

House of Commons  
Education and Skills Committee

**A LEVEL STANDARDS**

Third Report of Session 2002–03

*Report, together with  
Proceedings of the Committee,  
Minutes of Evidence and Appendices*

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### Footnotes

In the footnotes of this Report, references to oral evidence are indicated by 'Q' followed by the question number. References to written evidence are indicated by the page number as in 'Ev 12'.

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# THIRD REPORT

**The Education and Skills Committee has agreed to the following Report:**

## **A LEVEL STANDARDS**

### **Summary**

Last summer there was considerable concern about the integrity of the A level system. The problems that occurred were largely due to the implementation of a new curriculum. The evidence we have taken in this inquiry has challenged many of the allegations made last year and underlined the importance of understanding the examination system. The A level examination system in this country has not been transparent and this had led to confusion throughout the system, from students to examiners. Whilst a small number of students had their examination papers re-graded, the concern of the media that *tens of thousands of pupils could have papers remarked* was not realised. There was however, a lack of communication and understanding between the examination boards, the QCA and the DfES.

The standard of A levels is often questioned. Evidence presented to us strongly suggested that, whilst the A level curricula and methods of assessment have changed, the system has not changed its standard. The increasing number of students passing A levels can mostly be explained by understanding the changes to the A level examination system since 1983. We should also recognise the widespread improvement of teaching quality and teaching resources over the last twenty years.

### **Introduction**

1. In August 2002 following the publication of the A level results, the A level examination system was heavily criticised by students, teachers, individual examiners and the media. There was considerable concern that a very large number of students' grades had been manipulated by the examination boards in order to ensure that the introduction of Curriculum 2000 did not lead to grade inflation. The DfES responded to this by announcing an independent inquiry by Mr Mike Tomlinson, former Chief Inspector of Schools. The QCA undertook an inquiry into course marking at 100 schools which focused on the complaints made against the examination boards.

2. On 27 September, the then Secretary of State, the Rt Hon Estelle Morris MP, sacked the Chairman of the QCA, Sir William Stubbs, "to restore and maintain confidence in the examination system".<sup>1</sup> She then resigned, herself, on Wednesday 23rd October 2002. Whilst our inquiry did take note of these events, our main concern was to establish the events behind the public debate on A level standards. We were concerned that the A level system had again been criticised and that the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority [QCA], the examination boards and the DfES did not appear to be working together effectively. We announced our inquiry into A level standards and the work of the QCA on 7 October 2002. Our inquiry focused on the role of the QCA, the DfES and the relevant English awarding bodies.

## **THE BACKGROUND TO THE A LEVELS DEBATE**

### **History of A level**

3. To understand the current A level examination process and to evaluate the general criticism about lowering of standards that the A level system has received in recent years, it is necessary to understand the evolution of the A level and its grading system.

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<sup>1</sup> DfES press notice 2002/0180

***Norm referenced A levels***

4. A levels were first awarded in 1951.<sup>2</sup> Until the early 1960s A levels were awarded only at the grades of pass and distinction. In 1963, the Secondary School Examination Council [SSEC] issued guidelines for a 5 level scale, indicating roughly the proportions of candidates to be awarded each grade: 10% A, 15 % B, 10 % C, 15 % D, 20 % E and a further 20 % allowed an O level pass. One of the major problems with this approach was that it specified proportions of candidates and therefore the band of marks in a grade might be very small. (In 1982, the difference between a D and a B could be as few as 8 marks in one subject, 15 marks in another.)<sup>3</sup> This system ensured that only a relatively small number of students would achieve grade A. This also could allow the standard of an A grade to fluctuate each year, as it varied according to the level of attainment of the cohort.

5. This system is sometimes described as norm referencing. In a norm referenced system, the assumption is that the numbers taking the exam are sufficiently large to ensure that standards will not vary greatly from year to year; therefore a given percentage will achieve an A grade, another given percentage a B grade and so on. Norm referencing was set up as a way of identifying the most successful candidates, but it is an unfair means of assessing the performance of schools and, perhaps more importantly, of individuals.<sup>4</sup>

***Criterion referenced A levels***

6. In 1984, the Secondary Examinations Council<sup>5</sup> advised that grade boundaries should be based on the partition of the mark scale rather than on proportions of candidates, in a move towards a criterion referenced system. Examiner judgement was to be the basis for the award of grades B and E, with the remaining grades determined by dividing the mark range between these two points into equal intervals. This system was introduced in 1987 and remained in force until the introduction of the new curriculum in 2000.<sup>6</sup>

7. Criterion referencing sets standards against declared criteria of performance – the so-called ‘can do’ statements. A driving test is criterion referenced. Achievement of the driving certificate is set simply against performance and not against an annual limited number of certificates available in a competitive environment. The difficulties in criterion referencing lie in the establishment of the criteria. It is relatively straightforward in areas like science and mathematics, but not at all straightforward in areas such as humanities and social science. It was pointed out to the Committee that nearly all the subject areas that were recommended for reassessment in Tomlinson’s interim report were in humanities and social science areas.<sup>7</sup>

8. A levels are currently neither fully norm-referenced nor fully criterion-referenced. Ms Tattersall, Director General of AQA, told us that the current system used “a soft criterion referencing ...it is a system which does reward attainment at the more general level than some very specific criteria would do, and I think it is a system which has served students exceedingly well over the years”.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The Story of the General Certificate of Education (GCE) – Advanced level – Colin Robinson, September 2001. Commissioned by Statistics and Information Management Team; Communications and Knowledge Management Division; QCA.

<sup>3</sup> The Story of the General Certificate of Education (GCE) – Advanced level – Colin Robinson, September 2001. Commissioned by Statistics and Information Management Team; Communications and Knowledge Management Division; QCA.

<sup>4</sup> Ev. 130

<sup>5</sup> Predecessor of the QCA.

<sup>6</sup> Ev. 130

<sup>7</sup> Ev. 131

<sup>8</sup> Q.213

## THE AS LEVEL

9. In 1989 a new examination was introduced for 18 year olds: the Advanced Supplementary (AS). The aim of it was to broaden the experience of those taking A levels and its standard was to be the same as that of the A level, on half the content. This was contrary to the perceived need for an intermediate examination between GCSE and A level, and the AS was not taken up by as many students as the Government had hoped it would be.<sup>9</sup>

10. The 1996 review undertaken by Lord Dearing recognised the lack of appeal of the AS and proposed a new Advanced Subsidiary examination, which could be taken either as a free-standing qualification or as a precursor to the A-level itself.<sup>10</sup> The new AS was to be set at a standard appropriate to the end of one year's study in the sixth form, thus similar to the intermediate examinations proposed earlier.

## CURRICULUM 2000

### The new structure of the A level

11. In September 2000, a completely revised A level curriculum was introduced. This was an entirely modular curriculum which required candidates to take modules as they proceeded through the course, rather than only being examined in a single session at the end of the course. Generally all students now take the Advanced Subsidiary [AS] Level in Year 12 and then, where appropriate, continue to Year 13 to complete their A level by taking the A2 examinations.

12. Curriculum 2000 divided the A level into two parts: three units at AS level which, together, equate to the first year of a traditional A level course, and three A2 units which are awarded during the second year of study. When taken together these six units comprise a full GCE A level and form the basis for an A level award. The three units studied in the first year at AS level can, if the student wishes, be 'cashed in' to provide a certificated qualification in its own right. Each unit of the award is equally weighted, with the AS and A2 programmes each accounting for 50 % of the overall grade.<sup>11</sup>

### The policy objective of the AS

13. The DfES hoped that students would take a broad range of AS level courses during the first year of study – up to four or five. They would then be able to narrow their studies in the second year by selecting the subjects which they would pursue to the full GCE A level standard, whilst receiving a qualification for subjects they pursue no further. Students could also retake units to seek to improve their grade.<sup>12</sup>

14. Mike Tomlinson concluded in his interim report that the entirely modular curriculum, which allowed students to retake units, "might reasonably have been expected to lead to an increase, compared to the former 'legacy' A levels, in the proportion of full A level candidates who achieved the GCE A level standard without any change in the overall level of demand of the qualification".<sup>13</sup>

15. Curriculum 2000 was designed to provide students with greater flexibility. Mike Tomlinson concluded that flexibility had been achieved through the "broadened range of

<sup>9</sup> The Story of the General Certificate of Education (GCE) - Advanced level – Colin Robinson September 2001. Commissioned by Statistics and Information Management Team; Communications and Knowledge Management Division; QCA.

<sup>10</sup> Lord Dearing: Review of Qualifications for 16–19 Year Olds 1996.

<sup>11</sup> Tomlinson interim report, para 10.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, para 11.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, para 12.

subjects and types of learning within the A level strand, for instance by establishing A levels in vocational subjects".<sup>14</sup>

16. Ofsted told us that there were some problematic inbuilt design features in Curriculum 2000. Evidence from Ofsted's survey<sup>15</sup> and other subject inspections suggested that Curriculum 2000 had, on occasion, narrowed the students' range of knowledge and experience within subjects, whilst not always succeeding in broadening coverage of the areas of the curriculum through the choice of a range of contrasting AS courses.<sup>16</sup>

### **Celebrating Curriculum 2000**

17. We took evidence from people who had been involved in teaching Curriculum 2000. Mr Neil Hopkins, Principal of Peter Symonds College, Winchester, was supportive of the new curriculum, although he believed "that AS and A2 was introduced very quickly, too quickly frankly, and we worked very, very hard to make it work. There were some problems with it but in proportion I do not think the problems were that extreme."<sup>17</sup> He said that there were "still some confusions" which were beginning to be clarified.<sup>18</sup> He reminded us of the many changes made to the examination system in the last few years and said that schools did "not want too many changes. We want to settle down and make some sense of this scheme."<sup>19</sup> Mr Hopkins highlighted the "tremendous benefits" of the new curriculum; "it has given accessibility via the AS to people who would not have got an advanced level before".<sup>20</sup>

18. Mr Tony Neal, Headmaster of De Ashton School, Lincolnshire, agreed that "the system of AS and A2 is better for students and better for everyone than the old system".<sup>21</sup> He believed more work was needed to clarify the standards of AS and A2 levels. Dr McLone, Chief Executive of the OCR awarding body, told us that Curriculum 2000 had been a "great success" as a new curriculum because, "it had allowed students to move into a broader number of subjects".<sup>22</sup> Mr Edward Gould, Master of Marlborough College, reminded us that the criticism of Curriculum 2000 in most schools was "purely related to assessment. [It was] not related to Curriculum 2000, which we welcome."<sup>23</sup> He was concerned that universities continued to demand three A levels for admission, showing no acceptance of the AS/A2 framework. This practice discouraged the diversity of curriculum the AS and A2 examinations were designed to encourage.<sup>24</sup>

19. Ofsted's evidence to the Committee was drawn from their wide experience of school inspections, and concluded that students faced an ever more exacting schedule of assessment, and that the character of Year 12 has changed dramatically. They believed that the curriculum changes had produced beneficial effects in concentrating teachers' and students' minds and giving a real sense of purpose, and that they had broadly maintained the rigour and depth expected for advanced study.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Inquiry into A level standards – Final Report, Mike Tomlinson, December 2002, paragraph 17.

<sup>15</sup> QCA 25 Ofsted Section B1.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Q.270

<sup>18</sup> Q.281

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Q.126

<sup>23</sup> Q.281

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ev. 134 (QCA 25 Section B1). Ofsted published a report: *Curriculum 2000: implementation* on 21 March 2003 which expanded on the evidence it gave to the Committee.



### **HOW WERE THE A LEVELS GRADED?**

Grading happens twice each year, within each of the awarding bodies, after all scripts and coursework have been marked. It involves deciding the lowest number of marks needed for a grade A, B, C, D and E in a unit. This number is known as the grade boundary mark. The grade boundary marks and candidates' marks are converted to a scale that is common for all units: the UMS (Uniform Mark Scale). This ensures that a mark from one unit is worth the same as a mark from any other unit, in whatever year the unit is taken.

The process of deciding raw grade boundary marks for each unit happens in two stages:

- a meeting of the awarding committee to recommend grade boundaries
- a review of the recommended grade boundaries by the awarding body's accountable officer.

This process is set out in QCA's Code of Practice, which as Mr Tomlinson has reported, the awarding bodies follow.

#### **Recommending grade boundaries**

The awarding committee typically has around eight members, each of whom are senior examiners and subject experts. The committee considers students' work from scripts and coursework, as well as statistics and archive material of students' work from previous years. It uses the evidence to recommend grade boundaries that will ensure the standard is maintained year on year.

The Code of Practice recognises that grade awarding is not an exact science and therefore grade boundaries cannot be determined entirely by fixed rules. This is because the validity of evidence from sources can change in different circumstances. For example, statistical evidence will be less reliable for subjects with only a few students; evidence from scripts will be less reliable where syllabuses have changed substantially. Both statistical evidence and experienced judgement contribute a distinct perspective and both are valuable.

#### **Evidence from scripts**

The awarding committee uses evidence from scripts to make a direct comparison of standards. It compares current scripts with scripts from the previous year.

The previous year's scripts represent the work that fell on the grade boundary for that year. The current scripts are from a range of marks that are around where the grade boundary is likely to fall.

The awarding committee decides which marks from the present year's examination show A level of performance that is most similar to the level of performance shown at the previous year's boundaries.

#### **Statistical evidence**

Since comparing evidence from scripts is the only direct method of comparing standards, some question why statistical evidence is used at all.

In previous decades, examiner judgement was often the sole criterion. However, there were instances of apparently large swings in performance from one year to the next. This suggested that examiner judgement alone was insufficient, which is understandable; grading examination papers that are not of identical difficulty is a complex process, especially when changes in curriculum and assessment arrangements have occurred.

The awarding committee uses statistical evidence to build a picture of how performance might be expected to change. This is based on the characteristics of students who take each examination and the characteristics of the examination itself.

For example, if the average mark is slightly higher in the current year than it was in the previous year, the committee might look at the schools entered. If there was a greater proportion of high-performing schools, this might explain the higher average mark, and provide evidence for an increase in the percentage of students gaining a particular grade.

### **Approving grade boundaries**

The accountable officer reviews the awarding committee's recommendations before making final decisions. The officer cannot make further judgements of scripts, but can consider the committee's judgements and recommendations in light of decisions made by other awarding committees for similar subjects. This provides an opportunity to:

- check the recommendations made by individual awarding committees
- coordinate decisions across subjects.<sup>26</sup>

## **SUMMER 2002**

20. A level results published on 15 August 2002 showed a rise in the pass rate (A–E grades) compared to 2001 from 89.8 % to 94.3 % and a rise in A grades from 18.6 % to 20.7 %, an achievement praised by Ministers.<sup>27</sup> Concern about the 'fixing' of grades and the marking down of some students was reported in the press on 1 September 2002. Initial concern centred on one board, OCR (Oxford, Cambridge and RSA Examinations), and on examinations in the humanities and social sciences. The concern grew throughout September, as more schools and students requested re-marks and went to the press about unexpected results.

21. In response to the rising concerns over the allocation of A level grades, the then Secretary of State, Estelle Morris made a statement on 19 September 2002 stating that no Minister had been involved in any aspect of marking, assessing or grading students.<sup>28</sup> She stated that she had requested a report from QCA into the grading of certain course work units in the 2002 OCR examinations as there had been a considerable increase in complaints about the 2002 examinations set by that board. She also announced a two part inquiry by Mike Tomlinson into the allegations of grade fixing. The Secretary of State sacked Sir William Stubbs, Chairman of the QCA, on 27 September, following a public dispute over actions taken by the DfES prior to the publication of Tomlinson's interim report.<sup>29</sup>

### **The Tomlinson inquiry**

22. Mike Tomlinson's interim report was published on 27 September 2002. He recommended an examination of the grading of a number of A2 units, subsequently extended to some AS units as well, with a view to re-grading if necessary. Re-grading means changing the boundaries for the translation of marks into grades. It does not involve re-marking the papers.

<sup>26</sup> This information was published in the QCA's Review of A level awarding in 2002.

<sup>27</sup> Minister Stephen Twigg – DfES Press Notice 2002/0164.

<sup>28</sup> Statement by the Rt Hon Estelle Morris – 19 September 2002.

<sup>29</sup> Evidence the Committee received regarding the public dispute is detailed in Qq. 327–405, 428–429.

23. The precise Terms of Reference<sup>30</sup> for the inquiry were:

- *To investigate allegations about the setting of standards for A level grades this year. In particular, to make sure that the conversion from marks to grades was determined according to proper standards and procedures. A first report on this was provided to the Secretary of State on Friday 27 September.*
- *To investigate the arrangements at QCA and the awarding bodies for setting, maintaining and judging A level standards, which are challenging, and ensuring their consistency over time; and to make recommendations by November to the Secretary of State and Ken Boston, Chief Executive of the QCA, for action with the aim of securing the credibility and integrity of these exams. A second report on this was provided to the Secretary of State on 2 December.*

### **Concerns about the Tomlinson inquiry**

24. There was some criticism that the Tomlinson report did not address the concerns raised over the 2002 A level results. We did not find this to be the case and outline some issues that were raised by the Committee with Mike Tomlinson during his oral evidence session.

### ***Should more examination papers have been re-graded?***

25. On 14 October 2002, Mike Tomlinson announced the results of his investigation into the grading of A levels.<sup>31</sup> Grading was reviewed for all A2 and AS units for which the relevant awarding body Accountable Officer made changes outside the historical norms to the grade boundaries recommended to them by Chairs of Examiners. There were 78 units which fell into this category, and these were then reviewed by expert panels, each of which comprised the relevant awarding body Chief Executive and Chair of Examiners, and a Chair of Examiners from another awarding body. Each panel was observed by a representative of the QCA and an independent observer, nominated by representative organisations for schools, colleges and teachers. Seven independent observers were used.<sup>32</sup>

26. Following this process A level grade boundaries in 18 units were revised: 6 AS units, and 12 A2 units. These changes affected a total of 9,800 candidate entries. The redefinition of these grade boundaries affected 733 candidate entries for AS levels and 1,220 for A levels. 1,945 individual students from 839 centres have received at least one revised A or AS level grade.

27. Mr Roger Porkess, Project Leader for Mathematics in Education and Industry (MEI), and also an OCR Principal Examiner for Mathematics, expressed to us his concern that many more examination papers should have been regraded.<sup>33</sup> Mr Tomlinson explained “the three boards gave me the data for their movements of grades. mark boundaries this year. and they gave me data from 2001... The decision to look at it was mine alone. based on that evidence and the evidence from documentation. which indicated whether or not the chair of examiners had been consulted about the changes and had agreed them”.<sup>34</sup>

### ***U graded students***

28. Some colleges found that students who were performing exceedingly well in terms of their examination results got an unclassified mark for their coursework. Dr McLone said “There are very few of those. I know there has been a lot in the press about it, but we did an analysis for QCA, in their inquiry, and, as you will have seen in that report, there are

<sup>30</sup> A Level Standards – interim report, Mike Tomlinson.

<sup>31</sup> DfES: Tomlinson Report on Outcomes of Review of A-level Grading – 14 October 2002.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> The debate the Committee had with Mr Porkess may be found under: Qq.408–439.

<sup>34</sup> Q.484

actually very few who actually got a U in coursework; and, in fact, in English, which was the subject which was most under review, nobody got a U in coursework who got As in the examination, when you actually analysed the results. So I do not think that there is actually an issue which goes along with what we are talking about.”<sup>35</sup>

29. The QCA’s review of Curriculum 2000, which was undertaken marginally before the Tomlinson inquiry, had looked at the reports about students who showed extreme A2 unit profiles: for example, two grade As and a grade U. OCR had 979 students with an AAU profile. This was 0.5 % of OCR’s total entry. Most of these candidates were spread across a range of schools and colleges. In very few schools and colleges were there more than one of these students. AQA had 769 students with an AAU profile. This was 0.3 % of AQA’s total entry. The QCA concluded that we should expect a very small percentage of extreme unit profiles and that uneven or extreme unit profiles did not imply grading or marking error. Uneven or extreme unit profiles could be expected because different units commonly assess different aspects of the subject and some students under- or over-perform from unit to unit.<sup>36</sup>

### **Success in 2002**

30. During September and October 2002 there was great concern that many A level students had been affected by confusion in the grading process of the new examinations. There was also concern that the increasing number of students passing the A2 examinations demonstrated that A levels were getting easier. However the evidence that was presented to us largely agreed with the findings of the Tomlinson inquiry. The vast majority of students who took A2 examinations this year were unaffected by the grading issues and they can be proud of their achievements. Nothing in the evidence submitted to the Committee has led us to believe that it was a lessening of the standards that gave rise to improved pass rates.

31. Dr McLone reminded us that “a lot of the students out there have done very well, a lot of the colleges worked very hard”. Curriculum 2000 required a great commitment from staff in schools and colleges to ensure its effective implementation. Dr McClone said “there is a good deal of evidence... that those organisations that spent time with their students, worked out how they were going to do it over the two years... have actually done very well”.<sup>37</sup>

32. Mr Tomlinson praised the commitment of FE colleges in adopting the new curriculum, saying that “they spent an enormous amount of time and effort getting ready for Curriculum 2000 and ensuring adequate training of staff”. He recognised that schools had different pressures placed on their resources and therefore he wanted to refrain from being critical. “There is some evidence that some schools did not participate in the training for Curriculum 2000”.<sup>38</sup>

## **ANALYSIS OF THE ISSUES**

### **The AS and A2 Standard**

33. In August 2001, QCA published *Managing Curriculum 2000 for 16–19 students*. This guidance was sent to schools, colleges, LEAs and Connexions services. It clearly states that A2 should be more demanding than the overall A level standard.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Q.173

<sup>36</sup> QCA’s Review of A level awarding in 2002, Section: Unit Profiles.

<sup>37</sup> Q.172

<sup>38</sup> Q.494

<sup>39</sup> QCA: Managing Curriculum 2000 for 16–19 students, Annex 1: level of demand.

34. The Tomlinson inquiry found that there was “no clear, consistent view among awarding body officials and many examiners and teachers about the standard required at AS and A2 unit levels in order to ensure that the overall GCE A level standard is maintained.”<sup>40</sup> More worryingly, the report notes that these concerns were highlighted, in relation to the standard of the AS, in the review of Curriculum 2000 carried out by Professor David Hargreaves, then Chief Executive of the QCA, in 2001, months before the A2 examination problems.<sup>41</sup> Mr Tomlinson reported that different interpretations of the AS and A2 standard existed.<sup>42</sup>

35. Tomlinson’s interim report concluded that “the lack of a common understanding of the standard associated with AS and A2 units, along with the challenges associated with aggregation of the units, given all had equal weighting, played a significant part in the problems experienced by the three examination boards during the grading this year”.<sup>43</sup>

### ***How the schools and colleges coped***

36. Mr Hopkins said that his college had worked extremely hard to implement the new curriculum and to understand the standard required. He said “we did a huge amount of training. We kept in constant dialogue with the boards. One of the advantages of Hampshire is that we have ten large sixth-form colleges and we got together and we put on our own training, we encouraged our staff to become examiners. Every one of those colleges had an examiner in some subjects somewhere and we got together and trained each other.”<sup>44</sup>

37. Mr Neal argued that his school had dedicated considerable time and effort in providing training for staff teaching the new curriculum: “All the training took place and all the teachers were involved in that. The teachers moved heaven and earth to make the system work, but throughout that period the contradictory messages were coming back about standards. There was a lack of exemplar material, so it actually was quite difficult for teachers to have a clear understanding of what the standards were that were being aimed for, of what the assessments were going to look like. That was a genuine difficulty throughout AS and A2.”<sup>45</sup>

38. Mr Hopkins emphasised the advantages of working with local colleges to combine training resources and share expertise: “We got together, we worked together and collaborated. We made sure that we had examiners in the boards from each of the colleges and we found things out. It was not spoon fed to us, I have to say.”<sup>46</sup>

39. Mr Gould was frustrated that OCR appeared to have “set their own standard with A level minus one for AS level and A level plus one for A2. Nowhere is that in the code of practice, nowhere is that standard defined, nowhere has that standard been relayed to schools, teachers or examiners beforehand.”<sup>47</sup>

### **The challenge that faced the examination boards**

40. The A level results released in August 2002 were the first A levels taken under the new curriculum. The major awarding bodies, AQA, Edexcel and OCR, were faced with the task of marking these new examination papers.

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<sup>40</sup> A level standards – interim report, Mike Tomlinson, paragraph 14.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, paragraph 14.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, paragraph 15.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, conclusions.

<sup>44</sup> Q.286

<sup>45</sup> Q.287

<sup>46</sup> Q.290

<sup>47</sup> Q.274

41. The marking of A levels has become increasingly complex in recent years. The introduction of the compulsory AS level in 2000 effectively doubled the amount of work undertaken by the English awarding bodies, mainly AQA, Edexcel and OCR. [The bodies have frequently voiced concerns that they were unable to recruit sufficient numbers of staff.] The increase in work has put a strain on the examination boards. Edexcel was heavily criticised in January 2002 for errors concerning examination scripts. The then Secretary of State asked the QCA to investigate, and the QCA's Director of Quality Audit was placed inside Edexcel to monitor and prompt rapid action by its management. The supervision of Edexcel had been agreed earlier but was brought forward to 22 January 2002 following the exam boards' problems. Edexcel has since been given a clean bill of health and was not at the centre of concerns last summer.

42. Mr John Kerr, Chief Executive of Edexcel, told us that "The exam system is still essentially Victorian, it is a large number of pieces of paper; in our own exam board, it is ten million marks, five million pieces of paper, scripts, in a large warehouse, there is little technology that has been applied there".<sup>48</sup> He warned that without investment the examination boards would continue to make "errors and mistakes, which clearly we will strive to minimise, and it is important that we do so, but there are limited reserves within the exam boards, as charitable organisations".<sup>49</sup>

43. Dr Boston, the Chief Executive of QCA, highlighted the problems which continue to pervade the examination system: "It is the shortage of examiners, and I think that is going to be exacerbated this year by many people not wishing to examine again, or perhaps examine for one board again; the sheer volume of the assessment that occurs across the country. I do believe examinations here are probably the most excessive in the world for young people, and that we could get equally valid measurements of student performance and progress with less examination. The reliance so strongly on external examinations, rather than some component of it, at least, being internally examined. The notion of having internal assessments externally moderated, which the Secondary Heads Association is advancing in the form of chartered examiners, is, in fact, the norm for many examinations in many western countries and produces valid results.... The technology that we use is very simple, and it was the subject of some comment in the report, *Maintaining A level Standards*, that Eva Baker chaired earlier this year. Our scripts are all marked by single markers, no script is marked by two markers; the scripts from centres move by post to a marker's home, usually, we do not use, although we have trialed, as a general rule, marking centres, where markers are brought in to mark under supervision, and one marks questions 5a and 5b, and another marks questions 6a and 6b, and you get consistency that way. Very little application of technology. We are running here a 21st century education system on a huge cottage industry, in the marking process, and it is just going to fail, unless we move to change the way that operates. Now that cannot be done for the summer examinations next year, we do not have that capacity to move that quickly; but that is the longer-term issue, we have got to get the examination system logistically and technically on a much firmer basis."<sup>50</sup>

### ***The August challenge***

44. In Summer 2002, the awarding bodies faced a particularly complicated challenge. A level course material had been split in two, with the less demanding content in AS and the more demanding content in A2. There had been considerable discussion and confusion regarding the level of attainment required at each level. A2 examination papers often used a more challenging style of question. Despite the difference in difficulty, AS and A2 examinations were each worth 50% of the final mark.

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<sup>48</sup> Q.180

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Q.265

45. In previous years, examiners were shown example scripts from former examinations, which highlighted the preceding years' standards and associated grade boundaries, at awarding meetings to illustrate expected levels of performance. In 2002, the A2 was a new examination which had not been piloted, and consequently exemplar scripts of A2 examinations were not available.

#### **How the Awarding Bodies tried to define the standard**

46. Mike Tomlinson was clear that "nothing that was done this summer was outside of the Code of Practice and the frameworks which govern that".<sup>51</sup> However, there was a substantial debate on standards following the publication of the A level results, and at the heart of this debate was confusion about the differing approaches of the awarding bodies AQA, Edexcel and OCR in awarding grades.

47. The Tomlinson inquiry initially focused on the grading decisions made by the awarding bodies. Although questions were raised about the number of subjects requiring verification he decided, in consultation with the awarding bodies, that a very small number of papers would be re-graded. There was considerable concern that the bodies had altered grades inconsistently with the expected A level standard, and had acted in an attempt to limit artificially the increase in the number of A level passes in August 2002.

48. We discussed with many of our witnesses the difficulties the awarding bodies experienced with grading. We established that the awarding bodies had taken divergent views on standards and were surprised to note that, despite those divergent views, Mike Tomlinson stated that none of the bodies had acted outside the Code of Practice. Indeed Dr Boston, Chief Executive of the QCA, subsequently acknowledged that "the key to that lies in the revision of the Code of Practice.... which should remove the capacity for different approaches in that way."<sup>52</sup>

#### ***The Joint Council for General Qualifications***

49. Ms Kathleen Tattersall, the Chair of the Joint Council for General Qualifications [JCGQ] and Director-General of the AQA, told us of the work undertaken by the awarding bodies: "we met over the period of the four years, or so, leading up to the new A levels, on several occasions, there is the Joint Council for General Qualifications, that is the forum in which we meet together, and also with QCA, to try to establish all those difficult technical issues which have to be resolved when the new qualification comes into being. And this was a qualification which was quite different from the qualification that went before it; here we have a qualification made up of two parts, the AS examination and the A2 examination, AS being a qualification in its own right, and A2 being the second half that makes up the A level. I believe we worked as best we could to try to establish those standards, and it is only really in retrospect that some of these problems now begin to emerge, which at the time were not seen as real issues."<sup>53</sup>

50. Ms Tattersall told us that the JCGQ had had several meetings with Sir William Stubbs, the then Chairman of the QCA, to clarify the standard of the A2 examinations. She told us that "awarding bodies are charged with the maintenance of standards, year on year, ...and the issue is, how do you measure those standards". She said that "one measure... is the percentage of candidates who receive a given award in a given year, the outcomes, I will call them, and the discussion that we had on 12 March focused very much on the outcomes, the expectation being that in 2002 they would be very similar to 2001".<sup>54</sup> Ms Tattersall told us that this "worried many of us, because, clearly, many will see the outcomes only as indicators, not as real examples of standards, and the issue is what are the

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<sup>51</sup> Q.440

<sup>52</sup> Q.226

<sup>53</sup> Q.93

<sup>54</sup> Q.112

standards”. Ms Tattersall then wrote to Sir William “really setting out our position, as awarding bodies, that we judged the standards from the evidence, and the prime evidence is the candidates’ work, and the subsidiary evidence is the statistical information”.<sup>55</sup> Sir William confirmed in writing that he concurred with that view. He told us that “the Chairman of the Joint Council said she was quite satisfied with the letters that she had got clarifying it in April and she thought as far as the meeting in July was concerned there was no pressure put on to go to any artificial targets and that has been echoed, indeed Tomlinson found that [was the case]”.<sup>56</sup> Ms Tattersall believed that the correspondence had dealt with the awarding bodies’ concerns.

51. Ms Tattersall told us of a further meeting, on 26 July, called as the examination boards had recognised that “the pattern of the outcomes was going to be very different in 2002 than it had been in 2001. What I was anxious to ascertain was whether this was something peculiar to AQA, or whether it was something which my fellow chief executives were also experiencing in their awards; and so we called a meeting of the boards, we ascertained that we were all experiencing the same sort of pattern of results, and we identified the reasons for that pattern of results.” She said that the awarding bodies had concluded that “one of the major reasons being that there is a big drop-out rate between the old AS and the full A level, people who had performed to the best of their ability at the AS level and then not gone on to take it at A level. And so, as a result of that meeting, we were very comfortable that the results we were seeing were indeed representing truly the true standards that we were expecting, the carrying forward of standards, and we then shared that information with QCA. There was no pressure from QCA to intervene and change the results after that point.”<sup>57</sup> Sir William Stubbs told us that the guidance provided to the awarding bodies was to ensure that “any increase in the numbers passing or any increase in those getting the higher grades had to be rooted in the evidence of what the candidates did”.<sup>58</sup>

52. Ms Tattersall said: “I did not see that as a pressure to actually bring in awards at a particular level, once we had clarified that we were talking the same language, and we were not actually saying that the outcomes for 2002 had to be exactly the same as the outcomes of 2001”.<sup>59</sup>

### *AQA*

53. Ms Tattersall told us that for AQA “the job that we have done in this first year of A level is exactly the same job that we have done in all the previous years of the old A level”. AQA was asked by the Tomlinson inquiry to examine only two of the 1,008 boundaries which it set at A level. “The inquiry... has reaffirmed the boundaries which I set as a result of looking at the Chair of Examiners’ recommendations. So AQA, I believe, can be very proud of its record of bringing in the new A level, and, of course, as a board, we are responsible for something like 45 % of the grades awarded in A level this year.”<sup>60</sup>

54. We asked Ms Tattersall if she had concerns regarding the QCA’s guidance to the awarding bodies. She reminded us of the JCGQ’s correspondence with the QCA saying “as far as AQA was concerned, that clarified the issue, we were all talking the same language; we were not talking about outcomes being the same, we were talking about judging the evidence on the basis of what candidates actually did in the examination.”<sup>61</sup> Ms Tattersall noted that “the main pressure on us is to be able to demonstrate that the standard of our awards is commensurate with the standard of previous awards; and in the

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Q.352

<sup>57</sup> Q.113

<sup>58</sup> Q.354

<sup>59</sup> Q.117

<sup>60</sup> Q.92

<sup>61</sup> Q.112



first year of an examination that inevitably is difficult, because the syllabuses are different, the structure of the examination is difficult, you do not have the same reference points as you had in the past. But that is the sort of pressure that I would describe, but it is a pressure of which we were very aware, even without QCA saying it.”<sup>62</sup>

### *Edexcel*

55. Mr Kerr told us “I would not claim that Edexcel has not had its problems in the past; but, for this particular year, I am very confident we set the grades professionally, we set them accurately and we set them in accordance with the Code of Practice”<sup>63</sup>.

56. Mr Kerr told us that “the letter of 19 April [from Sir William to the JCGO] did not reassure me. I felt the pressure. I am sure the integrity was clearly there but the pressure put on by OCA was inappropriate”.<sup>64</sup> He said that “to link grades this year back to legacy A levels was only one factor: the most important factor, from Edexcel's point of view, was the student performance, and to depress students' performance based on Government statistics would be unethical”.<sup>65</sup>

### *OCR*

57. Dr McLone said “we changed 18 out of 1,012 [units], which is a very small number. But, yes, we did, and it is a matter of doing it in a different context; we had a different context, we had different people present, we were making judgements. The judgements that we made, on the evidence, and [in] the summer, stand, the judgements that we made were done in a different context at this particular time, and I judged it right to be able to make the amendments I did in the 18 units that I did, but, nonetheless, that is quite a small number.”<sup>66</sup>

58. Dr McClone told us “We have always worked to [get] the examiner judgements first and then [look] at statistical evidence, to make sure that we can compare year on year that we are getting to the right overall standard. I think I do go back to the question of AS and A2; we did not know exactly, all of us, where exactly A2 was. There is a real tension between trying to set boundaries at A2 and yet carrying forward a standard which is not A2, since we do not have any archive evidence at A2, there is nothing of that kind, but we do have to carry forward the A level standard, which is a combination of the AS and the A2. So therefore it has been a tension, in trying to establish all of that. The setting of the standard is actually QCA's job, of course.”<sup>67</sup>

59. Dr McClone said “The system was flawed, if I may, and I think we are all trying to operate in a flawed system...[I have] great confidence in Ken Boston [the Chief Executive of the QCA]”.<sup>68</sup> He believed that Dr Boston was attempting to “right what was not done in the past.”

60. Dr McLone recognised that OCR applied a slightly different awarding process to the allocation of grades, compared to the other boards; however, he was adamant that standards had been kept at a very similar level across all of the examination boards. He said “if you take a look at where our boundaries have been set, compared with, say, [AQA's] boundaries, you will probably find them in very much the same place”.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Q.118

<sup>63</sup> Q.97

<sup>64</sup> Q.142

<sup>65</sup> Q.143

<sup>66</sup> Q.95

<sup>67</sup> Q.95

<sup>68</sup> Q.99

<sup>69</sup> Q.120

## DID THE QCA OR THE GOVERNMENT FAIL THE STUDENTS?

61. The Tomlinson report concluded that the alleged problem with the grading process this summer has its roots in decisions made by the DfES and QCA about the structure of the AS and A level awards, the assessment model and the preparation for the introduction of the new arrangements, particularly for A2.<sup>70</sup>

62. Dr Boston told us: “The QCA did everything it could to make a clear statement about how the A2 standard and the AS standard related, and, indeed, I understand it has been on our website since 2000; we did everything we could to write rich, meaningful statements about grades in all the subjects, which examiners and teachers could understand.”<sup>71</sup>

63. Mr Tomlinson told us: “I believe that, though the QCA issued some guidance, that guidance in my view was not satisfactory and sufficient to clearly define the standard of AS and A2 and to exemplify it by material not only with reference to the criteria but also to students' work. That was missing as well.”<sup>72</sup>

64. Dr Boston recognised that the OCA had not provided sufficient exemplars of the A2 standard. He commented that it was difficult to “know what a grade B is at A2 level until you have looked at a thousand scripts, from young people across the country”. He told us that this was “not a fault of the OCA or of the awarding bodies, that was a fault of the time-line: we launched into the first A2 examinations in summer without that pilot material behind us, and we should have had two years of it.”<sup>73</sup>

65. Mr Tomlinson believed that greater independence for the OCA could be generated by shifting its accountability. Whilst he acknowledged that as HMCI he had been given a certain amount of independence by being held accountable to this committee, he did not believe that such a measure would provide enough independence for the OCA from the DfES: “changing the legal status of the body would not necessarily of itself change the behaviours and relationships. What you want are changes in those relationships.” He insisted that “the OCA must be a rigorous regulator and must be fully involved throughout the awarding process, fully involved throughout, which at the moment is not the case”.<sup>74</sup>

66. Mr Tomlinson compared the relationship of the QCA and the DfES with Ofsted's relationship with the Department. He said “It was a matter of being diligent at all times. Hence, for example, I did always request and, indeed, I always got, a full remit from the Secretary of State for any particular activity they wanted Ofsted to undertake – not how it should be done, I always resisted that – in particular the involvement of other parties, if other parties were to work with Ofsted. It is that clarity we want [for the QCA].”<sup>75</sup>

## REFORMING THE EXAMINATION SYSTEM

### Short term changes

67. Mr Tomlinson told us that the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority should be charged with taking forward his reports' recommendations.<sup>76</sup> He declared his “confidence in the new leadership of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, Sir Anthony Greener and Ken Boston” and praised the progress they had made in addressing issues discussed

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<sup>70</sup> Tomlinson Interim Report – recommendation.

<sup>71</sup> Q.241

<sup>72</sup> Q.441

<sup>73</sup> Q.241

<sup>74</sup> Q.472

<sup>75</sup> Q.473

<sup>76</sup> Q.490

in the interim report. Mr Tomlinson believed that the issues that arose this summer could be addressed by a “a change of attitude, a change of ethos, a change of behaviour” of the QCA.

68. Mr Tomlinson recognised that the Secretary of State would have a major role to play in the redefinition of the QCA. The Rt Hon Charles Clarke MP, newly appointed as Secretary of State, had welcomed the Tomlinson reports, agreed with the recommended actions and appointed Mr Tomlinson to the role of an independent and public observer of the QCA. The Secretary of State made £6 million available to help ensure that the 2003 examinations were not affected in a similar way to the 2002 exams. The money was to be spent on ensuring that the necessary examination markers could be recruited.<sup>77</sup>

### Long term changes

#### *What is the A level system for?*

69. The A level exam was designed as an entry qualification for higher education. It remains the main precursor to higher education and the backbone of the university admissions system. Following the development of A levels from a norm referenced qualification to a primarily criterion referenced qualification in 1983,<sup>78</sup> the numbers of students achieving good A level grades has dramatically increased. In evidence to the Committee Sir Howard Newby, Chief Executive of the Higher Education Funding Council for England [HEFCE], said that research HEFCE had commissioned from the University of Warwick showed that at a “given level of A level entry students from state schools actually outperform those from independent schools. The conclusion I would draw from that is that the independent schools are extremely good at preparing and coaching students to take A levels and succeed at A level examinations, rather better in that respect than the state schools. When they come through to university it is not always the best coached students that performs at university in terms of degree results.”<sup>79</sup> On this evidence it appears that whilst A level examinations test the academic development of students, they do not provide a definitive guide to the academic *potential* of any student.

70. A levels have also gained a wider purpose as a qualification leading to employment. This development was at the centre of the Curriculum 2000 policy which intended to increase the flexibility of the A level system and enable students to extend the scope of their studies.<sup>80</sup>

71. The Tomlinson final Report concluded that there was “very little systematic support for a return to grading in which fixed quotas of grades would be awarded to students according to rank order rather than performance against a fixed standard of achievement (broadly, “norm referencing”)”.<sup>81</sup>

#### *The baccalaureate*

72. The Green Paper *14–19: Extending Opportunities, Raising Standards* was published in February 2002. It suggested that from the age of 14 young people should follow pathways tailored to their aptitudes and aspirations. These should include a wide range of high quality vocational and academic programmes in school, college and the workplace. More people should be encouraged to stay in learning to the age of 19 and beyond. An overarching award available to young people to recognise the breadth and depth of

<sup>77</sup> Q.490

<sup>78</sup> See page 4 for further information.

<sup>79</sup> *Higher Education Funding*, HC425-iv, Session 2002–03, Q.491.

<sup>80</sup> Tomlinson Final Report page 7 paragraph 17

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, paragraph 19

achievement by the age of 19 was proposed.<sup>82</sup> David Miliband MP, Minister of State for School Standards, has since published the results of the consultation on this paper and highlighted his support for a Baccalaureate-style qualification. He said that “this model, designed to suit English circumstances, could help us to tackle long standing English problems, promoting progression and achievement through Foundation to Intermediate and Advanced levels. If such a unified system could recognise the range of achievement expected by employers and higher education then it will perform a major service to educational attainment.”<sup>83</sup>

73. Mr Hopkins, Principal of Peter Symonds College, cautioned those who would replace the A level system with a baccalaureate qualification, following the events of last Summer: “I just do not think it is worth throwing out the baby with the bath water. We have a perfectly good system. What people sometimes forget, I think, when they talk about the Baccalaureate is that it involves more examinations and assessment than the AS and A2. If everybody in this country followed the IB who is going to mark it? The same three exam boards.”<sup>84</sup>

74. Mr Gould, Master of Marlborough College, supported the long term development of an English baccalaureate which would develop an education for all children from 14–19 offering a variety of routes to a qualification, but he added “for heaven’s sake do not rock the boat with where we are at the moment. Let us keep it and let us keep working towards a more uniform system which will be inclusive for all children within England.”<sup>85</sup> Mr Neal, Headmaster of De Ashton School, added that “in the shorter term there are many benefits that can be derived from the AS and A2 process and because of what happened last year we have not yet derived all those benefits”.<sup>86</sup>

### THE ANNUAL AUGUST FRENZY

75. Mr Tomlinson decried the “the annual August frenzy” surrounding A level results, which he said was based on the erroneous assumption that “if more students have achieved the standard then the only way that could have been done is by somehow lowering the requirements they had to meet” an allegation which had been consistently repeated over the years.<sup>87</sup> Sir William Stubbs said that “in recent weeks each of these elements of trust has been significantly and quite unnecessarily weakened. Therefore the challenge for those responsible for those matters in the future will be to restore that trust, but they do so on the basis that the underlying system is sound, and that is an enormous strength.”<sup>88</sup>

76. Mr Hopkins, of Peter Symonds College, put in context the impact of the August examination concerns. “As a college we have nearly 2,500 students, 2,300 studying AS and A2, so we make 27,000 entries to the three main examining boards by the time you count all the units and modules. We get something like 1,000 to 2,000 applications for re-marks each year which result in several hundred upgrades. As a result of the Tomlinson Inquiry we had one subject where we had 200 module re-marks which resulted in 17 final upgrades. I have to say that although things went wrong, the vast majority of the experience this summer was actually right.”<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> 14–19: Extending opportunities, raising standards.

<sup>83</sup> 21 January 2003 Mr David Miliband speaking at the AOC/NAHT/SHA Conference.

<sup>84</sup> Q.325

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Q.441

<sup>88</sup> Q.327

<sup>89</sup> Q.268

77. Mr Neal acknowledged that “it does appear that concern about public expectations has been part of the problem”.<sup>90</sup> Ms Tattersall of AQA said that “whenever we publish results then there is an interest in those results and quite a public debate about them”.<sup>91</sup> Mr Kerr of Edexcel said “We are not very good at explaining to people what we do. I am looking at the faces, going round, and there is still a lack of understanding here, there is clearly a lack of understanding on the press bench, exactly what we do, and it is not that difficult”.<sup>92</sup> He added “We get the press we deserve; it is our job to try to educate the press, it is our job to make clear what we do, how we do it, and that is bearing fruit”.<sup>93</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

78. The perceived crisis in the A level system in summer 2002 was born out of the real concerns of students, parents and schools and colleges over some exam results and lurid stories in the newspapers, on television and on the *Today* programme about the ‘fixing’ of grades. **On the evidence presented to us, we conclude that the events of last Summer were not caused by the manipulation of the examination system but by confusion arising from the introduction of the A2 exam without adequate trials.**

79. We welcome the reports produced by Mr Tomlinson and his inquiry team. He produced a useful analysis of the events of the summer operating on a restricted time frame. **We welcome the transitional role of external assessor of the examination system and are confident that this will assist in upholding the integrity of the A level qualification system.**

80. We welcome the principles underlying Curriculum 2000 and congratulate those who worked hard to implement it in their schools and colleges. The school and college representatives who gave evidence to us all supported the new curriculum and argued that the hard evidence of what papers looked like and how questions were marked would help to ensure that the exams would operate smoothly in 2003 and beyond. **We reject a knee-jerk change to the curriculum. The time and money invested in implementing Curriculum 2000 must not be wasted.**

81. There has been a lively debate about the future of the A Levels. Whilst our evidence focused on this year’s events and therefore does not extend to the long term implications of curriculum change, **we emphasise the importance of supporting the current A Level system. A period of stability is required, and further discussions about the future of the system should be undertaken with caution in order not to undermine the value of this current qualification.**

82. **We urge the Government to encourage the acceptance of the new AS and A2 levels by our universities. By adopting Curriculum 2000, the Government has shown its support for a broader curriculum at A level. For students to benefit from this policy, universities must also support the diversification of study at A level and adapt their admissions procedure to reflect this. This could be a key factor in progress towards the achievement of the Government’s target of 50% of 18 to 30 year olds participating in higher education by 2010, as our evidence has shown that the AS exam helped more students to achieve the A level standard.**

83. Our evidence has shown that the awarding bodies, AQA, Edexcel and OCR, each made considerable efforts to maintain the standard of the A level system and succeeded to do this in the majority of cases. We also recognise that the QCA had made some

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<sup>90</sup> Q.283

<sup>91</sup> Q.91

<sup>92</sup> Q.176

<sup>93</sup> Q.184

considerable efforts to ensure that the results of 2002 were not compromised. **The QCA should have provided clearer guidance to the schools, colleges and awarding bodies. However, the guidance most requested by schools, colleges and awarding bodies was that of exemplar material. Had the A2 examinations been piloted, the information required to provide guidance would have been available to the awarding bodies. Our evidence has shown that the QCA was not solely responsible for the issues arising this year. The DfES presented a timetable to implement Curriculum 2000 which was not properly thought through and placed considerable pressure on all those in the examination system from the QCA to the students themselves.**

84. It was significant that only one examination board, OCR, took decisions which were considered by the Tomlinson inquiry to be inappropriate and when reviewed OCR took the opportunity to change them. **We formed the opinion that OCR felt pressurised by the QCA to suppress grade inflation. Neither did they accept that AS and A2 were of equal value. However we are satisfied that the guidelines imposed on the examination boards, following the Tomlinson report, will enable future grading decisions to take place in a more transparent environment. We expect the exam boards to grade this year's A levels with professionalism and consistency.**

85. **It is significant that none of the evidence we received argued that the answer to problems of consistency is to have a single awarding body; on the contrary, the diversity provided by the three boards was welcomed. All three will continue to have an important role to play, not least because it is by no means certain that there are other bodies keen to enter this market.**

86. We are concerned that the new A2 was introduced without proper piloting. We believe the QCA felt pressured into introducing these examinations quickly and without what they would have considered adequate trials. These events question the independence of the QCA as a watchdog designed to advise the Government on qualification and curriculum issues. **Since its establishment, QCA has gained a number of functions in addition to its regulatory role.**

87. **We recommend that the QCA's regulatory function be given more independence in a similar way to Ofsted, and that it should be directly accountable to Parliament. Independent advice should be seen as an asset, not as a problem. The DfES should make greater use of the wealth of expertise within the QCA; if it had accepted guidance and allowed the A2 examinations to have been piloted, this report would almost certainly not have been necessary.** For this to happen other functions such as settings SATs, would need to be redistributed.

88. The exaggerated, almost hysterical, way in which the A level debate was reported was extremely unhelpful and was considerably more damaging to the system than the problems with grading, which ultimately resulted in some minor changes to the allocation of a minority of grade boundaries. Many of our witnesses highlighted the lack of general public understanding of the A level process. **We recommend the DfES and QCA take a more proactive role in making the examination system more transparent to parents, schools and colleges. We hope that when the A level results are published in August this year that any issues that do arise will be reported in a balanced and measured way.**

## TIMELINE OF EVENTS

**12 March 2002:** Sir William Stubbs meets the chiefs of the three English exam boards – OCR, AQA and Edexcel. One of the topics discussed is the coming summer’s A level exams, the first under the new Curriculum 2000 system.

**22 March 2002:** Chief executive of AQA Kathleen Tattersall – as chair of the Joint Council for General Qualifications – writes to Sir William. She asks for clarification that he was not asking the boards to disregard candidates’ actual performance as part of efforts to ensure standards of difficulty remained the same as last year.

**19 April 2002:** Sir William replies, saying grades can only be determined “using a combination of professional judgement”. To constrain awards would be contrary to the code of practice and disadvantage students, he adds. He also says he expect last year’s A level results to provide a “very strong guide” to this year’s outcomes.

**26 July 2002:** Sir William and the three exam chiefs meet again. Exam boards realise the pass rate is set to go up by 2–4 % .

**29 July 2002:** Sir William contacts Education Secretary Estelle Morris and tells her of the improved pass rate, warning that this could inflame allegations that exams are getting easier. He suggests a review of the causes of these statistical changes to establish that there has been “no dilution of standards”.

**15 August 2002:** Results day. Pass rate reaches a record 94.3 % , up 4.5 percentage points on 2001.

**1 September 2002:** The Observer runs a story claiming thousands of pupils may have had their grades “fixed” (most notably by OCR) and had missed out on university places as a result. Department for Education and QCA express concerns and promise an investigation.

**12 September 2002:** Ken Boston, the Australian educationist, takes over as the QCA’s new chief executive.

**13 September 2002:** QCA launches an inquiry into claims examiners awarded more unclassified (U) grades in coursework in 2001/02 to prove A levels were not getting easier.

**17 September 2002:** Edward Gould, chair of the HMC, claims the QCA has been “co-ordinating” the move to mark some students down.

**18 September 2002:** The HMC, the Secondary Heads Association and the Girls School Association calls for results to be re-issued and call for an independent inquiry.

**19 September 2002:** Estelle Morris announces an independent inquiry into the row, headed by Mike Tomlinson, the former chief inspector of schools.

**20 September 2002:** The QCA review of grading clears the exam boards of wrong-doing, saying there was no evidence to back claims that coursework had been down-graded unfairly.

**25 September 2002:** Sir William accuses Ms Morris of “meddling” in the Tomlinson inquiry after finding out her officials contacted the boards about contingency plans should Mr Tomlinson recommend a complete re-grade.

**26 September 2002:** Mr Tomlinson moves to quell fears his inquiry has been compromised.

**27 September 2002:** Mr Tomlinson publishes the first part of his inquiry. Later that afternoon Ms Morris sacks Sir William as chairman of the QCA “to restore public confidence” in the organisation.

**4 October 2002:** The exam board at the centre of the grading controversy – OCR – says it will only reconsider 63 of the 97 exam units about which Mr Tomlinson had raised concerns.

**10 October 2002:** QCA chief executive Ken Boston says the testing system needs overhauling, with teachers being trusted to do more assessment themselves. He promises a new “examinations taskforce” to set out in detail how exams should be delivered.

**15 October 2002:** The deadline for the boards to issue any revised results to students, schools and colleges. Only 1,220 A level and 733 AS level students have their results improved. Ms Morris makes an apology in the House of Commons about the grading debacle.

**24 October 2002:** Estelle Morris resigns as Secretary of State for Education and Skills.

**31 October 2002:** Sir William says he will sue the government for wrongful dismissal unless he receives a public apology from the government for being sacked as chairman of the QCA.

**2 December 2002:** Mr Tomlinson publishes his final report on A level standards.

**5 February 2003:** Sir William reaches a settlement with the DfES for unfair dismissal.



**PROCEEDINGS OF THE COMMITTEE RELATING TO THE REPORT**

MONDAY 26 MARCH 2003

Members present:

Mr Barry Sheerman, in the Chair

Mr David Chaytor  
Valerie Davey  
Paul Holmes  
Mr Robert Jackson

Ms Meg Munn  
Mr Kerry Pollard  
Jonathan Shaw  
Mr Andrew Turner

The Committee deliberated.

Draft Report [A Level Standards], proposed by the Chairman, brought up and read.

*Ordered*, That the Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 88 read and agreed to.

*Resolved*, That the Report be the Third Report of the Committee to the House.

*Ordered*, That the Chairman do make the Report to the House.

*Ordered*, That the provisions of Standing Order No. 134 (Select committees (reports)) be applied to the Report.

Several Papers were ordered to be reported to the House.

*Ordered*, The the Appendices to the Minutes of Evidence taken before the Committee be reported to the House.—(*The Chairman.*)

Several Memoranda were ordered to be reported to the House.

The Committee further deliberated.

[Adjourned till Monday 7 April at a quarter to Four o'clock.]

**LIST OF WITNESSES**

*MONDAY 28 OCTOBER 2002*

Ms Kathleen Tattersall, Mr John Kerr and Dr Ron McLone ..... Ev 31  
Mr Ken Boston, Ms Beverley Evans and Mr Keith Weller ..... Ev 49

*WEDNESDAY 6 NOVEMBER 2002*

Mr Neil Hopkins, Mr Edward Gould and Mr Tony Neal ..... Ev 84  
Sir William Stubbs ..... Ev 93

*WEDNESDAY 4 DECEMBER 2002*

Mr Roger Porkess ..... Ev 111  
Mr Mike Tomlinson ..... Ev 115

## LIST OF MEMORANDA INCLUDED IN THE MINUTES OF EVIDENCE

Memorandum submitted by the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance [QCA18]	Ev 27
Memorandum submitted by OCR [QCA 19] .....	Ev 27
Letter from Kathleen Tattersall, Director-General, QCA, to Sir William Stubbs [QCA 28] .....	Ev 30
Supplementary information given by OCR [QCA 34] .....	Ev 58
Commentary by Brian Seager, OCR, on a paper by Roger Porkess [QCA 33] ...	Ev 59
Letter from Frank Wingate, Edexcel, to the Chairman of the Committee [QCA 37]	Ev 60
Submission by SHA to the Tomlinson Inquiry [QCA 22] .....	Ev 62
Submission by HMC to the Tomlinson Inquiry [QCA 23] .....	Ev 71
Submission by the AoC to the Tomlinson Inquiry [QCA 24] .....	Ev 78
Letter from Sir William Stubbs to the Clerk of the Committee [QCA 36] .....	Ev 106
Memorandum submitted by Roger Porkess [QCA 32] .....	Ev 107
Supplementary memorandum submitted by Roger Porkess [QCA 35] .....	Ev 111

## LIST OF APPENDICES TO THE MINUTES OF EVIDENCE

1. Memorandum submitted by Len Masterman [QCA 14] .....	Ev 127
2. Memorandum submitted by Brian Stevens [QCA 17] .....	Ev 128
3. Submission by Ofsted to the Tomlinson Inquiry [QCA 25] .....	Ev 134
4. Letter from Sir William Stubbs to Kathleen Tattersall [QCA 27] .....	Ev 140
5. Memorandum submitted by the Department for Education and Skills [QCA 27]	Ev 140

## LIST OF UNPRINTED MEMORANDA

Memoranda have been received from the sources listed below. These have been reported to the House, but to save printing costs they have not been printed. Copies have been placed in the House of Commons Library, where they may be inspected by Members. Other copies are in the Record Office, House of Lords, and are available to the public for inspection. Requests for inspection should be addressed to the *Parliamentary Archives*, Record Office, House of Lords, London, SW1 (tel 020 7219 3074). Hours of inspection are from 9.30am to 5.00pm Mondays to Fridays.

Alan Stinchcombe [QCA 10]  
 The Knights Templar School [QCA 11]  
 Mark Jones [QCA 13]  
 Speech to QCA Annual Conference from the Chief Executive, QCA [QCA 15]  
 Fearnhill School and St Christopher School [QCA 16]  
 EdExcel [QCA 20]  
 EdExcel [QCA 21]  
 Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference [QCA 23]  
 AQA [QCA 29]  
 UCAS [QCA 30]



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MONDAY 28 OCTOBER 2002

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Members present:

Mr Barry Sheerman, in the Chair

Mr David Chaytor  
Valerie Davey  
Jeff Ennis  
Paul Holmes

Ms Meg Munn  
Jonathan Shaw  
Mr Mark Simmonds  
Mr Andrew Turner

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**Memorandum submitted by the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA) (QCA 18)**

We understand that the Committee is investigating the work of QCA and that we have been asked to attend today to contribute evidence towards that investigation.

We have made a written submission to the Committee which highlights a number of issues, but particularly the difficulties which we believe can arise from the current mixing within QCA of its regulatory function and its own activity as a test developer.

However, in the light of the recent events concerning A-level examinations, which have put a particular spotlight upon QCA, we feel that it might help the Committee if we very briefly set out AQA's position on that matter.

AQA believes strongly that examination boards should be close to the community they serve. AQA's Council and committees consist of individuals drawn from the educational and employment communities. AQA invites organisations such as the Teacher Unions and Subject Associations, Universities UK, LEA Chief Officer Association, CBI and TUC to make their own nominations. AQA exists solely to serve the public and in particular the students who take its examinations. Our only objective is to ensure that our specifications and examinations are of the highest quality and that AQA awards reliable grades which represent a consistent standard across options and across years.

Everybody associated with AQA is fully committed to this objective because we are deeply aware of the great importance of the qualifications which we issue to the futures of the young people who take our examinations.

AQA therefore understands very well the strain which candidates, their teachers and parents have been put under by recent events. For this reason, although we were, and we remain, confident about our own procedures and standards, we willingly co-operated with the Tomlinson Inquiry at all stages. We believed that it was vital to address rapidly the doubts which existed in the public mind that the 2002 awarding process had not been entirely fair to candidates.

Having examined the records of our awarding process, Mike Tomlinson asked us to review just two out of the 1,008 awarding decisions which we made in the summer in order to issue a total of 752,258 individual candidate results for AS and A-level examinations. The review meetings, which were attended by Mike Tomlinson himself as well as independent observers from the teacher associations and QCA, upheld both of our original decisions. Not a single candidate therefore had to be re-graded by AQA as a result of the Tomlinson Inquiry.

As our ready cooperation with the Tomlinson Inquiry shows, AQA takes an open and transparent approach to all its work. At no time were we influenced by any external pressure or agency to act differently this year when awarding grades. We followed our normal awarding procedures which conform fully to the QCA Code of Practice. We are confident that those procedures are appropriate and that they were operated in an entirely professional and transparent way this year. The fact that none of our 752,258 published results had to be changed as a result of the Tomlinson Inquiry shows that our confidence is well placed.

*October 2002*

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[Continued

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### Memorandum submitted by OCR (QCA 19)

This brief paper identifies key issues that OCR believes need to be addressed in order to improve public confidence in and understanding of the assessment arrangements for the “Curriculum 2000” qualifications.

#### 1. THE STRUCTURE OF “CURRICULUM 2000” QUALIFICATIONS

- The assessment issues that provoked debate this summer are a direct consequence of the structure of the new A Level qualifications. The first part of the assessment—the AS—focuses on the first year of A Level teaching and is set at a level of demand appropriate after one year of sixth-form study. This means the standard is lower than that of the old A Level. The second part of the assessment—the A2—focuses on the second year of study, and includes the so-called “synoptic assessment” that is designed to ensure that students have gained an understanding of the courses of study as a whole. The A2 is set at a correspondingly higher level of demand than A Level to balance the lower standard of the AS. The overall A Level standard is achieved by the combination of the two different levels.
- The AS is a “stand-alone” qualification in its own right: it is designed to provide recognition for achievement if students choose not to pursue a subject into the second year of sixth form. It has proved to be very popular with students and teachers alike for that reason. An issue to be addressed is whether the A2 ought also to be “stand alone”; were it to be so, the difficulty of combining two new and different standards to maintain the overall legacy A Level standard would be overcome. The issue then would be whether A2 assessment (as currently designed) would provide sufficient basis to be equated in content and skills with the old A Level.
- When the new qualifications were being designed, there was a major debate on the weighting to be given to the AS and the A2. The original proposal was for an AS weighted at 40%, with a more demanding A2 carrying 60%. The final decision was for a 50:50 weighting. This decision had a major impact on the determination of the assessment standards.
- In the longer term, consideration also needs to be given to a qualification structure that better matches the teaching time available in schools and colleges, and at the same time reduces the assessment burden on students. It could be argued, for example, that a four unit arrangement might provide advantages for teachers and examiners.

#### 2. STANDARDS

- There is an urgent need to produce and disseminate an agreed definition of the standard required of students on AS and A2 assessments and, crucially, the relationship between the two and the old A Level.
- There is an equally urgent need to establish clear guidance on the balance to be struck in the awarding process between professional judgement and the use of statistical evidence.
- There is a fundamental tension inherent in the awarding process between the current Code of Practice (CoP) requirement to maintain year-on-year standards at qualification level whilst making examiner judgements on the basis of script evidence at unit level.
- This is primarily the cause of concern widely expressed (both publicly and within awarding bodies) that the demands required in the form of unit grade boundaries at A2 are significantly higher than in the past, although the overall A Level results are equally significantly better than in the legacy A Level.
- Guidance is required for teachers to ensure that there are no misunderstandings of the two separate activities of marking and grading. Many of the concerns expressed this year stem from the incorrect assumption that by marking their students’ coursework, teachers are determining the grades to which the students are thereafter entitled. There is little understanding that the normal awarding process which sets grade boundaries for that year applies to all types of assessment, including coursework.

