

Consultation on marking reviews, appeals, grade boundaries and Code of Practice

This is a submission to Ofqual by SCHOOLS NorthEast, the UK's only regional schools network representing all 1,250 schools in the North East of England.

1. About SCHOOLS NorthEast

Established in 2007, SCHOOLS NorthEast was set up by head teachers to create a unique culture of collaboration and mutual support amongst North East schools to ensure the best possible outcomes for all of our region's young people.

SCHOOLS NorthEast is schools-led, governed by serving head teachers and guided by a 28-strong advisory board comprised of school leaders from all types of schools and representing each of the 12 local authorities that make up the North East region.

A registered charity, SCHOOLS NorthEast works to connect schools to each other and external organisations such as business, to facilitate new projects and additional support, to provide a strategic voice for our members and promote a wider understanding of the issues facing education in the North East.

2. Background

SCHOOLS NorthEast warmly welcomes Ofqual's decision to consult on the examination reviews and appeals system which has, in recent times, lost the faith of many in the schooling community.

Ofqual will be aware that SCHOOLS NorthEast issued a Call for Evidence to schools in September 2015 to all serving head teachers within secondary schools in the region in response to concerns at volatility in exam assessment in summer 2015 and a significant degradation in trust regarding the process and the organisations responsible for delivery.

Responses were collated and submitted to the Education Committee's session with Ofqual last October (see Appendix A). We would encourage you to revisit this information and keep the schools' perspective in mind when making final decisions on future changes.

SCHOOLS NorthEast subsequently hosted a positive session with the Ofqual Chair and now interim Chief Regulator Amanda Spielman and schools. This was attended by more than a third of all secondary education establishments in the region.

3. Executive summary

SCHOOLS NorthEast supports much of Ofqual's proposed reform of the reviews and appeals system. We also include in this submission additional proposals that would further strengthen the system and rebuild confidence within schools.

Areas of support for the proposals:

- * Greater emphasis on transparency is a significant step in rebuilding school confidence in exam boards
- * Appeals based on mark/moderation in addition to procedure is an important progression, the lack of which has been a major cause of concern for schools in the past
- * Access to GCSE scripts will enable schools to make evidence-based judgements on requests for re-marks
- * A heightened focus on exam boards use of training and performance monitoring is essential to improve the quality and consistency of marking

As a final outcome of this consultation, schools want to see the Regulator take a more proactive approach to upholding standards across all exam boards. Establishing revised standards, procedures and conditions is beneficial but only if Ofqual becomes more engaged in ensuring those standards are upheld. To that end, schools want to see:

- * ***A comprehensive Quality Assurance programme established for monitoring of exam boards during the marking and review periods***

Transparency would be enhanced by engaging schools more actively in quality assurance. In recognising the limited resources available to the regulator, schools propose:

- * **An inspection regime of exam board invigilation and review that includes and involves school leaders from across the regions who can instil confidence by reporting back to schools in their locality**

One factor that has contributed to the weakening of trust within the system is the pace of change within different exam boards. Schools would like Ofqual to:

- * **Drive digital uptake across the exam boards to improve standards, reduce errors, improve timescales and interactions with schools**

Confidence in the quality of assessment is key. Information submitted to SCHOOLS NorthEast by examiners, including team leaders, indicates a lack of trust among markers themselves as to the quality of some colleagues. To that end, schools want to see:

- * **Ofqual establish a digital database of markers which performance-manages at an individual level and drives excellence in the system**

Improving transparency presents an opportunity for more focused dialogue during the review process. Schools would like to see:

- * **The review process changed to enable schools to have a specific dialogue with exam boards on aspects of individual scripts that they are submitting for review. This reduces the need to re-evaluate entire papers and encourages schools to be more focused in their review/appeal requests**

While releasing assessments to schools in advance of their decision to submit a review request is sensible, it is imperative that they also have visibility of the guidance markers were given in reaching their assessment. To that end, schools need:

- * **Marking schemes for all papers to be released at the time that marked scripts are made available**

Centres appreciate the logistical difficulties exam boards face during the high-volume periods around examinations; however, there seems no logical reason why each board has different deadlines and why there is flexibility in this process. Ofqual should look to:

- * **Implement a national deadlines procedure for all exam boards**

Detail on all of the above is contained further into this consultation response.

