

Speech

Making the case for vocational qualifications

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Good morning.

The title of my speech today is ‘Making the case for vocational qualifications’ – but given the audience, I do question whether I really need to make the case! I think we would all agree that vocational qualifications are essential given that they support entry to employment, skills development, workforce mobility and economic prosperity. The Sainsbury review was clear about the importance of technical pathways and apprenticeships and the skills plan further emphasised the commitment of government in this area.

So I do not want to focus on the question directly, but rather give a regulator's perspective of the sector, with an eye to the future.

I should start by declaring my hand – my previous role in Ofqual was firmly in the general qualifications arena where the reform of GCSE and A levels is moving from design and development into the delivery and evaluation phase.

I see some parallels with the journey facing vocational qualifications, not least the central importance of engaging end-users of qualifications. But of course it is important to also recognise that vocational qualifications are necessarily distinct from their general qualification counterparts. In particular, vocational qualifications are of course more applied in nature; we need to consider how to accommodate this distinct feature while seeking to ensure that the qualifications and assessments are valid – that is to say they are able to identify and maintain a level of skills, knowledge and understanding. It is a difficult balance to strike.

In this context, I want to give my thoughts on what makes a successful vocational qualification and importantly how we might maintain trust in them in a period of reform.

The changing landscape

It is self-evident that there is a huge amount happening in the vocational qualification sector. I have already alluded to the recently published government Post-16 Skills Plan, a response to Lord Sainsbury's independent review.

The intention of the Government Skills Plan is to simplify and improve provision for 16 to 19-year-olds, developing a new approach to technical education that provides valued routes in to work.

And in apprenticeships, change is already underway, with new trailblazer standards designed directly by employer groups coming on line and replacing the old framework standards.

And another area of reform currently underway is the work being

carried out on functional skills qualifications, making sure they remain relevant to employers and ensuring they are a reliable way of signalling achievement in numeracy and literacy.

Taken in the round, this represents a significant programme of change. Although only five weeks into my current role, it is apparent to me that we need to configure ourselves, collectively, to meet these challenges. Our intent is to work closely with all interested parties to establish an appropriate and coherent regulatory system for the reformed vocational qualification landscape.

The role of the regulator

As a regulator, we think that we have a clear role in ensuring that qualifications and assessments are designed and then delivered appropriately, such that standards can be set and maintained. This assurance of standards is important in ensuring that outcomes can be trusted, particularly by employers who rely on qualifications for recruitment and training of staff.

Before talking about what this means in the future, I do want to dwell on the present, where of course many learners are engaged in, or embarking on, vocational courses. We are committed to ensuring that these current learners continue to be served well and their achievements recognised. You would expect nothing less from us.

Equally, we must ensure that learners who first encounter the reformed qualifications and assessments are not disadvantaged during the transition process. Regulation can play a part here, but there is a need for a sector approach to minimise any volatility associated with change.

Having considered the broader landscape, I thought it might be useful to consider some of the specific areas of reform I have mentioned.

Functional skills

As you know, functional skills are significant qualifications. Over 1 million functional skills certificates were issued last year and they are seen as important in improving literacy and numeracy rates in England.

We are closely engaged in the reform of functional skills qualifications that are being redeveloped to make sure they maintain relevance to employers, while ensuring that they are reliable indicators of achievement in numeracy and literacy. This has meant that aspects of assessment methodology as well as qualification content are being reviewed.

We have been working closely with the Education and Training Foundation, which is developing the new qualification content, advising on aspects of valid qualification design.

Technical education reform

The reform of technical education is another policy that is likely to have a significant impact on the market and the regulatory approach to these qualifications will be an important factor.

There are currently around 18,000 qualifications listed on our register that fall into the technical or vocational education market. They are offered by more than 150 different organisations. Regulating these represents a significant resource challenge.

We are taking some steps to address this now. We're requiring the organisations we regulate to review their qualifications, and to remove from view on our register any qualifications that they have not awarded in the past two years. We expect this action to remove some 2,000 qualifications from consideration.

