

The Qualifications Regulators' Inquiry into Examination Errors – Response from Voice

Voice: the union for education professionals is pleased to have the opportunity to respond to the inquiry into examination errors. Voice is an independent trade union, founded in 1970 by two Essex teachers, Colin Leicester and Ray Bryant, who gathered together a group of like-minded professional teachers who were prepared to commit themselves to the principle of not striking. The union now has 35,000 members across all sectors of education (early years, primary, secondary and tertiary), including teachers, lecturers, school and college leaders, teaching assistants and other school support staff, nannies, nursery nurses, childcare and early years professionals, centrally employed staff working for Local Authorities in education or children's services, students on teacher training or childcare courses, and self-employed tutors and consultants. Formerly known as The Professional Association of Teachers, the union re-branded in February 2008 as Voice: the union for education professionals. Independent of the Trades Union Congress and not affiliated to any political party, Voice prefers to use the force of argument rather than the argument of force and, as such, relies on the power of effective negotiation rather than resorting to strikes or any other form of industrial action.

The unprecedented number of errors in examination papers this year has exposed significant flaws in the quality assurance procedures of national awarding bodies. The various checks and balances which should have been in place (e.g. proof reading, revisers working through papers and the activities of sundry scrutiny panels) appear to have gone awry. As Voice is not an examination centre, it is difficult for us to comment on how the errors first came to light and what subsequently happened in the examination room. We will, therefore, confine our comments to the attempts made by awarding bodies to address the errors.

1. AQA – AS Level Business Studies (BUSS2)

The error in the AQA AS Business Studies paper (BUSS2) is of particular concern for two reasons: (a) the error occurred very early in the paper which increases its potential to disadvantage candidates in their attempts to negotiate the remainder of the paper especially if they spend disproportionate time in attempting to answer an impossible question; (b) we are not reassured by the actions taken to redress the error. Candidates who correctly identified that the question was impossible to answer deserve credit. The Item Response Theory Analysis is not sufficiently valid or robust to identify with certitude those candidates who were disproportionately affected by the error.

Candidates who spent too long on this question may have either not been able to complete the paper or have had to rush to answer all the remaining questions. However, it is difficult to distinguish between these two categories as there may have been other candidates who failed to complete the paper because they were too slow or lacked sufficient knowledge and skills to tackle the latter questions, whilst other candidates may have simply rushed through the paper regardless of their response to the deficient question.

Given that the vast majority of candidates are not due to complete this particular 'A' level until summer 2012, consideration should be given to allowing any candidate who thinks he or she has been detrimentally affected to re-sit this unit free of charge.

2. AQA AS Computing (COMP2)

Whilst at first glance the error in this paper does not appear to be as serious as that in the previous paper, especially as the defective question appears much later in the paper, the action taken to redress the error may disadvantage stronger candidates and significantly advantage weaker ones. As the question is worth 8.3% of the total marks, by giving candidates full marks, candidates who have omitted this question are being disproportionately credited vis à vis those who have answered fully and correctly. After all 8.3% could be a whole grade band.

3. AQA AS Geography (GEOG2)

Same response as 1 above (Business Studies).

4. AQA GCSE Mathematics (43602F)

This paper demonstrates the kind of dereliction of duty which risks damaging public confidence in GCSE examinations. Compared with candidates sitting the correctly printed paper, candidates sitting this misprinted paper can achieve only 11 marks from the questions set for the June 2011 sitting of this unit. As this paper is designed for foundation tier candidates, the number of errors is likely to have had a particularly disconcerting effect. We are not reassured by the proposed actions to redress the error as there are no objective ways of ensuring comparability between candidates sitting affected and unaffected scripts. In this situation, the best remedy may be to base final awards on the three other units which make up this GCSE qualification.

5. AQA GCSE Chemistry (CHY1AP)

Affected candidates were prevented from responding to $16\frac{2}{3}\%$ of the paper. Whilst AQA response correctly points to the fact that this constitutes only a mere $2\frac{1}{2}\%$ of the GCSE Qualification as a whole, it does not appear to address the consequences of the disruption caused by discovering missing questions and repeated questions. Such a discovery may have had a deleterious impact on candidates' ability to complete the remainder of the paper. This is exacerbated by the fact that this is a timed test, which means that candidates may have lost valuable time in attempting to make sense of a nonsensical situation. Furthermore, the missing questions may have pertained to candidate's particular strengths (or indeed weaknesses). In either case discounting the affected six marks and scaling up the remainder would lead to problems of reliability and validity.

6. Edexcel GCE AS Biology (6BI01/01)

Whilst the error accounts for only 1% of the total mark, its significance is the anxiety experienced, and time wasted, by candidates attempting to make sense of the question. As this is likely to affect stronger candidates more than weaker ones, it is especially important for cases to be considered on an individual basis. In particular, candidates who have indicated that there is no correct answer should not be penalised by the act of discounting this question.

The printing error which affected nine candidates is of concern because a blank page appears to have occurred where the very first question should have been. This is a particularly disconcerting way to start an exam and the ensuing panic may have affected performance on the remainder of the paper. In addition, the missing page happened to contain instructions for how to proceed if candidates wanted to change their answer to a multiple choice question, so particular care needs to be taken to ensure that candidates are not unduly penalised for a change of answer on pages 7 and 21.

7. OCR AS Mathematics (4736)

Whilst we are reassured by the actions taken by OCR to mitigate any negative impact on individual candidates, we are alarmed by the fact that the defective questions are worth 11% of the total marks available for this paper.

The effect is likely to be worse for the better candidate who may spend a disproportionate amount of time attempting to prove the incorrect expressions and worry that their apparent failure to do so may cost them their predicted A* grade.

8. OCR 'A' Level Physics (G485)

We find the awarding body's description of the impact of the error disingenuous because the error clearly affects more than the two mark question alluded to.

One wonders how the candidate who decided that it was impossible to answer the questions because of the two conflicting readings would have been treated.

9. OCR GCSE Latin (A403/02)

The three proof reading errors in questions 25, 26, 28 are at best confusing. Well prepared candidates may not have been thrown by the errors in questions 25 and 26, basing their answers on the correctly quoted Latin phrases. There may have been some disruption in a centre where one or more candidates queried the name of Pythius in 25 and 26 if the invigilator, as is likely, had no part in delivering the subject. At first sight, the mention of Tacitus in question 8 is merely careless and unfortunate since Cicero, the real author of the piece, is mentioned clearly on three occasions. However, this random occurrence of Tacitus' name could have thrown a lesser candidate, who may either have spent valuable time querying it with the invigilator, again not a Latin specialist, or, worse still, focused on some of the wording of the question and produced an answer discussing Tacitus' choice and position of words and other stylistic features in isolation without reference to passage B6.

10. CCEA GCSE Business Studies (GBS21)

As the error did not affect any questions, its impact was likely to be minimal and was probably not even noticed by the majority of candidates.

Steps taken by CCEA to account for any possible impact on individual candidates' answers are entirely appropriate and commendable.

11. CCEA 'A' Level Mathematics (AMF21)

There is some confusion between different communications from CCEA as to how many marks (2, 4 or 5) were affected by this error.

The impact of the error is likely to be softened by the fact that it occurs towards the end of the paper, although as this paper is only taken by candidates who are very good at mathematics it may have caused undue anxiety and distress, particularly to candidates who were required to achieve A* for University entrance.

12. WJEC 'A' Level Mathematics

As only two candidates were affected by this error, the scale of its affect is very much limited and the awarding body appears to have taken reasonable steps to ensure that the two candidates in question were not detrimentally affected.

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