SCHOOLS NorthEast does want to encourage the Regulator to adopt a positive approach to the decisions that are made following this Consultation so that the root cause of the problem is addressed and not a response to the symptom. This Consultation points to the additional pressures placed by Ofsted and the Department for Education upon schools with regard to performance as the cause for increasing volumes of requests for reviews/appeals. It also cites increased focus on grades at all levels as being a potential catalyst for even greater numbers of re-mark submissions in future.

From the schools perspective, SCHOOLS NorthEast's Call for Evidence clearly showed a marked and worrying degradation in confidence in the system and the ability of exam boards to deliver the level of quality required for candidates, school staff, governors and parents to be reassured of accurate grades. Furthermore, schools are facing significant budgetary pressures which make them less financially capable of submitting speculative objections against marking decisions even if that was their intent.

Against that backdrop, this Consultation is a tremendous opportunity to draw a line in the sand and to build confidence and co-operation between the Regulator, exam boards and examination centres.

4. Response to proposed changes

The following chart tracks the key changes proposed by Ofqual with additional detail on proposals by SCHOOLS NorthEast to further improve the system.

Ofqual proposal	Key change	SNE response
<p>Allow centres (or, in some cases, candidates) to see copies of any of the candidates' assessments marked by the exam board.</p>	<p>Centres can see marked GCSE assessments before deciding whether to request a review of marking or administrative error review.</p>	<p>This is eminently sensible. The primary concern from a schools' perspective is that this does not impact financially and the system is fair to candidates. SNE proposes that this change should then form the basis of dialogue between centres and exam boards on review/appeal SEE: Proposal for an Intelligent Review System (below)</p>
<p>Require centres to provide candidates with the pre-moderation mark for assessments they have marked.</p>	<p>Candidates to be told the marks of their centre-marked assessments in time for them to ask the centre to review its marking.</p>	<p>In principle, this is an acceptable change but it could potentially create substantial tension between centres and candidates/parents if the exam board assessment is at odds with the school assessment. SNE proposes that a banded mark is communicated to candidates SEE: Banded marking transparency</p>
<p>On a review, change the marking or moderation where the reviewer finds that the original marker or moderator gave an unreasonable mark or arrived at an unreasonable moderation outcome.</p>	<p>Explicit rule to stop exam boards replacing one reasonable mark with an alternative reasonable mark. Explicit rule to stop exam boards replacing one reasonable moderation outcome with an alternative reasonable moderation outcome.</p>	<p>The language here is unhelpful. Use of the word 'reasonable' should be replaced by 'accurate'.</p>
<p>Explain to the centre/ candidate the reasons for its decision ... following a review of marking or moderation.</p>	<p>Exam boards to give reasons for their decisions.</p>	<p>This is a positive proposal</p>

Ofqual proposal	Key change	SNE response
<p>Make sure that reviews of marking and moderation are undertaken by markers or moderators who have been specifically trained and prepared to undertake the review role.</p>	<p>Reviewers of marking and moderation to be specifically trained for this role.</p>	<p>Improved training for marking and moderation is sensible, as long as it is delivered from the approach of improvement and not encouraging examiners to 'mark harder' to rectify perceived softer approach previously.</p> <p>Schools are clear they want it to be mandatory that reviewers cannot be the individual who assessed the original script/coursework. Ofqual must remove the optionality for exam boards in allowing the same assessor to 'mark their own homework'.</p>
<p>Monitor whether reviewers who undertake marking or moderation reviews are changing marks when an error has been made but are not substituting one reasonable mark or moderation outcome for another and intervene when necessary.</p> <p>Monitor whether reviewers who undertake marking or moderation reviews are acting consistently and, where they are not, take steps to promote consistency in the future.</p>	<p>Exam boards to monitor the performance of their reviewers</p>	<p>This cuts to the core of the review and Ofqual cannot be an 'armchair' regulator in this process.</p> <p>Schools want to see greater rigour placed on the assessment of reviewers, improved use of data to drive up standards in marking and to identify those individuals who need additional training and guidance or, ultimately, who are not fit for purpose.</p> <p>SEE: Proposal for Ofqual Quality Assurance programme; and, reference to a database of examiners in Digitisation of the System</p>
<p>Allow centres (or, in some cases, candidates) that, following a review of marking or moderation, remain concerned about a mark or moderation outcome to appeal to the exam board on one of the following grounds:</p>	<p>Appeals on the grounds that a mark/moderation outcome was unreasonable to be allowed.</p> <p>Appeals against a grade boundary to be prohibited.</p> <p>Using procedures consistent with the Code no longer to be considered on an appeal.</p>	<p>Strong support for Ofqual's proposal to enable centres to appeal on mark/moderation outcome <u>as well as</u> procedure. SNE believes there is an opportunity to refine this proposal further in a way that would both reduce the volume of appeals and improve the review system.</p> <p>SEE: Proposal for an Intelligent Review System</p>

