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Education, universities and childcare during coronavirus

Speech

ASCL annual conference 2021: Ofqual Chair Ian Bauckham, CBE

Ian Bauckham CBE delivered a speech reflecting on the topic of qualifications and assessment in 2021, particularly GCSEs and A levels.

From: Ofqual and Ian Bauckham, CBE
Published: 18 March 2021

Delivered on: 18 March 2021 (Transcript of the speech, as well by as it was delivered)

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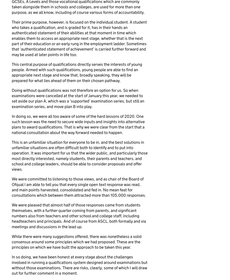

Good afternoon colleagues and thank you very much for that introduction. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak with you today in my capacity as chairman of Ofqual. I would like to use this chairman's reflect on the topic of qualifications and assessment in 2021. I hope to have some time to answer some questions afterwards too.

I imagine that many of us were quite unaware of what the future held in store for us when we last met at this conference in March last year. Lockdown was for the majority of children and young people. We had watched with rising anxiety the devastation the pandemic was wreaking abroad on our television screens, and were beginning to imagine what might happen if, or more likely when, it arrived here. But I am not sure that the full consequences of the pandemic for our education system's young people were at that point painted in clear enough detail for us.

A major question for us as a country has been how to award qualifications, with last summer and this. We have had to consider the possible safety difficulties in physically taking examinations, given the infection risks.

This was a particular worry last year, but given the unexpected endurance of the virus, it has been a major consideration for us in the spring of this year and over time, but we also have a concern for 2021. We have had the challenge of the increasing and often extreme unevenness of the playing field on which students have been working, owing to the very bumpy impact of the pandemic.

This was raising issues in minds last year, but perhaps less so than this year, simply because the pandemic struck in March when the majority of examination courses had almost been completed.

This year, though, as everyone listening to this will know, differential disruption to education is very high on our worry list.

Qualifications, and I am thinking throughout this speech particularly of GCSEs, A levels and those vocational qualifications which are commonly taken alongside them in schools and colleges, are used for more than one purpose, as we all know, including of course serious forms of accountability.

Their prime purpose, however, is focused on the individual student. A student who has been assessed and who has been given a grade by an authorised judgement of their abilities at that moment in time which enables them to access an appropriate next stage, whether that is the next part of their education or an early rung in the employment ladder. Sometimes that 'authenticated statement of achievement' is carried further forward and may be used at other points in life.

This central purpose of qualifications directly serves the interests of young people, and it is important that we do everything possible to ensure that appropriate next stage and know that, broadly speaking, they will be prepared for what lies ahead of them on their chosen pathway.

Doing without qualifications was not therefore an option for us. So when examinations were cancelled at the start of January this year, we needed to set aside our plan A, which was a 'supported' examination series, but still an examination series, and move plan B into action.

In doing so, we were at less aware of some of the hard lessons of 2020. One such lesson was the need to secure wide inputs and insights into alternative plans to award qualifications. That is very well now clear from the call for a national consultation about the way forward needed to happen.

This is an unfortunate situation for everyone to be in, and the hard solutions in unfamiliar situations are often difficult both to identify and to put into practice. We have had to ask teachers, school leaders, college principals, those most directly interested, namely students, their parents and teachers and school and college leaders, should be able to consider proposals and offer views.

We were committed to listening to those views, and as chair of the Board of Ofqual I am able to tell you that every single open feel response was read, and main points harvested, consolidated and tied in. No mean feat for consultations which between them attracted more than 100,000 responses.

We were pleased that almost half of those responses came from students themselves. We were also pleased that a large number of responses from numbers also from teachers and other school and college staff including headteachers and principals. And of course from ASCL, both formally and via meetings and discussions in the lead up.

While there were many suggestions offered, there was nonetheless a solid consensus around some principles which we had proposed. These are the principles on which we have built the approach to be taken this year.

In so doing, we have been aware of every page about the challenges involved in running a qualifications system designed around examinations but without those examinations. There are risks, clearly, some of which I will draw out for further comment in a moment.

But let me say this first. Placing this year's qualifications successful will, ultimately, be a collective effort. Exam boards, and we as the regulator of them, have a lot of work to do, and we will do it. But we need the support teachers and school leaders have to bring, as do parents.

