

November 2007

Withdrawal of cassettes from GCSE, GCE and AEA Modern Foreign Languages

Background

OCR has been advised that long-term supplies of cassettes are at risk.

Initial plans to withdraw cassettes completely after 2008 have been revised in the light of feedback from MFL centres.

The Joint Council for Qualifications has agreed that incoming specifications will use CDs rather than cassettes.

OCR is able to source sufficient supplies for its needs over 2009 and 2010.

Mp3 format has been selected over .wav format as mp3 takes up approximately a tenth of the storage space needed for .wav files. Detailed guidance to centres and assessors on how to play, record, store and access mp3 files is available on the OCR public website.

Phased Withdrawal

A phased withdrawal of cassettes and introduction of CDs using mp3 format will be put in place from 2008.

The January 2008 series is unaffected by the phased withdrawal.

For the outgoing GCSE and GCE speaking tests blank CDs will be introduced as a service available on request from June 2008. Blank cassettes will continue to be provided as standard for these speaking tests. Both pre-recorded CDs and cassettes will be provided as standard for listening tests. This provision will be in place for the remaining life of the specifications. A proforma enabling centres to request blank CDs will be sent out following the entry closing date for a particular series.

For incoming GCSE and GCE speaking tests blank cassettes will be offered as a service available on request for 2009 assessments only. Two copies of the pre-recorded listening tests will be provided to each centre on cassette for 2009 assessments only. The standard format for both qualifications will be CD for listening

and speaking tests, as agreed by the JCQ. From 2010 CDs only will be provided, with cassettes withdrawn after 2009. A proforma enabling centres to request blank cassettes will be sent out following the receipt of entries for a particular series during 2009.

For the AEA, pre-recorded CDs and cassettes will be provided as standard for listening tests in 2008 and 2009. Pre-recorded CDs only will be provided in 2010, with pre-recorded cassettes withdrawn after 2009.

The phased timetable has the advantage of enabling centres to continue with their current practice for outgoing specifications. It also adheres to the JCQ agreement. It will hopefully meet the needs of centres who have expressed the need for digital format sooner rather than later and will enable other centres to make the move gradually.

PROVISION OF CASSETTES AND CDs FOR OCR MFL GCSE, GCE AND AEA

2008

January Outgoing AS and A2 listening tests provided with pre-recorded cassettes and CDs in wav format. Speaking tests provided with blank cassettes.

June Outgoing AS and A2 listening tests provided with pre-recorded cassettes and CDs in mp3 format. Speaking tests provided with blank cassettes. Blank CDs available on request.

Outgoing GCSE listening tests provided with pre-recorded cassettes and CDs in mp3 format. Speaking tests provided with blank cassettes. Blank CDs available on request.

AEA listening tests provided with pre-recorded cassettes and CDs in mp3 format.

2009



RECOGNISING ACHIEVEMENT

January

Outgoing AS and A2 listening tests provided with pre-recorded cassettes and CDs in mp3 format. Speaking tests provided with blank cassettes. Blank CDs available on request.

Incoming AS listening tests provided with pre-recorded CDs in mp3 format. Two pre-recorded cassettes provided per centre. AS speaking tests provided with blank CDs. Blank cassettes available on request.

June

Outgoing AS and A2 listening tests provided with pre-recorded cassettes and CDs in mp3 format. Speaking tests provided with blank cassettes. Blank CDs available on request.

Outgoing GCSE listening tests provided with pre-recorded cassettes and CDs in mp3 format. Speaking tests provided with blank cassettes. Blank CDs available on request.

AEA listening tests provided with pre-recorded cassettes and CDs in mp3 format.

Incoming AS listening tests provided with pre-recorded CDs in mp3 format. Two pre-recorded cassettes provided per centre. AS speaking tests provided with blank CDs. Blank cassettes available on request.

2010

January

Outgoing A2 listening tests provided with pre-recorded cassettes and CDs in mp3 format. Speaking tests provided with blank cassettes. Blank CDs available on request.

Incoming AS and A2 listening tests provided with pre-recorded CDs in mp3 format. AS and A2 speaking tests provided with blank CDs.

June

Outgoing A2 listening tests provided with pre-recorded cassettes and CDs in mp3 format. Speaking tests provided with blank cassettes. Blank CDs available on request.



Outgoing GCSE listening tests provided with pre-recorded cassettes and CDs in mp3 format. Speaking tests provided with blank cassettes. Blank CDs available on request.

AEA listening tests provided with pre-recorded CDs in mp3 format.

Incoming AS and A2 listening tests provided with pre-recorded CDs in mp3 format. AS and A2 speaking tests provided with blank CDs.

Appendix 3

REPORT ON MFL QUESTIONNAIRE

Introduction

A paper questionnaire was sent to 5600 centres in August 2007. An electronic version of the questionnaire was available on the OCR public website from 7 September to 1 October 2007.

Questions

OCR was attempting to gauge the readiness of its centres to accept the provision of pre-recorded material on CD. This service is currently provided for GCE listening examinations.

OCR was attempting to gauge the readiness of its centres to accept blank, recordable, CDs for speaking examinations.

OCR was also attempting to gauge the degree to which its centres had been exposed to mp3 as a format and the degree to which its centres might welcome on screen tests for MFL examinations.

Analysis

776 questionnaires were returned by mid November, 39 of these submitted via the website.