Ofqual proposal	Key change	SNE response
<p>Set and publish reasonable deadlines by which centres/ candidates must request the return of a marked assessment script (where it will not make the script available automatically), request an administrative error review, request a review of marking and request a review of moderation. Specify a reasonable time period during which an appeal may be requested.</p>	<p>Exam boards can set their own deadlines.</p>	<p>This is a flawed proposal. There is no rationale behind not publishing uniform deadlines at the start of the academic year which are harmonised across all exam boards and to which they are obliged to conform. This gives certainty to centres and they can build capacity around the stated times. SNE proposes that Ofqual sets and publishes the timetable for review and appeals in advance. Furthermore, Ofqual needs to penalise exam boards who fail to comply with the timetable.</p>
<p>Set and publish target deadlines for responses</p>	<p>Exam boards to set, publish and take all reasonable steps to meet target timescales. Requirements on exam boards to publish information about their performance.</p>	<p>As above. SNE welcomes transparency on performance and would extend that to Ofqual publishing notification of any exam boards penalised for missing deadlines as per the above proposal.</p>
<p>Publish how it trains and prepares its markers to undertake reviews of marking/moderation...</p>	<p>Exam boards to publish information about how they train and monitor their reviewers.</p>	<p>This is welcome, as long as there are guidelines by Ofqual on the content of information published to make it meaningful to centres. Additionally, SNE proposes that information is published on Quality Assurance, both Ofqual's QA programme (as outlined) and internal exam board QA. SEE: Proposal for Ofqual QA programme</p>
<p>Publish the following data for each qualification: The number of administrative errors found and corrected and a summary of the nature of the errors and how it proposes to reduce such errors (etc.)</p>	<p>Additional information to be published about the outcomes of reviews and appeals and about other administrative errors which have been found.</p>	<p>This will be a valuable change for centres and SNE anticipates it will drive up standards and encourage exam boards to continually strive for excellence. Ofqual is requested to publish not only national data by exam board but also to publish regional data.</p>

Ofqual proposal	Key change	SNE response
<p>Identify any other candidates who are affected by a marking error that has been found through the operation of review arrangements or the appeal process, and correct the error or take steps to reduce the effect of the error for those other candidates.</p>	<p>There will be no automatic protection for candidates who have been given a higher result than their work deserved where that error was found as a result of a review of marking (although we propose to introduce further guidance which exam boards would be required to have regard to when deciding how to deal with the issue of an incorrect result).</p>	<p>This is logical. Were the regulator to adopt SNE's proposal for an Intelligent Review System, it would negate the need for this proposal.</p>

4.1 Digitisation of the system

It is imperative that Ofqual uses this review of exam board marking to effect wholesale improvements to the system. The technology exists, and is currently in use by some organisations. All exam boards must embrace digital systems to improve efficiency, reduce cost, be more flexible, to eliminate human and logistical errors and to generate smart data.

In publishing the outcomes of this review, Ofqual should seize the opportunity to set a timetable for all exam boards to digitise their systems and to ensure they are 'system compliant'. This will enable the regulator to have improved visibility regarding how the service is performing, to identify and address capacity issues and to integrate a robust Quality Assurance programme.