But this is a small step compared to the potential implications of reform that will introduce 15 routes, with dedicated qualifications for the occupations offered by a single organisation in each route. This marks a potential step change to the open market that we have now and has the potential, in the longer term, to reduce the number of qualifications on offer significantly.

The reform of these qualifications allows us to consider our regulatory options. We think that our expertise and experience offers much to the development and delivery of these high profile qualifications.

Apprenticeships

We have been paying equally close attention to the development of trailblazer apprenticeships. We have been identified as one of the four External Quality Assurance agencies (EQAs) and, over recent months, have been working with a range of trailblazer groups to review their apprenticeship assessment plans. Interestingly, although the number of trailblazer groups that have engaged us is relatively small, together they provide for around 50% of anticipated apprentice numbers.

In reviewing these assessment plans, we have seen much that is to be commended, including a commitment to designing assessments that are fair for students and manageable for those delivering them. We have seen a clear sense of what employers want end point assessments in apprenticeships to achieve – that is, a reliable method of ensuring an apprentice can demonstrate the skills and knowledge they have developed through their employment and study.

But there are some challenges too. Unsurprisingly, few trailblazer groups have the very specific expertise required to develop assessment plans. Some of the issues we have seen so far include unclear rationales for differentiating performance, a lack of clarity about how different forms of assessment can be used together to form a complete evaluation and a desire to grade a student on very subjective skills, such as customer service and empathy.

None of these issues are insurmountable, but we do think that our experience reflects the importance of assessment expertise early in the process. This enables an assessment plan, and the related end point assessment, to be designed to test the full range of knowledge, skills and understanding described in the apprenticeship standard. In turn, this gives confidence that an

assessment will give an apprentice a fair and consistent opportunity to pass.

The challenge for the wider system is, perhaps, to ensure a level regulatory playing field such that end point assessments are comparable irrespective of the EQA selected. We are working closely with the Department for Education, the Institute for Apprenticeships and others in order to support the trailblazer groups further as work continues to develop new standards and plans.

The role of the employer

Clearly, the role of the employer in developing trailblazer apprenticeships is key. From a regulatory perspective, we do not think it appropriate to set an arbitrary number for how many employers should be in a trailblazer group, nor should we determine what the qualification should cover. And we need to allow some flexibility between sectors, and between the occupations within them, so that qualifications are responsive to identified needs. Employer leadership is crucial here.

But what employers tell us is that they want to know that the qualifications and assessments themselves are of high quality. They want to know that they can trust the certificate presented to them on a CV – that a distinction achieved in Essex is the same as one achieved in Yorkshire, and that people presenting themselves have been tested on their knowledge and skills appropriately and consistently.

We have a range of regulatory tools that enable us to meet this need. One of these is the evaluation of new qualifications and assessments before they reach the market, to confirm whether they are capable of meeting these demands.

Upfront evaluation of new vocational qualifications

For functional skills, for trailblazer apprenticeships, and for technical education when the work begins, we expect to see the

development of a defined content. Given this, and drawing on our experience of general qualification reform we will consider the role that an up-front evaluation process might play for vocational qualifications. One size will certainly not fit all and we do not want to introduce unnecessary regulatory burden. But we do think that considering the evaluation of reformed qualifications and assessments, before they enter the market, should be a consideration in deciding our overall regulatory approach.

In summary

To sum up, we are looking to the future while maintaining our regulatory focus on the present. We continually review the sector and will tackle issues that undermine trust. We are committed to maintaining confidence in current vocational qualifications. Looking to the future, we want to work closely with stakeholders across the sector to ensure that we strike the right balance between the needs of the employer and our ability to provide them with the assurance of assessment and qualification standards they want.

To finish where I started, our ambition here is to work with stakeholders to ensure that we develop an appropriate and coherent regulatory system for the reformed vocational qualification landscape. This clarity, together with a shared understanding of how standards are set and maintained, seem to me central to the maintenance of confidence in the vocational system.

Thank you.

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