emphasise the need for the development of specifications and assessments to be carried out, supported and regulated by people with expertise in that subject. Any AO and its regulator must have subject expertise in-house. In addition, the system should require specialist input from subject communities (including teachers, professional bodies, employers and academics) at all stages of qualification development. Subject experts should be used throughout: setting the criteria, developing the assessments and accrediting specifications.

   — Be transparent — The roles and responsibilities of any AO, the regulator and the subject communities must be clearly defined and transparent. Furthermore the system should engender supportive relationships between these groups. In addition, all AOs with responsibility for administering 15–19 examinations should be obliged to publish or otherwise make available anonymised, subject-based data on examination participation and performance in all national qualifications. This information would allow reliable assessment of how the examinations system in England is performing.84

   — Support innovation — The examinations system should be responsive to and engaged in educational research to support suitably evidence-informed innovations in assessment, curriculum and pedagogy.

   — Ensure comparability between subjects — A system must be committed to achieving parity of standards across subjects and specifications. Where this is not possible the system must be transparent and suitably acknowledge a lack of parity.

   — Offer real choice and quality — Learners (or, more realistically, their institutions) must be offered a genuine educational choice in qualifications to accommodate and support different styles of learning. These qualifications must also lead to clearly differentiated career pathways.

   — Promote a cycle of evolution — The system should operate on an evolutionary cycle where high quality and effective qualifications are continually improved, based on meaningful research and evidence so that each round of specification-development is informed by the successes (and failures) of the previous round. In addition, assessments and specifications should be piloted (with assessments being pre-tested to reduce errors) and the cycle of specifications should be long enough to allow any major changes to be based on evidence.

5. In addition, an effective examinations system must be considered within the context of the broader ecosystem. Awarding Organisation(s) do not exist in isolation. They have interdependent relationships with the regulator, subject communities, learning institutions and the Government and it is the effectiveness of these relationships that will determine the way a model operates in practice (see also paragraph 9).

Current System

6. While SCORE recognises the potential merits of multiple AOs (it spreads risk in the system, reduces the extent to which qualifications are under direct political control, presents diversity in qualifications, and

83 Bloom’s Taxonomy is a hierarchy of learning objectives for education: the lower levels include recall, comprehension, application and the higher levels include analysis, synthesis and evaluation. Learning at the higher levels is dependent on having attained prerequisite knowledge and skills at lower levels, creating a deeper and more holistic form of learning.

potentially keeps costs down) the current model in which the AOs operate in England is not effective and we strongly believe that it jeopardises the needs of the learner, the consumer (HEIs and employers) and the country, by not assessing the specifications and thereby reducing the demand of what is taught.

7. The current system falls short on almost every point set out in paragraph 4, many of which are interrelated.85

— **Standards**—The commercial nature of AOs has led to an erosion of standards. Because it is a priority for AOs to maintain market share in qualifications they will never make a unilateral change to an assessment that makes it more difficult to achieve a high grade (or, put another way, reduce the number of high grades)—as most schools are unlikely to choose an AO that offers fewer high grades. This has led to a continual increase in the number of students getting the high grades. It is reasonable to assume that over time a number of the students who obtain the top grades would not have done so in the past. Individual cases and indeed year groups are difficult to compare, but the impression that standards are either slipping or becoming incomparable between year groups cannot be ignored. Of course it is a good thing for schools to aim to increase the number of their students achieving high grades; but the current system, in which a school’s performance is measured mainly by the raw grades of its students, encourages them to connive in a broken market.

— **Engendering high quality teaching and learning**—The nature of AOs we believe has led to some decisions being made on commercial rather than educational grounds. These decisions have affected both the content of the specifications (chosen to be easily assessable) and the way in which they are assessed (tending to concentrate on the lower levels of Bloom’s taxonomy). The higher levels in the taxonomy (analysis, synthesis and evaluation) are rarely assessed. Attributes like curiosity, enthusiasm, imagination, persistence and teamwork are also relatively un-assessed; and therefore they are less likely to be taught. The effect has been to impoverish the learner experience by including a large number of knowledge-based statements in specifications and straight recall questions in examinations.86 Furthermore there is no regulation in place to prevent this from happening, as Ofqual is not required to review assessments prior to use. Rather than acting as an “air traffic controller”, preventing problems in which a school’s performance is measured mainly by the raw grades of its students, encourages them to connive in a broken market.

— **Authentically represent the subject**—Multiple AOs producing multiple specifications for the same qualification in the same subject means that the expertise is spread thinly. It calls into question whether there are enough people who have sufficient subject and examining expertise and experience in each subject in each of five main AOs in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Additionally, having multiple AOs makes it hard for professional bodies and the subject communities to take any role in specification development, as all must be treated equally. This lack of engagement with subject communities results in a lack of confidence from users of the system, including HEIs and employers. Furthermore, Ofqual is responsible for ensuring qualifications authentically represent a subject but, with little in-house subject expertise, it is hard to see on what grounds they can make this judgement (see paragraph below on transparency).

— **Transparency**—The role of the subject communities is not defined in the current system. The Criteria, to which all specifications must adhere for each subject, are set by Ofqual without in-house subject expertise and without formal engagement with the subject communities. Specifications are required to have received official support from their subject community before they are accredited. However, this official support is not defined and could come from any number of organisations whatever their expertise or professional standing.

— **Innovation**—SCORE believes the current model is not supportive of innovation. This is in part due to the competitive commercial nature of some AOs. Sharing best practice and collaborative working are not embraced and there is pressure from institutions (the customers) to minimise change to syllabuses and assessment methods.

— **Comparability**—The Criteria are produced by Ofqual to ensure comparability between specifications within the same subject. However, in reality, evidence shows substantial differences in how the Criteria are interpreted, particularly in terms of assessment. In recent SCORE reviews of GCSE87 and A-level88 examinations papers the type, the quantity and the difficulty of the mathematics assessed varied considerably across the five main AOs in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

85 SCORE’s comments on the current system are based on member organisations’ collective experience of working with Ofqual, QCDA and the Awarding Organisations.

86 For example, evidence from SCORE commissioned research into the assessment of “How Science Works” at Key Stage 4 found that many of the assessment items were low-level recall and few gave the opportunity for students to demonstrate higher level understanding [Andrew Hunt (2010) Ideas and evidence in science: Lessons from assessment].


88 Preliminary findings from SCORE commissioned research into the assessment of mathematics in science A-levels. The final report is due for publication in Spring 2012.
Alternative Models to the Current System and their Potential

8. There are numerous models (and layers within models) for structuring AOs and the way that qualifications are provided. In Appendix 1 we have attempted to summarise this in a diagram, highlighting the interactions between the different models and the ways in which qualifications are produced. It is important to note there is not a direct mapping between the structure and the offering to schools (it is possible, for example, to have multiple AOs with just one of them or all of them producing a given qualification). In Appendix 2 we have used this diagram to describe the potential advantages and disadvantages of the models.

9. In summary, based on the analysis set out in Appendix 2, SCORE sees very few advantages of providing the same qualification for a given subject, in competition, by multiple AOs. Although there are a number of risks, we would favour a model in which competition is not for market share within a qualification. While we have highlighted the potential risks and gains for these models there are a number of external factors that will affect how the examinations system operates in practice and SCORE strongly recommends the following factors are included within the remit of this inquiry:

   (a) Status of an organisation—An organisation’s status (eg charity, not-for-profit, commercial) will affect how they respond to the various incentives that any assessment system promotes.

   (b) Definition and role of a subject community—How these communities are defined and their subsequent role in qualification development will impact on the level of confidence in the system. There are likely to be different definitions of subject communities across the different subjects and across the different qualifications. For example, the strength and representation of professional bodies/learned societies vary across different subjects and it is not as simple as appointing the main subject association (in many cases there will not be one).

   (c) Role of the regulator—Whatever system is in place there is a need for some form of external regulation or scrutiny—via a national board, or ultimately Parliament itself. Who the regulator is will affect the system differently. For example a governmental regulator is likely to exert more direct political control, whereas subject community regulators will have the expertise to recognise authentic subject qualifications but may not be able to offer subject comparability and an independent body may not have the relevant expertise but be able to offer comparability. There is also the question of how the regulator is itself regulated and also the power the regulator is able to exert over the system.

   (d) Geographical remit—The current model of qualification development allows specifications developed by AOs in Northern Ireland and Wales to be used in English learning institutions (and vice versa the specifications developed by AOs in England are available to Northern Irish and Welsh learning institutions). Will (and can) this still be a requirement with increasing divergence between the nations?

Ensuring Accuracy in Setting Papers, Marking Scripts, and Awarding Grades

10. SCORE urges the Committee to consider the quality of examinations papers as well as their accuracy. The poor quality of assessment items degrades the curriculum through wash-back. Increasingly, assessments tend to be in the form of written examinations with items that test what is easy to assess. They concentrate on the lower level domains in Bloom’s taxonomy: recall, comprehension and application. Consequently, there is an over-emphasis on these skills in the way the subject is taught. This has a damaging effect on the learner experience because teachers will tend to emphasise the content and techniques that they know are likely to come up in examinations.

11. In paragraph 7 SCORE refers to Ofqual as a “crash scene investigator” rather than an “air traffic controller”. The regulator should be responsible for preventing problems arising with examinations in the first place and it is hard to understand how Ofqual can accredit specifications without taking into account the accompanying assessment tools.

12. SCORE therefore calls for there to be a formal requirement of the regulator to review assessment prior to use. The regulator should undertake this review with an expert panel comprising of subject and assessment expertise. Professional bodies and subject associations should be involved in the process—either through direct involvement or through proposing members of subject review panels. This would ensure the appropriate level of demand is demonstrated in all assessment materials and that there is a comparable standard of assessment across equivalent qualifications.
13. To ensure assessment is not dictated by commercial forces the Select Committee may wish to consider a model where one national organisation develops a bank of trialled, quality examination questions. Such a body would have a permanent team of recognised subject experts and subject assessment experts and could exist in a model with more than one AO.

**Commercial Activities of Awarding Organisations, including Examination Fees and Textbooks, and their Impact on Schools and Learners**

14. SCORE is very concerned about the management of conflicts of interest between awarding functions and any other activities AOs (and their related companies) undertake. Good specifications should support effective teaching, learning and assessment, without being influenced or constrained by commercial interests and/or connected activities.

15. In 2010, some AOs marketed unaccredited GCSE science qualifications to schools in order to capitalise the market, leading to possible confusion as to their status. The regulator must have the power to ensure that for those qualifications that need to be accredited, specifications can be marketed only after accreditation.

16. Different qualifications (eg GCSEs in English and Science) can and are grouped together by AOs in package deals for centres. The cost of such a grouping, rather than the quality of a particular qualification within it, can affect a centre’s choices. There should be regulation to ensure that pricing structures of individual qualifications, and packages, are fair.

17. The relationship between AOs and publishers must be carefully/strictly monitored. This relationship could mean that “preferred” published resources are pushed in the direction of teachers, even if they are unsuitable for developing a depth of understanding of a subject. There are also issues with Chief Examiners writing text books as there is a perception amongst teachers that these books may contain “insider information” and this could be seen to be a conflict of interest in terms of the Chief Examiners’ role. This is potentially damaging to the teaching and learning of science.

18. AO endorsement of text books means that textbooks are very tightly matched to specific specifications and their associated examinations. Schools usually feel it is necessary to replace entire sets of text books if they changed specifications. This may lead to reluctance to change specifications for financial reasons. Additionally, the relationship between the specifications being developed by AOs and the production of textbooks that support those specifications can, as was experienced in 2010, lead to unresponsiveness by AOs to feedback on their proposed specifications. We strongly recommend that this link is broken between specification/assessment development and the commercial publications that provide resources in support of a specification.

19. The Select Committee should consider recommending the following restrictions on AOs to break the link between them and publishers:

- A restriction on AOs talking in detail to publishers until after specifications have been accredited—the date for introduction/first teaching would need to be extended by 1 year.
- A restriction on AOs (or the Department for Education) endorsing particular text books—moving towards more general text books for GCSE science.
- A restriction on AOs being owned by publishers where there is clear evidence of this having too much influence on qualifications development and the outcome of examinations.
- A restriction on AOs and current examiners writing textbooks, for instance preventing them both from releasing information about any mutual affiliation they may have.
Appendix 1: A diagram summarising a number of different models for structuring Awarding Organisations (AOs) and the way that qualifications are provided. This diagram does not show any one model to be more successful than another and a full break down of advantages and disadvantages are described in Appendix 2.

MULTIPLE AOs

Multiple developers
Multiple AOs develop and offer a qualification(s) in a given subject(s).

Qualifications in a subject

SINGLE AO

Single developer
One AO is responsible for a qualification in a given subject. This could still involve multiple AOs.

COMMERCIALLY COMPETITIVE
The AOs sell their services to all schools and compete with each other for market share in a given qualification (and across qualifications).

REGIONAL
The AOs provide a service to a smaller number of schools in one region. Any given qualification is offered by only one AO to a given school.

FRANCHISED
(by subjects or qualification type)
A given qualification is offered nationally by a single AO on a fixed term franchise. Different AOs offer different qualifications.

NOT FOR PROFIT ORGANISATION
A single, not-for-profit organisation produces the national qualifications.

NATIONAL AGENCY
A state-managed organisation produces all national qualifications.

COMPETITIVE
The franchise is awarded through competitive tender.

APPOINTED
The franchise is awarded to organisations chosen centrally.
Appendix 2: A description of the potential advantages and disadvantages of the various models, as set out in Appendix 1, for structuring Awarding Organisations (AOs) and the way that qualifications are provided.

1. Multiple developers versus a single developer of a qualification in any subject:

   — A model which includes multiple developers of a qualification in any given subject has the potential to offer schools (although not necessarily learners) more choice. It also spreads the risk in the system and avoids single points of failure. However, the model requires additional regulation (including the development of criteria) to ensure parity. It presents difficulties for subject communities to engage with multiple bodies. Furthermore the nation’s assessment expertise is spread thinly. This model also increases the length of the development cycle and there is a duplication of effort which in return increases the cost to the school (no advantage of scale).

   — Conversely, a model in which a single body develops specifications for a given qualification offers many advantages (and could still exist with multiple AOs). Subject expertise can be concentrated to ensure the best teams develop qualifications. It also allows for effective engagement with the subject community as efforts can be focused in one qualification. This model allows for greater links to be forged with educational and assessment research to help facilitate innovation. Regulation would be easier; it can be based on quality of the qualification and its assessment tools rather than on comparability. Furthermore there are no destructive drivers (such as commercial competition for the market share) on standards and quality. On the downside, by not spreading the risk across multiple developers this model allows for a single point of failure to occur (although whatever failures do occur will affect all learners so no one will be any more disadvantaged). There is also no immediate market incentive to maintain quality and there is the possibility that qualifications might stagnate—though this could be overcome by working with not-for-profit organisations where the interest in the quality of a qualification is intrinsic and goes beyond commercial considerations. Such a model will involve a large number of candidates and could prove difficult to run logistically.

2. Multiple AOs versus a single AO:

   — Multiple AOs have the potential to offer a range of supporting resources. The competition between AOs may also prevent stagnation in the system. It also spreads the risk across the system. Such a system does however require a regulatory framework and risks the comparability between qualifications. Whilst qualifications have not stagnated in the current system, there have been very few changes for the better in the assessment tools. See paragraph 3 for model options within multiple AOs.

   — A single AO would remove risks of comparability between different specifications within a qualification. Such a model would be likely to increase cost-effectiveness and also reduce duplication of effort. Market pressures would not exist and, as with a single developer of a qualification, it would be easier for professional bodies/learned societies and the wider subject community to engage with qualification development. Potential risks include stagnation and a reduced emphasis on innovation, a lack of choice and potentially a large number of candidates. See paragraph 4 for model options within a single body.

3. Commercially competitive AOs versus regional AOs:

   — Commercial competition provides an incentive for AOs to keep the costs to schools down. However, market pressures encourage the system to focus on costs and accessibility rather than standards, the quality of examinations, its assessment tools or the learning it engenders. Qualifications are offered in suites with some included as loss-leaders. Furthermore, the regulation in place has to take account of commercial sensitivities weakening its power as a regulator—it would be risky for the regulator to make statements that might damage market share.

   — A model using regional AOs offers the potential for qualifications to be tailored to regional educational resources. It does carry substantial risks particularly on regional comparability and routes for progression across the country; it offers a lack of choice and has the potential to create regional differences. It would also be difficult to implement as more schools become independent of any local or regional control. Furthermore this divisive model could cause problems in applying to universities (if a whole region is favoured or not) and when moving schools. SCORE does not see this as a realistic option.

4. Centralised state body versus not-for-profit single organisation versus franchised system:

   — A centralised state body removes “market pressures” completely and potentially allows a direct focus on standards. However, it does present concern on who would regulate the state. There may also be implications from having direct political control on qualification development (eg introduces party ideology into assessment system) and the potential changes in “ethos” on the cycle of elections could affect the stability of any such model.
— A not-for-profit organisation again removes market pressures completely but, as with a centralised body, raises concern on who will examine the examiner. One possibility could be to set up a system of peer review as a form of regulation. This could also include a stakeholder review or a steering group (convened by a Professional Body where they exist for a subject or where there isn’t one, made up of people with real knowledge and understanding of the qualification).

— Some of the risks above might be mitigated by developing a system in which there are multiple AOs but only one holds the franchise for a qualification or suite of qualifications. Under this model market pressures have the potential to drive up standards as the franchise (and commercial return) would be awarded for excellence of the qualification and assessment tools. The requirements of a franchise could also drive innovation by stipulating the need to develop more than one version of the qualification (ie the “B” specification would not reduce market share for the AO). Stagnation or continual change is, however, a risk depending on the franchise period. It also raises questions on who should have the responsibility for selecting particular franchises. Furthermore a school would have to deal with a number of different AOs (unless all the administration is centralised). Paragraph 5 outlines the models available within a franchise system.

5. Competitive franchise versus appointed franchise:

— A competitive franchise potentially takes out “market pressures” with a focus on creating high quality qualifications. There would however be upheaval whenever a franchise holder is changed. There may be an advantage to the existing franchise holder as they will tend to have greater subject expertise and experience. There is also the possibility that different qualifications will cost different amounts (bigger entries etc) and it may not be within an organisation’s interest to develop a more expensive qualification which offers little return. Another risk is there may be no bids for minority qualifications which could result in a loss of potentially good qualifications.

— An appointed franchise system is harder to rationalise as it removes competition entirely and begs the questions on what basis organisations would be selected.

Introduction

Written evidence submitted by Ofqual

1. Ofqual aims to secure the standards, fitness for purpose and quality of regulated qualifications and to regulate in a way that promotes a robust, secure and efficient qualifications system. We welcome the opportunity to participate in the Committee’s inquiry and contribute to further work in this area, given our responsibilities and expertise.

2. The structure of the market for qualifications has evolved over many years. There are five main providers of GCSEs and A levels, which are the most high-profile and widely taken qualifications by this age group. Three awarding organisations (AQA, Edexcel and OCR) account for over 85% of awards. Alongside these, there is a wide range of other qualifications, most of which are proprietary and offered by only one awarding organisation. Annex A sets out the landscape of qualifications for 15–19 year olds in more detail. There are strong interdependencies with the market for adult qualifications, which are out of scope of this inquiry but which Ofqual also regulates.

3. This submission sets out our views on the outcomes that an effective qualifications system should deliver. It is against these outcomes that alternative arrangements would need to be evaluated. The submission sets out the benefits and risks presented by the current model, and how Ofqual’s regulatory approach seeks to secure the benefits and manage the risks. In putting in place a new, risk-based approach to regulation we have set out to understand and evaluate the health of qualifications markets. We set this out in more detail below.