If all exam boards had system compliant digital platforms, they would be able to:

- * **Provide real-time reporting to Ofqual on marker capacity** - this would give the Regulator confidence that the exam boards had employed the requisite volume of markers with the right specialist subject knowledge to meet marking deadlines
- * **Generate real-time data on the quality of markers** - Support QA within exam boards by allowing them to track to the individual marker the number of requests for reviews and the percentage of reviews requiring a revised mark. This would enable them to identify where training and guidance was most needed and, in cases of repeated anomalies, eliminate rogue markers (SEE: Proposal for an Intelligent Review System)
- * **Support the Ofqual marker database** - School-based examiners reported to SCHOOLS NorthEast a revolving door policy in some exam boards, where markers identified as not being suitable for the role were re-appointed by the same exam board the following year, sometimes in promoted positions such as team leaders. The access to data on marker quality should be stored centrally so the regulator can QA exam boards and also ensure that individuals who are not of an acceptable standard do not pass around the system if they are released by an organisation for sub-standard work
- * **Improve the speed and efficiency of sharing assessments with centres** - SNE's proposal for an Intelligent Review System sets out the process by which centres and exam boards can work in a more targeted way to identify genuine errors and rectify them. Digitisation enables the instantaneous sharing of assessment papers as well as the reassurance of uniform marking that supports the ability of centres to have focused dialogue with examiners ie/ instead of interpreting handwritten marking on scripts, there should be a standardised digital footprint on each paper showing where marks are awarded and any additional comments.
- * **Reduced costs/inefficiencies** - Whilst we recognise the installation of digital systems is a significant cost, the removal of the logistical costs over time will be positive. In addition, the

introduction of a smarter system of review will have a considerable impact on the volume of reviews. Furthermore, it removes the perennial issue of scripts going missing.

4.2 Proposal for an Intelligent Review System

There is the intention in this Consultation to support centres to streamline reviews and appeals to those that have reasonable grounds for appeal. The proposal to release scripts for GCSEs as well as A/AS levels is a significant step forward in this regard as it enables centres to determine which candidates they should be requesting re-marks for based on a review of their submission rather than on the basis of the awarding mark being at odds with the expected result for the pupil.

SCHOOLS NorthEast acknowledges the reasoned arguments in the separate paper on *Research into alternative marking review processes for exams* and Ofqual's decision to keep the current system with some additional proposed refinements.

However, we would argue that this will only go some of the way to improving the status quo.

Ofqual has the opportunity to build greater rigour into the system that will empower schools and exam boards to have a more intelligent conversation.

We propose that:

- * All exam boards convert their operations to digital to a) eradicate administrative errors; b) enable the sharing of scripts instantaneously to markers and, later, to centres; and, c) to standardise the on-script markings so centres have clarity where marks are awarded
- * All marking schemes are shared with centres at the same time as the release of scripts so they understand the rationale behind the awarding of marks
- * Upon receipt of the marked assessments, centres are able to review results against the expectations of grades for pupils and identify any anomalies for which they can then review the marking against the marking schemes
- * Centres are then able to enter a dialogue with exam boards regarding specific aspects of papers where candidates have not been rewarded for marks and is at odds with the marking scheme. This has three specific benefits to this process - 1) it builds confidence between centres and exam boards as the review process is then based on specific aspects of marking rather than the general belief the marker has 'got it wrong'; 2) it streamlines the review process, allowing exam boards to focus on specific elements of a paper rather than having to re-mark entire scripts every time; and, 3) it speeds up the reviews process by ensuring the independent review of the marking appeal can focus on specific aspects of the paper and thus removes the obstacles outlined in research on alternative marking review processes.

- * Ofqual will put safeguards in place to restrict requests for re-marks solely to those papers where the centre perceives the deviance from the marking scheme would result in the candidate achieving a different grade outcome
- * In adopting this new system, Ofqual will also allocate sufficient time in its published national deadlines procedure (proposed above) for schools to review and identify scripts it wishes to submit for re-marks. Currently, centres report that deadlines set by exam boards are overly generous in their favour, leaving centres with unworkably tight turnaround times.

The approach set out above rebalances the examination marking system. It ensures exam boards and centres work together to achieve an accurate outcome and it will reduce the volume of requests for re-marks and all but eradicate appeals.

