

Ofqual call for evidence: qualification fees, purchasing and value for money

Regulated awarding organisations must comply with Ofqual's rules on making fee information available. [These rules](#) currently give awarding organisations significant flexibility, with different organisations making their fee information available in different ways.

If purchasers of qualifications have difficulty making informed choices, this may reduce the incentives for awarding organisations to deliver efficiencies and other changes that will improve value for money.

Ofqual want to understand whether the different approaches to making fee information available mean that schools, colleges and other potential purchasers have difficulty comparing qualifications and choosing between providers.

They will use responses to ascertain if there is any need to improve the accessibility of fee information, and, if so, what action they should take to do that.

Gathering information

1. When choosing the qualifications, you plan to offer, what are the main factors you consider? In your response, please indicate the type of qualifications the factors would apply to, where appropriate

Previous research, and feedback from NAHT members, tells us that schools predominantly choose awarding organisations to provide their qualifications based on the specifications on offer.

For teachers and school leaders the first priorities are the content, structure and methods of assessment of the qualification and whether these will meet the needs of the students in the school.

In addition, schools may consider their previous experiences with an awarding organisation. Exams Officers provide a wealth of advice to school leaders and teachers based on their experiences of administering qualifications for different awarding organisation. Teachers may also consider their familiarity with a specification and the resources available to support teaching and learning. These resources may be part of the offer from the awarding organisation, such as specimen assessments or access to CPD, alongside the resources available elsewhere, including textbooks, which will also be important.

Changing awarding organisations is a significant decision which tends not to happen frequently. Such a change will most likely occur in a period of qualification reform as has just been experienced, as schools review what options are available. In addition, a switch of provider may occur if a school feels they have had a poor service from, or experience with, their current one. Multi-academy trusts (MAT) may wish to have greater alignment of awarding organisations across the trust, so schools which are part of a MAT may switch awarding organisations to standardise across the Trust.

Usually a change of qualification provider will be instigated by the Head of Department, who has considered student needs and staffing resources, and this process will usually take a significant period of time. The costs involved with a change to the qualification offered will be part of that process. This is not only the cost of the qualification itself, but the financial cost of teaching resources and textbooks as well as the time cost to staff of curriculum planning and training.

If schools are looking to make efficiencies in exams, we need to facilitate easy access to information on the pricing of qualifications which can be clearly compared across different awarding organisations.

2. How important is price in determining your choice of qualification?

The school funding crisis is today the biggest area of concern for school and college leaders. £2.8bn has been cut from school budgets since 2015, with the average cut to a secondary school's budget being £185.2k ([SchoolsCuts](#)) Our recent [Breaking Point survey](#) of school leaders found that 71% are expecting to have to set a deficit budget in the next financial year and almost four fifths (79%) are expecting a deficit budget for the following year 2019/20.

The cost of examinations is one of the biggest non staffing areas of expenditure for secondary schools. The latest figures available from the Department for Education showed that expenditure on examinations in LA maintained schools in England was over £91million pounds in the academic year 2016/17, while the latest academy data suggests that academies spend 27% of their non-staffing expenditure on examination fees ([DfE, 2017](#)).

In the most part, a centre's choice of qualification is based on what the school thinks is the most appropriate for their learners, with the cost of those qualifications playing a secondary role. However, the financial crisis in schools means that all costs are subject to review. This could make qualification pricing more relevant in the decision-making process about the qualifications that schools and colleges offer to their students.

There are indications that schools are already working to minimise examination costs, for example by reducing the number of late entries, which are typically charged at double the original fee. In the last year alone, late entries for GCSEs have declined by 10% and the number of late AS/A level entries has also dropped by almost 8%.

Ofqual's own research, School and College Purchasing Behaviours (Ofqual, 2015), indicated that the fee charged played a greater part in schools/colleges' consideration of whether to make an enquiry or appeal about a result than it did in purchasing or switching decisions.

These extra costs also need to be easily comparable between awarding organisations. NAHT welcomes Pearson's 'free Access to Scripts service which enables schools to make an informed decision on whether to incur the costs of an enquiry about student's results and encourage other awarding organisations to adopt this approach.

There may be some justifiable difference in cost between awarding organisations for the same, or similar, qualification. All pricing and additional costs must be made explicit for schools to be able to fairly evaluate the relative cost vs. benefit of the awarding organisation and its offer. Any move to have improved pricing transparency will be beneficial to schools.

Switching and negotiating

3. How important is the price of qualifications when considering providers?

Very important; quite important; **neutral**; not very important; not important at all

As outlined above, in the most part, a centre's choice of qualification is based on what the school thinks is the most appropriate for their learners, with the cost of those qualifications playing a secondary role. Previous research commissioned by Ofqual in 2015, found that only 19% of schools compared fees across exam boards.

However, the financial crisis in schools means that all costs are subject to review. This could make qualification pricing more relevant in the decision-making process about the qualifications schools and colleges offer to their students.

4. Have you ever attempted to negotiate or re-negotiate qualifications' prices with awarding organisations? Yes/No

It is not clear from the available pricing information publicly available from the awarding organisations, that negotiation of qualification prices is even a possibility. NAHT believes that this is an unfair practice. The opportunity to negotiate prices is not made explicit to all schools and even if this was the case, some schools will be at a disadvantage in terms of their ability to negotiate. If this is standard practice, all schools must have an equal opportunity of utilising this option and it must be clearly publicised.

5. How confident are you that you have secured value for money in your choice of qualification provider?

*Very confident; quite confident; **neutral**; not very confident; not confident at all*

Accessing information on the pricing for general qualifications was relatively straightforward for the main awarding organisations; schools can simply find the cost of a particular GCSE or A level qualification for one awarding organisation and find comparable information from another.

However, it is much more difficult to review and compare the pricing of vocational qualifications. It is harder to locate pricing information for these qualifications and the wide variety in structure, size and assessment of these qualifications makes direct comparisons difficult.

If schools are looking to make efficiencies in qualification costs, then improvements must be made to facilitate easy access the information they need to make the

appropriate decision. Ideally, there would be a simple, uniform format to allow for easy comparisons between qualifications. This may help to increase confidence that schools and colleges are securing value for money.

Centre Collaboration

6. Have you considered joint procurement? If yes, what was your experience? If not, why not?

NAHT is concerned that prices could be open to negotiation and change, depending on whether a school is able to collaborate on procurement. For some schools, this may not be possible. All schools must have an equal opportunity of utilising any options to reduce qualification costs; currently it seems that such practices are discriminating against some schools, particularly those that operate as single entities rather than as a multi-academy trust.

Comments from other respondents

7. If you are not a purchaser nor an awarding organisation but would like to provide comments relevant to the issues addressed in this call for evidence, please comment below. *Open*

Ofqual regulations offer significant flexibility to awarding organisations about how they make their fee information available. This could cause inconsistency between awarding organisations, which in turn impacts on the accessibility and comparability of that pricing information for schools.

If schools are to be able to make informed decisions about qualifications effectively, then there must be a clear and simple way for them to compare 'like with like'. A more uniform approach would be beneficial, particularly for vocational qualifications.

Timely provision of qualification pricing information is also necessary. Updated pricing for the 2018/19 academic year was not available at the end of August 2018 from some of the main awarding organisations. This lack of up to date information makes it extremely difficult for schools to plan their upcoming expenditure, which at a time of funding crisis, is critical.