4. There are many alternative models for delivery of qualifications. No delivery model is risk-free and there are many factors that could influence the pros and cons of each. These need to be considered carefully, so that if changes were made, they were not based on the assumption that we would be able to create a perfect system.

5. An effective qualifications system must:

— Secure qualifications standards;
— Secure delivery standards;
— Incentivise value for money;
— Be transparent; and
— Support innovation.
SECURE QUALIFICATION STANDARDS

6. Ofqual recently hosted a standards event, looking at some of those aspects of standards said to be of concern. We are building and exploring the evidence base. We know that the commercial pressures inherent in any market (particularly if combined with the wrong incentives on purchasers) risks downward pressure on standards. The perception is that by its very nature, competition risks the development of more “accessible” qualification specifications (syllabuses) creating incentives on centres to switch to these less demanding qualifications. Whether schools are regularly switching between different specifications in particular subjects and the rationale for switching needs further analysis—but it is important to note that the overall awarding organisation share of GCSE and A-level qualifications has remained relatively stable over a number of years (as set out in figures 2 and 3 in Annex A).

7. However, there are broader influences, including the impact of the use of qualifications as accountability measures for schools, which may create incentives to lower standards, and various systemic pressures which risk small annual changes in standards that add up to more substantial reductions over time. Our role as regulator is to understand these risks and pressures, and design our regulatory arrangements to mitigate them. The current Education Bill proposes a revision to our standards objective, so that we have to seek to secure comparability of standards with qualifications awarded outside the United Kingdom. Assuming that the Bill is passed, we will consider whether we need to recalibrate qualification standards in the light of our international studies, and also whether we can use international comparisons to help manage the pressures and risks to standards of regulated qualifications.

8. We require awarding organisations to use methodologies that provide assessments that minimise bias and are valid, reliable, comparable and manageable. We use a risk-based approach, and our regulatory arrangements include qualification and subject criteria which set out the minimum requirements for particular high-stakes qualifications, notably GCSEs and A-levels. Awarding organisations’ specifications must meet those minimum requirements in order to be accepted onto the register as regulated qualifications, and are then subject to Ofqual’s monitoring.

9. Ofqual now monitors the interim outcomes from summer awards to secure comparability between awarding organisations and minimise any “grade inflation”. Since we have been doing this, the rate of increase in students achieving the top grades has slowed to such an extent that in summer 2011 there was no increase in those achieving grade A or above at A-level. Ofqual is committed to containing grade inflation whilst making sure that awards reflect accurately students’ achievements.

SECURE DELIVERY STANDARDS

10. It is fundamentally important that the system delivers high quality assessment including (so far as is humanly possible) error-free papers, accurate marking and fair awarding. Our powers, based on conditions of recognition, allow us to intervene if we find weaknesses in awarding organisations’ approaches. There are also mechanisms in place to ensure inaccuracies can be dealt with, for example the Enquiries About Results (EAR) appeals mechanism. For the summer 2010 GCSE and GCE series there were 171,700 enquiries about results, resulting in a total of 34,800 grade changes. The general trend has been for an increase in both the number of appeals, up from 119,300, in 2006 and the number of grades revised, up from 25,900 in 2006. It is difficult to attribute this increase to a single factor because of the changes to the system (such as the change to unitised qualifications and the introduction of the A* for GCEs), and since 2009 the changes include cases where grades have decreased as well as increased, meaning that direct comparisons are not available. The Examination Appeals Board (EAB), which is independent from the awarding organisations and the regulator, handle appeals where the candidate is not satisfied by the EAR process. In 2010 the EAB received 16 appeals (an increase from 11 in 2011 and six in 2009). Nine applications to appeal were declined in 2011 (five in 2010).

11. The qualifications delivery system is complex. Each summer examinations period requires the awarding organisations that offer GCSE and A level qualifications to set over 60,000 examination questions, mark over 25 million separate examination scripts and items of coursework, and issue over 8 million GCE (AS and A Level) and GCSE results. In dealing with the consequences of the unacceptable number of significant errors in live examination papers this summer, we promoted a principles-based approach to ensure that, as far as possible, no candidate was unfairly disadvantaged or advantaged. We have also launched an inquiry to provide recommendations directed at driving improvements for the future. Our interim report can be found http://www.ofqual.gov.uk/files/2011–10–31-exam-errors-inquiry-summer-2011-interim-report.pdf. We will produce our final report in December.

12. A major strength of the current system is that for high-stakes qualifications, multiple providers can serve to reduce delivery risk since failure in one provider does not affect a whole cohort of students. The failure of National Curriculum test delivery in 2008 and the events in France this summer demonstrate some of the risks of relying on a single provider. In France, 165,000 candidates were affected when one question from the French baccalaureate mathematics paper appeared on the internet the day before the test. Many of the live exam errors affected very small number of candidates. The largest, by far, in one paper affected nearly 42,000 candidates.

**Incentivise Value for Money**

13. Competition can incentivise awarding organisations to implement more cost efficient processes for the development and delivery of qualifications and lower prices. The qualifications market continues to grow in terms of qualifications, awards and revenue. In a healthy market there will be incentives on organisations to meet the needs of purchasers, learners and the end-users of qualifications in the most efficient way possible. Competing providers can lead to greater choice and incentivise the tailoring of qualification products and services to meet the diverse range of needs of millions of students. The current system enables awarding organisations to respond to market need in particular in vocational and industry-led qualifications.

14. Expenditure on examinations and assessments in state secondary schools in England has nearly doubled from £154 million to £303 million over the period 2002–03 to 2009–10. A high quality, internationally competitive, system of qualifications provision has an associated cost. There is a high level of assessment in the current system and changes in the structure and the mix and type of qualifications being taken in schools and colleges has compounded the pressures on costs. Ofqual’s international comparisons work evidences England’s unusual reliance on examination as opposed to other forms of assessment. Ofqual’s market report shows that whilst unit fees have fallen for A levels they have risen slightly above inflation for GCSEs.

15. The current data available do not allow us to make a robust overall judgement on the efficiency of awarding organisations’ costs or cost structures, including their ability to exploit economies of scale and scope. But we need to be able to make this judgement: we have an efficiency objective to secure that regulated qualifications offer value for money.

16. Ofqual’s recognition conditions already require awarding organisations to make fee information available and to be transparent about how their products and services are bundled. They are also required to notify Ofqual if they anticipate cost pressure that could result in fee increases above the level of inflation.

17. As a new regulator our early focus has been on delivery and qualification standards. But as evident in our healthy markets work our economic regulation and market work is taking a higher profile. We will be undertaking work to better understand what is driving costs in the sector, the scope for efficiency and on pricing principles and structures. Where the market fails to deliver qualifications that offer value for money, we will intervene, where necessary and appropriate, using our fee-capping power.

**Transparency**

18. Effective and appropriate choices either by those actually taking a qualification or on their behalf require a system of provision that is transparent and navigable. A system where purchasers of qualifications know what they are buying and are able to buy only those services they want to buy is a sensible goal. The total number of regulated qualifications has risen from 7,400 in 2006 to 15,400 in 2010. Of the 15,400 currently available, some 8,000 are in regular use, and therefore there are several thousand on our register that are not in common use.

19. Competition in the market may incentivise awarding organisations to diversify the range of qualification types provided. Whilst this may have benefits, as the volume of qualifications rises, there is a risk that the system may become more complex and difficult to navigate. There is also an associated risk that some qualifications may lose their value as a signal of attainment. Regulation, notably the introduction of the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF), has also impacted on qualification numbers. There are other questions about the QCF including whether the arrangements are too cumbersome, too prescriptive, or if they unduly constrain choice, for example choice of provider. We intend to find the best way to enable a unitised and credit-based approach to qualifications to work well in the interests of users.

20. For vocational qualifications awarding organisations have welcomed early proposals by Ofqual to increase transparency by bringing more relevant information into the public domain to aid choice.

**Supporting Innovation**

21. An effective qualification system must enable innovative approaches to be introduced safely to examinations and assessments, reflecting the needs of the future. Competition can encourage greater levels of investment and innovation over time, for example in marking technology and systems. Our innovation stock-take aims to gather information on the drivers and barriers of innovation in the qualifications sector and understand better the investment incentives faced by the sector.

**Independence from Government**

22. A key benefit of the current structure is that awarding organisations are independent of Government and many of them have long histories; the large awarding organisations that provide qualifications for 15–19 year olds have their roots in the universities and industries that remain key users of these qualifications. This helps give their qualifications credibility with the independent sector, employers and universities. In considering potential alternative arrangements for provision of qualifications, the Committee will want to consider how such credibility could be maintained.
Healthy Markets

23. We want to develop our regulatory arrangements to enable and incentivise a healthy market for qualifications that:

- Provides mechanisms for those operating in the market to interact with each other in a way that provides qualifications that meet the needs of users and is clearly understood; and where
- Intervention is directed to those areas where the market by itself would not produce desired outcomes (ie there is a likelihood of market failure).

24. Ofqual is embarking on a continuous programme of work to set out what a healthy market(s) would look like and where we may need to intervene.

25. The current operation of qualifications markets and their ability to deliver desired outcomes ("market health") is affected by a range of factors relating to:

- supply and demand side market structures—such as the concentration of awarding organisations, the extent of vertical integration in provision and the nature of purchasing decisions on the demand side;
- supply side interaction between awarding organisations—such as the intensity and form of competition, collusion or collaboration;
- the interaction between the supply side and demand side—for example determined by the degree of information provision and procurement practices; and
- Broader systemic factors—including political (and institutional), economic, sociological, technological, legal (and regulatory) and environmental factors.

26. Ofqual plans several projects relating to healthy markets:

- Conflicts of interest—to determine the issues and potential problems associated with conflicts of interest in the qualifications sector, in particular in relation to study aids such as textbooks and training services, and to develop a long term action plan to address issues where they exist.
- The role of market forces—to consider the appropriate role of competition and market forces in the qualifications sector, and develop an approach to promoting competition where it is beneficial in delivering desired outcomes. This work will include consideration of, for example:
  - the benefits of competition in delivering innovation in the sector and containing costs;
  - the risks of downward pressure on standards of qualifications;
  - the risk of duplication of resources in qualification provision; and
  - the risk that market forces create too many qualifications.
- Market distortions—to identify existing policy and regulatory distortions to the effective operation of market forces. This work will include consideration of, for example:
  - the role of some Sector Skills Councils—which are themselves evolving—in the operation of the market; and
  - the impact that requirements in relation to shared qualification units in the Qualifications and Credit Framework are having on incentives for awarding organisations to invest and innovate.

27. Given the range of forces that impact on the health of markets, many of these projects will require a long term collaborative approach with other bodies across the sector, including DfE, BIS, UKCES, the OFT and the funding agencies.

The Commercial Activities of Awarding Bodies and their Impact on Schools and Pupils

28. The activities undertaken by many awarding organisations (and their parent companies) extend beyond qualification provision and include, for example, provision of training courses, publication of textbooks and development of educational IT platforms. These activities are an important part of many awarding organisations’ current business models.

29. There is a perception that some such activities risk creating conflicts of interest with qualification provision. One such area is the publication of textbooks by awarding organisations (or in exclusive partnership with other publishers).

30. The textbook issue is complex and has two key dimensions:

- The potential impact on competition—if awarding organisations produce textbooks to accompany their examinations, it may be more difficult for others to develop and sell high quality alternative textbooks. This problem may be exacerbated if awarding organisations “bundle” qualifications and textbooks (and other related products), selling them together as a package, even if bundling has other benefits.
- The potential educational impact on standards—if awarding organisations produce textbooks, there is a risk that the material in the textbooks will be considered to be the only material candidates need consider in preparing for examinations, leading to an undesirable narrowing of teaching.
31. The latter issue does not arise just from the production of textbooks related to specific qualifications, which if produced and used appropriately can support and enhance learning. Rather it arises when textbooks provide too much information about likely questions and the structure of answers, facilitate “teaching to the test” or otherwise distort candidate learning.

32. Ofqual requires assurances through the recognition conditions from awarding organisations that connected activities do not affect the standards or quality of qualifications, unduly limit learners’ programmes of study or prevent other awarding organisations from offering similar products.

33. But given stakeholders’ concerns, in particular in relation to textbooks, Ofqual intends to investigate the evidence to determine what regulatory action, if any, we should take. Our investigation will be part of our broader healthy markets programme (see above) and will consider both the potential competition and educational impacts of textbooks.

CONCLUSION

34. Ofqual welcomes the Select Committee’s interest in this area. Securing the efficient delivery of rigorous qualifications is an essential part of the education system. This evidence seeks to demonstrate two things in particular to inform the Committee’s deliberations:

— First, that the issues involved are complex. Whatever arrangements are put in place to provide qualifications, they will need sophisticated and intelligent oversight to secure the right outcomes, particularly the maintenance of standards. And any decision to reform the system—in whatever direction—would need to take into account the interdependencies and pressures within and beyond the market for 15–19 qualifications.

— Second, that Ofqual is absolutely committed to the challenge of making the system work in the interests of users and the wider education system. As a new regulator, we acknowledge that we have much to do. In particular, we will:

— complete the work to put in place the foundations of our regulatory arrangements, including to reflect the proposed change to our objectives and powers in the Education Bill;
— continue to develop our analysis of the qualifications system, to inform the debate about the development of regulation and the delivery of qualifications reform; and
— continue our programme of work to identify the key areas of risk where we need to focus our regulatory effort, in order to secure robust standards and a healthy qualifications market.

35. Ofqual looks forward to discussing this evidence and the wider issues further with the Committee.

February 2012

Further written evidence submitted by Ofqual (Annex A)

THE RANGE OF QUALIFICATIONS

1. Qualifications taken by 15–19 year olds in schools and colleges have a range of purposes and progression opportunities. Some are commonly taken in preparation for entry to university, some lead into further vocational training or employment; others may be taken for other learning or recreational purposes.

2. As learner age is just one way to classify qualifications, there is no clear mapping of qualifications for 15–19 year olds. Alongside GCSEs, AS and A-levels, many other qualifications are commonly taken in schools and colleges, including:

— Vocational qualifications including BTECs and OCR Nationals.
— Other proprietary qualifications such as the Cambridge Pre-U and the International Baccalaureate.
— Composite “qualifications” such as the Diploma.
— Other alternatives and complements to GCSEs and A-levels such as Level 1/2 certificates (derived from IGCSE qualifications), Advanced Extension Awards (now only mathematics) and functional skills.

3. There is also extensive choice within qualification types. For example there are currently 87 different A-level subjects, and for vocational qualifications the choice is even broader.

4. Over the last five years, vocational qualifications have grown in popularity in schools, with the number of achievements increasing threefold from roughly 334,000 in 2006–07 to over 1.32 million in 2009–10. By contrast, general qualification achievements rose from approximately seven million to 7.33 million over the same period. Vocational qualifications now account for 15% of all achievements in schools.
**Figure 1**

Number of completed General and Vocational Qualifications in schools (2006 -2010)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Vocational</th>
<th>General</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2006-2007</td>
<td>334,070</td>
<td>7,010,249</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007-2008</td>
<td>675,878</td>
<td>7,350,223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008-2009</td>
<td>1,088,605</td>
<td>7,198,704</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009-2010</td>
<td>1,319,206</td>
<td>7,325,641</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**THE CURRENT PROVIDERS OF QUALIFICATIONS FOR 15–19 YEAR OLDS**

5. A significant number of awarding organisations provide qualifications for 15–19 year olds. These include both large awarding organisations providing many different qualification types, and smaller organisations active in niche areas.

6. There are five major providers of GCSEs and A-levels in England (AQA, OCR, Edexcel, WJEC and CCEA), with three (AQA, OCR and Edexcel) accounting for over 85% of awards and AQA alone accounting for roughly 45% of GCSE awards and 42% of A-level awards. The market share of each awarding organisation has remained relatively stable over a number of years.

**Figure 2**

Awarding Organisation share of GCSE Qualifications completed in schools (2006 -2010)
7. However whilst there are five major providers across all GCSEs and A-levels, for some subjects there are fewer than five providers, and for many there is only one. For example, of the 87 A-level subjects currently offered, only 21 are provided by all five awarding organisations, and 40 are provided by only one organisation. Subjects provided by all five organisations tend to be more traditional subjects such as English Literature, Maths, Sciences, History and Geography, whereas those provided by only one include lower volume niche subjects such as Anthropology, Biblical Hebrew, Film Studies and Philosophy.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Aos providing subject</th>
<th>Number of A-level subjects</th>
<th>Examples of A-level subjects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Anthropology (AQA), Biblical Hebrew (OCR), Chinese (Edexcel), Engineering (Edexcel), Film Studies (WJEC), Moving Image Arts (CCEA), Philosophy (AQA), Portuguese (OCR)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Accounting, Critical Thinking, Geology, History of Art, Home Economics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Applied Art and Design, Computing, Electronics, Human Biology, Sociology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Applied Science, Physical Education, Psychology, Travel and Tourism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Applied ICT, Biology, Chemistry, English Literature, French, Geography, History, Maths, Physics</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

8. For vocational qualifications, the 20 most commonly taken qualifications are provided by five awarding organisations (AQA, British Safety Council, Edexcel, OCR and Sports Leaders UK), with Edexcel and OCR accounting for over 80% of achievements in these top 20 qualifications. Both of the most commonly taken suites of vocational qualification (BTECs and OCR Nationals) are offered by only one awarding organisation (Edexcel and OCR respectively). However some vocational qualification taken in schools are seen as interchangeable by schools, for example level 2 ICT qualifications and this would influence any formal market definition undertaken.
Further written evidence submitted by Ofqual (Annex B)

THURSDAY 15 DECEMBER 2011—OFQUAL STATEMENT

Ofqual welcomes the Daily Telegraph journalists’ shining light on an area of concern that we raised publicly and wrote to Ministers about in November. The immediate steps we have taken are focussed on safeguarding future examinations, particularly those to be taken in January; requiring awarding organisations to review their own policies and practices to ensure that all seminar delivery meets the regulatory requirements. The Committee will be aware that our priorities for our healthy markets work include a review of the supporting materials provided to teachers by awarding organisations including seminars, text books and web based materials.

Ofqual’s specific actions in the past week to investigate and follow up these allegations include:

1. Convening an immediate meeting with the Chief Executives of the four awarding organisations, AQA, Edexcel, OCR and WJEC.
2. Writing to each awarding organisation (under formal notice) to require:
   — information about the role of examiners, the controls in place around seminars and the management of conflicts of interest;
   — confirmation about the security and integrity of January and summer exams;
   — confirmation that all seminars/guidance/published materials do not narrow the breadth or depth of study; and
   — data used by the awarding organisations in considering comparability.
3. Securing the evidence from the Daily Telegraph which is now being transcribed and checked.
4. Shared actions and responses with fellow regulators in Wales and Northern Ireland.
5. Announced to awarding organisations our review of the role of such seminars which they all welcomed.

ABOUT OFQUAL

Ofqual is the regulator for qualifications in England and vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland. Ofqual regulates the organisations that deliver qualifications and assessments. Ofqual has responsibility for maintaining standards in qualifications and examinations.

January 2012
Further written evidence submitted by Ofqual (Annex C)

1. Ofqual’s Chair and Chief Executive, Amanda Spielman and Glenys Stacey, will be giving oral evidence to the Committee on 21 March. To help the Committee prepare for that hearing, this paper provides an update on a number of developments since we submitted our initial evidence in early November 2011. Much has happened since then, so Ofqual welcomes the opportunity to provide this update.

2. This paper covers four areas:
   - The work to follow up the allegations about seminars made in the Daily Telegraph in early December.
   - Our plans for tackling concerns around GCSE standards.
   - Progress with the healthy markets work that we announced at the end of November.
   - The on-going development of Ofqual’s capacity and capability and our regulatory arrangements.