#### 3. PROCESS

- The new AS/A2 structure has imposed greater pressure on the time available to carry out the marking and grading process.
- The “fixed point” to which the A Level system is required to work is the university admissions process. The current admissions system relies on teachers predicted grades and conditional offers. The result is that many students every year (for whatever reason) do not obtain their predicted

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grades. With a mass HE entry process, moving towards a post qualification admissions system would, we believe, save staff time and resources in HE and would, critically, enable all students to seek suitable HE places when in full possession of accurate information about their achievements.

- All examination boards have experienced increasing difficulties in attracting and retaining suitably qualified examiners. Headteachers and Principals of many schools and colleges are increasingly reluctant to release staff for examining purposes. The age profile of the examining force is worrying in that attracting younger teachers in particular has become more difficult. The examination boards on their own cannot address this situation; concerted action involving both QCA and the DfES are required: recognition that involvement in public examining is a worthwhile form of professional development that carries with it benefits (financial as well as professional) are needed to reverse the current trend.

#### 4. REGULATION

- The quinquennial review indicated the need for QCA to be a robust defender of the public examinations system. In order to fulfil that role, it needs to be, and be seen to be, independent of Government. It is difficult not to conclude that its closeness to the DfES (and its predecessors) has had a direct impact on the design and implementation of the “Curriculum 2000” qualifications. Again, it has been unable to counteract allegations of direct pressure on issues that have critical impact on assessment design and process, which led to the current position.
- Since its creation in 1997, QCA has been too heavily involved in the detailed design of assessment systems without, in our view, the expert understanding of the implications of the requirements it imposed. In the context of the new A Levels, two examples illustrate the point: the way in which the subject criteria imposed undue complexities on the way in which many subjects had to be assessed (English Literature being a case in point), and second, the way in which synoptic assessment was introduced (late in the development), defined and incorporated into subject criteria.
- The QCA accreditation process for individual qualifications has been too lengthy and subject to far too many delays and to inconsistencies between subject teams and staff. Time-lines need to be set out before new initiatives begin and adhered to.
- QCA needs to focus far more of its attention on conducting an effective programme of monitoring that addresses the key issue of consistency of standards applied by awarding bodies. At present, it focuses too much on simply adherence to processes.
- Implementation of change without trialling or piloting inevitably means foreseeable problems not being worked through. Hastily conceived changes compound instability for schools, examiners and awarding bodies (eg The Hargreaves Review, in Summer 2001 to AS and A2 assessment, which followed demands to ease the timetable and the assessment burden after the first AS examinations.
- Lack of appreciation of the impact of regulatory requirements on operating systems has proved costly and confusing to awarding bodies as well as schools and colleges.

#### 5. IMPLEMENTING CHANGE

- A clear statement of the time-scales involved in the preparation and implementation of curriculum changes need to be agreed between all parties and widely disseminated. This needs to cover the period for development of new criteria (by QCA) specifications by awarding bodies, the period needed for effective trialling, when In-Service Training (INSET) should be provided for teachers and lecturers and when exemplar materials and other support will be made available to schools and colleges.
- The concept of “Curriculum 2000” has been generally regarded as a welcome and successful development of post-16 education; OCR concurs with this view. However, the communication and implementation process was too rushed both for schools and colleges as well as awarding bodies. It allowed insufficient time for the preparation needed to ensure clear understanding and effective teaching and assessment of the new courses.

#### 6. ATTACHED SCHEMATIC

- We enclose a schematic which illustrates the difference between the standard at legacy A-level and the standard of Curriculum 2000.

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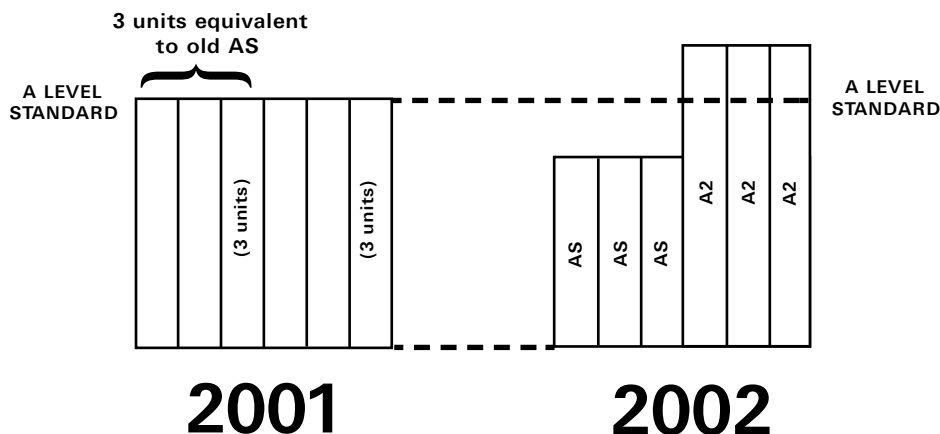
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## ANNEX

Oxford Cambridge and RSA Examinations

## A LEVEL STANDARDS: 2001 AND 2002



October 2002

### Letter from Kathleen Tattersall, Director-General, AQA, to Sir William Stubbs (QCA 28)

#### AS/A-LEVEL AWARDS 2002

Following our discussions on 26 July 2002, I am writing about some of the important matters which emerged during the meeting.

First, there is the matter of the exchange of entry information amongst the Awarding Bodies. You made it clear that you would expect this to take place as a matter of course for all future summer examinations. I am writing to confirm that the Awarding Bodies will exchange this information for all future GCE, GCSE, VCE and GNVQ examinations. Consideration will be given as a matter of urgency following the publication of the results of the 2002 examination to the mechanism for the exchange, which we shall be putting in place and how the data might best be analysed in order to provide as much information as possible about likely outcomes.

The matter is not, however, quite as straightforward as it might appear at first sight. The closing date for entries for the Summer Examination was 21 March 2002. As you will appreciate, this is a week after the date for the publication of results of the January tests. During the period for Enquiries about Results (up to mid-April), centres are allowed to cancel or amend entries in the light of the outcome of any enquiries. April is, realistically, the earliest at which an exchange of data could take place. There is, of course, a much more fundamental problem in reaching a position where entry information can be regarded as finalised. This stems from the continuing problem of centres making late entries and amendments to entries on an extremely large scale. Indeed, late entries continue to be made up to the day of the examination. Ron McLone illustrated the scale of the problem from OCR's perspective. All Awarding Bodies have had similar experiences.

You will know that the Regulatory Authorities issued a statement to all centres in April supporting the earlier letter to centres from the JCGQ explaining that late and amended entries created serious risks for the timely delivery of the examination. Because this problem has continued this year, despite strong representations to centres, the Awarding Bodies are considering other ways of tackling it. I think it highly likely that we shall be seeking further support from the Regulatory Authorities. The new agreement to exchange and interpret entry information adds a further imperative to the task of reducing to the absolute minimum the volume of late entries.

We fully understand your concern that, despite the extensive work which has been carried out by the Awarding Bodies, much of it in close collaboration with the Regulatory Authorities, in preparation for the awards this year, our analyses of likely outcomes had not taken account of the changes in student entry patterns in the new AS/A2 structure. We appreciate that it would have been helpful had the emerging picture of an increase in the numbers of candidates being awarded Grade E and above been anticipated in the



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[Continued

statistical modelling that preceded the awarding period. As we made clear on Friday, we stand ready to meet with the Secretary of State or her Ministerial colleagues to discuss the issues. We will, of course, be discussing these issues with officials at the Department with whom we have been in close contact in the preparation for the publication of results. In the knowledge that you have alerted the Department to this issue, a copy of this letter is being sent to Celia Johnson at the Department.

A further matter which emerged at our meeting on 26 July was your view that QCA should launch an enquiry into the outcomes of this year's examination. We were glad that you recognised the sensitivities for candidates and parents and agreed to work with the Awarding Bodies on the timing and nature of any public announcement. It would, as I am sure you will agree, be extremely damaging to public confidence in the system as a whole were any announcement of an enquiry to suggest that you had fundamental concerns about the process or the outcomes. The word "enquiry" is unsettling and, as I am sure you will also agree, it is essential that no further doubts are cast on the integrity of the public examination system.

Clearly the Regulatory Authorities will wish to evaluate the first awards of Curriculum 2000 prior to the review following the 2003 examination announced in David Hargreaves's Report of December 2001. We would wish to work closely with the Regulatory Authorities as you carry out any such evaluation. It would be helpful if we could discuss the timing and nature of any announcement you will be making when we meet on 6 August.

We fully accepted your point that misunderstanding or misinterpretation of the results should not undermine the success of this first cohort. We have already, as agreed at our meeting on 26 July, provided a draft statement on the key issues relating to the A-level award and will continue to work with your colleagues as we prepare for the publication of results.

30 July 2002

#### Examination of Witnesses

KATHLEEN TATTERSALL, Director-General, AQA; JOHN KERR, Chief Executive, Edexcel; and RON McLONE, Chief Executive, OCR, were examined.

#### Chairman

91. Can I welcome you, and start with Kathleen Tattersall, who is Director-General of AQA, John Kerr, who is Chief Executive of Edexcel (in the centre position); and Ron McLone, who is Chief Executive of OCR. We thought we would have you all in together to get a little more spontaneity than just having separate sessions. Just to explain to you that these proceedings are held under Parliamentary Privilege, and so you can say anything you like and have all sorts of protection, but you must not repeat it; if you say anything that you want to be careful about, do not repeat it outside, even though you have said it here. So I want to make it clear before we start that we are not conducting a repeat of the Tomlinson inquiry. Of course, as the elected representatives of Parliament, with the role of inquiring into anything and keeping to account the Department for Education and Skills, and regularly meeting with both yourselves and the QCA, of course, we want to find out not only what is going on in the world of examining boards and the QCA and the relationship between them, but we will be looking to the future, about the way in which we better govern our examination procedures and the way in which perhaps we better organise the accountability of the system. So of course we will be asking you some things that reflect on the past, but we will also be trying to learn lessons. So can I start really by asking you not just for an opening statement, Kathleen Tattersall, but to say, you are something in the public eye at the moment, are you not, as examining boards, and some of us would say better to be out there doing your job in a kind of low-profile way, because what the public want and what parents want and what students want, teachers and everyone else involved in

the education system want, is a quiet system that delivers reliability without any fuss, and they do not want to hear a debate on quality of standards on Radio 4 every morning, which they have had fairly recently. Why do you think we are where we are at the moment, what do you think has caused these problems?

(*Ms Tattersall*) In the first year of a new examination, inevitably, there is more of a focus on the examination than might be the case in the examination that has been running for some time; we also know that whenever we publish results then there is an interest in those results and quite a public debate about them. In this, the first year of A level, when the results were published on 15 August we were all very pleased that the day passed as well as it did, because the focus has to be on the students who have attained the grades in question, and, indeed, my recollection of that day is that there was a welcome for the new examination. I recall *The Guardian* leader of the day, for example, that there was a welcome for the examination and that things had gone so well. What happened since was that there was clearly some concern, dissatisfaction, on the part of some schools, with the grades which their students attained and a questioning of those grades, and that has led to the re-opening of various issues, some of which were very much firmly in the past, but nevertheless a concentration on those issues, which has led to where we are today.

92. Did this process lead you to feel anxious about your role as an examining board?

(*Ms Tattersall*) No. Looking at AQA as a board, I believe that the job that we have done in this first year of A level is exactly the same job that we have done in all the previous years of the old A level. And,

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KATHLEEN TATTERSALL, JOHN KERR AND RON McLONE

[Continued

**[Chairman Cont]**

thinking about it from my own personal perspective, where I have been a chief executive for 20 years, and indeed seen the coming of GCSE, for example, in 1988, the first year of that, and knowing some of the problems that people foresaw at that time, I believe that AQA has done an extremely good job. If you look at what AQA was asked to do, as a result of the Tomlinson inquiry, it was to examine only two of the 1,008 boundaries which we set at A level, and the inquiry, which was very open, very public, very transparent, has reaffirmed the boundaries which I set as a result of looking at the Chair of Examiners' recommendations. So AQA can be very proud of its record of bringing in the new A level, and, of course, as a board, we are responsible for something like 45% of the grades awarded in A level this year.

93. So you are feeling quite comfortable; but it is quite a small world, the examinations, because we are down to three examining boards in England, are we not, and you people meet together a great deal, both informally and formally, and you all have a relationship with the QCA. And how is it that you seem to be very comfortable about the process, but something went wildly wrong, it seems; what went wrong between the three of you? You are all on very close, first name terms, you seem to be great friends, when I look at you chatting together; it is a very small world, very well communicated. What went wrong, in your view?

(*Ms Tattersall*) It is a small world, in that there are three chief executives, as you say, and, of course, we have also got to remember that the system operates in Wales and Northern Ireland, so there are also two other chief executives who are involved. All of us work within the Code of Practice, which is laid down nationally, it is laid down by QCA, drawn up by QCA in consultation with ourselves, and all of us work against the criteria which are determined for A level. We were all working together to try to establish the same standards across the awarding bodies, as we are charged to do, because three awarding bodies have to ensure that their grades and their awards are in accord with each other. We met over the period of the four years, or so, leading up to the new A levels, on several occasions, there is the Joint Council for General Qualifications, that is the forum in which we meet together, and also with QCA, to try to establish all those difficult technical issues which have to be resolved when the new qualification comes into being. And this, remember, was a qualification which was quite different from the qualification that went before it; here we have a qualification made up of two parts, the AS examination and the A2 examination, AS being a qualification in its own right, and A2 being the second half that makes up the A level. I believe we worked as best we could to try to establish those standards, and it is only really in retrospect that some of these problems now begin to emerge, which at the time were not seen as real issues.

94. The people we represent, you would understand them saying to us that everyone knew a new examination system has a lot of problems, its teething problems are obvious, and, you have just said, you have been planning for a long time this transition. Indeed, the Committee has just come back from New Zealand, where we looked at exactly a parallel situation of introducing a new set of

examinations in that country, and, yet again, a great deal of work had to go into that transition, and a lot of bad feeling about those guinea-pigs who went through the first years of the transition. If I can turn to Ron McLone then for a moment. Dr McLone, can I ask you, you were at all the meetings, the three of you and the meetings with the QCA, but your board seemed to have more problems and seemed to go off at more doing your own thing than the other two; now can you explain why that was?

(*Dr McLone*) We do things slightly differently, that is absolutely true. We have all worked, as Kathleen said, to the same Code of Practice, we have worked to the same procedures, and in the end we all come to the same outcome, in terms of the comparability of the results. We do it slightly differently. Where we have started, we start from looking at what the examiners do first and apply statistical evidence afterwards; not all the boards work in exactly the same way, and therefore it becomes more evident in the way, I suspect, we have done it than perhaps in the others. But I think the important thing is that we do work together in looking at the technical issues, that is absolutely true; but it is the way they have been set up in the context of the whole of the implementation of AS and A2 which I think has led us to where we are now.

95. But, if we look at it forensically, here you are, you have all seen this coming for a very long time, you have all worked together and you all have a relationship with the QCA, indeed you have meetings with the QCA together; how come it seems your interpretation, of your board, seems to have been different? I would not say that Kathleen Tattersall was being smug, she was saying, "I think we did it right; a very experienced board, I am Chief Executive, I have been here 20 years and, more or less, we haven't had any problems." And she has not said anything nasty about the other two boards, certainly, Dr McLone, about you; but you could not say the same thing as Kathleen Tattersall, could you, you have had real problems?

(*Dr McLone*) I would say that we have not had real problems, but we have worked exactly to defining an A level standard, in the same way that OCR and its predecessors always have. We have always worked to getting to the examiner judgements first and then looking at statistical evidence, to make sure that we can compare year on year that we are getting to the right overall standard. I think I do go back to the question of AS and A2; we did not know exactly, all of us, where exactly A2 was. There is a real tension between trying to set boundaries at A2 and yet carrying forward a standard which is not A2, since we do not have any archive evidence at A2, there is nothing of that kind, but we do have to carry forward the A level standard, which is a combination of the AS and the A2. So therefore it has been a tension, in trying to establish all of that. The setting of the standard is actually QCA's job, of course.

96. That is exactly where we are trying to get to. If the QCA was setting the standard, and the QCA is talking to all three of you, how come that all three of you do not seem to operate in exactly the same way? It seems, to someone from the outside trying to look

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KATHLEEN TATTERSALL, JOHN KERR AND RON McLONE

[Continued

**[Chairman Cont]**

in, that two of you seem to read the mind of the QCA in one way, whereas, Dr McLone, you and your board read the QCA's mind in a different way?

(*Dr McLone*) I think it is possible, in applying the Code of Practice, to be looking for what is the overall standard and trying to define what A2 really means, in a way in which all of us were trying to get to the same place, as Tomlinson said, all of us did our best to get to the same place; if you have not got a definition, and there was no definition written down, as to what you are really trying to get with A2, then I submit that we will be looking to do our best to get there.

97. Mr Kerr, do you concur with that view?

(*Mr Kerr*) I have certainly listened very carefully to what my two colleagues have said, and, in fact, I am in full agreement. In terms of setting the standards, I have one year's experience, and clearly I would not claim that Edexcel has not had its problems in the past; but, for this particular year, I am very confident we set the grades professionally, we set them accurately and we set them in accordance with the Code of Practice.

98. So how do you explain the degree of unhappiness about recent events?

(*Mr Kerr*) I think, to answer your first question, what has gone wrong here, clearly, 90,000 students had to wait nearly two months to get their grades confirmed, and clearly that is unacceptable. In terms of my own board, we did not change any of the grade boundaries, we co-operated fully with the Tomlinson inquiry, we thought it was very important that we did co-operate and that there was seen to be a public scrutiny of how the grade boundaries were set. At the end of that, I saw no reason to change any of my grade boundaries.

99. What I am trying to get out of the three of you is, if we know what the events of the last two months have been and you all say, "Well, we operated in terms of our Code of Conduct and full professional standards," what guarantee have the public that this will not all happen again next year? None of you seems to be saying, "It was me, Guv, and we made a mistake and we'll put it right." If none of you admits to any mistakes, how can you improve on what happened this year?

(*Dr McLone*) The system was flawed, if I may, and I think we are all trying to operate in a flawed system, that really we need to deal with; and I have to say that, personally, I have great confidence in Ken Boston, in putting forward these new committees, that he is putting forward, to try to right what was not done in the past. Tomlinson and Ken have been very clear about that, and I think that we do need to get to the root of those flaws in the implementation of the system that, in my view, and I think in Mike Tomlinson's view, from what he said, exist.

100. Dr McLone, what I am trying to push you on is the difference between the three boards. I am still not clear, and we are 659 Members of Parliament and I do not want to tell you how many letters we have had from individual MPs, because schools in their constituencies were very much affected by the events of the last two months, and I am still not clear, as Chairman of this Select Committee, what went

wrong differently in your board that did not seem to go wrong with John Kerr's and Kathleen Tattersall's boards?

(*Dr McLone*) It is a matter of how you look at the way it is done and the way in which you can make the measure. Tomlinson, quite properly, put a measure forward for looking at the way it was done; it could have been looked at in different ways. The way we have done it, which is the way consistent—certainly, it shows more in a system where you are in change. When you have consistently an examination that has been taken year after year and everybody is absolutely sure. With the A2, and if I may just use this chart which I sent to you, if everybody is using something where they know the demand is always the same as A level then they have been consistently arriving at it. When you have a demand at AS, and an advanced A2, it does matter, the way you are doing it, shows. In other words, the perception of what we have been doing is clearer. But I do believe that, when it comes to the outcome at the end, you will see, in the comparability of what we three do, and we run comparability studies, that we are actually at very closely the same standard all along.

101. But you have changed lots of results, have you not; the students who thought they had one grade now have a different grade?

(*Dr McLone*) With respect, we changed 18 out of 1,012, which is a very small number. But, yes, we did, and it is a matter of doing it in a different context; we had a different context, we had different people present, we were making new judgements. The judgements that we made, on the evidence, in the summer, stand. The judgements that we made later were done in a different context at this particular time, and I judged it right to be able to make the amendments I did in the 18 units that I did. But, nonetheless, that is quite a small number.

102. So if we were doing a forensic job and we said to you, "It seems that the QCA was terrified about grade inflation," they were terrified of grade inflation, and they said to the three of you, they expressed their anxiety about this, two boards reacted in one way but you seem to have reacted in a different way?

(*Dr McLone*) I think we reacted all more or less in the same way. I was about setting standards, just as my colleagues were, for the A level examinations. I think there are a lot of lessons to be learned for the future out of this, and I think that, critically, we need to be looking at the lessons that we have in the way we all managed to do it; we are doing it a slightly different way, I grant that.

**Mr Turner**

103. Yours were the 18 units that were revised, and you have said that, essentially, you do the marking first and then the statistics, while the other two boards do the grading and the statistics together. Now that implies, to me, that your actions are more transparent than those of the other two boards; would you agree with that?

(*Dr McLone*) It could be interpreted so, but I think all the methods that we use are quite proper. I think it is still the case that you *could*, and should perhaps

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get the statistics first. The key thing is where you select scripts; and I think that this is what we really need to be looking at, in the future, trying to make sure that we all carry out what is a much tighter Code of Practice procedure. The way you select scripts and where you select them depends very much on how much information you put into the system to start with; in a very steady state system, people are very confident about where they might go to select scripts, in a completely new system they are not as confident. Therefore, there are ways in which you have got to get the first set of scripts in which you are actually trying to find out where the boundaries are. We did it, I have to say, by saying to the examiners, "Well, where do we look?" and then we looked at the statistical evidence, where the GCSE performed, there are all sorts of stats that you properly do every year. I have to say that you could do it, and we could have done it, by looking first of all at statistical evidence, to say, "Well, let's think about this; if we want a new A2 standard then where will the scripts come from."

104. That is the first time I have heard anyone mention selecting scripts.

(Dr McLone) It is critical.

105. So how do you select them differently from the other two boards?

(Dr McLone) We have a set of procedures laid down, that is absolutely true; what turned out, and the way we have actually operated in the last few years, is that we have looked very closely at what the examiners have said, that is the principal examiner, with not very much, I have to say, statistical evidence applied at that time. We then apply statistical evidence and GCSE performance. We look at "A" performance from year to year, of course, to see whether or not we are agreeing. This year, in some subjects, they would obviously work something out to get to the right place, and other subjects, not. My job is to bring all the subjects together, just as it is Kathleen's and John's.

106. I did not quite hear your words. You said they work something out?

(Dr McLone) What I am saying is that when the examiners are looking at the scripts they are looking at where they should be selecting the scripts from. If, in a new system, we are not sure where the A2 is to be set then they are working in the dark, to some extent, if we do not have some statistical evidence applied; there is no archive, there is nothing of that kind.

107. Could I ask just one other related question. This is to do with whether what you are trying to do is possible, actually, because the former Secretary of State told me, a few days ago, that an AS level is worth half an A level; do you agree with that?

(Dr McLone) Technically, it is, because of the 50% weighting. But the problem is that, if you have got a 50% weighting, and, I have to say, we argued very strongly for 40/60, my own experience, from being an academic, is that if you have a part one and a part two, and, many universities, the one I was at was certainly like this, you got the balance right between a part one and a part two one year, and then a harder exam the next year, by a 40/60 weighting. It was changed to a 50/50 weighting. A 50/50 weighting has an impact; of course, it all depends on the demand

that is set in question papers, but if you look at a 50/50 weighting and you set one at an AS, which everybody said would be at a lower standard, then, the other one, by definition, you are asking for something that is more demanding. You hope to get A2 question papers that are more demanding, but, if you have got to get the higher demand, that 50/50 weighting, in my view, totally distorted really what we have all been asked to do. Now you could actually look at statistical evidence, to start with, to try to get that distortion out of the way; we look at it afterwards.

### Chairman

108. Who did you argue with for the 60/40?

(Dr McLone) We argued with QCA and with, well, I suspect we argued with—there was a lot of "big four" debate that went on, at the time, I remember, and we certainly argued about 40/60 at that time.

109. Did any of the other examining boards think that 50/50 was unwise?

(Ms Tattersall) We all started off by arguing for a 40/60 relationship, that is absolutely true, but as the debate went on other factors came into play, one of them being the points which UCAS proposed to award to AS and to A2, and since AS was half of the other then 50% seemed to be an appropriate percentage. I think we were all asked to, as it were, square the circle, but, I have to say, we did not find it as difficult in AQA as Dr McLone is saying that the problem is in theory; for us, we saw that the AS and the A2 made up the old A level standard, that AS was clearly at a lower standard because it was after one year's work in the sixth form, and that the A2 had somehow to bridge that gap between the full standard and, as it were, the half standard. And so we saw it in terms of the less difficult parts of the old syllabuses being in the AS, and the more difficult parts being in the A2, and the whole being the old A level standard.

110. I think we sent you the letter from Alan Stitchcombe, I think all three boards were sent his letter, where he says that, his argument was that all this was predictable, all the problems were entirely predictable, that you were going to run into these problems, you were going to have these difficulties, and he is a chap that is a sort of voice of commonsense, pointing out, what you just said, that it was going to be a totally different examination, it was going to be an easier first year, you were going to be able to retake it, so that that was going to push up the passes. What Stitchcombe says is that all this was predictable, that these, you, highly sophisticated examination boards, with the QCA, did not get it right?

(Dr McLone) I must apologise, we have not seen it; we could not open the e-mail.

(Mr Kerr) I think, what Kathleen has said, we did get it right. We are actually not making any apologies for the standards set this year; the standards set, certainly by Edexcel, were correct.

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**Mr Chaytor**

111. Chairman, I am getting very confused, because what we are hearing from each of the three boards is that the difficulties that we experienced this year were really entirely technical matters; but that is not really what the Tomlinson report concludes, because Tomlinson says, quite specifically, that the actions of the boards during the grading exercise arose from the pressure they perceived they were under from the QCA, both to maintain the standard and achieve an outcome, more or less in line with the results in 2001. So what Mike Tomlinson is saying is that the problem was not merely a technical issue but it was an issue that arose directly because of the pressure from the QCA and the way in which each of the three boards responded to that pressure. Now the submission from the AQA says: "And at no time were we unduly influenced by any external pressure or agency to act differently this year, when awarding grades." So my first question to Ms Tattersall is, are you saying Mike Tomlinson's conclusions are completely wrong; and then I would like to hear from the other two boards as to this pressure from the QCA, when was it applied, and in what form did it occur?

(Ms Tattersall) Let me start by saying that AQA did not respond, as it were, to any pressures, of any kind.

**Chairman**

112. That was not the question. Were you pressured, was the question?

(Ms Tattersall) Let me come back then to the discussions that took place between QCA and the awarding bodies, and they are on record, in two letters, which I think you have, a letter of 22 March and a letter of 19 April; 22 March, myself, and 19 April from Bill Stubbs. And they relate to a meeting that we had on 12 March, when inevitably the issue of standards and the new examination came up; and all of us, as awarding bodies, are charged with the maintenance of standards, year on year, and indeed between ourselves, and the issue is, how do you measure those standards. One measure, you could say, is the percentage of candidates who receive a given award in a given year, the outcomes, I will call them, and the discussion that we had on 12 March focused very much on the outcomes, the expectation being that in 2002 they would be very similar to 2001; that worried many of us, because, clearly, many will see the outcomes only as indicators, not as real examples of standards, and the issue is what are the standards. And that gave rise to the letter that I sent to Bill Stubbs, which was really setting out our position, as awarding bodies, that we judged the standards from the evidence, and the prime evidence is the candidates' work, and the subsidiary evidence is the statistical information that Dr McLone referred to; and we had a letter back from Bill Stubbs, which concurred with that view. Now, as far as AQA was concerned, that clarified the issue, we were all talking the same language; we were not talking about outcomes being the same, we were talking about judging the evidence on the basis of what candidates actually did in the examination.

**Mr Chaytor**

113. But was that the end of the story with the QCA, or was there further intervention following the completion of the marking and the early results coming forward?

(Ms Tattersall) We had a further meeting, firstly of ourselves and secondly with QCA, on 26 July, and the reason for that meeting was that it was very clear, certainly from the awards in AQA, that the pattern of the outcomes was going to be very different in 2002 than it had been in 2001. What I was anxious to ascertain was whether this was something peculiar to AQA, or whether it was something which my fellow chief executives were also experiencing in their awards; and so we called a meeting of the boards, we ascertained that we were all experiencing the same sort of pattern of results, and we identified the reasons for that pattern of results. One of the major reasons being that there is a big drop-out rate between the AS and the full A level, people who had performed to the best of their ability at the AS level and then not gone on to take it at A level. And so, as a result of that meeting, we were very comfortable that the results we were seeing were indeed representing the true standards that we were expecting, the carrying forward of standards, and we then shared that information with QCA. There was no pressure from QCA to intervene and change the results after that point.

114. So there was no further communication with yourself after the meeting on 26 July?

(Ms Tattersall) I think I wrote to Bill Stubbs following that meeting, again to clarify what we were doing. We were a little worried when QCA had mentioned an inquiry, because that seemed to undermine confidence in results, although all of us recognised that with a new system it is inevitable that people want to see how the system has worked, and therefore an inquiry in the general sense was quite acceptable, but in the specific sense, as to whether the grades were right or not, we thought would really have cast doubt, which would have rebounded very badly on the candidates.

115. What you are saying there is completely at odds with what Mike Tomlinson is saying in the Conclusion to his report?

(Ms Tattersall) I do not think it is. Mike Tomlinson is recognising that there were clearly pressures, and all of us operate in a very pressurised society, particularly when results are being published, we have to stand up and be counted; and that, of course, is a pressure, that you have to stand up and be counted, you have to be able to say that the standard of the award in this year is the same as the standard of the award in previous years, regardless of what the statistics actually say. And so that is the sort of pressure that we were all operating in. And, certainly, in terms of specifically bringing in a particular percentage, no, that was not the case, as far as AQA was concerned; we followed our procedures and our practices in the normal way.

116. So William Stubbs ought to be in the job still?

(Ms Tattersall) I cannot comment on William Stubbs not being in his job; clearly, that was a matter for the Secretary of State.

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**[Mr Chaytor Cont]**

117. You are saying to the Committee, there was no undue pressure brought to bear by the QCA?

(*Ms Tattersall*) In terms of that particular issue, I did not see that as a pressure to actually bring in awards at a particular level, once we had clarified that we were talking the same language, and we were not actually saying that the outcomes for 2002 had to be exactly the same as the outcomes of 2001.

118. But were there other issues in which the QCA brought pressure to bear? I am just trying to put some flesh on this Conclusion to the Tomlinson report.

(*Ms Tattersall*) I do appreciate that. I can only say that, within the context we work, the main pressure on us is to be able to demonstrate that the standard of our awards is commensurate with the standard of previous awards; and in the first year of an examination that inevitably is difficult, because the syllabuses are different, the structure of the examination is difficult, you do not have the same reference points as you had in the past. But that is the sort of pressure that I would describe, but it is a pressure of which we were very aware, even without QCA saying it.

**Ms Munn**

119. I want to clarify something which is in Ron McLone's written submission to us, in terms of this issue about maintaining the standards. Because what you have said here is: "There is a fundamental tension inherent in the awarding process between the current Code of Practice requirement to maintain year-on-year standards *at qualification level*" which is what we have just been talking about, and which I understand very well, "whilst making examiner judgements on the basis of script evidence *at unit level*." What does that mean? I do not understand what you actually mean by that.

(*Dr McLone*) I am sorry if it is vague, but what it is really saying is that the standard that we are required to take forward is that of the whole A level, and that, in fact, is what is in the Code of Practice. The Code of Practice does not mention the AS or the A2; whether it should or not, I think, maybe it ought. But the judgements that are required to be made were not at A level, they were at A2, now, by definition, which is not at A level; there has been a debate as to where it should be, that has been the whole issue about what the whole thing has been about, what should be the A2 standard. And, therefore, the senior examiners, in looking at scripts, were being asked to look at something which was not the exact continuation of the A level, by definition, because of a 50/50 weighting and because of what we have been doing with AS. In my view, that would have been a lot easier if it had been a 40/60 weighting, because they could certainly have continued with a view about what was going on in the past A level and drawn a similar conclusion, the weighting would have taken account of it. I do not think, with a 50/50 weighting, and I think this is pretty clear now, that you could expect that; and the examiners themselves, to be fair, understood that they had got to go for a different level. But there is a tension in that.

120. So is 'tension' a nice way of saying it was problematic from the start?

(*Dr McLone*) I think the whole of the implementation scheme was flawed from the start, yes, and I believe, and certainly my board believe, that what we should have been seeing was a much cleaner, crisper definition for all of us of what that actually meant, that tension explained. It is inevitable, I think, and Tomlinson said so in his report, that you are going to get different interpretations, I accept ours looks a different interpretation. I have also to say, what matters is the outcomes, and I believe that, the outcomes, actually, if you take a look at where our boundaries have been set, compared with, say, Kathleen's boundaries, you will probably find them in very much the same place.

121. So is it, was it, should it be in the future, QCA's responsibility to sort that tension out?

(*Dr McLone*) It is, and I do think that Ken Boston is intending to do so.

122. And it would have made your life a lot easier, if that had been done last year rather than the next year?

(*Dr McLone*) Most importantly, it would be right for all the students and teachers out there; that is what actually matters. Whether life is easier for us, we are exam boards, it is our job, but it must be right and clear for all the students out there.

123. So that was one problem that you could have identified at the outset, that one issue that was going to cause you a problem. Given that this was a new process anyway, what are the other teething problems that you expected there to be, given that you were changing to a new system and that examination boards have had that experience in the past, I think Kathleen Tattersall referred to that earlier?

(*Dr McLone*) It has been a big change this year, the first time we have had such a change to one of our major qualifications, and the first really big change to A level in 50 years, of course, splitting it into two. The issue that I think was important to get it sorted out, apart from that, was the technicalities all to do with whether there should be a trial or not; there were no pilots, we had some pilots to AS, which helped, I think, with AS, we had one or two, I think, Kathleen did one, we did one, I think John probably did one, maybe, at A2, but no consistent pilot at A2. In the end, of course, what actually happened was no pilot of A2. I think that if we had got some pilots, we had tried to define some archive evidence on which we could base a moving forward, I think that would have been immensely helpful. We could also have done something different, I suspect, in the structure of AS and A2 and whether they were linked, because another problem, again, we wrote about this earlier, a problem about this is: we had one qualification, AS, embedded in another one; that is a very difficult thing actually to sort out in the end. It is much better if you sort out the two and split them up.

124. I just wonder, Chair, whether John Kerr or Kathleen Tattersall want to say anything on the pitfalls that they saw at the outset, in terms of this being a new examination?

(*Ms Tattersall*) One of the pitfalls that has not been mentioned is the number of units that formed the qualification. In the early stages, when the qualification was being discussed, we certainly

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**[Ms Munn Cont]**

argued for four units, not for six, and, one of the difficulties I think there was, that had there been a unit devoted to coursework it would have actually exceeded the limits which at that time were being laid down nationally for coursework. So, in a sense, six became the norm as opposed to four. And that, of course, has brought about other problems, like examiner recruitment, and that is a real issue, in terms of the new qualification. So that, for us, was one of the issues, the number of units, the fragmentation of the curriculum; and we have got to remember this is a curriculum problem, not just an examination problem. So we felt that, in some subjects more than in others, for example in English, History, the splitting into that number of units was in itself a problem in curriculum terms.

(*Mr Kerr*) Having piloted material, having exemplar material, out in the schools, would have made it clearer. I think clearly it was a mistake to launch A2 without going through that; and also I think that Kathleen's view on four units is probably easier for everyone to grasp, rather than six.

#### Chairman

125. Where were you three in terms of, the general impression we get, in terms of this Committee, is that there is this great discontent, about the old A level being too narrow, too specialist too early, three, sometimes four, three subjects, at 16, and, can I call them, the chattering classes, right across the piece, people wanted change, they wanted a broadening; where were you, did you want to stick with the old system, or were you champions of a new system?

(*Ms Tattersall*) AQA only came into being in 2000, so I am now speaking from a different board, specifically the NEAB, which was one of the boards that formed AQA, and we argued for many years for a change to the system, in particular actually to have an examination which was at a lower standard than A level following GCSE, because there was such an appalling drop-out of young people between GCSE and A level, with no record at all of their achievements, and we felt that that was such a waste of talent. So, as a board, we piloted what we called the E examination, I think it was Extended, I think that was the name, the Extended examination, which was piloted with many independent schools, because they were the only ones free actually to take an examination which was not a formal qualification. And I think that demonstrates where we stood on the issue of change.

126. Dr McLone, you were around at that time; where were you?

(*Dr McLone*) Yes, I was, indeed. I do believe that Curriculum 2000, as a curriculum driver, has been a great success, because it has allowed students to move into a broader number of subjects, it has allowed students to develop as they can over 16 to 18; it is a time when students change, to think about all sorts of things that they can suddenly decide. If they are choosing subjects at 15, as, of course, they have to, and then at 17 and they have still got a year to go, and "This really wasn't the subject I wanted to do," they could now drop it. This was certainly a real

success, it seems to me. So I do not think we should be throwing anything out, we certainly should not be pulling up plants yet again to inspect the roots.

127. So let the thing settle down, is your view, not switching to an International Baccalaureate immediately?

(*Dr McLone*) I think we need to be just a bit calm about it.

#### Paul Holmes

128. We have just heard two of you welcoming the new system, the fact that it is broader and it is a test in different ways, and allowing Year 12 students, who were finding difficulty from GCSE to A level, actually to show what they can do. But is not one of the problems that we have had this summer the very fact that the exam boards and the QCA and the Government did not adjust to that, that, the 4% increase in A level passes that we had this summer, really is not that too small? If you introduce a modular system which allows students to resit their modules, and therefore obviously do better, and if you introduce a system which allows students to drop their weaker subjects before they go on to the final A2 stage, and therefore do better, should we not have seen a much bigger jump in pass rates than the 4% we achieved?

(*Dr McLone*) Of course, you expect those to have an effect. I have to say that, of course, an awful lot of people were already doing modular A levels, they are not new. So the whole business about whether they actually have dropped the units, or they have dropped out, that has been going on for some time, over half of our A levels before were already modular; so we were not experiencing that massive shift because we were now going to modular. The fact that there were five, and that therefore they could drop different subjects. That of course is new, and we expected an increase at E because of that.

129. I would be interested in the figures across the exam boards, because you were saying over half of yours were doing modules already. I was an A level teacher, I was a head of sixth form, and certainly over half of ours were not doing modular, although there were more modular courses around; but when I was teaching in the first year of AS level, and when I was talking to A level teachers last summer, before the results came out, generally everybody in the education world expected there to be a significant jump in the number of children, students, achieving. Have we not artificially depressed that achievement, for whatever reason? Mike Tomlinson thinks, he says twice in his Conclusion, that that was what happened, because the exam boards perceived this pressure to keep the "grade inflation" down.

(*Dr McLone*) I do not perceive that we have artificially depressed anything. I do believe that we have been looking very hard as to what this A2 standard would be, and A2 is, indeed, a good deal harder than AS, and I think has been differentially seen, across different schools and different colleges, as to what that really meant. And I think Kathleen and John are right, that if we had had more exemplar materials and more worked out then it would certainly have helped.

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**Chairman**

130. Can I just intervene, on that question, Paul. If you had, whose duty was it to do this, to have the pilots; who let us down, in terms of the system, was it the QCA, was it the Department for Education and Skills, was it your own boards?

(*Dr McLone*) The boards clearly cannot operate in their own vacuum; obviously, to have exemplar material for a new standard, you have got to do it collectively and you have got to do it all together. Therefore, I perceive that it should be down to the regulator to be driving that forward. Whether it was at anywhere else, I would not like to speculate.

**Paul Holmes**

131. So the root problem, as teachers found, and as, in various evidence, we have had submitted, and Mike Tomlinson points this out, is that the thing was introduced too quickly, without piloting, and so, two years on, that is why we have got the problem we have got?

(*Dr McLone*) Absolutely; completely, yes.

**Chairman**

132. Will not the people that we represent feel a bit aggrieved that you, as the great examining boards, the three great examining boards of this country, did not squeal a bit louder to warn the educational world and parents and students? If Mike Tomlinson has been saying it was a disaster waiting to happen, to broadly quote him, why were you not shouting, why were you not jumping up and down; where are the letters, why did you not knock on our doors, as politicians, and say "Look, this is going to be a real problem for students"?

(*Dr McLone*) We certainly, all of us, were very concerned when this was being introduced, and there are minutes of the joint meetings that we had, that it was being rushed.

133. Being rushed; who did you say that to?

(*Dr McLone*) We said it, I am sure, in meetings we have had with the QCA, but we certainly had it in meetings we had with the Joint Council together; so I am sure we pushed it forward.

134. So you had been saying it to Sir William, whoever was the Chief Executive?

(*Dr McLone*) Whoever is in receipt.

135. Did you find it difficult, because there was no chief executive?

(*Dr McLone*) I am talking about two years ago.

136. Well, two years ago there was a chief executive for only a year, was there not?

(*Dr McLone*) There was, yes.

137. And then there was an interregnum of nine months?

(*Dr McLone*) Yes, something like that.

138. So was it difficult to communicate with the QCA?

(*Dr McLone*) I think I would ask my colleagues what they feel about that. I think it is important—

139. You are being a bit difficult to pin down on this?

(*Dr McLone*) We do communicate, yes; the question is, the response.

140. Yes, but, Dr McLone, I am asking you a straight question. You are saying to me you did see the problems and you stood up and said, "There are going to be problems with this, there are going to be real problems here," you said that to the QCA; you are saying that you do not know what came back, or if anything came back?

(*Dr McLone*) What I am saying is that we all perceived that there would be problems; we were working with these problems but we did not conclude any answers.

**Mr Chaytor**

141. Chairman, can I just pursue this question of the relationship between the examining boards and the QCA, because I do think this is the heart of the issue, really. And what we have been told so far is that on 12 March there was a meeting with the QCA, at which the line was given out to the boards that there should be no grade inflation this year; on 26 July, there was a meeting with the QCA, at which the boards told the QCA, essentially, there was going to be grade inflation this year, and after that there was nothing and there was no communication, no further meetings, no undue pressure. Now the submission to the Committee by OCR and Edexcel, and this is many, many pages of documentation, is very direct in its criticisms of the QCA, it is sometimes vitriolic in its criticisms of the QCA as being bureaucratic, unresponsive, divided, unsure of where they stand on particular issues, and the Edexcel submission particularly. But here you are almost ignoring what you said—

(*Mr Kerr*) You asked one question to AQA, you did not ask the rest of the panel.

**Mr Chaytor:** This is why I am now turning to you, Mr Kerr, and Dr McLone as well.

**Chairman:** Mr Kerr, we are giving you the opportunity to contribute.

**Mr Chaytor**

142. Because what I am concerned about is that you are very critical of the QCA in your written submission, but in front of the Committee you are saying, "Well, it's purely a technical matter"?

(*Mr Kerr*) I must interject. In terms of the events that Kathleen outlined, I agree entirely, the 12 March meeting, the letter that the three chief executives wrote, because we were extremely concerned by what was said at the 12 March meeting; but the letter of 19 April did not reassure me, I felt the pressure, I am sure the integrity was clearly there but the pressure put on by QCA was inappropriate. That was my evidence to Tomlinson, that has been repeated in the press outside.

143. So you disagree with Ms Tattersall, you are saying there was inappropriate pressure?

(*Mr Kerr*) The events are the same, I think our interpretations are the same; the pressure was clearly inappropriate. To link grades this year back to legacy A levels was only one factor; the most important



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factor, from Edexcel's point of view, was the student performance, and to depress students' performance based on Government statistics would be unethical.

144. Was there any further communication between yourselves and QCA after 26 July, before the publication of the results?

(Mr Kerr) No.

(Ms Tattersall) Can I just say, I had forgotten this when I was answering your earlier question, I am sorry; we had a routine meeting, a meeting that was in the diary for a long time, on 6 August, in anticipation of the results. Now by that time, of course, everything is done, dusted, we know where we are, and all we are talking about is what the results are and the sorts of explanations that are available for those results; so there was that third meeting, which, I am sorry about, I had forgotten.

145. But there was no inappropriate pressure at that meeting on 6 August?

(Ms Tattersall) No. As I say, by then, it is impossible anyway, even if anybody had wanted to, by then, your results are ready to go out, they are ready to go out to UCAS. So the answer is, no, there was not.

146. Could I just follow that and ask Dr McLone about the broader issue of the relationship with the QCA, because I think the picture that is emerging is of quite a profound breakdown in communication with the QCA, not only over the issue of this year's results but over the whole issue of the design of the new qualification. Are you saying that you have been arguing your case for a longer trial period, for a different weighting between the two parts of the new qualification, and the QCA has been completely unresponsive?

(Dr McLone) I think what I am saying is that there have been flaws in the system, which it is QCA's responsibility to deal with, and that that has not been sorted, and that is now clear. What I think I am also saying is, what we need to do is look forward, we have got a new Chief Executive in QCA, I think we have every confidence in that, and we must build that new relationship; and I think that we should look forward, in doing that.

147. But you, as an examining board, are completely exonerated?

(Dr McLone) I say that what we should be doing is working to a completely new system. I think that QCA have the responsibility to define what it is that we have to do in a new structure like AS and A2, it is their responsibility.

148. That does not answer my question. Are you, as an examining board, completely exonerated?

(Dr McLone) I say that we operated, as Tomlinson said, with integrity, in a proper procedure, to deliver what we had to.

#### Chairman

149. But what we are trying to get out of you, Dr McLone, is, what is your opinion, in terms of the right relationship with the QCA? If it was wrong in the past, is that because of personality, or is it structural; is there something fundamentally wrong with a regulator that, as I look at it, has got an

executive role, it has got an advisory role, it has got a combination of roles, has it not, and also it has this relationship with examining boards, it has a bit of a relationship with Parliament, it has a relationship with the Secretary of State? It could not really be called an independent body. Would you like it to be more independent?

(Dr McLone) We certainly would; in our submission to the QCA quinquennial review, we made it quite clear that we thought the QCA was trying to fulfil a whole host of roles, some of which were incompatible. For example, it has an operational role in the Key Stage tests, it has a regulatory role for the awarding bodies, and yet at other times it is making its own awards for tests, for example. It defines operations sometimes very crisply, very precisely, in places where, as awarding bodies, we would say that is not their role; but it is their role to set and define a standard, it is their role to regulate that, it is their role to set that very crisply. That, I would have to say, was not as successful as it should have been. And I think, possibly you were perhaps suggesting it, at the root of it is where its independence is. We believe strongly that we should have an independence, responsible to Parliament, preferably a robust regulator, who will be clear—

150. Why? In the past, have you been frightened of them, because they are so close to the Government?

(Dr McLone) I would not say that we have been frightened of them, at all, but it is quite clear that that has a different impact than if it is independent.

151. What was your view of the fact that the Acting Chief Executive was a secondee from the Department for Education and Skills?

(Dr McLone) I have no view on that.

152. No view; you have no view. We are a bit worried about you not having a view on anything. Would you have preferred not to have a senior civil servant seconded from the Department as the Acting Chief Executive?

(Dr McLone) As an issue of principle, yes; but I do not wish to make any comment about individuals.

153. You do not, and we would not want to do that in this Committee, but what it signifies is a very close relationship between the QCA and the Department, does it not?

(Dr McLone) It is our view that the QCA should be independent and should be responsible to Parliament.

154. Alright. John Kerr, what is your view on that?

(Mr Kerr) Absolutely, coming from a regulatory background, I do believe in an independent, robust regulator, with one *caveat*, a right of appeal, particularly as it is not envisaged at the moment, answerable to Parliament, would help to restore public confidence.

(Ms Tattersall) In general terms, I agree with what my colleagues are saying here. Certainly, we have argued for a very independent regulatory role for QCA, and we believe that that would be the most accountable and transparent way of demonstrating that. If I could say though, where I disagree somewhat with my colleague is in terms of the discussions which did take place between QCA and ourselves about the big issues of timing, and so on.

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**[Chairman Cont]**

155. Which colleague are you disagreeing with?

(*Ms Tattersall*) With Dr McLone; on the question of the timing issue, for example, we did press our case very, very strongly to QCA. What we do not know is what QCA advised Government on those issues, because those matters are not made public; and this again comes back to the issue of the independence and the transparency of the process. I am sure QCA will speak for itself on that issue, but we did, as awarding bodies, make very clear that more time was needed for the new qualification, and, in particular, to test out some of the technical matters. As I say, it is then for QCA to advise, in the current terms, Government on what to do, and I am sure QCA will speak for itself on that particular matter.

(*Dr McLone*) I do not think we are that far apart, Chairman.

156. You are very keen to agree, Dr McLone, on some of these things?

(*Dr McLone*) No, no; sorry about that, if I gave a misinterpretation. I do believe that the pressure was there, and I was trying to say the pressure was there.

**Valerie Davey**

157. Is there a formal relationship between your bodies and the QCA, such that if, in these discussions, which seem very general to me, you wish to make an appeal, can you formally appeal, and what formalities are there between yourself and the QCA?

(*Ms Tattersall*) There is not a formal appeal process; the formal relationship is certainly between QCA and ourselves in the Joint Council for General Qualifications, and, I have to say, that is at a policy level, but we also have several working relationships and working groups, of a technical nature, between QCA and ourselves. So there is very regular communication. But, in terms of an appeal process, that is something that we do not have and which we have argued for, and have been told that the only way in which we could make an appeal is through a judicial review.

158. But the regular communication is with the Council, rather than you as individual boards?

(*Ms Tattersall*) No; sorry, with the Joint Council, yes. I misunderstood you.

159. So your Joint Council is the body that would appeal, in the future, if that was what emerged, or individual boards?

(*Ms Tattersall*) It would depend on the issue. If it is an issue to do with the system, where we are acting collectively as individual boards, then that would be a matter, I think, for us to act collectively in that context. If it is a matter which affects an individual board, for example, a matter of accreditation, either the qualification or of the individual organisation itself, that will be for the individual organisation to take up.

160. It seems to me that if you had a robust and, I would appreciate too, a more independent QCA, then having determined that these exams are 50/50, that should be the end of the argument; it seems to me that on this occasion, in what seems to be a very fluid dialogue, still going on, one board has accepted, in AQA, it was 50/50, whereas OCR is still. . .

(*Mr Kerr*) Edexcel were also very clear at 50/50.

161. And Edexcel; it seems to me that OCR is still arguing the case. Now, if you are still arguing the case, does that not affect, can I ask you, the way in which you are dealing with this matter?

(*Dr McLone*) No. I do understand where you are coming from; but, no. Our job has been to apply 50/50, and that is what we have done, and that is why I have said that we are looking for A2 to be a considerably higher standard than the old A level, that is part and parcel of the 50/50. My argument was that if we had gone for 40/60, if, then it would have made it easier to deal with in a different way; and I think it would. But that is not affecting the outcome now, we have to deal with 50/50, you are quite right.

162. A last question. This newly constituted, potentially, QCA would then have more power, or less power, *vis-à-vis* the Joint Council?

(*Ms Tattersall*) In terms of acting as a regulator of the system, acting as a regulator laying down the rules for the system, the powers would be similar to what they were, but I think more clearly expressed, and I hope more clearly focused, in terms of the way in which QCA activated those powers in respect of the boards. That will be the cleanest and the most transparent way of carrying out those responsibilities.

**Jeff Ennis**

163. All three witnesses have advocated that we do need to change and redefine the existing role of the QCA and make it more independent from Government, etc., etc. Could I ask our three witnesses, do you have confidence in the QCA as it currently stands, in their role and capacity as regulator of the current exam system?

(*Ms Tattersall*) Clearly, QCA has had some difficulties, both in terms of not having a Chief Executive and also its Chair, only recently a new Chair being appointed. But I have to say that, in terms of the general working relationship that we have with QCA, at a very practical, logistical, technical level, we have very good relationships and confidence in the people that we deal with. I think, as Ron McLone has said, we now have an opportunity to rebuild relationships at the political, as it were, level with the new Chair and the new Chief Executive. So I have every confidence that we will actually strike a proper relationship with the newly constituted team and, if the QCA does change, with any newly constituted QCA.

(*Mr Kerr*) I think I would agree with that. We have a new Chief Executive in place now, and that all three boards should work very closely with him to achieve some aims. But if there is an opportunity to redesign QCA, perhaps it is removing its role on the design of qualifications and focus much heavier on the regulation side.

(*Dr McLone*) I agree with everything that has been said; particularly I agree with Ken Boston, when in his speech at the QCA Annual Conference he talked about the restructuring of QCA that was necessary and the reconstituting of it, and I think we have every confidence in Ken that he will deliver that.

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**[Jeff Ennis Cont]**

164. It has already been said, Chair, that when we adopt any new examination system you will get teething problems; would it not be fair to say that one of the ways we could cut down on the teething problems with new examinations being brought in would be to cut down on the number of examination boards that we have got, and cut down from either three to two, or even now to one? I wonder what the witnesses have got to say about that, Chair.

(*Mr Kerr*) The teachers tell us that they value the choice and innovation that three exam boards bring.

165. I am not on about the teachers, I am on about you?

(*Mr Kerr*) And we would echo that; we are here for educational services to students and to the teachers, and I think we continue as three boards.

(*Ms Tattersall*) I do not really think the main issues that we are dealing with are problems arising from three boards; what I think it is arising from is the problem of a new system, and, inevitably, in a new system you do get the issues that we have been talking about, about interpretation of standards, and I am quite certain that would occur even if you had the one board dealing with it. Furthermore, the volume of candidates that we have in this country taking qualifications, I think, if you put it all into one board, the risk of things going wrong will be far greater than the risk of things going wrong with three boards.

(*Dr McLone*) We are, of course, talking about England here, are we not, the English awarding bodies and QCA; but I do not think I have to remind you about that.

**Chairman**

166. This Committee's remit is for England only, not for Scotland.

(*Dr McLone*) But I do not have to remind you, I am sure, about what happened in Scotland two years ago, when we had one board and one set of problems; and it is not a matter of whether it is three boards or not, one board can make all the problems. And, in truth, if you have only got one board, you could argue that it might all get hidden.

**Mr Simmonds**

167. You have all said, categorically, that you think there was no either perceived or other pressure put down upon you, as examining boards, from QCA; you have also stated that very few grades were changed, at the end of the day. Do you actually think the Tomlinson inquiry was necessary at all?

(*Ms Tattersall*) I think, by the time the Tomlinson inquiry was set up, the lack of confidence, as it were, in the public perception was such that there needed to be some objective look at what had gone on, and some objective recommendations for action. And, therefore, in that sense, I do think the Tomlinson inquiry was necessary actually to break the deadlock, which we had to, in terms of the public perception and the public confidence in the system. As a board, we were very confident ourselves in the grades that we had awarded, and, indeed, in the interventions that I had made, as a chief executive, which, just to remind the Committee, most of the interventions I made were to lower the grade boundaries, not to raise

the grade boundaries, in other words, in favour of the candidates, we were very confident of that, but, nevertheless, we felt it important that we co-operated in full with the Tomlinson inquiry, in order to restore the public confidence that was so necessary.

(*Mr Kerr*) There is no real other effective mechanism for reviewing grade boundaries. The inquiries by results procedure will look at re-marking only. So this was the only mechanism really to try to demonstrate to the public how the grade boundaries were set, and, as Kathleen said, to diffuse what was clearly a tension out there.

(*Dr McLone*) I think we all welcomed the fact that we had the Tomlinson inquiry. I think the most important thing that was unfortunate was that the whole expectations had been raised of so many students that we had to do something; and the sad thing, and which we are all concerned about, is how many students have had, as it were, two goes, having their expectations raised and then dashed. That clearly is very sad.

168. There does seem to be a contradiction also in what the three of you are saying about the future confidence that you have in the QCA. On the one hand, you seem to be saying that you prefer it to be an independent body that is responsible to Parliament, and yet, on the other hand, at the same time, you are saying you are happy with the new team that is there, you are happy to continue as it is existing. Perhaps you could explain that contradiction?

(*Ms Tattersall*) I think we are facing the situation as it is, namely, QCA as it is; there is no indication, as far as I am aware, that QCA is going to be changed in the near future. And I think it is right that we, as examining boards, work in a proper, professional way with the body which exists to regulate the system, with all its other activities, which we somewhat question. So I do not see, myself, a contradiction between a willingness to make the system work as it is, but also saying, as certainly we did in February, when we made our submission to the quinquennial review, that we would prefer to see a QCA that was totally independent, in the way we have been talking.

169. Before the other two gentlemen reply, could I just say that my question was whether you would have more confidence if it was independent, rather than a willingness to work with what is there already?

(*Ms Tattersall*) Yes, we would certainly feel that the system could be accounted for and be demonstrated to be more transparent and free of any sort of interference if it were a new system; so the answer is yes.

(*Mr Kerr*) The answer is, very simply, yes, we would have more confidence with an independent regulator.

(*Dr McLone*) We certainly would.

**Chairman**

170. Can I just take you back for a moment to the unhappiness that so many students felt in the summer, because, in a sense, I get the feeling that it is not that you want to sweep it under the carpet, any of you, but you would rather get on with looking at

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the future rather than what happened in the past. Something that members of this Committee expressed to me, privately, has it really come out of Tomlinson or anywhere else, why. And next Wednesday, Wednesday week, we will be having Sir William Stubbs and representatives of the headmasters' organisation in both the independent sector and the state sector, to talk to them; those people, the heads' associations, they got very, very unhappy about what was going on, in an unprecedented way. Now was that all nonsense; can you explain to us why there was this deep unhappiness? Dr McLone, you were in the forefront of that, were you not?

(Dr McLone) I think there was deep unhappiness because many people were unsure, just not clear, about what was happening and why it was happening; and I understand that.

171. But, Dr McLone, they had good students, they had predicted they had good results, who did not get them?

(Dr McLone) With due respect, some schools are like that, a good deal of the time; if we take a look at our forecast grades, we would never say, I do not think any of us would say, they have an expert prediction of what the outcomes will be, and that has always been the case.

172. But you have the whole university system of acceptance, the whole university allocation system is based on predicted grades?

(Dr McLone) It is, it is; but we have done an analysis of the forecast grades, and some of them are very good and some of them are not so good, and it depends, and that has always been the case. It has been true that there have been some people very, very unhappy; there have been some people, I have to say, who have been very happy. We have had a number of letters saying how well they thought the thing had gone, with us. I go back to the fact that a lot of the students out there have done very well, a lot of the colleges worked very hard, and there was a demand, in some way, with Curriculum 2000, that, as an organisation, you gave commitment to Curriculum 2000. And there is a good deal of evidence, on what we have seen, that those organisations that spent time with their students, worked out how they were going to do it over the two years, put some people in for the first January, then into June, then into January, then into June, have actually done very well; the colleges, I have to say, some of them, in particular, have done very well, because they planned it. Not everybody planned it.

173. Is that the reason why some colleges found that students that were performing exceedingly well in terms of their examination results got an unclassified mark for their coursework?

(Dr McLone) There are very few of those. I know there has been a lot in the press about it, but we did an analysis for QCA, in their inquiry, and, as you will have seen in that report, there are actually very few who actually got a U in coursework; and, in fact, in English, which was the subject which was most under review, nobody got a U in coursework who got As in the examination, when you actually analysed the

results. So I do not think that there is actually an issue which goes along with what we are talking about.

**Paul Holmes**

174. As a result of all that has happened over the last few months, you have got a lot of teachers out there who are not at all sure whether they are teaching the right things, whether they understand the system, and yet, within the next few weeks, they have got to predict grades for the students who want to sit modules in December. What are you doing collectively to train, to work with those teachers, to reassure them about what is going on, to avoid all this happening again?

(Dr McLone) First of all, the most important thing is that we are working with QCA exactly on looking at the main points that we need to do to establish confidence and to give guidance; that we have to do fast, and I know Ken Boston says we have got to do it fast, and we will want to do that. We are establishing many more INSET sessions, to be able to advise teachers and to give teachers help. That sort of thing is very important. It is also done subject by subject; it is not done, as it were, globally, we are giving advice to individual subjects where we know there are issues out there.

175. And how well is that being co-ordinated across the three of you? And, again, I can remember teaching the first year of AS levels and teachers were coming back from different INSET, in different subjects, with different exam boards, with totally different stories of what was going on. Is that still happening, or are you avoiding that now?

(Ms Tattersall) The main point, as Ron said, is that we are working with QCA to define more closely the standard that we were talking about earlier in this session; but each of us does run our own INSET meetings, in the case of AQA, we have something like 1,000 meetings lined up in the next two or three months to help teachers to understand better the system. And, of course, we do have now archive material to draw on; so that is a better position than we were in last year, when the INSET material was being provided for the first time. In response though to the first question, if I may, AQA did not have a grading problem, I really must make that clear, and I must make clear that, as I said earlier, we deal with something like 45% of the grades awarded in this country. And so we did not perceive we had a grading problem, we certainly did not have any regrading, arising from the Tomlinson inquiry, and we have many letters from schools, who are saying that they are very content with the service which AQA provided for them and their examination results. So, in a sense, while we are talking about all the problems that have occurred, and quite rightly so, I think one has also got to remember that there are people there who have actually performed in the way that they expected in the exam and been rewarded appropriately for their performance.

**Chairman:** Can I just ask you, Kathleen Tattersall and Ron McLone, to stand down for a moment. Would you like to sit to one side, you could even have a breather outside; do whatever you like. We would like five minutes with John Kerr, and then,

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**[Paul Holmes Cont]**

alphabetically, Ron McLONE and then Kathleen; just five minutes, so that we can concentrate questions on particular issues that affect your position.

*Mr John Kerr, Chief Executive, Edexcel, was further examined.*

#### Chairman

176. Mr Kerr, we were interested in seeing your interview, with *The Times* report this morning. Is there anything that, what particularly, at this stage, made you feel strongly enough to say the sort of thing you said this morning, in that very interesting article?

*(Mr Kerr)* Thank you, Chair. I disagreed with your opening comments, where you said the exam boards should keep quiet, exam boards should keep below the surface and should not have a voice. I really do not agree with that. I think that is perhaps one of the lessons we do have to learn from this activity. We are not very good at explaining to people what we do. I am looking at the faces, going round, and there is still a lack of understanding here, there is clearly a lack of understanding on the press bench, exactly what we do, and it is not that difficult. And I do think that certainly both Kathleen and Ron have far greater experience, and that, together, or individually, we can actually restore that public confidence by explaining what we do. That was why I agreed to do the interview with *The Times*, and I think it is something I wish to continue to do.

