

The Mathematical Association

A Position Paper on Awarding Bodies

The case for a single awarding body in England for GCE and GCSE mathematics with either one awarding body franchised to offer mathematics or a single awarding body for all subjects.

1. Standards

1.1 Although the evidence is far from clear, there are strong perceptions amongst teachers and others that there is variation in standards in mathematics between awarding bodies and specifications. These result in pressures on teachers to go for what are perceived to be the 'easiest' examinations, namely those which are thought to give the 'best' results, and to favour awarding bodies that offer the best support aimed at achieving these 'best' results.

1.2 Obtaining the best results is not necessarily the same as obtaining the best educational outcome for students, because of all the widely rehearsed difficulties associated with 'teaching to the test'. Competition between awarding bodies with similar specifications adds to the pressures to equate good educational outcomes with narrowly focussed examination preparation.

1.3 Since examination results are very high profile and comparability is important to ensure confidence in the national system, it would be much simpler and fairer to allow no choice or more limited choice than to continue attempting to ensure comparability amongst a variety of options.

1.4 QCA's role as regulator would be greatly simplified if there was only one awarding body for GCSE and GCE mathematics.

2. Competitive pressures

2.1 The competitive pressures caused by each awarding body trying to increase its market share leads to a waste of scarce resources – examining expertise, advertising, duplication of documentation for specifications and support for teachers.

2.2 Those books which are targeted at particular specifications are a matter of great concern because they emphasise examination-orientated ways of learning mathematics and compete unfairly with books that present mathematics in a broader context.

2.3 Competition between awarding bodies has resulted in fewer opportunities for innovation, with very similar specifications for GCE and GCSE offered by all (with the notable exception of MEI). A single awarding body would be in a position to offer innovative alternatives to **all** centres alongside standard specifications of the current type, whilst maintaining comparable standards.

Alternatives to competing awarding bodies

3.1 With the Key Stage tests, specifications and support are completely independent of the process of producing papers and marking schemes. There is much less concern in mathematics about the format and organisation of Key Stage tests compared to concerns about GCE and GCSE.

3.2 Scotland, with the equivalent of a single awarding body, has operated successfully over a long period without the difficulties and concerns that are evident in England.

3.3 This paper does not consider Wales and Northern Ireland, which have their own awarding bodies, because we lack evidence of concerns about the systems in those two countries. However, if their systems continue to offer equivalent qualifications it may be that a single system for the UK, excluding Scotland, would be appropriate.