SEMINARS

3. At the end of November last year, Ofqual announced the launch of our healthy market work to explore concerns about the impact of a market system on standards and the integrity of the examination system. Just a week later, allegations were made in the Daily Telegraph that examiners had been providing teachers with inappropriate information about the content of examinations during seminars run by awarding organisations. The following week, Glenys Stacey and others gave evidence to the Committee about these allegations. The week after that, on 20 December, we published our initial report into the findings. Our most immediate concern was making sure that the January examinations were secure, and particularly that guidance or seminars had not narrowed the breadth or depth of study required. One GCSE ICT unit, from the WJEC examination board, was clearly compromised and was withdrawn, and an alternative paper for that unit is being sat this month.

4. Since then, our focus has been first to ensure that this summer’s examinations are as secure as possible, and second that our regulatory arrangements are tight enough to secure standards and confidence. For this summer’s examinations we will be getting, and testing, assurances from the awarding organisations that study has not been narrowed as a result of seminars; we know that there have been improvements in the controls awarding organisations have put in place around seminars. Changes have already been made to three papers as a result of awarding organisations’ investigations. If necessary, other papers will be changed or replaced.

5. More widely, our position as regulator is clear: awarding organisations must have strong controls in place so that no teachers or students can access information about examinations which would give them an advantage. This does not mean that students should enter an examination hall with no idea about the type of questions that will be asked; a student who is taken by surprise by the structure of an examination paper, or the nature of the questions, will not be well placed to show what they have learnt. Teachers need to have consistent access to support that enables effective teaching, but a student should not know in advance which particular aspects of the curriculum will be tested. Teachers and students should know that the best way of preparing for an examination is a thorough study of the curriculum.

6. We have already taken action. We are consulting on a new regulatory condition that tightens our requirements around the confidentiality of examination materials. We are also giving serious consideration to banning awarding organisation seminars: we will need to judge whether the risks they pose to the integrity of the system outweigh the benefits—helping teachers prepare students appropriately for examinations. We have issued a call for evidence around guidance, training and textbooks relating to examinations and we will be making further announcements shortly.

7. Awarding organisation seminars are only one aspect of this issue, and they should not be looked at in isolation. There is a range of different ways that teachers could get information about examinations if controls are not tight enough: they could work out content if past papers are too predictable, they could attend seminars run by organisations other than the awarding organisation, they could read textbooks which claim to give hints about the assessments, they could get information from those responsible for setting or checking the examinations, or they could be examiners themselves. Whether we ban seminars or just tighten the arrangements, we will make sure that awarding organisations have stricter controls in place to deal with all these other risks. This issue goes to the heart of our role as regulator; securing standards and high quality assessments, promoting true learning and starting to rebuild confidence in the examinations we regulate.

GCSE STANDARDS

8. In December we confirmed our plans to strengthen the assessment of spelling, punctuation and grammar (SPaG) in a number of key GCSEs in England from September 2012. We will also be stopping GCSEs from being modularised; assessments will now normally take place at the end of the course of study. Awarding organisations are currently working on changes to their GCSEs to reflect these new requirements.

9. One of the allegations made by the Daily Telegraph was that Edexcel’s GCSE Geography allowed schools to limit the breadth and depth of their study, and yet still cover enough to get good results. We reviewed the
current qualifications as a result of this, and then announced in January that we were requiring awarding organisations to strengthen the Geography GCSE qualifications for teaching from this September.

10. We also reviewed other GCSE subjects and identified several wider issues that caused us concern. These included the limited number of texts used in GCSE English literature and the number of different ways that schools were able to interpret assessment objective requirements and their associated questions in history. As a result, we have now written to awarding organisations setting out details of the actions they must take to strengthen GCSEs in English literature and history. These changes will be in place for September 2013 to be fair to those students who have already taken modules based on the current texts, and to ensure revisions are of the right standard.

11. Separately, we are halfway through a scrutiny of the new GCSE mathematics specifications for first full awards in summer 2012. We would normally report our findings after the first awards. This time we have reported our early findings to the awarding organisations because we believe they are serious enough to need action urgently. We think in particular that candidates at the key grades do not show the knowledge, skills and understanding set out in the grade descriptions. We will require awarding organisations to take action for assessments from November 2012.

Healthy Markets

12. In our written submission to the Select Committee we said that we wanted to develop our regulatory arrangements to enable and incentivise a healthy market for qualifications. We wrote to Ministers in DfE and BIS at the end of November to set out our plans. Events since then have confirmed the importance of this work. The problems exposed by the Daily Telegraph show that in the past the market has not been regulated tightly enough, and in particular that there has not been sufficient attention paid to the controls awarding organisations have in place to protect examination standards and integrity. Much of the work to follow up the concerns around seminars, as set out above, is part of our healthy markets work. We have shaped this work to respond to these concerns, including making the call for evidence on textbooks and guidance. We will be undertaking detailed research over the coming months to inform the development, by September, of a regulatory plan of action to address any confirmed problems with textbooks and study aids.

Ofqual’s Capacity, Capability and Regulatory Arrangements

13. As well as dealing with the immediate concerns set out above, we are putting in place arrangements that will make us better placed to prevent things going wrong in future. We are currently finalising our corporate plan for the period 2012–15 setting out our priorities in detail. We are also carrying out a substantial programme of work to move from the regulatory arrangements we inherited to more robust arrangements, in line with the our statutory powers and duties. As part of this we are currently consulting on our new approach to monitoring. Our regulatory arrangements will in future be stronger and more strategic, and awarding organisations will be more clearly accountable for the qualifications they award. We were also given new powers in last year’s Education Act, including the power to fine, and are consulting as well on how we should use those powers. On many of the issues set out, we are working with our fellow regulators in Wales and Northern Ireland.

14. To enable us to make proper use of these new arrangements, we need to build the capacity and capability of the organisation. We are currently implementing a change programme, Future Ofqual, which will restructure and strengthen the organisation. Change is always difficult, but we believe the end result will be an organisation fit for the future and able to meet the many challenges we face.

March 2012
Further Supplementary evidence from Ofqual (Annex D)

MULTIPLE ENTRIES

1. Are multiple entries allowed? If not, when were they prohibited?

There’s nothing to stop a centre entering a student for the same subject with more than one AO. There is no obvious way to police this since AOs don’t cross-check entries with one another (and even then centres could use a different candidate number if they wished). Obviously there would be an additional entry cost, and there are practical difficulties if it’s done in the same series because the exams will be timetabled on the same day, so students will have to be supervised separately to sit all the exams. It’s also worth noting that only one result will count for performance tables.

2. Does Ofqual collect or has Ofqual in the past collected data on multiple entries (numbers of candidates, which subjects, types of centres)?

We don’t. The only way to get data on this would be to ask AOs to cross-check their centre/candidate data for each subject, which probably wouldn’t be proportionate! I suspect the cost and practical issues mean the number is tiny. But if ACME have evidence that it is more widespread, we’d be happy to look at that.

In addition, through the common timetabling arrangements it’s likely that if a candidate was entering more than one specification in the same subject they would suffer from timetable clashes—although this would be less with unitised qualifications. Also, they cannot count the outcomes from two qualifications leading to the same title in performance table measures. They would fall within the same leap code (group of subjects) and only one result can be accepted.

May 2012

Written evidence submitted by the Department for Education (DfE)

INTRODUCTION

1. We welcome the Committee’s Inquiry, which is timely in two key respects:
   — There is a danger that confidence of candidates in the qualifications they are taking is falling. Too many serious errors were made in GCSE and A Level exam papers this summer. The awarding bodies—overseen by Ofqual—must put in place better systems to ensure no repetition of such problems.
   — Confidence among universities and employers in the rigour of key qualifications has fallen. In recent years market incentives have failed to ensure that developments in some key qualifications meet the needs of end users.

2. A high quality qualifications system must meet two criteria:
   — The qualifications concerned have the confidence of end users in how they assess students’ knowledge, skills and understanding following the study of an appropriate curriculum: in other words, qualifications with the right content and rigorous assessment;
   — and these are underpinned by efficient and effective delivery mechanisms that have the confidence of candidates, characterised by students receiving the right papers at the right time with the results accurately reflecting their achievements.

Importance of the qualifications system

3. A key role for qualifications is in supporting progression to further education or training and work. Results allow judgements to be made as to how well candidates have performed in their studies and how well prepared they are to move on: both in absolute terms and relative to their peers; and in this country and overseas.

4. Qualifications should not necessarily be seen as a key driver for the quality of teaching in the classroom. But their importance to pupils means that they run the risk of putting barriers in the way of good teaching, by placing a de facto cap on ambition if they do not recognise the most rigorous aspects of a subject.

5. Qualification results are also an important proxy measure for the effectiveness of schools and colleges. If qualifications lack the necessary rigour or are testing the wrong things, results will give misleading signals about where educational performance needs to improve. And parents, pupils and communities will be less able
to hold schools and colleges to account for how well they perform. Professor Wolf laid bare in her report\(^90\) on vocational education just how significant a problem this has been. There are some good quality vocational qualifications which are respected and have currency in the labour market. But the number of vocational qualifications taken in schools up to age 16 has grown dramatically in recent years, from 15,000 in 2004 to 575,000 in 2010, and far too many of these are either of poor quality or are not appropriate for young people. Young people have therefore been studying courses which are not of real worth and do not enable them to progress. This is why we are implementing Professor Wolf’s recommendations for change as a matter of urgency.

6. Given the importance of the qualifications system, it is imperative that we have excellent, internationally renowned qualifications that are delivered efficiently and effectively. We will be securing significant changes to the content of GCSEs and A levels to ensure they are appropriately geared to this country’s needs and so that they stand up better in comparison with other countries. We are also—in the light of the Wolf Report—making major changes to the performance regime relating to the use of vocational qualifications, so that the qualifications used most widely in schools and colleges are those that are best for young people. Drawing heavily on evidence from the world’s best education systems, we will be reforming:

— the National Curriculum, so that it sets out only the essential knowledge and understanding that all children should acquire and leaves teachers to decide how to teach most effectively;

— GCSEs, so that they reflect where relevant the new National Curriculum and focus on essential knowledge in key subjects;

— A Levels, so that universities and learned bodies are more fully involved in their development, ensuring that they measure up against the most rigorous qualifications systems and meet the needs of Higher Education; and

— school and college performance measurement systems, so that these set out our high expectations—every pupil should have a broad education, for example through the English Baccalaureate—and only the highest quality vocational qualifications should be recognised in performance tables.

7. We are also concerned that increases in the numbers getting higher grades in GCSEs and A Levels have undermined the confidence of employers and Higher Education in the rigour of those qualifications. For example over the last 15 years, the proportion of pupils achieving at least one A at A level has risen by approximately 11 percentage points. In 2010, more than 34,000 candidates achieved three As at A level or equivalent. Research by Robert Coe and Peter Tymms at Durham University\(^91\) concluded that between 1996 and 2007 the average grade achieved by GCSE candidates of the same “general ability” rose by almost two-thirds of a grade; for A level candidates the increase between 1988 and 2007 was over two grades. These findings raise important questions about grading.

8. We are therefore complementing the reforms to the content of qualifications with changes to required assessment approaches, so that standards are measured more rigorously: through structural change to qualifications (for example, limiting GCSE exams to the end of a course); and through changing Ofqual’s statutory objectives so that they have to seek to secure consistency with qualification standards overseas, not just standards over time. We also welcome the initiative that Ofqual is taking to acknowledge and tackle the issues around standards and public confidence in exams; including through using its new powers to regulate more strategically under its founding legislation (see paragraph 17 below).

9. We will need to reassure ourselves, however, that these changes are indeed enough to deliver qualifications with the content and rigour necessary.

10. In parallel with these changes to the content and assessment methodology, we need to understand how the delivery mechanism can best support these reforms and make changes accordingly. High quality qualification specifications must be matched by efficient machinery for the actual delivery of qualifications. The challenges are significant, for this is a complex, high volume, high stakes system involving schools and colleges throughout the country. To take A Levels and GCSEs\(^92\) for example, during last summer’s exam series:

— over 2.5 million GCE AS and A level awards were made;

— over 5.5 million GCSE qualifications were awarded; and

— c 15.1 million scripts were marked.

We look to Ofqual to monitor closely whether the system is delivering the standards that the public would rightly expect; to be quick to intervene where (as was the case last summer) it is not; and to alert us when we too need to take action (as we have for example over legislating to give Ofqual extra sanction powers—see paragraph 17 below).

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90 Review of Vocational Education—The Wolf Report; March 2011
92 The figures relate to England, Wales and Northern Ireland.
The benefits and drawbacks of having several awarding bodies

11. The qualifications system has a long history, with roots in the university sector, industry and trade associations. England is unusual internationally in having a regulated qualifications market with a number of commercial and not-for-profit providers of pre-19 qualifications. However, the fact that we are unusual is not a reason to think we are wrong. The Government believes in the effectiveness of the market in delivering the right quality products and services efficiently, with appropriate regulation where necessary to address market failure. However, qualifications play such an important role for individuals and for society that it is right to ask whether the current delivery mechanism is as effective as it needs to be and whether other options would result in a more secure system that delivers the best educational outcomes. The overriding priority has to be the effectiveness and integrity of the qualifications system in practice, because so much else depends upon it.

12. In principle, the current market approach to the development and delivery of qualifications provides a range of potential benefits, notably the following:

- There are incentives for awarding bodies to offer choice for students, schools and colleges (so that for example a range of syllabuses can meet the diverse needs of students, employers, universities, etc); to deliver qualifications that meet the needs of end users—employers, colleges and universities; to have syllabuses that keep pace with subject change; to innovate, for example over the use of technology in assessment; to provide excellence in the quality of the service provided to schools and colleges; and to provide efficiency, in particular through competition over price.

- There is resilience in the case of delivery failure—the risk is spread between a number of providers. (We have seen in recent years examples overseas where a single State supplier has been involved in delivery failures, with an impact on very large numbers of students.)

- The risks of qualification reform are shared between the State and the awarding bodies.

- GCSEs and A levels are independently regulated and developed and therefore they have credibility outside the State sector, with independent schools and universities: they are typically the qualification of choice even when there are other options available.

There are also some particular advantages associated with the current system. Many such qualifications are widely used and respected around the world; and the awarding bodies concerned—often (as we have noted above) with their origins in universities—have a long-established reputation.

13. Where market failure may be creating tensions over achieving the outcomes that are in the public interest, regulation may be needed. The qualifications market presents some very real risks of this kind. The errors in exam papers this summer (see paragraphs 19–20 below) are a good example, but there are also long-term trends which are just as worrying.

14. The chief such risk of market failure with qualifications is in relation to standards—the so called “race to the bottom”. Central to our concern is that the nature of competition seems to present significant risks of awarding bodies producing more “accessible” specifications, with content which is less intrinsically challenging, in order to capture market share. To understand whether this is happening one must look not just at the qualifications themselves but also at the context in which they are purchased and taught. Perverse incentives in the performance tables, the structure of examinations, modularisation and re-sits, and support materials for teachers, all influence the level of demand in a qualification. That is why, for example, the Government and Ofqual have acted to reform performance tables and end modularisation in GCSEs.

15. We also need to ensure that the qualifications market is working efficiently. Competition should deliver some upward pressure on service quality and downward pressure on price; but it is costly for a school or college to switch between awarding bodies, and entry to the market for new organisations requires substantial investment in delivery infrastructure.

16. We have the benefit of a new regulator in Ofqual, with a key role in regulating the market, particularly for GCSEs and A levels. It is charged with ensuring that awarding bodies operate in ways that best serve the public interest.

17. Ofqual is a relatively new body, enjoying full independence only since April last year. It has made a very significant impact over a short period, notably in its timely and robust response to the exam paper errors in the summer. As we noted in paragraph eight above, Ofqual has also begun to show a real willingness to tackle awarding bodies on the key issue of standards. We are looking to Ofqual to help deliver the kind of improvements to the qualifications system—to both the standards of the qualifications, and to the systems for delivery—that need to be made. We have full confidence in Ofqual and its leadership to transform the system and restore confidence. To support Ofqual, we are legislating to give it extra powers to sanction those awarding bodies that fall short of the required standards, to deter poor practice and to punish if it does occur. Ofqual itself has recently put in place a robust new regime of strategic regulation, using the powers given to it by its founding legislation; and it is working on a better understanding of the “health” of the market in targeting its regulatory interventions. Some very significant changes are being made towards a more efficient and effective regulatory regime that will help ensure outcomes that are in the public interest.
18. Our overriding interest in considering the qualifications market and its regulation is securing the credibility of and confidence in the qualifications system; and that is the criterion we will apply in deciding what changes are appropriate.

Ensuring accuracy in setting papers, marking scripts and awarding grades

19. The scale and nature of last summer’s awarding body errors over GCSE, AS and A level papers were unacceptable. Twelve question papers contained significant errors that made it very difficult or impossible for candidates to answer certain questions. 138,000 papers were affected. Were it not for Ofqual’s intervention, with our full support, the impact on students would have been even worse; with inevitable implications for confidence in the system. The awarding bodies concerned need to ensure that errors of this seriousness do not happen again. We must have a highly reliable system: a low error rate overall is no comfort to the thousands of young people who are caused great and justified anxiety about their futures when mistakes are made.

20. We warmly welcomed the action taken by Ofqual during the exam season to minimise the impact of the errors; and the work that it and its fellow regulators in Wales and Northern Ireland have done to identify the lessons that must be learnt. We support both the action that Ofqual and its fellow regulators set out in the interim report on their investigation\(^\text{93}\) published on 31 October and the areas for further enquiry that they have identified.

21. The qualifications system must ensure that assessments are marked consistently and accurately. It falls to Ofqual to lay down the requirements of the marking system and to ensure that awarding bodies discharge their responsibilities over marking accordingly. We recognise that no large-scale marking system of this kind can be entirely error-free, but with so much at stake we look to the awarding bodies to ensure that students are awarded the marks their achievements deserve, first time (ie without recourse to the appeals system). We strongly support Ofqual in its work to ensure that the system is indeed robust and fair.

The commercial activities of awarding bodies, including examination fees and textbooks, and their impact on schools and pupils

22. The qualifications market is large and has grown significantly in recent years. In Ofqual’s 2010 Annual Qualifications Market Report,\(^\text{94}\) it gave an indicative figure of at least £933 million for the total annual revenue of the qualifications sector (pre- and post-19) that it regulates: with £281 million spent by schools and £173 million spent by colleges. This includes £219 million spent on procuring GCSEs and A levels and £614 million spent on other regulated qualifications.

23. Given this context, we welcome the Committee’s interest in the commercial aspects of awarding body behaviour. We have seen a shift in awarding body behaviour in recent years towards a more commercial approach and diversification into areas like publishing and training. In all their activities awarding bodies need to strike the right balance between what is in their commercial interest and what is in the public interest. We would expect this to be evident in every aspect of their business decisions. We would for example expect them to continue to recognise the educational importance of qualifications in certain subjects even if the take up (and therefore profit to be generated) is relatively low.

24. Expenditure on exams including exam fees is one of the most significant calls on school and college budgets; and for a range of reasons the sums have been growing in real terms, as has the percentage of budgets that this represents. Expenditure on examinations and assessments in secondary schools for example accounted for nearly eight per cent of running expenses (non-staff costs) in 2009–10 compared with around six per cent in 2002–03. This makes such expenditure the second largest non-staff cost for secondary schools.

| EXAM FEES—EXPENDITURE IN STATE SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN ENGLAND (£ MILLIONS)\(^\text{95}\) |
|------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| 154.0            | 172.3         | 196.8         | 218.3         | 239.2         | 263.3         | 281.0         | 302.6         |

25. Exam fees are met from the public purse and represent money that could otherwise be spent on teaching. We must therefore reassure ourselves that fees are at an appropriate level. Awarding bodies should be setting fees that give a reasonable return on their investment, given the risks they face, but do not generate excessive profit. We must also eliminate any waste in spending on qualifications, for example by schools and colleges minimising the fees associated with late entries. Key to ensuring the right outcomes is Ofqual’s ability to regulate the market effectively, and one of its statutory objectives relates to ensuring that qualifications are provided efficiently and that exam fees represent value for money.