#### Ms Munn

177. So what do you do?

*(Mr Kerr)* We are a large awarding body, of which half of the qualifications are involved with general qualifications, at A levels; the other half are the B-TEC qualifications, the vocational qualifications, which receive no publicity at all, and these are very good, solid qualifications, which we firmly believe in, these are the qualifications that are in demand internationally, they are in demand from employers and from fellow education specialists.

178. And, in terms of where you see yourselves going, presumably, like any organisation, you have some sort of development plan, or vision statement, or something like that?

*(Mr Kerr)* Yes, we are still working on our vision statement; but I think it is really to deliver great qualifications, qualifications that enthuse the learner, the qualifications that teachers find it enjoyable to deliver.

#### Mr Chaytor

179. What are the most important steps to be taken by your examining board and by the QCA to avoid a repeat of this year's affair next year?

*(Mr Kerr)* As my colleagues have already stated, it is working with Tomlinson, it is working with QCA, to get the standard communicated better to schools and colleges. It is to enhance the training that is provided; we have already provided training to 40,000 teachers this year, we will probably have to do

more. And it is getting our message across, that people can trust the grades that are set by the exam boards, and these are very important qualifications.

180. But you are adamant there is nothing in your existing systems that is at fault?

*(Mr Kerr)* I am not adamant at all on that. The exam system is still essentially Victorian, it is a large number of pieces of paper; in our own exam board, it is 10 million marks, five million pieces of paper, scripts, in a large warehouse, there is little technology that has been applied there. Certainly, the question for me is investment, who is going to pay for that investment and bring technology in; otherwise, we are going to continue with errors and mistakes, which clearly we will strive to minimise, and it is important that we do so, but there are limited reserves within the exam boards, as charitable organisations.

#### Jonathan Shaw

181. If you had the opportunity to pinpoint what you do, if you had the opportunity to pinpoint one particular event, over the course of the summer, that would have been done differently, what would that be?

*(Mr Kerr)* From Edexcel's point of view, I was very, very pleased with the results this summer, given the publicity surrounding the board earlier in the year.

#### Chairman

182. You were pleased to be out of the public eye?

*(Mr Kerr)* I was very pleased to be out of the public eye. I was very pleased to see that we delivered the results on time and that we delivered them accurately. So, actually, this whole grading issue came as a bit of a surprise to us. In terms of what I would want to change, piloting of the A2s would have helped enormously.

#### Paul Holmes

183. You talked about the half of your business that goes without any comments, any problem, all the vocational courses; is that because the vocational courses are essentially criterion referenced, and they are not bedevilled all the time by the harp back to the old days of norm reference in A level, and the idea that if there are any improvements in grade passes it must be because things are getting easier?

*(Mr Kerr)* I think some of the aspects from the B-TEC qualifications are that they are essentially assessed by the teachers, the scripts never leave the college, we have an internal verification system, we have an external verification system, teachers and lecturers have a great deal of confidence in applying these qualifications, and they feel confident and they pass on that confidence to the children.

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**Chairman**

184. When, in my introductory remarks, I suggested that most people do not really want to know much about examining boards, I said that in the sense that they want a quiet confidence but they do not want really to hear exam results questioned, as they always are, round about August, which comes at a particularly slow news time. Is part of what you were saying, in terms of your method of explaining, or your mission to explain, if you had a mission to explain, how would it be better done, because in view of the very good article by Len Masterman, regarding, I think he said, "How the papers saw it: press coverage of the A-level controversy (up to the publication of the Tomlinson inquiry)," and if there are ridiculous articles in the *Daily Mail*, and Simon Jenkins in *The Times*, and then Melanie Phillips, again in the *Daily Mail*, those are articles that are really not based on any reality, you could have explained, how would you have come back and explained yourself?

(*Mr Kerr*) We get the press we deserve; it is our job to try to educate the press, it is our job to make clear what we do, how we do it, and that is bearing fruit.

185. And you could see it all going away from you, in the summer, that run of articles, because it was all moving away from you, was it not? Who should have stepped in and said, "Actually, these are the facts; this is what's happening here," who should have done that, you, the QCA, who?

(*Mr Kerr*) Referring again, an independent regulator, a regulator who was respected by the public, could stand up and say, "Don't worry; these are the issues, we can resolve it." But I think also a Government spokesman standing up and saying that they had confidence in the exam system, confidence in the exam results, would have gone a long way to allay press speculation.

186. So the Government did not give you enough support; the Government should be out there, battling for that?

(*Mr Kerr*) I would prefer to see the Government taking forward the lead in promoting the qualifications, and promoting confidence in the qualifications.

**Chairman:** Mr Kerr, thanks very much. And can I now have Dr McLone back in the seat.

*Dr Ron McLone, Chief Executive, OCR, was further examined.*

187. Dr McLone, the reason I really wanted to get you on your own was because you are a consensus builder, and I felt that I wanted really to find out more in depth what you individually thought about what had been going on in the last couple of months, and also your view of how you could better do your job. How do you think you can better do your job as an examining board?

(*Dr McLone*) I think that it is absolutely essential that we have a clear remit in which to operate, given by a regulator. I also believe that what we have in the system that we have got is something, as John has said, which is not transparent, and that we need to move on the examination system we have got in this

country to make it more transparent, but also to bring it into the 21st century. That will make it a better job.

**Mr Turner**

188. I am still worried about your chart, Dr McLone, because Val asked you, essentially, were you arguing with the 50/50 split or not, and you said, no, you were not, and then proceeded, in my view, to do so, by saying it is still 40/60. And, putting it at its simplest, what we are saying is, an A level is worth £1, an AS level, according to the Secretary of State, is worth 50 pence, but, according to you, it is worth 40 pence?

(*Dr McLone*) I do apologise, if I have not explained it properly. What I am saying is that we would have preferred it to be 40 pence, because that would have been a recognition that it was not half an A level. But we worked on it being 50/50, in terms of having to get a balance between the two, yet it is something which is not worth 50 pence but you are having to call it 50 pence; that being so, you have got to have something which really should be 60 pence, and you are going to call that 50 pence. All of that means that you have got this complexity of where you are at; and I am sorry if the arithmetic does not add up, but I think it does.

**Chairman**

189. I think we are getting to the heart of this problem.

(*Dr McLone*) We have to apply 50/50, and, in my view, and I think in lots of other people's, the 50/50 meant the A2 was harder than A level, otherwise it did not stack up.

**Mr Turner**

190. Ms Tattersall, I think, used an expression relating to the maturation of the candidates, maybe she did not but somebody did; no, I wrote it down, actually, on the basis of what she said. This is making assumptions about the maturation of the candidates over the two-year period, is it not, and I still do not see how you can say, on the one hand, that your chart shows 40 pence because the student in the lower sixth is only broadly capable of achieving a lower standard, and therefore you have got to top it up with a greater achievement in the upper sixth?

(*Dr McLone*) Indeed; and that, I think, is part of the flaw in the system, which we referred to earlier. And, also, if I go back to my analogy with the university world, which I was in, if we had said it was 50/50 we would have been asking too much of the final year students, that is absolutely true, but the 40/60 made that balance work. The fact that you say 50/50 means that you are really asking an awful lot, because you are asking something that is not A level; it is this comparison with what we were doing before which is the problem, because many students in the modular course took these three units in the first year sixth before, yes, and they were A level standard, by definition. Now we have them taking it, and we say, "No, it's not A level standard." That has been the problem; it is a flawed process, and it has been

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flawed, I think, because we have not had the right definition, and the definition should come from the regulator.

191. But when answering David Chaytor, you were asked about communication with the QCA, effectively, over the last two years; as I read it, it was before the last two years began that the failure of communication, or, at least, of agreement, took place?

*(Dr McLone)* The roots of the problem certainly happened then. What needed to be done, in my view, was, over that time, to have recognised that the roots of the problem were going to be difficult. Now we spent a lot of time, of course, in 2001, focusing on AS properly, because we have not run A2; and, properly, I think we got AS right, it was welcome. What we did not do, and what I think everybody feels we should have done, is have some exemplar material, so that everybody understood what A2 was, we did not have it, and if I go back and think about it, collectively, or individually, I think, driven by QCA, we should have had exemplar material.

#### Valerie Davey

192. You say there was not pressure from QCA; was there pressure from the universities, in any way, in any way over this new process?

*(Dr McLone)* I would not like to say. There was certainly no pressure on the individual awarding, absolutely not; but, in terms of that 50/50 decision, I suspect it was a contributory factor, yes.

193. So universities, which we have not really mentioned very much, are the other factor in determining how they value the outcome of your exams?

*(Dr McLone)* I think there was a concern within the universities, and, as I said, I come from the sector, I can understand it, there was a concern about what on earth AS was supposed to be; and if it was not valued at 50, I think the understanding of the universities was that it would not have been something that they could value. That must have been, in the end, a political decision, of one sort or another, and I am using 'p' with a small 'p', not a large 'P'. But, nonetheless, that must have had an effect on the final decision about whether it is 40/60 or 50/50; they tend to be decisions that are not made on the assessment structure but on other dimensions.

194. So where does the university influence come into this debate; is there any debate from your Council, or the QCA, or is it all done then by the Government?

*(Dr McLone)* I would say it was done directly, myself, it would not have been through our Council; directly to QCA or to Government, I would think.

195. To QCA or Government?

*(Dr McLone)* Or. I would not know.

196. Are we saying that this is another body that does not understand the system that you are operating?

*(Dr McLone)* We need a lot more transparency for everybody. I think the business about whether the AS will count as one point, or not, was something which certainly did not get thought through alongside what

that would mean if you had put it in terms of assessment structure; and, of course, there is an argument which says the two should be divorced anyway.

#### Chairman

197. But, Dr McLone, the worry the Committee would have, from your evidence today, particularly after your remarks just now, would be that here is a flawed system, you have said it is a flawed system; on the one hand, some of your colleagues have said, "But we've got great confidence in the new team in QCA," but you are saying, "It's a flawed system, we have not said it right, the super-tanker is on its way, kids are doing this AS level, they are on their way, they are on the new A level system, they are on their way, very soon we'll be in June again." But you are saying you are happy with this system. On the one hand, you are saying, "It's a deeply flawed system, we're all on the way to the next disaster, the next iceberg;" what are you saying?

*(Dr McLone)* I do understand the question, and I think there is a tension; there is a tension between picking up plants, as I said, and inspecting the roots, because you want to embed something that is already going. There are flaws which I believe will be put right through Ken Boston's procedures over the next few months; those are the flaws, and that is the way it must be put right.

198. Right; so the QCA can get it right. We are not suggesting that you pick it up by the roots and replace it by the International Baccalaureate immediately, but what we are saying is, you have identified the flaw but you have not actually said, at which I am surprised, how you will put it right, by next year?

*(Dr McLone)* By next year, I think we will put it right, by talking to Ken Boston's task group and Ken Boston's Programme Board and the arrangements he is getting right, and Tomlinson's inquiry, I think we will be looking to get things out that can match next year and get it on the road. I think there are longer-term issues that we will have to address, like six/four units, because, eventually, there is really too much assessment going on, and it is overburdening our teachers and students.

**Chairman:** Dr McLone, we will have you back to talk about that at greater length; thank you. Kathleen Tattershall, can I ask you for the final spot.

*Kathleen Tattershall, Director-General, AQA, was further examined.*

199. Can we just, seamlessly, sort of move from that question to Dr McLone to you, in the sense that, right at the end there, he said, "far too many examinations." As I say, the Committee has been to New Zealand, where they are really at the opposite end, hardly any examination and testing, a large number of educators there saying, "We ought to have more appropriate and accurate evaluation of how students are doing; we don't have it." And they are looking at our system, they do not want our system because they think we have gone to an extreme, but they would like something. Are we at the extreme, should we be fighting back and getting less

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examination, I know it is difficult, you are in the exam business, are we overexamining our students in this country?

(*Ms Tattersall*) I think we are externally overexamining our students, and that, I think, is where the problem lies; and certainly there has been a trend to external examining, over the last 14, 15 years, which actually has swept away some very good coursework-based examinations. So I distinguish between assessing of students and externally examining our students, and I think the balance has tipped too far to external assessment, and, as I said earlier, that brings with it some problems, such as recruiting examiners to fulfil our requirements. So I would prefer to see the pendulum swing somewhat back, to enable teacher assessment to take place, but, in order for that to happen we would have to recognise that there would have to be a lot of training of teachers, for a start, in assessment methods, there would have to be very robust systems of moderation, and there would have to be, I think, a turnaround of public perception of the value of teacher assessment, because that was where it went wrong 14 or 15 years ago, when people really started questioning whether that was valuable.

200. Yes; in New Zealand, they said every school thought they were assessing objectively, independently, but they were not?

(*Ms Tattersall*) And the important thing, therefore, is moderation; and, therefore, as an examination board, we would certainly welcome more emphasis on the teacher involvement in assessment, but it would have to be in a context where there was a very clear framework of moderation provided by some external body, of which we would be one of them, we hope, and we would provide the exemplar material for teachers, we would do the training of teachers, and we would moderate samples of the work which they assessed.

**Ms Munn**

201. John Kerr said nobody really understands what you do, as examining bodies, and Ron McLone said earlier that OCR were doing things differently from the other two bodies. Can you just explain, what you told us right at the outset was that you complied with the Code of Practice in terms of setting the grade boundaries, and just explain how you do it, so we understand really very clearly how that is different from how OCR do it?

(*Ms Tattersall*) I think what Ron McLone was talking about was the information that we provide to the awarding meetings when they are making their decisions about grade boundaries. And we provide, at the outset, both the candidates' scripts and some statistical information which will help the awarders come to a judgement about those scripts; and that statistical information, as Ron McLone said, is GCSE mean grades, it is AS performance of the candidates who are being judged on the A2, it is information in normal circumstances relating to the previous examination, in terms of how candidates performed, and we provide that from the outset. So we provide parameters, which show very clearly what the impacts of judgements are going to be and how they might compare with, let us say, the GCSE mean

grade data. We believe that interaction between the evidence is important for people actually to understand the scripts themselves; because there is an awful lot of research evidence to show that if you simply present scripts in a vacuum then people are not very sure exactly where they relate to the different grades. So we provide as much information as possible from the outset, and that is the difference between ourselves and what I think Ron McLone was saying.

202. Just explain that to me again, because what I understood Ron McLone to be saying was there is a clear difference, and this is something which has been confused throughout this debate between marking and grading, and he was saying, as I understand it, that OCR mark the scripts and then use statistical information to help with the grading and the grading boundaries. Now you are saying something different?

(*Ms Tattersall*) No, I am not really. I am taking it from the point of the grading boundaries. All of us have a very clear procedure, in terms of the marking of the scripts, the standardisation of examiners, they all have a meeting where they are standardised.

203. So when you talk about the awarding meeting, that is the grading, that is not the marking?

(*Ms Tattersall*) It is the end of the process. All the marking has been done, or should have been done, by that stage; and then there is a group of people whom we call 'awarders', there will be a Chair of Examiners, who is the person who makes recommendations to the Chief Executive, and there are the various chief examiners, or principal examiners, for the different components of the examination, and they will have made recommendations as to where they think the grade boundaries should rest. And the awarders as a whole will get that information, together with the statistical data that I have just mentioned, together with a range of scripts, which cover the various recommendations which have been made; and, within that, the awarders have got to try to find the defining mark between one boundary and another, and it is not easy. And if you actually look at the range of decisions which awarders make, some will believe that a mark of, let us say, 40 is the mark, others will believe a mark of 39, others believe a mark of 41, and so on, and somewhere somebody has to come down and make a judgement on that matter.

**Chairman**

204. We understand that; but what happens when a senior examiner, the most senior examiner, of a board, gets in touch with this Committee and says, in the whole 30 years that he has been in the examining business, he has never known a year where, in the final meeting, after the marks have been agreed, that they then are especially called back, as chief examiners, to a meeting, to be told that all the marks in that subject have to be changed? What is going on out there, when that can happen? This is something that was communicated to this Committee, anonymously, because the person, in terms of the chief examiner of that subject, did not want to be identified. What is going on, if that happens?



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(*Ms Tattersall*) I have to say, that did not happen in my board, so I cannot actually account for what you are actually describing; it does not happen in that way in my board, the recommendations come through to me, as the accountable officer, and in the vast majority of cases the recommendations stand, I accept them. In the very small number where I say, "I am not quite certain whether all the evidence has been properly taken into account," then the normal procedure in AQA is for that then to be discussed with the Chair of Examiners, and some accommodation of view is arrived at. In some instances, I might have to decide that a different mark, and it is usually one or two marks that we are talking about here, would prevail, and, as I said earlier, some of the decisions which I took, in the very, very small number of cases where I made a decision, the majority of my changes were actually in favour of the candidates, they were actually to drop the mark, not to raise it.

**Ms Munn**

205. I am just getting even more confused now, because I am not sure how your process is different from OCRs, it does not sound different?

(*Ms Tattersall*) Obviously, I cannot account for what Ron is saying, in terms of it being different. I think what he was saying was that some of the statistical information, which we introduce at the very outset of the awarding meeting, because we believe that to be transparent, open, above board, everybody knows what is going on, might have been introduced into the OCR procedure at a later stage.

206. And do you think there is something different about script selection, which was the other bit, where it starts to get very technical but which seems to be very important in terms of grade boundaries; is it different?

(*Ms Tattersall*) The Code of Practice very clearly lays down that the script selection is made by the awarding body staff, in connection with the recommendations which have been made by the principal examiners for the unit or the paper concerned; so I doubt very much if there are differences really in how we operate there, because there is a very clear statement in the Code of Practice.

**Paul Holmes**

207. Can I ask you, again, individually, the question I asked everybody collectively. We heard a few minutes ago from OCR, we were talking about the grid, showing whether 40 and 60 adds up to 100, or 50 and 50 does, and we have heard you talking about whether a boundary should be 39 or 40 or 41.

Should not the exam boards this year, or in the last two years, have been saying, to the media, to the QCA, to the Government, that, that thinking, really you have got to move on from that, because there should have been a quantum shift upwards, as a result of the new exam system that has been introduced, that it should not just be measured within 1 or 2% against last year's and the year before and the year before?

(*Ms Tattersall*) I think that really is precisely the issue that, as awarding bodies, we took up with QCA in March, when some language, which might have suggested that we ought to be having the same percentage of candidates, was being used, and we took up that issue very firmly and very clearly in the letter that we sent on 22 March, and which then, in my judgement, was resolved by the letter which we had back from William Stubbs. In terms of the quantum shift up, as it were, you referred earlier to a 4% rise, and I think you were suggesting that perhaps it ought to have been a 9% rise, or whatever; now, if you actually look at individual subjects, you will find that there are 8% here, 9% there. Four% is the general, overall, national shift across the three awarding bodies; look at it in individual subjects and you will find some very different patterns emerging. And we have not done this analysis yet in AQA, but I am suggesting to my colleagues that we do it, as to whether those shifts were different in those subjects which were modular beforehand from those subjects which moved to a modular system in 2000; and that is an analysis which certainly we can have a look at, and we will be happy to provide the Committee with information later on.

208. If the average pass rate this year was a 4% increase, what were the sorts of averages increases over the last four or five years?

(*Ms Tattersall*) It has been at round about the 1%, sometimes less than 1%, level, but it has been a very marginal change over the years. But, again, if I can pick up on the modular theme, if you go back to round about 1993, when many of the subjects, particularly in the sciences, started to, as it were, go modular, you did actually find the shift then at the Grade E and above level, which was greater than the normal pattern in other exams; and that was in a system where you had a greater facility for retaking than now, because there was no limit on the retakes.

**Chairman:** I have asked Dr McLone to come back, and he has very kindly agreed, because I think Meg Munn was not happy that she quite fully understood the difference between the two approaches of the two boards; so would you like to rephrase your question, Meg Munn?

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*Kathleen Tattersall, Director-General, AQA, and Dr Ron McLone, Chief Executive. OCR, were further examined.*

**Ms Munn**

209. What I am trying to get at is understanding the point that you made earlier, Dr McLone, which was about saying that you were doing it differently. Now Kathleen Tattersall has explained to us what they do; is that different?

*(Dr McLone)* I do understand what Kathleen is saying, because we have had these discussions many times. They are both within the Code of Practice; the whole thing about the Code of Practice says that you have got a balance between examiner judgement and statistical evidence. I have to say, I am going back a few years now, back to the Midland Examining Group, which was part of one of the first GCSE groups, along with the NEAB and SEG, and so on; we always took a view then that what we wanted to do was to make sure that the examiners had the first go and talked about it and then looked at what the impacts were. It is sort of very much a bottom-up process; in a sense, I think the Midland Examining Group said it was an accountable process, because you could see what was happening with the statistics, because then it was evident. It is true, there are other ways of doing it, and one of the other ways is, as Kathleen has said, to produce a good deal more of the statistics to inform where the scripts are selected in the first place. That, essentially, is where we are at.

**Ms Munn:** Thank you. I understand.

**Chairman**

210. Can I come back on a question I gave, that it was one of your examiners, chief examiners, I was talking about, who approached this Committee, who approached me, as the Chairman of the Committee, because, in the 35 years, I think it was, he had been an examiner, and now chief examiner, of a subject, he had never had the process that occurred this summer ever before, to have had the final meetings of his exam board, to have come to some conclusions about the marking, and then to be pulled in by a conference of heads of examining boards to be told that grade boundaries were going to be moved. Everything you have said today has said it has been business as usual, it has never been any different; but here is one of your chief examiners who said something very different happened this year?

*(Dr McLone)* Indeed; and, without knowing the subject, of course, I cannot actually directly comment on what an individual would say. The difference this year has been, it is the first time in 50 years to have such a fundamental change of A level; it is not different in the practice, and it may well have been that, in his subject, or her subject, I would not like to say whether it is his or her, nothing has happened significantly, but this year, in a few subjects, I have to say, in most of the subjects, did not get such substantial issues that have arisen, but in some subjects, obviously in this subject, there was this difference which has come by looking at what they have suggested against statistical evidence that has been more dramatic than in the past. And we

have said, and I say again, it is a major shift this year. The way we do it obviously works very well in circumstances when it is maintained year on year and it is a regular, consistent standard, but if you are working, again, with an A2 standard, which, I still submit, we did not know, we had no exemplars, that has provided the issues for some of our examiners, it is absolutely right. Remember, I look across all subjects, he is looking at his own subject.

211. So it is not surprising that some of these people, that saw themselves as guinea-pigs, might now consider themselves sacrificial lambs?

*(Dr McLone)* I think it is unfortunate that we had no trialling done before we made such a major change.

**Mr Chaytor**

212. Yes, but, to Kathleen particularly, is not the root cause of the problem the fact that A level has this unique means of assessing the grade boundaries, we do not have this in awarding university degrees, the degrees are not moderated by students' performance at A level, we do not have it in the standard attainment test; and do you not think there has to be in the future a move to a criterion system for AS and A2?

*(Ms Tattersall)* We are not a norm referenced system, I think that is the first thing that I would wish to say; we moved away from norm referencing many, many years ago. I think, at some point in the 1980s, A level ceased to be a norm referenced examination. Nor are we fully a criterion referenced examination, but we have, as it were, moved along the scale more to that by defining some criteria to underpin the grades, and those criteria are defined at A level overall. If we moved entirely to a criterion referenced exam, then you have got to take the consequences of that; namely, if you have not mastered whatever is determined for the grade, you will not get that grade, however good you are.

213. But most parents would assume that should be the case, would they not?

*(Ms Tattersall)* But what we do have is a system which is a soft criterion referencing, for want of a better term, where there is some compensation for a weakness in one skill area, with strength in another, and, in that sense, you could say, it is a little bit of a fudge, when it comes to the criteria. But it is a system which does reward attainment at the more general level than some very specific criteria would do, and I think it is a system which has served students exceedingly well over the years, and, indeed, if you look at GCSE it is exactly the same sort of system, if you look at Key Stages 2 and 3 then I think what we are talking about there is a pre-determined level of attainment, which is only slightly moderated when the students have actually done their SATs. Some of us would say that, in some ways, criterion referencing is fine, but it is when the students actually do the exam that some of the criteria begin to break down, because it is not like that in the real world. So, in a sense, I would argue very strongly for the soft criterion referencing system that we have, provided we have a little bit more definition of those criteria, but not so specific that we are going to cut people out of the grades.

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[Continued

**[Mr Chaytor Cont]**

214. But do you think we have this soft criterion referencing because we have this overemphasis on external assessment, and if we had more internal assessment there would not be the need to have the methodology for the external assessment that was designed to compensate for any protection.

(*Ms Tattersall*) I think we would have exactly the same issue, but we would have to have descriptors which enabled teachers to mark work consistently; and the fact is that students do not perform in consistent ways, and, therefore, there has to be, as it were, some sort of compensation for the way in which students strive to meet the criteria, and that is what our system does. And I think it is irrelevant, whether it is internal or external assessment, to actually apply the criteria that we have. I am all for making the criteria more explicit, trying to reach

criteria which are better understood by everyone, but I really do think that we would be in trouble if we tried to rely entirely on criteria for our system.

**Chairman:** I think that we have to end the session now. Thank you, all of our witnesses today, who have taken the time also to enjoy a rather different format we have played with today, and thank you very much for being so flexible. Can I say, to quote John Kerr, perhaps a mission to explain, I was thinking this when you were talking about, of course, everyone knows we have moved from norm referencing to soft criterion referencing, but there are a few people in my constituency who did not quite realise that that had occurred. Perhaps it is part of the role of the QCA and the examining boards to tell parents and students that that is the case. Thank you.

### Examination of Witnesses

KEN BOSTON, Chief Executive, Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), and BEVERLEY EVANS, Deputy Chief Executive, QCA, and KEITH WELLER, Head of Qualifications Division, QCA, were further examined.

#### Chairman

215. Can I welcome Ken Boston to the Committee, and say, when we met the QCA in May of this year, we were trying to persuade the then Chairman, Sir William Stubbs, to get on with getting a new Chief Executive, and we are delighted that, shortly after that, he succeeded in doing so; so welcome aboard, at a particularly interesting time in the development of the QCA, so welcome indeed. And Keith Weller and Beverley Evans we have met before; but welcome. You have been sitting there listening to the evidence that we have been taking from the examining boards, and I hope that that will give you a clue as to the sorts of questions that we are going to be asking you. We pushed them pretty hard, in terms of where they were coming from, in terms of their relationship with the QCA, and there did seem to be a deep ambivalence; on the one hand, they wanted to work with you, obviously, as a new broom, a new Chief Executive, a different personality at the helm, and with the new Chair that has just been announced, but there was also unease, was there not, about the status, the independence, the split roles of QCA. Dr Boston, could you tell us how you view getting the show back on the road; what is your vision of how you will sort all this out?

(*Dr Boston*) Well, Mr Chairman, I will start by saying that I certainly have no magic wand, and I am not at all sure that the path into the examinations in January and in June will be smooth; there are some major problems and some major risks ahead of us. Certainly, we will be able to respond to the Tomlinson recommendations by the end of November; we will have before us then better generic statements of standard, we will have a revised Code of Practice, we will have made considerable progress in getting specific exemplars from this year's exams, for A2, which we did not have before, but getting that all understood in time for the 2003 examinations is a big challenge. We also have some enormous logistical problems ahead of us, in running the examinations.

We have been stretched in the past, or the awarding bodies have been stretched, to find sufficient examiners; we have this incredible process where 24 million scripts go round the country in a matter of weeks. We have little control at the moment, or virtually no control, but need some control, I believe, on the number of late entries for examinations; and I am not at all sure, unless we pull all this together into a better managed system, that we will not have strife ahead of us again. Now so far as the QCA is concerned, I think it needs to take a far more directive and management role, so far as its powers allow, in determining what goes on. I am not at all sure, for example, that there is real benefit in having awarding bodies able to take slightly different, but nevertheless significant, approaches to implementation of the Code of Practice. I am not at all sure, at the moment, until we have done further work, that we might not run into trouble with one awarding body, or several, again. All of these things urgently need to be attended to. Now so far as the QCA is concerned, as the independent regulator, it needs to have the authority and the credibility to be able to make statements publicly about the state of the examination system, be believed, and have the power to fix it; it needs, in my view, to have some degree of greater distance from Government. I do not believe that there has been any evidence of Government interference in standards, or in the work of the QCA, or in the work of awarding bodies, but if it is to be a credible public authority there needs to be the appearance of independence. The other side of that is, there needs to be greater distance, I think, too, between Government and the awarding bodies. If I were here to regulate a financial market, a market in financial services, I would expect the providers of financial services to be totally at arm's length from Government, and for the regulator to bridge the distance between them. Similarly, there must be, in my view, conspicuously, clear blue water between the awarding bodies and Government, and the bridge

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KEN BOSTON, BEVERLEY EVANS AND KEITH WELLER

[Continued

**[Chairman Cont]**

across that is the regulator; now that is not conspicuously apparent at the moment. I believe the QCA has acted independently, from my reading of all the documentation, and, believe me, my mind has been concentrated wonderfully on the documentation over the past few weeks. I do not believe there is evidence of political interference or pressure on QCA. I see no evidence, but I take Mr Tomlinson's report, of pressure from the QCA on the awarding bodies. But it is clear that the independence of the organisation is not transparently there, it is not unambiguously accepted, and it needs to be, in a far stronger and clearer way.

216. Would you like to see it on parallel lines with Ofsted?

(Dr Boston) I think Ofsted is a very good model in the education area, yes. There are other models of regulators, I guess, both here and overseas, in completely different sectors, in my home country, for example, in the transport sector, the financial services sector; there is not in the education sector because education, in the states where I worked, in Australia, is not run on the basis of a competitive market between organisations, competing on the basis of not of price but quality of service.

217. Let us just probe you a little bit though. You are saying, you, the QCA, should be the bridge between the awarding bodies and Government; what is the relationship, as you perceive it, and has been, between the awarding bodies and the Department then?

(Dr Boston) There seems to be, from the evidence I see, quite close contact between DfES (the Department for Education and Skills) officials and individual officers in awarding bodies, at a variety of levels and for a variety of purposes, all of which, I am sure, are benign. But, nevertheless, in a situation where there is a regulator, I believe that relationship is not a desirable one.

**Jonathan Shaw**

218. You described a situation that is going to require QCA to undertake a considerable amount of work to restore public confidence. When you applied for the job and you had the interview, what did QCA, Sir William Stubbs, say to you, "This is a well-oiled machine," or "We're in a hell of a mess"?

(Dr Boston) The reason I became interested in the job was because the QCA does have a very high international profile. It is the international benchmark, as a qualifications and curriculum authority, far broader than simply something concerned with A level examinations. There are, in fact, 117 different awarding bodies, many of them, the majority of them, by far, in the vocational area. Qualifications and curriculum authorities have been introduced in many western countries fundamentally for the purpose of maintaining standards, enhancing standards and responding to the workforce skills needs of the countries in which they operate, the building of social and human capital; that is the job that I came to do. I also came to manage the operation. Now I have walked into the situation where I find, since taking up the position ( which I took up on 12 September, but, being here in August,

just privately, watching the examination system and the results come out) that a whole new set of priorities have emerged, as a result of this real problem that has occurred with the A level examinations, and which is the product of a series of mistakes made by Government, by QCA, by awarding bodies, and a lack of common understanding across the country about what standards are and how they are determined, and we have seen that lack of understanding in here today. Here is a real problem that needs to be addressed; and that is my task, to take that on. I am simply saying, there is no magic solution here, it is a long, hard row ahead of us, and I can give no guarantees, except the capacity to point the organisation in the right direction, work with the awarding bodies and Government and the headteacher association and teacher associations to try to get it right.

219. You have been fairly direct, in response to the Chairman's questions about how you see the organisation should be set up; are you going to continue to be as direct, if Government makes recommendations, or you make recommendations to Government and they do not accept them, will you stay?

(Dr Boston) The job is that of a regulator, I report to a board, the board is appointed by the Secretary of State, but it would seem to me that the QCA is an organisation outside the Civil Service *per se*, it is a non-departmental public body, it is there to maintain and defend and protect standards, it is there to guard standards, it is the watchdog, and the watchdog occasionally must bark.

220. Just to move on, did you bark; were the examination boards barked at too much, do you think that there was undue pressure put on them?

(Dr Boston) I was not here when the events that were discussed by Mr Tomlinson, and have been referred to in the discussion today, were alleged to have taken place; all I can do is read the documentation available to me, and I find no evidence there. I read Mr Tomlinson's report and I take that at face value. It is not for me to say, in that instance, when I was 12,000 kilometres away, whether undue pressure was put on them or not.

221. And do you think the removal of Sir William Stubbs will restore the confidence that you spoke about?

(Dr Boston) That was not what I said, and I do not have a view on that matter.

**Valerie Davey**

222. You have talked about the international element, I would like to pick up that, just quickly, before we move back to the main issue of today. Has this issue within Britain affected the international nature of your work, as a QCA?

(Dr Boston) I would guess the answer would be, yes, in that all our attention has been focused on dealing with this issue, of which we are, along with others, partly the cause. So that the key priority at the moment, the real key priorities are to overcome the problems in the examination system, urgently. There are two levels with that, implementing Tomlinson, the first part of his inquiry, and attending to the

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immense risks that reside in the logistics of the operation, and restoring the credibility and authority of the organisation; they are the two key priorities. And the international work takes, clearly, second priority, second preference, to those.

223. You were very clear in saying that the QCA had made mistakes; what were the mistakes that QCA made, and how are you going to put them right?

(Dr Boston) I think that the key mistake was not perhaps being vocal enough with the time-line issue, when one goes back to look at the way in which this was implemented. A change of this magnitude really should take three years of development and two years of piloting, and the piloting is so critical, to get the exemplar papers, which set the standard. We have a generic statement about standards, about the A2 being harder and the AS being an easier paper, as it were, we have grade descriptions for English, for History, for Physics, for Chemistry, for Mathematics, which describe in terms of perhaps 200 or 300 words quite analytical, well put together documentation of the sorts of knowledge, understanding and skills and analytical abilities a student should have at each level of a grade description; but you cannot take that any further and operationalise it until you have actually got exemplar material. Now that is what we did not have; and, in fact, the time-line was very rushed. The final specifications were finalised in January 2000, teaching began in September 2000 and the first examination was in June 2001. Now it is quite clear that that sort of time-line makes it very difficult to introduce a change of this type without real risk occurring. Reading through the documentation, it drew to the attention of Government several times the impact of the time-line, so did the awarding bodies, but perhaps we should have been more strident at that time about where we were heading. I think that was the key problem. At the same time, of course, as all this was happening, a whole lot of other things were going on; there was Key Stage testing going on, there were changes to the GCSE, to the GNVQ, there were examiners being stretched to the limit in all sorts of things other than A levels. Specifications, or syllabuses, were being written everywhere. 3,500 new specifications were written between 1998 and 2002, when you go to the exact dates, it works out at an average of 15 new specifications, new syllabuses, a week; now that is stretching an examination system to its absolute limits. And it is quite clear that we have reaped the fruit of it in this most recent event; and there is no sort of quick fix, that it is only a matter of attending to that, or attending to that to get it right.

224. The examining bodies, therefore, the awarding bodies, were right in their criticisms of you, and they made those points, I think, in a different way, perhaps. What would your criticism be of them?

(Dr Boston) I do not have any specific criticism of the awarding bodies; one can point to areas where, with the benefit of hindsight, there could have been better performance. The problem really only lies with one awarding body, and there are two issues that seem to me to reside there; one is the different approach to implementing the Code of Practice, which seems minor, and might be minor, but if it did

have an impact, and I do not know whether it did, but we would need to sort that out, then that impact clearly had a very bad effect upon a generation of young people. The other is this issue of standards, and the definition. With respect I do not agree with my colleague, Dr McLone, that we are really talking about a new standard, with A2. In my view, it is better to look at there being two examinations, of different levels of difficulty or demand. For 50 years, the A level has been judged by one examination at the end of two years; we have now changed to a system where there is a less demanding examination at the end of the first year, or, if you like, in the language of the students, an easier examination, and at the end of the second year there is a harder examination. I do not believe it is an examination pitched halfway between the old A level and the end of first year university standard, that is inappropriate for these young people.

#### Chairman

225. But you were sitting in this room when Dr McLone gave his evidence, he seemed to think that that was the case, that we had two examining boards marking on the A level concept, with Dr McLone not sure what level he was marking on?

(Dr Boston) I think that we would all be more certain, and I agree with Dr McLone and others, if we had the exemplar material that would actually show you. I have been back through, say, some History papers, I looked at the A2 History papers and the AS History papers, and I looked earlier today at a question on Nazi Germany. Now the AS paper was a question that took students to some source material, one was a cartoon and some short pieces of text, and then had a 30-mark question which was broken up into sections of five marks, five marks, 10 marks, five marks, and something else. The A2 paper is a paper which also had source material but it was heavy-duty, political literature, and then the question was only in two parts, a ten-mark question and a 20-mark question, making the 30 marks, and was far more demanding. Now, the young people who do that exam, that is a hard exam, and the other one was an easier exam; but the two of them, when they come together, and you will perform probably not as well on the harder exam as on the other, when the two of them come together, that gives you the A level, and it is our job to ensure that the awarding bodies see, that the standard of that is the same now as it has been for 50 years. Now we will only do that with certainty when we have got the exemplar material, and we did not have the exemplar material for this round of exams; but my starting-point is, let us talk about level of demand rather than a standard, there is one standard, and that is the A level standard.

#### Ms Munn

226. Coming back to this issue then of different approaches to the grading process, which we were exploring before the break, you said at the outset you do not think it is a good thing, or you probably do not think it is a good thing, for there to be different approaches among the examining boards. How

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would you determine which process of the two, or indeed a third process, which I cannot think of, but which process you would want to use, what would you use to determine that?

(*Dr Boston*) I think the key to that lies in the revision of the Code of Practice, that Mr Tomlinson has asked, or directed, that we undertake, which should remove the capacity for different approaches in that way.

227. I accept that, I am taking that as a read, that you have said there should be one approach. How would you decide which was the fairest approach?

(*Dr Boston*) I would seek the advice of the experts in my organisation, and I am not in a position tonight to say which is the better approach. But, clearly, in the revision of the Code of Practice, this is an issue we need to address, and we are addressing that through the A Level Standards Programme Board, which meets tomorrow again, its second meeting since Tomlinson came out, it includes the heads of the regulatory bodies of England, Northern Ireland and Wales, the heads of five awarding bodies, representatives of the head teacher associations, and the teacher associations, and it is in that body we are going to sort it out.

228. So are you saying to me that that would be on the basis of some expert evidence as to which was the fairest approach?

(*Dr Boston*) I might ask my colleague, Mr Weller, who is, in fact, doing the detail of this, to come in, Mr Chair, if you would be agreeable.

(*Mr Weller*) The Code of Practice is revised every year, actually, for A levels, and for other examinations, and it is done in the light of what happens operationally; we look at the Code in action, we look at it with the awarding bodies, and we adjust it, if it is not doing the job effectively. There are always areas, I think, that the Code cannot go into in the finest level of administrative detail, we would be doing the awarding bodies' job then, and there are always areas where you decide there are various ways of doing the job perfectly reasonably, and that is the way the Code operates. If it transpires that, in doing the job reasonably, through various methods, we have some cause to doubt whether they are equally efficacious, we will talk with the awarding bodies about that and establish which of those methods should be codified. We do seem to have an issue here where there might be some of that kind of discussion necessary.

229. Efficacious, or fair?

(*Mr Weller*) Both.

230. Can I just follow that up and ask Beverley Evans, because when you came to see us in May 2002 you said to us that, A levels, they had had a great deal of change, with the introduction of the reforms, and that you were spending a lot of time focusing on the arrangements to make sure they were being conducted properly. Did you identify, in that focusing exercise, the likelihood of the particular problems that arose, or did you identify other particular teething problems, which, in actual fact, because of identifying them, did not subsequently become problems?

(*Ms Evans*) I think, when you spoke to the QCA in May, it would be fair to say that the problems that we thought were going to create most difficulty in the A level system this year were ones to do with the delivery of the exams, the physical delivery, making it happen, getting papers into schools and colleges.

231. Is that because of Edexcel problems that we spoke about at length at that time?

(*Ms Evans*) Certainly, there were specific problems with Edexcel, but we did not just concentrate on Edexcel, we were looking at the issues right across the range of awarding bodies. I think it was referred to earlier, examiner supply, for example, was an issue that we had to pay very great attention to, and, indeed, one of the awarding bodies, in the end, was not able to have all its papers marked to the right timescale; that was a matter of great concern to us, we were managing it very directly, right up until the results were announced, in fact. So I think it is fair to say that our attention was focused on those issues, because we had identified those as being the highest risk issues to the development of the system.

232. So you had not identified a likely problem around grading, although, given that this was a new process and therefore there were not exemplars, there was not previous information, did not that alert you to a possible problem, along with the rushed timescales we have heard about?

(*Ms Evans*) As with Ken Boston, I have not been here for the whole of the period when QCA has been working on the new exam system.

#### Chairman

233. You have been here two years?

(*Ms Evans*) I have been here two years, and what I was going to say is, looking back at the record to 1998, what I see is an enormous amount of exchange, dialogue, correspondence between QCA and the awarding bodies and the teacher associations, and head teacher associations, in examining the very issues that you are describing, what the standard should be, what the A level standard will be in future, was it going to be a different standard, or was it going to be the same standard, and how the AS and the A2 components of those fitted in. So that dialogue had been taking place since 1998, and, in fact, I think, since I have been in the QCA, since the year 2000, that dialogue had seemed almost to have come to an end by the time I joined QCA. There is a record in the early part of the teaching of the first A levels, in the autumn of 2000, and that, to me, would appear to be the tail-end of that debate and that discussion; it was not an issue that was continuing to be discussed between ourselves and the awarding bodies during the last two years, the main issues for us were delivery.

234. So you are at the helm of the QCA in this period, and you seem to be concentrating on whether the exams, physically, a sort of Consignia role, making sure everything got delivered, and so on, whereas, this disaster, you are going right to the iceberg; and you seem to be saying that, here you are, in a sense, your fingerprints are all over this, Ms Evans, you have been there the longest, and you are

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saying that you did not see any sign of the problems of the awarding bodies, the examining bodies, you did not see any of this coming?

(*Ms Evans*) Perhaps I could correct what I said earlier, because that was not what I meant. Certainly, the organisation has a whole division of staff who attend awarding body meetings to observe what happens when decisions are taken about awarding, and their role there is to determine that our Code of Practice is being followed correctly; that was going on throughout the whole of the period. I am sorry if I gave you the impression that that was not happening.

235. But what we are trying to push you on is, you heard the evidence earlier about the deep unhappiness, what Dr McLone called this “flawed process”, yet you, as QCA, you were the Acting Chief Executive, you did not see that this flawed process (a) was flawed, or (b), if it was flawed, was going to cause a great deal of unhappiness?

(*Ms Evans*) Dr McLone was in a lot of correspondence with the QCA since 1998 on what he believed were aspects of the process that he wanted to clarify; but I think it is fair to say that, certainly during 2001 and 2002, there was very little exchange that went on, the awarding bodies were not saying to QCA, during 2002, “We’re very unhappy and very uncomfortable about how to do awarding this year,” that was not being said at all.

(*Mr Weller*) Chairman, may I comment. I have to confess to having been there longer than Beverley. Over the period from May ’98, when the decision was made to proceed with the new curriculum, until about May of this year, we had some 35 meetings of a technical kind with the awarding bodies, and they went right up to April or May this year, and they were concerned with all the technicalities of the examinations. I think it would be true to say that the issues with grading and awarding were resolved, we believed, with the awarding bodies ahead of time. I think we were all conscious that we would have liked more exemplar material, that point has been made a number of times, but I do not think we were leaving the issue as though it had been finally resolved early at all, we went on meeting, indeed, up until April this year, on those issues.

236. But what about the central problem, that Dr McLone pointed out, of treating this exam as a 50/50, first year 50%, second year 50%, which seemed, from his evidence, at the real heart of the problem; did you not worry about this, did it not concern you?

(*Mr Weller*) We worried about it a good deal, and we had a very extensive discussion on it at the time that the first advice went to ministers at the time on the reforms; and, indeed, that advice was public, as was the Minister’s response, that is all public. We talked long and hard, in a whole host of consultation conferences and through written consultation, with all the users, all the stakeholders, including the schools and colleges, about the options of a 40/60 or a 50/50 balance. It has to be said that, while two-thirds of those responding were supporting the introduction of an AS examination—it was a very popular reform, still is, I believe, a popular reform—the one thing that they really worried about was the 40/60 split proposed by Ron Dearing. They worried about it in terms of what it would mean in relation to perceived value, by universities, by parents, they

worried about the complexity, that 40/60 would have to sit alongside 50/50 in the university tariff system, 50/50 performance tables, and the main message from that consultation was, this is a bridge too far, in terms of complexity. So the decision was that we make it a 50/50 balance, we have an easier part, or a first-year part, and we have a second-year part, and the combination of that first-year and second-year part, more and less demanding, makes the A level standard. Once the decision was made, it was important for us to get it right and work at it with the awarding bodies, and that was what we did, over those 35 meetings.

**Jeff Ennis**

237. In earlier examination, we heard from the three examination boards that, in their opinion, the remit of the QCA was now too broad and woolly and needed to be redefined, and that you needed to concentrate on your core business, as it were. What comment would you make on that particular line, Mr Boston?

(*Dr Boston*) I think the comment has a good deal of substance to it, and, in fact, it relates to the quinquennial review which took place earlier this year and made some similar points. We are looking at that very closely, and are about to respond to Government on how to implement the quinquennial review, or to deal with it in another way. One of the key issues was that the regulator should not also be the provider of examinations, and with our statutory tests we are the provider of the examinations; the suggestion, or the recommendation, was made that we look closely at separating that and at moving it away. Now we either grow some capacity outside the organisation to take on the statutory tests, or we hand it to an awarding body, and I do not think there would be necessarily immense public confidence in that, at the moment, or we contract it out in some other way, by tender, or we live with the ambiguity and continue to run the Key Stage tests ourselves, until such time as they can be moved elsewhere. The public has confidence in those tests, and they are running smoothly; it is not a problem that needs to be fixed, it is a philosophical point that a regulator should not also be a provider, and I agree with that, but, nevertheless, there must be an element of pragmatism in the implementation. I have no doubt that the QCA will change and develop over a period of time, particularly if it has a different reporting relationship, in due course. None of us is in the business of defending the status quo, in fact, in my view, the status quo is the only option that is not on the table; another way has to be found.

238. Generally speaking, when problems occur within organisations or across organisations, generally, it can be perceived to be a poor communication strategy, or the fact that you are not getting your message across to whoever it may be. Do you agree with me that poor communication has been a major factor in the events that have unfolded this summer?

(*Dr Boston*) I think all of us failed, in the key strategic thing we all have to achieve, and, by that, I mean Government, the QCA, the awarding bodies, teacher associations, and everything else, we failed to

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**[Jeff Ennis Cont]**

communicate the nature of the new standard, and we are still grappling with it tonight, and that is the key issue that we have to resolve. The Programme Board was set up to do that, it is working very hard, we will meet the Tomlinson deadlines, we will get clarification, but the promulgation of that and growing it into a community understanding of what it is about is going to be a very complex process, and I doubt that we are going to have that delivered into the national psyche by the time of the January examinations.

239. Just one supplementary question, on the answer you have just given me, Mr Boston. Is there any agency or organisation, in the ones in which are involved, which should be taking the lead, in terms of improving the communication strategy across the agencies involved, or should it be just a sort of partnership approach?

(Dr Boston) I think the QCA should be taking the lead in it, and that is what we intend to do; but, of course, the training and development, the in-service education training programmes for teachers, are delivered by the awarding bodies. But we need to be far more rigorous, I believe, in our scrutiny of that, just as we have been rigorous in our scrutiny of the actual awarding process. We need to have a far greater eye to the support that goes into working with teachers and getting a general community understanding; and there are some things we must do ourselves, as the regulatory body.

**Paul Holmes**

240. A few months ago, this Committee did an inquiry into ILAs, another inquiry came out on Friday, into ILAs, and one of the findings of that was that it was a good scheme that was ruined by being rushed in too quickly, to meet political targets, really. And you said, a little while ago, that the introduction of Curriculum 2000 was rushed in, far, far too quickly, when there should have been five years of development and piloting; and you also said that there should be a clearer, blue-water barrier between the exam bodies and the Government and the QCA, it should be there. So do you see the QCA, from now on, standing up and taking a very public role, and saying, perhaps, to the new, ambitious Secretary of State for Education, "No, you shouldn't be doing that"?

(Dr Boston) I would not put it that way. I would put it as the QCA properly carrying out the role for which it was established, and that role, from time to time, will involve saying to Government, "This is not a possibility; if you proceed to go down that track, or on that time-line, you're going to run into trouble." It seems to me that that is what the nature of a regulator is, and that, unless a regulator is prepared to do that, credibility and authority will never be established; you cannot legislate for credibility and authority, you have actually to demonstrate it by performance, by the quality of what you do, and that is where the QCA must position itself, in the public arena.

241. That is good to hear. Would you say, as a newcomer, again, looking back at what has happened here, that it was really an object failure by

the QCA not to have put in place very clear guidelines on what the A2 standards were and should be?

(Dr Boston) No, I cannot say that. The QCA did everything it could to make a clear statement about how the A2 standard and the AS standard related, and, indeed, I understand it has been on our website since 2000; we did everything we could to write rich, meaningful statements about grades in all the subjects, which examiners and teachers could understand. What we did not do was deliver on exemplars. You do not really know what a Grade B is at A2 level until you have looked at a thousand scripts, from young people across the country, how did they handle that question on Nazi Germany, what was the depth of the analysis, the depth of the synthesis of argument, how did they deal with the synoptic issues, you do not know that until you have got that material in front of you. Now that was not a fault of the QCA or of the awarding bodies, that was a fault of the time-line; we launched into the first A2 examinations in summer without that pilot material behind us, and we should have had two years of it. We were okay with AS, because that has been sat three times, but we were not able to deliver on the A2; even though the A2 had been sat during the trial process, the grading had not been sorted out, and so the exemplars simply could not be used.

242. But, given that the QCA had the situation as it was, not as you might have wanted it to be, the thing was introduced, the exams were being set. Now the Tomlinson inquiry says, in paragraph 16, that, quite clearly, there was no common understanding on how much greater the demands of A2 should be, compared with AS. So, given that we were in the middle of this process, should not the QCA have done more to try to establish that common understanding?

(Dr Boston) The QCA should have done more, but it is not in the sense of being able to write down, in specific detail, other than the generic statement, what the standard is in History at A, at B, at C, using real substance. That has to come from the exemplar material. But the fact that we even have a discussion now about AS and A2, and whether there are standards or level of demand and how they relate to each other, indicates that the QCA, along with other agencies, has not delivered adequately in implanting that understanding in the minds of the profession and the community.

**Chairman**

243. We have a system in this country, as there is also in Australia, of accountability; you know, when things go wrong, people we represent tend to want people to say, "Well, who was responsible for these problems?" and to home in on who it was and to exact some sort of retribution. Who were the guilty people, who should now carry the can, using terribly blunt language, who should carry the can for what happened over these last two months?

(Dr Boston) Mike Tomlinson has produced a report which has looked at those issues, and I really do not want to add anything to what he has said,



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because he has looked at a wider range of evidence than I have, I have simply looked at what has happened in the QCA.

244. He has not looked at the political accountability of who now carries the can, who pays the price. Now the battlefield is littered with corpses, we have got a new Secretary of State, we have a new Chairman of the QCA; have the right people disappeared from the scene?

(Dr Boston) I would not want to comment one way or the other in relation to individuals.

245. So you will not be making any personnel changes in the QCA?

(Dr Boston) I did not say that. I have not discussed the structure of the QCA. The QCA is an organisation which, as I have said publicly, now has to reinvent itself, it has to establish very clearly what its priorities are, it has to be very clear about what its strategy is, it needs to align its structure to deliver that strategy. There will be changes in the QCA, but I do not believe that the problem which has emerged here is a problem which can be driven home to particular individuals, either in the QCA or elsewhere, and say they were guilty. It is a compound of a series of things that should not have happened, rushed time-lines and other things, which, with the benefit of hindsight, coming in as a new person, I can see, and others are seeing at the same time. I am not so sure, if I had been here, whether I would have seen all of those problems emerging, but, the fact is, they happened.

**Mr Turner**

246. You have made it pretty clear, tell me if I am wrong, that you do not think that an AS level is worth half an A level. Is it, therefore, not entirely wrong for UCAS to treat an AS level as worth half an A level?

(Dr Boston) What I am saying is that that is the wrong question to ask, if we are going to make progress with this. The issue is, we are dealing with A levels as they have been for 50 years; the change is, we are arriving at it now from two papers, one of them is a hard paper, one of them is an easy paper, relatively. But that is language which every student who takes the course understands, there are two papers, and you add together the scores on the two of them, one you take a year before the other, and you get a result.

247. But the universities, or, at least, the university admissions system, is treating an AS level as if it is not an easy paper, as if it is half an A level; surely, that is wrong?

(Dr Boston) Mr Chairman, I am not wishing to comment on that issue, because I have been rather preoccupied with things other than UCAS and university entrance, and I have not thought that fully through; but, clearly, it is part of the work that we have to do in implementing Tomlinson, because, clearly, this is a major purpose to which the result is put.

248. Can I ask you another question, which relates to what Sir William Stubbs wrote in the *Sunday Times*. Do you recall being told what you were told by a senior official in the Education Department, about them approaching chief executives of boards with a view to what might happen in certain circumstances; would you like to recount that, if you do?

(Dr Boston) Yes, I do, I do recall that. Mr Chairman, I was made aware, by a senior official of the Department, that discussions were occurring between members of the Department and the awarding bodies on what would happen if Tomlinson sought to recommend regrading, and that was accepted by the Secretary of State. I was concerned about that, as the regulator, and concerned because, earlier that same day, we had been examined by Mr Tomlinson, and we had made it clear, in response to questioning from him, that we ourselves were having no contact with the awarding bodies while his work was in progress. Now I contacted a more senior official at the Department to express concern at that, as the regulator. I have no objection at all to the Secretary of State sorting out the various scenarios, as it were, that might emerge from an inquiry and seeking advice on what to do with each one of them, but, the reality is, the conversation should not have been with the awarding bodies, by the Department, but with the regulator. Because the regulator is thoroughly aware, because of its role as a scrutineer and day-to-day regulator, issues of the capacity of the awarding bodies to deliver, and would be able to advise Government on whether or not regrading was possible; indeed, we were, in fact, doing that, as a result of another request. My concern was not that the work was being done, but that it was being done directly with the awarding bodies rather than the regulator.

**Chairman:** We are going to suspend the session for 15 minutes.

*The Committee suspended from 7.02 pm to 7.15 pm for a division in the House*

**Chairman**

249. Thank you very much for being patient. I am sorry to delay everyone's dinner. There is now legislative power that you have, Dr Boston, in terms of actually intervening, as I understand the new legislation, in an examining board you are unhappy with, discontented with. Can you see the QCA using that power?

(Dr Boston) Yes. There are three amendments to the Act; the most substantial one is a new section, 26(a), which does give us the power to intervene, to direct, and we do see ourselves using that power, not necessarily always only to correct what might be some mistake or aberration but to manage the system a little better. I referred earlier to, one of the problems in dealing with the examinations is the large number of late entries that can occur, in fact, there are sometimes young people who turn up on the day of the examination, and papers are photocopied and given to them. Edexcel had, over all qualifications, over half a million late entries at the last examination; now, if we got something like that scale with the A levels, even in proportion to it, it just simply becomes unmanageable, the number of markers that you require goes up enormously. Now, if we are to model the system and manage it correctly, one of the things we are looking at is using that new power to determine that there be no late entrance, or no late entrance after a particular date, except for young people who might be in particular categories, awaiting re-marks, or

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[Continued

**[Chairman Cont]**

something like that. Now we have not committed to that, but that is an example of the sorts of things the new powers could be used for.

250. Would not a lot of people be a bit worried, in a sense that some people would have thought that, if you were going to assess most recent problems, it is the QCA that have got the problem rather than the examining boards, and you have now the power to go in and interfere with the running of exam boards; some people might see that as a nightmare scenario?

(Dr Boston) They might. I think the community would see the fundamental test any regulator has to face, or pass, or, indeed, a Government has to pass, is, well, it is the equivalent of making the trains run on time, make sure the examination system works; and we have seen in this last month an examination system that has been under extraordinary pressure. The priority now, I think, is to make sure that never happens again, and we do that both by addressing the Tomlinson recommendations and, on the other hand, addressing the issue of logistics.

251. Do you anticipate any new legislation that will affect QCA in the new session of Parliament?

(Dr Boston) I have no expectation of that, at the moment. It will depend very much, I think, on what Mr Tomlinson finds as he addresses his second term of reference, and it might be that legislation flows from that, possibly in relation to the role of the QCA itself.

**Chairman:** In terms of the Queen's Speech, I think he would have to hurry up with that. Andrew, you were in the process of finishing your questions, I think. I think you were in full flow.

**Mr Turner**

252. Yes, I was, and I apologise for returning late. I had only one other question at that time, and that was, did you perceive the response of the Permanent Secretary to your inquiries to be appropriate?

(Dr Boston) I think the answer is, no. Mind you, I came to that conclusion on the basis of experience in another country, where there are ways in which these matters are handled, and I was coming from that background; but, because of my concern about the matter, I did telephone Mike Tomlinson and report it, because of the discussion, or the examination that he had given us earlier in the day, when the issue of contact was raised. I had no thought that it compromised the integrity of this inquiry, and he quite properly came out the next day and made a statement on precisely that point, and that was fine. Nor, as I said earlier, did I have any reason to think that the Secretary of State acted inappropriately; of course, she was sensible, to look at all possible things that could come out of the inquiry and know how she was going to deal with them. It is just the wrong bodies were consulted.

**Chairman**

253. So there was a clear division on that subject between you and your Chairman?

(Dr Boston) My Chairman. I do not understand the assertion, Mr Chairman.

254. I am just seeking what your views were on the actions of the Secretary of State, and the Chairman's?

(Dr Boston) The then Chairman, Sir William Stubbs?

255. The then Chairman; you must have discussed it, surely?

(Dr Boston) I did discuss it with Sir William Stubbs, indeed, before calling Mike Tomlinson.

256. So his protest about the Secretary of State was something that you were in accord with him on?

(Dr Boston) No, I was not in accord with any protest against the Secretary of State. I was concerned that the legitimate request of the Secretary of State had been dealt with by approaching the awarding bodies to ask them whether they could handle a regrading, which was still being considered by an independent inquiry in progress. My concern was that the QCA, as the regulator, had not been the body that was consulted. I had no criticism at all of the Secretary of State.

257. How different was that from Sir William's point of view there?

(Dr Boston) I cannot speak for Sir William, Mr Chairman.

258. What about Beverley Evans, you must have been heavily involved in this, and you are seconded from the Department, you must have been involved; did Sir William consult you before he made his allegations about the inappropriate behaviour of the Secretary of State?

(Ms Evans) I was present when the discussions were taking place between Ken Boston and Sir William Stubbs.

259. And there was a disagreement between those two?

(Ms Evans) No. I think, my recollection of Sir William Stubbs's view, as we were discussing it, was that it was inappropriate of the Secretary of State to have discussed, or to have asked two officials to discuss, those matters with the awarding bodies, rather than discuss them with ourselves.

260. And did Sir William say he was going to make those views of his public?

(Ms Evans) He then proceeded to speak to a number of journalists about a number of matters, including the evidence that we gave earlier that day to the Tomlinson inquiry, and it was in the course of those discussions with journalists that that came out.

261. So, as you had those discussions, as a very senior secondee from the Department, did you give him any warning on what would be the repercussions, if he made that sort of public statement?

(Ms Evans) There was not a discussion of that sort that took place, I am afraid.

262. But you knew that he was going to make that?

(Ms Evans) I am a member of the Department, as you have referred to before in this Committee, but for the period that I have been working in QCA then my role is as a member of QCA's staff, and that is the way in which I have acted.

263. No. What we are seeking to discover is, many of us who know Sir William were surprised at the way in which he spoke, because it did seem inevitable that if he spoke in that way there could be only one resolution to that action. Did no-one in the QCA at that time counsel him that that would be one of the possible repercussions?

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KEN BOSTON, BEVERLEY EVANS AND KEITH WELLER

[Continued

**[Chairman Cont]**

(*Ms Evans*) The discussion that took place between us was on the appropriateness of DfES officials having those discussions with awarding bodies and not having those discussions with ourselves.

264. And what was your view?

(*Ms Evans*) I think it was inappropriate that the discussions were had with awarding bodies and not with ourselves.

**Chairman:** Right; so you are in accord with your new Chief Executive on that.

**Mr Chaytor**

265. If I can refer to the speech you gave at the QCA Annual Conference earlier this year, where you talk about the annual problems of the examination system, which are quite separate from the specific issue of grading this year, what are the annual problems, over and above those we have discussed this afternoon?

(*Dr Boston*) It is the shortage of examiners, and I think that is going to be exacerbated this year by many people not wishing to examine again, or perhaps examine for one board again; the sheer volume of the assessment that occurs across the country. I do believe examinations here are probably the most excessive in the world for young people, and that we could get equally valid measurements of student performance and progress with less examination. The reliance so strongly on external examinations, rather than some component of it, at least, being internally examined. The notion of having internal assessments externally moderated, which the Secondary Heads Association is advancing in the form of chartered examiners, is, in fact, the norm for many examinations in many western countries and produces valid results. John Kerr referred earlier to issues of technology. The technology that we use is very simple, and it was the subject of some comment in the report, *Maintaining A level Standards*, that Eva Baker chaired earlier this year. Our scripts are all marked by single markers, no script is marked by two markers; the scripts from centres move by post to a marker's home, usually, we do not use (although we have trialed) as a general rule, marking centres, where markers are brought in to mark under supervision, and one marks questions 5a and 5b, and another marks questions 6a and 6b, and you get consistency that way. Very little application of technology. We are running here a 21st century education system on a huge cottage industry, in the marking process, and it is just going to fail, unless we move to change the way that operates. Now that cannot be done for the summer examinations next year, we do not have that capacity to move that quickly; but that is the longer-term issue. We have got to get the examination system logistically and technically on a much firmer basis.