4.2 Proposal for Ofqual Quality Assurance Programme

Ofqual is the guardian of quality and consistency. While considerable steps have been taken to tackle issues in marking quality, not least this latest Consultation, evidence from those operating within the marking rooms indicate the systems are not currently in place to ensure proper Quality Assurance.

During the SCHOOLS NorthEast Call for Evidence, team leaders reported incidents where they recommended certain markers not be re-employed only to see them re-appointed the following year and promoted to team leader. Examiners reported non-subject specialists drafted in to mark papers due to staff shortages. There was widespread concern about the general lack of markers resulting in exam boards offering inflated rates as an incentive for markers to work overtime to clear backlogs of papers.

All of this speaks of a system in turmoil.

Schools are keen to see Ofqual take a more proactive role in Quality Assuring the process. In particular, they have requested Ofqual establish a system of inspections of examination rooms to hold exam boards to account.

Head teachers report concerns regarding the lack of rigour in requests for references - often consisting of five questions requiring Yes/No answers - and fears that Ofqual is not sufficiently close to the front line of marking to observe the cracks in the system.

Having a Quality Assurance Programme in place which rigorously assesses that exam boards are deploying the right quality and quantity of trained markers during live marking periods would drive up standards and instil confidence.

SCHOOLS NorthEast would encourage Ofqual to have a serving Head Teacher participate alongside an Ofqual representative in inspections to a) build greater capacity into the QA process; and b) encourage reporting back into the regions so that other school leaders can learn at first hand from trusted peers about the rigour in marking rooms.

The inspections should include monitoring to ensure exam boards have sufficient markers to deal with the volume of papers, that all markers are subject specialists and that they have been given the appropriate guidance and training to deliver consistency.

Ofqual should publish data by region to further demonstrate transparency to boards, centres and candidates.

4.3 One exam board per subject - Ofqual's responsibility to Government

There is a concern that the lack of markers is driving a culture of desperation in the system with exam boards increasingly desperate to fill vacancies that will enable it to cope with demand.

As stated above, Ofqual must be the guardian of quality and consistency. It has a duty to communicate to Government where issues arise that jeopardise quality and consistency.

SCHOOLS NorthEast's Call for Evidence repeatedly received representations from schools calling for a single exam board per subject. While we accept Ofqual's response that this is a policy matter for Government and not within your jurisdiction, it is imperative that Ofqual reports to Government the concerns of schools and also its own concerns regarding a marker capacity shortage that this Consultation highlights will only worsen under the new assessment regime.

While falling outside of the remit of this Consultation, SCHOOLS NorthEast urges the Regulator to request the Department for Education commences a review of capacity in the marking system with a view to assessing the long-term benefits of fewer exam boards per subject, preferably one per curriculum area.

4.4 Banded marking transparency

This consultation is proposing that a requirement be placed on centres to provide candidates with the pre-moderation mark for assessments they have marked.

In principle, there is no objection to this proposal. However, it has to be recognised that, on occasions, differences will occur between centre assessments and final marking, in much the same way that this Consultation's review of marking highlights that two external markers can arrive at different marks.

This proposal could cause a tension between schools/teachers and candidates/their parents where pre-marks are shared that are then revised downwards by external examiners. This could lead candidates/parents to question the professional judgement of the issuing department or teacher. This is particularly true for subjects where there is only one teacher responsible for that coursework assessment within the school.

To avoid this situation, whilst also offering transparency to candidates, SCHOOLS NorthEast proposes that banded marks are shared rather than absolute ones. For example, where a music teacher has given a piece of coursework a mark of 22, the candidate could be given a 5-mark

banded marking of 20-24. This provides a tolerance for marks to fluctuate at assessment while reducing the risk of friction between centres and parents/candidates.

Conclusion

SCHOOLS NorthEast's submission to the Education Committee was clear on the high stakes nature of modern education that placed increasing pressure on candidates and school leaders. This submission to the Ofqual Consultation also recognises the changing landscape and pressure on both the Regulator and exam boards.

Our aim in this response is to proactively identify opportunities in which future reforms can bring the system closer together, to propose solutions that will improve the quality of marking and the consistency across exam boards, and to build on the Regulator's desire to see greater transparency. It also builds in responsibility on the part of schools to play a more active role in the re-marking process which we believe will positively impact on workload within exam boards.