\(^{93}\) Inquiry into Examination Errors Summer 2011 Interim Report; October 2011; Ofqual/11/5073
\(^{94}\) Annual Qualifications Market Report, Version Two; August 2011; Ofqual/11/4854
\(^{95}\) Taken from Department for Education England outturn summary tables at www.education.gov.uk/schools/adminandfinance/financialmanagement/schoolsrevenuefinancereport/section251/archive/b0608383/section-251-data-archive/summary-level-la-outturndata-reports
26. The links between awarding bodies and textbooks is an area where there can be a tension between what is in the public interest and what would be in an organisation’s commercial interest. On the one hand, teachers and students require high quality textbooks and related material and awarding bodies are well placed to help meet this need. On the other, certain types of textbook can promote risk-averse teaching focused on what may be assessed, rather than the fuller picture and the promotion of a real love and understanding of a subject. Textbooks associated with awarding bodies are likely to be particularly attractive to schools and colleges, so such material must be of high quality educational value rather than a product that incentivises “teaching to the test”. It is essential that the barriers to entry to the market are not unduly high, and that potential new entrants compete on equal terms with existing awarding bodies when it comes to the production of textbooks and similar material. Links between awarding bodies and textbooks also raise issues about whether there are inappropriate conflicts of interest because of the risk that these make (or may be perceived to make) questions in exams more predictable. The same issue arises in relation to other activities including training, for example chief examiners offering exams training to teachers.

27. To protect public confidence in the system, we need the highest possible ethical standards combined with a fully transparent system. Ofqual has a remit to keep under review activities by awarding bodies such as involvement in the publication of text books, and has in place a regime for managing conflicts of interest. It also takes a very close interest in the quality and security of assessments. Ofqual has acknowledged that more work is needed in this area.

CONCLUSION

28. The Committee’s Inquiry will be addressing a range of key issues over the qualifications system. We look forward to the Committee’s findings as a contribution to policy development.

November 2011

Written evidence submitted by David Burton, Deputy Headteacher, St Michael’s CoE High School, Crosby, Liverpool

GUIDED LEARNING HOURS

We take GLH as an indication of how many lessons staff and pupils will need. Our experience tells us that some subjects don’t quite require the GLH so we reallocate these hours to other subjects often English, Maths, Science. Far from reducing the number of hours taught, I believe we need to increase them with extra lessons before school and after school both in traditional subjects for pupils and community members and in a range of extra-curricular activities.

SINGLE EXAM BOARD

I believe this would increase the reliability of qualifications, for example vocational qualifications can only be given the same status as academic qualifications if they are awarded by the same exams body. As well as being helpful for children who move across the system, like military children and travelling children, the parity of having one established national qualification in each subject would be helpful for employers and universities. Furthermore, examiners could dedicate time to focus on ensuring the preparation and assessment of the national qualifications is quality assured so that exams and marking are of high quality. Finally, a single examinations body would reduce commercial exploitation if the body was state-owned so that employers and universities could provide input into the content and assessment of the curriculum so that our examination system provides pupils with progression routes.

HOW AND WHEN WE SHOULD BE EXAMINING CHILDREN

— Assessing students can be much more innovative eg Presentation skills assessed by employers via Skype link.
— Teacher assessment through video, sound recording, photographs.
— Time with employers assessed by employer on basis of skills, motivation, teamwork, communication.
— Maintain written exams for relevant students with short term exams.
— A level exams to be sat in early December and April so final results are out by end of June and students can apply to university/employers with qualifications to enhance chances of pupils from more deprived families gaining first-choice university entrance.

RE-MARKING

Reinstate senior examiner review meetings and checks of pupils’ work on grade boundaries to minimise the need for remarks. Examiners/moderators whose work to be found substandard by remarks to receive further training and all further work to be subject to stricter controls and assessment.
GCSE Examinations in Year 10, maybe Year 9

Appropriate pupils start GCSE courses in Year 9 to be sat at end of Year 10 (or continued in Year 11 in the case of triple science).

A-level in Year 10/11/12/13, and what proportion

A small number of pupils start AS levels in year 11 and continue through to A2 and/or AS in Years 12 and possibly Year 13.

January 2012

Written evidence submitted by Robert Pritchard, Headteacher, St Mary’s Catholic High School, Ilkley, West Yorkshire

1. The number of hours you teach and whether you use exactly the recommended number of hours that are set per subject or go over that (guided learning hours)

For most courses, we give the recommended or more than the recommended number of hours. However, the BTEC courses we give about 20% less than the recommended hours.

2. Your views on the benefits and drawbacks of a single exam board

Single exam board would lead to more consistent approach. How can it be right that schools look for an "easier exam board" for a subject. The standard should be the standard across the country. A Maths paper needs to have the same questions to everyone in a sitting.

However, if agencies such as OfQAL did their job this may not be necessary.

The down side is that this new body would have immense power. At the moment we can swap exam boards if not satisfied. The new one would need quality, and be transparent in its protocols.

3. Your views on the time of year we should be examining children, and whether this should be earlier in the year?

Never a good time. Summer exam timetable is about right with the number of examinations that there are. If the number of modules were reduced, this could shorten the season.

4. Do you enter children for GCSE examinations in year 10 or year 9, how many, the proportion of children this is and in what subjects?

No, not any more. This is because they may get the C, but would be able to get a B or better if we wait for maturity.

5. Whether you enter children for A level in year 10/11/12/13 and the proportions

No, not any more—they rarely get a “good” grade, or a grade they could have got if waited to mature.

January 2012

Written evidence submitted by Teresa Kelly, Abingdon and Witney College

1. The number of hours you teach and whether you use exactly the recommended number of hours that are set per subject or go over that (guided learning hours)

This very much depends on the qualification that is being followed by the students.

For AS/A2 we do teach more than the recommended hours. The main reason for this is that our experience has shown us that for many of our students they need the additional direct teaching by a specialist member of staff in order to maximise their grade potential. In addition, we offer an A level offer in partnership with three schools in Abingdon and the hours per taught subject are common across all four organisations.

A third factor in teaching over the recommended hours is the point in the year that the exams take place. Those courses requiring coursework demand that assignments are submit often as early as April.

For Entry level qualifications we also teach more than the recommended hours. The recommended hours for Entry 1 and 2 are extremely low and do not reflect at all the ability of the student to complete with such a low (sometimes 30 hours) hourly allocation.

However, for some qualifications we teach less than the recommended hours such as many of the BTEC qualifications and we balance the specialist teaching with a range of additional enrichment in order to provide a full and balanced programme for the individual student.
2. Your views on the benefits and drawbacks of a single exam board

Whilst the benefits of a single exam board in terms of the administration and time spent by colleges would be very attractive, a single exam board would not cater for the needs of the majority of young people 16—19 who are taking vocational examinations and would be unlikely to satisfy the demands of the sector skills councils and the world of employment.

A single exam board would make sense for GCSE and AS/A2 as it would assist with those students transferring during the two years and would also eliminate any attempt to maximise performance through the selection of particular boards or syllabi.

3. Your views on the time of year we should be examining children, and whether this should be earlier in the year?

For the majority of our students examination earlier in the year would put them at a disadvantage. Unlike the school population taking GCSE, FE students usually only have nine months to study for and learn the content relating to a GCSE examination. Even if they have taken GCSE in a particular subject before there is no relevance to the GCSE they may take in a college.

4. Do you enter children for GCSE examinations in year 10 or year 9, how many, the proportion of children this is and in what subjects?

Does not apply to FE Colleges as all students entering full time are a minimum of 16

5. Whether you enter children for A level in year 10/11/12/13 and the proportions.

Again—Colleges would only enter students doing AS/A2 in the equivalent to years 12 and 13 in school. The majority of year 12 equivalents would be studying for AS and the majority of year 13 equivalents would be studying for A2

January 2012

Written evidence submitted by the British Academy

INTRODUCTION

1. The British Academy, the UK’s national Academy for the humanities and social sciences welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to the House of Commons Education Select Committee inquiry into the administration of examinations for 15–19 year olds. We are grateful for the Committee’s invitation to do so despite the passing of the deadline for written evidence, so that it may consider the humanities and social sciences perspectives of the issues.

2. We would like to assure the Committee that there is a great deal of knowledge and experience with regard to the administration and understanding of examinations within the social sciences academic community. Contributors to the review of examining procedures published by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority in 2007 (Newton, 2007)96 included many social scientists and the statistical methodology that has informed exams research has mainly come from within the social science community. Much of the methodological work has been carried out outside the traditional mathematics and science education community, by social statisticians and quantitative social researchers.

3. Though outside of the scope of this inquiry, we think it is important that the Committee gives some thought to the general culture of assessments for 15–19 year olds, in particular whether the quantity of assessment is appropriate. This age group is now—with GCSEs, AS levels and A levels—required to prepare for more examinations than in previous generations. This may result in a situation where preparing for exams detracts from opportunities to explore subjects in depth and develop independent learning skills.

4. It is also important that the inquiry considers the context of how appropriate the examinations are for purposes such as university applications. The improved standards achieved over the years mean that universities are often required to consider other ways of differentiating between candidates, and to assess the potential of individuals to flourish in the more independent learning environment of university.

A RANGE OF AWARDBING BODIES OR ONE NATIONAL BODY

5. It is vital that curriculum subject specialists and developers continue to be involved in examining, so that the exams remain relevant and in keeping with curriculum change. It is important that the conduct and control of examinations should be done by organisations that understand and are sympathetic to the social and educational value of what they produce.

6. A major argument against a single national body is that it would tend to discourage the experimentation that has been a real strength of the current system. Diversity helps to ensure a healthy system and needs to be preserved. Some specialisation is possible and does exist to some extent already, but care is needed that this does not result in real reductions of choice among providers. If a single body were to be proposed then the Scottish model (as implemented by the Scottish Qualifications Authority) is worth considering.

7. It is also important that examining bodies are independent of Government, so that examinations and assessment are motivated by educational factors, not by political factors. However, it is important to ensure that sufficient accountability to Government and Parliament is in place—there are many examples in models such as executive agencies, regulatory organisations and non-departmental public bodies.

**INvolvement of Professional Bodies and Learned Societies**

8. The setting of examinations, and assessment generally, is an area where there is now a large body of knowledge within the educational community. This expertise should be used to guide and direct the development of assessment. Professional bodies and learned societies will also bring expertise on assessment, but it is likely to be specialised and applicable to a more narrowly defined group of people who aspire to professional qualifications, rather than national public examinations such as GCSE or A level.

**Ensuring Accuracy in Setting and Marking**

9. We believe that over the years, experts in many organisations have developed a number of ways to ensure accuracy in setting and marking. The review in 2007 discussed this at length. Developing these techniques through the use of expertise, experience and analysis should have a high priority.

**Commercial Activities**

10. The current examination boards in England (with one exception) are not-for-profit organisations. Moving towards greater market-based competition is worthy of consideration, but there are risks involved in encouraging for-profit providers to the extent that they become the dominant model. Equally, market-based competition could also lead to consolidation of providers, which may ultimately lead to a single or excessively dominant provider. Both these risks need to be considered carefully when assessing changes to the current organisational models.

11. Recent media coverage has highlighted some of the risks that come with market-based competition. The claims being made suggest that serious unintended consequences can stem from well-motivated policy developments. Commercialisation can bring great benefits—for example, innovation in assessment—and often leads to increased investment in education. However, an increase in the commercial activities of awarding bodies should not conflict with the primary concern of ensuring high quality, rigorous, effective conduct of examinations.

**Conflicts of Interest**

12. Commercial activities can present particular issues in other ways. For example, involvement of organisations in different educational areas (curriculum advice, examination administration, textbook provision) may lead to competing interests. It is understandable that the expertise of individuals and organisations in sectors is shared and transferred, and involvement extended to many areas, some of which may overlap. Where this happens, it is important that appropriate organisations such as this Committee are able to scrutinise adequately activity to avoid any perception of conflict of interest. This may occur through boards strongly promoting textbooks linked to exam curricula with the risk that diversity of textbook material becomes constrained. Another issue would arise if senior representatives of boards became involved in national curriculum development, either within the UK or abroad where boards have interests.

13. For example, the Committee might wish to examine the relationship between Pearson International, one of the world’s largest educational publishers and a major supplier of textbooks and teacher resources in the UK and worldwide, and operations such as Edexcel, BTEC and City and Guilds, in all of which we understand that Pearson has a substantial financial stake. Or, taking Cambridge Assessment, which, through OCR, is the second of England’s GCSE/A level examinations triumvirate, the Committee might usefully examine how far its work as a major examination/qualification provider in England, which also (according to its website) markets its expertise, qualifications and materials in 150 of the world’s countries, sits with the leadership role currently being taken by one of its top executives in the Government’s review of England’s National Curriculum.

14. Such questions may be doubly pertinent when we note that the Government has talked about making greater use of standardised textbooks to ensure that schools comply with national curriculum requirements. Its advisers have also recommended that the content of England’s National Curriculum be benchmarked against

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97 Edexcel was a not-for-profit organisation until June 2003, when it became part of Pearson PLC.

the curriculum of educationally high-performing jurisdictions, including Singapore, whose O level examinations are run jointly by Cambridge Assessment and Singapore’s Ministry of Education.

15. No suggestion of impropriety attaches to our use of these two examples. However, given that the marketing of examinations, qualifications and the associated textbooks and teacher support materials is both a major financial operation and intensely competitive both nationally and globally, the integrity of the examination system and its providers might best be demonstrated if the not-for-profit administration of examinations is entirely separate from commercial activities such as textbook production, and if both are detached from policy leadership on the issues in question. We therefore believe that the current relationship between these various activities deserves the Committee’s close attention.

January 2012

Written evidence submitted by Jo-Anne Baird, Jannette Elwood & Tina Isaacs, Oxford University Centre for Educational Assessment, Queen’s University, Belfast & The Institute of Education

1. OVERVIEW

1.1 In this paper, we outline the historical reasons for the current number of awarding bodies, compare this with the situation in other countries, consider the benefits and problems with multiple awarding bodies, discuss alternative models of examination provision and, finally, discuss the issue of qualification currencies.

1.2 English public examinations are respected internationally and emulated in many countries. We also know that there is a great deal of public confidence in the examination system in England. Nonetheless, recent press reports will reduce confidence levels, at least temporarily.

1.3 The facts regarding competition between examination boards on standards should be established before decisions are taken to overhaul the system. Media reports, though worrying, did not constitute widespread evidence of competition. Independent research could be undertaken on the statistical screening data to provide better information on this issue. We indicate in sections 6.3 and 6.4 some of the areas that could be pursued.

1.4 Assessment policy over the last decade has been characterised by change, which directs educational resources to managing these changes rather than improving education per se. Re-structuring examination provision also heightens the risk of system failure. Furthermore, any change needs to address the problems of lack of curriculum innovation and the dominance of examinations over secondary education.

1.5 Justifiable methods for setting and assuring the standards of our syllabuses and qualifications are important for upholding public confidence and breaking the cycle of angst about our examination standards. Regulators are often in a weak position with respect to industry, as the relevant expertise resides in industry to a greater extent than in regulatory organisations. As such, we would encourage the establishment of an advisory body comprising strong assessment expertise in relation to content and performance standards, as well as methodology for national and international comparability studies.

1.6 Qualifications have differing currencies for different stakeholders. Students who take the examinations can use them for access to Higher Education or employment. The performance tables are another exchange rate that has impact upon the schools rather than directly upon the students. Assignment of values of qualifications for the performance tables needs greater transparency and scrutiny. This aspect of the system has had insufficient attention in spite of the powerful incentives created by value assignment to the performance tables.

2. NUMBER OF EXAM BOARDS

2.1 A search of Ofqual’s register of regulated qualifications shows that there are currently 183 regulated providers in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and nearly 14,000 qualifications. However, there are many more unregulated providers of qualifications. This Inquiry is not concerned with the extent of examination boards per se, but with the running of examinations for 15 to 19 year olds. However, the Department for Education’s Section 96 list, which gives the list of qualifications that will be government-funded in schools and colleges has over 11,000 entries from a large number of providers. Nonetheless, we tend to think only of the unitary awarding Bodies: AQA, Cambridge Assessment, CCEA, Edexcel and WJEC. These bodies are able to offer general public qualifications such as GCSE and A-level in England.

14–19 Centre Research Study.


http://www.ofqual.gov.uk/news-and-announcements/83/582

Written evidence submitted by Jo-Anne Baird, Jannette Elwood & Tina Isaacs, Oxford University Centre for Educational Assessment, Queen’s University, Belfast & The Institute of Education

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2.2 Historically, there was a plethora of regional examination providers; many of which had strong links with universities (eg the Northern UniversitiesJoint Matriculation Board). This picture has been simplified over time. The “Unitary Awarding Bodies” were created following the Dearing Review, with the aims of rationalising the number of providers and qualifications (particularly vocational qualifications) and addressing “the century-old division between education and training”. Examination boards were required to create partnerships that spanned the academic-vocational divide in the late 1990s. Edexcel, for example, was created in 1996 from the merger of the University of London Examinations and Assessment Council and the Business and Technology Education Council.

3. INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON

3.1 Unlike the UK, most countries have a single set of exit qualifications. Some countries appear to have a reasonably simple system of examination administration, with a single organisation, typically the Ministry, responsible for examinations (eg Denmark, France, Hungary, Italy, Kenya, Lebanon, Malawi, Malaysia, Netherlands, New Zealand, Northern Ireland, Norway, Scotland, Sweden, Uganda, Wales, Zimbabwe). Others have regional exam boards for each state or province (eg Australia, Canada, China) or regional boards across countries (eg Caribbean Examinations Council, West African Examinations Council). The International Baccalaureate Organisation is an international examination body designed to administer particular qualifications globally. Another model is specialisation of examination board (eg by language (Singapore), region (Pakistan), school type (Greece, South Africa)). Many countries have hybrid systems that defy classification. For example, in the US, there are national testing initiatives (eg SATs, ACTs, Advanced Placement Program) in addition to statewide tests. Public and private ownership of exam boards also coexist in the US. Russia has a federal examination system, but many aspects of it are devolved to states. Yet another complication is how exam board functions are handled. Some countries have a single exam board to handle everything from setting examinations to issuing results, whilst others have different organisations involved in setting, administering and certifying examinations.

3.2 As we see above, the international position is complex. Although we have not found another country with examination boards in competition for school examinations, in many countries there are at least international examinations available in tandem with the national examinations.

4. BENEFITS OF MORE THAN ONE AWARDING BODY

4.1 The benefits of competition could be reduced prices, diversity and innovation in product offer and/or high quality customer services. However, these benefits arise in theory in situations of open competition in a market. In practice, examination boards operate in a regulated oligopoly, which produces different characteristics. In an oligopoly, firms compete less aggressively on price and the more the fewer operators in the marketplace. Financially, examination boards in England went through difficult times in the early part of this century due to the requirements or create merged organisations and to produce new qualifications frequently. In years where there has been greater stability, examination boards have been able to recoup their losses and produce a profit. Government policy can have a large impact upon the financial health of these organisations. Even in a steady state, cross-funding of small-entry qualifications from the profit-making larger-entry qualifications is a necessary to enable breadth of provision.

4.2 Pricing strategy can also run counter to traditional economic theory. Few people want to buy cheap perfume, safety equipment or educational resources. A low price is not always a good sales point in an educational market—who wants a cheap qualification? That is not to say that we should not expect value for money from examination boards. The point is that the market itself will not necessarily produce prices at marginal cost.