266. Now some of the points you have listed are issues of management, or issues of technique, but other points are matters of huge importance in terms

of policy, and, if there were a move to a greater degree of internal assessment and a reduction of the overall volume of assessment, that would be a reversal of the policy in this country, under successive governments, over the last 20 years. So, if that is what you identify as the annual problems of the examination system, how are you going to influence the Government to bring about that kind of change of policy?

(*Dr Boston*) I cannot say that I have a developed strategy for doing that, at this stage; but I think it needs to be put on the agenda for public discussion, backed up with a lot of evidence and with alternatives, and become a subject with which the community as a whole occupies itself. I have followed very closely the developments in education over the years, and I understand the pressures that have led to this highly intensive testing programme. As a person who is experienced in this field, although in other contexts, but has been in it all my life, I think there are major problems here, and I am actually more concerned about those problems than the A level issues. From the point of view of the A level and the marking and the limited amount of regrading that has gone on, this is not a system in disarray from that point of view, it is a system that has been through a difficult passage but the causes of that can be addressed, and can be addressed probably in the relatively short term. But addressing the bigger issues of the potential for the system actually to break and not be capable of being delivered, they must be urgently on the public agenda; and I think one of my roles, and one of our roles, in the QCA, as an independent regulator, is to lead that public debate.

267. And you think that criticism applies to A level, to GCSE and to the Key Stage tests as well, you are including all phases of the education system?

(*Dr Boston*) I think we should be looking at all phases. 7, 11 and 14—certainly there are intervals there, and other systems have similar intervals, but we also have an extraordinary number of optional tests, some of which, many of which, QCA, in fact, develops, that are administered to children. There has to be a balance between assessment for formative purposes, for aiding learning, and assessment for summative purposes, so that Government, that has made the investment in education, knows whether they are getting the outcomes that they are investing in; but it does not have to be this extraordinarily intense programme, we have got to leave some time for teaching, not testing.

**Chairman:** Dr Boston, I think that that is a good note on which to end this session, and, certainly, if you are coming out of your corner fighting for those principles, you will get a lot of support from this Committee. And I hope you have enjoyed your first session in front of this Committee, and we look forward to a long and creative partnership. Thank you.

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*28 October 2002]**[Continued*

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## APPENDIX 1

### **Supplementary information given by OCR on the level grade setting process (QCA 34)**

The team of examiners who mark each paper attend a “standardisation meeting”. They are trained to mark the paper as required by the Principal Examiner—to ensure that each student is marked in exactly the same way regardless of which school or college they are from or which examiner happens to mark their paper.

After the meeting, examiners have approximately three weeks to mark their allocation of scripts. Examiners are not permitted to mark papers from their own school or college.

During marking, examiners send sample marked scripts to their Team Leader. The Team Leader checks to see that they are continuing to mark scripts as required. If problems are identified, they are stopped from marking and their scripts given to another examiner.

At the end of marking, all marks and scripts are returned to the Board by post.

Shortly after the marking is complete, the Principal Examiner for each paper will suggest to the Exam Board’s Subject Officer a range of marks within which they think the key judgemental grade boundaries fall (NB and EJU at A-Level). They make their suggestions on the basis of the scripts they have seen for the question paper they have marked; they will not have any direct experience of the other papers that make up the overall A or AS-Level.

When the Subject Officer has the suggested ranges for each of the question papers (and for Coursework), he or she carries out a “pre-award” review with the Chair of Examiners using the statistical information available to check that they appear to cover appropriate ranges of marks where the boundaries might be expected to fall. The Subject Officer then arranges for scripts at each mark point to be available at the grade awarding meeting. When there is a new syllabus, a less experienced Principal Examiner or a significant change to the student cohort, the Subject Officer tends to err on the side of caution and ensures that scripts are available above and below the suggested range, should the Principal Examiner’s judgement not be accepted by the other awarding committee members.

The grade-awarding meeting usually takes place about two working days after the end of marking. Those attending are the Chief Examiner, Principal Examiners for each paper, the Principal Moderator for Coursework unit(s), and a suitably qualified examiner from a cognate subject at the same level.

The timing of the meeting is important: it may be held before all the marks have been received at the Board. Normal practice is that awarding meetings proceed if 80% of the marks are entered onto the computer system.

The Code of Practice states the process to be followed in awarding meetings. For each judgemental boundary, the committee will look at the scripts within the range suggested by each Principal Examiner. By looking at the bottom of the range and working upwards and then from the top downwards, they identify a “zone of uncertainty” within which they think the boundary should fall.

That may prove to be at one end or the other of any individual Principal Examiner’s suggested range, or indeed go outside the Principal’s suggested range if the committee feels, on the basis of its experience and evidence of the scripts, that the boundary should be set at a higher or lower mark than had been initially suggested by the Principal Examiner.

Key evidence are the archive scripts (if available): these indicate the minimum level of work required for the award of a grade A and E in a previous examination. The awarders use that to ensure that their recommendations maintain the standard year-on-year.

This process is followed for each paper (and for coursework) until the committee have agreed recommendations for all the unit boundaries at NB and EIU. As the recommended unit boundaries are agreed, the Subject Officer enters these onto the computer to see what the unit results would look like.

Once all the recommended boundaries are available and entered, the Subject Officer can see what the outcomes for the overall qualification look like. This is the first time that the overall distribution of grades would be evident

Having seen the overall distribution, the Chair indicates to the awarding committee whether or not the outcomes appear to be in line with expectations given the nature of the examination, the cohort of students taking it and evidence from all of the examiners as to how the students this year compare to last. If the outcomes do not align with those expectations, the Chair would lead the meeting to reconsider the initial recommendations. (The process is then repeated.)

When the Chair and awarding committee have unit and overall outcomes in which they have confidence and believe can be recommended to the Accountable Officer, the awarding committee has completed its role.

The Chair of Examiners and the Subject Officer then present the recommendations from the awarding committee to the “Grade Endorsement Meeting” (the GEM), usually one or two days after the awarding committee has finished. At the GEM, the Accountable Officer or his representatives (due to the number of

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[Continued

meetings involved) questions the Chair about the recommendations, unit by unit, using as reference points the statistical evidence from this and previous years as well as the comments from the awarding committee in relation on how student performance compares to archive material.

Because the GEM happens at the end of the process, the vast majority of marks will now be on the computer system and the unit and overall qualification distributions will be very accurate. The GEM team therefore considers the recommendations in the light of the full statistical evidence available. The GEM also has access to the outcomes for similar awards in related subjects. This provides valuable points of comparison that ensure consistency of standards across subject areas.

If the GEM team consider that the recommended boundaries are not appropriate given the evidence (comments about students' performance, what the statistical evidence is suggesting about students' performance) they request further adjustments to boundaries and task the Subject Officer with inputting changes to see what the impact is on the unit and overall qualification outcomes.

At the end of the GEM, the boundaries are "endorsed" as being acceptable.

The final stage of the process is an overall review of all of the outcomes from each subject area by the Accountable Officer. This stage was introduced because the Accountable Officer is not able to attend all of the GEMs but, as the person ultimately responsible for "signing off" all of the awards for OCR, considers it appropriate to see all of the recommended boundaries before results processing occurs. Any adjustments will be made in the light of the final statistical evidence available within and between subject areas.

At the end of this process the boundaries are "frozen" on the computer system and the students results processed. Bulk production of the results electronically then occurs, in readiness for distribution to schools and colleges on the due date.

November 2002

## APPENDIX 2

### Commentary by Brian Seager, Chair of Examiners (Mathematics) OCR, on the paper "The effect of moving grade thresholds" by Roger Porkess (QCA 33)

N.B. The Chair of Examiners oversees the work of the 12 Chief Examiners who are responsible for the 33 Principal Examiners, each of whom is responsible for one or more units.

1. It is unfortunate that a self-confessed mathematician has allowed himself to fall into this enormous trap. Since Roger states that the data from other boards are rather restricted, he presumably believes that he knows the data for OCR. If this is the case, he has no excuse for extrapolating to such a rash extent.

2. In the first instance—his background section—the use of "many" in "many cases" is unfounded. The question he poses (in italics) is the nub of the erroneous calculations. The whole of the subsequent calculation appears to assume that all units that were not considered in the Tomlinson review had been raised by five raw marks. I have not attempted to verify Roger's calculations, as they are based on this extreme and false premise.

3. In essence, even if Roger's thesis were correct, for OCR, only 21 out of 460 unit Grade A boundaries were raised by more than two raw marks (excluding two minority subjects whose awarding had been uniformly different from the norm).

4. Of these, only one unit was raised by five marks. This clearly cannot have the effect that Roger has claimed. Even if that one unit was subject to the "Porkess process" it would not necessarily lead to increased grades at full A-level as this depends on the grades achieved in the other five units.

5. Of the other 20 changes, eight were four marks and 12 were three marks. I have recorded the number of changes totalling three or more raw marks. Any fewer than that would be normal changes at a Grade Endorsement Meeting (GEM). I understand that six marks was chosen by Tomlinson in discussion with OCR as changes of between three and five marks were normal in relation to the completely new examination that was AS in 2001. (Caveat: I have only considered the changes at Grade A as I suspect that those at Grade E will have had little effect on the university entrance factor and Roger has not considered it either.)

6. A further point made by Roger was about changes to coursework boundaries in "Appendix -an example"—third paragraph. The actual coursework boundary changes of three or more comprise:

Biology (2,806) +4; French (2,657) +4; German (2,667) +5; PE (2,567) +3.

The band widths of each grade in these were 5.5, 4.5, 4 and 5 respectively. Not the two suggested and therefore this point has no justification, mathematical or otherwise.

7. Specifically in Mathematics, the final changes made, after the awarding committees and before the Tomlinson process, were:

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[Continued

*Specification A:*Pure Maths Two +2;  
Statistics Two +3;Pure Maths Three +3;  
Decision & Discrete Maths Two +1

Mechanics Two +2;

*MEI:*Pure Maths Two +2;  
Statistics Two +3;Pure Maths Three +2;  
Decision & Discrete Maths Two +1

Mechanics Two +3;

All these changes were of a minor nature, given that they are within the normal range of discussion in the awarding process and only five units out of 17 (Specification A) and five out of 25 (MEI) were changed. Thus the effect in Mathematics was very small, given that candidates would have only taken some of these units at this session.

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Brian Seager was appointed Chair of Examiners in 2000, responsible for all Mathematics syllabuses (now called specifications). He has been examining for 35 years—15 years as a chief examiner and nine as a Principal. Mr Seager graduated from Nottingham University with a degree in mathematics and studied for the PGCE at Cambridge. Subsequently, he taught Mathematics in four schools, was head of department in two and then deputy head of a large comprehensive.

After a two year secondment as Assessment Co-ordinator for Derbyshire, he took early retirement to concentrate on all aspects of assessment and writing associated books. He was Chairman of Examiners for GCSE Mathematics for MEG/OCR before taking up the current post as Staff Chair. He is Member of the Mathematical Association.

Roger Porkess is a Principal examiner for part of unit 2603 (Pure Mathematics 3B comprehension) but does not mark it—and an assistant examiner for Mechanics 2607 for the OCR Examinations Board. He is also the driving force behind, and full-time employee of, Mathematics in Education and Industry (MEI), whose specification OCR have accepted and had approved by the QCA.

November 2002

## APPENDIX 3

**Letter from Frank Wingate, Head of External Relations, Edexcel, to the Chairman of the Committee (QCA 37)**

Now that Mike Tomlinson's second report has been presented, I would like to take this opportunity to provide you with a brief outline of our thoughts and also highlight one key issue—the shortage of examiners.

Edexcel broadly welcomes the recommendations of the Tomlinson Inquiry and believes that Mr Tomlinson outlines a series of common sense and practical improvements that will help us enter into a period of consolidation and stability.

Specifically we approve of the suggestion to look at ways of reducing the burden of assessment and external examining and of improving examiner training, which are changes we have long advocated.

The report could well have been more robust in proposing a more independent role for the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority and we would have liked to see bolder recommendations regarding the use of much needed ICT in the examining system.

Following the announcement that the Secretary of State has allocated £6 million to help combat examiner shortages and with Mr Clarke meeting of the Select Committee on Wednesday, I attach for your reference an outline of our central views on this issue.

10 December 2002

Annex

## BRIEFING NOTE ON EXAMINER SHORTAGE

1. We welcome the £6 million allocated to helping recruit examiners, but believe careful thought needs to be used in its allocation. Our own view is that it ought to be given to the schools and colleges to allow them to buy in cover whilst releasing the experienced examiners to examine.

2. Edexcel spends £32 million per annum on fees and training for its 16,000 examiners and external verifiers. We estimate that we will be short of 1,000 examiners in 2003, but only in certain areas. If money was the main barrier to teachers becoming examiners then we believe this figure would be much higher.

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3. The subjects in which we are short of examiners correlates with a shortage of teachers in these areas (eg ICT, RE). This further reinforces the view that money is not the main barrier.

4. Increasing examiners' fees across the board to recruit a small percentage would not be cost effective. If higher fees are paid only in those subjects where there are shortages, we feel that this would cause resentment among existing examiners and would possibly have the opposite effect.

5. Edexcel believes that the £6 million would best be allocated to schools and colleges so that they can procure replacement resources while their teachers are training or marking.

6. The use of residential marking has been discussed whereby examiners are grouped together for a period of time to carry out the marking. In theory we support this as it would see an end to the Victorian style system of moving of hundreds of thousands of scripts through the mailing system. However, this intensive "battery-hen" approach to examiners has potentially some drawbacks. It would not solve the problem of headteachers being reluctant to release staff as it would mean examiners would be absent not just for training, but also for marking—something they usually carry out at home. It would remove examiner's choice as to when to mark. There is also the issue of the cost of feeding and housing the examiners. Edexcel has considerable experience of using residential marking.

7. One solution that should be given more thought is the expansion of our successful pilot project of using PGCE students as examiners. Under close supervision and with careful monitoring of their work, these teacher students achieved high results. Additionally, the training of other competent professionals to become examiners is another valid solution.

8. As already mentioned, Edexcel believes more money is not the only answer. In the long run examining needs to become part of teachers' professional development. The wide reaching benefits of being an examiner need to be conveyed to teachers and headmasters should encourage them.

9. Curriculum 2000 saw a staggering rise in assessment. At Edexcel the number of marks processed increased from four million in 2000 to 10 million in 2002. This kind of dramatic increase puts a strain on the whole system, especially examiners. Edexcel believes that the amount of assessment needs to be analysed and perhaps a move in favour of internal verification at GCSE and GCE levels is required. Internal and external verification have been successfully used for some years in our BTEC qualifications.

10. Over the longer-term Edexcel sees ITC playing a crucial role in making the examination system more accurate and efficient. The role of the diagnostic testing through on-line entry may be the ultimate goal but there are a number of practical steps towards that vision the Government, the awarding bodies and schools and colleges can take—such as on-line entry and e-exam papers—that can be put in place much earlier.

Substantial investment is needed to achieve these goals, but as a charity Edexcel cannot be expected to generate this.

WEDNESDAY 6 NOVEMBER 2002

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Members present:

Mr Barry Sheerman, in the Chair

Mr John Baron  
Valerie Davey  
Jeff Ennis  
Ms Meg MunnJonathan Shaw  
Mr Mark Simmonds  
Mr Andrew Turner

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**Submission by the Secondary Heads Association (SHA) to the Tomlinson inquiry (QCA 22)**

## INTRODUCTION

1. The Secondary Heads Association (SHA) welcomes the opportunity to submit its views to the Inquiry on A-level standards being conducted by Mike Tomlinson.

2. The first stage of the Inquiry was, of necessity, on a very short time scale. Although the second stage has until November to reach its conclusions, the issues are complex and inter-related. We would have wished for more time to gather evidence and consult SHA members, but we recognise the urgency of this exercise, which is needed in order to restore not only the confidence of the public in A-level standards, but also the confidence of A-level students, teachers and examiners.

3. The terms of reference of this second stage of the Inquiry are:

To investigate the arrangements at QCA and the awarding bodies for setting, maintaining and judging A-level standards, which are challenging, and ensuring their consistency over time; and to make recommendations by November to the Secretary of State and the Chief Executive of QCA for action with the aim of securing the credibility and integrity of these examinations.

4. The SHA evidence is therefore set out below in three sections:

4.1 Advanced level standards

4.2 Roles and relationships of the DfES, QCA and the awarding bodies.

4.3 General concerns about assessment

The SHA evidence on 4.3 is supported by the attached paper (Annex 2) on Examinations and Assessment, recently published by the Association.

With HMC and GSA, SHA has identified 15 recommendations that need to be put in place urgently for 2003. These are attached in a joint GSA/HMC/SHA paper at Annex 1.

## ADVANCED LEVEL STANDARDS

5. We have often heard A-level described as the gold standard. Nothing could be further from reality: there has never been a single standard for A-level. It has been well known for many years that different A-level subjects have different levels of difficulty. Evidence for this view has consistently been produced by Professor Carol Fitz-Gibbon through the A-level Information Systems (ALIS) project, which has analysed A-level results for the last 20 years. SHA recommends that equivalent grades in all A-levels should represent the same level of achievement.

6. It was understood that, from the mid-1980s, A-level grades would no longer be norm-referenced, but would be criterion-referenced, at least at grades A and E. In fact, as has become public knowledge in 2002, the grading system is an uneasy mixture of norm and criterion referencing. SHA recommends that the A-level grading system should be criterion-referenced.

7. A stronger focus on criterion referencing would ensure that grades resulted from the professional judgements of experienced chief examiners and were not subject to statistical manipulation at the end of the process. SHA recommends that the chief executives of awarding bodies, acting as Accountable Officers, should not normally change the grades agreed by chief examiners. In the exceptional circumstances where this is done, a report on each case should be sent to QCA within two days.

8. The calculation of AS grades has been transparent, at least in theory. According to the Dearing Report, each grade at AS represented the standard reached after one year of an A-level course that is equivalent to the same A-level grade reached after two years. SHA recommends that this definition of AS grades should remain.



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9. The calculation of A2 grades has never, to this day, been clearly articulated. If, as has been suggested, the level of A2 grades is above that of A-level in order to compensate for the lower level AS grades to which they are to be added, this has never been made clear. If that is the case—and SHA strongly believes that it should not be the case—then the amount by which A2 is above A-level needs to be publicly stated.

10. SHA believes that it is wrong for A2 grades to be above that of A-level. During the debates on the implementation of Curriculum 2000, it was never suggested that it was the purpose of the changes to raise the standard expected of 18 year olds.

11. If the combining of AS and A2 grades into a single A-level grade proves impossible without raising the standard of A-level accreditation, SHA recommends that the A2 grade should be uncoupled from the AS grade, with AS and A2 grades being reported separately. The AS marks should not be used in the calculation of the A2 grade.

12. Students study AS courses and normally complete AS examinations after one year. They proceed to the A2 courses in their chosen subjects and take A2 examinations during the second year. At least one of the A2 module examinations in each course would be synoptic, testing students on the work covered in the whole AS/A2 course. SHA recommends that the A-level grade should be the A2 grade and should not be computed by combining marks from AS and A2.

13. Although uncoupled for grading purposes, SHA recommends that the AS and the A2 courses should continue to form a single coherent A-level course, normally taken over two years. There should be no change in AS and A2 specifications.

14. With A2 uncoupled from AS, SHA recommends that A2 grades should represent the same achievement as the equivalent traditional A-level grades.

15. AS is currently worth half an A-level in UCAS points. In the interests of promoting breadth of study post-16, SHA recommends that the UCAS points for AS should remain at half of those for a full A-level of the same grade.

16. SHA believes that it is vital to retain the modular structure of A-levels, which has brought greater flexibility and helped to raise achievement. There is, however, little reason to retain the six-module structure, other than for symmetry of course architecture. In order to reduce the amount of post-16 assessment, SHA recommends that AS courses should have only two modules, a proposal put forward by SHA and others several years ago. This should not, however, necessitate a reduction in coursework, which SHA sees as a valuable part of many A-level courses.

17. The two examination sittings per year, in January and June, have given schools and colleges opportunities for flexibility of organisation and SHA recommends that two examination sittings per year should be retained. However, SHA believes that a system of end-of-module assessments would be preferable to examination period at fixed dates in January and June.

18. SHA believes that it would add to the reliability of AS grades if greater weight was placed on the professional judgement of teachers in the manner described in Annex 1 to this submission. SHA therefore recommends that AS should be largely teacher assessed.

19. SHA welcomes the discussions concerning a six-term year and the potential thus created for a post-qualifications admissions process to university.

20. The six modules of vocational A-levels are currently all assessed at full Advanced level standard. This causes considerable problems for many vocational A-level candidates taking modular examinations in the first year of their course. SHA therefore recommended previously that the assessment structure of vocational A-levels be changed to match that of A-levels, with the first three modules being assessed at a standard half way to full A-level. SHA recognises that this potentially creates the same grading problem for the final three modules of vocational A-levels as has beset A-levels in 2002. SHA therefore recommends that the standards expected in vocational AS and A2 should match the standards expected in the general AS and A2 equivalent.

21. The Code of Practice—or, at least, its interpretation—has been found wanting in 2002. SHA recommends that the Code of Practice should be amended to reflect the changes recommended by the Tomlinson report.

#### ROLES AND RELATIONSHIPS OF THE DFES, QCA AND THE AWARDING BODIES

22. Although there was no evidence of involvement by DfES ministers or officials in the statistical manipulation of A-level grades in 2002, SHA officers have long observed the close links between the DfES and QCA. DfES officials attend critical QCA meetings and QCA seemingly feels unable to make recommendations to ministers that might be received unfavourably. This is not a healthy system. QCA advice to the DfES should be evidence-based and independent. SHA therefore recommends that QCA should be reconstituted as an independent body, governed by a Board drawn from schools, colleges, universities and business, and reporting to Parliament.

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23. The Government nevertheless has a legitimate interest in curriculum and assessment matters. Legislation on curriculum and assessment will, of course, remain with the DfES. SHA recommends that the DfES, advised by the independent QCA, should establish a framework for the curriculum and assessment, but should leave the detail to QCA.

24. During the years when separate bodies were responsible for curriculum and assessment, SHA officers observed tensions and disjunctions between the two bodies. SHA believes that assessment should serve the curriculum and that the two should be planned coherently by a single body. SHA therefore recommends that QCA should continue to be responsible for both curriculum and assessment.

25. A confusion of role exists at QCA because of its responsibility for setting national curriculum tests. SHA recommends that QCA should no longer set national curriculum tests. These should be set by another body, regulated by QCA.

26. There should be greater clarity concerning the role of QCA as the regulator of the awarding bodies. SHA believes that, with the independent status described above and with its responsibility for setting national curriculum tests removed, QCA will be better able to act as an effective regulator of the processes and decisions of awarding bodies.

27. Under current circumstances, SHA supports the continuation of three awarding bodies. Recent administrative problems experienced by awarding bodies have partly stemmed from their large volume of work, much of it acquired recently with the great expansion in the number of examinations caused by Curriculum 2000. If, however, the SHA recommendations to reduce the number of external examinations are accepted, it may be possible for the work to be done by fewer than three awarding bodies. For the meantime, however, SHA recommends that there should be no reduction in the number of awarding bodies.

28. In order to reduce the bureaucracy associated with the examinations process, SHA recommends that the awarding bodies should streamline and co-ordinate their procedures.

#### GENERAL CONCERNS ABOUT ASSESSMENT

29. SHA believes that young people are subjected to far too many external examinations. SHA also believes that greater clarity is needed about the purpose of each examination and assessment instrument.

30. SHA recommends that the government should place greater trust in the professionalism of teachers and thus recommends that internal summative assessment should play a greater part in the examination system. SHA particularly welcomes the support given to this proposal by the Chief Executive of QCA at the QCA Annual Conference in October 2002.

31. SHA recommends that its proposal for the establishment of a cohort of Chartered Examiners, as set out in the Annex, should be piloted and, if successful, adopted nationally as soon as practicable.

32. SHA recommends that decisions on GCSE and AS grades should rely more on internal assessment by teachers. A2 papers should remain predominantly external examinations, with coursework where appropriate.

33. SHA's full recommendations for the future of assessment and examinations are set out in the attached paper in Annex 2, Examinations and Assessment: Proposals by the Secondary Heads Association for a radical reform of examinations and assessment.

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#### Annex 1

#### SUMMARY OF PROPOSALS FOR IMPLEMENTATION IN 2003

##### A LEVEL STANDARDS

1. Agreed national definitions of the words "standards" (in relation to public examinations) and "standards over time" should be communicated as a matter of urgency by QCA (as the standard-setting body) to awarding bodies, schools and colleges, and the public at large.

2. Differences between the old, legacy A-levels and the new A-level structure should be more widely publicised, with a focus on managing public expectations that pass rates are likely to rise.

3. Teachers', examiners' and moderators' confidence in their professional judgements (especially in respect of coursework) needs bolstering, as a matter of urgency, through an intensive programme of support from the awarding bodies.

4. The primacy of professional judgement over statistical data in the awards process needs reasserting.

5. The system of marking and grading should be made less complex and more transparent.

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6. The immediate priority is to define and communicate the standards of AS and A2 and how, together, they form the new A-level standard. These should be criterion-referenced:

- for the AS, against the standards established through the AS pilot and the 2001 summer award;
- for the A2, against expanded grade descriptions (Grades A, C and E provided in the specifications for all subjects), with greater use of archive scripts. Use of the grade C description, although not currently a judgemental point, would serve as a useful additional check on the accuracy of the overall grade setting.

7. The standards expected of the vocational AS and A2 should match those of the general AS and A2 equivalents, in line with recommendation six above.

#### ROLES AND RELATIONSHIPS OF QCA AND THE AWARDING BODIES

8. QCA should be fully independent of DfES and accountable either to Parliament (not a Select Committee) or the Privy Council.

9. QCA's functions should be restricted to setting national standards and regulating the system that assesses achievement against such standards.

10. QCA should be supported in its regulatory role (at least for the next three years and arguably as a permanent arrangement) by a distinguished panel of independent scrutineers.

11. The Awarding Bodies should be demonstrably independent of QCA (and DfES) although the powers of their Accountable Officers would be circumscribed and their operations open to independent scrutiny (as suggested above).

12. Awarding Body Accountable Officers should only be permitted to move grade boundaries recommended by the Chairman of Examiners/Principal/Chief Examiners by an agreed maximum.

13. Final raw mark grade boundaries should be routinely published by all awarding bodies for each unit of assessment, at the time that results are published.

14. All awards meetings should, in future, include representation from the other board(s) to help ensure consistency of approach and the application of common standards.

15. All awarding body personnel (including teachers employed as examiners on a part-time basis) should have a "let out" clause in their confidentiality agreements to enable them to contact the independent scrutineers if necessary.

#### Annex 2

### EXAMINATIONS AND ASSESSMENT

#### **Proposals by the Secondary Heads Association for a radical reform of examinations and assessment September 2002**

##### SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Young people are subjected to far too many external examinations. (Paragraph 11)
2. Greater clarity is needed about the purpose of each examination and assessment instrument. (Paragraphs 20–22)
3. The 14–19 Green Paper mentions assessment and examinations in so far as they contribute to league tables as drivers of improved performance. Otherwise, it largely ignores assessment and examinations. Successful reform of the qualifications structure for this age group depends heavily on reform of the examinations system. (Paragraph 10)
4. The Government should place greater trust in the professionalism of teachers. Internal summative assessment should play a greater part in the examination system. (Paragraph 28)
5. The SHA proposal for the establishment of a cohort of Chartered Examiners, as set out in the Annex, should be piloted and, if successful, adopted nationally as soon as practicable. (Paragraph 34 and Annex)
6. As a supplement to other forms of assessment, national item banks of well developed assessment tools could be made available for current and future testing arrangements, such as national curriculum tests, GCSE and AS. (Paragraph 31)
7. Decisions on GCSE and AS grades should rely more on internal assessment by teachers. A2 papers should remain predominantly external examinations, with coursework where appropriate. (Paragraph 36)
8. At ages seven and 14, teacher assessments, supported by online test scores, should be reported to parents, but not used to compile performance tables. (Paragraph 32)

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9. The feasibility of having a cadre of professional salaried examiners and moderators who are not serving teachers should be investigated. (Paragraph 30)

10. A fundamental review of assessment should seek to promote a move from assessment of learning to assessment for learning, which focuses more strongly on the needs of the learner than the needs of the system. (Paragraph 23)

11. The random sampling tests carried out by the Assessment of Performance Unit (APU) for national monitoring of standards and national levels of attainment should be reintroduced. (Paragraphs 7, 37)

12. To ensure consistency, more emphasis should be placed on training in a range of assessment methods for teachers, both in initial training and in-service training courses. (Paragraph 26)

13. National performance tables in their present form, even when recording value added in addition to raw scores, have no part to play in a progressive assessment structure. They should be abolished. (Paragraphs 6, 9)

#### THE ASSESSMENT PROBLEM

1. Assessment in Britain requires a radical review. The introduction of modular AS examinations in 2000–01 highlighted the problem of adding new external examinations to an already over-examined system. There is widespread agreement that young people in England and Wales are subjected to far too many external examinations and that the extent of these examinations has a damaging effect on the quality of education in schools and colleges. In the words of Professor Harry Torrance,

To use an engineering metaphor, it seems that we are beginning to “test the system to destruction”. Well, that’s all very well when we want to know how much force the materials in a bridge can withstand, but it hardly seems appropriate to the future building blocks of our society—our children. (Torrance, 2002)

2. There is less consensus on how the system of external examinations should be reformed. This paper sets out a programme of reform that is both practical and radical. The proposed measures could be introduced over a five-year period, with some reforms being introduced more quickly.

3. This paper does not argue against assessment. Far from it. High quality assessment is an important part of good teaching. As we argue below, however, the purposes of assessment have become confused. This has happened largely because external examinations have assumed too much importance in the system. Examinations have become the master of education, not the servant.

4. Recent research has shown that examinations are a less precise science than the public is led to believe and that too much confidence has been placed in the detailed results by those who use them to make judgements, both on the performance of individual pupils and on the performance of the school system as a whole. (Black and Wiliam, 2002)

5. There are historical lessons about over-reliance on high stakes testing, as well as evidence from the modern era. Teachers have always set goals for their pupils, based on the demands of the examination syllabus. The higher the stakes in the examination, the stronger is the concentration on the limited goals of the test. Under the Revised Code in the nineteenth century, Matthew Arnold HMI described the school examinations as “a game of mechanical contrivance in which the teachers will and must learn how to beat us” (Report, 1864–65) and Joshua Fitch HMI commented that the Revised Code was:

tending to formalize the work of elementary schools, and to render it in some degree lifeless, inelastic and mechanical. Too many teachers narrow their sense of duty to the six Standards, or what they sometimes call the paying subjects. (Report, 1864–65)

6. The current school performance tables, which summarize age-related achievement at 11, 14, 16 and 18, impose perverse incentives on schools. At GCSE, resources are often concentrated on pupils at the C/D borderline, sometimes to the detriment of those who could perhaps raise a grade B to an A, or an E to a D. The performance tables dictate that many pupils have to be entered for examinations when they are not ready for them. We need to move away from age-relatedness of examinations.

7. As Torrance notes, national curriculum test scores improve each year because teachers ensure that pupils practise for the tests. The same is surely true of GCSE and Advanced level. International evidence, notably from the US, also indicates that high stakes testing raises test scores without necessarily improving knowledge and understanding. (Torrance, 2002) The random sampling tests carried out by the Assessment of Performance Unit (APU) were a more effective way of monitoring national standards.

8. The 2002 Annual Report of HMCI, Mike Tomlinson, observed that

in some primary schools the arts, creative and practical subjects are receiving less attention than previously. This risks an unacceptable narrowing of the curriculum. (Ofsted, 2002)

If educational standards are defined more broadly than literacy, numeracy and science, HMCI’s observation suggests that standards are being reduced, rather than improved, by the present testing regime. (Torrance, 2002)

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9. The national performance tables in their present form, even when recording value added in addition to raw scores, have no part to play in the progressive assessment structure outlined in this paper. Many alternative ways of making schools accountable for their performance exist.

10. The Government's proposals for a post-14 qualifications structure will be threatened if the current weight of examinations for 17 and 18 year-olds is replicated in reforms for students aged 15 and 16. Unless we change the examinations system, we cannot build the progressive structure of curriculum and qualifications that the government has proposed. The 14–19 Green Paper mentions assessment and examinations in so far as they contribute to league tables as drivers of improved performance. Otherwise, it largely ignores assessment and examinations. Successful reform of the qualifications structure for this age group depends heavily on reform of the examinations system and the Green Paper does nothing to move us away from our national obsession with levels and grades at every age.

#### THE NEED TO REDUCE THE NUMBER OF EXAMINATIONS

11. Young people are subjected to far too many external examinations. The total number of examination papers sat by young people in schools and colleges in 2002 in national curriculum tests at 7, 11 and 14, GCSE examinations, AS and A2 examinations and key skills tests is over 30 million. No other country has so many examinations, taking place so frequently in the life of a young person. Fewer examinations would not mean worse. Indeed, SHA believes that fewer examinations could lead to an improved education system.

12. Under the pressure of the present system, schools and colleges spend too much valuable curriculum time in directly preparing for, and conducting, external examinations.

13. The examination system is very costly, taking too high a proportion of available funding in schools and colleges. A typical secondary school of 1,000 pupils, including a sixth form, is spending around £100,000 per year on external examinations. A typical sixth form college is spending around £180,000.

14. The three awarding bodies are buckling under the pressure of the system. Unacceptable administrative errors have increased greatly in the last two years. The underlying cause of this increase has been the rapid expansion of the number of examinations during this period.

15. The complexity of the examination system has led to an increased number of errors in marking and results. Appeals are not dealt with efficiently.

16. It is becoming impossible to find sufficient markers, moderators and examiners.

17. The problem of over-reliance on external examinations is illustrated by the fact that bright children take over 100 examinations during their school career.

18. The national obsession with tests and grading is illustrated by the daft proposal that national tests for seven year olds will include starred grades "to differentiate the very highest performers from the merely excellent".

19. The chief inspector of independent schools—a very experienced ex-HMI—reports that examination overload "threatens to turn education from an intellectual and spiritual adventure into a treadmill". (Tony Hubbard)

#### A CONFUSION OF PURPOSE

20. There is considerable confusion about the purposes of external examinations and assessment. In particular, the purpose of examining the student has become confused with school accountability and the performance management of teachers. The same assessments are used for the following purposes, as cited in the TGAT Report (DES, 1988):

- Diagnostic assessment.
- Formative assessment.
- Summative assessment.
- Evaluative assessment.

They are also used for:

- Component of the qualifications structure.
- Progress monitoring.
- Teachers' performance-related pay.
- School performance tables.
- Meeting national targets.

Of the last group of five purposes, three are evaluative, demonstrating how the government has skewed the assessment system from its prime purposes of diagnostic and formative towards the evaluative.

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21. No single assessment tool can be applied effectively in so many ways. There needs to be much greater clarity about the purpose of each assessment.

22. The recent furore over Advanced level grades has highlighted the confusion at Advanced level and GCSE between norm-referenced assessment and criterion-referenced assessment. This has been apparent to many chief examiners since the late 1980s.

#### ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING

23. A fundamental review of assessment should seek to promote a move from assessment of learning to assessment for learning, which focuses more strongly on the needs of the learner than the needs of the system. It seeks to promote pupils' learning, rather than act as a measure of accountability. (This section is based on Black *et al*, 2002)

24. Assessment for learning is formative assessment, producing evidence for teachers and pupils that leads to modifications in both teaching and learning. Black and Wiliam (1998) demonstrate clearly how formative assessment raises standards. *Assessment for learning* is used widely in the Government's key stage three strategy.

25. Key features of assessment for learning include:

- more effective questioning techniques by the teacher;
- increasing the waiting time for answers from pupils in class;
- feedback from teacher to pupil by comments, instead of marks or grades;
- feedback that causes pupils to think;
- more self-assessment by pupils;
- peer-assessment as a complement to self-assessment;
- the formative use of summative tests.

26. To ensure consistency, more emphasis should be placed on training in a range of assessment methods for teachers, both in initial training and in-service training courses. This is an imperative when major changes, such as assessment for learning, are introduced.

27. So much of the current debate about assessment is divorced from the student's learning process. The work of Black and Wiliam is refreshing in bringing the focus of the debate back to the central issue of learning.

#### NEW METHODS OF ASSESSMENT

28. In recent years, teachers have become more rigorous and skilful at assessment. The Government should place greater trust in the professionalism of teachers. Internal summative assessment should play a greater part in the examination system.

29. One way to increase the proportion of internal assessment is to have a massive programme of moderation, but this would be unduly bureaucratic and would take moderators (who would mostly be serving teachers) out of their own schools for too much of the summer term.

30. Another way to solve the present examinations crisis is to have a cadre of professional salaried examiners and moderators who are not serving teachers. The seasonal nature of examinations may make this an inefficient way of proceeding. Nevertheless, this is worth investigating, as part-time salaried examiner posts may be attractive to teachers at the end of their career in the classroom.

31. The use of online assessment is likely to increase, as online techniques become increasingly sophisticated and cost-effective. As a supplement to other forms of assessment, national item banks of well developed assessment tools could be made available for current and future testing arrangements, such as national curriculum tests, GCSE and AS. These item banks could be used to complement teachers' judgements of levels and grades achieved. Online assessment is good at testing knowledge and, to a lesser extent, understanding, but it is not so good at testing analytical ability and other higher order skills. It should be noted, therefore, that the results produced by online assessment do not always correlate exactly with the results of other forms of assessment. Nevertheless, online assessment has an important part to play, although the practicalities of organising online testing in schools should be considered carefully.

32. At ages seven and 14, teacher assessments, supported by online test scores, should be reported to parents, but not used to compile performance tables.

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## CHARTERED EXAMINERS

33. A problem with relying more on internal assessment by teachers is that there is a lack of trust in the professional ability of teachers to carry out such assessment rigorously. A change in the balance between external and internal assessment must take place in a way that maintains public confidence in the qualifications system.

34. SHA's scheme for the establishment of a cohort of Chartered Examiners would produce no loss of rigour in examining and would thus hold public confidence. The SHA proposals are set out in the Annex. These should be piloted and, if successful, adopted nationally as soon as practicable.

35. The proposal to create Chartered Examiners will raise the status of teachers and of internal assessment in schools and colleges. It will improve the quality of school-based assessment and thus contribute to the raising of achievement in schools and colleges. It will provide a new step on the continuum of professional development for teachers. It will provide important professional development opportunities for aspiring classroom teachers. It will make just-in-time testing more viable and reduce the length of the examination period each summer. Above all, it would make the examinations system more manageable.

36. With Chartered Examiners in place, the GCSE and AS examinations could rely more on internal assessment by teachers. Assessment instruments could be externally set and internally marked by (or under the supervision of) Chartered Examiners. Instruments could also be internally set. Grades could be recommended internally from a combination of internal and external assessment instruments. A2 papers should remain predominantly external examinations, with coursework where appropriate.

## NATIONAL MONITORING

37. National curriculum testing should not be used to monitor progress towards the achievement of national targets. The pressure of high stakes testing creates a false picture. The random sampling tests carried out by the Assessment of Performance Unit (APU) should be reintroduced. Monitoring of progress should be by national sampling, not by national saturation, as we have at present.

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Annex

## PROPOSAL TO CREATE CHARTERED EXAMINER STATUS

1. A new Chartered Examiner status is introduced for experienced teachers.
2. If greater reliance is to be placed on internal assessment by teachers as a component of externally awarded qualifications, this must be achieved with no loss of rigour.
3. The internal assessment is therefore carried out by teachers who uphold, and are seen to uphold, the standards set by the government, QCA and awarding bodies.

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#### ACCREDITATION OF CHARTERED EXAMINERS

4. Chartered Examiner status is available to qualified teachers with at least four years' experience of teaching the subject in which they are to be accredited.

5. Teachers applying for accreditation as Chartered Examiners take part in three to five days of training and testing, administered by the awarding bodies. Much of this involves the marking of candidates' work and the estimation of grades. Only teachers achieving a high standard of consistency in this work are accredited as Chartered Examiners.

6. The status of Chartered Examiner is granted by the awarding bodies and is publicly recognised with a post-nominal C.Ex.

7. The status is awarded at Advanced level for those conducting assessments at A level and AVCE; at Intermediate level for those conducting assessments at GCSE and vocational GCSE; at Foundation level for those conducting key stage three assessments.

8. It is for consideration whether teachers awarded the status at Advanced level need to be separately accredited at Intermediate and Foundation levels.

9. The proposal could be extended to teachers of children at key stages one and two.

10. The status of Chartered Examiner will be awarded to teachers in maintained and independent schools and colleges.

11. Precedents exist for the proposals in this paper, both in the D32 to D35 qualifications for teachers who assess vocational courses, and in the accreditation awarded to modern languages teachers to carry out A level and GCSE speaking tests. In each case, teachers apply for the accreditation and undergo training and testing for one or more days. The awarding bodies administer the process and award the accreditation.

#### OPERATION OF A SYSTEM OF CHARTERED EXAMINERS

12. It is envisaged that each large subject department of a secondary school or college will have several Chartered Examiners. These teachers will be responsible for carrying out or overseeing rigorous internal assessment that would form a substantial proportion of externally awarded qualifications.

13. The work to be assessed by the Chartered Examiners will be of two types:

- i. externally set tests or assignments, and
- ii. internally set assignments on specified parts of the syllabus.

14. If a department does not have a Chartered Examiner in a particular subject, the school or college may use a Chartered Examiner from another institution or may send the work to the awarding body for external marking.

15. It is the responsibility of the Chartered Examiner to mark and grade work at the standard of the external qualification to which it contributes.

16. A senior Chartered Examiner will be appointed in each school to oversee the whole assessment process.

17. A small amount of moderation of the work of Chartered Examiners could take place each year. Moderation systems tend to be very bureaucratic and time consuming. The extent and procedures of the moderation must avoid this excessive bureaucracy.

18. The proposed increase in internal examining is subject to the criticism that it will increase the workload of teachers. This should not be the case. If year 12 is taken as an example, the experience of 2000–01 suggests that the weight of external examinations has caused additional stress and workload. Yet year 12 students have always been given internal examinations by their teachers without these problems. Unless the new system is introduced with excessive bureaucracy, a more rigorous form of internal assessment will add little to the workload of a typical teacher of year 12 students.

19. C.Ex. status will be renewable every three years.

20. C.Ex. status (as was the case with a good honours degree) will be appropriately rewarded with a salary supplement.

21. The cost of the proposals has not been calculated, but any additional cost will be offset by the reduction in external examinations, which are expensive consumers of resources.



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**Submission by the Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference (HMC) to the Tomlinson inquiry (QCA 23)**

## INTRODUCTION

1. The Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference (HMC) welcomes the opportunity to submit its views to Stage Two of the Tomlinson Inquiry on A-level standards.

2. The first stage of the Inquiry was, of necessity, on a very short time scale. Although the second stage has until November to reach its conclusions, the issues are complex and inter-related. We would have wished for more time to gather evidence and consult HMC members, but we recognise the urgency of this exercise, which is needed in order to restore not only the confidence of the public in A-level standards, but also the confidence of A-level teachers and examiners.

3. The terms of reference of this second stage of the Inquiry are:

To investigate the arrangements at QCA and the awarding bodies for setting, maintaining and judging A-level standards, which are challenging, and ensuring their consistency over time; and to make recommendations by November to the Secretary of State and the Chief Executive of QCA for action with the aim of securing the credibility and integrity of these examinations.

4. The HMC evidence is therefore set out below in three sections:

- Advanced level standards.
- Roles and relationships of QCA, the awarding bodies and the DfES.
- General comments about assessment and examinations from 13–19.

## SECTION ONE: ADVANCED LEVEL STANDARDS

5. This section identifies the problems which help to explain why this summer's A-level examination awards were doomed to go wrong. It then seeks to identify ways forward.

6. The problems were as follows:

(a) Confusion over the word "standards"

The word "standards" does not even appear in the glossary of the QCA Code of Practice. In common parlance, a "standard" is something, which is defined (or set), against which the performance of individuals (or groups) can be measured or judged. In employment contexts "occupational standards" are set by employers and in a pure, competence model, employees either reach the standard (and pass) or don't reach it (and fail). In educational contexts performance is often graded, either in relation to more specific criteria (criterion-referencing) or relative to the performance of others (norm-referencing).

Since the mid 80s, with changes to the A-level grading system and the introduction of GCSE, there has been a strong perception that examinations are mainly criterion-referenced. From this perspective, if more students reach a pre-set standard, more should pass and achieve higher grades. The numbers of people now able to run the four-minute mile or reach the summit of Everest are often cited as real life examples of such a phenomenon. On the other hand, accusations of "grade inflation" reflect a public perception that more people are passing A-levels, not because they are performing any better in relation to a fixed standard, but because the standard itself has been lowered.

(b) Confusion over the concept of "maintaining standards over time"

The requirement in the QCA Code of Practice "to maintain standards over time" compounds an already confused interpretation of the word standards. It is clear from evidence presented to stage 1 of the Tomlinson Inquiry that many people involved in this year's awards—including awarding body senior personnel and chief examiners—interpreted this requirement as an expectation that pass rates (and possibly high grades) would not differ markedly in 2002, from those of the old "legacy" A-levels in 2001.

The post-awards meetings "manipulations" that took place at many of OCR's Grade Evaluation meetings altered the balance between the three key variables in any award: performance (ie quality of work as judged against set standards), pass marks (including grade boundaries) and pass rates. The latter were maintained broadly in line with the 2001 profile of results by increasing pass marks irrespective of the quality of candidates' work. In this scenario, it was statistics not standards that were being maintained over time. It would appear that QCA and the awarding bodies paid little attention to the report of the three international experts (Professor Eva Baker, Dr Barrie McGraw and Lord Southerland of Houndwood) commissioned by QCA to look at (amongst other things) standards over time. They state:

There is no scientific way to determine in retrospect whether standards have been maintained. Therefore, attention should be placed on ensuring accuracy, validity and fairness of the system from now on. (January 2002)

(c) Confusion over the relationship between "old" and "new" A levels

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Previous studies of “standards over time” have always looked at three related variables in any examination:

- the level of demand of the content; (as set out in the syllabus/specification);
- the level of demand of the question papers (together with their mark schemes);
- the level of response (ie the quality of work or candidate performance in relation to the two aspects above).

By analysing syllabuses, question papers and archive scripts broad comparisons can be made about different balances between each of these three variables at different points in time. Most studies conclude that “standards” (the sum total of these three variables) have changed over the years. Whether they are higher or lower is often a value judgement.

Although Curriculum 2000 saw the introduction of two new exams (AS and A2), the original design for the new A-levels (the sum total of AS and A2) was intended to maintain the same overall level of demand in each of the above variables. No new content was to be added; no old content was to be lost. AS and A2 questions were to be drawn from the “easier” and “harder” ends of the A-level spectrum (not from outside it). Performance was to have been of the standard expected after one year’s study (for the AS) and at the end of the course (for the A2). In short, all three elements (syllabus content, questions and expected levels of performance) were to be redistributed and repackaged between AS and A2.

It was therefore surprising to read in the TES on 20 September that OCR’s “model” for AS and A2 standards was that AS was graded one grade below the legacy A-level (AS = AL–1) and A2 one grade above (A2 = AL + 1). If this was, indeed, the model being applied, irrespective of the fact that it contradicts the Dearing model, three questions need answering:

- Was this model decided by QCA (the proper standard setting body)?
- Was it applied consistently by all three awarding bodies? (as it would have to have been to ensure consistency, as required by the Code of Practice).
- How and when was it communicated to examiners and teachers?

To date no satisfactory answer has been forthcoming to these three questions.

(d) Failure to define the new AS and A2 standards and how they would be aggregated to form the overall A-level standard

The OCR example given above does, at least, represent an attempt at defining each of these two new standards in relation to the old legacy A level. The problem is that it appears to have been invented retrospectively (after the exams were set) and unilaterally (without the agreement of the other boards or QCA). Throughout 1998 and 1999 HMC and GSA continued to register serious concerns with QCA that the standards of these two exams had not been defined satisfactorily. While the AS exam had at least benefited from a limited pilot, this was not true of the A2. Indeed, it could be argued that the root cause of this year’s difficulties was QCA’s failure to define and communicate these new standards. Instead, we saw an inversion of roles whereby OCR appeared to set the AS and A2 standards and QCA (through “perceived pressure” on awarding body personnel) tried to influence the grade boundaries. A related complication of this dereliction of duties was that the standards applied in June of 2002 appear, in many cases, to have been different from those applied in January 2002. Intra-year comparability may well have been sacrificed for inter-year symmetry of outcomes in terms of pass rates and grade distributions. Similar fears have been expressed with regard to the standards applied to the 2001 AS and 2002 AS examinations. It is clear from these examples that the failure to set the standards properly in the first place will have wide-ranging and long lasting consequences.

(e) Failure to anticipate “real” improvements in candidates’ performance consequent upon a new system

With the introduction of any new exam (eg O and A-levels in 1951, GCSE in 1988) there is always a danger of discontinuity in “standards” (as defined in paragraph 6 (a–c) above) with the past. In some cases this is intentional (eg with GCSE, the focus on helping candidates show what they “know, understand and can do” was designed to “raise standards” in the sense of improving performance—particularly at the lower end of the grade range). With the introduction of Curriculum 2000, five factors made such a discontinuity both inevitable and entirely predictable: its modular structure (with several assessment opportunities), the availability of resits, more detailed and specific syllabuses/specifications and assessment objectives, harder work by sixth formers over the course as a whole, and the element of “self-selection” from AS to A2 as students dropped their weakest subject(s). The A2 cohort was, in this scenario, likely to be stronger than the former legacy AL cohort. They were also the first cohort to have benefited from the National Curriculum from age five. These “artefacts” of the new system, combined with more focused teaching to the test (an inevitable consequence of the publication of exam results and league tables) were guaranteed to inflate the numbers passing the new A level. It would have been a sad indictment of government policy had these students not been better equipped to sit, pass and excel in the new A level examination. The failure of DfES, QCA and the awarding bodies, collectively, to prepare for this in terms of managing the media and public perceptions is, with hindsight, extraordinary. In passing, it is worth noting that the “Rose Inquiry” some two years’ ago was set up after allegations of QCA’s “level fixing” to ensure more pupils reached higher levels, in

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line with government targets. That Inquiry led to the introduction of independent scrutineers from the teacher associations as observers at level setting meetings, an idea which Stage Two of the Tomlinson Inquiry has adopted and to which we return in section two of this submission.

(f) Over-reliance on statistical evidence and the marginalisation of professional judgement

Awarding in recent years has always involved a blend of these two inputs. In 2002, the mistaken desire to maintain pass rates in line with legacy A-levels (in spite of the view of many awarding committees that “standards”, in the true sense of the word, were being maintained) led to the domination of statistics over professional judgement. The backwash effect of this on teachers’ (and examiners’) confidence in making future judgements about standards has yet to be calculated. Certainly many experienced teachers who thought they had a secure sense of “standards in the head”, supported by exemplification material provided by the boards, which was further corroborated by positive feedback from the boards’ own moderators, have been left confused and demoralised. Subsequent explanations from the boards that assigning coursework to broad “bands” was not the same as giving such work “marks” which, in turn, was different from awarding “grades” have only compounded the confusion.

(g) Over-complexity and over-engineering of the system of marking, grading and awarding

There can be little justification for a system which has become so complex and over-engineered that only the awarding body technocrats are capable of understanding it. The example, above, of judgements about coursework illuminates the problem well. Elsewhere in the education system teachers have been encouraged to make “best fit” judgements in relation to pupils’ overall level in National Curriculum subjects. They do not “level” each piece of work but have grown accustomed to making overall judgements based on level descriptors and exemplification of pupils’ work assessed. Public examinations, in particular where coursework is concerned, need to regain some of the transparency and simplicity of this process. The distinction made in a letter to HMC’s General Secretary by OCR’s Chief Executive between “professional assessors” (employed by the boards) and “professional teachers” is artificial and unhelpful. Many examiners, if not most, are also teachers. If we are ever to move to a situation in which the SHA proposals for “chartered examiners” is to function effectively, then a simplification of the system is urgently required. This is also necessary if public confidence and understanding are to be enhanced.

7. The remainder of this section seeks to identify short term solutions to some of the problems identified above. Proposals for more radical changes (eg to the structure of AS and A2, to the balance of internal and external assessment) are set out in section 3 at the end of this submission. Proposals for the short term are set out in the form of recommendations, with the key points identified in bold print. They are based on submissions from HMC’s senior officers and members of its Academic Policy Sub-Committee, informed by discussions of stage 2 of the Tomlinson Inquiry at HMC’s Annual General Meeting on 3 October 2002. The proposals for the medium to long term in section (iii) draw on the same sources.

8. In order to secure the credibility and integrity of the new AS and A-level examinations over the next 12 months, we recommend that:

- (i) Agreed national definitions of the words “standards” (in relation to public examinations) and “standards over time” should be communicated as a matter of urgency by QCA (as the standard-setting body) to awarding bodies, schools and colleges, and the public at large.

This should make clear the difference between standards as a “yardstick”, and standards as “student performance”; similarly the distinction between “setting a standard” and “the proportion of students meeting that standard” should be clearly articulated and disseminated.

- (ii) Differences between the old, legacy A-levels and the new A-level structure (as set out in para 6e) should be more widely publicised, with a focus on managing public expectations that pass rates are likely to rise.

The Government has done this with the National Curriculum and national literacy and numeracy strategies. Indeed, the onus is on the DfES and others to explain why more pupils are not reaching national targets, rather than trying to hold down pass rates artificially. A new climate and culture of “celebrating success” needs to be fostered in relation to public examinations.

- (iii) Teachers’, examiners’ and moderators’ confidence in their professional judgements (especially in respect of coursework) needs bolstering through an intensive programme of support from the awarding bodies.

This will require a frank and honest retraction of some recent statements that teachers did not understand what was required and a re-establishment of the expectation that coursework judgements and marks in relation to published “band” descriptors correlate with broad expectations of the grade that might be expected for a piece of coursework.

- (iv) The primacy of professional judgement over statistical data in the awards process needs reasserting.

QCA’s current review of the Code of Practice should result in fundamental changes to the Code with respect to the balance and interplay of these two key determinants in the awarding process. References to various forms of comparability and the maintenance of standards over time need a

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radical rethink and rewrite. Those sections and paragraphs which refer to comparability (between units, boards, over time etc) will need special attention. We believe that notions of “fitness for purpose” in the assessment regime of individual subjects and qualifications should replace spurious concepts of “comparability” as currently enshrined in the Code.

- (v) The system of marking and grading should be made less complex and more transparent.

The introduction of the Uniform Mark Scale (UMS) has helped teachers, students and parents monitor progress and attainment, both during and at the end of the AS and AL course. The 0–100 scale is, on the surface at least, easy for end-users to understand and should be retained. Every effort should be made to reduce complexity at the various levels, which operate beneath the surface of the UMS. Coursework banding and marks have already been referred to. Another example is mathematics, where the process of scaling can result in identical UMS scores for candidates whose raw marks discriminate much more finely. In some other subjects (eg AQA A2 Psychology coursework where 87% was needed for grade A and 60% for grade E this summer) the setting of raw mark grade boundaries defied any reasonable “common-sense” view of standards or fairness.

- (vi) The immediate priority is to define and communicate the standards of AS and A2 and how, together, they form the new A level standard.

This is the most difficult challenge in the short term. Section Three contains a number of proposals for the medium to long term, but it is doubtful whether any of them could be implemented in the timescale available. In our view the best option in the short term is to criterion reference AS and A2 standards. This proposal would rely on the standards newly established through the AS pilot and the 2001 summer award being carried forward and applied to the January and June 2003 AS exams in all subjects. (Those June 2002 AS awards, which were felt to have been severely graded should have been reviewed and, where appropriate, regraded as part of the Tomlinson review). The A2 standards, however, would be referenced against the grade descriptions (Grades A, C and E) provided in the specifications for all subjects, with greater use of archive scripts. The A/B and E/U boundaries would continue to be determined judgementally, and the intervening grades mathematically, as at present. Use of the grade C description, although not currently a judgemental point, would serve as a useful additional check on the accuracy of the overall grade setting. There would be no statistical adjustment to results to deliver outcomes based on AS being a grade easier and A2 a grade harder than the legacy AL. Use might, however, be made of MidYIS and ALIS data (or similar, including prior GCSE scores) to monitor the extent to which standards appear to be varying relative to the baseline input measure. The standards of the old legacy A level (still extant in most teachers’ and examiners’ heads and exemplified in archive scripts) would also provide a reference point. Over the next two to three years, some of the steps proposed in section three could be taken (eg uncoupling AS from A2) to further simplify the standard setting process and ensure greater consistency.

## SECTION TWO: ROLES AND RELATIONSHIPS OF QCA, THE AWARDING BODIES AND DfES

9. Our recommendations are as follows:

- (i) QCA should be fully independent of DfES and accountable either to Parliament (not a Select Committee) or the Privy Council.

If the Government can accept that the Bank of England can act as an independent body to regulate interest rates and our economy, so, too, should QCA be allowed to act independently. It is totally inappropriate for any government, which sets national targets to be in a position (directly or indirectly) to influence the outcomes of a system in which they have a vested interest.

- (ii) QCA’s functions should be restricted to setting national standards and regulating the system that assesses achievement against such standards.

QCA’s first duty is to set, define and communicate national standards. These include early learning goals, the National Curriculum, GCSE and AL criteria and vocational/occupational standards. It should do this in close consultation with all key stakeholders. Its Board would need to comprise members drawn from each key “standards” sector: early years providers, schools and colleges, universities and employers. It would need a truly independent Chairman, technically appointed (like HMCI) by the Queen. Three standards sub-committees would advise the main board: academic standards (with key HE representation, including the Russell Group universities), vocational/occupational standards (FE and employers, including captains of industry) and formation standards (covering the 3-14 curriculum). A fourth sub-committee (regulations) would oversee QCA’s regulatory and quality assurance roles. QCA would have no role in assessment, setting national tests or the setting, marking and awarding of public examinations (other than monitoring awarding body processes and procedures).

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- (iii) QCA should be supported in its regulatory role (at least for the next three years and arguably as a permanent arrangement) by a distinguished panel of independent scrutineers.

This would be an extension of the arrangements which apply to QCA's National Curriculum level setting meetings and which the Tomlinson Inquiry has introduced for the grade review exercise currently taking place. The scrutineers (who should be drawn from outside the Headteacher and teacher associations and the educational establishment at large, as a signal of their total independence) would attend all Grade Evaluation Meetings (ie those meetings which take place after the normal awarding meetings). Their role would be to ensure that the awarding body Accountable Officers act within their powers (see v below) and that common standards are applied across awarding bodies. Where they have concerns they would alert QCA. If QCA failed to act appropriately they would have direct recourse to the Secretary of State who would be expected to call an independent public inquiry. This, of course, would be a last resort.

- (iv) The Awarding Bodies should be independent of QCA (and DfES) although the powers of their Accountable Officers would be circumscribed and their operations open to independent scrutiny (as suggested above).

Although QCA would continue to regulate and monitor the work of the awarding bodies (in accordance with a revised Code of Practice), the attendance of QCA officers at awarding meetings would be as non-participating observers. Should QCA officers have concerns, the panel of independent scrutineers would be alerted. All meetings between QCA senior officers (including Chairman and Chief Executive) and awarding body personnel (including Accountable Officers) would be minuted. Discussion of the likely outcomes of each summer's exam results would be on the strict basis of the sharing of information. A member of the panel of independent scrutineers would attend such meetings.

- (v) Awarding Body Accountable Officers should only be permitted to move grade boundaries recommended by the Chairman of Examiners/ Principal/Chief Examiners by a maximum of (say) two marks.

Where there is a potential justification for any greater adjustments, this would have to be authorised by QCA after consultation with the panel of independent scrutineers.

- (vi) Final raw mark grade boundaries should be routinely published by all awarding bodies for each unit of assessment, at the time that results are published.

At present this does not happen for all awarding bodies. If it did, it would aid transparency and consistency between them. It should be part of the process of educating the public at large to understand the system.

- (vii) All awards meetings should, in future, include representation from the other board(s) to help ensure consistency of approach and the application of common standards.

Ideally this should involve the Chief Examiner and/or Subject Officer of the other board(s).

- (viii) All awarding body personnel (including teachers employed as examiners on a part-time basis) should have a "let out" clause in their confidentiality agreements.

This would allow them to contact the independent scrutineers if they had evidence of breaches of the Code of Practice or other conduct likely to undermine the consistency of awards or public confidence.

- (ix) The number of Awarding Bodies should be kept under review.

Most members of HMC support the continued existence of more than one awarding body. Concerns about a monopoly situation and the ability of the system to cope with a sudden move to a single awarding body are at the heart of this. There appears, however, to be growing support for a model, which envisages "more than one but fewer than three" awarding bodies! Suggestions, such as the possible sharing of subjects between awarding bodies, merit further exploration. In the short term, however, the need for stability and continuity outweighs the case for a further reduction, even though consistency of standards might be helped by such a move. Once confidence has been re-established in the system, we would wish to see awarding bodies spending more time and effort on supporting teachers (possibly on a regional basis) and developing innovative approaches to assessment and examining, including online tests where appropriate.

- (x) The role of DfES

This should be restricted to the promulgation of national curriculum and assessment frameworks (but not detailed prescriptions), to setting National Targets, to reporting on the achievement of these targets, and to supporting schools and colleges in their efforts to meet such targets through the provision of adequate resources.

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## SECTION THREE: GENERAL COMMENTS ABOUT ASSESSMENT AND EXAMINATIONS

10. HMC fully supports and endorses the recommendations made in the policy paper “Examinations and Assessment”, produced by the Secondary Heads Association. We also welcome proposals for the creation of a new “Chartered Examiner” status, though we recognise that further work needs to be done on the practical implications and implementation of such a proposal.

11. So far, this submission has focused strictly on the immediate remit of stage two of the Tomlinson Inquiry. This section goes beyond that remit to make tentative proposals for the medium to long term. We recognise that the short term changes needed to restore consistency and confidence cannot fully respond to our deeper concerns. We hope, however, that any short term changes will pave the way for more radical, longer term reform.

