

Speech

Sally Collier's inaugural speech as Chief Regulator of Ofqual

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Sally talks about her first 8 weeks in post and her priorities for the regulator.



Good afternoon.

I am the new Chief Regulator. I have been in office 8 weeks, so go easy on me, and most of you in the room have probably been in this sector a lifetime or parts of lifetime, so 8 weeks is not long, but I thought I'd share with you my views 8 weeks in, and you can test me whether 8 months in I'm still saying the same thing. Many of you will know I don't come from the education sector; I was a CEO of a large commercial buying organisation, of which there are more similarities than you might think actually.

What have I been doing for the last 8 weeks? Well, I've been back in the classroom for half of the time. Indeed, my tutor is

sitting in the front row. And the other thing I've been doing is I've been getting out and meeting our stakeholders, and I've been in several schools, I've met heads and deputy heads, heads of faculties, young teachers, new teachers, and kids, because that's the best way that any public organisation serving those stakeholders can learn and develop as they go forward, so thank you to the schools and colleges that have welcomed me so far and long may it continue. I want to continue for my stint here to get out and about and listen to the people at the coalface.

The other thing I've done is I've also talked to employers, because Ofqual has a very important role not just regulating general qualifications, GCSEs, AS and A levels, but regulating vocational qualifications and I've been out to colleges and employers looking at apprenticeship schemes. As well as talking to exam boards and, indeed, other regulators and other countries' regulators, and getting to know my team. That's been a pretty busy couple of months.

So what have I found? Well, the first thing I've found is this area is much, much more complicated and interconnected than I thought when I wasn't in it and Ofqual has a very, very important job in communicating and trying to make sense of those complexities. Also, quite a bit of it is counterintuitive, where my initial instinct has been wrong. It is not intuitive. There is not a simple right mark for every question in every paper and there are many other instances where I've had to check myself and say, well, hang on a minute, this is counterintuitive and it's important that we always do that as a regulator.

Secondly, everybody is a stakeholder. In my previous role, there was certainly a defined group of stakeholders who were interested in buying things. In this role, everybody has been a student, has taken qualifications, has children, knows somebody's children, has an interest, and that makes the communication job of the regulator extremely difficult, and the communication role will be putting increasing emphasis on how we get our messages out to all those stakeholders, and they are very different – not different messages, but different tones, different angles, and in some cases those messages are landing well and in other cases we need to do much more work.

Thirdly, what I've found in Ofqual as an organisation is immense expertise in our subject area. It's still a relatively new organisation. It has grown up a lot in the last few years and I'm really, really glad of the team that I have inherited, and some of their work will be on display today, which sets us up well I think for what will continue to be a challenging and interesting period over the next five years.

Let me look at this through the lens of the lifecycle of the qualification. Let's talk first about the whole qualification reform agenda, which is ambitious and wide-ranging, whether it be different subjects being taught, whether it be content of examinations changing, whether it be different content, harder content, linear versus modular, new grading system, there is clearly a lot of change in the system, and the system can only work if all of the component parts of that system operate well together, whether that be the Department for Education, the exam boards, teachers, schools, all of that has to cohere well in order to deliver the reforms. The regulator has a part to play in that, but it is only a part to play in that.

You will be interested, I know, in accreditation of new qualifications, where a lot has been learnt by all parties involved in accrediting subjects for teaching last year and for teaching this year. I make no apologies that the bar for accrediting a subject is high. If we get the assessment standard wrong in the beginning, it will come back to haunt everybody at the end. If the assessment strategy means that there is not sufficient differentiation between the grades, if we get too many students at one end of the scale, if we get content that students can't understand regardless of their ability, all of those things will come back and bite at the end, so we must get it right at the beginning, and everybody has learnt a lot from the process of accreditation in the first 2 waves. I am pleased to say that the timetable for first teaching in 2017 has started and is on track, and the process is definitely slicker. Everybody has learnt, but we will not lower the standards for getting subjects accredited.