5. WHAT EVIDENCE IS THERE FOR THESE BENEFITS IN PRACTICE?

5.1 Due to the regulation of the examinations market, there is little diversity or innovation in product offer. There is a tension between the regulator upholding content standards and allowing variation in the syllabus and examination offer. Differences can be perceived as having an effect upon standards. For example, the content of the curriculum can be perceived as more or less demanding if it is allowed to vary. However, the concern for maintenance of standards has come to overshadow innovation. Presently, we have a large number of syllabuses in a given subject, but the differences between them are small. Ofqual need to be empowered to foster more diversity in the examinations system, whilst ensuring that evidence is collated to reassure stakeholders that standards have been upheld.

5.2 Examination boards compete in terms of quality of customer service and some of the comments by Chief Executives of the Awarding Bodies indicated this in the evidence provided to the Committee on 15 December 2011. These services include production of syllabus and examination materials, quality of marking, advice and guidance through Subject Officers and teacher events, rapidity of appeals processes and so on. Gareth Pierce

105 The Victoria University of Manchester, University of Liverpool and the University of Leeds.
(CEO of WJEC) argued, for example, that their market share in GCSE English could have risen because they are a small organisation in which teachers can speak directly to a knowledgeable Subject Officer by telephone.

6. THE MAIN PROBLEM WITH MORE THAN ONE EXAMINATION BOARD

6.1 Competition between examination boards on the grounds of examination standards is a longstanding concern with the current arrangements and this has also been raised in the recent The Telegraph articles.\(^{105}\) In a context in which falling examination standards is the prevailing media narrative, the recent allegations are clearly worrying. We note the refutation of some of the allegations in the evidence of the examiners involved to the Select Committee Inquiry and Ofqual’s decision to revoke one examination paper. A useful question to ask is how we would know if examination boards were competing on standards, in the absence of direct admissions.

6.2 Standards are set in England in a distributed fashion by individual examining committees and those are then scrutinised on a case by case basis by the examination board; in particular the Accountable Officer has a formal role in approving them. No individual is responsible for the national level outcomes for GCSE or A-level examinations. They are simply collated across committees and awarding bodies for the purposes of a formal role in approving them. No individual is responsible for the national level outcomes for GCSE or A-level examinations. They are simply collated across committees and awarding bodies for the purposes of a JCQ press release and later for statistical records.

6.3 A system of statistical screening was implemented by JCQ so that standards could be compared statistically after the fact. Using the statistical screening data, the following could be independently investigated:

— how many examinations have statistically significant differences in outcomes, after controlling for prior achievement of the students who entered for the examinations\(^ {106}\)

— given that the statistical screening was introduced a number of years ago, has the number of examinations with statistically discrepant outcomes reduced? (ie have the examination boards taken action to address the findings).

— aggregated across syllabuses, are any of the examination boards significantly more generous or harsh, or are effects subject-specific?

6.4 Examination standards cannot simply be defined by the statistical outcomes.\(^ {109}\) The statistical screening process catered for this by proposing that qualitative investigations were undertaken (“comparability studies”) when there were grounds to suspect that the quality of students’ work justified the discrepant statistical results. Thus, it would be useful to know:

— how many comparability studies have been undertaken by Ofqual, JCQ or the awarding bodies in response to the statistical screening findings and what were the outcomes of the studies?

6.5 A creeping “grade inflation” might also be construed as evidence of competition between awarding bodies. As the Inquiry has heard, there are many potential determinants of increased proportions being awarded the grades, so this source of evidence is rather indirect as an indicator of competition. Due to the performance tables, there are benefits to many stakeholders in examination results going up annually. Furthermore, there is a genuine effort on the part of teachers to raise the numbers of students attaining the requirements. Disentangling the extent to which rising pass rates is due to different causes is impossible. Nonetheless, confidence in the system is undermined by these concerns.

6.6 Aside from annual rises in outcomes, large changes in the statistics can occur when new syllabuses are first examined. The changes could legitimately be explained by movements of schools to different examination boards, but unless proper attention is given to what is known statistically about the schools and students entering for the examinations, changes in syllabuses could lead to unwarranted changes in outcomes. We note that GCSE Science outcomes increased dramatically in 2009 when there was a syllabus revision and question paper change. The grades, so this source of evidence is rather indirect as an indicator of competition. Due to the performance tables, there are benefits to many stakeholders in examination results going up annually. Furthermore, there is a genuine effort on the part of teachers to raise the numbers of students attaining the requirements. Disentangling the extent to which rising pass rates is due to different causes is impossible. Nonetheless, confidence in the system is undermined by these concerns.

6.7 Another indicator of competition between examination boards could be an attempt to reduce the content of syllabuses and examinations. As such, it would be helpful to know:

— how frequently does Ofqual have to reject awarding body syllabus and sample assessment material submissions on the grounds that they are not demanding enough?

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108 A study conducted by NFER (Benton & Lin, 2011) shows that there are very few significant differences between English awarding bodies. The predominant pattern was of significant differences between CCEA and the other awarding bodies. However, it would be useful to investigate whether any differences between English awarding bodies pertain, having excluded the effect of CCEA.

6.8 Equally, the process by which content standards of qualifications are judged by Ofqual could be more robust and transparent. A review of methodologies and publication of the process generated by this work is warranted.

6.9 In her evidence to the Committee, Glenys Stacey, Chief Executive of Ofqual, recognised that assessment expertise is scarce and that much of it lies within the assessment industry. Indeed, much of the assessment expertise in the country is developed by the examination boards. We believe that Ofqual’s access to expertise should be strengthened and support their proposed development of an advisory committee. Membership of their Board would also be strengthened by the appointment of an expert in assessment.

7. What are the Alternative Models?

7.1 Nationalisation—Several countries run the examinations through the Department for Education and this is effectively the case for national curriculum test in England (currently operated by the Standards and Testing Agency). A single examination board would remove problems of comparability of standards between awarding bodies, but not issues of comparability of standards over time, between subjects or between qualifications. As previously mentioned, a single nationalised examination board would remove at a stroke the allegations of the “race to the bottom” associated with competition. Theoretically, a single examination body could offer as much choice of provision as is currently the case, managing volume and complexity is a recipe for disaster and most organisations would keep their offer as simple as possible under conditions of a nationalised exam board. Thus, it would be likely to lead to little diversity or change and this could cause problems in our educational assessment slipping behind other countries that could be more agile in keeping up with the times due to a different structural system. With such scarce assessment expertise, a single examination board could arguably make better use of resources. A regulator would not be required, for example, in this system. Examination fees would remain within the public sector and small-entry, niche subjects could be subsidised as a matter of policy. Another advantage of nationalisation is that the government is in control of an important societal service, but there are disadvantages associated with direct political connection with examination results and governments often wish to have some distance from them for reasons of impartiality and public confidence. Certainly, it is difficult to see how it would be politically acceptable (or the political will) to nationalise public examinations in England currently, as examination boards have a long history and tradition of independence from government.

7.2 Outsourcing on a contract basis—Through the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency, national curriculum tests were operated on a contractual basis. All of the largest examination boards in England, the National Foundation for Educational Research and ETS-Europe held contracts with QCDA to deliver aspects of the national curriculum tests at some time. Advantages of this model are distance from political control, drawing upon expertise in other agencies and ability to change provider. Contracts could be drawn up for different operational functions, by subject area or by qualification type for the entire operation.

7.3 Outsourcing by function runs the risk that the functions will not connect well between suppliers and it is worth bearing in mind that the likely suppliers would be competitors. Problems with the delivery of the national curriculum tests have occurred regularly. These were contracted by function, which might have contributed to the problems. A more pressing problem with the contractual model for the national curriculum tests was the length of the contracts. Setting up large-scale, detailed operations is challenging and changing providers is wasteful of resources and runs risks of delivery problems. To assist with stability, contracts would need to have a minimum of five years’ duration. Even so, running the examination system on a contract basis could undermine capacity in the industry, as expertise takes time to develop and staff employment prospects would be uncertain under this model. New computer systems, personnel, logistics and so on have to be devised each time the supplier is changed.

7.4 Outsourcing by subject area would have the advantages that the entire operation would be joined up through a single organisation with responsibility and accountability and it could foster greater development of expertise in particular subject areas. Examination boards have significant logistical operations to deliver under tight time schedules with extraordinarily high demands for accuracy. Over the past decade, following the Curriculum 2000 examiner shortages and the Qualifications and Curriculum Agency’s view that examinations were a “cottage industry” in England, examination boards have invested heavily in their systems. As some examiners have testified, this has led to electronic systems making examiners feel somewhat de-professionalised and alienated. Accompanying this was an influx of staff to examination boards and QCDA with backgrounds in business rather than education. Examination boards need both kinds of experience. Outsourcing by subject area might foster greater focus and connection with subject matter experts and create better leadership in disciplinary-embedded assessment. Expectations for comparability of standards between subjects would have to be tackled explicitly under such a system. Provision of small-entry subjects would also need to be a requirement upon awarding bodies in this model, as it has already been noted that they must be cross-funded and will not be financially viable as stand-alone propositions.

7.5 Links with universities—Historically, each of the awarding bodies had ties to universities and there has been some discussion in the current debate about the merits of this and of having senior examiners from Higher Education. One caution we would place upon this is that systems of accountability in Higher Education are now a disincentive to academics being involved with examining at secondary level, as this would not contribute to the indicators upon which individuals and institutions are measured in HE. These are predominantly: quality of research output, research funding and research impact.
8. Currency of Qualifications

8.1 The Wolf Report (2011) sets out a dire picture in relation to some of the vocational qualifications available and promoted to numbers of young people, defining them as “sub-standard” with little or no labour market value. Furthermore, increased competition for university places, employment and careers has created concern amongst students about the devaluation of the currency and worth of their qualifications. Research shows that students are concerned about the different titles of qualifications that are available (GCSEs, A levels, BTECs, etc) and their actual value with employers, their worth in the HE market, their equivalencies and what are the best qualifications to optimise opportunities. A present need for better transparency and common agreement around value of qualifications cannot be underestimated and links with discussions on standards and equivalences in qualifications from different awarding providers.

January 2012

Written evidence submitted by WJEC

A. Competition between Exam Boards

How do the exam boards avoid competing on standards?

One of the most important aspects of collaborative work undertaken by awarding organisations is the “statistical screening” analysis undertaken after each summer series of examinations. This provides a method of benchmarking which is sufficiently robust to provide alignment of awarding standards within a subject.

Common use is also made, at the time of awarding, of data which relates to the prior attainment characteristics of each awarding organisation’s cohort of candidates. While this can also have some value, WJEC’s view is that it should be used with caution because of uncertainty regarding the validity of the assumptions on which such predictive models rely.

What are the factors which account for WJEC’s increase in market share in certain subjects eg GCSE English, GCSE RS (short course) and A level French in recent years? What makes a syllabus/exam board attractive to teachers?

The evidence that we have from teacher opinion surveys and comments received directly from teachers suggests that the most important considerations are: the suitability of the specification for the school/college’s cohort of candidates; the accessibility of awarding organisation staff (especially, in WJEC’s case, the direct contactability of our specialist subject officers and their support teams), and the reliability of marking.

B. Reform of the Exam System

What evidence should be considered when deciding whether reform is needed?

WJEC’s view is that the existing system should be evaluated in the context of a set of key priorities. These might include:

— being responsive to the evolving needs of learners in the context of society and the economy;
— cost-efficiency;
— comparability of awarding standards within a subject within a year;
— comparability of awarding standards within a subject over time;
— comparability of standards between subjects; and
— operational risk.

What should be the key priority in deciding how the exam system should be reformed?

This is for stakeholders to determine. WJEC considers that being responsive to the evolving needs of learners in the context of society and the economy should be high within the list of priorities.

What are the benefits and drawbacks of a single board or franchised system?

The main benefits might be the elimination of issues relating to comparability of awarding standards within a subject within a year, if provision was restricted to one specification per subject.

A single board might be appropriate for subjects with relatively small candidate numbers that are currently spread thinly across a number of awarding organisations, though a board providing this service would need to be involved in high volume activity as well in order to ensure overall financial viability.

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Potential drawbacks of a franchised model might include greater difficulty in addressing comparability themes between subjects and increased operational risk.

It is less clear how such systems would compare with present arrangements in terms of cost-efficiency and innovation. Within a franchised system, there is potentially a risk to those curriculum areas which have relatively less volume or which require relatively more costly assessment arrangements, as the scope for cross-subsidy across qualifications within an awarding organisation would be much reduced.

**Role of the regulator—should this be strengthened and if so, in what respects?**

Regulatory priorities should be reviewed. There is evidence which suggests that the accreditation processes which were applied to some current qualifications did not address rigorously some matters which are fundamental to comparability of standards, and regulators are now finding that they are having to address these issues retrospectively.

Going forward, it is important that regulators are equipped to address all significant aspects of comparability at the time qualifications are accredited, with this being recognised as one of their highest priority activities.

C. **Innovation**

*Has the current system delivered innovation which supports high quality teaching and learning?*

WJEC’s view is that the current system is capable of delivering innovation which supports high quality teaching and learning, but it is also the case that when the criteria which govern specifications are overly detailed there is a significant constraint on such innovation.

*Does competition between exam boards enhance or work against innovation in qualification development?*

WJEC’s view is that innovation is enhanced by having more than one awarding body offering qualifications in the same area of learning.

D. **“Standards Debate” and Grade Inflation**

*What factors contribute to the rising number of high grades at GCSE and A level?*

This is a complex question in that trends in grades awarded are not uniform across subjects nor across awarding bodies. For example, there are subjects where the proportion of high grades awarded by WJEC has remained very stable over a period of years.

It is known that many centres have, in some subject areas, provided more intensive support for candidates who are considered to be close to achieving the next highest grade. In addition, some candidates have found that their intended progression routes have required higher grades than might have been required of their predecessors and this may have stimulated greater effort in preparation for examinations.

*What could the exam boards do to increase public confidence in grading?*

Recent actions have included allowing teacher organisations to attend awarding meetings. Possible additional steps might include the publication of explanatory material.

*How would a single exam board or franchised model need to deal with comparability issues, such as between specifications, subjects, qualifications?*

A single exam board or franchised model would simplify matters relating to comparability within a subject, if provision was restricted to one specification per subject.

If more than one specification is permitted per subject, then the comparability issues remain very similar to those which characterise the current system. Key variables that would need to be taken into account are:

(i) Potential differences in the cohorts taking each specification.

(ii) Potential differences in the relative demands of the assessments.

Issues relating to comparability between subjects and between different qualifications would be very similar for a single exam board, a franchised model and the current system. Under the franchised model, comparability between subjects could potentially become more difficult to address, since an individual awarding body might have data for only a limited range of subjects. In this situation the regulator might need to be the agent that draws data together for work relating to comparability.

*And with standards over time?*

The issues relating to comparability of standards over time are expected to be the same whether there is a single exam board, a franchised model, or the current model.
E. COMMERCIAL ACTIVITIES OF EXAM BOARDS AND CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

What is your view on the conflicts of interest in the current system?

Conflicts of interest of a commercial kind may be perceived rather than actual.

WJEC does not generally engage in “for-profit” publishing activity, but even if we did the products sold would be subject to competitive market pressures.

In a situation in which delivery of a qualification required the purchasing of “for profit” published resources from the same awarding organisation, the total cost of delivery of that qualification would need to be competitively priced otherwise learning providers would choose alternatives to that qualification.

How much exam boards should be involved in improving results as well as in impartial assessment of attainment?

Our view is that improvements in results occur as a consequence of improvements in the engagement of learners within the educational setting.

As an exam board, we have no direct involvement in that setting; however, we would be one of several agencies that have the potential to contribute to improvements which teaching staff can bring to the educational setting. This can be through professional development events for teachers, through the feedback that we provide through examiners’ reports, and through teaching and learning resources which we provide to support our specifications.

Should examiners be allowed to author endorsed textbooks?

We have not encountered any specific difficulties in this area and therefore have no evidence which suggests that there is a need to move away from the current arrangements, which allow examiners to author textbooks but prevent publishers from identifying the examining role that is fulfilled by the author.

Should current endorsement arrangements between publishers and exam boards continue?

The merits of the endorsement arrangements might be judged on the basis of whether teaching staff find it useful to have an assurance of this kind in relation to published materials, or whether they consider that they can make their own judgements about the relevance and suitability of a published text in the context of the specification which they propose to teach.

Should Ofqual be regulating more actively in this area? In what ways?

This should be a relatively straightforward area to police: the most important requirement is a clear set of protocols, which could be based on clarification of the present arrangements or on a new set of arrangements which eliminates some of the current possibilities.

February 2012

Written evidence submitted by the Society of Authors

1. Executive Summary

I(a) A survey of members of the Educational Writers Group carried out in the summer of 2010 revealed grave concerns about the current structure of secondary education. Feedback suggested that there was little incentive or opportunity for students to appreciate a subject’s subtleties, to research complexity, to write discursively or even to learn to think for themselves.

I(b) The impression our members have is that the prescriptive nature of the current Curriculum and short-answer examination questions are primarily responsible. In addition, the side-effect of league tables has been that schools are compelled to be results-driven, so the teaching focus is often narrowed down to little more than coaching pupils to achieve good exam results.

I(c) Textbooks are also central to this issue. If budgets effectively limit schools to the purchase of one book, teachers understandably select the one that will most directly provide what their pupils need to pass the exam. In practice that will most likely be the one endorsed by the examining body, often written by the examiner and rarely offering more than the exam specifications.

I(d) A requirement that students show in some part of their examination that they have consulted a range of different sources (and a course-structure which allows this to happen), and introducing exam questions which require longer, essay-style answers, would greatly increase students’ breadth of learning and their literacy and communication skills. It would also make it easier for examiners to assess pupils’ abilities in these essential and fundamental areas.
1(e) It is also essential that, in addition to the core curriculum and studying of set texts, reading for pleasure and creative writing are included within education as cultural experiences, and that school libraries are made compulsory.

2. **Brief Introduction**

2(a) The Society of Authors’ membership includes over 700 educational writers of whom many are teachers and some of whom are also examiners and chief examiners in core subjects.

2(b) In autumn 2010 we raised with Michael Gove our concern about the reductive nature of the current examination structure, and we also contributed to the Independent Review of Cultural Education in spring 2011. We have repeated here those parts of the submissions which relate most directly to the Inquiry’s concerns. The full submissions are also attached.

3. **Factual Information**

3(a) The Society has been concerned for some years about the increasingly reductive nature of teaching. In the light of the government’s new austerity measures it was felt that schools might find it even harder to afford the time and money to seek out or invest in any materials other than those focusing directly on core exam questions. We asked members of the Educational Writers Group whether this was a fair understanding of the current situation, and whether they shared our concerns. We suggested that they might elaborate their answers with details from their own experience. The comments most relevant to the current Inquiry are given at 5: Appendix A.

4. **Recommendations for Action**

4(a) A requirement that students show in some part of their examination that they have consulted a wide range of different sources, and a course-structure which allows this to happen.

4(b) Introduce exam questions which require longer, essay-style answers, as this will greatly increase breadth of learning and literacy and communication skills.

4(c) Allow time before the new curriculum is launched for publishers and authors to create quality new teaching materials rather than rushing.

4(d) Contrary to recently stated policy, abolish league tables.

4(e) Contrary to recently stated policy, make school libraries compulsory. See 6: Appendix B.

5. **Appendix A**

5(a) The Society has been concerned for some years about the increasingly reductive nature of teaching. Recent austerity measures mean that schools might find it even harder to afford the time and money to seek out or invest in materials other than those focusing directly on core exam questions. We asked members of the Educational Writers Group whether this was a fair understanding of the current situation, and whether they shared our concerns. Below are those extracts from their responses which bear most directly on the Inquiry’s concerns:

5(b)(i) “We are all so driven as teachers to ensure students pass examinations that we have lost sight of the fact that we are supposed to be educating children. As a teacher, I am finding students to be ever more unwilling to think independently because all they want is the answer. As an examiner, I find that the same answers get regurgitated over and over again by pupils. As an author, I don’t get paid enough to do anything interesting and I don’t have the time to put to tasks because of demands for swift turnover because I teach and examine.