12. Our proposals are guided by the following key principles for reforming public examinations in England.

*Key principles*

1. *Assessment/examinations should support, not distort, the curriculum.*
  2. *Assessment/examinations from ages 13–19 should, like the curriculum, be considered as a whole rather than as two separate phases (3–16; 16–19) in isolation from each other.*
  3. *The current overall burden of assessment/examinations from 13–19 should be reduced.*
  4. *A clearer distinction should be made between high and low stakes assessment, with a greater use of internal assessment for the latter. Assessment, in general, should be on a “fitness for purpose” basis.*
  5. *Assessment/examinations should be inclusive and do justice to the achievements of pupils of all abilities, including those at the bottom and the top of the ability range.*
  6. *The system should be as simple and intelligible as is consistent with the minimum quality assurance necessary to command public and professional confidence.*
13. The following proposals, for consideration and exploration in the medium to longer term, attempt to translate the above principles into practice. They also build upon, and extend, the short-term proposals made in section 2.

*Specific proposals*

- (i) AS and A2 should be uncoupled

This would turn them into discrete qualifications (like Scottish Highers and Advanced Highers) and make standard setting simpler. It would avoid the need to aggregate two different standards into a third overall standard. AS would be the standard appropriate to students at the end of the first year of A level study (as intended by Dearing). A2 would be equivalent to the old legacy A level standard, involving a synoptic element drawing on the more demanding content and questions appropriate at the end of the A level course with expectations of performance also pitched at that level. To counter fears of “content skipping” or “dumbing down”, there could be a requirement to have taken and passed AS (which would be ungraded) before an A2 grade could be awarded.

- (ii) AS and A2 content should be restructured

In terms of content, AS and A2 could be restructured into five modules: AS (two units), A2 (three units). This would better match many schools’ model of curriculum delivery and would signal a 40:60 weighting (even if AS and A2 are not aggregated for assessment purposes). The old FE distinction between “modules of delivery” and “units of assessment” should be resurrected. A modular structure for curriculum purposes would allow students to continue to receive formative and diagnostic feedback as they progress in their AS and A2 studies (eg after the first term). For assessment purposes, however, serious consideration should be given to treating AS and A2 as single units of assessment (see below).

- (iii) AS and A2 assessment should be “linear” (ie a single assessment opportunity for each in June of each year).

This would dramatically reduce the overall assessment burden by taking out the January sitting and turning “resits” into “retakes”. The number of exam papers that would need to be set would be cut by over half; costs and disruption to schools would also be substantially reduced. It would, moreover, ease the pressure on the boards and reduce the examiner recruitment crisis. At the same time, however, consideration should be given to ensuring that the length of the A2 exam is of sufficient duration to enable candidates to demonstrate their intellectual ability and level of achievement over the course as a whole.

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- (iv) Internal assessment (with light touch external moderation) should replace external exams at AS (and also at GCSE in subjects other than English, maths, science and, possibly, a modern foreign language)

This would further reduce the burden of external assessment. It would, however, increase the responsibility of teachers to make “in the round” judgements about students’ achievements at GCSE and AS level. There would need to be adequate support and training to prepare for this. However, if the non-externally examined GCSE and AS subjects were to be simple “pass/fail” assessments, this should not be too difficult. For candidates not intending to progress beyond AS level, a degree of externality could be brought to bear either through enhanced external moderation or through an externally set and marked test/exam. Either way, this should still be on a simple pass/fail basis. As an alternative, a bank of short online test items (similar to the theory test administered by DVLC for new drivers) might be considered to test students’ knowledge and understanding of the subject.

- (v) A2 specifications should be “extended” to include additional, more challenging material either for external assessment or as the basis for a single, serious piece of extended individual research.

This would make the development of AEAs redundant. It would address the problem that the top of the A level grade range no longer adequately discriminates between able candidates. It would also restore to A level one of its original purposes: to help provide a reliable basis for fair and meritocratic selection for entry to Higher Education. This additional, optional, material would help to redress accusations of “dumbing down” which might accompany the uncoupling of AS and A2. Finally, the “individual research” option could render separate, subject-specific coursework assignments redundant (see vi below).

- (vi) Coursework should be radically reduced (at GCSE, AS and A level)

Subjects with a strong practical element (eg D & T, drama, art, music, modern languages oral etc) will continue to require an assessment of such components. This need not necessarily be a coursework assignment. Some subjects have experimented with a written or oral exam on the work undertaken during the course, rather than assessing the coursework as a product in its own right. Further consideration should be given to such alternatives.

The objective, however, is clear. Coursework, as currently operated, is fragmented, time consuming and open to abuse. Repeated across several subjects, many of the skills it develops are generic and could be better fostered (and assessed) through a single, serious piece of work in just one subject, of the student’s choice. In the context of other qualifications (existing or under development, eg the IB, English or Welsh Bacs), coursework of this sort could play an important integrating and “connective” role in drawing together discrete elements of a student’s overall programme of study. While such developments are clearly for the longer term, changes to current arrangements should pave the way for (rather than close off) such opportunities. At this stage, we are calling for a root and branch review of current coursework arrangements.

- (vii) All AS and AL specifications should be reviewed with the intention of making them less fragmentary and atomistic.

This would greatly support the simplification of the overall assessment process and moves to encourage a greater alignment of teachers’ “best fit” judgements against grades in a more holistic way. Linked to (v) above it could also help to stimulate and challenge the most able learners.

## CONCLUSION

14. There are, of course, a number of possible variants on the above proposals. We recognise, in particular, that for many teachers and learners outside our schools (and a good number within them), the modular structure of AS and A2 and the availability of resits, have been a positive feature of *Curriculum 2000*. At the same time, many of these same schools have experienced the additional disruption, costs and erosion of teaching and learning time (not to mention extra-curricular activities) that have accompanied these new flexibilities. While we have set out our preferred model for the redesign of AS and A2, we recognise that a “compromise model” is possible. This might involve, for example, a modular AS and a linear A2 or, conceivably a linear AS with a modular A2 (with a January as well as a June sitting in the upper sixth but not in Year 12).

15. The important thing is that these various models are fully discussed and explored, with the profession and other key stakeholders (notably Higher Education and employers) before any are adopted.

16. We are also optimistic that other positive aspects may emerge from the pain and suffering of the last few weeks. If the eventual introduction of a properly worked out system of Post Qualifications Admissions (PQA) and the long overdue demise of national performance/league tables follow in the wake of the Tomlinson Inquiry, HMC (along with its partner organisations) will have much to celebrate.

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### Submission by the Association of Colleges (AoC) to the Tomlinson inquiry (QCA 24)

#### INTRODUCTION

The Association of Colleges (AoC) is the representative body for further education colleges in England and Wales established by the colleges themselves to provide a voice for further education at national level. Some 98% of the 420 colleges in England and Wales are members.

#### CONTEXT

1. The Association of Colleges wishes to set its comments within the context of positive endorsement of Curriculum 2000.

2. It believes that any remedial action, taken to address issues relating predominantly to assessment and the definition of standards, should not have a negative impact on the very positive attributes the new curriculum offers learners—namely greater flexibility, greater feedback and greater choice. It is to these principles that the Association refers, when advocating any curriculum reform.

3. The Association regrets the narrow focus of the remit. It believes that for developments and improvements to be effective at level three, the whole of that provision, and not just AS and A Levels, needs to be taken into account.

4. In the colleges' view, there are far more critical issues to be addressed relating to AVCEs, for example, that appear to fall outside this remit. Less than half of sixteen and seventeen year olds still in learning are actually studying at A/AS level. The critical issues pertaining to a unitised approach to the curriculum (an approach we strongly support) also apply to AVCEs and BTEC Nationals.

5. The FE sector has been fully supportive of Curriculum 2000, and is keen that those principles that underpin the curriculum reform will not be diluted or lost in the outcomes of the inquiry, particularly the unitised approach. Indeed, the Association's approach throughout this inquiry is to seek to develop the curriculum further to create greater flexibility and more choice, rather than retrench. The FE sector accounts for a third of all A/AS candidates in the 16–19 age group; nearly two thirds of those taking VCEs/GNVQs; and the overwhelming majority of those taking other qualifications.

6. It is fair to say that the FE sector has gone further to implement the spirit, as well as the structure of Curriculum 2000 than any other sector. This was recognised in the evidence of the Chief Executive of OCR in his submission to the select committee on October 28, in which he singled out colleges for their thorough preparation for the implementation of the new curriculum.

7. Colleges fully support the new curriculum and approach as suiting the needs of the broad cohort of learners that it accommodates—far the broadest range of learners than any other sector. There are 498,000 full-time learners in the 16–19 age group receiving their education in Further Education colleges which is 93,000 more than in schools; a further 165,000 learners in the same age group study part time on FE colleges.

8. Further Education colleges, it should also be remembered, as well as catering for the 50% of 16 year old learners who are capable of progressing to an A Level programme at level three, also cater for the 50% who are not, or who choose not to study via these routes. It accommodates those who only just qualify, through their GCSE scores, for A Level study as well as those with very high level two achievements. It has also gone the furthest in encouraging those taking vocationally based programmes also to take an AS.

9. The Association would advise that it is imperative that the interests of all these learners in the Further Education sector are borne in mind; that the new approach becomes more inclusive in providing a measure of access to level three study—and thence to HE—that was not available to them before. These learners will be critical in contributing to this government's targets at levels three and for HE participation.

10. The Association wants all young people to be served by a curriculum that is based on the development of relevant skills and attributes that will equip them for active engagement in the workforce and the community; that fosters lifelong learning; and that is flexible enough to continue to meet their needs as they re-skill and develop throughout their working lives.

#### *The structure and design of A Levels, including the weighting given to AS and A2*

11. The Association would therefore not support any measure that limited the current flexibility and choice in the curriculum at level three. It would be concerned if the first moves towards greater modularity were lost, for example if the suggestion that a reduction in units or changes to examinations specifications should predicate a return to a linear mode of curriculum delivery. This would be a retrograde step.

12. On balance the Association would counsel as little change as possible to the structure of the qualifications. It would, however suggest that the de-coupling of the AS qualification from A2 deserves serious consideration, to create two distinct qualifications comprising three units of learning. However this development could not be implemented in isolation—a similar arrangement to create three unit qualifications



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would need to be considered for vocational A Levels and for BTEC Nationals in order to maintain the long-sought parity between the qualifications. Many sector colleges are moving away from AVCEs in favour of the new BTEC National qualifications because of the way AVCEs are assessed. It is therefore important that this qualification is also similarly adjusted.

13. One solution to address this which would maintain one of AoC's fundamental principles for curriculum development—that is, to ensure increased flexibility and equivalence in the advanced level—would be to consider setting papers in AVCEs at two levels, one equivalent to the standard expected in year one of level three study, and one at that required at the end of year two. This would maintain the freedom to deliver the units in a variety of ways over two years, maintaining the desired flexibility.

14. We recommend that energies are similarly concentrated on addressing the vexed issues of standards of the awards, and the disparity in difficulty between the subjects. As we reported to the QCA review of Mathematics criteria, no learners will be persuaded to take a qualification that is perceived by learners to be more difficult than others, when their primary objective is to maximise their UCAS score.

15. We agree with others that the new qualifications were implemented too quickly—and indeed advised a more measured introduction at the time. The Association has warned QCA and the department on countless occasions that rushed implementation, before practitioners in schools and colleges have been provided with learning materials and exemplar models by which they can ensure they understand the standard required, can only bring a new qualification into immediate disrepute. This, unfortunately, has been the fate of AVCEs.

16. The precise duties of awarding bodies to ensure that institutions are provided with this information needs to be clarified and strengthened. Any new qualification, and any alterations to existing qualifications should include a mandatory lead in time, before they become operational, and staged according to the level of change incorporated. We are pleased, for example, to note that the new Modern Apprenticeship frameworks are adopting this principle, having lobbied for this feature in the implementation groups.

*The relationship between the timing of A2 assessment and results and the applications and admissions process for HE*

17. It must first be reiterated that the period of assessment and examination takes up far too great a proportion of the academic year. Teachers must be trusted to apply the same level of expertise and professionalism to internal assessment as these same individuals apply to their marking contracts with the awarding bodies. Additionally, there is far too great a reliance on paper tests and written examinations at the expense of methods that measure the acquisition of the skills young people need for employability.

18. Dates for examinations are set to suit the convenience and requirements of the awarding bodies, and not the young people—and the many adult learners—who sit AS and A2 examinations. With one third of the academic year now devoted to examinations, the richness of the teaching and learning experience has been eroded.

19. Some radical thinking needs to happen, to ensure that young people are provided with the teaching they deserve, rather than fitting their learning around the bureaucratic needs of awarding bodies and admissions tutors.

20. Things need to change to address some unintended consequences of the freestanding AS levels. The Association is picking up some evidence that universities are now prepared to make offers to students based on AS results alone; this is undermining the second year of study and the currency of the A2 qualification.

21. There is a strong case to suggest that the time is now right for university application to be on the strength of actual, rather than predicted achievement. A move of all university terms beginning, as the OU and continental HE institutions already do, in January rather than in September each year, would facilitate this. (This would also, incidentally, facilitate the enrolling of international learners to UK universities.)

22. A recent AoC survey of its members (Curriculum 2000 Survey, 2001) showed overwhelming support for the summer examination window to be moved back in the academic year, rather than forwards, so that the peak of the examination period was at the end of June and the beginning of July.

23. Were a January start in HE institutions ever to be achieved (and AoC does not underestimate the cultural shift required of HE in order to contemplate such a radical departure), then awarding bodies might find the recruitment of examiners to be alleviated and the UCAS/admissions process simplified and transparent.

*The number and variety of A level subjects and options*

24. If AVCEs are considered to have parity with A Levels, then the time has come to remove any distinction in the title of the qualifications. However, this does not mean that all level three qualifications should be examined in the same way. This is one of the major criticisms the Association has of the current qualifications (including Key Skills)—the ideology is right, but in many cases, the examination is wrong.

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25. Far more creative and relevant means of assessment need to be devised—whilst maintaining standards and rigour—to ensure learners' skills—both practical and theoretical—are appropriately measured. This does not necessarily mean a written examination.

26. The Association believes that alternative assessment measures have already been developed and applied. What may have been lacking in the past, however, is a sufficiently robust verification system, and, yet again, insufficient preparation of practitioners to establish the expected standards prior to implementation.

27. Addressing the number of qualifications on offer, Further Education colleges are well equipped to cope with the range of subjects offered (though it should be pointed out that the disadvantageous funding of the FE sector is causing real difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff—many of whom are migrating to the schools). It is aware that institutions with a small sixth form may hold the view that the curriculum offer is too large, based on the grounds that they do not have the capability to deliver it, and that their cohort of learners is too small to form viable groups.

28. We would strenuously resist any reduction in choice, based on the view of institutions representing the interests of only a small number of learners. The mechanisms and the encouragement now exist to form partnerships with institutions such as FE colleges, so that the broader curriculum and minority subjects might be available to all learners, whether in a small school sixth form or large college.

#### *Institutional architecture*

29. As AoC pointed out in the QCA quinquennial review, the relationship and tensions between the remits and responsibilities of QCA, the awarding bodies and the DfES can be, from AoC's perspective, problematical. Each is subject to the demands of the others, and from the user's perspective, can lead to difficulties in determining where decisions have been made, or policies devised, and where responsibility rests. Given its position as guardian of standards, it is clear to the Association that QCA needs to be able to provide ministers with clear messages and advice—that by necessity may sometimes be at variance with ministerial aspirations.

30. Whilst not expressing a preference for QCA's accountability, AoC's advice is that the organisation must be seen to operate independently, if it is to discharge its function effectively.

31. We would advise that one approach that would facilitate greater transparency would be the publication of advice from QCA at the point at which it is given to ministers.

32. We also recommend a clarification of QCA's remit. It currently has the role of being both a guardian of standards and a developer of the curriculum. We have stated in our response to the quinquennial review that this is not an appropriate mixture of roles. QCA should cease to be an awarding body but should maintain a proper regulatory function.

33. The Association believes it would be helpful if it and other associations were consulted in the process of setting parameters and producing guidelines relating to curriculum development. It can call on a wealth of experience through its close contact with its members and other providers with whom it works.

34. As a guardian of standards, the relationship between QCA and the awarding bodies needs clarification. More needs to be done to ensure consistency of approach in the administering and marking of examinations and to ensure that a proactive approach is adopted early in any case where the awarding body wishes to implement a significant shift in grade boundaries. We recommend a named person at QCA becomes responsible for checking and approving such a change, wherever an awarding body wishes to implement one.

35. Whilst the Association has already developed good working links with QCA, we would advocate a much more clearly defined channel of communication between QCA and organisations such as our own.

36. AoC, for example, predicted very early in the development of Curriculum 2000 the issues that needed to be addressed, and provided evidence of the concerns of the sector drawing on feedback from principals and the AoC surveys. This is an independent resource, which could be usefully incorporated into QCA's intelligence gathering, to inform its monitoring role.

37. It is a concern to our organisation that QCA still appears to be largely school-centric, despite the statistical evidence we have provided above that the majority of learners in this age range receive their education in colleges. Improved communications with AoC might go some way to address this anomaly.

#### *The organisation of, and the relationship between, the awarding bodies*

38. As alluded to above, it is the Association's view that some of the criticisms levelled at awarding bodies could have been addressed or alleviated earlier, had more open communications been established earlier. The Association is pleased to report on a significant improvement in its communications with the awarding bodies, through regular meetings and frequent communications, which has allowed it to support the significant improvements the boards are making, with many of AoC's suggestions beginning to be adopted.

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39. In support of this dialogue, the Association has been able to draw on the two major Curriculum 2000 surveys it has undertaken, and the three monitoring surveys relating to examinations it has conducted since the start of Curriculum 2000, all of which have provided authoritative and independent data to support the awarding bodies' work.

40. AoC has also been working closely with Edexcel as they seek to support the professional development of examination officers through the introduction of a new qualification.

41. Although the justifiable frustration of principals in the FE sector last year manifested itself in the call on the part of some for a radical overhaul of awarding bodies—for example by creating just one body—nevertheless the Association feels that the competition and different character of the awarding bodies, each serving different constituents of users, is, on the whole, good for learners provides more choice, specifications and models, which are more likely to meet the needs of all.

42. We have observed that the competitive position the awarding bodies find themselves in can lead to greater creativity in devising new qualifications to meet the needs of all learners, at a point when rationalisation of existing qualifications might have left some learners very poorly served.

#### *The process for setting, marking and grading of A-Levels*

43. The A-Level qualification bears the burden of both trying to provide the ranking of students at the same time as it demonstrates their level of attainment. Decisions need to be taken at the highest level to determine what it is we are measuring and the purpose of level three qualifications.

44. The unitised approach to assessment has inevitably thrown into sharper relief the issues associated with overall grades determination, given that a certain inexactitude is necessarily built in to the assessment of each unit, an inexactitude compounded as marks are aggregated to achieve a final mark. The process by which grades are then determined can further compound the issue and resulted in confusion in the minds of the press and public this year.

45. The Association would recommend therefore that the statistical method by which results are determined is reviewed, to see how well it serves both those learners on the “cusp” of one grade and another (where the compounding of the inexactitudes might count unfairly against them) and those learners in the majority one year, that might have a different profile from the achievement of the majority the year before.

46. In term of standards, the Association would advocate a standard for AS set appropriately for those at the end of one year's study, and that the A2 standard should be equivalent to that expected under the legacy A Levels.

#### *Promoting public and professional understanding of the A-Level system*

47. We take issue with the narrowness of focus of this question, which confines itself to the perception of A-Levels. It is only when the whole curriculum—critically AVCEs, BTEC Nationals and other vocational qualifications at level three are as well understood by the public and employers as A-Levels, that progress will be made in opening progression routes to a wider cohort of learners.

48. To talk about the promotion of A-Levels alone is divisive, and does not give the widening cohort of learners (who tend to choose to learn in FE colleges and who tend to be attracted to work related programmes) the credit they deserve. This is of particular concern to the Association when related to the perceptions of employers and HE who desperately need to understand the content, skills acquisition and level of all qualifications.

49. Whilst it is of course vital to restore any credibility in an examination where it has been lost (and in our view the case for AVCEs in this regard is far more pressing), we see this as a short-term imperative.

50. Much more critical long term is to establish once and for all the currency and relevance of qualifications to Higher Education admissions tutors and employers. There may now need to be a consideration as to whether a voluntarist approach is working, or whether qualifications with proven currency automatically provide progression for those who want it.

51. The Association suggests therefore that serious consideration should be given as to whether an entitlement should exist to progress to degree level study, including Foundation degrees, where a certain level of qualifications, or in future an overarching diploma, has been achieved.

52. The Association holds the view that the purpose of qualifications in general is being distorted in the minds of the public—particularly parents—because they are being used for purposes other than the promotion of the interests of young people by preparing them for future employment or further training.

53. Instead, results are being employed as a means by which institutional performance is being assessed. We refer to league tables. We believe that the crude way in which examination results are being used as a so-called quality measure does nothing to celebrate the achievement of the individual (to achieve a D at A-Level

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might represent outstanding performance in the case of a learner excluded from school, for example). This form of reporting is a particularly problematical for inclusive FE colleges, whose remit is to remedy the underachievement of learners in compulsory schooling and provide a suitable learning programme for those with the whole range of learning abilities, prior achievement and aspirations.

*The use of information and communication technology in the A-Level assessment and awarding process*

54. The Association would advocate that thorough research is needed before embarking on the extensive use of on-line assessment. We identify some of the issues to be explored in the following paragraphs.

55. We accept that there should be a move towards to use of IT to support assessment, but would wish to point up the potential limitations of this medium as being capable of measuring skills. The screen should not replace the pen and paper as a means by which learners are examined—this only reinforces the limitations of the written examination.

56. The Association has long lobbied for the relevance of a written examination to be investigated; this investigation in our view should precede any development of screen-based assessment.

57. The technology also may set up barriers for the inclusive cohort of learners that the Association champions. Even if the use of computers is confined to the more “paper-based” subjects, traditionally examined in written examinations, nevertheless this may prove to be discriminatory.

58. It could favour, for example, those learners whose parents have provided them with a computer at home and who are comfortable with the technology. As such, it again favours the middle classes. It is likely that girls may do less well than they do now, and it may provide insurmountable problems for the less able, less co-ordinated learner.

59. The Association would advise that government should guard against any development that could undermine the achievement of the “first generation” of 16–19 year olds who have stayed in education for the first time in their families’ history. This is a fragile and vulnerable cohort of learners that FE has worked hard to engage and inspire. These learners are likely, however, to withdraw wherever the hurdles they are asked to face are too large. Many do not yet have confidence in, or competence with, Information Technology at present.

60. However, the Association is clear of the benefits of the use of IT as a management device. The sector, in its efforts to raise standards and improve retention and achievement has led the education sector in using software to track, register and monitor students’ progress.

61. Similarly the electronic registration of candidates for examinations has made the process more effective and efficient.

62. The Association believes the time is now right, and the technology available, to further streamline the system and reduce the bureaucracy for institutions by introducing a single standard registration form, by which all candidates could be registered at a central “clearing house”. Awarding bodies could then convert the standard information supplied to suit their own format and processes. We would also suggest a similar process used for the reporting of results.

CONCLUSION

63. To summarise, the main recommendations from the Association are:—

- any remedial action, taken to address issues relating predominantly to assessment and the definition of standards, should not have a negative impact on the very positive attributes the new curriculum offers learners—namely greater flexibility, greater feedback and greater choice.
- for developments and improvements to be effective at level three, the whole of that provision, and not just AS and A-Levels, needs to be taken into account.
- there are far more critical issues to be addressed relating to AVCEs than A-Levels
- the sector is keen that those principles that underpin the curriculum reform will not be diluted or lost in the outcomes of the inquiry, particularly the unitised approach.
- it is imperative that the interests of all learners in the Further Education sector are borne in mind; that the new approach becomes more inclusive in providing a measure of access to level three study.
- the Association wants all young people to be served by a curriculum that is based on the development of relevant skills and attributes that will equip them for active engagement in the workforce and the community; that fosters lifelong learning; and that is flexible enough to continue to meet their needs as they re-skill and develop throughout their working lives.
- the Association would therefore not support any measure that limited the current flexibility and choice in the curriculum at level three.

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- de-coupling of the AS qualification from A2 deserves serious consideration, to create two distinct qualifications comprising three units of learning.
- one solution would be to consider setting papers in AVCEs at two levels, one equivalent to the standard expected in year one of level three study, and one at that required at the end of year two.
- energies need to be concentrated on addressing the vexed issues of standards of the awards, and the disparity in difficulty between the subjects.
- qualifications should not be introduced, before practitioners in schools and colleges have been provided with learning materials and exemplar models by which they can ensure they understand the standard required.
- the precise duties of awarding bodies to ensure that institutions are provided with this information needs to be clarified and strengthened.
- the period of assessment and examination takes up far too great a proportion of the academic year.
- one third of the academic year now devoted to examinations, the richness of the teaching and learning experience has been eroded.
- universities are now prepared to make offers to students based on AS results alone; this is undermining the second year of study and the currency of the A2 qualification.
- that the time is now right for university application to be on the strength of actual, rather than predicted achievement.
- a move of all university terms beginning, as the OU and continental HE institutions already do, in January rather than in September each year, would facilitate this.
- there is overwhelming support for the summer examination window to be moved back in the academic year.
- were a January start in HE institutions ever to be achieved then awarding bodies might find the recruitment of examiners to be alleviated and the UCAS/admissions process simplified and transparent.
- the time has come to remove any distinction in the title of the qualifications, but this does not mean that all level three qualifications should be examined in the same way
- far more creative and relevant means of assessment need to be devised—whilst maintaining standards and rigour- to ensure learners' skills—both practical and theoretical are appropriately measured.
- Further Education colleges are well equipped to cope with the range of subjects offered. We would strenuously resist any reduction in choice, based on the view of institutions representing the interests of only a small number of learners.
- QCA needs to be able to provide ministers with clear messages and advice that by necessity may sometimes be at variance with ministerial aspirations.
- one approach that would facilitate greater transparency would be the publication of advice from QCA at the point at which it is given to ministers.
- it would be helpful if it and other associations were consulted in the process of setting parameters and producing guidelines relating to curriculum development.
- a named person at QCA becomes responsible for checking and approving such a change, wherever an awarding body wishes to implement one.
- we would advocate a much more clearly defined channel of communication between QCA and organisations such as our own.
- it is a concern to our organisation that QCA still appears to be largely school centric. Improved communications with AoC might go some way to address this anomaly.
- the Association feels that the competition and different character of the awarding bodies, each serving different constituents of users, is, on the whole, good for learners. It provides more choice, specifications and models, which are more likely to meet the needs of all.
- the A Level qualification bears the burden of both trying to provide the ranking of students at the same time as it demonstrates their level of attainment. Decisions need to be taken at the highest level to determine what it is we are measuring and the purpose of level three qualifications.
- the Association would recommend therefore that the statistical method by which results are determined is reviewed
- in term of standards, the Association would advocate a standard for AS set appropriately for those at the end of one year's study, and that the A2 standard should be equivalent to that expected under the legacy A Levels.

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- it is only when the whole curriculum—critically AVCEs, BTEC Nationals and other vocational qualifications at level three are as well understood by the public and employers as A-Levels, that progress will be made in opening progression routes to a wider cohort of learners.
- to talk about the promotion of A-Levels alone is divisive, and does not give the widening cohort of learners the credit they deserve.
- much more critical long term is to establish once and for all the currency and relevance of qualifications to Higher Education admissions tutors and employers.
- serious consideration should be given as to whether an entitlement should exist to progress to degree level study,
- the purpose of qualifications in general is being distorted in the minds of the public—particularly parents—because they are being used for purposes other than the promotion of the interests of young people by preparing them for future employment or further training.
- results are being employed as a means by which institutional performance is being assessed. We refer to league tables.
- the Association would advocate that thorough research is need before embarking on the extensive use of on-line assessment.
- the Association is clear of the benefits of the use of IT as a management device.
- the time is now right, and the technology available, to further streamline the system and reduce the bureaucracy for institutions by introducing a single standard registration form, by which all candidates could be registered at a central “clearing house”.

October 2002

#### Examination of Witnesses

MR NEIL HOPKINS, Principal, Peter Symonds College (nominated by the Association of Colleges), MR EDWARD GOULD, Master, Marlborough College (nominated by Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference) and MR TONY NEAL, Headmaster, De Aston School (nominated by Secondary Heads Association), examined.

#### Chairman

268. Can I welcome Neil Hopkins, the Principal of Peter Symonds College, who in a sense is representing the Association of Colleges this morning, Edward Gould, who is the Master of Marlborough College from the Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference, and Tony Neal who is Headmaster of De Aston School who in a sense is here because of his links with the Secondary Heads Association. We are very grateful that you could take the time to come to the Committee. We want to make this a very positive session, we do not want to trawl over where the blood was left on the carpet because we believe that the examination system and its credibility is very important to the education sector in this country. Part of what we will do today is to clear the air but also to look forward to how we get things right and learn the lessons from the recent past. Can I open by not asking you to make an opening statement in the terms of a broad opening statement but I am going to start with Neil Hopkins on the left and move across. What do you think went wrong this summer? Forensically what went wrong?

(*Mr Hopkins*) If I may, Chairman, I would just like to put things in perspective slightly to give you some idea of the scale. As a college we have nearly 2,500 students, 2,300 studying AS and A2, so we make 27,000 entries to the three main examining boards by the time you count all the units and modules. We get something like 1,000 to 2,000 applications for re-marks each year which result in several hundred upgrades. As a result of the Tomlinson Inquiry we

had one subject where we had 200 module re-marks which resulted in 17 final upgrades. I have to say that although things went wrong, the vast majority of the experience this summer was actually right.

269. How many examination boards were you dealing with?

(*Mr Hopkins*) We use all the three main examining boards and also the Welsh board for one subject.

270. So you did not see much of a crisis this year?

(*Mr Hopkins*) My experience was that AS and A2 was introduced very quickly, too quickly frankly, and we worked very, very hard to make it work. There were some problems with it but in proportion I do not think the problems were that extreme.

271. Before this summer or as the year went on—we were coming to the first years of A2s—did you flag up your concern that it was all happening too fast?

(*Mr Hopkins*) We are in constant dialogue with the examining boards. It was a very frustrating period before September 2000 in particular, the preceding year, when we were talking to exam boards about the fact that the syllabuses and course specifications were very late at delivering, exam boards blamed QCA and we had no idea who was to blame, and materials and so on were very late in coming. There was a constant dialogue between us and the boards. One of the things about the size of my institution is when you talk to an examining board they are aware that you have got several hundred entries they are talking about, so there was this dialogue going on. In the end AS came through okay but what was frustrating was

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**[Chairman Cont]**

there was a degree of complacency over A2 across the whole country, “we have sorted it because we have got AS sorted out” and people forgot in some cases that A2 was also a new exam.

272. Can I move to Edward Gould. When your organisation got involved it looked as though you were very angry indeed as an organisation about some of the ways in which the new system had impacted on your students and your results. Can you give us your background in terms of how you saw it unfolding in the summer?

(*Mr Gould*) There was a problem in that the standard required for A2 was not defined. There was no clarification in terms of how an AS plus an A2 equalled an A-level. There was confusion in terms, therefore, of how the new A-level matched the legacy A-level. If you have an examination—I am trying to keep it as simple as possible, therefore as brief as possible for all your sakes—if you have a triangle and you have the word “standard” written at the top that has got to be defined in terms of quality of work, on the bottom left of the triangle you have the word “marks” and on the bottom right you have the word “grades”, people either reach a standard or they do not reach a standard as defined by quality of work. Children take examinations and they are given marks which are converted into grades. If no standard is defined and you do not like the final grades, bands, in terms of As, Bs, Cs, Ds, Es, all you can play with are the marks. I would suggest what happened this year was because the standard was not defined, which in terms of HMC we flagged up, and I can probably produce some letters going back to 1998. We found the marks being altered. The three boards, awarding bodies, did it in different ways after there had been a meeting between the Chairman of QCA with the three chief executives of the awarding bodies present at which it was made clear that grade inflation was not to take place. That information was given to one of the members of the HMC committee by one of the people who was present at that meeting. That was further endorsed by a scrutineer from QCA and various senior examiners. I do not wish to trawl back over what happened, to quote your earlier remark, but, to answer your question, there was a failure to set standards. There was not a pilot of A2, there was no exemplar of material and there was no way in which it was explained to anyone how AS and A2 became an A-level.

273. Tony Neal?

(*Mr Neal*) The issue here is one of standards and the setting of standards. Having set the AS level standard in relation to what the pupil ought subsequently to achieve at A level, there ought to be no need to adjust the A2 standard in any way. The A2 standard could have and probably should have equated with the old legacy A-level standard. Certainly one of the benefits of the whole system should have been that A-level would have become more accessible to students. By that I do not mean that the standard would have changed or it would have become easier, but changing the course structure should have meant that more students would be enabled to reach that standard. As it unfolded it became clear that that was going to happen and two things appear to have taken place. First of all, during the course itself there seemed to be

some attempt to change the A2 standard to move it to a standard that was higher than the old A-level standard, and we can see no justification for that, and then there was the subsequent issue of the changing of grade boundaries to try and adjust the statistical profile of the outcomes after the event. The main issue does seem to resolve itself into the definition of the standards.

274. Are you happy with the resolution of the summer’s events in the sense that we are here now, there has been time for reasonably mature reflection and things have settled down and we have seen how many papers have had to be looked at again and how many courses had to be changed? Are you happy with what happened?

(*Mr Neal*) Since between arriving here this morning and coming into this room I have had a phone call from school saying that we have just had the results of 12 papers come back to the school and upgraded, I am not entirely sure what the resolution of this year’s events yet is. There is still some mystification.

(*Mr Gould*) I would argue, if I may, Chairman, that there are still some unresolved issues, notably with OCR. I have all the time in the world for the way Mike Tomlinson has conducted his independent inquiry. Since he was given about 10 days it was inevitable that he was going to have to set certain parameters for reporting to the DfES. I think he did it absolutely admirably and I have nothing but praise for what he did but, still, inside his two parameters there are a number of unresolved issues. It does appear that OCR set their own standard with A-level minus one for AS level and A-level plus one for A2. Nowhere is that in the code of practice, nowhere is that standard defined, nowhere has that standard been relayed to schools, teachers or examiners beforehand. It all came about later and, of course, since the AS was in the bag for many children, whatever school they were at, and since some of them had the AS from the previous summer, some of them had the AS from January, they had very few papers with which they could alter the marks. Then, bearing in mind what I have said previously, you do not have the grades and so you tamper with the marks if you do not have a standard.

275. In your experience was there more of a problem with one examining board rather than another?

(*Mr Gould*) Yes. If all we were dealing with was Edexcel with what has happened, I would not be sitting here. It would be like a normal year, if I can put it that way. We are happy with Edexcel by and large. With AQA we have some difficulties across the GSA, the Girls’ Schools Association, and ourselves, and we have considerable problems still with OCR.

(*Mr Hopkins*) We have to deal with all the boards. 40% of our work is with OCR and the other 60% is split evenly between Edexcel and AQA. We have difficulties every year with all three boards and the quote I gave to my local press, if I can remind you of it again, was that we are no more dissatisfied this year than usual. These are ongoing routine remarks and I have to say that I think the problem is the quality of the marking and the quality of the examiners, nothing extraordinary this year in relation to the question of grades in particular.

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[Continued

**[Chairman Cont]**

(*Mr Neal*) The problem in a sense goes beyond that. I think the problem relates to uncertainties all round about what the standards were, uncertainties perhaps on the part of the boards, although we cannot know that for sure, but certainly uncertainties amongst teachers as to what the standards were.

**Mr Baron**

276. Can I come back to try and flush out a few points that you have raised, and that is that some of the outstanding issues need to be resolved. I take Neil Hopkins' point that we must keep this perspective.

(*Mr Gould*) I agree.

277. We are talking about a relatively small number of cases but the fact remains that from the perception point of view there is a bit of a credibility problem at the moment and this has wider implications. What are the lessons that need to be learned from this? How can we put this situation right? We have talked about standards and I would like to hear more about that, but is it simply a case of standards?

(*Mr Gould*) No. There are a number of factors involved. I will not bore you with the complete list which I think you should have seen by now. To define standards is needed and I happen to know that Ken Boston is in the throes of doing that and a draft has been produced and I am quite sure that that is eminently soluble. I think there needs to be independence to regain the level of confidence which I think your question was referring to. I think there needs to be independence at QCA from the Government, though if you asked me to give you evidence of Government interference with QCA I have no evidence for that whatsoever, which I have consistently said when I have been asked. I think that the QCA should confine itself to setting standards and then acting as the regulator of what happens with the Awarding Bodies which should themselves have a level of independence. They should be concerned with actually setting the various tests and exams through the ages. There needs to be a better balance between judgments made on quality of work versus statistics because this year I believe that statistics ruled, if I can phrase it like that and, because the standards were not there, therefore statistics took over, most notably in OCR.

278. How do we get back to ensuring quality of work versus statistics? Does it not come back also to this business about independence of the QCA from the Government? Are we living in a culture of too many targets being set and our being submerged by statistics?

(*Mr Gould*) I think there are too many targets. Trying to reduce a human being to a statistic is in the end a fairly pointless exercise. Education is certainly about more than that. I also think there is too much testing, too much assessment. I think one could look at the different ways of assessing people. It does not all need to be the external examination. I would estimate at the moment, although I have not done any figures on it, that you have probably got less than two-thirds of the two-year A-level course being spent

in learning, ie, teachers teaching. There is over a third being used in assessment of some form or other, and that seems to me not particularly helpful.

279. It is not just statistics though, is it? You have mentioned other issues as well. Do you think that is one of the key factors, the fact that we seem to be driven by statistics?

(*Mr Gould*) Yes, we have been for some time, even with the old A-levels. Teachers make judgments on course work, which is a separate issue, so they are used to making these judgments. One of the things that was highlighted this year, particularly in the course work issue, was that as teachers made judgments, these were moderated externally by people who had been trained by the boards, and the moderators may well say that those marks are increased, decreased, they are not right. At any rate, the moderators finish their job and those marks by and large are accepted by the boards as part of the final awarding process, whereas this year in a number of subjects those marks got radically altered. That kind of illustration is going to confuse teachers and reduce confidence in teachers who have been working jolly hard against a very tight timetable in terms of the pace at which these new exams came in and is unhelpful in trying to restore confidence in the teaching profession, whatever school they are in.

280. Just assume that we do not get over this hurdle of statistics and the issue of standards is not addressed properly, how do you think universities are going to adapt at present? How are they going to look for good work? Is it going to be more interview based, though that would be nigh on impossible bearing in mind the numbers? How are universities going to adapt?

(*Mr Gould*) I would have thought that alongside this there are one or two other issues that can come along and presumably Mike Tomlinson in part two may well address some of these points. The post-qualification application, PQA, I believe could well come in on the back of this because if everyone has their qualifications by the time they are applying to universities I think that would make the universities' job quite a lot simpler. It would be possible for the Government, if it was so minded,—and I accept that this would require cash—to alter, say, the university year (but you would expect me to say that) to run from January, ie, the calendar year, and then that period in the autumn when a boy or a girl has left school can be used for the university application season. I think that would help quite a bit. I also think that you could solve some of the six-term year problem at the same time because if you did that you could adjust the length of your terms during the year to get back to a pattern whereby your first term in the academic year was not so long and overloaded. There are a number of issues in there which could come out which might be beneficial to the total education system.

**Ms Munn**

281. I want to explore briefly the AS/A2 examination itself. Tony Neal said that this shift should have made achieving the A-level standard more accessible, and certainly the Principal of



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[Continued

**[Ms Munn Cont]**

Sheffield College, in updating me on general issues, said that his experience was that it had been a very positive change for the students there and that more students were achieving it. Do you therefore support the change from the A-level in spite of all the problems that there have been in implementation to an AS/A2 level and, if so, why?

(*Mr Hopkins*) Very much so. Curriculum 2000 is a good thing. It was introduced too quickly and we should have had some piloting. There were confusions. There still are some confusions but it is settling down now. If you like, the victims I suppose of the pilot year were this year's students but the pilot in a sense has been run now and if I were to send any message to this Committee please do not throw out the baby with the bath water. We do not want too many changes. We want to settle down and make some sense of this scheme. There have been some tremendous benefits. It has given accessibility via the AS to people who would not have got to an advanced level before. It needs some fine-tuning, yes, but it also needs a lot of attention paid to the AVCE, the advanced vocational certificate of education which I think has been put to one side by the Curriculum 2000; we have had too much weight put on to the A-level debate. As far as the overall pattern is concerned for Curriculum 2000 it is beginning to work. Let us not change it.

(*Mr Neal*) I certainly agree in terms of supporting the principles of the change and that the system of AS and A2 is better for students and better for everyone than the old system, but I think it is more than fine-tuning because clarity on standards is absolutely at the heart of putting this right. We still do not have that clarity and there is an urgent need for that to be defined because teachers are still in the dark about where the A2 standard is going to be for this coming year.

(*Mr Gould*) I also support Curriculum 2000. I think it would be helpful if the universities would make their views clear on the breadth because as long as they keep doing everything on three A-levels it is a disincentive in some places for breadth to come in, which is perfectly possible with the AS level. Criticisms like that are purely related to assessment. They are not related to Curriculum 2000 which we welcome. I think it does provide a range of opportunities for young people and again I agree: I do not think it should be shaken up and rattled. I think the assessment process needs to be correct and then we are off.

282. So the assertion that we have heard sometimes that AS is a failure, it is a nightmare and we should move away, is not supported?

(*Mr Gould*) I would totally disagree with the idea that AS should go.

283. Given that there is a general acceptance, certainly among the people we have got here and hopefully you are representative of the kind of institutions that you come from, and given that the idea was that we should be making it more possible for more young people to achieve these standards, were you so surprised then that there was a bit of an outcry that more students were achieving?

(*Mr Hopkins*) This is an annual problem, is it not, this debate over standards dropping and so forth? I would like to draw the analogy of the four-minute

mile. When Roger Bannister ran a four-minute mile it was a wonderful achievement, the best in the world. Now it is almost commonplace but people don't keep going out and measuring the mile to see if it has got shorter, which in effect is what is happening to A-levels. We have got better at teaching, I have to say, and people learn how to teach well. Students now work a lot harder than we used to and they are achieving better. It does not mean that they are the best in the world, the best four-minute milers.

(*Mr Gould*) I absolutely agree with that. This year I think there should have been a huge celebration of more children getting more success because they had reached the standard and, although the standard was not defined, even if they had used the standard that was there before, I still think that there would have been a large number of people clearing the hurdle, running inside the four minutes or climbing Everest, which would be my analogy, and it should have been a huge success story which everyone should have been pleased about.

(*Mr Neal*) I am getting tired sitting here and thinking about four-minute miles. There is an issue also of public expectations, is there not? I think that we could sensibly have expected more students to achieve better with the new course structures and perhaps thought should have been given earlier to the way the public might react to that because it does appear that concern about public expectations has been part of the problem.

(*Mr Gould*) To give you one illustration, with history, with OCR it was clear once the Awarding Committee had done its stuff with the standards as they perceived them, ie, quality of work standards, not statistical standards, that there was going to be a 99% pass rate. This caused a panic and I have the documentary evidence for that.

**Jonathan Shaw**

284. In order to continue to do well, the three-minute mile or climb Everest, it requires people to prepare, it requires people to be match fit. Mr Gould, I wonder if you could respond to the point made by Dr Ron McLone of OCR, of which you are critical, when he told the Committee in relation to Curriculum 2000 that "there was a demand, in some way, with Curriculum 2000, that, as an organisation, you gave commitment to Curriculum 2000. And there is a good deal of evidence, on what we have seen, that those organisations that spent time with their students, worked out how they were going to do it over the two years . . . have actually done very well", and he cited the colleges in that respect. He said that they had done well because they had planned well, they had prepared, they had got fit for their climb or their three-minute mile. How would you respond to that? Did you not prepare your students in the way that Mr Hopkins did?

(*Mr Gould*) Certainly. I would answer yes to that question. We would have accepted the results that came through if we had not seen things which had been amended clearly at a very late stage, plus the evidence we were getting through from examiners, scrutineers, awarders. After all, a large number of those are teachers too. Yes, we did go to training sessions, which is another of the allegations that have

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**[Jonathan Shaw Cont]**

been made, that we did not attend those. I do not necessarily mean where I am but schools in the organisation.

285. What made Dr McLone say that? What evidence would you be aware of?

(*Mr Gould*) I do not know what evidence he is referring to.

286. Mr Hopkins, what do you think?

(*Mr Hopkins*) Obviously I cannot comment on what happened in schools. All I can tell you is that we worked very hard out there, training every day, without even seeing the track if you like, to take the analogy beyond its useful life. We did a huge amount of training. We kept in constant dialogue with the boards. One of the advantages of Hampshire is that we have 10 large sixth-form colleges and we got together and we put on our own training, we encouraged our staff to become examiners. Every one of those colleges had an examiner in some subjects somewhere and we got together and trained each other.

287. This is a triumph for the collective spirit of further education colleges?

(*Mr Hopkins*) You will not be surprised to hear that I am quite keen on the idea of sixth form colleges as being a successful idea..

(*Mr Neal*) All the training took place and all the teachers were involved in that. The teachers moved heaven and earth to make the system work, but throughout that period the contradictory messages were coming back about standards. There was a lack of exemplar material, so it actually was quite difficult for teachers to have a clear understanding of what the standards were that were being aimed for, of what the assessments were going to look like. That was a genuine difficulty throughout AS and A2.

288. But what about the colleges?

(*Mr Neal*) For everyone.

(*Mr Hopkins*) I have to say that there was a shortage of exemplar material; it is absolutely true.

289. But you managed it.

(*Mr Hopkins*) We managed.

Why did not the others?

(*Mr Hopkins*) Because I suppose we trained extremely hard, if you like. We are big enough. We got together, we worked together and collaborated. We made sure that we had examiners in the boards from each of the colleges and we found things out. It was not spoon fed to us, I have to say.

#### Chairman

291. Apart from Neil Hopkins with all his training, are you not in a sense blaming everyone else but yourselves? Are you saying you were match fit and all the rest but when things go wrong we all know that if you change a major examination it is going to be painful and there is going to be disruption. As I say, the Committee have been in New Zealand and I am sure, whether the Committee went to Tanzania or any other country where they have had a major change in the examination system, we would see those difficulties. I cannot think of any system where you do not have a certain amount of disruption, and everyone has to work together in order to get through

that transition. Dr McLone in a sense was saying that part of the blame really rests with those of you who run the schools, your organisations. Neil Hopkins is saying that he is not guilty because it is all right as far as he is concerned, he is very happy. Mr Gould and Mr Neal are saying, "We were totally fit for this and ready, so it must be someone else's fault"? In terms of blame whose fault was it mainly?

(*Mr Gould*) I personally would say that I do not go in for the blame culture. I have not been for the blame culture since I first articulated the concerns we have. I have concerns with the examining bodies. I fully accept that when you bring in a new system there are likely to be growing pains with it. I am happy to accept that and I have no problem with that at all. The same thing happened to some extent with GCSE at first when I was certainly around and was as well ahead then as I was prepared now. But you did not have the differences that took place late in the award stage. You did not have these differences between what came out of awarding meetings and what finally emerged. That is where there needs to be some clarification.

(*Mr Neal*) Straightforwardly, not seeking to blame anyone, but very concerned that things that went wrong last year do not go wrong again for the benefit of present and future students. It is as simple as that.

#### Jeff Ennis

292. How much has student confidence in the new exam system been dented in the light of this year's events?

(*Mr Neal*) We are trying to reassure students because it is important that their confidence is kept as high as possible. There are certainly concerns clearly expressed both from students and from parents, not only at what has happened but where they stand in relation to the following year and a very high priority needs to be the reassurance of students in particular but also of parents.

(*Mr Gould*) I quite agree with that. It is dreadful, and I believe and trust and hope that the report coming out of the Tomlinson Inquiry Stage 2 will do a great deal overtly to restore confidence in what is going to happen from January onwards.

(*Mr Hopkins*) I agree with all that. The only thing I would have a slight disagreement with is that I think the parents' confidence has been knocked more than the students'. We have managed to reassure the students. It is the public and the parents and what they read in the press that has knocked their confidence.

293. Going on from a point that Mr Gould made in his earlier evidence, has teacher confidence been dented more than student confidence in the light of events this year?

(*Mr Gould*) I would say there is an element of confusion in some areas, not all. I think that is there and I hope there will be some clarification that will become obvious to help people through and I know that all the boards are aiming to have more training sessions and hopefully that will be constructive and not turn into apathy.

(*Mr Hopkins*) I am not sure it has got worse this year. We already have some degree of lack of confidence in the exam boards. I am no friend of the

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**[Jeff Ennis Cont]**

exam boards. I do not want you to think it is all sweetness and light. You will find the three chief executives all know my name; they do not necessarily like me. I have had quite a lot of correspondence with them. We have difficulties with the exam boards. As I say, I do not think it is an extraordinary thing this year. It is to do with the quality of marking and the quality of their own procedures, their own quality assurance procedures.

(*Mr Neal*) Teachers are walking a fine line between their own uncertainties and trying not to communicate those uncertainties to students.

#### Valerie Davey

294. It would appear that you use all three boards, all of you. How do you decide which board to use?

(*Mr Hopkins*) We tend to allow the head of department to make their own choice or at least to make their own proposal and bring it to senior management as to the basis of that choice. It not only relates to the content of the syllabus or specification but perhaps the assessment method and what suits the department style of teaching.

295. Edward Gould, you seem to be flying the flag for Edexcel. I am not sure that last year many people would have flown the flag for Edexcel. What has changed?

(*Mr Gould*) Edexcel seem to have got their house in order over the last year. There is some evidence to support that.

296. Would that influence your staff as to which exam they choose in future?

(*Mr Gould*) No. I think which board we would use in any particular subject is exactly based on the answer from my right.

**Valerie Davey:** Are they the same reasons that your staff are using them or is it that they prefer a particular syllabus as opposed to a syllabus being more refined or more adaptable or more sophisticated?

**Chairman:** Or easier?

#### Valerie Davey

297. Or easier, indeed.

(*Mr Hopkins*) I do not think it is a matter of easier. I think it tends to be what the Department gets comfortable with, to be honest. I have had frustrations with my English department because we have had major problems with AQA English Literature over the last two years with over 100 upgrades each year and re-marks which puts our Tomlinson problems in the pale, but they will not move away from AQA because they like the specification, they like the way they choose the books, they like the way it is assessed. The fact that it is not assessed properly does not seem to worry them.

298. In other words it is the convenience of the teachers rather than the betterment of the students?

(*Mr Hopkins*) I think "convenience" is slightly the wrong word. It is that they have genuine belief that that is the right specification for them.

(*Mr Neal*) There is a strange antithesis there, is there not, between the convenience of the teachers and what is good for the students and I am not sure

that that is an antithesis. Very often the two things go together because the teachers are working with and alongside the students. The reasons for choosing a particular syllabus and a particular board I would go along with exactly and that issue is not a new issue this year.

299. Are you happy with there being three or would you prefer for there to be more or indeed only one?

(*Mr Hopkins*) The idea of some competition is good because one of the problems for us is that there is not a clear complaints procedure any more. There are various systems and we have mentioned QCA a number of times. I am not sure that the average teacher is clear about its role as a regulatory body. If we have difficulties with exam boards, frankly the one big stick we have is that we will take our business somewhere else, so having some competition is a good thing. About three boards makes sense to me. I do not think the number is particularly critical.

(*Mr Gould*) I hope the number of boards will remain the same and the whole thing will settle down and we will all go with it.

300. You mentioned the need occasionally to complain and the fact that in some ways one board rather than another gets it right. Should there not be general standards of how, as I think you were alluding to earlier, grading is dealt with or examining is done which you know are qualitative across the board and they do not vary in the different examining boards and the QCA you are indicating should have the power to regulate in those areas?

(*Mr Hopkins*) That is my view. What goes on in those boards is largely a closed box as far as we are concerned. I read the evidence from last week and I discovered things about the way the boards work and that was the first time I had found that out.

301. And they differ.

(*Mr Hopkins*) They differ in their methods. I do think there is a role for QCA being a regulatory body and make sure there is equivalence between the boards.

(*Mr Neal*) Parity of standard, which is desirable, is not the same as parity of results, statistics. They are different.

(*Mr Gould*) Certainly we would look for more co-ordination of the procedures of the boards, particularly in terms of awarding, and we would say that routinely it should be the case that representatives of other boards should be present at the awarding meetings of a particular board in order to help to achieve that parity.

**Chairman:** One of your answers excited either indigestion or a "harrumph" from one of my members.

#### Jonathan Shaw

302. Mr Hopkins, you said that you have got issues with AQA and that is an ongoing issue within your English department, but you do not change examination boards. You are a principal and you are saying that your English department do not wish to change, despite all the difficulties in terms of the grades for the students, because the course work etc they find to their liking. Coming back to you, is this

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**[Jonathan Shaw Cont]**

collusion here, the fact that with teachers and examination boards people are not complaining, people are not taking their business elsewhere?

(Mr Hopkins) It is not collusion. I need to expand on that if I may. We have had difficulty with a particular exam, the AS in English Literature with AQA, where we had difficulty with the marking. It had been poorly marked. We have complained and they have put it right. It has happened two years on the run, which I think is unsatisfactory. I have had a dialogue with them about their quality assurance procedures and if they do what they say they will do and if they mark correctly we do not have a problem. It is a question of how long do you put up with poor quality marking.

303. We have only heard about one year this year and you have been putting up with two years.

(Mr Hopkins) Yes, exactly. Because it was put right very quickly. In fact, we got the new AS grades back in time for it not to affect the students' UCAS applications.

304. So this sort of thing goes on all the time?

(Mr Hopkins) Yes.

305. The fact that it is A-levels actually gives it more attention. Is that what you are telling us?

(Mr Hopkins) I think that is probably true, yes.

306. Going back to the evidence that we had from the examination boards last week, you say you have read the transcript. Is that going to assist you in terms of making complaints or raising issues now you know what they do or do not do?

(Mr Hopkins) I do not know if it will assist me. It made me realise how little I had known and I am from one of the biggest, if not the biggest, A-level centres, and if I knew so little about it then I suspect other institutions know very little as well and there is something to be done about looking up those procedures.

307. So you do not expect to come back here next year and say that you are still having the same problems with AQA but you are still keeping your business with them?

(Mr Hopkins) I sincerely hope not. We have had reassurances. The chief examiner put it right. They had difficulties with the examiners. I said at the start that our difficulty is with the quality of the examiners that the boards are being forced to recruit because they are short of examiners.

#### Chairman

308. It is very nice to hear that you have been reading the transcript of the deliberations of this Committee last week but Ken Boston still had some degree of fear about the future, that the problems could arise again and that of course caused us quite a lot of concern. One of the suggestions that came up last week in getting the AS/A2 levels right was almost uniform across the three examining boards, that they thought it should be 40% of the first AS year and 60% for the second. How would you react to that suggestion?

(Mr Hopkins) Frankly I do not think it matters too much as long as we know and as long as it is clear. Personally I would like the AS to be a separate examination.

309. Does it have to be an external examination board or could colleges mark it internally and assess it internally?

(Mr Hopkins) There could be more internal marking and assessment, but it does put a tremendous load on teachers. Art and Design, for example, is 100% internally marked already and then just moderated from outside. That is a tremendous burden on teachers. There is a temptation there I think for the boards to say that it is a good thing because it puts the problem somewhere else. Yes, let's have a degree of internal marking, and certainly a greater degree of trust of teachers is a good thing, but there is a compromise that needs to be struck.

310. Edward Gould, you seem to be warmer towards internal assessment.

(Mr Gould) I would go for some internal assessment, yes, with moderation. I think there is a difference between a candidate who may be wishing to go on to take a full A-level, and a candidate who is just taking AS-level. And, so long as you know in the first case that they have covered the units and specifications and have not skipped anything all should be well; that is very light touch. For someone who wants to use AS-level as an exit point, for whatever reason, from that subject, I think the amount of assessment has to command credibility with employers and places of higher education of all sorts, and therefore some slightly more robust form of assessment is required for those particular candidates. Otherwise I would uncouple. As has been said, whether it is 40/60 or 50/50, as long as we know and it is clear I will leave it to the wizards above.

311. Do you go along with that, Tony?

(Mr Neal) Yes. I do not see how the difference between 40/60 and 50/50 would have made a significant difference to this year's outcomes and yes, we would go along with them because there is too much external assessment, because the whole system is buckling under the amount of external assessment, with 30 million papers flying around each year, and we can see all the time the ways in which the system is having difficulty in coping with that. A move towards internal assessment at AS level with an external assessment at A2 level we would support.

#### Mr Turner

312. Mr Neal, you said earlier that an A2 should have equated to legacy A-level. Do you think it did?

(Mr Neal) We have really no way of knowing. We did not know what the standards were during the course of the year we were teaching A2 and, to be honest, we still do not know what they are because we are still receiving amended results.

313. But clearly an A-level should equate to legacy A-level?

(Mr Neal) Yes, it should. The issue here is the AS standard. Assuming that the AS standard was right, and we have no reason to suppose that it was not, then a candidate who in the past, let us say, would have got a B at A-level, would have got a B on their

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AS modules because the aim of the AS modules was to replicate the A-level standard but allow for the fact that it was taken a year earlier and therefore the content and maturity of the candidates would be affected by that. If that candidate got a B on their AS modules, they would need then to get a B on their A2 modules to stay at the level they would have been for A-level, no need whatever therefore to change the level of A2. That could have and should have remained on a parity with the old A-level and indeed, when Curriculum 2000 was being discussed, there was never any suggestion that the A2 level was going to be raised.

314. But the theory, which I am sure some of you will be familiar with, from Dr McLone was that because the AS level is easier—

(*Mr Neal*) And that is the weasel word, is it not? AS is not easier. The standard for AS is that it should be such that a candidate in the past who had achieved grade B, let us say, at A-level a year later would achieve grade B at AS-level.

315. Yes, but, taking account of their lesser maturity, to achieve a grade B would require the same skill and effort and everything else. If you do not take account of their lesser maturity it is easier. That, I think, is Dr McLone's point.

(*Mr Neal*) The system was postulated on the notion that AS would be taken at the end of the first year and that the parity would be achieved taking account of the fact that it was taken at the end of the first year.

316. I will open this up to your colleagues in a moment if I may. If I can tell you what has come through all this to me it is that Dr McLone found it much more difficult with intellectual honesty to cope with the AS-level being "easier" without making the A2 "harder" so that they would add up to an A-level which was an equivalent standard to legacy A-level. What is your reaction to that?

(*Mr Gould*) QCA should have set the standard. It is not for the individual Awarding Body to set the standard. We need a parity of standard across the board, not a parity of results, and it is not in my view according to the code of practice of the QCA as I understand it up to the Awarding Bodies' chief executives or the accountable officers to set the standard. The standard is set by QCA and therefore I do not think—and I have nothing against him—it was Ron McLone's job to set the standard for candidates sitting OCR. It was QCA's job and they had to monitor and regulate that standard and that is where I think things must be put right in future so that there is a parity of standard across boards so that all children are confident that whatever board the head of department puts them in for they will be treated fairly, consistently, accurately and with a quality result.

(*Mr Hopkins*) I certainly agree with that idea. However, I think the difficulty is because of this notion that the AS and A2 go together to make A-level. It transpired as it developed that A2 would be harder than the old A-level to make up for AS being easier or earlier. Is that the same thing? It is actually a very difficult intellectual standard to fit in. How does one do that? The problem would be solved if AS were a separate exam with its own level at the end of

the year and those results were not then taken as part of the final A-level, and if then A2 could be at the legacy A-level standard. If they were two discrete examinations it would be far easier to understand and far easier to cope with.

317. You have both answered that in a way which implies—and correct me if I am wrong—that you agree with my broad thesis about Dr McLone's approach.

(*Mr Gould*) No, I do not agree with Dr McLone's approach.

318. No, but you agree with my thesis?

(*Mr Gould*) Sorry; that is okay.

319. But where the standard has not been set what else could the chief executives have done?

(*Mr Gould*) If, going back to your initial thesis, that you wanted consistency of standard, maintaining standards across time, bearing in mind there was no pilot, no exemplar material, no standards set, then the best thing you had in my view was the judgment of teachers who are examiners and awarders and scrutineers from right across the spectrum. Particularly in course work, where they have been doing it for years,—and there is nothing new about course work as a unit—they were able to do it this summer with moderators trained by the boards, I assume, who moderated the teachers' work and those awards, that were then turned into an AS and A2, should remain consistent. That would be at least one way of ensuring a maintenance of a standard across the two years and moving from the legacy A-level to the current A-level.

(*Mr Neal*) Could I reiterate that there should not have been a difficulty about setting the A2 standard and that standard should have been in line with the legacy A-level standard and there should certainly not have been an intellectual difficulty with that. There are always practical issues in terms of setting any standard.

**Mr Baron**

320. Could I turn to this business about standards versus statistics? Trying to look forward and not back now, we are all aware that we are moving to a target driven culture at the moment, but targets driven from the centre can distort the priorities of professionals at the coal face. How are we going to put standards in place to redress the balance? What is going to be the mechanism? How are we going to ensure uniformity?

(*Mr Hopkins*) We are all looking at each other because we do not know how to answer that question. It requires people who are able to step back and look at the standards and try and define a clear standard. It is obvious from our conversation that no-one is quite clear what even an A-level standard is, never mind AS and A2. They need to be defined and it is very difficult to do.

321. You are at the coal face. It is affecting you and others very greatly. How would you like to see the standard? I do not mind if I get three different answers but I am just intrigued.

(*Mr Neal*) Can I respond to that in this way. Perhaps the issue you are talking about, one of the issues at any rate, is the issue of clarifying the purpose

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**[Mr Baron Cont]**

of the assessment because currently the assessment is being used for two purposes which are to some extent contradictory. It is being used for its main purpose, which is and should be to assess the standard reached by the pupils. It is also being used as an accountability mechanism against the sorts of targets that you have talked about. Our answer to that would be that these assessments should serve their main purpose and the accountability mechanisms should be otherwise. Our specific proposal would be to look at the model which was set up by the Assessment Performance Unit in terms of statistically testing across the students throughout the country standards that are being achieved and uncouple that from the examination process.

**Jonathan Shaw**

322. Looking forward, Mr Gould, your organisation has said that the QCA should be fully independent from the Department. You have said it should be accountable either to Parliament or to the Privy Council but not a Select Committee in the way that Ofsted is accountable to Parliament through this Select Committee.

(*Mr Gould*) If that is the way it is then I have nothing against the Select Committee. I am not about to say that with odds of 10 to one against. It is not a good background.

323. What we are keen to do is make some recommendations in our report that we do find a better structure for QCA because there has been some criticism, and indeed there are some positive noises coming from the new chief Executive, about whether it should be independent or not. I wonder if Mr Hopkins or Mr Neal have views on that.