52% of questionnaires came from 11-18 state secondary schools.

18% of questionnaires came from 11-16 state secondary schools.

19% of questionnaires came from independent schools.

2% of questionnaires came from 6th Form Colleges.

3% of questionnaires came from FE Colleges.

6% of questionnaires came from 'other' types of centres including 13-18 schools, special schools and secure hospitals or prisons.

Centres were asked to tick the qualifications offered. The most popular qualifications were GCSE with 1258 responses. GCSE French was ticked by 415 centres. GCEs in total were indicated by 518 centres.

Current Use of Technology

Interestingly only 57% of centres indicated that they were able to play cassettes to groups of candidates. This compares to 66% of centres who were able to play CDs to candidates. 16% of centres are currently able to play mp3 files to groups of candidates.

Several centres indicated that receiving GCSE listening material on cassette only was a source of difficulty for them as they had to digitise the material before being able to play it to candidates over a tannoy or public address system.

58% of centres indicated that they were able to play cassettes to individual candidates. Only 54% of centres were able to play CDs to individuals and 14% were able to play mp3 files to individual candidates.

Capacity

51% of centres are able to play CDs to groups of more than 20 candidates. 22% can play CDs to groups of up to 20 over headphones with only 5% being able to play CDs to over 20 candidates using headphones.

12% of centres are able to play mp3 files to groups of more than 20 candidates. 11% can play mp3 files to up to 20 over headphones with only 6% being able to play mp3 files to over 20 candidates using headphones.

The questions about mp3 files in this section and the preceding section were answered by about 80% of respondents. Several respondents wrote 'what is mp3?' alongside one or other of the questions.

Maximum Numbers of Candidates

27% of centres could not play CDs over headphones at all. 21% of centres could play CDs over headphones to 1-10 candidates, 15% to between 11-30 and only 2% to more than 30 candidates. A handful of centres were able to play CDs over headphones to over 50 candidates.

48% of centres could not play mp3 files over headphones at all, 2% could play mp3 files over headphones to 1-10 candidates, 9% to between 11-30 and 2% to more than 30 candidates.

Future Plans

10% of centres had updated their equipment in the last 6 months.

13% of centres had updated their equipment in the last 12 months.

18% of centres had updated their equipment in the last 1-2 years.

18% of centres had updated their equipment in the last 2-5 years.

9% of centres had updated their equipment in the last 5-10 years.

5% of centres had updated their equipment in the last 10+ years.

Another 5% of centres indicated that there were no records of any updating of the MFL equipment or recorded 'not in living memory' next to this question.

Computers

82% of centres responded to the question about computers in Language Laboratories. 59% of total respondents noted that they had no computers in their Language Labs, for the majority this was because they did not have a Language Lab. 25% of total respondents had computers in their Language Labs.

More encouragingly 54% of centres had computers available for on screen tests with 30% recording that they had no computers available.

Comments

About a third of respondents included additional comments on the back of their form.

From these comments one misunderstanding on the part of centres stands out. Centres are assuming that CDs can only be accessed one track at a time and that forward/rewind does not work within a particular track. FF/RR buttons are available on the majority of CD players. For machines that do not have this button, movement within a track is generally achieved by pressing part of the 'track next/previous' button. This facility may not be available on low end machines. OCR CDs will contain mp3 files which have the advantage of allowing forward/rewind in exactly the same way as a cassette. The one disadvantage of CDs containing mp3 files is that they will not play on a standalone CD player unless it has the facility to support mp3. Although CD players purchased in recent years are likely to have this facility centres should check their equipment. Clarification of this issue will deal with the vast majority of concerns raised by centres, particularly for GCE.

There was also some confusion over what an mp3 player was. Some respondents were unaware that an mp3 player is a modern equivalent of a walkman, coming complete with headphones, and able to be plugged directly into a computer.

Of the comments received approximately 50% were welcoming of the move to CD/mp3 whether or not the individual centre was currently able to cope with the new format.

There was broad acceptance that CD/mp3 gave better sound quality for listening examinations. There was, however, concern that centres were unfamiliar with the process for recording in mp3 format

Centres offering lesser taught languages, particularly those offering Dutch, stood out as being most enthusiastic. It should be noted, however, that lesser taught languages have smaller class sizes than French, German and Spanish. The practicalities of recording 5 candidates as opposed to recording an entire cohort of 300 are, of course, quite different.

There were some concerns about the security aspects of using mp3 players. Centres who currently digitise cassettes before the examination recorded that this was easily accommodated in the hour prior to the examination so there was no need to hold examination material on the school network for long periods of time.

It was clear that it is common practice for centres to require GCE candidates to provide their own walkmans. This is becoming increasingly difficult as walkmans are phased out by retailers. The provision of material in mp3 format should make it easier for candidates to use their own mp3 players although centres should be aware of the security implications given the storage capacity of mp3 players.

There are concerns about the possibility of equipment failure, the need for administrator rights on any pc used to record Speaking examinations, lack of technician time, training of staff, security and data protection, equipment and software specifications particularly related to recording, and general nervousness about using unfamiliar processes.

Conclusion

Having considered the views of centres OCR will continue to provide cassettes into 2010 according to the published plan. OCR will also provide detailed generic guidance on assist centres in moving to current technology. OCR will delay consideration of making mp3 files available from a secure website until the changeover to CDs can be evaluated.

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