5(b)(ii) “I can’t afford to teach from books anyway, so in work, I use materials I produce. Other schools cobble photocopies together and hope for the best.”

5(c)(i) “I was asked if I wished to author a revision textbook for children doing GCSE that was linked to the exam board specification. I turned this commission down for several reasons, but my main reason is that I fundamentally object to the linking of textbooks with GCSE/As or A2 specifications, especially when the authors are the examiners. I see this as very destructive to science education (I suspect the same is true for all subjects).”

5(c)(ii) “I feel that authors should deliver materials that meet the needs of the specification but which do not restrict the way in which the scientific ideas and concepts are delivered to teachers and pupils.”

5(c)(iii) “I am also disturbed by the commercialisation of examinations and the links between publishers, examinations and textbooks. The specification is written, the textbook written by the examiners meets only the specification, and the teaching is restricted to the textbook. It is a circle that is difficult to break and destroys innovation, creativity and good teaching and learning.”
will continue to do so. The exams are the tail which wags the dog.”

through the tests”, which is what the schools want... until you get rid of this mentality or change the tests they
will continue to do so. The exams are the tail which wags the dog.”

process and replaced with teaching for testing.

part a result of the changes made to the curriculum and the fact that any “fun” was taken out of the learning
eventually happened and the requirement to take a second language was dropped. I believe this was in no small
harmful to the learning process and would put children off learning a second language, which of course
Curriculum was introduced to raise standards but there no longer seems to be any scope for individuality.”

subject with the big educational publishers to produce ‘exam board recommended’ texts. It is hardly
with covering every possible base in terms of the exam. These books are sometimes dull and uninspiring.

surprising that examiners have authored these books. Sometimes quite slim books are co-authored by a
taught by examiners. They obviously have a good grasp of their subject but do not necessarily have a flair for lively,
focused. Textbooks tend to resort to the bullet-point too easily. They are usually set out in a style that makes
examiners stamp, I doubt if most would be interested.”

little money left for KS3 where a less results driven teaching is possible. I have had a KS3 series cancelled
before publication by (publisher's name removed) as they felt the investment would not pay off.”

results of standardized tests, has become an Anglo-Saxon phenomenon. The 1988 National Curriculum is the
prime cause, and 10 years of New Labour have only reinforced its emphasis on targets and the threat to schools
of living or dying by the numbers. We need to stop the endless tinkering. We need to allow schools to develop
their own strategies for things, which are then assessed by Ofsted during an inspection. Strategies evolve
and change, and any process of evolution needs to be slow and considered and be adapted to a school’s
individual needs.”

publishers) are constantly looking for bestsellers.”

Will other publishers try to challenge ‘official books’ at GCSE or A level? Teachers won’t buy books/materials
that aren’t closely linked to government guidelines, and in straitened times educational publishers (like trade
publishers) are constantly looking for bestsellers.”

In secondary schools, money is concentrated on KS4 and 5 (the results for league tables) and there is
little money left for KS3 where a less results driven teaching is possible. I have had a KS3 series cancelled
before publication by (publisher’s name removed) as they felt the investment would not pay off.”

We need a genuine emphasis on creativity, not hidebound by targets. If that were part of the curriculum,
I think educational publishers would produce worthwhile books (or digital materials) to support it. Without the
government stamp, I doubt if most would be interested.”

In the courses I have worked on it is certainly true that books have become increasingly exam
focused. Textbooks tend to resort to the bullet-point too easily. They are usually set out in a style that makes
heavy use of little shaded boxes, icons and vacuous photographs. The authors are almost invariably senior
examiners. They obviously have a good grasp of their subject but do not necessarily have a flair for lively,
conceivably provocative thought in the reader. Too often the books are an uncomfortable balance between
slightly pedantic explanation of a kind that assumes students are fairly dim and an almost neurotic concern
with covering every possible base in terms of the exam. These books are sometimes dull and uninspiring.

Exam boards have become increasingly concerned to maximise revenue. They have allied
themselves with the big educational publishers to produce ‘exam board recommended’ texts. It is hardly
surprising that examiners have authored these books. Sometimes quite slim books are co-authored by a
considerable number of them. This might account for some of the lifelessness of the product.”

“At first I used to say that my job was to make learning fun. Latterly I felt my job was to make the
curriculum the least harmful that I could, but I am not always able to achieve this.

On occasion it has seemed that the changes I was being asked to make to my materials would actually be
harmful to the learning process and would put children off learning a second language, which of course
eventually happened and the requirement to take a second language was dropped. I believe this was in no small
part a result of the changes made to the curriculum and the fact that any “fun” was taken out of the learning
process and replaced with teaching for testing.

Publishers have stifled initiative in their pursuit of materials more or less guaranteed to “get pupils
through the tests”, which is what the schools want... until you get rid of this mentality or change the tests they
will continue to do so. The exams are the tail which wags the dog.”

Specifications should not be straightjackets but guides of the areas that examinations will visit. Within our teaching surely we should be able to teach around that concept. We should feel confident that if we teach for understanding this will be recognised by the exam system.”

The logical consequence of this is that the examinations cannot then be so restrictive that the
questions require extremely specific one-word or one-sentence answers with a low degree of freedom allowed
for sensible marking.”

“The questions should allow pupils to show their understanding: longer answers.”

“As an author who has benefitted greatly by also being a GCSE Chief Examiner, I would totally agree
with you. The League Tables have meant that schools are totally results driven and therefore their teaching has
become results driven.”

The skills of the examiner aren’t necessarily those of an author. These books aren’t written to be
read for enjoyment— they’re often written quickly and in a mechanical manner. The focus on exam questions
and how to answer them takes space which could be used for increasing depth of knowledge and for writing
in a more discursive and enjoyable way. The authors tend to be expert examiners, not necessarily experts
in the topic. Coverage is restricted to the narrowness of the specification—no broader context, interesting
byways etc.”

The existence of such ‘official’ books also has a negative impact on the availability of other books.
Will other publishers try to challenge ‘official books’ at GCSE or A level? Teachers won’t buy books/materials
that aren’t closely linked to government guidelines, and in straitened times educational publishers (like trade
publishers) are constantly looking for bestsellers.”

I just see pressure after pressure to turn children out in conformity to a pattern. The National
Curriculum was introduced to raise standards but there no longer seems to be any scope for individuality.”

Politicians’ obsession with accountability, in the misleading form of ‘league tables’ based on the
results of standardized tests, has become an Anglo-Saxon phenomenon. The 1988 National Curriculum is the
prime cause, and 10 years of New Labour have only reinforced its emphasis on targets and the threat to schools
of living or dying by the numbers. We need to stop the endless tinkering. We need to allow schools to develop
their own strategies for things, which are then assessed by Ofsted during an inspection. Strategies evolve
and change, and any process of evolution needs to be slow and considered and be adapted to a school’s
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Publishers have stifled initiative in their pursuit of materials more or less guaranteed to “get pupils
through the tests”, which is what the schools want... until you get rid of this mentality or change the tests they
will continue to do so. The exams are the tail which wags the dog.”
5(j) “Materials for Modern Languages are currently written by teams of disparate people that now always seem to include a number of examiners with inadequate foreign language skills. There is no cohesion. As the quality of materials produced by exam boards (eg syllabus and actual exam papers) is pitiful (ie full of grammatical, lexical and cultural mistakes) how do you expect publishers, who have a special relationship with one exam board or another, to produce good quality materials?”

5(k) “Reputable publishers are still keen to provide quality and value in the material they publish for teachers. But they are hampered by the lack of money available to schools. Fewer books are being bought and publishers are being forced to concentrate more and more on market success. The abundance of free—but inferior—online material is not raising the children’s standards. An injection of money to be spent on published teaching material is needed urgently.”

5(l) “Last year I had discussions with a publisher regarding a proposal for materials to support cross-curricular topic work. Many young teachers, in particular, have limited experience of cross-curricular planning as a result of government initiatives such as the literacy hour. The publishers liked the ideas and outline proposal but ultimately the project failed because it focused too much on practical experience by children (something which in the past would have been seen as a strength), and on supporting a teacher’s own planning and assessment across subjects (including self-assessment by children). It could not be turned into, as they put it, “an extensive resource using multimedia” which would justify the £100 price tag attached to most of their products.”

5(m)(i) “As an experienced A level teacher over a 20 year period, I have no doubt that A levels have become steadily easier. This trend has accelerated since 2000 and the introduction of the AS/A2 system. I suspect that this is at bottom the result of pressure from government to achieve measured improvements in school performance and increase the staying on rate.”

5(m)(ii) “It seems that the subject knowledge of younger teachers can sometimes be a little shaky. If teachers are insecure in their subject knowledge they are likely to gravitate towards books which make their subject easily digestible and provide the security blanket of “preparing students for the exams”.”

5(n) “There was a when time teachers liked to have books that expanded knowledge and perspectives on subjects, but nowadays the extra material is seen as a distraction from what has to be taught. The Education Minister needs to encourage teaching and teachers to support the production and need for children’s books that stretch minds, interests, and needs and do not just focus tightly on the curriculum. Books are important to help reading, understanding, comprehension and, most importantly, how to organize, structure, and present information.”

5(o)(i) “We can confirm that publishers no longer seem keen to publish innovative “good ideas”. They are just no longer willing to take risks—supplementary resources in Modern Foreign Languages are not commercially viable (only main courses and textbooks have made money—until now, but even those no longer seem to guarantee earnings). More and more, schools are turning to free online resources for MFL—some are good, some terrible—especially those for Primary schools.”

5(o)(ii) “The poor quality content of some materials is worrying. It is clear that some of the material is not being thoroughly checked before being made available (I was shocked by the contents of MFL on something as prominent as the London Grid For Learning a couple of years back). This is not just affecting MFL. Speaking to editors in other sectors (engineering, science, etc), the problem of quality control seems to be similar there too.”

5(p)(i) “Ironically teachers have been complicit in the reduction of real education for the very best of motives—they want their pupils’ achievements recognized. Many believe that this recognition can only come from the testing/examination system.”

5(p)(ii) “The mega-committee that devised the first English curriculum tried to write down everything that good English teachers claimed to do with their classes. The result was a massive document which was almost impossible to teach. What they should have done was exactly the opposite: set down basic minimum criteria and then let good teachers get on with doing what they do best: teach.”

5(p)(iii) “Politicians’ and administrators’ commitment to make everything measurable: it is extremely difficult, usually impossible, to measure the most important educational benefits numerically by testing an individual child.”

5(p)(iv) “Public unwillingness to trust teachers: Politicians, administrators, and journalists have formed an unholy alliance to promote the idea that teachers cannot be trusted. This campaign has found willing ears amongst the general public, since adults tend to have more negative memories of school and teachers than positive ones.”

5(p)(v) “Increasing centralization and a top-down approach to educational innovation: Politicians like to interfere with curriculum content, even when they don’t really understand it.”

5(p)(vi) “Michael Gove appears to have accepted that “A” level students are being assessed too much over too many subject areas, leading to superficiality. The same thinking could be applied to the rest of what goes
on in school. Official curriculum requirements should be framed to allow enough “gaps” in which real education can take place. In short,—test less, trust more."

6. Appendix B

6(a) We understand that the Inquiry is also considering “broader issues regarding the examination system”.

6(b) We are concerned that an exam-focused curriculum may not ensure that sufficient time or priority is given to nurturing basic skills. Inadequate reading and writing skills are emphatically not limited to young children; the problem is widespread even in universities (see Writing Matters, published by the Royal Literary Fund, www.rlf.org.uk/fellowshipscheme/research.cfm).

6(c)(i) Reading and being read to for pleasure can engender, better than almost anything else, an enquiring mind and a real capacity for deduction, empathy, and extended concentration. Readers encounter information and perspectives beyond merely those being sought, an awareness of values beyond those of celebrity. Extended reading encourages a critical faculty, independent thinking, the ability to be more discriminating, to assess things in their own right and realise the value of the source.

6(c)(ii) Communication skills are important for self-confidence. The best way to nurture such skills is through the reading and writing of narrative non-fiction.

6(c)(iii) We believe it is essential that, in addition to the core curriculum and studying of set texts, reading and creative writing are included within education. Failure to engage in culture, and poor literacy and imagination skills, lead to a failure in empathy (a large proportion of the prison population is illiterate yet intelligent). A child can learn more about, absorb and empathise more closely with a country, race or religion, say, through half an hour’s drama or fiction, than through a day of news reports or baldly didactic lessons. Books stimulate the imagination and independent thought in ways that the more passive act of watching TV or films simply cannot. Some provide pleasure, others—equally importantly—provoke, or unsettle the reader.

6(c)(iv) The value of reading for pleasure was highlighted in a study on “Family, scholarly culture and educational success: Books and schooling in 27 nations” published in the journal Research in Social Stratification and Mobility (www.sciencedirect.com). It makes the point that regular reading for pleasure is the single most useful and effective improver of educational achievement, and that having access to books can raise a child on average 3.2 years in education. Many homes are without books; many parents do not take their children to public libraries (and indeed the future of public libraries is under serious threat).

6(d) For these reasons, in our submission to the Independent Review of Cultural Education we strongly urged the government to reconsider and make libraries statutory in schools (as they are in prisons), and—for schools with above a certain number of students—to make school librarians statutory also.

November 2011

Written evidence submitted by Oxford University Press

Executive Summary

OUP has serious concerns about the commercial activities of awarding bodies and their links with publishers. The boundaries between awarding bodies and publishers are increasingly blurred, giving rise to very real conflicts of interest. These clearly affect the perceived worth of the exams and, in OUP’s view, are also likely to undermine their actual worth, by encouraging narrow focussed teaching with no scope for differentiation of approach, undermining the scope of a pupil’s educational experience and genuine attainment. Public confidence in the administration of exams is also affected by concerns about these issues, and must be restored.

The commercial activities of awarding bodies reduce the choice of resources available to meet the diverse needs of pupils, teachers and schools. A “one size fits all” approach to education will inevitably lead to a fall in standards. Effective competition in the provision of resources for exams should be promoted to ensure quality, innovation, plurality, choice and value.

There are clear conflicts of interest that arise from the relationship between an awarding body and a publisher. As a result, freedom of choice for teachers and schools is reduced, and confidence in the system undermined. OUP agrees with the article annexed, which states that: “[awarding bodies] have moved some distance from the line of being impartial assessors to becoming businesses, dedicated to giving clients what they want.” OUP believes that the priority for the administration of exams should be excellence in education and the achievement of each and every pupil. This can only be achieved by a return to impartiality, and an appropriate separation between the supply of educational materials and the administration of exams which accurately reflect true educational attainment.

1. Introduction

1.1 Oxford University Press (“OUP”) is a department of the University of Oxford. OUP’s mission is to further the University’s objectives of excellence in research, scholarship and education by publishing materials
1.2 OUP provides resources across a range of subjects and levels for pupils and teachers preparing for exams for 15 to 19 years olds in England. In view of its mission and the University’s objective, OUP is committed to providing resources that assist and encourage the development of skills, knowledge and understanding so as to further excellence in education.

1.3 OUP welcomes this inquiry’s focus on the commercial activities of awarding bodies and their impact on schools and pupils. These comments reflect OUP’s concerns that the boundaries between awarding bodies and publishers are increasingly blurred, in particular where there is common ownership and resources are branded with the awarding body brand. The actual and perceived conflicts of interests affect public confidence in the administration of exams. We are concerned that certain commercial activities will inevitably also reduce the choice of resources available to meet the diverse needs of pupils, teachers and schools, leading to an overall fall in educational standards. The very real nature of OUP’s concerns is borne out by the findings of the investigative journalist Andrew Gilligan in the article attached at ANNEX A [not printed].

1.4 A failure to address these concerns means that pupils will complete their secondary education without having reached their potential.

2. THE NEED FOR A RANGE OF AWARDING BODIES

2.1 OUP strongly believes that there should be a range of awarding bodies as explained below.

2.2 Only a choice of awarding bodies for a given exam can guarantee that the diverse needs of pupils, teachers and schools are met. A range of qualifications following varied curricula allows schools to choose the approach that best suits them and their pupils. For example, the requirements of a teacher in an inner city London school for GCSE Science may be very different to those of a country school in Yorkshire. Another example is GCSE Geography: a thematic exam like GCSE Geography for AQA A works well in traditional independent schools, whereas an issues-based specification like GCSE Geography for Edexcel B is arguably better able to meet the needs of some lower achieving schools. Facilities, life experience, access to external resources, the level and quality of parental support and general socio-economic factors will influence the resources and educational approach that are most likely to provide an effective education.

2.3 Competition and choice are also key to delivering value for money and driving down costs, as acknowledged by the Government.112 Competition among awarding bodies is therefore necessary to ensure that the qualifications market provides value for money.113

2.4 The most effective way of encouraging innovation by awarding bodies (and others active in the sector) is to encourage and ensure effective competition and choice. Competition and innovation lead to strong and effective markets which are essential to improving educational standards.

2.5 Having a single national body or awarding bodies franchised to offer qualifications in particular subjects cannot guarantee that the diverse needs of pupils, teachers and schools are met, that value for money is delivered, or that innovation in qualifications is encouraged. Only a range of awarding bodies with competition between them that will spur innovation and differentiation can guarantee these outcomes.

3. THE COMMERCIAL ACTIVITIES OF AWARDING BODIES

3.1 The last decade has seen increasingly close links between awarding bodies responsible for the administration of exams, and publishers who supply the resources for use by pupils and schools. These links have taken the form of vertical integration (i.e. common ownership with a publisher), exclusive arrangements with a publisher, or the explicit or implicit endorsement of a publisher by an awarding body.

3.2 The commercial activities of the three major awarding bodies and their links with publishers are explained below.

(a) Edexcel. Edexcel is owned by Pearson. In 2007, Pearson acquired Harcourt’s publishing businesses, changing the branding of many resources for Edexcel from Harcourt’s established Heinemann brand to an Edexcel own brand114. To be clear, this means Edexcel promotes its own resources with the tag “Edexcel’s own” giving the impression that they are the best resources for that exam. An extension to this is when Pearson sends out the Edexcel specifications. These are often sent with the corresponding Edexcel textbook which carries the same cover and branding as the specification material. The package is often accompanied by publicity that combines the two and the packaging also often

112 See, for example, the recent publication dated March 2011 from the Department for Business, Skills and Innovation, A Competition Regime for Growth: A Consultation on Options for Reform. The foreword by Vince Cable notes that: “Competition is one of the great drivers of growth, keeping prices low for consumers and encouraging innovation, enterprise and investment”. Section 1 of the consultation also notes the importance of economic growth and competition. See http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/hiscoe/consumer-issues/docs/c/11–657-competition-regime-for-growth-consultation.pdf.

113 The brochure Introducing Ofqual 2010/11 acknowledges that one of Ofqual’s objectives is “taking steps to make sure that the qualifications market provides value for money and meets the needs of learners and employers”.

114 Since this acquisition, Pearson publishes under the following brands: Longman; Causeway; Kickbox; BBC Active; Edexcel’s own (formerly Heinemann); Ginn; Rigby; Payne-Galway and Raintree.
carries the same branding. So a teacher thinks the texts are official. A number of significant recent changes in Pearson/Edexcel’s management have also taken place. The following roles are now combined within the same team: (i) development of an exam and (ii) development of educational materials to accompany an exam.