(*Mr Hopkins*) I think it would be helpful to us, as you say, at the coal face if we were clear what QCA's role is. It seems to me it performs different roles at different times. It is in effect an exam board on occasions with Key Stage tests; on other occasions it is a regulatory body. If we have a complaint about an exam board it is not even clear to whom we take that complaint. Does it have that role or not? Clarity of the role would be helpful and an independent regulatory body would be the role I would imagine for it.

(*Mr Neal*) We do believe that it should be independent and reporting to Parliament. We believe that its role should be setting standards and regulating assessments to those standards. We have suggested a panel of scrutineers to monitor that. QCA certainly should not be setting the tests itself is the issue there as opposed to in relation to national curriculum tests, which it does set, and the examination board should be independent of QCA.

324. That was looking forward. Just one looking back question. It goes back to the Chairman's opening remarks. At the time of Mark Tomlinson being required to begin his investigation the Secretary of State contacted the various examination boards in order to find out whether they would be sufficiently prepared to undertake any re-marking and there was criticism of the Secretary of State in

that regard. From your perspective, considering pupils, the students, the children, do you think that the Secretary of State acted appropriately?

(*Mr Gould*) As I understood it at the time, and I did not have any personal contact with her so it was all reported second-hand, I thought her question was reasonable except that we were into re-grading. Mike Tomlinson stage one was into re-grading, not into re-marking so, provided that her question was on the re-grading, which I thought it was from what I understood to be the case, then I think her question was perfectly reasonable.

(*Mr Neal*) I have no view beyond that of a layman's view in relation to that. Yes, I would agree that it seemed to be reasonable.

(*Mr Hopkins*) I have no comment to make. I do not think I know enough about it, to be honest.

**Chairman**

325. I asked you about turmoil. There always have been changes. As I said, we have just been in New Zealand where they are introducing a new examination system with parallels and some difficulties. What about the fashion and flavour for moving to a different examination system altogether? Of course what people like to call the chattering classes, and there are a lot of them in the education sector, immediately would say they want the International Baccalaureate to replace the new system of A-levels. How beguiling is that perspective for you, Mr Hopkins?

(*Mr Hopkins*) I would be very much against it. I have nothing against the International Baccalaureate as a qualification, or indeed the European Baccalaureate or the French Baccalaureate or all the other baccalaureates. However, I just do not think it is worth throwing out the baby with the bath water. We have a perfectly good system. What people sometimes forget, I think, when they talk about the Baccalaureate is that it involves more examinations and assessment than the AS and A2. If everybody in this country followed the IB who is going to mark it? The same three exam boards.

(*Mr Gould*) I am not in favour of moving headlong into the IB. I am in favour of developing an English Baccalaureate, particularly along the Ken Boston model with which we are involved, because I think it actually brings together an education process from 14-19 for all children, including apprenticeships, A-levels, the whole range, and it provides a flexibility in doing that. The A-level is fine but a lot of children in this country do not take A-level whatsoever and I am concerned that there is vocational training (which may not affect A-level students) which I believe is very important for the education of children as a whole. That whole area, which has not been looked at all this morning, I believe to be important. If you are asking me whether I would favour an English Baccalaureate in about 10 years' time, for heaven's sake do not rock the boat with where we are at the moment. Let us keep it and let us keep working towards a more uniform system which will be inclusive for all children within England.

(*Mr Neal*) It is a pity that the 14-19 Green Paper said practically nothing about assessment other than its role in the accountability process and there

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certainly are some long term issues relating to the assessment of pupils right through from 14 to 19 and beyond which need to be addressed in the longer term. In the shorter term there are many benefits that can be derived from the AS and A2 process and because of what happened last year we have not yet derived all those benefits and that is the reality.

**Mr Baron**

326. From the answers you have given one of the things that has come out is the fact that you believe there are too many targets being set and that you are being swamped by statistics. To what extent would you roll that barrier back? Do you have any ideas as to how far you would reduce targets in order to try and redress this balance?

(*Mr Gould*) We are here talking about assessment as I understand it and that is where we are. There need to be national targets and that is a matter for DfES. I think what we ought to roll back the statistical barrier which I think has advanced too far. I would be for coming up with expanded grade descriptions for grades A, C and E; grade descriptors are well known. We have this year got some exemplar material from the exams that have been taken this

summer and I believe if some work is done on those archive scripts and with the use of a grade C descriptor, which I accept would be a new thing, then it should be possible to move away from statistics to making the judgments about standards, that is, quality of work. If children jump that hurdle then we should reward and congratulate them.

(*Mr Neal*) We certainly do believe that there are too many targets, but perhaps the more fundamental questions are who are those targets for and how is the reaching of those targets measured? It is the confusion between that process and the assessment process that is causing many of our difficulties.

(*Mr Hopkins*) I am not sure that I concur that there are too many targets. They do not impinge on me as an individual institution, but there is too much assessment and anything that can be done to reduce the assessment burden is welcome. We need to spend more time teaching and less time testing.

**Chairman:** Can I thank all three of you for an excellent session. We would love to have gone on a little longer and touch on a few more subjects. We have learned a lot. It has been a very useful exchange and perhaps we should repeat it on a regular basis. Thank you very much for your attendance.

**Examination of Witness**

SIR WILLIAM STUBBS, further examined.

**Chairman**

327. Sir William, welcome back to the Committee. There has been a lot of water under the bridge since we last met in May when we had a very good session as I recall. Can I first of all not only welcome you but also say that this session is about learning and about how we make our system work better rather than worse, to learn some of the lessons from past experience and see how we move positively into the future. We do not really want to trawl over particular things of personal concern to you, and everyone here will know what I mean by that. We want to learn about how we get that relationship between the QCA and the examining boards and between the Department and those organisations on a better footing. I know from our previous session in May that you had some pretty clear ideas about that then. You will maybe have seen some of the evidence that was given to this Committee by the examining boards last week. I am not sure you were in the room when I asked my opening question to the people who have just given evidence, but what I was asking them was, in what ways can you move to learn from that past? Everyone knows that when a new exam comes in there is going to be a certain amount of transition difficulty and some might say that perhaps we have had less than we could have had, but the Chief Executive of the QCA last week was very pessimistic about having more problems in the coming year, which rather concerned the Committee. Given the events of this transition, I wonder whether you have any particular recommendations for the Committee on how we could improve the system?

(*Sir William Stubbs*) Thank you, Chairman, and thank you for that clarification, although I would just like for the record to say, as we are in a new session and a new topic under discussion, that I was Chairman of the QCA for five years. Throughout the entire period I was part-time and for four of the five years I was unpaid. I only was paid from the time I retired from my full time employment about a year ago and I was asked to increase my involvement from two days a week to four days a week by Estelle Morris and, looking back at the letter, she said she wanted me to provide strong leadership. That is where I come from in all this. What I would like to do at the beginning, and the Clerk very kindly sent me a copy of the transcript of the interviews with the Awarding Bodies and the QCA, is to say something about the A-level crisis, a term which has been used both in the Committee and further afield. It seems to me the word "crisis" in relation to A-levels has two possible meanings: either the operation of the awarding system is so significantly defective as to give good grounds for concluding that the main outcomes are invalid, or, alternatively, confidence in the validity of the system has been so diminished that there is widespread anxiety among students, parents, universities and employers. The first meaning is clearly inappropriate on the basis of the evidence that was available five weeks ago and the evidence that has been uncovered since then. The system is sound and indeed some of the evidence I heard this morning confirms that. But a national exam system as complex as the one that we now have available relies significantly on trust in the overall process, trust in the markers and examiners, trust in the integrity of

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**[Chairman Cont]**

the exam boards, and trust in the integrity and independence of the regulator. Therefore at the outset, Chairman, I have to say that in recent weeks each of these elements of trust has been significantly and quite unnecessarily weakened. Therefore the challenge for those responsible for those matters in the future will be to restore that trust, but they do so on the basis that the underlying system is sound, and that is an enormous strength. So that is where we are coming from because I think it is important when the word "crisis" is used, it is a crisis of confidence rather than anything else. At some stage, and I know you said you do not want to go into too much of the past, but one cannot understand the future without the past and I think in some of these discussions there will be something—

328. The Chairman was merely trying to be reasonably sensitive about these things.

(*Sir William Stubbs*) I know and I appreciate it.

329. Feel free to cover any subject you wish.

(*Sir William Stubbs*) At some stage I would like to talk about the maintenance of standards in A-level but not necessarily in this opening statement. All I wanted to do at the beginning was say let's conduct a discussion on the basis of terms that we understand and that is the way I understand "crisis", and I think that is the probably the way you understand it in the light of what has happened over the past few weeks.

**Chairman:** At the beginning of the summer in the early days of the so-called turmoil both you and I appeared on the same programme saying there was not a crisis and dampening down the suggestion.

(*Sir William Stubbs*) Absolutely, Chairman.

330. However, let's move on. One thing that came through from the evidence this morning was that one failing of the QCA in the minds of those people who are the consumers, in a sense—the colleges and schools—was this inability to set parity of standards across the piece. It seemed to be a pretty valid criticism that QCA did not really do that. What would you say to that criticism?

(*Sir William Stubbs*) I have got a little bit in reply, Chairman. I think the chronology starts from April 1998 when the then Minister responsible for qualifications, Baroness Blackstone, in agreeing the new system and saying this was the Government's policy, in 1998 said: "We are determined to ensure that A-level standards are safeguarded and that all students study to rigorous standards." From the outset at the time of the change continuity of A-level standards was absolutely in the Government's thinking. A year later in March 1999 a letter was sent to all schools from the department "no compromise on A-level standards". In August 1999 David Blunkett speaking as Secretary of State said, "I can assure you that there will be no reduction in A-level standards under this Government." In April 1999 a DfES official: "Ministers place the standard of the A-level examinations as the priority." There is absolutely no doubt where the Government was coming from. In May 1999, as we started to develop the intricate arrangements for the examinations, HMC wrote to the Minister responsible and said: "It would appear that the awarding bodies are contemplating various statistical treatments to ensure that the first set of A-level results for the new

system will be very similar in outcome to the current percentage gaining each grade. We would maintain there should be a small but definite increase in the numbers passing and gaining higher grades under the new system." As an aside, the outcome last year was a 4.5% increase in the pass rate and a 2.1% increase in grade As. I would put it to you that that is exactly what HMC, GSA and SHA were asking in May 1999 of the Minister. On the basis of that, in June 1999—and this seems to me absolutely significant—the QCA then published a statement on standards which was subsequently on their web site—"broadly speaking, the proportion of grades awarded in the current A-levels and those awarded to candidates completing the new A-levels will be expected to be similar. Where, however, on the basis of the quality of candidates' performance and changes in the nature of the candidature"—and as we know it did change—"a more substantial change in proportions is justified, this will be acceptable, provided the reasons for the change are fully justified and the standard of the full A-level is maintained." There was correspondence taking place at that time between HMC following an exchange with Tessa Blackstone whom I referred to and Nick Tate who was the Chief Executive of QCA, and they wrote to David Hargreaves, who had by then become the Chief Executive and this is what HMC said: "We cannot accept the lack of action over proper definition of grade boundaries for the new awards. Standards must be defined and some anchoring device must be established. Whilst it is good that the awarding bodies will provide examiners with a comprehensive package of statistical information, we would very much wish to know whether they are going as far as to establish grade boundaries. We would suggest it ought to be possible to use historic data on regression lines to ensure that the various boundaries will map on to a predicted grade boundary on a completion of A2." That is HMC. The reply they received from David Hargreaves—and this is my last statement on this chronology, Chairman—leaves absolutely no doubt on the record: "We are not clear why you suggest there has been a lack of action over a proper definition of grade boundaries in the new awards. A vast amount of work has taken place throughout the development of the new specifications, sample assessment materials and detailed statistical modelling of the new awards. The Joint Council is involved in an extensive programme of research to ensure that when the first awarding bodies meetings take place next year the examiners are provided with the most comprehensive set of statistical data that will ever have been used in our public examination system. Historic data on regression lines between GCSE and A-level are central to the work that has taken place and the mapping you describe has been going on for many months. You say that Nick Tate's statement 'the establishment of standards in any qualification is complex and the prediction of grade profiles cannot be precise' is unacceptable. No examination system which provides for an element of examiner judgment and a changing cohort would allow the precise prediction of grade profiles. This would be possible only with a completely non-reference system. You may be arguing for such an approach but that would represent a fundamental change in the way qualifications are awarded and a



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**[Chairman Cont]**

step away from equitable treatment of candidates over time.” That, Chairman, effectively ended the correspondence on standards between the heads associations and the QCA. There have been since then, I am told, and I was not involved, something between 30 and 40 technical meetings to flesh out the arrangements. So I am in no doubt from the record that there was a clear understanding of standards, recognising that we did not have past papers. Standards are not like the metre where one could in the 18th century go and hold something against it. It is not like that; it is a combination of judgments made every year against criteria, against specifications and against the evidence of previous performance. I believe it would have helped to have had a run of exemplar A2 examinations beforehand, in other words pilots. That was just not possible in the time available and, indeed, would have been very complex because to be good pilots they would probably have had to have taken place after the AS examinations and you would have had to draw on the AS experience so you would then have an interregnum. I am not sure exactly how one could have run those terribly smoothly. We did not have that. As far as the standards were concerned, recognising we did not have past papers, there was a comprehensive understanding and indeed—and this is what I find utterly baffling—the results of two of the awarding bodies, having been held up to the daylight more than once and scrutinised, have come through with flying colours in judgments that I find must be exceedingly difficult for the chief executives to make. I think they have done a splendid job and we should be congratulating them. Edexcel came from its knees. When I last saw you Edexcel was in intensive care and indeed the board of Edexcel had decided as a matter of policy that it wanted to abandon A-levels and cease to award it as an awarding body and was in the course of discussion in the spring on selling that off to a private company. Yet through the valiant efforts of officials in Edexcel and colleagues in QCA, they came through in the summer and produced an unflawed system. I have said this to the Secretary of State not once but twice that I believe, like you, there is no evidence of widespread failing. There is evidence of shortcomings in one awarding body but even there in only part of the judgments made by that awarding body. We now know that the chief executive of OCR miscalled it 16 or 18 times out of the several hundreds of judgments he had to make and he made a mistake. When I say made a mistake, when fellow professionals are called in and asked to look at it, they took a different view. I do not think there is a walk of professional life where, when a professional judgment I’ve taken, whether it be law, medicine or whatever, and held up to scrutiny by an independent second opinion that you will be guaranteed you will get them all confirmed as the view of the first opinion. In this case his judgment was found to be wanting, but it was confined to a relatively small number. What has caused the worry for not just tens of thousands but hundreds of thousands is they thought their certificates from other awarding bodies and from the unflawed part of OCR were invalid, and for that there is not a shred of evidence. I believe it is a scandal; it should never have happened. On standards therefore—and that is where we started—I am saying there was evidence

there on the QCA web site and there have been plenty of technical meetings, but there is nothing on the record over the last two years from bodies that I have seen about it, although they all recognise that this was a difficult transitional year and I think in the main they have done well.

**Chairman:** Sir William, that has been a most helpful chronology and explanation to the Committee. Now we will begin the questioning. Meg Munn?

**Ms Munn**

331. When you came to see us in May you were very confident that the quinquennial review would be a very positive one and that it would say basically that you were doing a good job. Are you satisfied with what was in the quinquennial review and the conclusions that they came to? Do you think they were fair?

(*Sir William Stubbs*) How does one say one is satisfied? If we were graded, it was beta plus or alpha minus or something like that; it was a good report. Indeed, one of the reasons last time why there was an interregnum about the chief executive, whom I hope you will find a very good colleague to work with in the future was that we wanted to wait in the making of that appointment until that quinquennial was out the road. I think it confirmed in an area where 99% accuracy is not acceptable that the QCA, in the observation of most correspondents to that inquiry, is doing a good job. What it has got, though, and I heard from the heads just 10 minutes ago and I saw in the evidence from Ken Boston, is an accretion of tasks that are not central to its purpose but were given to QCA because there was no other body in town that the government could trust to do it, and that is of course running key stage tests. They are a huge exercise, they are politically highly significant, with great involvement by DfES officials (in my view too great an involvement) and a way has to be found to deal with that and to distance it from QCA. You could give it to the awarding bodies but I think that would be unfair because it is different to their main tasks, but a way has to be found to get some kind of clear water between QCA and the key stage tests.

332. One of the recommendations in the report is that QCA should strengthen its capacity for intelligence gathering as regards standards and then adopt a more visible and authoritative public stance. I think this goes perhaps to the heart of the matter you were just discussing, where in terms of creating confidence in the examination system, in terms of trying to get past this situation every summer where we have this “Are standards dropping?” what this is suggesting is that QCA itself could play a much more important role in creating that public confidence. Do you agree with that?

(*Sir William Stubbs*) I think that is absolutely right, Chairman. There the quinquennial report was echoing the comments in the report that was published in January by the international panel that looked into A-level standards and confirmed that QCA was doing as good a job as could be expected of it but it should do more to educate people about the system. I absolutely agree with that, I think that is one of the big tasks. To some extent there was

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**[Ms Munn Cont]**

evidence of success in that because when the results came out in August and there was a significant increase in the overall pass rate as well as the grade As, I think the amount of carping that took place in the press this year, if colleagues will forgive the expression, was less than had happened in previous years. There was more of an element of celebration about it. Students had worked hard and done well, I think we need to build on that. So yes, I do agree that more work needs to be done on that, but it is a complex matter to explain.

333. One of the other recommendations is around the relationship between QCA and the examining bodies and saying that both QCA and the DfES should actually look at the issue of greater quality assurance of awarding bodies and less involvement in the details of individual qualifications. Do you think that would be a helpful way forward?

(*Sir William Stubbs*) It depends on where you see the boundary. I think if I were sitting here now in the context of QCA and it had not been involved in some of the detail of the awarding bodies you would be highly critical of QCA and say, "Look, you should be much closer to the action." I think what the Review were saying was you could validate the awarding body and give it a three-year licence and then it gets on and does its task. There may be a place for that in some respects in some qualifications, but for the high stake qualifications I think the QCA as the regulator has got to be fairly well-informed and closer to the three principal exam bodies.

**Jeff Ennis**

334. When Dr McLone, the Chief Executive of OCR, gave evidence to the Committee he said we needed to make the exam system "more transparent" and also "to bring it into the 21st century". Do you agree with that statement and how can we achieve that if you do?

(*Sir William Stubbs*) The transparency goes back to the earlier question, that we need to explain it more. This year, as a result of the crisis of the nature that I described, there has been more independent observation of the grade boundary setting by the awarding bodies. It is not done within a closed room. I think that is absolutely healthy and I think one could build on that. So to that extent, I believe that we need to do more. At the end of the day, however, one has to see that for thousands of young people and for hundreds of teachers they are having to cope with partial success. Young people have put themselves forward in a demanding situation and some have got higher grades than others and indeed, sadly, some, but not many, fail entirely. They would all like to see themselves doing better but the system is designed to have rigorous standards, and some do not meet them. So there is always going to be an element of disappointment around but, yes, I think we could do more on that. But at the end of the day judgments still have to be made because this is about personal judgments, we are not dealing with a mechanised system, and there could be mistakes there. On your question, and it came up in your meeting the first time, I think "cottage industry" was the phrase—

**Chairman**

335.—"Victorian cottage industry".

(*Sir William Stubbs*)—Victorian cottage industry! We have not got a system of computerised examination as exists in some colleges and universities in the United States, which largely comprise multiple choice questions and which are computer marked. I cannot see that the A-level system would fulfil its expectations if it went down that route. It is going to rely on individual judgments to a significant extent, but it is possible through the development of new software to see how in five years' time there could be a greater contribution from IT in the mechanics and logistics of handling the process. By the way, someone in the last meeting said all QCA was doing was behaving like Consignia. I took that as a bit of an insult because the number of first-class letters that get lost every day is quite high! You can through the use of IT scan and transmit the papers to markers quickly and indeed to selected markers on selected subjects and then bring them together and aggregate them. That needs money and indeed that was one of the reasons why Edexcel considered earlier on in the year they might have to give up A-levels. I am not sure whether this is the place to disclose it but I did speak to the Secretary of State about that and said that I thought the Department should invest significant sums of money running into 10 of millions in order to assist the awarding bodies develop computerised systems. Without that investment I think it is quite unrealistic to think that they could do it themselves.

**Jeff Ennis**

336. You mentioned in your earlier remarks that elements of the trust within the exam system have been weakened over the last few months. This is to some extent echoed in the submission from the Secondary Heads Association to the Tomlinson inquiry when in one of their recommendations they says "SHA recommends that the government should place greater trust in the professionalism of teachers and thus recommends that internal summative assessment should play a greater part in the examination system." Do you agree with that?

(*Sir William Stubbs*) I am not sure there is quite a yes or no to that. Yes, in parts. SHA has for some time been proposing the idea that teachers should be eligible to become certificated examiners or markers, and I support that, I think that would be a very sensible development. In my first meeting with David Miliband when he became the Minister responsible for qualification and examinations I said to him I did not think this system could be sustained over the next five years without increasing the risk of significant failure, by that I meant not just A-levels, I meant GCSEs, key stage tests, advanced extension awards and the whole gamut. By the way, I heard the bit about ISB and that would require more markers there. That is just another world if we went down there. So I think a way has to be found to recognise the professionalism of teachers and give them a greater place. In Australia they find it possible to do that and have an external check on the teacher's judgments, so there is not too much of a halo effect in the school about the individual students. If we are

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**[Jeff Ennis Cont]**

going to retain that same profile of examinations, Chairman, we will have to do something about that, so to that extent I agree with what is being said.

337. One final question, in your earlier remarks you mentioned that there has only been one examination board, the OCR, that has had major problems with the transition to the new system. How confident are you that they will overcome these problems next year?

(*Sir William Stubbs*) Just for the record, I said five weeks ago there was only one awarding body with a problem. You have found that that is the case. In other words, it is not just me saying it now, the evidence has said it. It is only in OCR and only in a minority of subjects. Do I think next year we are going to have the same problems in the system? No, I do not take quite such a pessimistic view at all. I think we will now have, as HMC was saying this morning, real exam papers and real scripts there to guide the teachers, guide the awarding bodies, guide the markers and so forth. There is a greater understanding about what is expected and some of the uncertainties surrounding course work, which by the way Chairman, was the big crisis five weeks ago. Where it is now I ask you. It is not there, although further work needs to be done involving the people sitting behind me on a greater understanding of what is expected about course work. I think they can do that and I think they will be engaged in discussions with QCA about how to bring that about. So the only problem facing us not so much in January but certainly in the summer next year (because the scale is so much bigger in the summer) is whether they can get enough markers. Being a marker now is quite a demanding task, Chairman, because your work can be discovered. Students get scripts back and their parents and teachers can see it and if there is a mistake they can, quite rightly, challenge it. It is something that is truly a very professional task. When there is all this confidence crisis around I think Ken Boston was right to say to you there might be some doubt as to whether they can get the markers. I know that some people say extra pay could help. Maybe extra pay would help but that was tried in another place a few years ago and there was not a quantum leap in the number coming forward. I think as part of the professional development of teachers, if they see it as something they do in order to understand their subject and the learning process better, then there is a way forward.

**Chairman**

338. You are being rather kind about Dr McLone, saying that he made a bad call in just a small number of subjects, but he described in our session the whole exam system as flawed. Everything you have said to us this morning runs counter to that. What would you say to him?

(*Sir William Stubbs*) I would say first of all I have read the evidence from last week, I did not hear it all this morning but I heard a bit this morning and, as far as I know, he is the only person to come before you and say the system is flawed. No one else has said that and he is only saying it is flawed because of this notorious 40/60 50/50 split and you had a long and rather complex discussion about that at your last

meeting. That decision was made a few years ago, I do not think it is going to be re-visited, I do not think it should be re-visited, and we move forward. I disagree with him. I think the system is now sound and we should not change it. Lord help me, the amount of training of teachers and the amount of new understanding by markers and examiners, the new expectations to which young people would have to adjust if the system were changed markedly are beyond comprehension. This system needs to be allowed to settle down. I predict quite confidently in a year or two years' time that we will be seeing great strengths from it. One of the great strengths of it is the anchor point of AS. It has proved to attract more young people to continue their studies into the sixth form than many of us thought was possible and it is showing encouraging but not convincing signs of encouraging some young people to broaden their studies in the lower sixth.

**Mr Baron**

339. Can I return to the line of questioning I pursued earlier with what many of us see is a question of standards versus statistics. To use a very brief analogy, when I was a platoon commander in Germany before the Wall came down we were always told that quality will outdo quantity any time, to which we retorted under our breaths that quantity has a quality all of its own. Has this not happened here in the sense that, in the absence of standards, statistics became the standard because guidance was given that certain statistics had to be met and that is what is at the core of the whole problem?

(*Sir William Stubbs*) Neither of those statements is true. You said standards did not exist; yes they did. No one has said that there were no standards. Of course there were standards. We would all have liked them to be clearer. We are using the statistics of this year to try and make them clearer. That is the first statement that is not true and the second statement that is not true is that statistical information from last year had to be applied rigorously. That is not true at all. So both of those statements are invalid. What we have been mandated by the Government—and I gave you the chronology of it—is “the A-level standard is here to stay under this Government and you must make sure as the regulator that that applies. That means you cannot ignore previous years and the achievement of previous years”. Statistical information from previous years, I concede to you to some extent, must come into play. Indeed, I reminded the awarding bodies that there should be no grade drift or benign changes of the marking system that were not justified in the actual achievement of candidates. Those letters have been held up to scrutiny now and I am pleased to say that the Chairman of the Joint Council said those were perfectly reasonable letters and it was a perfectly proper view for the regulator to take. Indeed, Mike Tomlinson himself said that. Yes, there were always going to be difficulties in moving to a complex new system but we very nearly got it completely right. If it had not been for a small number of miscalls, I think you would be exploring another topic this autumn.

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**[Mr Baron Cont]**

340. Would you not accept from the point of view of perception and credibility—and we are talking about a very small number here, you have made that clear and we must keep these things in perspective but, having said that, we are discussing this issue because there is an issue of confidence, to put it like that—that perhaps one of the key issues is if there were standards there they were not recognised enough, which is one of the main problems, and there was not a general acceptance of standards, which is why we had this slight drift. Would you accept there is any truth in that statement at all?

(*Sir William Stubbs*) I repeat yet again standards were absolutely clearly defined. The demand at A2—and that is different—one attempted to do that as best one could. I see when you asked Ken Boston last week on that he came as a freshman to QCA and he did everything he could to make a clear statement about the A2 standards and how the AS standard related. He said "We did everything we could to provide rich, meaningful statements about grades in all the subjects". So in an ideal world but an unreal world when you are introducing a new examination you would like to have papers in front of you but we could not have them. That will not recur. That is why I think when you look back you see that problem but when you look forward it will have diminished considerably.

341. You think therefore this will be a non-issue in a year's time? Put it this way, on the general acknowledgement of standards, will it be easier to acknowledge the standards?

(*Sir William Stubbs*) It will be easier to acknowledge. I think there will be a wider acceptance of it by young people themselves. They will also see increasingly the universities are more at ease with it, employers themselves make more reference to it and I think the troubled waters and choppy waters will have settled down. However, there are responsibilities that must be fulfilled and when there are worries expressed about standards, it is incumbent upon those who have responsibilities in these areas not to buckle but to stand firm, difficult though it may be. When this storm was blowing, when I heard that the head of news at the DfES, D J Collins, and the political media cannot adviser, Chris Boffey, were saying that the QCA was 'dead in the water' and all these other remarks, that was absolutely wrong. The instinct should be to support the regulator until proven wrong and not to find a scapegoat. Therefore confidence is about exercising responsibilities as well as spreading knowledge.

**Valerie Davey**

342. You have clearly outlined the directive that came from the DfES. Did any directive come from the universities to the QCA?

(*Sir William Stubbs*) We would not accept, forgive me, a directive from the universities in those terms. The directive which the Secretary of State was giving us, in Mr Baron's terms, were our marching orders.

343. What was the relationship then?

(*Sir William Stubbs*) The relationship with Universities UK was different. They gave evidence to the original paper on Curriculum 2002 and they gave

that not to us, they gave that to the department. That was taken into account by the Minister at the time, Tessa Blackstone and how it weighed on her, and indeed in detail what they said, I could not answer to that. I have not seen anything coming from the universities certainly passing my desk at QCA, and I am unaware of anyone else's desk, about anxieties about what was meant by an AS or what was meant by the new A-level. Individual academics from universities are involved at various stages. They are certainly involved in the examining bodies and they are involved in some of our committees dealing with qualifications and so forth, but we had no formal representation from Universities UK or any other body, with one exception I will come back to, expressing concern about standards. The one exception was to do with those in universities which have a professional interest in the standard of mathematics. When AS was introduced last year the AS examination was thought to be too difficult and as a result a disproportionate number of young people in comparison with previous years failed to get an AS. As a consequence of that, fewer carried on into the second year to go to the full A-level and that caused widespread concern among universities. I was just about to enter into a series of meetings with mathematicians from the Royal Society and mathematicians from the universities about how we could carefully and sensitively redress that misjudgment of grading on those courses. Other than that I do not recall anything.

344. Was there a formal mechanism for a university or a group of universities—Universities UK—to approach QCA?

(*Sir William Stubbs*) There was no standing committee that met regularly throughout the year. Chairman, that did not happen. But what does happen is organisations—and I mentioned the maths one but there are others concerned with vocational qualifications—from time to time enter into a series of discussions with us about aspects of the qualifications. If Universities UK had wanted to do that then the door was open.

345. It has occurred to me over the discussions that we have been having on the subject that the difference between A-levels and any other exam is the fact that it is the entry into university. That is why parents and students are so sensitive about it and why the grade differential is so crucial. It does seem to me that universities are an element within that equation that perhaps we have not given enough attention to. Would you agree with that?

(*Sir William Stubbs*) When you say universities, who do you mean?

346. Universities UK.

(*Sir William Stubbs*) Do we mean vice chancellors? Universities UK is an organisation comprising vice chancellors, they are the only ones who are represented. Do we mean admissions officers? They are the ones that deal with individual students' applications. There is complexity around the voice of the universities and if you went into Universities UK and asked for a unanimous decision on this matter we might be here for some time.

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[Continued

**Jonathan Shaw**

347. Like most things.

(*Sir William Stubbs*) Because of course they take different views. Indeed, some of them are giving conditional places not on A-level but on ASs in the year that has just started.

**Mr Chaytor**

348. Sir William, earlier you quoted correspondence from the HMC calling for a small but significant rise in the results in the first year of the new system. I am unsure as to your view about that. Did you imply that you were considering the 4.5% rise in overall passes and 2.1% rise in A grades to be small but significant, but that that is acceptable?

(*Sir William Stubbs*) Two and a half years ago if we had been able to say that we are not fixing the results but it is going to come out as 4.5, I think they would have been quite relaxed.

349. So you are content with the outcome?

(*Sir William Stubbs*) I am content with the outcome because I have seen no evidence that young people's achievements have been artificially downgraded in order to meet some mythical and arbitrary boundary.

350. Why then were all three of the examining boards convinced that the message from the QCA was clearly that there should not be a rise in the results and the pass rate in the first year of the new system and particularly, from my recollection of the evidence session with them, the Chief Executive of AQA quoted a series of meetings with the QCA and a series of letters from QCA making it clear that there should not be a rise in the pass rate because that would be deemed to be pretty unacceptable.

(*Sir William Stubbs*) I do not think there were any letters from QCA saying there should not be a rise in the pass rate, not at all.

351. We need to return to the transcript of the evidence session with the exam boards.

(*Sir William Stubbs*) Return to wherever you want, but there was no letter from the QCA saying that. What I read out to you was the QCA was saying that we expect any increase in standards to be as a result of increased attainment by young people, absolutely square and on the record. As far as you asked me—

352. So you are saying that either in correspondence or in meetings with the examining boards—and again my recollection from the transcript last week was that there was a series of meetings the last of which was 9 August, there was no steer whatsoever or any steer that could have been interpreted in this way to say that an increase in the pass rates would be unacceptable?

(*Sir William Stubbs*) Not only, Chairman, am I saying it but the people you cross-examined last week said it. The Chairman of the Joint Council said she was quite satisfied with the letters that she had got clarifying it in April and she thought as far as the meeting in July was concerned there was no pressure put on to go to any artificial targets and that has been echoed, indeed Tomlinson found that, so I cannot possibly concede that.

**Chairman:** Can I just intercede for a moment. I think that David is really referring in part to a letter you sent to Kathleen Tattersall on 19 April 2002. The middle paragraph says: "I am conscious of the importance of that candidates (reading as to the words). . . judgments about, however in this summer's A-level awards the change to new specifications means that boards have less evidence to assist them than in normal circumstances. In this situation I do expect last year's A-level results to provide a very strong guide to this year's outcomes." Is that what you are particularly concerned about?

**Mr Chaytor**

353. I did not have the text to hand but that is precisely what I recall from last week's evidence session.

(*Sir William Stubbs*) In the evidence to you last week Kathleen Tattersall said, I think in response to a question from you, Chairman: ". . . as far as AQA was concerned, that [letter]"—my letter—"clarified the issue, we were all talking the same language; we were not talking about outcomes being the same, we were talking about judging the evidence on the basis of what candidates actually did in the examination."

354. So again you are reiterating there was no steer whatsoever that a rise would be unacceptable but a clear steer that if there was a rise it should be on the actual achievement among students.

(*Sir William Stubbs*) I am not sure about the first part of your question but the second part is absolutely right; any increase in the numbers passing or any increase in those getting the higher grades had to be rooted in the evidence of what the candidates did.

355. Therefore do you agree with the conclusions of the interim report from Tomlinson saying that the roots of the difficulties lay in the different perceptions that the exam boards had of the steer given by the QCA?

(*Sir William Stubbs*) What he said was—and by the way he must have arrived at his judgment on the basis of two days or three days of intensive work as he was asked to report within a week for that interim report—the letters from me were perfectly proper for the regulator to send. I was charged to maintain standards and I did that, and those who received the letters have given evidence that that is perfectly reasonable, and I was doing what was expected of me. I have no difficulty in saying that; those letters are on the record and I stand by them.

356. In terms of your guidance both the content and the process of issuing guidance, was it different this year from the previous year?

(*Sir William Stubbs*) You bet it was different this year from the previous year.

357. So the QCA took more of an interest?

(*Sir William Stubbs*) The QCA took more of an interest and there were a lot of people expecting us to take more interest this year in how the system worked; in terms of markers, the number of centres, was there a proper system for corresponding with them and handling their concerns, the training of teachers and so forth.

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[Continued

**[Mr Chaytor Cont]**

358. I understand all that but in terms of the outcomes this year, did you take a more detailed interest in the outcomes than you had in previous years?

(*Sir William Stubbs*) There are two points in this. One is when I gave advice—and that is in March you have quoted from that—that has been shown to be in keeping with the duty of the regulator. The second was when they came to us in July—they came to us, we did not go to them—because they were seeing a pattern emerging in AQA which they were uncertain whether it was being replicated across the other two bodies and they wanted to meet the other two bodies, indeed the other four bodies because I think the Irish and Welsh attended, and then having met them they wanted to share that with us. They then said to me, “Does this cause you concern?” I am on the record as saying to each of them, ‘Have you abided by the code of practice? Are you satisfied that the grades that have been given are on the basis of the evidence?’ They all assured me yes and we went away. I did say if the increase of overall pass rates—I was not concerned about the proportion getting grade As—is maintained (and it was then thought to be about a 3% increase in the pass rate and it turned out to be 4.5%) I felt we would probably have to have an inquiry to satisfy ourselves that standards had been maintained. That caused the three English awarding bodies some anxiety because they said if you do this—this crisis of confidence matter—you will worry the world outside.

359. Could I interrupt you because this seems to be a slight contradiction. You were saying earlier that you were entirely happy with the 4.5% increase and now you are saying you told the examining boards if the pass rates increase above a certain level there will need to be an inquiry.

(*Sir William Stubbs*) I did not say above a certain level.

360. Under what circumstances would you have expected there to be an inquiry?

(*Sir William Stubbs*) They were telling me about the average increase across three awarding bodies—and, by the way, we are talking about an average increase because if you look at individual subjects it varies significantly—and I was saying if the increase was as significantly different as they thought it would be from previous years we would have to as QCA satisfy ourselves that that was justified on the basis of the evidence. I said we would have to have an inquiry and they said, “We don’t want a public inquiry, can’t you do it as part of your continuing studies?” Not at the meeting but subsequently we agreed that was probably the better way to do it, but we did not have a fixed view in mind about X% or Y%. We wanted to be sure that increases were justified.

361. There was subsequently an internal inquiry?

(*Sir William Stubbs*) No there was not because I was not there to do it!

362. But there would have been?

(*Sir William Stubbs*) But of course there would have been!

**Mr Simmonds**

363. If you say you successfully maintained standards as you stated and the problem was a small one, why do you think you were dismissed?

(*Sir William Stubbs*) I thought you might come to that. I think this is, Chairman, sailing a little bit close to the wind but it is a fair question to be asked and I am prepared to answer.

**Chairman**

364. You answer it in the way you wish.

(*Sir William Stubbs*) I do draw on notes because I want to be careful on the record. On 25 September when the inquiry was called, on two occasions I had informed the Secretary of State directly that there was no evidence to doubt the results from two of the awarding bodies, and that with OCR the number of students affected was relatively small. That advice was not accepted. I was speaking as the regulator on the basis of the evidence. On 19 September I had complained directly to the Secretary of State about the continuing damaging references that were being made by her staff about QCA to the press, and asked her to take action to stop them. Notwithstanding that request, during the period from the setting up of the Tomlinson inquiry until Wednesday 25 September, the Secretary of State herself made direct reference to QCA as a possible cause of “the crisis” and her officials—and I have mentioned them already—were directly briefing the press that QCA was “dead in the water” and that by the end of that week I would be gone as Chairman. When I gave evidence to Tomlinson he specifically asked if QCA had been in contact with the exam boards since the inquiry started. So he was alert to the possibility of compromise. On being informed that I had written a minute requesting all my meetings with QCA staff on Tomlinson matters to be witnessed by the Chief Executive, which I did as soon as I heard there was an inquiry, he asked to see a copy of that. In other words, he was concerned about the integrity of the process. Having given evidence at Tomlinson on the Wednesday, that evening I was informed by Ken Boston that officials at the department had approached chief executives of exam bodies to ask, amongst other matters, if they would be prepared to accept the recommendations of chief examiners which they had previously rejected. I agreed with Ken Boston that this was improper and that he should inform the Permanent Secretary. When the Permanent Secretary not only confirmed that this was happening but it had been done on the express instructions of the Secretary of State we were concerned. I recommended he check to see if Tomlinson knew of the approach. When he contacted Tomlinson, Tomlinson said he did not know and asked Ken Boston if he thought the inquiry was compromised and he should resign. Ken Boston, correctly in my judgment, although he did not ask me when he made it, advised against that and said, “You should press on.” So we faced a situation where (i) the Secretary of State had instructed her officials to contact the exam boards without informing the Chairman of the inquiry; (ii) the exam regulator had been bypassed; (iii) the Secretary of State had become directly involved in suggesting

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[Continued

**[Chairman Cont]**

possible grade outcomes to awarding boards; and (iv) the Secretary of State clearly had in her mind a possible outcome that involved widespread re-gradings in bodies for which there was absolutely no evidence. So what should be done? I had no confidence by that time in the DFES in the light of continuing press briefings. We considered informing the Secretary to the Cabinet, given his overall responsibility for the Civil Service, but Sir Richard Wilson had just retired and we did not know that evening whether a successor was in post. Time was of the essence. The draft of the Tomlinson report was due the very next day and I did not know who Tomlinson still had to meet. I concluded that it was my responsibility as Chairman of the regulator, not Ken Boston as Chief Executive, to bring this action into the public domain. I had been due to speak that evening on my appearance before the Tomlinson inquiry and chose to do so then. I was a chairman independent of politics. You asked me last time, Chairman, if there are occasions when I should be banging the table more when unsatisfied with the Secretary of State's decisions. I said that was not my style after 30 years in education administration. However, on this matter I felt so strongly that the integrity of the whole independent process was being carried out in a way that was not impeccable and exceptionally I considered I should speak out in this instance. I would be surprised if that is not a factor in the Secretary of State's decision. The other factor that she took into account—the perception by the awarding bodies—the more the spotlight is turned on those, the less we need to say about that, but she deemed I was unfit and unable to be Chairman of the QCA. That is where I now disagree and, as you know, a separate course has been taken on that. I hope you find that helpful.

365. That is a very thorough answer to quite a simple question but I appreciate the answer. Can I follow up on one or two of the points you made there. Do you feel, bearing in mind the evidence we have heard, both on a previous occasion and earlier on this morning, where it seems to me most people are saying that the problem or the “crisis” as it was then called was no more than a storm in a tea cup, that you have been dismissed and used as a scapegoat to try and divert attention from perhaps pressure put on various areas from elsewhere?

(*Sir William Stubbs*) I do not like using the phrase “storm in a tea cup” because for any young person to get an A-level result that was invalid is for them no storm in no tea cup; it is about their life. But when running national affairs one has to keep things in perspective and there is no doubt, as I said at the outset, there was no crisis, the system had not failed overall and the perception was given that it had failed. I believe that was wrong and as a result many young people were worried unnecessarily.

**Chairman**

366. You are suggesting, to use your term earlier, that the department ‘buckled’ under pressure?

(*Sir William Stubbs*) I am in no doubt about it. In fact, not only did they buckle under pressure, they did not ask for the evidence before they called the second independent inquiry. We had one called on

the Monday, 16 September. Ken Boston was asked to do one and by the Friday he had produced it. On Wednesday 18 September the Secretary of State had decided to have a second inquiry and she had not seen the evidence because HMC, SHA, and the girls' association said they would give it only to an independent inquiry. At least I am assuming that is the case. If that evidence was given to the Secretary of State and not to the regulator, it would be a scandal. I do not think it was given to the Secretary of State. So the Department did panic, they lost their nerve in the light of a storm of hostile press criticism, when I think those responsible for national affairs should keep their mind on the facts and behave calmly and steer the ship home, but they did not do that.

367. Earlier I think you named specific people who used what I found at the time to be offensive the term that you at the QCA were “dead in the water”. Can you repeat to the Committee who you think said that?

(*Sir William Stubbs*) Yes. I am of the view that that was said in briefings given to the press by Chris Boffey, the political media adviser, I am not sure what his correct title is, and the civil servant who is head of news, D J Collins, must surely have taken a lead in this. Those were the ones I asked the Secretary of State the week before when there was malign briefing taking place, particularly during an independent inquiry, would she act to stop it. If she did act, they did not stop. If she did not act, I think that was abominable. But, of course, subsequently Estelle Morris has said that handling media matters was an area she was not very comfortable with. I believe that was a significant part of the problem, the idea you could close down an issue quickly by finding there is where all the action should be, there is where the problem is, we have dealt with it, there is going to be decapitation, and now we can move on and resume normal life. That is just a panic reaction. The facts, as you now see, do not support it.

**Mr Simmonds**

368. Can I ask on a slightly different topic, how independent did you feel your Chairmanship actually was?

(*Sir William Stubbs*) It is really how you approach the job in some ways and what you bring to it. I felt if there were things I wanted to speak out on and matters of principle I could do it but I was required to do it behind closed doors, notwithstanding the Chairman's encouragement last time we met to maybe do it more vigorously. The flaw in much of the arrangements over the first five years of the QCA's existence is Secretaries of State requiring that advice was given to them privately. Indeed, they used to keep it private for four months whilst they were talking publicly about developing policy and our advice was now being overtaken by events and would be published six months later and looked very dated. I do not think that is healthy. I think it should have been much more open. I never felt under the thumb of the Secretary of State. I felt I was under considerable pressure, and quite reasonably so in some cases. Estelle Morris was exceedingly worried about the likely going down of Edexcel. If that had happened this summer we really would have been in

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[Continued

**[Mr Simmonds Cont]**

deep, deep trouble. So she and her officials were on my back about that in regular meetings. I think it is the way in which the meetings with the advisers were private. There were lots of meetings with officials and they drift from being formal, minuted meetings to informal discussions. I do not think that is wise at times because it drifts into impressions and non-minuted advice. So I believe the system would gain from being more independent of the Department in any event, but particularly now that the political ambitions or political success of the Department is being judged by the outcome of key stage tests and examinations—not only as political targets, there are school targets based on them and indeed even teachers' own pay rises are based on these matters to an extent—these examinations are being used for purposes for which they were never intended and never constructed. Under those circumstances I think there should be, to use Ken Boston's phrase, clearer blue water between the Department and the QCA. It happens in other regulated industries, if you will forgive that phrase being used for education, and I think it would be much healthier in education.

369. There seems to be a general perception that we should have that clear water between the DFES and the QCA. Who would you like to see the QCA reporting to if it is not into the department?

(*Sir William Stubbs*) I am not sure there can be anybody but Parliament.

370. This Committee, for example?

(*Sir William Stubbs*) I assume that you are part of the majesty of Parliament in some way or other. In other words, I see it that way rather than the Privy Council because I do not think that is a public body.

#### Chairman

371. Like the HMC you would like Parliamentary accountability to be there. We were puzzled by that. Were they suggesting some sort of constitutional innovation of which we were unaware. Would you be happy to have the parallel with Ofsted? Ofsted is accountable to Parliament through this Committee.

(*Sir William Stubbs*) This is probably my swan song, I suspect, before bodies like this.

372. Sir William, I think we will have you back again.

(*Sir William Stubbs*) I have reported to Parliamentary committees over a number of years, both this Committee and other committees, and I have found it the most rigorous form of examination and accountability that I have ever had. Certainly reporting to ministers is not like that. Ministers' diaries press in and they have got things to do, they do their best but they have got a lot to do. With officials it is not the same relationship, but appearing before a select committee, either this or others, is something that officials, whether it be permanent secretaries or NDPBs or whatever, take very, very seriously and evidence is gathered. You know when you say something it has got to be right or you have got to correct it very quickly. To me that is proper accountability and I think we would be in a much healthier state if QCA had that through a body such as yours. I cannot see any other show in town—sorry

that sounds very demeaning, Chairman, but it seems to me you are the appropriate body. I have no difficulty with that at all.

**Chairman:** Time is getting on and there are three colleagues who have not had a bite at this questioning. Jonathan?

#### Jonathan Shaw

373. Could I ask you to fill in a gap from Dr Boston's evidence last week when he told us that in the discussions with yourself and the Deputy Chief Executive that he did not think that the action taken (where you responded to a question from my colleague) by the Secretary of State was inappropriate. You talked about minuted meetings. Was that a minuted meeting?

(*Sir William Stubbs*) That was not a minuted meeting. We had had Tomlinson's evidence, I think it finished about 7 o'clock and we went upstairs and then this news broke through a phone call and then we were into, frankly, an emergency meeting.

#### Chairman

374. News broke about?

(*Sir William Stubbs*) An official from the department phoned up to say they had been in touch with the awarding bodies and this was right out of a blue sky. It was not an organised meeting but I am perfectly clear what happened.

#### Jonathan Shaw

375. Your new Chief Executive Officer whom you had waited months to appoint, internationally renowned, did not think the Secretary of State acted inappropriately?

(*Sir William Stubbs*) So I see last week.

376. So you see last week? He did not say to you at the time, "I think the Secretary of State has acted appropriately. I do not think there is anything wrong with what she has done"? You did not say, "I disagree and I am off to tell every media outlet who will give me an interview"?

(*Sir William Stubbs*) I gave only one media outlet an interview. It happened to be the *BBC News at Ten*. Let's not create a crisis again. I was quite measured and I was quite reflective. We had a discussion. There was no doubt that Ken Boston concluded, I think it is in your evidence, that what happened was improper.

377. But he did not say—

(*Sir William Stubbs*) I am answering your question. He said that what happened was improper, that the Department should have gone through the regulator and not directly to the awarding bodies.

378. He did not say?

(*Sir William Stubbs*) He did say to you that he did not think the Secretary of State had behaved improperly; there I disagree.

379. Did he give you that advice? At this stage of a very delicate situation, and there are issues about a crisis in confidence, you yourself said that, was that going to help the confidence or would it create a further crisis if the Chairman went on the



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[Continued

**[Jonathan Shaw Cont]**

television—just the BBC—and publicly criticised the Secretary of State? Was that going to help the process?

(*Sir William Stubbs*) I think it was exposing the deficiencies of the process. I am in no doubt about that. I have spelt out quite clearly this morning why I think there are deficiencies in it. I believe in the integrity of administration, and have over many years, and I did not want to see it sullied so that is why I acted.

380. Did your Chief Executive say if you do this your position as Chairman is going to be untenable?

(*Sir William Stubbs*) I do not recall that being said to me at all.

381. Did you not say to him, “I am going to have to go on the media because I feel there is a crisis here, there is an issue of appropriateness, but I expect to be in the job tomorrow and to continue. Estelle will think that is a fair point. She will think, ‘I do not mind Sir William saying what he said’,” and you could continue in the job for as long as you like. In all your experience did that not occur to you?

(*Sir William Stubbs*) Are you talking about me or what I think Ken Boston said?

382. I am talking about what you thought the consequences of your intervention would be.

(*Sir William Stubbs*) That is a different matter.

**Chairman**

383. He is really asking whether you thought it was a *High Noon* situation?

(*Sir William Stubbs*) A hanging situation?

Chairman: No, *High Noon*.

**Jonathan Shaw**

384. Not hanging.

(*Sir William Stubbs*) The net outcome is the same. I considered it was grave. As I said to you last time Chairman, it is not my instinct or my way of behaviour to behave flippantly or lightly or emotionally. My track record would show that I am a pretty serious, measured administrator and I was, quite frankly, shocked by what I discovered. I took care this morning to put it in the context of the way a department of state had been behaving over the previous weeks. I considered that needed to be in the public domain, when an independent report was due to come out within 24 hours. I did not know what other influences were used by the Secretary of State and who else was being spoken to? But the fact is if anyone who was involved in being under the scope of that review was speaking to anyone else, it was wrong.

385. Did you think you would continue in your job?

(*Sir William Stubbs*) I had no reason to think I would not.

386. After all you said on television, you had no reason to think that you would not continue in the job?

(*Sir William Stubbs*) If secretaries of state or ministers believe that they can act improperly and then when they are told they are acting improperly

that the only way out is the *High Noon*, or whatever it is, situation, I think public life has come to a pretty sad pass.

387. Dr Boston had no criticism of the Secretary of State.

(*Sir William Stubbs*) That is what he told you last week and so be it. I am not talking about Dr Boston. Dr Boston did not make the statement; I made it, I accept responsibility. I pointed out to you that I was the Chairman of the regulator, I was not the Chief Executive and furthermore I had been in the job five years not five days. There is a difference between us. If you think this morning I am in some way going to say something that would open up a dispute between Ken Boston and myself or in any way reduce his acceptability as a Chief Executive, then there is no chance of that happening at all. I have confidence in him, I listened to him, I listened to the Deputy Chief Executive who was there, and I think you spoke to her as well last week, and I took my decision.

**Chairman**

388. If you look at question 256 in the transcript, Ken Boston’s response to the Committee is not as clear.

(*Sir William Stubbs*) No, it is not, Chairman.

389. He says: “No, I was not in accord with any protest against the Secretary of State. I was concerned that the legitimate request of the Secretary of State had been dealt with by approaching the awarding bodies to ask them whether they could handle a re-grading, which was still being considered by an independent inquiry in process. My concern was that the QCA, as the regulator, had not been the body that was consulted. I had no criticism at all of the Secretary of State.” I think all of us in this Committee are aware of what was said. It was not quite what some of the discussion between you implied.

(*Sir William Stubbs*) I read that. You were asking me was I aware of the consequences and so forth and I am saying, as I repeat yet again, that if a person in public office believes that a senior politician is behaving improperly and says so, if the consequence of that is a burial party every time we are in a sad state in public affairs. Indeed, when I met the Secretary of State the first thing I asked for was a meeting in private because I thought a bit of healing and reconciliation was called for. I have said that in the public debate over the last four weeks. I think reconciliation can be achieved.

**Jonathan Shaw**

390. You are a fairly robust and confident personality, indeed one of the most robust and confident that comes before our Committee. You give a great deal of certainty to the questions put to you and yet I find it extraordinary that you say you did not know whether you would be able to continue in your post or not after your intervention through the media.

(*Sir William Stubbs*) I was perfectly firm; I said I saw no reason why I should not continue. When I met the Secretary of State I said that to her, “What

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[Continued

**[Jonathan Shaw Cont]**

we need to do is work together to get reconciliation and get confidence restored in the system and I would be pleased to work with you and your officials to do it." I firmly believed that that was the way forward.

391. You thought you should stay on?

(*Sir William Stubbs*) I am sorry if I have given you anything other than that impression. I was in no doubt I should stay on.

#### Chairman

392. You were an independent regulator giving advice as an independent regulator so why should anyone dismiss you?

(*Sir William Stubbs*) That is right. In the context, Chairman, which is important, it was not as if we were dealing with something that was going to be resolved over the next few months. We were under severe constraints of time in which we had literally 24 hours before we started to see the emerging draft of the Tomlinson report. I did not know what Tomlinson was doing and there is no reason he should tell me. We would have gone to the Secretary of the Cabinet but that route was blocked for obvious reasons. Under those circumstances, as Chairman I saw only one route open to me and that was to bring it out into the public domain, and that is what I did, but I did not do it lightly.

#### Mr Turner

393. Sir William, you said you formed a view that certain officials have briefed the press. On what basis do you form that view or do you have evidence?

(*Sir William Stubbs*) I formed that view as far as D J Collins was concerned on the basis of the way he had treated a number of stories about the QCA in which I had been directly involved, and therefore knew his style. When it came to the actual week in question, I was being told by the QCA press officer that journalists had phoned up and said this was what was happening. They did not need to tell us, frankly, because it had appeared in the press. That is against the background where I knew Collins would give stories to reporters and then imply, "If you do not report them in a way that is friendly you will be cut off and get no stories." I have been told that by reporters. This is what is called these days "managing" the news. I think he is called manager or director of the news. I am sure that people sitting on the fringe here will be aware of the way in which some of their colleagues are treated, so I knew the way in which they were behaving. Then having had it reported to me direct what was happening, it appeared in the press not once or twice I think but five times, so I do not think there was much doubt there. One was a civil servant and one was a political adviser.

394. And to your knowledge, does that comply with the codes of practice which apply to civil servants on provision of public information?

(*Sir William Stubbs*) You mean the way in which they behaved?

395. Yes.

(*Sir William Stubbs*) I would sincerely hope it is not. If an independent inquiry is underway and they are saying this is the outcome by the way and this is what is going to happen, I would have said that is highly improper and wrong. Whether it is in a code is another matter. The point I am making to you is either these people were acting as free agents, in which case they are loose cannons in the departments and this is a big department of state, or they were acting under instructions. Either way that was a flawed system and it should not happen.

396. Is the evidence on which you formed your opinion limited to the process of this inquiry or does it go back to a track record of behaviour by these and other officials in a similar way?

(*Sir William Stubbs*) It goes back. I think I gave an example in something I have written or said recently on the QCA quinquennial report that Ms Munn referred to, which concluded that the QCA was doing a good job and in certain things it should do better. It was presented to the press as QCA needed to raise its act and sort out the awarding bodies. That was not even the subject of the quinquennial review. It was a good report and a number of, I am not sure whether they are faces sitting on the edge of the room, people that printed the story that QCA should raise its act came afterwards and apologised and said they had to do it because if they did not do it they would not get stories in the future.

397. A last question and I know this can only be with the view of an intelligent layman, have you experienced or read of this happening elsewhere in government?

(*Sir William Stubbs*) I have no experience of the Government other than in the particular part in which I have been involved. I read the press like everyone else and allegedly, as they say, there do seem to be examples of this, indeed one or two spectacular examples of it in last two or three years. I would not know enough about that. All I know was from the particular part I was dealing with, over a number of months and years now, that is a pattern of behaviour that was thought to be acceptable. My view of the administration of a great public service like education is that it should not be handled like that.

#### Chairman

398. Do you think a more independent role of the QCA would help in ceasing it being used as a whipping boy or girl?

(*Sir William Stubbs*) Yes, Chairman, no doubt about that. Given the security that comes from being a creature of Parliament direct rather than—indeed the Secretary of State wrongly said on the Monday after I had left that this was the worst example of breakdown by a departmental agency. We now know it was not the worst example, but she used the word 'agency' and I think that is the giveaway. Departments see these bodies as agents, and they are not. They are meant to be non-departmental public bodies, but there is a tendency to assume that they are there to do the bidding of the department. That was probably in your mind at the beginning of year when you said, "Are you sure you can tell the Secretary of

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SIR WILLIAM STUBBS

[Continued

**[Chairman Cont]**

State when you think she is straying offside?" If it is a creature of Parliament, from what I know of dealing with organisations like that, it would be a different attitude, and it would be a different organisation and a more self-confident organisation that it has been possible to be over the last five years.

**Chairman**

399. You have been saying some pretty nasty things about the department and civil servants—

(*Sir William Stubbs*) Two, Chairman.

400. I was going to restore the balance and say in a sense I as Chairman of this Committee was impressed by one other civil servant, the civil servant that was seconded to the QCA—I do not know if you saw the transcript?

(*Sir William Stubbs*) Yes I did.

401. I think most of press had gone but I thought what she said in answer to my questions was again pretty robust and courageous. If you remember, I asked her about what happened and I said, "What is your view?" and she said: "I think it was inappropriate that discussions were had with awarding bodies and not with ourselves." You rather put that on the line. I wanted that to lead us in. One difference between that last meeting in May and now is that at that time—and I do not know if you were putting on a front—you bridled a bit when I suggested you were too close to the department—

(*Sir William Stubbs*) Yes.

402. And I pushed you and again said that you not go in and thump the desk enough. The difference between May and now is that people have been rather more converted to the way that we were pushing you.

(*Sir William Stubbs*) The first thing, Chairman, is I am very pleased you made those remarks about Beverley Evans. The inference in the questioning from this Committee last week was that civil servants seconded to an external body behave like a spy in the camp. In all my experience, it has been exactly the opposite, in funding councils and other bodies, and civil servants seconded out behave as people with integrity, and she is a woman who did just that, so I am pleased you put that on the record. When I saw you in May, first of all, I was more exposed than I should have been because I was a part-time Chairman and we did not have a permanent Chief Executive in place who should have been alongside us, and we had the quinquennial review and one was not quite sure where that was going to lead us, and we had had the disaster of the January round of examinations with Edexcel. I knew it was in the offing but could not say anything at that stage that Edexcel were thinking about coming out of A-level examinations, so if I was playing down that particular aspect you were probing on, it was in that context, but now matters are different and I am saying it to you as honestly and frankly as I believe it to be. I am sorry if I have given the impression that I am more robust than people who have come before you before. I am calling it as I see it and I have been around for a fair number of years and seen how it happens. The Education Service is changing significantly with new expectations, new involvement

of Government, a lower involvement of local authorities, and an increased responsibility for schools. The whole landscape is shifting. Under those circumstances I believe there is probably an increased requirement to have a body that is independent and that is seen to be independent, speaking directly to the body that gives it its money, and Parliament votes that money, albeit through the department. So it is in that context that I say I am now utterly convinced, Chairman, that we need a new form of accountability.

**Ms Munn**

403. What the quinquennial review recommends is that there needs to be a Memorandum of Understanding between the DfES which is approved by ministers and QCA, because one of the things it says is that the relationship had been set out but in various letters in effect and that over time additional bits had been added to it. Would that not be sufficient then in your view to clarify the position?

(*Sir William Stubbs*) We are dealing with different matters. The Memorandum of Understanding, which has not progressed much, is really to get a better understanding of who is responsible for what. There are ministers in the Department who are now active in aspects of the school curriculum in ways which would seem to have been the responsibility of QCA, sometimes acting without even taking the advice of QCA. That is what is lying behind that recommendation, the feeling that the boundary between the responsibility of ministers, the responsibility of the Department and the responsibility of QCA should be sharper than it has been in the past.

404. But still the point concerns greater clarity about the relationship, and greater clarity about who does what, not just in terms of these kinds of issues but in terms of all the stakeholders, so that the people who are dealing with you and dealing with the department have that clear understanding.

(*Sir William Stubbs*) I am sure that would help, but it would not solve the problem we are dealing with. The problem we are dealing with is where it is seen that a body which is supposed to be independent is being treated and perceived as an agent, that is unhealthy, it is not true but it is unhealthy, and I think that needs to be properly addressed in the way in which other witnesses have given evidence to you.

**Chairman**

405. One little thing that worried me not in the last response but the one before that was when you were saying that ministers were playing around with the curriculum in the department without reference, are you saying ministers should not have views on changing the curriculum? I am teasing out what concerned you there.

(*Sir William Stubbs*) Clearly the Secretary of State decides at the end of the day what is in the curriculum but he does it on the advice of the QCA, or should do it on the advice of the QCA. What is happening is there are significant groups that have been established inside the Department, and civil servants and advisers appear—I do not mean advisers in the

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SIR WILLIAM STUBBS

*[Continued***[Chairman Cont]**

sense of political advisers but experts who come in and are advising ministers without being accountable in any way—and they start to form views about where they want matters to go and then ask QCA to flesh this out. I do not think that is the right way to go about this. I think they should say, “We are concerned about this, what is your view? We would like to strengthen or extend in this area; please may we have advice”, and then we take it forward, but it

is being blurred and that is what the person who carried out that review was getting at when he wrote that particular part.

406. Sir William, it has been a long session but a very interesting one. Thank you for your time and your frankness.

*(Sir William Stubbs)* Thank you for your patience.

**APPENDIX****Letter from Sir William Stubbs to the Clerk of the Committee (QCA 36)****QUALIFICATIONS AND CURRICULUM AUTHORITY**

Your office kindly sent at my request a copy of the memorandum from the Department for Education and Skills submitted to the Select Committee following my evidence to the Committee (QCA 31)<sup>†</sup>.

I am concerned that the Department, in seeking to discredit my evidence to the Committee, is misleading the Committee into believing that I supported the setting up of the Tomlinson Inquiry. To this end they have quoted selected sentences from a letter I wrote on 19 September to the Secretary of State.

To assist the Committee, I enclose a copy of my entire letter to the Secretary of State from which the department has quoted. From this it can be seen quite clearly that my support was confined to an independent inquiry into the allegations made by the headteachers organisations that the QCA had intervened to direct the A level awarding bodies to change marks and grades. At no time did I lend support to the type of wide-ranging inquiry that was commissioned. I maintained before the Committee that no evidence had been forthcoming to merit such an enquiry and that the Department panicked in bringing it into existence. I was of that view then and have remained so since.