I'm moving onto delivery and delivery of qualifications this summer – 8 million certificates, 2,000 examinations, a well tried

and tested system. Generally, although you wouldn't think it sometimes from the commentary, it is a robust system that has delivered well and has been delivered well for many years. There are clearly risks in the system. It is the regulator's job to monitor those risks and our exam boards' job is to deliver that system effectively and, by and large, they do. Clearly, mistakes will happen, security breaches will happen, and in rare cases, malpractice happens. It is the regulator's job to take appropriate action where we need to in those cases. Exam boards also have tried and tested procedures for dealing with these matters. And, of course, I am learning that social media commentary about exams is high, widespread and growing. In my day, I am showing my age, you didn't come out of your exam and tweet about it, you went home and moaned at your parents and got on with your revision for the next day. We live in a different world. Regulators live in different worlds and we have to move with those different worlds. It is our job in the midst of all that commentary, and the exam boards, to determine where there is a genuine problem and needs to be looked at or needs to be investigated, and we need to look at awarding patterns and where the exams are just hard. And that, you know, that has been a real lesson for me over the last few weeks. We can do more and the whole system needs to do more to stop simple errors in the delivery of exams. Where an error of opening the wrong exam pack or giving out the history exam instead of the geography exam, can have a fairly profound impact on the system. I think we can do more to help schools and centres understand how to eliminate, as far as we can, those errors. So that is delivery.

I want to move onto awarding. I am about to attend my first awarding meetings for this series, and touch on the subject of comparable outcomes. There has always been some kind of statistical basis for awarding, not always comparable outcomes. But there is commentary that says somehow marks are being depressed and it is a straitjacket, you can't move because of this system. Actually, last year, there were about 50 occasions when Ofqual said we can move from that system, and exam boards presented evidence to say that, you know, we think that these tolerances should move. And I am not so dogged as to say this

is the only way. We are constantly thinking about how different forms of suitable evidence can be brought into play in the awarding process. The alternative, of course, of not having something like comparable outcomes is when a subject is taught for the first time, when there is new teaching, new curriculum, is that you have a very significant drop in grades. Is that fair for students who simply have a new teacher who is not used to the curriculum who gets a completely different grade than they would have got otherwise? I am not saying one is completely right or wrong, it is not black and white. So we're constantly looking for new ways and new sources of additional evidence, including piloting the national reference tests which Ofqual's own board will consider in a few weeks' time in terms of whether it should be rolled out. So that is the awarding process.

And then we come onto reviews, reviews of marking and appeals, which is an immediate issue for me. We will be making our final decisions in the next week. Our research showed that the current practice for asking for reviews is unfair, that some schools do ask for appeals, some schools don't. One pupil may get a one-mark change, and one pupil may not, and that is based often on the difference in professional opinion between two examiners. That is not to say that an incorrect mark, a mistake should not be corrected. It should always be corrected, regardless of how small that mark is. And my colleagues will talk more about that. Our research showed that the system, we felt, was unfair, and we are going to make some changes. No system is perfect, and what this doesn't mean is that we will not continue to work doggedly to improve the quality of first marking, and we are open to ways in which we might do that. And, indeed, we will be initiating some further work in this area, but we will focus on once this summer series is over.

So that, I think, is a really quick sweep around reform to review. So I will finish with my priorities and I will start looking over the horizon of the regulator and then I will come right back into the current day. My priorities for the longer term are that Ofqual is a regulator for both general and vocational qualifications, and we need to put equal weight and emphasis on both. So I will be looking at our systems, our practices with the Ofqual Board in terms of Ofqual's role across the piece for all qualifications.

Secondly, you will be aware that the 9 to 1 qualifications in maths and English begin next year and, thereafter, in a wider range of qualifications. We must ensure that every user of the new qualifications understands the system and we will be having a widespread communications campaign for which I would like to enlist all of your help to ensure that the whole system understands the new grading system. And coming right back to this summer, we, of course, need to ensure we have safe awarding this summer and that the reviews of marking changes are implemented safely.

So to conclude, we have an imperfect system I have discovered and there is no perfection, and I don't think anyone has told me that there is a perfect system anywhere in the world. The regulator's job is within that imperfect system to regulate it fairly and firmly and to adapt as the world around us changes. We will not be universally liked by everyone on every matter. That is not the job of the regulator. The job of the regulator is to be trusted and respected based on the evidence it uses to make its decisions and the extent to which it listens to its stakeholders and adapts accordingly.

So who rely on our qualifications to be able to continue to rely and trust in them.

Thank you.

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