As a result, a single Pearson/Edexcel employee will be responsible in parallel for: (i) developing a particular Edexcel exam; and (ii) creating the accompanying Edexcel’s own materials. In addition, given that the Edexcel awarding body and publishing operation have been merged together, all sales and marketing functions fall under the responsibility of one senior management team. Thus a sales consultant in a school represents both the awarding body and the publisher. This integration makes it very difficult for other publishers to compete. Edexcel’s own materials are inevitably published before those of competing publishers. Despite having various non-exclusive endorsements in place with other publishers, Pearson/Edexcel clearly promotes its own “official” resources in preference to those of other publishers. OUP hears in schools on a regular basis that a teacher has chosen to adopt the Edexcel textbooks as they are the official texts. In practice, teachers and schools are pressured into purchasing “official” Edexcel’s own materials (see paragraph 3.4 below).

(b) OCR. Cambridge University Press and OCR are in common or partial ownership. For each specification, OCR uses a valid tender process to select a publisher to partner with. OCR also widely endorses texts for all qualifications. These practices give an advantage to the publisher partner for any given exam, but OCR recognises the value of and works hard to ensure freedom of choice for school teachers and pupils.

(c) AQA. AQA has had exclusive endorsement arrangements with the publisher Nelson Thornes for a number of years. Although these exclusive arrangements are coming to an end, they have made it difficult for other publishers to compete. OUP welcomes the fact that AQA is considering working with a range of publishers again and is of the view that such openness should be required.

OUP’s concerns: conflicts of interest and public confidence

3.3 OUP believes that it is vital for the public to have confidence that the administration of exams is untainted by any suspicion of conflict of interest. However, the commercial activities of awarding bodies are increasingly blurring the distinctions between awarding bodies and publishers, in particular when the exam and publish resources are jointly branded, as for Edexcel’s own materials.

3.4 When an awarding body promotes an “official” text, the public understands that pupils and teachers will be advantaged if they use it to prepare for exams. Parents, teachers and employers already fear that, although objectively exams may be as difficult as in the past, the standard of education and skill required to achieve a satisfactory result is lower. More focussed exam preparation with close links between those who set and assess the exams and those who prepare, write and publish the supporting materials therefore encourages “teaching to the test”. This in turn results in a narrowing of educational reach and an inevitable lowering of broad educational standards. The perception is understandably that pupils are “spoon-fed”, in effect being given the answers.

3.5 Annex A highlights the commercial activities of Edexcel examiners who run courses teaching people “examination techniques”, “how best to present [their] solutions and answers” and “helpful hints”. Public confidence in the administration of exams is irreparably damaged by these conflicts of interest.

OUP’s concerns: freedom of choice and plurality of resources

3.6 OUP believes it is vital that the diverse needs of pupils, teachers and schools are matched by a plurality of approaches to educational resources. A range of resources to suit different backgrounds and needs is key to educational achievement: not all pupils respond equally well to the same materials; not all teachers are comfortable with the same resources.

3.7 Schools and teachers’ freedom of choice is compromised when an awarding body appears to be dictating which resources to buy to achieve the “best” results. Although in principle an awarding body may endorse a range of materials, in practice its commercial interests will mean that its preferred publisher’s resources are pushed as the “official” materials.

3.8 Furthermore, once non-preferred publishers have been excluded by awarding bodies, it is difficult for these publishers to gain a foothold with schools given that schools only make publishing decisions on 3–5 year cycles.

3.9 If diversity of approach and plurality of materials are reduced through a lack of competition and choice, this could have serious consequences for effective education and achievement by pupils.

OUP’s concerns: Edexcel example

3.10 OUP’s concerns are illustrated by its experiences with Edexcel in 2009. While this is a single example, it represents the potential risks when the links between publishers and awarding bodies are unregulated.
Conclusions

3.11 It concerns an individual who is both a Pearson author and an Edexcel chair of examiners for a particular subject. The individual in question: (i) is paid by Edexcel to develop exams; (ii) is paid by Pearson to create the accompanying Edexcel own materials and very probably receives a royalty from Pearson for the sales of his Edexcel’s own materials. The individual is also involved with training related to Edexcel examinations.

3.12 As part of its sales strategy, Edexcel runs free promotional events. In principle, these promote its exams, but they were also used to promote endorsed materials. Before June 2009, the guidelines made available to publishers by Edexcel made it clear that one sales representative per endorsed publisher could set up a display at its promotional events.

3.13 In June 2009, this all changed. Edexcel blocked OUP, an endorsed publisher, from attending a series of events where Edexcel presented the Edexcel own textbook by the above individual. There was no mention of other endorsed textbooks, giving attending teachers the sense that this textbook was the only official text. It was also explained to teachers that this individual’s textbook would be sent out with the specification.

3.14 Due to these developments, OUP decided that there was little commercial sense in its sales representatives attending future Edexcel promotional events as delegates.

3.15 The OUP experience shows not only how conflicts of interest can arise from the relationship between (i) an awarding body, and (ii) a publisher, but also how they can arise in relation to (iii) the authors of those materials. It is hardly surprising that public confidence is compromised: “[Awarding bodies] have moved some distance along the line from being impartial assessors to becoming businesses, dedicated to giving clients what they want.” Edexcel’s 2010 marketing pitch for GCSE Maths to schools states: “We’ll give you answers and solutions when you need them…” (see Annex A).

The failure of existing regulation

3.16 Voluntary regulation of the commercial activities of awarding bodies and their links with publishers was attempted under a code issued by the Joint Council for Qualifications (“JCQ”) in May 2005, revised in January 2008 (see Annex B). The key provisions acknowledge the importance of impartiality and the avoidance of actual or apparent conflicts of interest which might undermine public confidence. There is also a provision to ensure plurality of resources (Sections 3.2 and 4.1 of Annex B).

3.17 This self-regulatory approach has failed: the key recommendations of the code are simply not being observed. Given the very close links that exist between awarding bodies and publishers (see above), OUP believes that the conflicts of interest within the industry cripples the prospect of effective self-regulation.

3.18 As well as its responsibility for maintaining standards in qualifications and assessments, Ofqual is also responsible for promoting public confidence in these exams. As demonstrated by the fact that the Education Committee is conducting this inquiry, it is clear that self-regulation and Ofqual have failed to address the concerns surrounding the commercial activities of awarding bodies and their links with publishers.

Recommendations for action

3.19 A strong commitment by the Education Committee to maintaining effective competition, an appropriate separation of the activities of awarding bodies and publishers and plurality of resources available would significantly strengthen public confidence in the administration of exams in England.

3.20 OUP seeks the enforcement and regulation of a level playing field within educational publishing to ensure that vertical integration or commercial links do not reduce standards and result in “teaching to the test”. Those who shape, set, and mark exams should be required to be distanced from those who create and sell the resources that teachers use in the classroom to prepare pupils for their exams. In particular, an effective mechanism needs to be put in place to ensure this happens when awarding bodies and publishers are jointly owned.

4. Conclusions

4.1 The Education Committee must consider the administration of exams for 15 to 19 year olds in England having regard to the effect on those exams of the actual and perceived conflicts of interest that exist in the sector. These clearly affect the perceived worth of the exams and, in OUP’s view, are also likely to undermine their actual worth, by encouraging narrow focussed teaching with no scope for differentiation of approach, undermining the scope of a child’s educational experience and genuine attainment. Public confidence in the administration of exams is also affected by concerns about these issues, and must be restored.

4.2 The commercial activities of awarding bodies also reduce the choice of resources available to meet the diverse needs of pupils, teachers and schools. A “one size fits all” approach to education inevitably leads to a fall in standards. Rather, effective competition for the provision of resources for exams should be promoted to achieve quality, innovation, plurality, choice and value.

4.3 OUP is committed to continuing to support, as long as commercially feasible, all of those with a role in the educational system in this country (teachers, pupils, schools, and awarding bodies) so as to achieve its mission of furthering the achievement of excellence in education.
Annex A + Annex B have been left out of this publication as they have been printed elsewhere. Please find the website links below.


Written evidence submitted by the Centre for Education Research and Policy (CERP)

CERP has a proven record of high quality research in education assessment, undertaken by it and its predecessors for over 40 years. Legally, CERP is part of AQA, but retains its own identity and research freedoms.

We use an appropriate range of quantitative and qualitative methods to maintain the highest standards of academic rigour whilst being grounded in the practical realities of assessment; this makes our recommendations evidence-based, relevant and manageable. Our work is meticulously reviewed by a prestigious committee of national and international experts, chaired by Professor Jannette Elwood of Queen’s University, Belfast. Our work is disseminated at national and international conferences, published in academic books and journals, in reports for policy-makers, and through newsletters and magazine articles for practitioners.

1. Introduction

1.1 This response, which relates solely to general qualifications (particularly GCSE and GCE), focuses on the Select Committee’s query “how to ensure accuracy in marking scripts and awarding grades”. It particularly addresses the question of whether standards are being maintained over time and between awarding bodies (ABs), and, if not, whether a different AB structure would help.

1.2 We begin with a brief but necessary preamble, to clarify key terms. We then acknowledge some of the issues identified by the Select Committee, but argue that the cause attributed is incorrect and so the solution, of restructuring awarding bodies, would not be effective; rather, many of the benefits of the system would be lost and major risks introduced.

Preamble

1.3 Marking and grading. Students’ examination scripts are marked against defined mark schemes and, whilst question papers and mark schemes are broadly consistent in demand, this inevitably fluctuates slightly between examination series. Grade boundaries are, therefore, set to compensate for such minor variations and ensure that standards are maintained. Taking advice from their Senior Examiners, subject Chairs recommend sets of grade boundaries to the AB’s Responsible Officer, whose decision is final.

1.4 Statistics and judgement. Two sources of evidence determine the correct grade boundaries. Statistical data have become increasingly sophisticated over the years and now play a major role in awarding, affording greater confidence that standards are being maintained. In addition, Senior Examiners use their expert judgement to scrutinise scripts, comparing them with those of the previous year.

1.5 Grading and content standards. The term “standards” has several meanings in education (Baird, 2007), and is used in two ways in the field of assessment. Grading standards refer to whether a student has an equal chance of being awarded a given grade in one examination, as in another. This is essentially what ABs aim to achieve in their awarding meetings (above). In the wider context, content standards refer to the criteria of what is being assessed and are far harder to compare. It is natural that content standards will change, especially over long periods of time: the content standards of computing qualifications, for example, are higher now than 10 years ago. Over shorter periods of time and between ABs whose specifications are tightly regulated, variation in content standards is minimal, and thus large changes in outcomes would not be expected.

2. The Issue

2.1 The focus of the Select Committee suggests that there is a perceived problem with the current marking and grading processes, which might be solved by restructuring awarding bodies.

115 “The AB will appoint a single named person to be accountable directly to its governing body for ensuring the quality and standards of its qualifications.” Para 1.5. Statutory Code of Practice.

116 The following page of AQA’s website provides a clear, yet comprehensive description of how grade awarding is undertaken: http://web.aqa.org.uk/over/stat_standards.php?id=03&prev=01
2.2 Each summer sees allegations that rises in GCSE and GCE grade outcomes are inflationary, and therefore unjustified. Each summer, there is an increase in the number of enquiries about results117 (requests for re-marks), implying a reduction in marking reliability. Undoubtedly, these trends reduce confidence in the examination system. This inquiry provides a unique opportunity to review empirical research evidence regarding the quality of marking and grading in the English examination system.

3. THE CAUSE?

Marking reliability

3.1 In order to maximise marking reliability, examiners are well trained at standardisation meetings and scripts are marked to as tight a mark scheme as is appropriate to the subject, without compromising the validity of its assessment.118 The marking reliability of GCSEs and GCEs is comparable with that observed for similar international assessments (Meadows & Billington, 2005), even for assessments requiring relatively subjective judgements, for example GCSE English (Fowles, 2009).

3.2 It is likely that the trend of increased enquires about results reflects not a reduction in marking reliability, but an increase in the high-stakes nature of general qualifications. Indeed, evidence suggests that re-mark requests are highly targeted, involving students who have just fallen short of a higher grade, and do not decrease even when there is research evidence of improved marking reliability (Meadows and Taylor, 2008). Overall, the proportion of re-marks leading to a grade change has not varied greatly over the past five years.119

3.3 It is difficult to see how levels of marking accuracy could be improved by changing the current AB structure. Indeed, evidence suggests that the competition that exists within the industry serves to stimulate better assessment practices. Online marking, which has recently been introduced on a large scale, requires examiners to mark by question rather than whole script. This has served to reduce bias, focus expert examiners on the more complex questions and thus substantially improved marking reliability (Fowles, 2005; Pinot de Moira, 2009; Taylor, 2007). Online standardisation has also significantly improved marking reliability by ensuring consistency in examiner training (Chamberlain & Taylor, 2010). These innovations are products of healthy competition between ABs in the reliability and validity of assessment offered to teachers and students.

Standards Maintenance

3.4 The conclusion often drawn from rising grade outcomes is that they are unjustified and result from ABs competing for entries, a further implication thus being that standards between ABs are out of alignment.120 The key questions are whether unjustified grade inflation exists in the system and, if it does, is it demonstrably because there are multiple ABs? Would the establishment of a different organisational structure in itself eliminate grade inflation, whilst resolving the issues associated with genuine grade increases? The evidence of the following sections suggests that the answer to these questions is "no", and that—given the rigour of the current grading system—confidence in standards in general, and in inter-year and inter-AB comparability in particular, should be high.

3.5 ABs focus primarily on maintaining standards between years and between themselves. (Inter-subject comparability, whilst important, is harder to ascertain unequivocally, both judgementally and statistically—see Coe, 2007.) Although the awarding process is subject to external regulation, most obviously via the statutory Code of Practice (2011), ABs themselves are rigorous both in monitoring standards and introducing improved approaches to ensure their integrity.121 For example, CERP made a substantial contribution to the seminal Qualifications and Curriculum Authority book, which comprehensively covered the history and practical and theoretical issues surrounding setting and maintaining standards in curriculum-embedded general qualifications such as GCSE and GCE (Newton et al., 2007).

3.6 Much of CERP’s work concerning maintenance of standards, particularly that of Good and Cresswell (1988), Jones (2009) and Stringer (in press) demonstrates that, without adequate statistical guidance, even experienced examiners find it hard to set grade boundaries that accurately take into account variations in question paper demand. Consequently, statistical guidance has come to play an increasingly important role in maintaining standards, especially since longitudinal student-level data became available (mapping student attainment at Key Stage 2, GCSE and A-level):

3.6.1 The outcomes of the previous year, adjusted for any changes in the ability profile of the student entry, provide a prime source of evidence for maintaining inter-year standards. Such measures, which are inflation-proofed, have been adopted by all ABs, have proven to be accurate, and have been instrumental in minimising grade inflation (Stacey, 2011). Ofqual recently commissioned NFER

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118 See Ahmed and Pollitt (2011) for a useful exploration of the relationship between assessment validity and mark scheme construction.
120 The most strident such allegation was made by Mick Waters (former director of curriculum at the QCA), who claimed that “the system is diseased, almost corrupt... We’ve got a set of awarding bodies who are in a market place”. In his support, John Bangs (2010), former head of education at the NUT, opined that, “I personally think there should just be a single examination board.” Bangs, J., MacBeath, J. and Galton, M. (2010) Reinventing Schools, Reforming Teaching. London: Routledge.
121 All the ABs, for example, have expert technical staff who are members of the Joint Council for Qualifications’ (JCQ) Standards and Technical Advisory Group, and Ofqual’s Standards and Technical Issues Group.
to undertake an independent evaluation of this approach; its positive report is available on the Ofqual website.122 (Benton & Lin, 2011)

3.6.2 Inter-AB standards are also maintained via this approach, since the national outcome for one year forms the basis of the next year’s subject outcomes. This use of a common, national basis promotes comparability, as far as ABs meet their expectations. Almost invariably they do: for example, in summer 2011, nearly all A-level outcomes at grade A were within +/-1% of their expectation. A post hoc comparability check is also undertaken, again taking into account the ability profile of the subject entries. The 2011 results are awaited, but in 2010 the outcomes of very few subjects were more than 1% from their prediction, and most of these were small-entry subjects for which statistical analyses are less reliable.

3.7 Grade boundaries are not, however, determined solely by statistics. Responsible Officers will approve awards which are not in line with statistical expectations if persuaded that the judgemental evidence of their Senior Examiners indicates that the correct standard lies elsewhere. In these instances, the judgemental evidence (detailed descriptions of student performance compared with that of the previous year) is carefully documented.

3.8 In addition to these rigorous monitoring procedures and checks, ABs undertake bespoke research, cross-moderation and comparability exercises on any subject which gives a cause for concern123 and, drawing on its annually-collected national archive material, Ofqual undertakes five-yearly reviews of standards. All of these measures are robust, effective and efficient.

3.9 Finally, ABs maintain a strict firewall around data which are collected for standards/assessment purposes: in particular, they are not shared with their marketing departments, nor used for commercial purposes. This restriction is reflected in the JCQ’s strict protocol governing the use of these data.124

3.10 Given these robust procedures, why have there been increases in grade outcomes? In recent years this can be attributed to a range of factors, not least increased investment in education in real terms (which has not, incidentally, resulted in pro rata grade increases), the increased pressure on schools to improve their performances for DEE league tables, and the consequential improvement in teaching and learning. If the government’s target of all schools having 50% of students achieving 5+ A*-C grades at GCSE by 2015 (up from 35%) is to be met, then significant genuine increases in grade outcomes will have to be realised.

3.11 There are also some arguably less positive reasons for the increases, including increased teacher focus on students on the borderline of grades (Richmond & Freedman, 2009), teaching to the test (Boyle & Charles, 2011) and use of past examination papers and mark schemes to “coach” students (Daly et al, in press). The culmination is that while performance on the highly defined set of knowledge and skills embodied by GCSE and GCE improves, performance on measures of wider learning such as those included in international surveys, may decline (eg Bradshaw et al, 2010).

4. The Solution

4.1 In GCSE and GCE a small degree of marking inaccuracy is an inevitable price for the delivery of a valid assessment (Meadows & Billington, 2005). There is a trade-off between reliability and validity, and these qualifications are respected for focusing on the latter, whilst aiming to maximise the former. Absolute marking reliability would only be feasible by, for example, using multiple choice tests, but this would significantly reduce assessment validity—our obligation is properly to assess the required knowledge and skills.125

4.2 Thus, insofar as marking accuracy is an issue, the solution lies not in changing organisational structures, but in measures such as further improving examiner standardisation, quality assurance and monitoring, activities in which all ABs are fully engaged. The on-going issues related to the marking of the KS2 National Curriculum Tests are a reminder that centralisation does not eliminate challenges to marking quality.

4.3 Similarly, increasing grade outcomes are not due to the existence of several ABs, nor to competition between them. Cresswell (1995) demonstrated from a theoretical stance that it was not in the individual or collective interests of ABs to compete on standards, a finding supported by Malacova and Bell (2006) and by the outcomes of the new routine annual analyses.

4.4 Inter-year and inter-AB standards can now be precisely set, evaluated and monitored. Increasing outcomes are a feature of the curriculum-embedded assessments, not the structure of the system. Even systems with a single AB are prone to rising grade rates and will thus face the issue of eroding discrimination in, and fitness for purpose of, their qualifications. The National Curriculum Tests are a case in point; rising outcomes are an inherent feature of maintenance of standards where a clearly defined set of knowledge and skills is being assessed.

4.5 The benefits of the current system are manifold, firstly and perhaps most importantly in the area of research and development. Innovative syllabuses and assessment schemes can flourish. “Bottom-up”

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122 http://www.ofqual.gov.uk/news-and-announcements/130/745

123 Since 1973, CERP (and its predecessors) has undertaken 110 comparability studies of various types, the most recent one being a study of GCSE Law in 2011. All inter-AB comparability studies, invariably including a cross-moderation exercise of students’ work, have been published.

124 Joint Council for Qualifications protocol for the sharing of confidential data between awarding bodies.

125 How would the range of skills encompassed by GCSE English, for example, be validly assessed without extended writing?
developments are demand-led and implemented by groups who intimately know the curriculum requirements of, and are enthusiastic about, their subject areas. These were more common in the past but still continue.