I should be grateful if you would bring this letter to the attention of the Committee.

*4 December 2002*

**Annex****Letter from Sir William Stubbs to the Rt Hon Estelle Morris MP****A LEVEL RESULTS**

Last night the GSA, HMC and SHA alleged that the QCA intervened to direct A level awarding bodies to change marks and grades in certain unspecified A level subjects. As you know the position of the QCA has consistently been to translate into practice the Government’s policy that A level standards should be maintained over time. We have put the A level boards in no doubt about this matter. The prominence given to the HMC allegations in this morning’s press and media must inevitably cast doubt about the integrity of the QCA’s actions. This is a matter, which concerns me. I am therefore asking you as a matter of urgency to appoint an independent inquiry into these allegations by HMC.

Separately we are continuing with the inquiry that you instigated on Monday and we expect to have the preliminary findings with you later today.

*19 September 2002*

<sup>†</sup> See Ev 140-1.

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WEDNESDAY 4 DECEMBER 2002

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Members present:

Mr Barry Sheerman, in the Chair

Mr David Chaytor  
Valerie Davey  
Paul Holmes  
Ms Meg Munn

Mr Kerry Pollard  
Jonathan Shaw  
Mr Mark Simmonds  
Mr Andrew Turner

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### **Memorandum submitted by Roger Porkess (QCA 32)**

#### 1. PERSONAL POSITION

##### 1.1 *The argument "Let sleeping dogs lie"*

1.1.1 It can be argued that what happened to A Levels this summer should be kept in perspective. Lots of students don't get the examination results they are hoping for or even perhaps deserve. Examining is not an exact science. Most of those involved are now at University and it is much more important for them to be looking forward and getting on with their new courses than harking back to what might have been. So we should draw a line under the whole episode and forget about it.

1.1.2 The danger with that argument is that it allows precedent to be established on two key principles.

##### 1.2 *Adjusting module thresholds to influence qualification outcomes*

1.2.1 The grading problems occurred because certain modules were marked down in order to reduce the numbers of candidates getting particular A Level grades. This is a fundamentally wrong thing to do in a modular syllabus.

(i) It breaks faith with the candidates, in effect secretly moving the goal posts.

(ii) It is unsound examining practice since it causes the candidates to be ranked incorrectly.

1.2.2 Modular A Levels have been around for some 10 years, but, to my knowledge, never before have module thresholds been adjusted to influence qualification outcomes.

##### 1.3 *Fairness to candidates*

1.3.1 Until now it has always been a principle of our examinations that the candidates' interests are paramount.

1.3.2 To the extent that it is humanly possible, every effort has been made to ensure that each candidate receives the correct grade.

1.3.3 This summer tens of thousands of candidates have received incorrect grades but nothing is being done about it, even though their grades could easily be set right.

##### 1.4 *The integrity of A Levels*

1.4.1 The future integrity of A Levels can only be guaranteed if these two key principles are re-established, and that in turn depends on re-grading this summer's candidates.

#### 2. BACKGROUND

##### 2.1 *Curriculum 2000*

2.1.1 Work began on Curriculum 2000 in the middle of 1998 and I was keen to do all I could to help make it a success. During the later part of that year there were a number of seminars on particular issues, most of which I attended. In several cases I followed these up by writing discussion papers to help QCA take matters forward.

2.1.2 One of these related to the question of how to aggregate AS and A2 marks without causing grade inflation, a matter which was causing concern to those designing Curriculum 2000. In that paper I suggested a mechanism that had worked well with our MEI syllabus for the previous eight years. However, in the event QCA neither accepted my suggestion nor any other but let the curriculum go through with this flaw built in.

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[Continued

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2.1.3 It became clear to me at that time that those involved were uncomfortable with the mathematical nature of the problem. At meetings eyes would glaze over. I suspect that this had a lot to do with its never being resolved.

## 2.2 *Syllabus submissions (1999–2000): specimen papers*

(This information is included in the light of some of the questions to earlier witnesses)

2.2.1 Syllabuses (renamed “specifications”) were submitted in 1999 and most were approved towards the end of that year although some dragged on into 2000. These submissions including specimen examination papers and mark-schemes. In the case of the MEI syllabus, the design thresholds are also written into the approved syllabus.

2.2.2 It is thus untrue to say that the AS and A2 standards were undefined. QCA put a great deal of effort into looking at the specimen papers, and held up approval for substantial periods of time until they were satisfied.

2.2.3 As it happens, in mathematics QCA got the AS standard badly wrong, contributing to the very high failure rate (29.1%) in June 2001.

2.2.4 I have seen no evidence of any attempt by QCA to ensure comparability of standards across subjects. It remains the case that pass rates are much higher in the arts subjects than in the science; mathematics remains firmly at the bottom of the list.

## 3. A CASE STUDY FROM THIS SUMMER

### 3.1 *Rationale for this section*

3.1.1 At this point I would like, as a case study, to describe the events surrounding the award of one particular syllabus. For reasons of confidentiality this is presented as a separate Appendix.

## 4. MODELLING THE SITUATION

### 4.1 *Description*

4.1.1 The rest of this submission is a report that was issued on 15 November 2002.

4.1.2 Most of this describes the calculations that led me to the conclusion that tens of thousands of candidates have received a lower grade than they should have done.

### 4.2 *Calculations*

4.2.1 While the actual calculations are correct, their validity depends upon assumptions about data which are held by the examinations boards and are not in the public domain.

4.2.2 Publication of full data would allow a more accurate estimate of the number of candidates affected to be made. In the absence of such data, these figures stand.

4.2.3 An exact answer to the question “How many candidates?” can only be obtained by re-grading all syllabuses.

## **Appendix to Section 4 Report: The effect of moving grade thresholds**

### SUMMARY

The Tomlinson Inquiry restricted its scope to the most extreme movements of grade thresholds.

Consequently many of this summer’s candidate’s have lost an A Level grade.

As a mathematician I estimate the number affected to be over 20,000.

### BACKGROUND

During this summer’s A Level award, there were many cases where the thresholds set by Awarding Committees were subsequently made substantially more severe by the examination boards.

The reason for this was to ensure that the numbers of students getting high grades were in line with those in 2001, before Curriculum 2000 was introduced.

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[Continued

Because Curriculum 2000 is modular, where action was taken it involved particular modules take in June 2002.

Adjusting the results on particular modules to influence the overall outcome is an intrinsically unsound practice; it introduces inconsistency in standards across modules and discriminates against candidates who took certain modules.

When the Tomlinson Inquiry was announced many of us expected that in all cases where grade thresholds had been moved the original thresholds would be restored, and candidates re-graded. This did not happen.

Instead a cut-off was decided upon. Only those modules with threshold shifts of six marks or more were considered for re-grading (and two others where there had been many complaints).

The application of the cut-off will inevitably have left some candidates with a lower A Level grade than would have been the case if all thresholds had been restored to those set by the Awarding Committees.

The Tomlinson Inquiry did not address the question of how many students lost a grade in this way.

There is also evidence that where re-grading did occur, the original thresholds were not fully restored.

#### A STATISTICAL ESTIMATE

The Tomlinson Inquiry set a cut-off point of a threshold adjustment of six marks on a module examination. A natural group to consider are those just below this cut off point. Here is a question.

*“Thresholds on AS/A modules are increased five marks at one sitting. What percentage of candidates lose an A Level grade as a consequence?”*

Until now this question would seem not to have been answered.

Perhaps the reason is because there is no single neat mathematical answer. It depends on the mark distribution for the particular A Level syllabus this summer, on how tightly the thresholds are packed together for the modules in question and on how many modules a candidate took at that sitting.

To deal with such a problem you need to make realistic assumptions, in this case about the mark distribution, the spacing of the thresholds and the number of modules taken, and then work through the consequences.

- The mark distribution is assumed to be that in the attached graph.
- The module thresholds are taken to be five marks apart, so that the Tomlinson cut off point corresponds to one module grade.
- The threshold adjustment is made only at the grade A boundary.
- Candidates take two examination modules.

All of these are reasonable assumptions, and they lead to the conclusion that 16.1% of candidates of that syllabus would have lost an overall A Level grade.

The next stage is to vary the assumptions and so obtain a range of values.

- Looking at other mark distributions gave a range of outcomes: 16.8%, 14.8% and for a very bottom-heavy distribution, 12.4%. A realistic “average” figure would seem to be about 15%.
- In coursework modules the thresholds are usually much closer together and so the final outcome would be higher, over 20% if one of the modules is coursework.
- In some subjects threshold adjustments were made to both A and E boundaries (and so to all those in between). In that case the final outcome would be about twice as large and so could be over 30%.
- Very few candidates would have taken only one module in June, but quite a lot took three as some schools had forbidden January entries. The final outcome for those who took three would have been one and a half times as great, so over 20%.

In conclusion, a low estimate of the percentage of candidates losing an A Level grade in such a “cut-off” syllabus is 15%, and it could be quite a lot higher.

The Tomlinson Inquiry identified syllabuses from all three examination boards which had had threshold adjustments above the cut-off level, but by far the majority of them were in one board, and in that one board it would seem that the average threshold adjustment was about five marks per module.

So an estimate of the number of candidates who lost an A Level grade from that one board alone is 15% of the total A Level entry

or about 35,000 candidates.

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[Continued

There will be some more from the other two boards but the available data are rather restricted, making it hard to do more than guess at the number. I prefer to stay with 35,000 than to guess higher.

The assumptions that underlie that figure have been deliberately on the cautions side. As a further act of caution, I will allow a large margin for error, and conclude that the evidence suggest a figure in excess of 20,000.

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**APPENDIX**

**AN EXAMPLE**

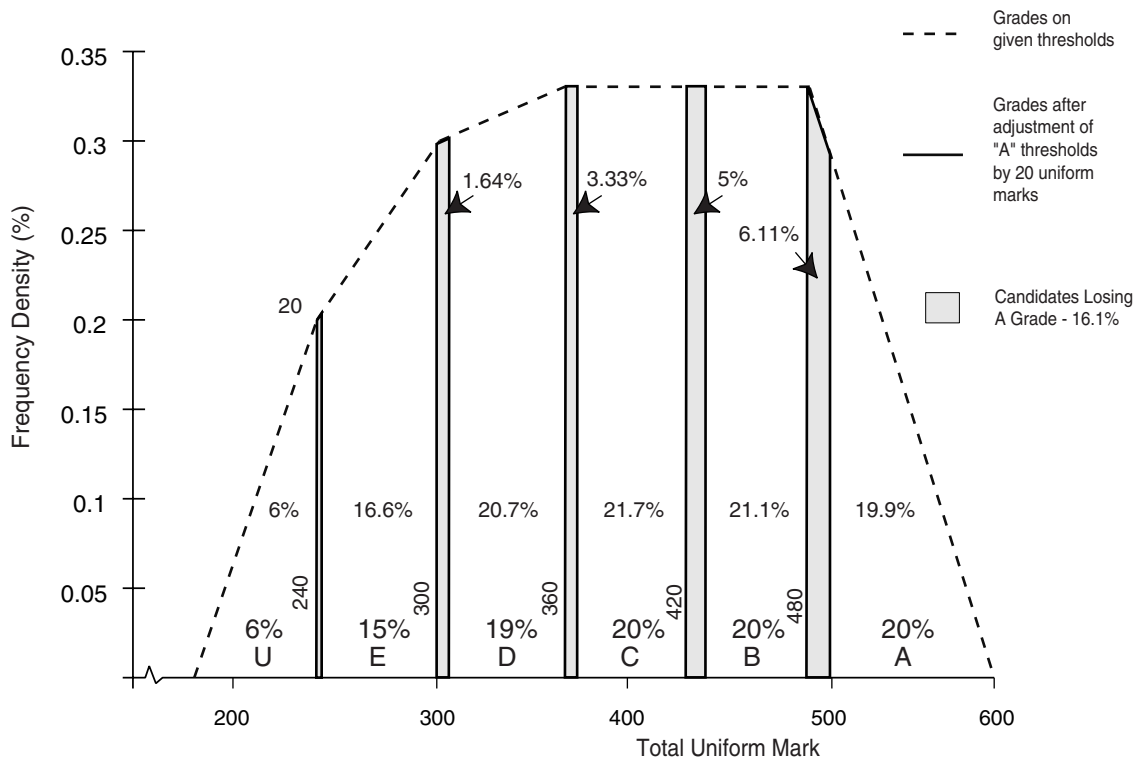
When an examination paper is marked it is given a raw mark. This is then converted into a uniform mark, which is independent of the difficulty of the paper. In the conversion, the value of one raw mark varies according to the grade band width.

A grade band width of five raw marks is quite common and this converts into 10 uniform marks. In that case one raw mark is worth two uniform marks. In most cases this is close to reality and so provides a helpful rule-of-thumb.

However, in coursework modules band widths may be as small as two raw marks, and in that case one raw mark is worth five uniform marks.

The effect of any change in candidates' uniform marks on their grading is illustrated for a typical distribution on the attached graph. In this example the cut-off for two modules is taken to correspond to 20 uniform marks.

- The black vertical lines are drawn at the aggregated A Level thresholds of 240 (E), 300 (D), . . . , 480 (A).
- The red vertical lines illustrate the effect of a change of 20 uniform marks at the A thresholds, with proportional effects at B, C and D.
- The grey shaded regions represent those candidates losing a grade. In this example, 16.1% of the candidates fall into this category.





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[Continued

*Roger Porkess*

- Roger Porkess is a mathematician and a Fellow of the Royal Statistical Society.
- He is Project leader for Mathematics in Education and Industry (MEI), a long established independent curriculum development body and is responsible for one of the largest Mathematics A Level syllabuses (MEI Structured Mathematics).
- He was responsible for the development of the first modular A Level in any subject; this established the principles for the assessment of such courses and is the model upon which Curriculum 2000 is based.
- He has long experience of examining, as a setter, revisor, awarder and marker.
- He is author, co-author or series editor of over 50 books, mostly on mathematics, and contributed numerous articles to various journals.
- In his earlier career he taught mathematics in a variety of schools in the UK and third world countries.
- Being employed by an independent body, allows him a freedom of speech and association on professional matters that few others in the examination world enjoy.

**Supplementary memorandum submitted by Roger Porkess (QCA 35)****RESPONSE TO THE COMMENTARY BY BRIAN SEAGER (OCR)**

1. No extrapolation is involved here. The Tomlinson Inquiry listed 22 OCR syllabuses in which there were threshold movements of six marks or more. Since OCR has just over 50 syllabuses this places movement of five marks firmly in the middle.

2. The Tomlinson Inquiry identified 97 modules where thresholds were moved. This alone is “many”, not counting any that did not exceed the Tomlinson cut-off of six weeks.

3. If what Brian Seager says is true, it follows that most of the modules identified by the Tomlinson Inquiry had their E grade thresholds raised, rather than the A grade. If so the number of candidates affected will be much the same, but many of them will be losing an A level grade E pass instead. This is consistent with paragraph 48 of Tomlinson’s interim report “... at ‘E’. . . to push the boundary until it squeaks.” Notice that I had deliberately not applied the changes to both A and E thresholds; it was always a possibility that some adjustments were at grade E.

4. This point is not valid since the threshold change affects the whole mark distribution, not just those on the borderline in question.

5. This point has already been covered under three.

6. Brian Seager is wrong here. Paragraph 73 identifies one coursework module in which nine raw marks separate A and U. This would correspond to a conversion factor of one raw mark to four and a half + uniform marks. Psychology and Salters Chemistry both had very tightly packed thresholds.

7. The whole point of the calculation I did was to see what sort of movements were “of a minor nature”.

Saying five out of 17 (syllabus A) and five out of 25 (syllabus B) obscures the fact that virtually every candidate would have done three out of the five eg his/her A2 modules. (The others are either AS or Further Mathematics modules. Some candidates will have done three of these this June and virtually all the year two. It is untrue to say that the effect “was very small”.

December 2002

**Examination of Witness**

MR ROGER PORKESS, Project Leader for Mathematics in Education and Industry (MEI), and also an OCR Principal Examiner for Mathematics, examined.

**Chairman**

408. Mr Porkess, welcome to our meeting. Thank you very much for attending. I am sorry this is a brief session but we will rattle through and try to get as much out of it as we can. Obviously we wanted to talk to you because of our very short inquiry into the A-level problems that were encountered this summer. It

did seem that we were just getting onto an even keel, and then suddenly you burst into the media expressing your unhappiness. I know in the document you sent to the Committee you talked about the argument “let sleeping dogs lie”. Is there not a problem in the sense that we were getting to the stage where parents and students were feeling that what had happened had somehow been resolved by

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MR ROGER PORKESS

[Continued

**[Chairman Cont]**

the Tomlinson inquiry and suddenly your head is above the parapet saying, “No, no, great injustice has been done to a great number of candidates”. Could you tell us why you said that?

(*Mr Porkess*) My motivation is that I want an A-level that has integrity and I want something that I can believe in. This is an area that I have been working in for a long time, and I want an A-level that works to proper principles and at the moment we seem not to be getting that. There are two principles involved: one is the technical matter which is very important, not that you should not use the thresholds on modules to influence the A-level outcome; the second is that candidates’ interest should be paramount. Those two principles at the moment have not been upheld and I am very concerned that we are setting a precedent which is going to mean that we cannot rely on any grade in the future. I want out of this process that we have an exam system that has an integrity that we can all believe in that we can build on for the future, and I do not think at the moment we are quite getting it.

409. But we have just now had the second part of the Tomlinson inquiry reported for this week: it was received positively by the Secretary of State who is going to action most of the recommendations across the piece: are you still unhappy after yesterday’s statement and the publication of Tomlinson mark 2?

(*Mr Porkess*) Yes, I am unhappy. Mark 2 does not say very much about the problems of Mark 1—they are only really *en passant*—and in particular in the section that deals with accountable officers it does not make the point that accountable officers should not use module thresholds to influence qualification outcomes. That was something that I had expected it to say and that I had expected to see written into the new QCA Code of Practice, and it is not.

410. But is there not a view in Tomlinson that the QCA and the examining boards will now sort this out?

(*Mr Porkess*) I am sorry—we have a precedent at the moment that says that this does not matter, and if it is not written down as a principle then I fear that the precedent will stand and we will have lost a major principle.

411. So how many candidates are you saying this summer got the wrong grade? You are talking mainly about mathematics, are you not?

(*Mr Porkess*) No, I am talking across all subjects. In the scheme of things mathematics was probably relatively lightly affected, but across all subjects it is tens of thousands but I do not know how many tens of thousands. Without the full information from the exam boards one cannot tell. Whether that full information can ever be fully available is also doubtful.

**Mr Turner**

412. Mr Porkess, have you seen the memorandum produced by Mr Seager, the Chair of the mathematics examiners with your board?

(*Mr Porkess*) I received that when I arrived at the hotel late last night. I have prepared a response to it which I tried to get typed up before this meeting but I did not succeed.

**Chairman**

413. We have only just received it and it will be added to the evidence to the Committee.

(*Mr Porkess*) Could I make some major points?

**Mr Turner**

414. Yes.

(*Mr Porkess*) Brian Seager accuses me of using extrapolation and that is untrue. OCR has about 50 syllabuses; 22 of those were identified by Tomlinson Part 1 as having threshold movements of six marks or more so that the case that I took of a five-mark movement is pretty much in the middle and it is not extrapolated out into some extreme region, which is what Brian Seager is implying so on that point he is wrong. The other point that he makes is that the example that I worked was using adjustments to an “A” grade threshold only. It seems from the evidence that he has produced from OCR that for most of the 97 modules that were identified in Tomlinson 1 with movements of six marks or more those movements were the “E” grade. Now the effect will be the same in terms of numbers of people losing a grade but it will be that people are losing an A-level grade “E” or going from “D” into “E” rather than at the other end. It will be a mirror image but it does not affect the total numbers involved. The third point that he makes is he questions my statement that the effect on coursework is greater. My statement is justified in the Tomlinson final report. In section 73 there is a reference to a syllabus where nine marks separate “A” and “U” and that means that the multiplying-up factor going from a raw mark to a uniform mark is about 4.5 or 5, which is the sort of thing that I sold. I think that syllabus was probably psychology. Salters’ chemistry was another one that had very similar tightly packed thresholds.

415. Mr Porkess, I have really only got two lines of questions, one arises out of what you just said. Is not an examination which produces such tightly packed thresholds rather an unsatisfactory examination?

(*Mr Porkess*) Entirely so, and I do not know how such a thing has got approved by QCA.

**Chairman**

416. You are saying this has been going on for years?

(*Mr Porkess*) No, I am not.

417. You are saying it is only this year?

(*Mr Porkess*) This is a new specification. It is a new syllabus for Curriculum 2000.

418. I thought you said in your answer to Andrew Turner that this methodology had been developed over a number of years? Am I wrong in understanding that?

(*Mr Porkess*) That was not what I said in respect of my answer there. The point I had made in my general comments were that the modular syllabuses have been around for about 10 years and the methodology has existed for 10 years and worked perfectly well. What has happened this year with Curriculum 2000

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MR ROGER PORKESS

[Continued

**[Chairman Cont]**

is totally new. What has gone wrong has gone wrong because principles that were adhered to, have no longer been.

**Chairman:** And in a moment you are going to tell us how to put it right.

**Mr Turner**

419. The numbers are interesting but what is surely more important is the principle and what you are asserting in your memorandum is that certain modules were marked down “in order to” reduce the number of candidates getting particular A-level grades. You assert that on a number of occasions in different places. What is the evidence for “in order to”?

*(Mr Porkess)* I gave you the example of our own MEI syllabus. That syllabus has been running a long time and most of the modules in it were virtually unchanged going into Curriculum 2000 so we have a very long history of awarding that. If, for instance, I take the statistics 2 module which has been unchanged for twelve years, so there is a long history of awarding that, in June 2002 we awarded the grade “A” on that at a mark of 46 out of 60 as an awarding committee and that was in line with everything that had happened before. That mark went to the accountable officer for the exam board and was accepted as being a right mark for that module. Later, it was then changed and increased by three marks to 49, and in the scheme of things three marks is a very big adjustment there. Now, whatever the motivation was it was not that the module was incorrectly awarded at 46 because that was accepted.

420. So you are saying that you do not know what the motivation was but you know that the change took place and you have imputed this motivation?

*(Mr Porkess)* Yes and no. I am imputing it but I also know that it was part of the air that everyone in the exam world was breathing at the time—that there was pressure to keep the results down.

421. Your Chief Executive has told this Committee effectively that an A2 has to be harder to balance the AS being easier—in other words, the grade threshold has to be higher. Do you see that as an improper objective?

*(Mr Porkess)* It is inconsistent with what the instructions were at the time that Curriculum 2000 syllabuses were submitted. Remember that this is a point I put in the papers in advance because I did not feel it was a point that has been properly brought out—that at the time of submission of these syllabuses a great deal of effort went into producing specimen papers and mark schemes, and QCA spent ages and ages poring over these trying to ensure the standard. At that point there was no suggestion that the standard that was required of new A2 modules should be any different from that required of the legacy A2 modules. Indeed, the design thresholds in our case are written into our syllabus and approved by QCA, the same as they always were.

**Paul Holmes**

422. You have submitted evidence in your experience as an examiner that normally grade boundaries might move by one or two marks in any given year but the Tomlinson inquiry was only allowed to look at grade boundaries of six marks or more, and this led to huge distortions because they were not looking at the majority of the unusual changes in grade boundaries. Can you explain that a bit more?

*(Mr Porkess)* If I could explain what happens at, first of all, the awarding committee, you are giving the grade “A” and the grade “E” on each module threshold and it is a very painstaking business looking at a lot of evidence. Typically you are taking about half an hour on each threshold that you are looking at and you are taking into account candidates’ work, the design thresholds, centres’ comments, centres’ predictions, the principal examiner’s suggestions, any evidence about the population and historical data, and an experienced committee will come out pretty much with the right mark. Now, it may be that, say you have a situation where you are looking at an “E” grade threshold, and one mark would give you 80% passing but if you go down a mark—which is your next option because you cannot have half marks—you might have 83% passing, so you have a lot of candidates around there. Last year there were, say, 81% who passed. Now you are going to be out of line a bit on last year whatever judgment you make and you make a decision. Now, it may well be that the accountable officer would say, “Sorry, I think you chose the wrong way there. You chose for the more generous; I am going to choose for the harder”, or the other way, and you had Kathleen Tattersall’s evidence where I think pretty well half her decisions for one mark adjustments were up and half were down. Now, that is normal for an accountable officer to look at. Occasionally two marks will happen but that is really the limit of changes that an accountable officer would make, and if an accountable officer is making changes of five and six marks regularly then something is desperately wrong inside the exam board. The awarding committee should not be that inaccurate and something is really seriously wrong with the direction and the personnel and whatever if the accountable officer does not have that level of confidence in them.

423. So if this year there were a lot of unusual moves between two and six marks rather than just one and two marks, and the Tomlinson inquiry only looked at one and six marks a board, does that mean they were missing the point in what they were looking at?

*(Mr Porkess)* Yes. If they had set a limit of two marks that would have been fine. One mark no one is going to question, as I have explained, but a movement of more than one mark really would be unusual, and more than 2 really worthy of comment.

424. The Tomlinson inquiry, the final version published yesterday, seems effectively to say that AQA and Edexcel more or less got it right but OCR were responsible for all the wide discrepancies. Would you think that was correct?

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MR ROGER PORKESS

[Continued

**[Paul Holmes Cont]**

(*Mr Porkess*) I do not have evidence of what went on in AQA and Edexcel and the Tomlinson inquiry did, but I do not have any evidence to the contrary.

**Chairman**

425. Why are you such a lone voice, Mr Porkess? You seem to be out there on your own. There are thousands of examiners and experts and statisticians out there who are not making the same voice that you are making about this?

(*Mr Porkess*) Everyone involved is subject to confidentiality agreements with the boards and because I am employed by an independent organisation I have a bit more freedom to speak out than others<sup>1</sup>.

426. There are other independent souls out there. This Committee has been inundated with information from people who you might think were bound by confidentiality, but you still are up there on your own. Why are you so deeply unhappy?

(*Mr Porkess*) I am unhappy because I do not see that, as we are, we are going to have A- levels that have credibility in the future.

427. What is your passion about? The injustice done this summer to students or about what might continue to be a problem in the future?

(*Mr Porkess*) It may sound discreditable to me but probably the latter is the greater—that I am more concerned about getting system that is going to work properly in the future. However, having said that, to get that I think we have to sort out what happened to candidates this summer as well. You cannot really separate the two but in the long term what happens in the future is really crucial to our country. We cannot have an exam system that does not have integrity.

**Mr Chaytor**

428. Mr Porkess, one of the main principles you identified earlier was that the accountable officers should not be manipulating grade thresholds to influence the outcomes, but is that not what happens every year?

(*Mr Porkess*) No. It has not happened in modular syllabuses.

429. But in terms of the history of A-level examinations, you have described to us a process whereby every year the accountable officer has the power, if he or she chooses to use it, to change the recommended grade thresholds made by the awarding committees?

(*Mr Porkess*) Yes. It is a question of where quality lies.

430. But is it not a matter of degree, not a matter of fundamental principle?

(*Mr Porkess*) No, it is a matter of fundamental principle. In a modular syllabus, you set your standards with the modules and having given the students credit for the modules, the final outcome is then outside your control. You set your standard on the modules so that is where the control is exerted and that is how every modular system works. It is how Open University works, for instance, with its degrees and in that it is different from a linear system.

431. In the normal year when you say that the grade thresholds may be adjusted by one or two points maximum per module, how many outcomes would that influence? For this last year you have given an estimate of somewhere between 20,000 and 35,000 but how many would it be in a normal year if the adjustment was only by one or two marks?

(*Mr Porkess*) On an exam module, if you had one module moved by one mark, that would affect about three quarters of a per cent of candidates when it came through to the A- level, roughly.

432. And in terms of raw numbers, how many would that be?

(*Mr Porkess*) Well, you are talking then about one syllabus so if you have a syllabus with 10,000 candidates you are talking about 75 people, and that would be a big syllabus.

433. Separate from that, one of the issues you raise in your submission is the question of comparability of standard between different subjects which has not been an issue that has featured in the public debate over the last few months nor I think in the first part of the Tomlinson report, and yet you made quite an important point of this. Is it possible to establish a system where there is precise comparability between subjects, or do we not simply have to accept that high achievement in certain subjects, be it maths or physics, is a rarer skill than in other subjects?

(*Mr Porkess*) I think there ought to be a methodology to get a lot closer than we are at the moment. In maths at AS last year, 2001, we had 30% failures where most art subjects were single figures of failures, yet in maths we would normally think that we are probably getting the brighter children, and that is an extreme injustice and really QCA should be setting up procedures that are advising the boards, "Look, your subjects are not working the same way".

434. Is the variation of pass rate between the different subjects in that order every year, or was that peculiar to this particular year?

(*Mr Porkess*) In maths in 2002 the pass rate went up a bit, but maths still came 31st out of 31 and the order of subjects was virtually unchanged.

**Valerie Davey**

435. Probability between subjects has not been touched but certainly comparability between examining boards has. Would it be fairer to both the individual students and, indeed, the integrity of A-levels if there were only one examining board?

(*Mr Porkess*) I think if you only had one you would end up with fossilised exams—you would lose the creativity that is there. Remember that a lot of your subjects are evolving—maths, science,

<sup>1</sup> Note by witness: However, that is only part of the answer. I was responsible for the design of the first modular A level, in 1989–90, and that design forms the basis for much of Curriculum 2000. I am thus particularly aware when quality control measures or, in this case, fundamental principles are being abandoned. My experience is thus deeper than that of most people in the examining system, encompassing the underlying probity of the system, as well as its implementation. This places me under an obligation to speak out, even if as a lone voice.

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MR ROGER PORKESS

[Continued

[Valerie Davey Cont]

technology and so on are evolving subjects—and you need the variety so you can represent that evolution and not just end up with a static syllabus. I am not quite answering your question but I think there is a bigger principle there of keeping our school syllabuses alive.

436. In which case, given that there was a new syllabus this year and it would appear that one of the three was out of line, would you not therefore have expected that the accountable officer might have made a greater variety of change within that year's marking?

(Mr Porkess) I would not have expected that that would happen with the accountable officer, no. I do not see that that would be for him. I can see that the awarding committees would have to think carefully but I am sure that they did so.

437. But if the awarding committees on the basis of the whole ethos of that particular examining board, OCR, was out of line then potentially the accounting officer did have to make that change at the end? I am talking theory: I am not competent enough to be talking as an expert but in theory that potentially could have happened this year?

(Mr Porkess) I do not think there is ever any evidence to suggest that the awarding committees of OCR were out of line with anyone else. It was what

happened subsequently that was a quite different procedure that happened with OCR than happened with the other two boards.

438. But potentially would that not have created a greater fairness at the end of the day?

(Mr Porkess) What I would say is that we have QCA observers at awards, and I would very much like to see that QCA observers are more helpful in making sure we are awarding to the same standards. They come; they check that you have followed procedures; they do not give you any indication, "Look, I think Edexcel would have set that threshold a mark higher", and actually that information would be very helpful to an awarding committee. It is actually QCA's job and it is something that they could do a lot better.

439. You are saying QCA could have improved its performance and would have had a better effect for both students and the A-levels this year?

(Mr Porkess) Yes.

**Chairman:** Mr Porkess, thank you very much for your attendance. We have learnt a lot in this brief session, and we will get your written comments typed up and taken in evidence. Thank you.

### Examination of Witness

MR MIKE TOMLINSON, Chairman, Inquiry into A-level standards, examined.

#### Chairman

440. Mr Tomlinson, welcome. We thought when we said goodbye to you as the Chief Executive of Ofsted that we would not see you so regularly but we are obviously going to see more of you than ever before! You are very welcome to this Committee but are you not becoming a "man for all seasons", to an extent? I was in the radio/television studio this morning and they complained that the Tomlinson report had not given them enough blood on the floor, and I am looking at this painting behind you and there seems to be blood on the wall in this particular room! Is there not a problem? Knowing you well, you have a personality that is likeable, if I may say so, and you have come up with two reports that do not say anything nasty about anyone. In a sense people are perhaps saying—parents, students—that we went through this terrible trauma during the summer yet when you read Mike Tomlinson's report basically no one is to blame and everyone has got off scot free. Is that a fair comment on you being too nice to everyone?

(Mr Tomlinson) I do not think so, no. I think I try to be fair in the sense of where the evidence allows me to go rather than where my own personal views might want to take me, and those are two different things. This inquiry was seeking to get to the bottom of what happened. I think my report pointed clearly to where there were inadequacies in the system which allowed the position we reached this summer to occur. I do not find that attaching personal blame is a particularly helpful activity. The issue was about the systems and the behaviours that those systems

allowed, and nothing that was done this summer was outside of the code of practice and the frameworks which govern that.

441. But how do we get to such a state where you come up with some remarkable recommendations for change and they, as we have heard yesterday, are going to be mainly accepted by the Secretary of State and implemented, and indeed you are going to take a significant role in the improvement of the system? How did we get to the state of what went wrong with the system, the relationship with QCA and the examining boards?

(Mr Tomlinson) I think probably it is long coming in history but the particular point really is that, first of all, the introduction of AS and A2, as I said in the interim report, was rushed. A2 was not piloted which it should have been, and there was no script material available to the QCA to inform and use with teachers, lecturers and students. Secondly, I believe that, though the QCA issued some guidance, that guidance in my view was not satisfactory and sufficient to clearly define the standard of AS and A2 and to exemplify it by material not only with reference to the criteria but also to students' work. That was missing as well. Then we get into a third area which has been going on for a long time and that is the annual August frenzy that says, if more students have achieved the standard then the only way that could have been done is by somehow lowering the requirements they had to meet, and I find that a very unsatisfactory situation. So it is a combination of a whole range of factors, some of which have been with us for a while and others of which are particular to Curriculum 2000, and more

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[Continued

**[Chairman Cont]**

broadly some of which are particular to the way we tend to see the introduction of innovation and new policy requirements.

442. You will know that certainly the Chairman of this Committee agrees with your comments on the summer frenzy, and what this Committee is very keen on is maintaining confidence in the system; that students who have worked so hard to pass their exams feel confident that the qualification is a good one and endures for years to come. But you heard Mr Porkess give evidence to this Committee in the last half hour: here you have conducted what we all assume is a thorough inquiry, in two parts, and there is Mr Porkess, a respected and well known statistician, who says, "Come on, you missed the point"?

(*Mr Tomlinson*) I do not think I did. First of all, the awarding committees do make recommendations about mark grade boundaries for each and every unit. Sometimes at those Committees they are specific to a mark: sometimes they give a range of marks and do not come down on a firm mark, and I am talking about the system as a whole—not the syllabus with which Mr Porkess is associated. In the case of the particular board that administers Mr Porkess' syllabus there is a second stage, and that is something called the GEM (Grade Endorsement Meeting) and that takes the recommendations of the awarding committee and involves the chairman of examiners of the subjects concerned. It has also available to it not only scripts but other data about performance and it can make recommendations on the movement of grade boundaries. Those committees are often attended by very senior people in the board, sometimes indeed the chief executive but not at that point acting as the accountable officer, and then those recommendations go to the accountable officer and are moved again. I think what is important to accept is that there is nothing sacrosanct about the recommendation of the awarding committee. It is their view and it is a respected view and an important one, but to suggest that no changes can be made to those mark grade boundaries flies in the face of what has happened consistently over time and no doubt will continue to happen in the future. So it was a new situation this year. The other point that has to be stressed is that at the accountable officer level, too, there is that one and only opportunity to look across the suite of syllabuses. In mathematics there are a number of syllabuses all under the heading "Mathematics", and the necessity there of ensuring that an 'A' in that syllabus in terms of the standard of students' work and in a syllabus in that suite is the same is a key role for the accountable officer.

443. So Mr Porkess is plain wrong? He is wrong to believe there are thousands of students who had an injustice delivered to them this summer, and he is plain wrong that there are serious problems for the future?

(*Mr Tomlinson*) I do not accept some of the assumptions that he makes in his paper and hence his calculations. I am not pretending, either, that this year or any other year there may not have been students who did not get the grade that they may have thought they got—or, indeed, deserved. That is the nature of examining. It is not a science, it is an art,

and you make decisions about grade boundaries. Now, that may sound shocking but it is the reality. We have a criterion reference system but it is not a perfect one. Nothing of a perfect criterion reference system exists, and you have each year, when you have got the data and the results, to have a look to see whether or not applying the criteria and judging where the grade boundaries are is right. In many instances they do need movement and those movements vary between syllabuses and between boards, in part because the arrangements for the process are different in themselves.

**Ms Munn**

444. One of the things that we have struggled with to some extent in talking to the different examining boards is understanding the whole process that the examining boards go through in arriving at first the marks and then the grade boundaries, and understanding that there is a lot of confusion around that. When we had the three boards here, there was a discussion which indicated that two boards came to their conclusions in one way. What they said, if I recall, is that they introduced statistical information at a different point. Now, OCR have helpfully given us a memorandum which sets out their process and includes the process you have just described but we have not got one from the other boards so I am still at a bit of a loss as to how that happened. Did you as part of your inquiry form a view about whether either of those ways is better, or is it just that they are different?

(*Mr Tomlinson*) I came to the view they are different but would not of necessity lead to necessarily different outcomes. I think that the difference in terms of how much statistical data is available at various stages is correct and certainly at the awarding stage in the AQA and Edexcel there appears to be more statistical data available at that point than in OCR, but that additional data becomes available at the GEM stage and even more at the final stage—more in the sense that the accountable officer is looking across all the suite of syllabuses in a particular subject, which is not something easily done at the other two stages.

445. Would having that statistical information earlier, as the two exams boards do, in your view mean there would be more likely to be a positive or negative influence on people's thinking in terms of where the grade boundaries should fall?

(*Mr Tomlinson*) If I take the balance of opinion of the chairs of examiners that I have spoken to then I think the provision of as much data information as possible at that awarding stage is regarded as beneficial to their work. That is their view and I respect their view as very experienced chairs of examiners.

446. So by bringing it in later what is the effect upon the OCR process, in your view?

(*Mr Tomlinson*) I think it could lead to mark grade boundary changes which are more numerous and potentially more in number than at the other stages, and that was certainly the evidence I was presented

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[Continued

**[Ms Munn Cont]**

with by the three boards when I asked for their most recent 2001 data movement in mark grade boundaries.

447. But what you said earlier still would hold true—that the outcome is not better or worse; it is just a different process?

(*Mr Tomlinson*) It is different. There are some studies being done by Professor Carol Fitz-Gibbon in Durham which looks at the performance of different boards with students of equivalent GCSE grades and what they get at A-level, and certainly mathematics shows a close correlation between the results of mathematics across the three boards, which is reassuring.

448. Is one of the outcomes of your report that the process should be standardised across all the boards so that the pointing of fingers in terms of “more grades are moving here”, which is what you seem to be saying is not justified, would not happen, or can we live with two different processes?

(*Mr Tomlinson*) I think we can live with two different systems as long as at each stage and particularly at the final stage changes to mark grade boundaries are not made without recourse to discussion with the Chair of Examiners, who of course has been intimately involved in looking at students’ work and therefore brings that important dimension to that discussion. That is something, of course, which following the interim report the QCA has moved to make a requirement. There were a number of cases this last summer that I investigated where those changes made had not been discussed and agreed by the Chair of Examiners. In the case of Mr Porkess’ syllabus both the Chief Examiner and the Chair of Examiners had agreed the mark grade boundary movements that were recommended. If I go and investigate them, they are going to say, “I agreed with these for the following reasons”, and how do I gainsay that they were wrong without going back and marking every single paper myself, which is clearly impracticable.

**Mr Pollard**

449. The essence of all this is about restoring credibility which we all support. Mr Porkess very clearly in his evidence a few minutes ago indicated that others may be keeping quiet. You have spoken to lots of people. Is there any evidence? Are you confident that Mr Porkess is a lone voice in this?

(*Mr Tomlinson*) I would never put my head on the line and say he is the “lone voice”. I think I should remind the Committee that I asked for the boards to relieve the Chairs of Chief Examiners of the confidentiality clause. They were free to speak to me and to offer me written and oral evidence if they so wished, and the confidentiality clause did not count, and a large number of them did submit evidence to me. In some cases it was very supportive of what had happened and their belief that it was correct; others, as you well know, did not agree. So the boards have not sought to gag anyone at all. There are some issues which came out of the inquiry which some examiners, and indeed some schools, continue to feel concern about and I referred to a number of those in my report of yesterday—in particular the fact that in one

syllabus the marks separating “A” and “U” were very small in range and therefore gave rise to some difficulties. Now, like Mr Porkess, I am surprised by that because, of course, not only had that whole assessment proposal to go through the board itself but it also had to go through QCA, and it raises some questions, shall we say. There are schools still worried about that—and quite rightly so. But the problem is it is not about the grading issue but about the whole marking and assessment arrangement. Those are being tackled by QCA in conjunction with the board and there will be changes not only to the psychology but the English literature syllabus, which suffered in a similar way, for the examinations next year. So there are people concerned about those issues and it did spark off concerns about the grading issue.

450. Mr Porkess could keep niggling away whilst everybody else is trying to draw a line and move forward and restore the credibility that everybody needs. If you just keep niggling away, does that not undermine what you and others are trying to do? How do we close that gap?

(*Mr Tomlinson*) Well, it is not going to help, is it, and certainly it does run the risk of undermining efforts to restore credibility which I think, and I have said in my report, is absolutely paramount: that people feel—students, their parents and teachers—that next year’s examinations are absolutely secure and they are going to get the grade their work deserves, and I have every confidence that what is happening in the QCA, with the boards and others means we are going to be quite clearly able to say that next year, and I hope I will be able to say that. I have spoken once with Mr Porkess and we have had a number of telephone calls. I might suggest to him that with the OCR and the QCA we sit down and look at this and see if we can find a solution which is acceptable to all parties. I do not mean a fudge—I think there is a need here to understand better and to have all the evidence in front of people such that we can make sensible decisions.

**Chairman**

451. So you are suggesting a meeting?

(*Mr Tomlinson*) I am suggesting perhaps a meeting with the QCA, the OCR board and particularly with the chair of examiners.

452. And Mr Porkess?

(*Mr Tomlinson*) And Mr Porkess, to look at this issue as clearly as we are able to.

**Chairman:** “Blessed are the peacemakers”—and I mean this Committee!

**Mr Simmonds**

453. Do you think your report would be more complete and have a greater holistic approach had you considered movements in all grade thresholds and not just in extreme ones?

(*Mr Tomlinson*) No, because as I have already indicated movements of mark grade boundaries have been something which are part and parcel of the examination systems—and justifiably so. You cannot set a paper year on year which has the same

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[Continued

**[Mr Simmonds Cont]**

level of demand or difficulty. It is not humanly possible to do that. Therefore you have to look at the marks and compare them with the past and ask yourself whether you are still pitching at the same standard. So there is always going to be mark grade boundary movements. In terms of my inquiry I got the data for all of the mark grade boundary movements for every unit done by all three boards this year, and I asked them what the mark movements had been in the previous year, 2001, which was the only basis because that was the first of the AS systems as well—for most. Mr Porkess quite rightly says there have been modular syllabuses for some while. I equally wanted to know whether those changes had been agreed after discussion with the Chair of Examiners whose responsibility it is, and I did not want an assurance from the board but a written assurance from the chair of examiners that that had been the case, and I got those assurances in the very large majority of cases. Where I did not, it was part of the stage 1 regrading exercise.

454. So with the exception of Mr Porkess, who we have heard from this morning, there is no evidence you have come across either directly or anecdotally that suggests there was greater movement—not in the extreme grade thresholds but the smaller ones—this year than in previous years?

(Mr Tomlinson) No, no evidence whatsoever. Remember that Mr Porkess is a principal examiner; there is a chief examiner and there is a chair of examiners for the subject, and the chair of examiners is the key person who takes forward the views of the awarding committee and certainly, as you have seen from the response, he was party to the discussions about movements in that particular set of syllabuses—and supported them. Now, if I had gone to him and said do you agree with the boundary changes that were made, then the answer would have been, “Yes, and this is why”—and where would I have turned?

**Chairman**

455. If you had gone to him—what do you mean?

(Mr Tomlinson) If I had gone to Dr Seager and included those units he would have said “I agreed those changes because...”, and he would have produced the evidence for me. So I believed I did do all that was possible to identify where movements were made which were outside the norm and had not been agreed with the Chair of Examiners.

**Mr Simmonds**

456. In your report you recommend that the examiners are professionalised. Where do you see those new professionals coming from? Out of the existing teaching profession or as a new graduate intake as professional examiners from the day they leave university? Will this not impact on the teaching profession by extracting numbers from it?

(Mr Tomlinson) No. I am not talking about a separate cadre of people; I am saying I want to professionalise the examining process which at the moment is quite rightly dealt with largely by teachers in our system—both in schools, in colleges and in universities for that matter. What concerns me at the

moment is that their work gets little or no credit: their training is, I believe, not as thorough and as consistent as I would hope it ought to be, and what I am looking for is good quality training to be provided for examiners and for examination secretaries in schools and colleges who have a significant role in all of this, and that that training should be properly accredited and that that accreditation should be part of the individual’s career and professional development, and I think it would be quite right to think in the future that a head of department in a secondary or a head of faculty in a college should be someone who has had experience of examining who can advise his or her colleagues and new teachers in what is a very important activity—not just in the public examination sense but in the internal school examination sense as well. I am not looking to pull teachers out of school; I am looking to give teachers a real professional status as an examiner in the system.

457. Many heads of department in secondary schools say they have quite enough to do as it is without laying more professional work on to them through this examination process you are talking about.

(Mr Tomlinson) My reaction to that is to say at the moment that is where the vast majority of our examiners come from each year. I also have met a number who are no longer examiners, and their reasons for not doing it any longer are very much along the lines that it just does not get the credit it deserves, and if we do value our examination system—and I think we should—then we should ensure that the people doing it receive the credit that it deserves and the training and support that they need to do the job effectively, a job which is changing quite significantly as time passes.

458. And paid?

(Mr Tomlinson) And paid too, yes.

**Chairman**

459. Some of us might say that if you had come from Mars and made these comments we would understand but, come on—you have been a senior education official for many years and Chief Executive of Ofsted. All the time you were in Ofsted and in other senior education roles, did you never worry or have concern about the professionalism, and the way in which you ran out examining and examination training for examiners?

(Mr Tomlinson) Yes, not in recent times because certainly Ofsted did not have access to the examining process, but when Ofsted was created in 1992 we continued then alongside QCA to have involvement in monitoring the examination system, and certainly I was very much involved at that stage in the work that was done in the reports produced following the introduction of GCSE and indeed also at A-level. We were, and our reports then were, critical of what was happening at that point in time so it is not a new call. I think it has become heightened, however, by the expansion in the number of examinations that are sat and marked and upon which so much depends for both schools and individual students.



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MR MIKE TOMLINSON

[Continued

**[Chairman Cont]**

460. So do you think we should have less exams or even more exams that are moderated internally in schools?

(*Mr Tomlinson*) In my report I have suggested strongly that there needs to be a serious look taken at the burden of examinations from GCSE through to A-level. This is not a personal view but a result of a lot of discussions with students, their parents, teachers and the like over recent weeks, and there is other evidence that has been presented in the press and to me by letter and the like. I think there is an issue to be looked at there and I recommend it is, but as part of the 14–19. What I do not want to see is a piecemeal approach to this; I want to see a co-ordinated approach looking across the 14–19 field such that whatever happens is a rational approach to the issue. So yes, I do think it needs to be reduced. Whether or not that reduction is to move the responsibility from external examination to internal assessment on the school I think bears much upon the point made by Mr Simmonds. There is a burden on teachers then that that would bring about, and also there are some serious questions to be resolved about coursework in order to give everyone the assurance that it truly represents the work of the student, and only the student.

461. When I was a struggling young university lecturer I think external examining was thought of as outdoor relief for struggling young lecturers. You were a bit reticent about pay—

(*Mr Tomlinson*) I am not reticent—I think they should be paid appropriately for the task that they do.

**Mr Turner**

462. In paragraph 9 of your recommendations you are taking into account the view expressed by Dr Boston that officials of DfES have too many bilateral relationships with examination boards and that those relationships should be conducted through the QCA.

(*Mr Tomlinson*) I am clear that there were contacts between officials and the DfES and the examining boards, yes. I am equally clear in some instances those contacts were quite proper and legitimate, and I would not wish to see them cease. For example, they might want to seek information about the policy which is after all set by the DfES and any advice ought to come from the Department on that. What I am wanting to see is a very, very clear and transparent set of responsibilities which people understand, who is doing what to whom, when and how, rather than at the moment those boundaries being somewhat vague. I think the argument that some have put forward that we should change the status of QCA seems to me a tendency to rush to say, to solve a problem you change the status of something. However, the important thing is the behaviour of people inside those organisations, changing the name will not necessarily itself change behaviour. What I am trying to do here is say that behaviour needs to be changed in such a way that everyone understands what is happening and how it is happening. If a remit letter is sent to the Secretary of State from the QCA to do whatever, if it is the view of the Secretary of State that he or she wishes to

involve another party in that then that should be part of the remit. If that party is DfES officials it should say so—that is what I am getting at—then everyone knows and there can be no conspiracy theories.

463. You said in some instances these contacts were quite proper and legitimate, does that mean in some instances they were not, or in some instances you have no evidence?

(*Mr Tomlinson*) I have no evidence, no.

464. You only know of some instances where they were?

(*Mr Tomlinson*) I did see an awful lot of written exchanges, all of which seem to be quite legitimate, I was told there were a lot of telephone calls, but I cannot say what was said during those. I am not by nature a member of the “Conspiracy Theory Club”.

465. On paragraph 82 you say, “It is self-evident that ministers should be responsible for key decisions which shape the qualification system”. Why?

(*Mr Tomlinson*) As the elected Parliament they are determining the policy.

466. That is circular.

(*Mr Tomlinson*) If the Government decide to introduce a new system called Curriculum 2000 that is a policy decision.

467. You are still within the circle.

(*Mr Tomlinson*) I do not think I am. I am saying policy, I am not saying they should actually be closely involved in all stages following that.

468. Presumably at one stage—you may know the date which ministers took responsibility for the qualifications system—there was a date before that when qualifications were not the responsibility of ministers, certainly not A-Level and O-Level qualifications, they were the responsibility of the Examination Board. Why is it self-evident ministers should have this responsibility?

(*Mr Tomlinson*) I cannot think back. I have to say I have been at the table of all secretaries of state since Keith Joseph and I cannot remember a time when a secretary of state did not feel that they had some responsibility for policy—he introduced GCSE.

469. He said that the only power he had was to decide whether to sign or not sign an examination certificate. Surely before that ministers did not feel responsible? What I am asking you is, why is it self-evident? The fact that it always happened does not mean it is self-evident. Why is it self-evident?

(*Mr Tomlinson*) Simply because at the moment in law the Secretary of State has that power.

470. We made the law we have to try and make it right.

(*Mr Tomlinson*) We are getting into territory—

**Chairman**

471. We do not want an argument. Questions and answers please.

(*Mr Tomlinson*) I am simply saying at the present time it is clear that the Secretary of State is determining policy on qualifications and I can see why that happens, given the responsibility they

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[Continued

**[Chairman Cont]**

currently have. If you are arguing that Parliament wants to change them that is up to Parliament, not me.

472. Our original meeting with Sir William Stubbs back in May gave us some cause for concern because it did seem there was a relationship between the QCA and Government, it was not quite well defined. I remember at that stage asking Sir William why he did not go in as an independent regulator, high profile, bang on the table and say he was unhappy with the situation and to say to the Secretary of State very clearly "I am unhappy". Taking a high profile approach, being more proactive rather than looking like the relationship was extremely close. After all the secondment a senior official from the Department was his Acting Chief Executive. It all seemed too cosy to for us. The QCA did not seem as independent and as rugged as it should be. Does your report really grasp that? You do not recommend that they have the same relationship with Parliament as Ofsted has?

(Mr Tomlinson) I do not recommend that. As I have already said I think changing the legal status of the body would not necessarily of itself change the behaviours and relationships. What you want are changes in those relationships. That is what I have said should happen. I also said, quite clearly, that the QCA must be a rigorous regulator and must be fully involved throughout the awarding process, fully involved throughout, which at the moment is not the case. I also recommend that some activity of the QCA should no longer be part of the remit because they run the risk of contaminating that role as regulator. I am very much in favour of being rigorous.

473. Mr Tomlinson, if you remember your days in Ofsted, is it not the fact that it did give you that mark of independence that you were responsible to Parliament through this Committee, did it not give you that status as security of having that independent challenge, accountability was not just pleasing your paymaster in the Department?

(Mr Tomlinson) It did give me a certain amount of comfort, yes. It also, of itself was not, in my view, sufficient. What was necessary as well was, and I go back to the behaviour of all concerned, was to recognise that fact and behave accordingly. It was a matter of being diligent at all times. Hence, for example, I did always request and, indeed, I always got, a full remit from the Secretary of State for any particular activity they wanted Ofsted to undertake—not how it should be done, I always resisted that—in particular the involvement of other parties, if other parties were to work with Ofsted. It is that clarity we want.

**Jonathan Shaw**

474. Mr Tomlinson, you said that AS and A2 systems should be uncoupled. There have been calls from some quarters for ASs to be scrapped completely, what is your view on that?

(Mr Tomlinson) I would not argue for ASs to be scrapped. The views of students, and taking account of my own experience, is that there are students who want to gain credit for what they have studied in their first year of sixth form because they are not going to

continue it in their second year of sixth form. ASs do have a very important, strong role. In the past students have left after one or two year's of study with nothing to show for what they have achieved. I think the ASs have a very important part to play, it has an important part to play in enhancing the breadth by giving due recognition to those subjects. I would not advocate the loss of ASs. It could also form an important part of any future development in our assessment system.

475. Do you think we need GCSEs and AS Levels?

(Mr Tomlinson) I think that question has to be looked at, part of the 14 to 19. I think as there is a difference between a public examination at 16 and a question of having some assessment of the progress made by the student at that point in time in order to help and inform decisions about where they go from there. Those are two different things that might be achieved by two different means. There will be students who will legitimately want to have a public qualification at the age of 16 simply because they were not going to continue with studying. I go back to my own days as a sixth former when whatever you studied at A-Level your O-Level disappeared with it, in other words it no longer counted. For matriculation purposes you had to have the necessary O-Level plus your A-Level. It was an interesting system and that is how it applied to what was a joint matriculation board.

476. Do you think that the AS Level standing alone is going to provide the necessary incentive for young people to stay on post 16? This Committee, and a lot of people, are really concerned about the number of youngsters staying on beyond 16. Is it going to have the weight and credibility for youngsters to stay on?

(Mr Tomlinson) I do not think youngsters stay on at sixth form because of the possibility of having an AS.

477. No, they stay on to get an A-Level and go on to university.

(Mr Tomlinson) It is still less than 50% that take the route of getting an A-Level and going on to higher education. Remember A-Level is not just the traditional, it is also the vocational A-Level as well. One of the challenges that has had to be met by A-Levels is to meet a population which is very much different from the population for which the original A-Levels were designed.

478. You said somewhere in region of five years in your report for them to be uncoupled and you talk about there being a due process. You say, "The necessary design, development and testing for schools and colleges to familiarise themselves with any changing. . ." Do you include piloting?

(Mr Tomlinson) Yes.

479. You do include piloting?

(Mr Tomlinson) Somewhere else I do refer to piloting. The five years is not plucked out of the air, AS and A2 were three years, GCSE was four. I do not think I need to say any more in quoting those two. I think there needs to be a proper time scale. It was also informed by my view that we need initially to have the AS and A2 firmly established on their standards as well before we can move forward.

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[Continued

**[Jonathan Shaw Cont]**

480. Will there be 50/50?

(*Mr Tomlinson*) I think that is a decision to be made when that is looked at. I am not making the decision.

481. We heard from Sir William Stubbs he thought piloting of the A2 would have been very difficult, do you agree with that?

(*Mr Tomlinson*) I do not know why it would have been difficult. It would have been difficult in the time scale given, it would not in essence have been difficult.

482. Given that there was no historical data to compare—

(*Mr Tomlinson*) There was not for AS, that was piloted.

483. That was, but the A2s were not.

(*Mr Tomlinson*) I said in my interim report I thought that was one of the mistakes made. A2 should have been piloted.

#### Paul Holmes

484. Very briefly to go back to the regrading exercise, who was it that took the decision that you and the regrading panels would only look at the minority of cases that were changed with six marks and above rather than the majority of the changes with a range of three, four or five marks? Was that your decision or the recommendation of the Examining Board?

(*Mr Tomlinson*) That was me. The three boards gave me the data for their movements of grades, mark boundaries this year, and they gave me data from 2001 and because most of the other stuff, remember the time scale, was archived and not easy accessible, they did refer to it orally but I did not see it on paper. It is not the case with all three boards I worked on the plus or minus five mark because the three boards were working differently and had different boundaries, one board has plus or minus two, one board had plus or minus three and the third board was plus or minus five. Most of it was bound up in the way the system operated. The decision to look at it was mine alone, based on that evidence and, as I already said, the evidence from documentation, which indicated whether or not the chair of examiners had been consulted about the changes and had agreed them. That was the basis.

485. When the regrading panels had finished, they looked at 75 different units covering 21 different subjects, in the end the person who decided whether to accept and implement the change was the accounting officer, the chief executive, which was the very people you were investigating in the first place?

(*Mr Tomlinson*) They were the people. That is what the code of practice requires. In my letter of 2 October to the then Secretary of State I made it clear that that would be the case. It was a public statement, it was not challenged by anyone as being not the right way to go about it. That decision by the accounting officer was not made out of that meeting, the accounting officer made the decision in front of everyone else who was present, including the Chair of Examiners for another board, including a QCA observer, including an independent teaching association representative. If he or she wished to

maintain the grade mark they had to put their arguments forward and at the same time it was looked at to see whether or not the Chair of Examiners present was satisfied with the argument as well. Where that was not the case further work was done, and it was.

486. When Ron McLone sat here in front of the Committee and said really the inquiry had vindicated him because there was not that many changes to grades, he was the person who decided there would only be a limited number of changes to grades.

(*Mr Tomlinson*) He had to sign off the ultimate decision. What I am saying was very different from what was done during the main part of the summer, that a decision was made by him, and him alone. In some cases there was no reference to other people, certainly no people present. What I am saying on the regrading is his decision was made in front of, and argued in front of, all of those other people and there needed to be agreement and ultimately there was in all cases. In one or two it required further work to be done, beyond that the regrading meeting was in order to satisfy everyone that the evidence substantiated the decisions made.

487. In your response to a question from Kerry Pollard you were saying, yes, we do need to draw a line and restore confidence in the system. In paragraphs 73 and 74 of yesterday's report one of the issues you talk about is about course work, you say that was not the thrust of what you were looking at, it was the issue of regrading, you talk about course work. There are a number of schools that we have heard about, Knights Templar School was visited by this Committee, where, for example, 14 out of 20 of their students got U grades on their course work and that brought it down, where they were getting As and Bs, they got Us for course work. You have said in paragraph 75 that you are concerned about the quality of communication and the feedback from schools and colleges about the course work and what went wrong. The head of Knights Nice Temple School was saying his teachers are still no wiser as to what was supposed to have gone wrong. He said they have had the course work back now with not one comment or mark on it. I have marked course work for 26 years and the rules are very strict, you have to annotate the work, you have to say why you are giving the marks. Here you have an example at the centre of a major control circuit about why they give 14 out of 20 kids U grades on one subject. They are not answering letters. They have not answered three letters. They have sent back course work with no evidence of being remarked, no comments on why it was wrong and yet these kids are re-sitting in January or the same teachers are teaching kids who are going to do the exams next summer and they have no idea.

#### Chairman

488. That cannot be right.

(*Mr Tomlinson*) That is not right. They deserve, and we need, a better quality of communication and feedback to schools and colleges. That school is not the only school that is complaining about these issues. I have had a number of letters. As you rightly point out, it is not within my remit to deal with this.

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[Continued

**[Chairman Cont]**

I have, in fact, by raising it here and with side communication, it is not just an OCR issue, it goes more widely than that, it may be the volume this year, I am not sure, it is certainly the case that schools do deserve full and clear communication of these matters such that they can deal with any issues that may be about their understanding of the standard, but equally importantly it may be issues that the board have to deal with. The QCA and the board are, I believe and I know, looking at this issue of guidance and criteria for course work. What I found was I could not locate it to say it was a system-wide issue. If they had all been brought down, if there had been a total pulling down of grades associated with course work one would have seen very high levels of failure across the course work module. That was not the case. It was individual schools, clusters of schools, individual pupils which forced us into that conclusion that I have come to. Your fundamental point that schools deserve and need scripts be annotated such that they could be understood. My suspicion is that the fact that papers are now returned makes examiners less willing to annotate their papers.

**Paul Holmes**

489. Yet they require the teachers to annotate and explain why they are rewarding the grades.

(*Mr Tomlinson*) This is about confidence in each other and systems.

**Valerie Davey**

490. The whole report is, I think, based on a change of ethos that you are looking for. You are looking for robustness in the QCA, you are looking for greater openness and dialogue between the examining board, you are looking for a different status for the Joint Council and throughout the report it is based on greater trust, greater understanding, greater communication. How is all that going to be enforced? Who is going to be essentially responsible for taking forward your recommendations now?

(*Mr Tomlinson*) The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority has the main responsibility for that. I have every confidence in the new leadership of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, Sir Anthony Greener and Ken Boston, and that derives from the way they tackled the issue round my interim report. They have tackled them with vigour and rigour, as well. It is obviously, as you quite rightly point out, a change of attitude, a change of ethos, a change of behaviour is really what this is all about. It must be QCA, equally the Secretary of State is also involved in this and has to be, quite rightly. He has already indicated he has made money available to help on one front, he has equally indicated he would be interested in costing for the increased use of ICT, which I think is very important. Going back to marking, with ICT you would be able to easily allocate scripts not just on the basis of a schools' package but on providing the examiner with a full range of the performance spectrum so that they were able to see As and able to see Us. At the moment you get the whole schools. Equally it would also mean

that marks go up on the ICT and you can then identify if you have any rouge markers and deal with it. There is a whole set of things which would improve the consistency and reliability of the marking and examining process. I was pleased when he announced he was willing to look at that as well.

491. The time scale for that, how do you see this working and how long will it take to achieve the kind of examining bodies, admittedly it being an art still and not a science, which I take, as a former teacher, very much to heart. How long is that going to take to achieve?