These 'using' the qualifications also have, I believe, some distinct obligations this year. In considering applications from students of this 2021 school, further and higher education institutions and employers must take into account the wider factors which have impacted these young people, and understand the flexible approach we have needed to take to their qualifications.

Further support and bridging opportunities for additional learning, catch up and revision, may all need to be built in in the early part of the next stage, whether that is a job, apprenticeship, degree or other route. We owe that collectively to our young people.

Now, a central benefit of the approach we are taking for this year for GCSEs, A levels and those vocational qualifications taken alongside them is that it permits young people to be assessed first and foremost on what they have actually had the opportunity to be taught. That surely is a first principle of a valid assessment.

This year, we strongly suspect that what has been covered, and how effectively it has been able to be taught, is variable on an altogether different scale to what we find in a normal year. In some cases for example weeks of education have been lost, in others, months, in some cases, almost all, in some schools. We know that the ability to provide quality remote education, and to receive and engage with it, has been varied from one to one, from school to school, and in a great deal of detail, from teacher to student, and family to family, within schools and colleges.

We know there is likely to be been in many cases what might call a 'breadth-depth trade-off', under pressure of time, some teachers will have been able to cover a wide curriculum but perhaps not in great depth or detail, but will have been aware that with more time, as in a normal school year, much stronger mastery could have been achieved. Others will have made the equally understandable decision to ensure that the contents has been a thoroughly learnt as time allows, so prioritising depth rather than breadth. We know that, in the case of vocational qualifications taken in colleges and school or geography, for a whole variety of reasons, are likely to have been least able to withstand or compensate for the challenges the pandemic has thrown at all of us.

It is for that reason that the only sensible, indeed, the only fair, thing to do in these circumstances is to ask teachers to make a holistic assessment of their students' achievement against what has actually been covered.

In doing, we are also aware that this places an additional responsibility on teachers, schools and colleges. It is certainly a task which requires all the professional judgement they can muster, and it requires a high level of judgement and professional integrity which teachers have in abundance. Exam boards will shortly be publishing more detailed guidance for teachers, schools and colleges to support with this process, and the majority of exam centres will have direct, human contact with exam board staff to support them in this task.

One feature of this support package will be a set of assessment questions which exam boards will make available to teachers and students. These will offered with mark schemes and exemplar answers to support teachers in making consistent and fair judgements, but they will not be arranged into mini-exams, neither will they be compulsory for students to answer, in part because of what I have just said about the variability of what has been able to be taught, and in part because of the risk of a mini-exam being interpreted in ways chosen the range which will be available, some of which will be drawn from past papers and some of which will be new, they will provide very helpful evidence to support those holistic grading decisions, and in any event again that I, we, are all so aware that this approach will involve teachers and students in work, and we do not want to add to the burden of work after 12 months of often heroic efforts on the part of the school and college workforce to keep education (and quite a few other things) going through the pandemic. We have tried to make the process as simple and as light touch as we could again and to acknowledge with gratitude the work that teachers and school leaders will be doing this summer to help get for grades to young people.

Let me stay with the theme of evidence to support grading. Since the return to school of all students last week, questions have been raised about the evidence teachers will need for this year's grading. I have talked about one form of evidence already. Let me be clear on the following point.

There is no need for any teacher to be anxious about not having kept this or that piece of evidence of student work completed in the last 12 months. We have had asked you to keep anything specific, and there will be no question of you being at any disadvantage or penalised if you have therefore not done so up to now.

Once you get the exam board guidance, which will be very shortly now, there will be clear indications of the kind of evidence that could be used and there will be ample time to produce anything that is likely to be needed from April to June, when grades need to be submitted.

Where there is already good evidence to hand from earlier in the course, which will often be the case, that may of course be used. But there is no need either pre-emptively or retrospectively to start trying to generate evidence for this purpose. Teachers know their students, and they know what they might raise a that teachers use the ad hoc limited time they have to hear their classes and keep the learning moving forward.

Questions have also been asked about the impact this year's approach will have on grade inflation. Let me offer some reflections on this. It is an understandable question, given that the thrust of much public opinion the last decade or so has been to control grade inflation.

The argument now barely needs to be made, surely, that in normal times for the proportion of high grades to keep rising year after year, if there is no evidence of overall achievement rising with it, is to receive a advantage, least of all students'.