4.6 Second, the customer—whether teacher or student—benefits from having several ABs to choose between in areas such as price, service, features of the specification and quality of the support materials. Competition in these areas, which is increasing, ultimately enhances the quality both of students’ education and their assessment. It encourages ABs to adopt a progressive, “can do” mentality—not a safe, entrenched mindset which tends towards retaining the status quo. ABs are always looking to draw on their substantial technical expertise to improve assessments initially for the benefit of the teachers and students taking their examinations, but ultimately of the whole system.

4.7 Third, any assessment system—whether single or multi-organisational—is subject to risk. Current measures to counter misalignment of standards are robust, efficient and effective. Although the likelihood of this, and other risks, would not diminish under a single organisation, their impact would be much greater, not least by affecting more students. Moreover, centralising the system, even if not nationalising it, would almost inevitably bring the delivery and responsibility of the service closer to the government’s door. The experiences of Scotland (2000), New Zealand (2004) and the National Curriculum Tests crisis of 2008 in England all serve as a warning against centralisation, concentration of risk, and perceived political interference in assessment operations. For example, in writing about the three British examinations crises in 2000-02, McCaig (2003) claimed that a common feature was government interference, particularly in too hastily imposing major reforms to the system.

5. Risks and Benefits of Other Approaches

5.1 Alternative structural arrangements—other than a single, monolithic AB—are possible, but the main thread of this response is that not only do these not address the concerns expressed, they constitute different risks. Partitioning the industry by subject area or by operational function would, in the former instance, result in a reduction in choice and innovation whilst removing the incentive for better service, and in the latter case, risk a lack of operational coherence and continuity with attendant increased risks of catastrophic system failure.

5.2 Legitimate rises in grade outcomes will eventually reduce the ability of qualifications to discriminate. At GCSE discrimination was improved with the introduction of the A* grade. Over time, more fundamental revision to the current grading model may be required to ensure that qualifications remain fit for purpose. However, examination grades are put to at least twenty different purposes (Newton, 2007), and McCaig (2003) showed that an issue underlying the 2002 GCSE examination crises was successive governments’ seeming unwillingness to define their expectations of the examination, a theme echoed in the Sykes Review (2010). Until this fundamental question is answered, fitness for purpose cannot be fully established and reorganising the structure of the ABs will simply prove to be a distraction, at best.

5.3 Some form of grade quota (norm-referencing) system could be introduced. This would prevent rising grade outcomes, but would fundamentally change the meaning of certification and impact on wider education policy such as school performance tables and targets. To ensure fairness (between years, specifications and awarding bodies), such a system ought to take into account the general ability of the cohorts of students entering qualifications (Stringer, in press). Detailed research into the implications of such a change would be required before widespread adoption.

5.4 Alternatively, a test-equating approach could be adopted (Wheadon, 2010), as per the KS2 National Curriculum tests or the Dutch national testing system. This is a very robust form of standards maintenance, empirically answering the question “What mark would a student who was awarded grade X on last year’s examination need to have gained to be awarded grade X on this year’s examination?” Whilst eliminating unjustified grade inflation, this approach does not, however, prevent rising outcomes, as the proportions attaining level 4 at KS2 demonstrate. In any case, the security risks associated with the necessary pre-testing for such high-stakes qualifications, allied to its cost and administrative logistics, currently render this option unfeasible.

6. Conclusion

6.1 In summary, this response argues the following:

6.1.1 There is no reason to believe that marking reliability would be improved by a change in AB structure. The marking reliability of GCSEs and GCEs is comparable with that of similar international assessments. Systematic improvements are likely to come from innovations such as on-line, question-level marking, and such innovation is more likely where competition between providers exists.

6.1.2 There is no evidence that rises in grade outcomes are due to either the existence of, or the competition between, several ABs. On the contrary, the awarding system is extremely tightly managed and many

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126 In addition to the locally-developed CSE syllabuses, examples of such successful innovations range from the JMB’s GCSE General Studies syllabus to the Nuffield and Salters’ science suites, the SMP mathematics developments, NEAB’s 100% GCSE English coursework syllabus, and OCR’s successful Computer Literacy and Information Technology (CLAIT) qualification. Doubtless there were failures too, but in the decades when these and other innovative qualifications were developed, a spirit of creativity prevailed.

127 For example, the Nuffield Foundation 21st Century Science suite of GCSEs.
rigorous anticipatory/monitoring measures exist to ensure that inter-year and inter-AB standards are maintained.

6.1.3 It would be unwise to engineer a major organisational restructuring to create a solution to a problem that does not exist (inter-AB misalignment), whilst not solving a problem (unjustified rises in grade outcomes) that is perceived rather than real. The folly would be exacerbated because restructuring would not only introduce many new risks, but would jeopardise benefits in the current system, many of which are not obvious.

REFERENCES


November 2011

Written evidence submitted by Ofqual (Annex E)

COMPETITION AND REGULATION OF AWARDING ORGANISATIONS

When Amanda Spielman and Glenys Stacey appeared before the Select Committee on 21 March 2012, they offered to provide you with information Ofqual has on both competition and how pricing works in practice in relation to GCSEs and A levels.

The attached note sets out average and individual qualification fees for selected GCSE subjects for the last six years and for selected A level subjects for the last four years. It provides some information on what has been driving the increase in examination expenditure in schools including re-sitting behaviours and increases in volumes of qualifications sat.

SUMMARY

1. Average GCSE fees have risen over the past six years in line with inflation. The difference between the most and least expensive awarding organisation for the same subject is at most 13% and often much less.

2. Fee increases for A levels have also generally mirrored the RPI. The gap between the dearest and cheapest awarding organisation is higher, at about 30%.

3. Most awarding organisations have flat fee structures, suggesting cross-subsidy in pricing between subjects as delivery costs are very different: for example, music technology is very expensive to deliver (we have been told over £300), maths is cheap.

4. There is little, if any, evidence that schools switch providers of GCSEs and A level qualifications on cost grounds. Specification content and the range and quality of exam board support are more important.

5. We are doing more analysis of the reasons that schools and colleges decide on an initial choice of qualification and when and why they might switch to a different awarding organisation’s specification. Our initial analysis shows GCSE switching is most likely to occur when new specifications are introduced.

6. Few schools and colleges are negotiating fee discounts. The development of purchasing consortia in the FE sector may put pressure on awarding bodies to offer greater discounts.

7. Expenditure on exam fees in schools in England has increased from £154 million in 2002–03 to £259 million in 2010–11. Several factors are at work here: an increase in the number of GCSEs and A levels sat; the impact of modular exams and the associated re-sitting behaviour; and the growth in uptake in vocational qualifications are the most significant factors behind the growing examination bill in schools. Schools are showing more control over late entries for exams, which is producing some savings in their overall examination bill.

8. Awarding organisations are obliged to have clear pricing structures and to publish a list of standard fees.

9. We have a programme of work that will enable us to present more detailed evidence on the purchasing behaviours by schools and colleges. This will inform our regulatory framework going forward. We will be happy to share the outcomes of this work with the Select Committee in the Autumn.

I hope this gives some flavour of the work which we are doing at Ofqual in this area. If you would like to discuss it further, please do call.

Tim Leslie
Director of Risk and Markets

GCSE AND GCE A LEVEL FEES

We do not publish data on fees for GCSEs or A levels. Awarding organisations publish this data and we have drawn on this information in the following analysis. We report the average qualification fee for selected subjects in our Annual Market Report. We have chosen these subjects to present a mix of subjects, including compulsory and most popular, and to cover a range of assessment methods. We have selected the most commonly used specification from each awarding organisation. We have excluded optional additional fees, for example for external examiner visits, and also exclude fees for late entry. This is the lowest possible fee that a school would have to pay for the provision and marking of exam scripts and associated awarding. There are differences in the way some subjects are assessed as they have performance related assessment, such as oral assessments for modern foreign languages. We have captured this in the selection of the subjects in the sample.

128 We have calculated the arithmetic mean of the available fees for the five organisations that award GCEs and GCSEs. This has not been weighted by volume of entries to each awarding organisation.
Table 1
MEAN BASE GCSE FEE OVER TIME

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>£23.64</td>
<td>£24.46</td>
<td>£25.28</td>
<td>£26.30</td>
<td>£27.41</td>
<td>£27.78</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maths</td>
<td>£23.64</td>
<td>£24.46</td>
<td>£25.28</td>
<td>£26.30</td>
<td>£27.45</td>
<td>£27.78</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>£23.79</td>
<td>£24.60</td>
<td>£26.14</td>
<td>£27.18</td>
<td>£28.23</td>
<td>£28.53</td>
<td>19.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>£24.04</td>
<td>£24.88</td>
<td>£25.72</td>
<td>£26.74</td>
<td>£27.89</td>
<td>£28.24</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>£24.04</td>
<td>£24.88</td>
<td>£25.72</td>
<td>£26.74</td>
<td>£27.93</td>
<td>£28.27</td>
<td>17.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art&amp; Design</td>
<td>£23.64</td>
<td>£24.46</td>
<td>£25.28</td>
<td>£26.30</td>
<td>£27.43</td>
<td>£27.78</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RPI</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>103.9</td>
<td>109.1</td>
<td>107.6</td>
<td>112.6</td>
<td>118.9</td>
<td>18.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes
1. Awarding organisation fee lists, averaged over time.
2. RPI data based on September index for each year.

Table 1 illustrates the close alignment of average GCSE fees for the chosen subjects. The average fees for each of the subjects have risen by around the rate of inflation, with five of the six below and one above. It should be noted that there have been changes with associated costs for modular options of GCSE subjects becoming available.

Similarly the table below presents the average A level qualification fee for the chosen subjects; the time series is different, to reflect the structural changes that were introduced to A levels in 2008. The awarding organisations charge a fee for each unit and the fee shown is the combination of the unit fees required to complete the A level (AS and A2). If a candidate only completes an AS level then the they would only pay for the units they have been entered for, which for most AS qualifications would be half of the total A level fee.

Table 2
MEAN BASE A LEVEL FEE OVER TIME

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>2008–09</th>
<th>2009–10</th>
<th>2010–11</th>
<th>2011–12</th>
<th>Increase over last 4 years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English Language</td>
<td>£71.16</td>
<td>£73.77</td>
<td>£76.57</td>
<td>£76.59</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maths</td>
<td>£76.68</td>
<td>£79.43</td>
<td>£82.37</td>
<td>£83.39</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>£77.52</td>
<td>£80.33</td>
<td>£83.29</td>
<td>£84.43</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>£85.24</td>
<td>£83.05</td>
<td>£86.17</td>
<td>£92.86</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>£71.72</td>
<td>£74.33</td>
<td>£77.13</td>
<td>£78.07</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art &amp; Design</td>
<td>£77.64</td>
<td>£80.41</td>
<td>£83.45</td>
<td>£84.42</td>
<td>8.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RPI</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>98.6</td>
<td>103.2</td>
<td>109.0</td>
<td>9.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes
1. Awarding organisation fee lists, averaged over time.
2. RPI data based on September index for each year.

Table 2 shows the average fees for 6 A level subjects, after the change from six to four units in most subjects. As with GCSEs, the increase in average fees has generally mirrored RPI. When the structural change was introduced in 2008–9, although unit fees increased, as a result of the specifications changing from six to four units, the overall cost of the entire A level decreased compared with the fees in the previous years. As with GCSEs, we have shown the lowest possible fee that a school or college would have to pay for the provision and marking of exam scripts and associated awarding.

Tables 3 and 4
VARIATION IN GCSE AND A LEVEL FEES BETWEEN AWARDING ORGANISATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GCSE 2011–12</th>
<th>AQA</th>
<th>CCEA</th>
<th>Edexcel</th>
<th>OCR</th>
<th>WJEC</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>£28.10</td>
<td>£28.80</td>
<td>£27.30</td>
<td>£27.80</td>
<td>£26.88</td>
<td>£27.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maths</td>
<td>£28.10</td>
<td>£28.80</td>
<td>£27.30</td>
<td>£28.00</td>
<td>£26.88</td>
<td>£27.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>£28.15</td>
<td>£28.80</td>
<td>£31.05</td>
<td>£27.80</td>
<td>£26.88</td>
<td>£28.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>£28.10</td>
<td>£28.80</td>
<td>£29.60</td>
<td>£27.80</td>
<td>£26.88</td>
<td>£28.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>£28.10</td>
<td>£28.95</td>
<td>£29.60</td>
<td>£28.00</td>
<td>£26.88</td>
<td>£28.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art &amp; Design</td>
<td>£28.10</td>
<td>£28.80</td>
<td>£27.30</td>
<td>£27.80</td>
<td>£26.88</td>
<td>£27.78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes
129 The inflation data is based on RPI, taking the September index for every year.
130 Some subjects offer both linear and modular options.
Notes:
1. Fees taken from awarding organisation websites
2. CCEA do not offer English Language

For GCSEs most awarding organisations have a flat fee structure where each subject is charged at the same level. Others have a structure where there is some variation but this variation is not substantial. For A levels the situation is more varied. Some awarding organisations again charge a flat rate across the subjects but others have a variable fee structure. For French, the assessment includes oral assessments as well as a written examination and so the fees tend to be significantly higher.

Qualification Volumes

Ofqual’s annual market report provides information on the total number of achievements in regulated qualifications over time. Expenditure on exam fees in schools in England has increased in real terms from £154 million in 2002–03 to £259 million in 2010–11. During this period there has been an increase in the number of GCSEs and A levels sat and also a very significant uptake of vocational qualifications in schools. In 2003–04, 22,500 vocational qualifications were taken in schools. By 2008–09 this has risen to 540,000—mostly taken at age 16.

Impact of Late Entries on Fees Paid by Schools and Colleges

Late entry fees charged by awarding bodies for GCSE and A levels are usually double the normal entry fee and for very late entries, fees can be up to three times the normal fee.

Data on entries from DfE indicate that schools and colleges have become better at controlling late entries and this will have resulted in savings on examination expenditure.

Total entries for GCSEs and A levels increased by 38% over the period 2003–04 to 2009–10. Over the same period, total late and very late entries decreased by 52%. By 2009–10 the percentage of entries that were late or very late had fallen to 6.3% from 16.7% in 2003–04.

Impact of A Level Re-sits on Fees Paid by Schools and Colleges

Trends in re-sitting will impact exam expenditure. Re-sits are charged at the full cost of the original unit fee.

We have some information but this is for the period before the number of units in A levels was reduced from six to four and the A* grade was introduced. Data on re-sitting patterns for some selected A level subjects suggests that between two-thirds and three-quarters of students were re-sitting at least one unit and that around 60% re-sat between 1 and 3 times. To illustrate, if three-quarters of candidates in June 2010 re-sat a single unit in these subjects the cost would have been £6 million. This is probably a low estimate and these subjects represent only a third of all candidate entries in June 2010. Some centres pass re-sit costs on to candidates and the pattern of re-sits varies between subjects.

Re-sitting patterns for A levels were expected to fall following the introduction of the structural changes in 2010 and we will be publishing the results of research on this shortly.

Information Available to Buyers to Compare Prices

In 2009, we published a report by the consultancy firm Reckon which considered options to increase the transparency of awarding organisations’ fees for all regulated qualifications, potentially making it easier for buyers to compare prices. Options included a requirement for awarding organisations to publish complete price lists for all regulated qualifications, a requirement to publish an “average price per qualification” (similar to the concept of an APR associated with financial products) and the development of an online interactive price

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131 http://www.ofqual.gov.uk/downloads/category/99-market-reports?download=1401%3AAnnual-
132 Annual Qualifications Market Report 2012 page 37 Table 11
133 Source: DfE Vocational qualifications statistical database
134 A level English literature, mathematics, physics, media, French, geography and psychology. Source—Ofqual ABDa project
135 “Comparative Analysis of A level Assessment Outcomes for 2008–10” to be published
comparison tool. The second and third options were considered to be expensive options in terms of regulatory burden for awarding organisations.

Ofqual’s recognition conditions require awarding organisations to have clear pricing structures, to produce a list of standard fees, and to make this available to purchasers either on the internet or by providing them with a copy of the list. These requirements will be monitored from May 2012 onwards, from when all recognised awarding organisations must comply with the recognition conditions.

**Buying Behaviours**

We have started to build our evidence base about why schools and colleges switch between qualifications. Our initial analysis suggests that the largest movements between GCSEs have occurred when new specifications were introduced for that subject. For example, more schools switched when the new GCSE specifications were introduced in 2009 for first award in 2010–11.

<table>
<thead>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Geography</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>33.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maths</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>25.3</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>17.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>15.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art &amp; Design</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Biology also saw a large number of centres switching in 2007–08 which coincided with the introduction of the separate sciences. We are continuing to investigate the factors that influence a school’s initial choice of specification and why they may also decide to switch to another awarding organisation. On the basis of current information, the GCSE and A level market does not appear to be particularly price sensitive. There is little, if any, evidence that schools are driven to change qualifications because of individual variation in fees. Other factors such as specification content and the range and quality of exam board support provided may be more important.

**Discounting Activity**

Two previously published studies commissioned by Ofqual have provided some evidence that, although fee discounting does take place, such practice is not widespread in schools and colleges. Schools and colleges reported that they did not negotiate discounts with awarding organisations nor did they think they would be able to do so. In the FE sector there is interest in the development of purchasing consortia. For example, Crescent Purchasing Consortium (CPC), which is owned by and run on behalf of the FE sector, has over 1,000 FE institutions (including academies) in its membership. CPC offers a procurement service to its members for a wide range of supplies and services. It is considering setting up a national negotiating body to represent the FE sector in negotiations with awarding organisations on fees for qualification products and services. CPC is also looking at commissioning plans to improve how the FE sector buys from awarding organisations. Commissioning plans involve the development and agreement, across stakeholders, of common payment methodologies, the setting of discounts and rebates, and other service and product improvements.

**Ofqual’s Future Work**

We are doing more work to understand the nature of price competition in qualifications markets. This work includes:

1. Working with DfE (and others such as the Association of Colleges) to identify the drivers of school and college spending on exam fees, including GCSEs and A levels, and how this spending might be reduced. This work will include gathering evidence to understand drivers such as increases in fees, late fees, and switching. It will also consider other procurement issues including fees transparency and information that awarding organisations provide on their invoices.

2. Establishing links with individual schools and colleges to develop case studies on exam spend in order to identify opportunities for efficiency savings. We will use case studies to illustrate good practice.

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3. Further analysis of the specific reasons for schools’ initial choice of qualifications and why decisions are taken to switch between awarding organisations, including switching incentives and the role of price in procurement decisions.

4. Research on how awarding organisations package (bundle) their qualifications with other products and services. This includes our current work to investigate how textbooks and study aids are made available to students to support them in examinations including GCSEs and A levels.

5. Implementing an approach to monitor awarding organisations’ fees over time. In 2010–11, 10,300 regulated qualifications recorded at least one certification.\textsuperscript{139} We are developing our approach to monitoring fees, concentrating effort on those which have the most impact on market efficiency,

6. Developing our understanding of competition and the role of market forces in delivering standards and efficiency in the qualifications sector. We will consider the incentives created by market structures on the supply and demand sides and broader systemic factors that impact on qualifications markets. This broader market analysis work is aimed at assessing the health of qualifications markets and for which qualifications there is the highest risk of market failure.

Further written evidence submitted by Nick Gibb MP, Department for Education (Annex A)

In the Select Committee evidence session on 21 March I responded to Q652 from Damian Hinds that I thought a move to an alternative model of delivering exams would require primary legislation.

As I set out in my evidence, we are actively considering a number of options. We are of the opinion that some of those options would not require primary legislation. We will continue to work through the advantages and disadvantages of all the options, and look forward to receiving the Select Committee’s report.

\textit{June 2012}

\textsuperscript{139} Annual Qualifications Market Report 2012 page 35 Table 10