(*Mr Tomlinson*) Some of it will be achieved I anticipate over the next months, because in January what will go into schools and colleges will be very, very, very clear statements of the standards associated with AA and AS supported by a whole range of exemplifications, including student work from examination papers. That will be there in January. Further material will come in later in the year. There is a training programme for examiners, markers, and so on, in place to take effect for next year's examinations. It will start there. I very much hope that the code of practice changes will have an impact through that. I cannot say how long it will take to fully gain the confidence of every party involved, it is impossible to answer that. It is important that it is done as quickly as possible. I have stressed this. I know that QCA has a thorough plan in place for communication. I think that it is vital over the coming weeks that we find a way of communicating with all students currently in the sixth form in a very simple, post-card way that says what has changed, what is to change and how it will make sure that what happened this year does not happen again. They need to understand that, and their parents. Then we need to get through to the Institute of Directors, chambers of commerce and the CBI about how they could work to get communication to employers. Equally, their confidence in what they are seeing on a certificate has been grappled with. There is a huge communication issue that has to start now.

**Ms Munn**

492. I wanted to clarify one issue, we were told by the head teachers who came to us that there were fewer re-markings and re-gradings this year than in a normal year, what was the process previously if a school was unhappy about the mark that a young person had received?

(*Mr Tomlinson*) The school can make an enquiry but it has to have the approval of the student before that happens, it did not use to require that but it does now. You have to get the approval of the student and that can sometimes cause difficulty because there are time limits and they could be away on holiday. You get approval from the student concerned and you then submit a request for remarking. At that point it is understood that that request could result in the mark going up or down and have the consequent impact on grades, it is not an assurance that it will always go up. The difference for me in my regrading process was the only movement could be upwards.

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[Continued

**Mr Chaytor**

493. Mr Tomlinson, you have talked this morning in your evidence about schools and sixth forms, a huge proportion of A-Level candidates come from A-Level colleges—

(*Mr Tomlinson*) I mentioned colleges a number of times.

494. Obviously I was not listening carefully enough. In the regrading exercise was there a distinction between candidates in schools and in sixth form colleges? The impression is certain schools have made more noise about this whereas sixth form colleges seem generally content?

(*Mr Tomlinson*) There has been evidence presented to me that colleges—I am broadening it beyond sixth form, to FE generally—that they spent an enormous amount of time and effort getting ready for Curriculum 2000 and ensuring adequate training of staff and all of the rest of it. They felt, according to them, particularly well prepared for that. I think that from the schools' side, I am going to resist being critical, some of the issues are about time for teacher release, and all of the rest, given the pressures in schools. There is some evidence that some schools did not participate in the training for Curriculum 2000.

495. That does not feature in your Report.

(*Mr Tomlinson*) I do mention the fact that not all attended. I do understand their reasons, this is about the fact that at the times they offered training it is very often hard to get teacher release and the necessary cover.

496. Do you think in retrospect that needs a higher degree of emphasis than you have given to it or has been given by media coverage of these events?

(*Mr Tomlinson*) It might. You may well be right on that. That has to be part of this whole issue that I dedicate one chapter to, that is professionalisation of training. That is an issue I think cannot be tackled on its own, it may have to be linked with discussions about teachers' contracts, and all of the rest of it, that are going on at the moment. You may know that the FE does say it is slightly easier on occasion for them, given their size and capacity. It was not a great difference, it was a slight difference.

497. You said the examining boards gave you statistical information from 2001. In 2001 there were O-Level exams and AS exams, so which was it?

(*Mr Tomlinson*) It was both. In some cases there were already module syllabuses, the administration was slightly different because of the fact we had AS and A2.

498. The question of the modular syllabus, how do you respond to that? The unique thing about this year was that the grade boundaries were sifted for individual modules, it was not just for the aggregate scores?

(*Mr Tomlinson*) Because the aggregate scoring derived from the marks of individual grade boundaries those had to be fixed.

499. Is there not inevitably a cumulative effect?

(*Mr Tomlinson*) There is. It is in some sense a perverse effect. What you get is a regression. What you find is if you use only the marked grade boundaries for the units and you did not look at the

broader statistics, this is something which people need to understand, then you would have ended up with much lower numbers of A grades because the regression causes that. That was one of the reasons why you have to look not just at the mark, the unit grade boundaries, but the aggregate as well. The code of practice requires that to happen.

500. Was it unique the grade thresholds were changed this year for individual modules?

(*Mr Tomlinson*) It was not unique, no.

501. In paragraph 64 of your report you talk about criterion-referencing and you say, "Effective use of statistical information will provide results which are closer to those that would result from effective criterion-referencing". Is that not like saying that genetically modified food is more authentic than the real thing?

(*Mr Tomlinson*) No. What that is saying is there is no such thing as a perfect criterion-referencing system.

502. Nowhere. Nowhere in the world?

(*Mr Tomlinson*) No. Once you have criteria you are open to different interpretations of those criteria by different people and different interpretations of the work they are looking at against those criteria. It is not an absolute science. You can get close, we are close in this country, possibly closer than many others, but at the end of the day you cannot be perfect. However, statistics help you to get closer to that perfection.

503. Are you satisfied that overall in looking at the syllabuses of all three examining boards across all subjects the detail of the specifications are sufficiently close to criteria and reference principle or is there room for a greater degree of specificity?

(*Mr Tomlinson*) I think in some subjects that I have seen, I must say I have not seen and read every single one of them, in those I have seen, it is a small minority of cases, there could be much tighter specifications to help. That, of course, relates to some of the issues that have been raised in the reports.

**Mr Chaytor:** Thank you.

**Chairman**

504. You talked about the "frenzy" in the summer, who is responsible for stoking that frenzy, was it the Headmaster and Headmistresses Conference, was it the *Today* programme?

(*Mr Tomlinson*) The frenzy that I refer to is an annual one, the annual frenzy as soon as results come out, how some people are unwilling to accept that as a result of harder work and better teaching more students can achieve the standards. We cannot call for improved standards and then as soon as we begin to have them appear, and they are appearing, we suddenly decide they cannot be real, somebody has lowered the boundary. I find that very, very unacceptable. If that boundary, that standard, is not being maintained year-on-year then I think those people are right to raise those questions. One of the issues I raised very clearly in my report is I do not think we can lurch from answering that question from crisis to crisis, there needs to be a systematic, consistent approach to looking at where the standards are being maintained all of the time. If they

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[Continued

**[Chairman Cont]**

are not we have to be honest and do something about it. If they are we have to accept the outcome and we have students achieving better than they did previously. After all that is what we want. We do not want it at the cost of lowering standards.

505. When the second part of your inquiry was published Sir William Stubbs reported your inquiry exonerated him by implication, he should never have been sacked.

(*Mr Tomlinson*) I make no comment on Sir William Stubbs. There is a process in train.

506. You can exercise parliamentary privilege. We cannot get you to say anything nasty, even about the *Today* programme!

(*Mr Tomlinson*) I apologise for not putting blood on the carpet. I am more interested in making sure students get what they deserve and that is not achieved by putting blood on the carpet, it is about dealing with the system.

507. You banged the table with your finger, Mr Tomlinson!

**Mr Turner**

508. Mr Tomlinson, is an AS level worth half an A-Level?

(*Mr Tomlinson*) It is at the moment, yes, by definition.

509. Even though both the former secretary of state and Dr Boston say that the AS paper is easier than the A2 paper?

(*Mr Tomlinson*) Of course it is, an A-Level paper in the past contained an easier group of questions and a hard group of questions. When you are testing over a two year period any A-Level paper, any student and any teacher will point out, there are an easier set of questions and there are harder ones.

510. One qualification is based on easier—

(*Mr Tomlinson*) It is based on one year of study, not two. I would argue that your maturity level, your capacity to synthesise and to analyse increases and improves not necessarily linearly but it does improve. You can ask more difficult and demanding questions after two years than you can after one.

511. What about somebody who takes an A-Level at the age of 30?

(*Mr Tomlinson*) They are judged by that standard and very often they do well because they bring to bear an awful lot of maturity and experience.

**Mr Pollard**

512. Are you satisfied that vocational examinations are okay?

(*Mr Tomlinson*) I am insofar as I have looked at them partly because they do not follow the model of the AS and A2, all units are graded at the same level.

**Chairman:** Mr Tomlinson, we promised to release you at 10.45, it is now 10.45. We have found this a most useful session. Thank you very much.

**APPENDIX****Letter to Andrew Turner MP from Roger Porkess (QCA 38)**

We met across the committee room yesterday, and, if I may say so, I appreciated your questions, both to myself and to Mr. Tomlinson. There were, however, two places where I felt we could have given you more informative answers.

**AGGREGATING AS AND A2**

You asked Mr Tomlinson about the effect of the AS being “easier” than the A2 and he gave you what is now the official reply, that the AS consists of the easier questions that would have been set in a legacy A Level and the A2 the harder ones. I find this a somewhat unconvincing argument, and think there is a better way of looking at the situation, exemplified by this question.

*“You have done AS German and are trying to decide whether to continue onto A2 German next year, or to do AS Mathematics instead. Which is going to be the more demanding?”*

If the curriculum is right, both will be equally demanding. They will both represent one year’s work. The extra technical demands of the A2 German will be balanced by the need to come to terms with what is involved in studying Mathematics at sixth form level. (And of course the same should be true for any pair of subjects.)

I find the words “easy” and “hard” unhelpful, whereas thinking in terms of the demands made on students does seem to make things clearer. If we have the AS and A2 right, then adding together two equally demanding years’ work on a 50–50 basis is entirely appropriate.

The conclusion is the same but I think this is a sounder way of arriving at it. Not only that, but it does allow a loose check on the present curriculum that does not depend on reference to legacy syllabuses which will soon be forgotten anyway.

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[Continued

## COMPARABILITY BETWEEN SUBJECTS

You asked me about comparability between subjects but time did not allow me to give as full an answer as I would have liked.

Concern over the relative difficulty of science and mathematics was recently expressed in the following paragraph of the Roberts Review for the Treasury.

*It is essential that pupils have a broadly equal chance to achieve high grades in science and mathematics as they would in other subjects. Without this fewer pupils will choose to study science and mathematics at higher levels. The review is firm that arguments about the merits of 'levelling up' or 'dumbing down' are a distraction—pupils generally find it more difficult to achieve high marks in science and mathematics, this needs to be corrected.*

The Roberts Review, 2002

This really does matter. Twenty years ago we had about 100,000 A Level Mathematics students a year. Now we are down to about half that number. Physics and Chemistry have seen big declines too. Without a strong science and technology base we will bequeath a third world country to our children and grandchildren. But look at the table below.

## AS RANKINGS, 2001 AND 2002

Subject	2001			2002		
	Rank	Pass (%)	Fail (%)	Pass	Fail	Rank
Welsh	1	97.2	2.8	97.8	2.2	1
Classics	2	96.0	4.0	95.8	4.2	2
Express Arts	3	95.7	4.3	95.6	4.4	3
Music	4	94.8	5.2	91.5	8.5	9=
English	5	94.7	5.3	93.8	6.2	5
History	6=	93.6	6.4	92.1	7.9	8
Media St	6=	93.6	6.4	94.1	5.9	4
French	11=	91.0	9.0	89.6	10.4	16=
Spanish	11=	91.0	9.0	90.1	9.9	14=
Geography	13	90.8	9.2	90.1	9.9	14=
Business St	20=	87.0	13.0	86.9	13.1	21
Chemistry	20=	87.0	13.0	86.7	13.3	22
Sociology	22	86.5	13.5	85.2	14.8	23
Physics	23	86.1	13.9	84.6	15.4	24
Biology	26	84.4	15.6	82.9	17.1	26
Psychology	27	82.8	17.2	82.7	17.3	27
General St	28	81.9	18.1	80.1	19.9	28
Computing	29	80.5	19.5	78.3	21.7	30
Law	30	79.5	20.5	79.4	20.6	29
Mathematics	31	71.4	28.6	77.9	22.1	31
All subjects		86.4	13.6	86.5	13.5	

Source: JCGQ

This shows the pass/fail rates for different subjects at AS Level in 2001. There were very marked differences, with the mathematics and sciences (which tend to attract the brighter students) clearly much harder.

Of course 2001 was the first year of Curriculum 2000 and so some disparities could be expected as teething problems. However QCA did nothing to address the problem for 2002, and that despite the Roberts Review. As you can see the relative difficulties of subjects are virtually unaltered.

*4 December 2002]**[Continued*

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I alerted QCA to the problem before this summer's award, pointing out that they needed to take an active role if the 2001 disparities were not to be repeated, and received a bland assurance that everything was in hand. My own view is that they have neither the methodology nor the competences to be able to deal with this problem.

*5 December 2002*



## APPENDICES TO THE MINUTES OF EVIDENCE

### APPENDIX 1

#### Memorandum submitted by Len Masterman (QCA 14)

##### HOW THE PAPERS SAW IT: PRESS COVERAGE OF THE A-LEVEL CONTROVERSY (UP TO THE PUBLICATION OF THE TOMLINSON INQUIRY)

It began with hysteria, paranoia and accusations of political conspiracy. “You Cheats” shrieked the front-page headline of *The Daily Mail* during the first week of the A levels “fiasco”. “Scandal of the Grade Robbers” the paper announced over an inside double-page spread.<sup>1</sup> *The Mail’s* charges were laid out with some precision. There is, it reported, “suspicion that grades were doctored in a politically-motivated bid to lower A level results at public schools so that the state sector compared more favourably”.<sup>2</sup> *The Mail’s* editorial asked, “Are results rigged in order to hide the shortcomings of state schools? . . . For reasons of political correctness it seems that thousands of clever, hard-working students may have been cheated of their just and deserved reward”.<sup>3</sup> *The Mail* was not alone. “Reverse discrimination”, Simon Jenkins called it in *The Times*.<sup>4</sup> Even *The Sun* was moved to comment that this “stinks of class prejudice of the worst kind”.<sup>5</sup>

What provoked the unlikely theory that the exam boards and its examiners were agents of a government-inspired class war were the well-publicised concerns of the Headmasters’ Conference, the association of independent school headteachers, HMC felt that there was evidence of a deliberate downgrading of some public schools’ results, particularly in course work, and that many students had a quite inexplicable spread of grades which suggested some degree of fixing.

This particular class-based version of events did not survive the week. The Secondary Heads’ Association confirmed that state-sector heads were also complaining of “bizarre exam results”. *The Independent* quoted SHA’s Chair John Dunford: “The evidence is . . . that QCA was at the centre of interference over the way exams were marked . . . Individual examiners have told SHA that the Boards said they were under pressure from QCA to avoid grade inflation”.<sup>6</sup>

Conspiracy theory, then, was superseded by a basic confusion which underpinned and undermined much of the subsequent media coverage: the confusion between marking and grading. HMC and SHA’s original concerns seem to have been primarily about unfair marking. QCA’s quite legitimate pressure upon the boards to maintain standards and avoid grade inflation, however, is a pressure to look carefully at grade boundaries. SHA’s view that it constituted evidence of interference over marking displayed a culpable lack of knowledge about the most basic tenets of examining. Examiners do not award grades. They give raw marks. Even these raw marks are not final marks since they are themselves subjected to statistical adjustment. What the final marks signify in terms of grades is not known until the final stages of the examining process when they are converted to recommended grades by senior examiners. Where the grade boundaries will fall will vary from year to year. Even Chief Examiners do not set grades. They recommend them to the Chief Executive who must decide on the basis of the available statistical evidence, and any additional supportive arguments whether to accept the recommended boundaries or adjust them.

Much of the media coverage of the exams crisis, then, as well as the comments of Heads’ Associations, teachers and even some examiners, has been based on a false assumption: that examiners have had their marks overturned and subjected to unwarranted manipulation, and interference. Mike Tomlinson disposed of this at his press conference in a single sentence: “This is not about marking”. Even this was not clear enough for some. *The Guardian’s* editorial on Tomlinson’s report the next day pronounced: “What is clear is that some students were unfairly marked”.<sup>7</sup>

The second great confusion underpinning much of media coverage was the way in which the routine annual process of adjusting grade boundaries by the exam boards’ Chief Executives was greeted as a jaw-dropping revelation by both the media and head teachers’ associations. To Melanie Phillips in *The Mail* the fact that a Chief Executive “overrode his examiners and arbitrarily raised the mark expected of the grade . . . beggars belief.”<sup>8</sup> Charges of manipulation, rigging, cheating, fixing and fiddling appeared in every newspaper. Ted Wragg, in these pages, was one of the few commentators to inject some realism into the debate: “The adjustment of grade boundaries happens in every major exam from school to university”.<sup>9</sup>

In fact the boards’ Code of Practice demands that “appropriate measures are set in place to make certain that standards are maintained in each subject from year to year.” The adjustment of grade boundaries is the most effective weapon, which boards have in maintaining standards. Nowhere in the media was the case put that the adjustment of grade boundaries where necessary works in the interests of fairness and justice to all students in guaranteeing comparability of standards between different subjects, different boards and different years and underwrites the value of and the public’s confidence in their award.

Of course if grade inflation had been allowed to run wild this year then the Government, QCA and the boards would all have been culpable. And *The Mail* and *The Telegraph* would have been leading the media lynch mob.

In the event, Mike Tomlinson had little difficulty in distinguishing between reality and the concoction of conspiracy theories and political interference, professional incompetence, class discrimination, fixing, cheating and other forms of chicanery which the media had attributed to those running the examination system. Those accusations may have sold newspapers and created headlines. But Tomlinson found not a shred of evidence to support them: "I am satisfied that the requirements the QCA placed on the boards were proper. I am equally satisfied that the actions of the Chief Executives were all done within the code of practice. They acted with integrity."<sup>10</sup> There were problems. But they were problems of structure, of communication and of perception. Above all there was a tension between the maintenance of a publicly-acceptable standard, and the increasing percentage of students who appeared to be meeting that standard.

The subtlety and importance of this, particularly in relation to the agenda it might set for a more enlightened future public debate, was not picked up by the media. Instead, a journalist at Tomlinson's press conference asked, "Isn't this a whitewash?" Tomlinson responded angrily. He would not accept that charge unless evidence was produced to support it. Silence followed. A re-run of the press's verdict on the QCA report a week earlier seemed to have been forestalled. "This is not a picture of an examination system in crisis", Tomlinson insisted. The next morning Tony Halpin, *The Times*' Education Editor, wrote "The report paints a devastating picture of confusion at the highest level of the examining system".<sup>11</sup> *The Mirror* editorialised, "Standards should be laid down well in advance so the right level of tests are set rather than fiddling with the results later".<sup>12</sup> *The Mail* called it "a whitewash".<sup>13</sup>

October 2002

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Len Masterman is Research Fellow in Communication and Politics at the University of Liverpool. A version of this article appeared in the *Education Guardian* on 8 October 2002.

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## APPENDIX 2

### Memorandum<sup>†</sup> submitted by Brian Stevens (QCA 17)

#### IMPLICATIONS OF THE A-LEVEL FURORE

##### WHAT HAS HAPPENED

In a Leader Column entitled "Exam Scandal Demands Action" the *Observer* leader writer wrote:

*"There is a crisis of confidence in our examination system which can only be remedied by swift and radical action. An essential starting point is to restore the students' original marks. The tampering by officials with this year's A-Level grades has betrayed the trust of teachers, parents and, most importantly, children."*

There are several implications in this comment, the two most important being the question of public confidence and secondly the question of technical detail. The general public, either directly themselves or through their children and grandchildren, are nearly all affected by what is happening. Whilst not needing, nor indeed wanting, to know the fine detail of the technicalities, the restoration of its confidence will depend to a very large extent on a better understanding of what is happening.

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<sup>†</sup> Briefing paper prepared for the FEdS Business Forum.

In England we should bear in mind what happened last year in Scotland. Many of the issues were similar: the introduction of a new system inadequately trialed, the need to understand new standards and new methods, the problem of coping with a modular system. Yet the Scots within the year have done a fine job in re-establishing confidence, not by returning to the old system, which would not have been possible, but by learning from mistakes and injecting stability into the new system.

The former Chief Inspector, Mike Tomlinson, was given the task by the Secretary of State, on 19 September, to investigate what has happened.

The precise terms of reference for his enquiry are:

1. To investigate allegations about the setting of standards for A-Level grades this year. In particular to make sure that the conversion from marks to grades was determined according to proper standards and procedures.
2. To investigate the arrangements at QCA and the Awarding Bodies for setting, maintaining and judging A-Level standards which are challenging and ensuring their consistency over time.

Mike Tomlinson's interim report has already been published and his further, detailed report into the re-grading of some students' papers will follow very shortly.

#### THE SCOPE OF THIS PAPER

This paper is not concerned with trying to shadow Mike Tomlinson's work; there would be no point. This paper seeks to consider some of the implications arising from the problem that has occurred this year.

#### SOME FURTHER DETAIL

In his interim report Mike Tomlinson set out the following background details to the development and structure of the current AS/A-Level system:

“8. The current Curriculum 2000 reforms of the A-level system were introduced in September 2000 with the first AS and A-Level awards being made in Summer 2001 and Summer 2002 respectively. The principles behind Curriculum 2000 were wholeheartedly endorsed during my enquiry.

10. The current A-Level is divided into two parts: three units at AS Level which together equate to the first year of a traditional A-Level course and three A2 Units awarded during the second year of study. Taken together these six units comprise a full GCE A-Level and form the basis for an A-Level award. The three units studied in the first year at AS level can, if the student wishes, be 'cashed in' to provide a certificated qualification in its own right. Each unit of the award is equally weighted with the AS and A2 programmes each accounting for 50 per cent of the overall grade.

11. This system was established with the intention that students would take a broad range of AS Level courses during the first year of study—up to four or five—they are then able to narrow their studies in the second year by selecting the subjects which they will pursue to the full GCE A-Level standard whilst receiving a qualification for subjects they pursue no further. Students may also re-take units to seek to improve their grade.

12. These design features might reasonably have been expected to lead to an increase compared to the former 'legacy A-Levels' in the proportion of full A-Level candidates who achieve the GCE A-Level standard without any change in the overall level of demand of the qualification.

18. AS units were piloted on a limited basis. A2 units were not, for reasons I have not had time to ascertain. Therefore before this summer there was no practical experience or relevant script to aid the grading process or to illuminate the challenges of the new grading and aggregation process across the GCE A-Level as a whole. This resulted in part from the speed of implementation of the policy as determined by Ministers.

36. The evidence put to me suggests there may be a lack of consistency in practices across the three English Awarding Bodies in the grading process. In the time available it has not been possible to investigate more fully this matter. I intend to do so in part two of my enquiry.”

In his conclusions to the interim report, Mike Tomlinson makes two particular points, which I have isolated:

*“From the evidence collected it appears that the alleged problem with the grading process this summer has its roots in decisions made by the DfES and QCA about the structure of the AS and A-Level awards, the assessment model and the preparation for the introduction of the new arrangements, particularly for A2. The lack of a common understanding of the standard associated with As and A2 units along with the challenges associated with aggregation of the units, given all had equal weighting, played a significant part in the problems experienced by the three examination boards during the grading this year.”*

*“At the root of this is a long standing misunderstanding of the difference between maintaining a standard and the proportion of candidates meeting that standard and hence deserving to be awarded a*

*GCE A-Level. This misunderstanding appears to exist at almost all levels of the system and in society at large.”*

In his press briefing Mike Tomlinson commented that rather than being able, through his enquiry, to apportion blame, this was an accident waiting to happen.

#### SOME TECHNICALITIES

Geoff Lucas, the Secretary of The Headmasters’ and Headmistresses’ Conference, and formerly a senior executive at the QCA, has published some helpful reflections:

*“The answer (to what has gone wrong) lies in the impossible task now facing the Awarding Bodies. They are required to achieve comparability between different modules or components (course work versus an external exam), different subjects, qualifications in the same subject area between Awarding Bodies in the overall pattern of results and comparable year on year standards.*

He also points out that:

*“Even before Curriculum 2000 many of these QCA Code of Practice Requirements were already under extreme pressure. Following the introduction of the new modular A-Level system, the availability of re-sits and the variable nature of the cohorts sitting different modules, something was bound to give.”*

Again, the accident waiting to happen.

The problem at the root of this issue as pointed out by Mike Tomlinson is the misunderstanding of the difference between maintaining a standard and the proportion of candidates meeting that standard. In different words or technical jargon, this is about norm referencing and criterion referencing:

- Norm referencing is a means of maintaining standards from year to year by simply setting a percentage pass rate for each level. Maintenance of standards is based on the concept that with a national cohort of students as the candidates, the numbers are sufficiently high to make the assumption that standards will not vary greatly from year to year; therefore a given percentage will achieve an A grade, another given percentage B grade and so on. This is precisely what the Cabinet Office required earlier in the year of this year’s A-Level passes to create an A\* by creaming off the top 5 per cent of the A-grades to differentiate the very good from the good.
- Norm Referencing in its purest form makes the maintenance of standards from year to year extremely easy and was convenient when the original purpose of A-level examinations was to assist in the selection of school students for University education, with the system largely run by the universities for their convenience. In this country you have to be accepted at a University. In France and in Germany the achievement of the Baccalaureate or of the Abitur respectively is a passport directly to University.
- However, Norm Referencing, set up as a competitive way of taking out successful categories of candidates, is deeply unfair as a means of measuring the performance of schools and, perhaps more importantly, of individuals. With Norm Referencing too there can be no targets because clearly the targets are pre-set, and there is the broad assumption that overall attainment does not change so that standards can remain constant from year to year.
- Criterion Referencing sets standards against declared criteria of performance—the so-called “can do” statements. A driving test is criterion referenced. Achievement of the driving certificate is set simply against performance and not against an annual limited number of certificates available in a competitive environment.

In the 1980s and the 1990s a strong move was made towards criterion referencing, strongly influenced by the growing importance of vocational qualifications and especially following the Peter D’Abo report in 1986 which launched the development of NVQs and then GNVQs. These are all performance or criterion referenced. This thinking led to the criterion referencing of the national curriculum attainment targets and then of course the whole panoply of target setting began to be set in place, with the government assuming greater and greater control of the process of examining in the form of guidance and core codes of practice.

- There was in this shift a move from a more general exam syllabus to a set of statements of outcomes for the course. A broad syllabus-controlled exam course can provide very little information about what the successful candidate at any level is able to do—apart from anything else nothing is contained in the certification indicating which parts of the syllabus were studied and examined.

This dichotomy between Norm Referencing and Criterion Referencing can still be seen very clearly in professional organisations. The Financial Services Authority, as the regulatory body for the Financial Services Industry, establishes the criteria by which people can be licensed to operate in the Financial Services Industry. It could not operate on Norm Referencing. The Chartered Institute of Bankers, as it used to be, ran largely a Norm Referencing system to maintain standards for entry into its Associate grades until it became obvious that companies were not much interested in supporting financially a percentage of candidates that would be failed by the Norm Referencing system.

The difficulties in criterion referencing lie in the establishing of the criteria. For practical issues like Driving Licences and licences to operate in certain commercial fields the issue is relatively straightforward. It is relatively straightforward in areas like science and mathematics but not at all straightforward in areas like key and core skills or arts subjects. It is noticeable that nearly all the subject areas recommended for reassessment in Mike Tomlinson's report are arts areas.

There is at the moment, to quote Geoff Lucas, "a messy and inconsistent hybrid of Norm and Criterion Referencing that has evolved over time."

#### REGULATORY FRAMEWORK

With the growing insistence of Criterion Referencing in the 80s and 90s came the need for regulation:

- In England the regulatory authority is the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, which regulates all external qualifications and draws its authority from the Education Act of 1997. We should perhaps remember that QCA is barely five years old and that the QCA is the first authority we have ever had in this country to regulate both academic and vocational qualifications.
- In Wales the regulatory authority is the Qualifications, Curriculum and Assessment Authority for Wales (ACCAC—the initials of the Welsh version).
- In Northern Ireland the regulatory authority is The Council for Curriculum Examinations and Assessment (CCEA).
- In Scotland the Scottish Qualifications Authority is quite separate from the QCA but the QCA and ACCAC work with the SQA to ensure that NVQs and SVQs remain aligned.

Following the events of this summer Damian Green, the Shadow Education Secretary, has called for the QCA to have the same kind of independence from the Government as the Bank of England has over interest rates.

#### HOW ARE GRADES AWARDED?

There is an element of Norm Referencing and a strong reliance on Criterion Referencing. Exam papers are marked and awarded grades against an agreed list of qualities or criteria. An A grade this year should represent the same quality of work as an A grade last year. Examiners meet to see if the grade boundaries need altering to reflect differences each year in the questions.

It was alleged that one of the Exam Boards, OCR, which happens to be the Board used by members of the Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference because of its direct links with Oxford and Cambridge—another trail into a particularly English situation—altered grade boundaries significantly to reduce the numbers passing or getting the best grades. OCR has responded that it made adjustments only to ensure that this year's results were broadly in line with those under the old A-Level system—an element of Norm Referencing.

This year is the first time that students have completed the two-tier A-Levels. They took AS Levels in the first year of the sixth form and then A2s in the second year. Add them together and you get an A-Level but there is the difficulty, as set out above, about the lack of precedent in this new, modular system.

#### THE BAC ISSUE

In to all of this the Secretary of State has perhaps rather precipitately re-introduced the issue of the Baccalaureate saying that the A-Levels may be scrapped and replaced by an English version of the IB—unfortunately reference to a British Baccalaureate was made, which would be beyond the powers of the Secretary of State who can only have jurisdiction in England. There is a danger that the Baccalaureate might appear to be the answer to all prayers but those who call for a system like the Baccalaureate miss the point. Exactly the same technical problems of standard setting inevitably arise there too.

Nor is the concept of the Bac always referred to clearly.

#### *The International Baccalaureate*

The International Baccalaureate Organisation, founded in 1968, is a non-profit educational foundation based in Geneva. It offers schools three programmes:

- The Primary Years Programme.
- The Middle Years Programme.
- The Diploma Programme. It is the Diploma Programme that is referred to in these discussions.

There are 1,341 authorised IB World Schools in 112 countries. The Diploma Programme is for students in those schools in the final two years of school before University. The programmes grew out of the international schools efforts as far back as 1924 to establish a common curriculum and university entry credential.

It is interesting that the Director General is George Walker, a prominent Head Teacher in England in the 1980s. The Director of International Education is Geoff Thompson, based in the University of Bath. He had been deeply involved in post-16 education issues in England during the 1980s and early 1990s. The Curriculum and Assessment Centre is based in Cardiff.

The IB Diploma Programme is designed for highly motivated secondary school students aged 16–19. It is a comprehensive two-year international curriculum available in English, French and Spanish, which is structured as a hexagon around three central features:

- The theory of knowledge—the course challenges students to question the bases of knowledge, to be aware of subjective and ideological biases, to develop the ability to analyse evidence that is expressed in rational argument.
- Creativity, action and service—this programme encourages students to share their energy and special talents with others. Its goal is to educate the whole person and foster responsible, compassionate citizens.
- An extended essay of 4,000 words—the student has the opportunity to investigate a topic of special interest.

The six academic subjects are drawn from the following groupings:

- Group 1. Language A1. More than eighty languages have been offered for examination as part of the IBO's policy of encouraging students to maintain strong ties to their own cultures.
- Group 2. A second language. All diploma students are examined in a second language.
- Group 3. Individuals and Societies. This includes Business and Management, Economics, Geography, History, Islamic History, IT, Philosophy, Psychology, Social and Cultural Anthropology.
- Group 4. Experimental Sciences. These include Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Environmental Systems, Design Technology.
- Group 5. Mathematics and Computer Science. This is to promote confidence and facility in the use of mathematical language. Computer Science is an elective subject.
- Group 6. The Arts. This includes visual arts, music and theatre arts.

It will be seen that the International Baccalaureate Diploma is a demanding academic diploma with no vocational strands.

### *The Welsh Bac*

Jane Davidson, the Education and Lifelong Learning Minister in Wales, has introduced the Welsh Bac, which is being tested in 19 schools across Wales in preparation for the introduction of the qualification throughout Wales next year.

As well as core exams, the Welsh Bac emphasises non-academic areas such as key skills and work experience. The Welsh Bac will also provide certificates embracing existing qualifications including A-Levels AS-Levels, vocational A-Levels and GCSEs. The core will include the study of Wales, Preparation for the World of Work, Community Activity, Key Skills and a Modern Language module.

Before devolution, Colin Jenkins, the former Head Teacher of Atlantic College and one time Deputy Director General of the International Baccalaureate, and John David began to develop the International Baccalaureate for particular use in Wales. They are both scornful of what is now called the Welsh Bac, dismissing it as “a qualification, not a Baccalaureate, something based on A and S-Levels” and as “Curriculum 2000’ with a bit of icing”.

### *The English Bac*

The movement towards the English Baccalaureate goes back over ten years. In 1990 the Institute for Public Policy Research published a document called “A British Baccalaureate”, one of whose authors was David Miliband, now the Schools Minister.

The proposed system would start at 14 and not 16 as in the International Baccalaureate and aim to provide a transparent, flexible and rigorous system of education *and training* for all. It would consist of a series of interlocking diplomas from Entry, through Foundation and Intermediate to the Advanced Bac.

Existing qualifications would be re-engineered to fit the system, which would cover both full-time and work-based learning. Students taking the advanced Bac would be able to do the general Bac or specialist Bacs. All of the Bacs would contain a compulsory core plus three choice specialist subjects. It would also include a record of wider activities such as community service.

This proposal follows very much the line of the Welsh trial Bac and is very close to the proposals contained in the Government's 14–19 Consultation Paper earlier this year.

*The French Bac*

The French Baccalaureate is quite different again, providing a single subject Baccalaureate exam which covers a range of both vocational and academic subjects. Those subject groupings are clustered under different Baccalaureate titles.

## WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

There is an immediate and pressing need to address the related issues of public confidence and technical details in Curriculum 2000, not only for the students and teachers involved in this year's difficulties but because also a new cohort of young people and teachers are already engaged in the first year of the same system.

There is a longer-term issue, probably over 10 years, of shaping the evolution of the system so new to this country along more carefully structured lines.

There need to be some clear guiding principles to this shaping:

- We are establishing a qualifications framework that reflects what candidates have achieved. Its primary purpose is not about recruitment either to University or to business. If either University or business uses the framework then so be it.
- We need to accept and explore the difference between testing and assessing. The teaching profession, as much as any business trainer or mentor, needs to have the professional capacity to assess backed up by the use of evidence. Testing should be carried out by external agencies.
- Individuals need to be encouraged to “own” the process of their own development. The Matriculation Diploma was put forward in the Consultation Paper under two models—the model with three levels and a model with no level where the diploma became the mechanism for drawing together assessment evidence and qualifications. Curiously the consultation document insisted that even the three-level model was not to be seen as a qualification. Instead of recruiters, either at University or in business, taking the lazy route of demanding certain grades they should, as is happening in the Universities, prompted by UCAS, be establishing required and desired characteristics for entry into any of their courses or, in the case of business, into their jobs. The lack of such capacity is a leftover of the days of Norm Referencing.
- The principles behind Curriculum 2000, which call for a wider assessment of understanding and competences than has formerly been measured by a limited diet of A-Level courses, should be held firm. Mike Tomlinson has already endorsed this point in his interim report.
- It could hardly be stressed enough that all stakeholders, including business and higher education, should be involved in the design of this evolving system.

*October 2002*

**Finance and Education Services—FEoS**

FEoS is a lead edge consultancy company, working as a catalyst to bring greater understanding between the worlds of business, education and the government in order to create the synergy needed to grow a thriving economy and social structure.

We seek to promote and instil lifelong learning, in order to secure that all individuals have sufficient skills, knowledge and understanding to be better equipped to take up the opportunities of adult and working life.

The basic premise upon which all our work rests is that the business community is a legitimate stakeholder in the policies and processes of education and training in this country. We are in the business of helping to create these vital partnerships.

FEoS was established by Brian Stevens and colleagues in July 1996. It was built on his experience as director of the Banking Information Service, a specialist education unit based within the Trade Association for the Banking Industry, the British Bankers' Association. BiS had also established the Banking Industry Training and Development Council, the strategic training unit for the banking industry, which has now developed into the Financial Services NTO and is seeking to become the Sector Skills Council for the financial services sector.

A perspective had therefore already been developed in the early 1990's on issues affecting the financial services industry to do with education and training—a perspective, which today goes under the umbrella title of lifelong learning.

FEoS has been established as a limited company to operate on a contractual basis to a wide range of national and multi-national companies and organisations, keeping a particular, but by no means dedicated, interest in issues affecting financial services.

## HOW FEDS OPERATES

FEdS operates as a small central team based in its offices in Godalming, Surrey, conveniently placed, not only for easy access to London, but to other parts of the UK. We do not wish to increase our central team; we create teams with a number of Associates to address particular programmes and issues, and work through an extensive network of individuals and organisations.

## APPENDIX 3

**Submission by Ofsted to the Tomlinson inquiry (QCA 25)**

## A. SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND PROPOSALS:

- The introduction in September 2000 of the new AS/A2 structure, as part of “Curriculum 2000”, has features which have been widely welcomed in many schools and colleges. However, its rapid implementation created difficulties initially with specifications and standards, as well as with the workload demands on teachers and students, and the assessment regime associated with it remains burdensome and volatile.
- QCA, working with the awarding bodies, has put in great efforts, but has not succeeded in providing an adequate system of quality assurance to give national confidence about the value and consistency of awards.
- The roles and operations of QCA have risked being insufficiently sharply focused for it to be fully successful as a regulator.
- Much more work would be needed to ensure consistency and comparability across awarding bodies, and a single national examining body should be considered seriously.
- A review of the quality of examiners and of their recruitment, terms and conditions and remuneration, as well as of the timing of awards, is a matter of urgency.
- Ofsted has the potential to contribute far more strongly to the setting and maintenance of standards, drawing on its subject expertise and knowledge of schools and colleges.

## B. COMMENTARY:

The following comments, drawn from all of our sources of evidence, including more informal intelligence-gathering, are offered under the following three topics:

- (i) The AS/A2 structure;
- (ii) The role of QCA;
- (iii) The examination groups.

A digest of key points from inspection is attached as an annex, together with a note about the sources of Ofsted evidence on which we have drawn.

(i) *The AS/A2 Structure*

1. In reporting on the first year of implementation, HMI pointed to a number of positive features, and these have become more firmly embedded in the second year. Nevertheless, some of the problematic inbuilt design features remain a significant cause for concern. It is undeniable that students face an ever more exacting schedule of assessment, and that the character of Year 12 has changed dramatically. These changes have had beneficial effects in concentrating teachers’ and students’ minds and giving a real sense of purpose, and have broadly maintained the rigour and depth expected for advanced study. However, evidence from our survey and other subject inspections suggests that they have also on occasion narrowed the students’ range of knowledge and experience within subjects, while not always succeeding in broadening coverage of the areas of the curriculum through the choice of a range of contrasting AS courses.

2. The weaknesses in the assessment structure have been rehearsed at length elsewhere (and the fact that these are only in part weaknesses of control). There is an inherent self-contradiction in the new AS—partially masked in “old” AS. The standard either is that of a full A Level (in which case it is often too high for Year 12) or it isn’t, in which case it cannot be right to allow Year 13 students to “improve” their performance. A statistical change to make AS weighted at, say, 40% of the full A Level would help, but it would still be subject to objection. The weighting attached to coursework is another serious concern. It is a concern not least because of the risk, in these IT-dominated times, of much re-drafting and possible cheating. But, in addition, analyses of the spread of candidates’ results have often indicated that coursework marks and grades can be significantly inflated when compared with students’ unaided work under controlled conditions.



3. One of the instantly glaring anomalies of the results this year is that candidates were being given a “U” grade for coursework—something hitherto virtually unheard of, let alone where candidates were securing A grades on written papers. These anomalous results were palpably indefensible and should have been spotted.

4. Modules compound the intrinsic problems over maintaining standards. In some subjects and some parts of subjects, specialists feel that it may be perfectly proper to “sign off” students’ achievements before the end of the course. But there are many others where it is not, because of the importance of gradual maturation and skills development, and where both curriculum and assessment standards are potentially distorted by early completion. All of these factors may contribute to variability in assessed standards, with the risk that grades no longer conform to previously accepted levels of achievement; however, it is also of concern that the lack of clarity over the expected standard makes it so difficult to determine whether they do so or not.

5. The AS/A2 structure has the potential for ending up as something of a compromise, failing for too many students to achieve either breadth or depth in a satisfying and sensible way, and not clearly representing improvements in quality and the safeguarding of standards for all. However, many individual institutions and students have certainly appreciated the greater range and tighter structure, as our evidence from surveying “Curriculum 2000” makes clear. Some have suggested various forms of baccalaureate approach as an alternative. We would argue that there are good reasons for not moving from AS/A2 to such an approach in the short term, partly on pragmatic grounds: there has been so much turbulence in the system that a further radical overhaul is the last thing that is wanted. In the medium term, however, a case for such an approach (with strands such as humanities, languages, science, economics, technology, performing arts) could be made. The structure of higher and standard level subjects within a coherent and intrinsically broad curricular framework has been found successful in schools which have adopted the International Baccalaureate, and HMI inspection has commented on much work of high quality in the work of candidates preparing for this qualification. But the demands of such courses are high, and their assessment systems are by no means proof against criticism. Meanwhile, the best way to progress is to eradicate the most glaring weaknesses of the current system (overweighting AS; retaking modules; excessive reliance on coursework) with a sufficiently rigorous system of quality assurance.

(ii) *The Role of the QCA*

6. Events over the past two years particularly have given widespread credence to the view that QCA has failed to act as a firm regulator of the system and of the work of the examining groups. In many ways, the QCA has had a hard set of challenges, and its staff deserve enormous credit for the way in which they have sought to cope with the range of initiatives and new tests and qualifications. But its roles have been too varied, its teeth too few and its management and managers not always able to provide a constant level of leadership, partly because of frequent changes at Chief Executive level. There has also been much uncertainty about its relationship with its parent department, the DfES, a matter which requires urgent resolution.

7. The QCA has also been too much involved in evaluating its own advice or policies, in a way that can lead to defensiveness and a lack of transparency. In consequence, it has failed to exercise effective quality controls on the awarding bodies. The reasons for this are complex. They relate in part to the weaknesses in the powers, which QCA was formally given, as QCA officers have, reasonably, pointed out. However, there has also appeared to be a lack of resolution, even within the powers it has had, in taking decisive action against anomalous or inconsistent actions on the part of individual awarding bodies. With its recent lack of involvement with awarding procedures, Ofsted has no direct, first-hand or up-to-date evidence on this, but the evidence from our specialist advisers, and from their contacts in the system, indicates that the scrutinising procedures adopted have been rather variable in effectiveness. They have frequently been revamped, but currently, the QCA does not always have a strong presence in the very processes most critical in determining standards (awarding, standardising and borderlining meetings, together with those intra-Board procedures which follow these, which is where statistical overlays are applied to the examiners’ professional judgements). Furthermore, our subject monitoring suggests that the new scrutinies have often not been staffed or managed in such a way as to ensure quality; and the reports, while engaging with key issues, are at times too anodyne and lacking in decisive effect.

8. For these reasons, it is evident that if QCA is to be an effective regulator it needs strong management, clear powers and a real commitment to setting and monitoring standards. All of these can, to a large extent, be addressed internally, and it is already apparent that the new Chief Executive has them on his agenda. However, it remains the case that QCA can be seen as too complicit in the very weaknesses that need addressing: intrinsically part of the problem, not of the solution. Moreover, although it has much expertise, it inevitably lacks the kind of perspective on standards in the field possessed by Ofsted.

9. Hence the arguments for a possible development of Ofsted’s remit on these matters seem strong ones. In particular, the risk of having “standards” apparently “guarded” by two largely separate arms of government is a real one; and while in principle the two roles can be seen as mutually supportive and complementary, in practice this is an unhealthy schism which can erode confidence and generate uncertainty. Reporting against nationally assessed standards is crucial to Ofsted’s role. There are currently significant doubts about the extent of grade drift and about the value of an A at A level or a C at GCSE. A firm fix on what these grades mean is needed, and at present it is lacking. Ofsted is, because of its remit, rights of access

and expertise, uniquely well placed to contribute to the independent review of examining standards for which this year's events have simply underlined the long pressing need.

10. This argument in no way reflects a belief that Ofsted should usurp what are properly the functions of others, but it is born of a strong desire to work in effective partnership with them. We would suggest that Ofsted's role should be focused essentially on issues connected with monitoring standards at all stages: in assessing and reporting on standards of syllabus construction, of setting questions and writing mark schemes, and of awarding and grading procedures. This development should encompass a wider exploration of how Ofsted employs its specialist expertise (eg through HMI subject advisers) in relation to QCA, and its working groups. A key principle should be the importance of integrating the evidence of standards and quality provided by inspection and that emerging from assessments. There is scope for further joint quality assurance work between Ofsted and the QCA, to evaluate independently both the standards achieved at the various grades and the reliability and validity of marking and awarding. The aftermath of the quinquennial review of the QCA provides a good opportunity to analyse functions in a coherent and systematic way, and also to ensure that Ofsted is not excluded from access to processes, which are of the utmost importance in determining standards. There are also important matters about the role of teachers in assessment procedures, with scope for exploring more widespread and planned development of teachers' professional skills through experience of examining. In summary, therefore, our case is that:

- Ofsted's annual reporting on standards is strongly inter-dependent with the outcomes of testing and examination regimes. Unless Ofsted can have complete confidence in the reliability of those data, a key element of Ofsted's benchmarking is lost.
- Closer integration of the scrutiny of standards which occurs within inspection and that which relates to external assessment procedures would be possible with Ofsted's involvement in the latter.
- The links between standards, curriculum, assessment and pedagogy are so important that there would be advantages in having a body with the capacity to offer a clear overview of these interlocking elements.
- Ofsted has proved itself successful in delivering high quality advice on standards, draws on the long experience of HMI in thinking and writing about the curriculum, and has a large number of high-level subject specialist HMI who could valuably be involved more fully in monitoring standards of assessment.

11. Based on the above analysis, we propose the following specific areas of work where Ofsted might usefully become involved:

- independent inspections, leading to public report, on the work of individual awarding bodies;
- within or in addition to such inspections, scrutinies and reports on standardising and awarding procedures for particular qualifications;
- checks on year-on-year consistency in awarding standards, looking in particular at the effects on such features as: the level of questions; the effect of changes to assessment procedures; the relationship between course-assessed elements and terminal tests; and objective evidence of performance in basic skills elements (eg written and computational accuracy); and
- evaluation of particular stages/facets of the curriculum, perhaps leading more broadly to a more formal locus in advice on curricular matters.

12. To enhance Ofsted's work in this way would be an evolutionary development, not a radical break with the past. For many years, both while HMI worked more directly with the DfES and in the early period of Ofsted's history, it was standard practice for HMI to attend subject meetings of the examination boards and hence to scrutinise scripts. However, in recent years that traditional role has fallen into disuse, not least because QCA's roles differed in significant respects from those of its predecessor bodies and because, in consequence of this, it has set up its own quality arm. Still more recently, there has been a keen desire on both sides for Ofsted to work more closely again with the QCA.

### (iii) *Examination Groups*

13. Events in the last two years have demonstrated that the examining groups are currently not always successful at self-regulation and that they are subject to inadequate external controls. This is in no way to minimise the extraordinary job the three groups have, in many respects, done to cope with change, keep the system going and meet exacting deadlines and new requirements. However, the system has creaked and groaned with every innovation and additional assessment load. Structural weaknesses have been evident in the examining system, and the questions raised may affect every level, from the competence of individual examiners, to the quality of administration and to the whole operation of grade determination. Nor are problems confined to the general awards: weaknesses over vocationally-related certification have been recorded by HMI and others over a number of years.

14. Various suggestions have been proposed, many of which miss the central point, which is simply one of consistency and credibility. Any extension of the "free market" approach is fraught with potential problems, if the key aim is to achieve sufficient consistency of standards and practice. However, it is right to continue to pose the question "three or one?" since the justification for having competition among three

boards, setting syllabuses and examinations to a single national framework and intending to offer awards which are nationally comparable, is inherently weak. The temptations in the system (such as providing the “easiest” - or “hardest” - examinations) are obvious. A single examining board for all general awards would be a leviathan and a monopoly; it would be likely to reduce choice and risk over-centralisation, and might be exceptionally demanding to manage. However, to many it has an inexorable logic, given the weight attached to these awards, eg by higher education. The evidence from comparability studies done over a number of years is anything but reassuring: the reduction of boards has perhaps limited the extent of inter-board variability, but Ofsted’s subject evidence shows that this still continues. In addition, “subject pairs” analysis has exposed that there are not just hard boards and easy boards, but hard subjects and easy subjects and hard syllabuses, and options within them, and easy ones: hence we are nowhere near a world where the standard of an A grade can be assumed to be constant—across all subjects, all examination groups and all strands of the assessment process.

15. An added complexity is that of the Key Stage tests, where the Quinquennial Review had some important things to say about the QCA’s role. One possible course would be to have a body responsible for all 5–16 National Curriculum testing (KS 1–4), or all Level One and Two awards, and a separate body responsible for all further education and sixth-form examinations at Level Three, whether general or vocational. (This might also have the effect of helping to develop an integrated structure at that level, to counteract some of the current uncertainties over parity of esteem and flaws in vocational assessment, and would make even better sense if a baccalaureate approach were to be developed.)

### C. KEY ISSUES FOR THE FUTURE

16. Whichever structure is adopted, some of the quality issues will not wait:

- Well-grounded research into “standards over time” is urgently needed: when Ofsted sought to undertake this work with QCA, its efforts were bedevilled by the lack of adequate archive scripts; now that, at least for recent years, these exist, a proper scrutiny should be possible of standards achieved by candidates under the pre-2001 system and those in new AS/A2 arrangements.
- A full in-depth study of awarding procedures is surely a matter of urgency. The evidence is now in the open that statistical “interference” with examiners’ assessments is common practice, almost certainly exceeding the—very permissive—bounds tolerated by the examination Code of Practice, but we still have seen only the tip of the iceberg. This study would need to encompass the processes of “borderlining”.
- A review of the qualifications, training and assessment of examiners—coupled with an analysis of the remuneration, timing and conditions under which examiners work—would test fully the vulnerability of the current system. It is likely that a re-phasing of examining and marking timetables, to reduce June and July congestion and even to produce “post-award” offers for higher education, would have considerable benefits.
- The proposal to increase the regular professional engagement of practising teachers in the process has much to commend it. However, exploring this option should take place with a recognition that extending examining competence so widely across the teaching profession is far from being a simple matter: there is much evidence that not all teachers’ own assessments currently within the system (in KS1–3 or in GCSE/AL coursework, for example) are completely reliable. Especially in those subjects where examining is essentially a matter of judgement against the criteria, rather than marking points right or wrong, the degree of challenge in securing consistency and quality assurance should not be under-estimated.
- A system of regular independent published reports, with teeth, from the subject-based scrutinies of GCSE and A Level would do much to strengthen quality assurance. As noted above, Ofsted would be well placed to produce such reports.
- A central place for Ofsted in all aspects of assessment procedures, making full use of inspection evidence, would ensure the necessary link between evaluations of standards in schools and colleges and those in the awarding systems.

*October 2002*

### Annex A

#### SOURCES OF OFSTED EVIDENCE:

- Subject monitoring by HMI, especially through the Curriculum Advice and Inspection Division (CAID) and the work of Specialist Advisors (SAs) and other specialist HMI.
- Inspections of schools (section 10) and colleges (Learning and Skills Act 2000) and of other parts of Ofsted’s remit.
- HMI surveys, especially those on the implementation of Curriculum 2000—leading to a published report (in production) on the second year of implementation.

- HMCI's Annual Report: that for 2000–01, published in February 2002, summarised key points on the first inspections of the new AS examinations.
- Ofsted's advice to DfES on the 14–19 Green Paper (June 2002).
- Ofsted's oral evidence to the QCA Quinquennial Review.
- Close and regular contact between Ofsted and the QCA, though meetings at Chief Executive/Inspector level and other levels in the organisation and the presence of an Ofsted observer at OCA board meetings.
- Correspondence between Ofsted and QCA, and Ofsted and DfES, on matters of common concern.

POINTS FROM INSPECTION EVIDENCE:

The following series of points is offered as a summary of issues to emerge from Ofsted's evidence:

*Curriculum 2000 (Year One)—Annual Report and other evidence:*

1. New AS course specifications for Curriculum 2000 were generally well devised; however, in some subjects, the level was insecure and varied excessively between units.
2. The requirements of internal and external assessment procedures were excessive for both students and teachers; the use of assessment data to set students learning targets and monitor their progress was patchy.
3. Students were generally well motivated, but there was a perceptible decline in enthusiasm as the year progressed and the pressures became more evident.
4. Students were subject to excessive, relentless assessment, which put unreasonable pressure and constraints on Year 12.
5. Technical problems over the assessment arrangements were substantial and resulted in a loss of confidence in the system.
6. Timetabling difficulties were at times formidable, leading to administrative problems for Centres and demanding schedules for students.
7. Difficulties over IT exacerbated an already difficult system, for example in developing the key skills assessments.
8. Awarding bodies were under mounting pressure over the supply of examiners and other assessors.
9. The impact on numbers taking so-called "minority subjects" was variable.
10. There was sometimes a narrowing of teaching approaches, both in content and method, at the expense of students' independence of learning and development of study and research skills.
11. Teaching was often initially rather uncertain, with doubts over the coverage requirements or on the new specifications.
12. Key skills had only rarely had a positive, discernible impact in schools on the quality of teaching.
13. A substantial investment in staff development (notably in further education) often improved quality markedly, not least in relation to key skills.
14. There was much evidence of appreciable lengthening of the teaching week and of heavier programmes for students.
15. The compression of programmes at times crowded out the development of the habits and attitudes of scholarship.

*Curriculum 2000 (Year Two)*

1. The difficulties of implementation observed in the first year of this inspection were to some extent overcome in the second.
2. Curriculum 2000 had been incorporated into the work of schools and colleges, with considerable difficulty, but without the loss of the rigour and depth traditionally associated with advanced study.
3. Teachers' confidence in teaching the new specifications grew considerably, though further support and training were still needed.
4. In the schools and colleges visited, the work seen improved over the two years of this inspection.
5. Teaching was almost always expert, well-planned and enthusiastic, and given greater clarity of focus by the quality of the A2 specifications, which were found to be helpful and supportive.
6. Many teachers still felt that they had little opportunity to go beyond the immediate demands of the specifications.

7. Despite the time teachers and students spent completing assessments, use of the results of assessment to set learning targets and to monitor progress remained patchy.

8. Standards of achievement in the schools and colleges inspected remained high, and had in some respects risen over the two years of the inspection.

9. Most students were addressing successfully the additional demands of A2 courses, and were developing at a high level the skills of analysis, critical thinking and evaluation of information, as appropriate to the subjects studied.

10. There was some evidence in the institutions inspected of a broadening of the range of subjects offered.

11. Colleges in particular had seen an increase in the numbers of students opting for subjects such as information technology, psychology, media studies and art.

12. Because of increased numbers overall, the retention of subjects, such as some languages, which attracted relatively few takers, was often possible.

13. The impact on the curriculum as experienced by the individual student was often modest.

14. Students, especially in schools, were much less well-informed about training and employment routes than about academic and vocational options in schools and colleges.

15. Generally, too, post-16 institutions, particularly schools, were insufficiently responsive to the views and needs of employers.

#### SUBJECT MONITORING

1. Modular arrangements in some subjects were seen to sit very uneasily with the desire to “maintain standards”.

2. Candidates were often retaking AS modules later in the course, and with the benefit of significant maturation, so that their grade profile in advance of taking A2s could be raised.

3. Candidates were occasionally retaking modules when they already had high grades (including, in business studies, candidates with grade A at AS).

4. In order to maintain standards, awarding bodies appeared to have resorted to statistical manipulation. In the past, under the Code of Practice, awarding panels were required to take account of statistical information after they had set provisional grade boundaries. This meant that judgmental awarding was informed by the overall statistics, and significant changes in grade distributions had to be justified. This was perhaps more difficult this year as examiners were working in a new context.

5. With regard to this year’s awards, these processes perhaps explained the eccentric patterns of attainment. In the “new” system the moderated module grades had been declared to schools, as had the AS grades by the time the AL awarding took place. Inevitably, any adjustment would therefore fall disproportionately upon the remaining components, usually A2 coursework and the terminal synoptic paper. Thus some candidates, for example, had CID adjusted to U in these components although their overall grade shifted less.

6. In subjects where modules were newly introduced, there are concerns. For example, in history there was a danger of “pick and mix” incoherence or the focus on particular periods, such as Europe of the Dictators. In art, there was a view that the demise of the more “open-ended” Year 12 course had narrowed the students’ experience, inhibiting experimental approaches.

7. The synoptic papers were an aspect of the A2 which suffered from the outset from unclear definition. In history, for example, different awarding bodies interpreted the synoptic requirements in different ways. The role and nature of specifications in their definition of synoptic and papers in carrying this forward would merit early review.

8. There was evidence to suggest that the scrutiny process was still not robust. Before the Code, scrutiny was by peer review, chaired by the relevant professional officer. Currently, scrutiny teams had membership from outside the normal pool of chief examiners, but as a consequence could lack experience.

9. The gravity of unresolved comparability issues among the examining groups was illustrated by the inexplicable differences in proportions of candidates reaching particular grade boundaries. In 2001 D&T, for example, the variations were very wide:

<i>Group</i>	<i>Percentage A</i>	<i>Percentage A–E</i>
AQA	13.2	89.6
Edexcel	2.3	74.5
OCR	16.3	90.1

10. The proliferation of examinations had exacerbated the difficulty in getting sufficient markers and moderators. For example, this summer Edexcel used student teachers to mark history, and it was suggested for other subjects, such as art and design.

#### APPENDIX 4

##### **Letter from Sir William Stubbs to Ms Kathleen Tattersall, Director-General, AQA (QCA 27)**

Thank you for your letter of 22 March.

I do appreciate that the awarding bodies and regulatory authorities all worked hard to ensure that preparations for the awards of the new AS and A levels have been as thorough as possible. I am concerned that the public have confidence in the new A levels. That is why we commissioned the review by Eva Baker and her colleagues. The independent panel's report mentions the tendency of grade percentages being rounded up if, when attempting to maintain comparability between two years, there is an upward rather than downward movement in the face of uncertainty.

I am conscious of the importance of judgements about candidates' actual performances. However, in this summer's A level awards, the change to new specifications means that awarders have less evidence to assist them than in normal circumstances. In this situation, I do expect last year's A level results to provide a very strong guide to this year's outcomes.

I am clear that grades for this summer's A level candidates can only be determined using a combination of professional judgement and statistical evidence. To ignore either of these dimensions and constrain awards would be contrary to the Code of Practice, risk serious disadvantages to candidates, and ought to be the cause of serious concern for the accountable officers of awarding bodies.

*19 April 2002*

#### APPENDIX 5

##### **Memorandum submitted by the Department for Education and Skills (QCA 31)**

1. The Department has received the Select Committee's invitation to respond to the allegations made about its conduct by Sir William Stubbs.

2. Since his removal from office on 27 September we have taken the view that nothing would be served by responding publicly to his many allegations. However, Sir William has made a number of inaccurate and misleading statements to the Select Committee, including untrue allegations about individuals, which we have no choice but to answer. We do so briefly, knowing that, given Sir William's threat of legal action, some of these matters may ultimately be argued out before the Courts.

##### SETTING UP THE TOMLINSON INQUIRY

3. We strongly disagree with Sir William's claim that there was no need to set up the Tomlinson inquiry and that the Department was panicked into doing so.

4. Despite his evidence to the Select Committee, Sir William himself actually supported the setting up of the Tomlinson inquiry into a letter to Estelle Morris on 19 September, sent before she announced the inquiry at a Press Conference. In that letter he said:

"The prominence given to the HMC allegations in this morning's press and media must inevitably cast doubt about the integrity of the QCA's actions. This is a matter which concerns me. I am therefore asking you as a matter of urgency to appoint an independent inquiry into these allegations by HMC."

5. As a result of the inquiry 9,800 students had their grades for individual papers upgraded; 1,945 students received new AS or A2 grades; and many thousands more students were given confidence that their existing grades were fair. We believe this to be a very significant outcome. It would not have been achieved by the QCA's own inquiry.

## SIR WILLIAMS'S REMOVAL FROM OFFICE

6. Since these matters may soon be before the Courts, we restrict ourselves to three factual comments.

7. *First*, in her letter to Sir William on 27 September, Estelle Morris gave four reasons for his removal from office. The letter says:

“First your actions have led to the perception of pressure on the part of the Awarding Bodies, as recorded in Mike Tomlinson’s report, which contributed to the problems with the grading of A levels this year.

Secondly, the report contains a number of serious criticisms about the performance of the QCA in administering the new AS/A2 examinations.

Thirdly, there has been a wider loss of confidence by the education community in the QCA under your chairmanship.

Fourthly, your actions, and in particular your recent public criticisms of my conduct in relation to Mike Tomlinson’s inquiry, have caused an irretrievable breakdown in the trust which must exist between the Secretary of State and the chairman of the QCA if confidence in the examination system is to be maintained.”

8. *Secondly*, Sir William’s account to the Select Committee of what took place between the Department and the exam boards on 25 September is inaccurate.

9. *Thirdly*, for the record and contrary to Sir William’s assertion, the new Cabinet Secretary was in post and presumably could have been contacted, if Sir William had chosen to do so.

## ALLEGATIONS AGAINST MESSRS COLLINS AND BOFFEY AND AGAINST THE DEPARTMENT’S PRESS OFFICE

10. Sir William’s allegations about the conduct of Mr Chris Boffey, the former Secretary of State’s special adviser, and Mr D-J Collins, a civil servant and the Department’s Head of News, are untrue. In particular Mr Boffey and Mr Collins did not brief journalists in the way Sir William described; nor did they have any involvement with the specific stories to which he refers.

11. There was authorised briefing about the weaknesses in the performance of the QCA several weeks before (on 17 June) when the then Secretary of State published the results of the Quinquennial Review of the QCA. This was, however, in the context of an on the record statement at a Press Conference by Estelle Morris and a Press Notice setting out the outcome of the review.

12. Finally, we strongly reject Sir William’s general comments about the conduct of the Department’s Press Office. The Press Office does encourage journalists to report information about the Department’s policies and to represent Ministers’ views, fairly and accurately. It also challenges inaccurate or misleading reporting. It is ridiculous to suggest that it could persuade or pressurise any journalist to report stories in a particular way against his or her wishes.

*October 2002*

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