Grade inflation is not in our interests. Unlike last year, we are this year requiring the exam boards to put in place a system of external quality assurance of the grades awarded by teachers, in accordance with Ofqual's prime purpose of this, when seen alongside the guidance and support, to give teachers, schools and colleges a framework within which they are enabled to do what I believe teachers and school leaders want to do, namely the right thing. Robust quality assurance not only provides incentives to do the right thing, it also helps to avoid or resisting any pressures which may still come our way to do otherwise.

"I know you want me to give this student this high grade, but I don't think I have the evidence to do so, and my judgements could be checked, so I am afraid I cannot do that."

As the regulator, we will be requiring exam boards not only to make direct checks on the quality of teacher assessment judgements, but also to have undertaken both random and risk-based QA checking exercises. The random exercises will take in all types of school and college, both state funded and independent, because we expect all actions in the system to play by the same rules.

The risk-based QA will identify, amongst others, those cases where patterns of grades submitted appear surprising when compared with recent history in the school or college. This is not to say that such patterns will always be wrong, or unduly inflated, but it does switch on a warning light that means, in the interest of fairness to all, that boards should take a good look at the evidence to make sure it really does support the grade judgements that are being put forward.

Quite serious action could consume we saw emerge in the consultation about many aspects of the proposed approach for this summer. One area where we saw a great deal of support was for the proposal that school governors made a response to the consultation, and in discussions with representative bodies, including this Association, that our original plan to force the appeals process on centres would not be the right way to proceed.

This push came from two directions. Firstly, it was felt that it would place very significant pressure on teachers if they had both to award grades and also to arbiters where there were explicit challenges to their own judgements, and to do so during the mid-summer summer holidays.

Secondly, there was a sense, especially from students and parents, that to expect centres to be the appeals process is challenge to a grade needed to be heard by a third party, external to the school or college where the original judgement had been made.

In the light of these responses we have limited the school or college's role to a formal check that no error has been made and correct process has followed.

If that relatively straightforward check does not satisfy the applicant, the centre will send the appeal to the exam board, who will be required to put in place processes for determining if the school's grade represented a reasonable exercise of academic judgement against the evidence available.

If it did not, the board will determine what grade, higher or lower, would be the most reasonable grade to award, and that grade will be what the student will then get.

Appeals are likely to play out rather differently this year to in a normal year. In normal years we all have available to us both numerical marks derived from exam papers and also the ability to see the pattern of the student's answers of individual and collective level about whether or not to challenge the grade awarded. Timed on at its raw mark – maybe a review of my script will find one more mark for me'. In 2021 however we will have only the grade, representing a holistic judgement on the evidence of performance. It will not be in the student's interest to challenge, unless there is a clear error or rule breach boundaries. It will be important for students, and staff advising them, to be aware of the implications of this when considering appeals.

Alongside requesting the exam boards for implementing the 2021 qualifications cycle, we are of course also thinking about 2022. It will be some time before the full impact of the pandemic has worked through our system, and it will not have escaped anyone's attention that the first year of what are, in most cases, 2 year courses, has already been disrupted.

Additional, those taking A levels or other exams at age 18 in 2022 will not have the experience of taking GCSE exams under their belt.

This is being worked on intensively currently. We will consult with stakeholders and representative bodies, including this Association, and hope that the processes can be worked through speedily so I am a bit less aware of the sense of urgency on this from young people and their teachers.

Finally, let me offer a few brief thoughts about the future. We have at present a very high level of focus on the immediate challenges of the pandemic, and it is fair and right that we do some serious thinking about the evidence, both national qualifications, and delegates will want to be assured that this work is in train. Very other innovations developed at speed during a crisis enable us to do things we were not able to do before the crisis. While the COVID pandemic is a tragic and international proportions, it is not the first to affect the operating of qualifications.

We will want to think hard about how we bring together the experience of the pandemic and the wider lesson developing evidence we now have in areas such as curriculum design, evidence based pedagogy and assessment, our growing knowledge of the capabilities of technology, and how that will interact, to ensure we have the best possible system in the future.

I will end by saying once again that we are most grateful to this Association and its staff and members for your preparedness to engage with us, both ethically and constructively, as we have worked up the approaches for 2021. It has been immensely valuable.

Thank you very much for your attention. I think there may be a little time left during which I would be happy to take some questions.

Published 18 March 2021

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