

ASCL annual conference 2021: Ofqual Chair Ian Bauckham, CBE

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

I imagine that many of us were quite unaware of what the future held in store for us, a year ago this week, when we were told that all schools must close for the majority of children and young people. We had watched with rising anxiety the devastation the pandemic was wreaking abroad on our television screens, and were beginning to imagine what might happen if, or more likely when, it arrived here. But I am not sure that the full consequences of the disruption to the education of the nation's young people were at that point panning out clearly before our eyes.

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

This was a particular worry last year, but given the unexpected virulence of the new strains of the virus and the difficulty of seeing how these would play out over time, has also been a concern for 2021. We have also had the challenge of the increasing and often extreme unevenness of the playing field on which students have been working, owing to the very bumpy impact of the pandemic.

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

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

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

Their prime purpose, however, is focused on the individual student. A student who takes a qualification, and is graded for it, has in their hands an authenticated statement of their abilities at that moment in time which enables them to access an appropriate next stage, whether that is the next part of their education or an early rung in the employment ladder. Sometimes that 'authenticated statement of achievement' is carried further forward and may be used at later points in life too.

This central purpose of qualifications directly serves the interests of young people. Armed with such qualifications, young people are able to find an appropriate next stage and know that, broadly speaking, they will be prepared for what lies ahead of them on their chosen pathway.

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

In doing so, we were all too aware of some of the hard lessons of 2020. One such lesson was the need to secure wide inputs and insights into alternative plans to award qualifications. That is why we were clear from the start that a national consultation about the way forward needed to happen.

This is an unfamiliar situation for everyone to be in, and the best solutions in unfamiliar situations are often difficult both to identify and to put into operation. It was important for us that the wider public, and particularly those most directly interested, namely students, their parents and teachers, and school and college leaders, should be able to consider proposals and offer views.

We were committed to listening to those views, and as chair of the Board of Ofqual I am able to tell you that every single open text response was read, and main points harvested, consolidated and fed in. No mean feat for consultations which between them attracted more than 105,000 responses.

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

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

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

But let me say this first. Making this year's qualifications successful will, ultimately, be a collective effort. Exam boards, and we as the regulator of exam boards, clearly have a central role to play, but so too do other players. Teachers and headteachers have a key role, as do parents.

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

qualifications.

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

Now, a central benefit of the approach we are taking for this year for GCSEs, A Levels and other qualifications most commonly taken in schools is that it permits young people to be assessed first and foremost on what they have actually had the opportunity to be taught. That surely is a first principle of all valid assessment.

This year, we strongly suspect that what has been covered, and how effectively it has been able to be taught, is variable on an altogether different scale to what we find in a normal year. In some cases for example weeks of schooling were missed in the autumn term in some parts of the country, and in some schools. We know that the ability to provide quality remote education, and to receive and engage with it, has been varied from area to area, from school to school, and at a granular level actually from student to student, and family to family, within schools and colleges.

We know there is likely to have been in many cases what we might call a 'breadth-depth trade-off': under pressure of time, some teachers will have made the entirely understandable decision still to cover all the content set out, but will have been aware that with more time, as in a normal school year, much stronger mastery could have been achieved. Others will have made the equally understandable decision to ensure that less content has been as thoroughly learnt as time allows, so prioritizing depth rather than breadth. And, finally, we know that the least advantaged young people, regardless of school or geography, for a whole variety of reasons, are likely to have been least able to withstand or compensate for the challenges the pandemic has thrown at all of us.

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

In so doing, we are all too aware that this places an additional responsibility on teachers, schools and colleges. It is certainly a task which requires all the professional knowledge both of students and exam standards, balanced judgement and professional integrity which teachers have in such abundance. Exam boards will shortly be publishing more detailed guidance for teachers, schools and colleges to support with this process, and the majority of exam centres will have direct, human contact with exam board staff to support them in this task.

One feature of this support package will be a set of assessment questions and tasks which teachers may use to guide their assessments. These will be offered with mark schemes and exemplar answers to support teachers in making consistent and fair judgements, but they will not be arranged into mini-exams, neither will they be compulsory for all teachers to use, simply

because of what I have just said about the variability of what has been able to be taught. However, where teachers are able to use with students questions or tasks drawn from the range which will be available, some of which will be drawn from past papers and some of which will be new, they will provide very helpful evidence to support those holistic grading decisions. Let me say once again that I, we, are all too aware that this approach will involve teachers undertaking tasks which they do not, in a normal year, have to do, and this after 12 months of often heroic efforts on the part of the school and college workforce to keep education (and quite a few other things) going through the pandemic. As a teacher and school leader myself I have seen this at first hand and would again want to acknowledge with gratitude the work that teachers and school leaders will be doing this summer to help get fair grades to young people.

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

There is no need for any teacher to be anxious about not having kept this or that piece of evidence of student work completed up to this point. No-one had asked you to keep anything specific, and there will be no question of you, or your students, being disadvantaged or penalized if you have therefore not done so up to now.

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

Where there is already good evidence to hand from earlier in the course, which will often be the case, that may of course be used. But, there is no need either pre-emptively or retrospectively to start trying to generate evidence specifically for the purposes of grading at this point. The most important thing right now is that teachers use the all too limited time they have to teach their classes and keep the learning moving forward.

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

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

Where you are able to run properly regulated national exams, there are well established approaches to keep grade inflation in check and ensure that where grades do rise, it is related to rising levels of actual achievement.

These are not however normal times.

Imagine: I am a pretty self disciplined teacher determined to act with integrity in grading my students. In 2021 I have a class of 30 year 11 GCSE candidates, and 5 of them have produced work, on more than one occasion and under fairly controlled circumstances, which leads me to believe they are capable of getting a grade 9 on the day of the exam. In reality, I know, because I have been at this for a while, that all 5 probably won't quite manage it on the day, despite the evidence. Problem for me is: I can't be sure which of the 5 will, and which won't. So, acting with complete professional integrity, using the knowledge I have of normal grading standards, the range of evidence I have of their performance, and following exam board guidance, I submit a grade 9 for all 5 of them. That small act of professional judgement, made in perfectly good conscience, and with good evidence, available for scrutiny if requested, will inevitably have an impact when repeated across the system.

Does that render this year's qualifications less valuable? No, I don't believe it does. Because those grade 9s still tell both the holder and the user that this is a highly capable student able to operate in this subject at grade 9 level.

Is it an argument for being stricter with myself when I look at the evidence than I might be, for example, if I were doing UCAS predictions, which tend on the generous side, but are made for quite a different purpose? Yes, it probably is.

Would it be sustainable if repeated year on year? No, because over time if repeated year after year it would of course cumulatively erode the value of the qualification. So it will need to be controlled. But to do so, we will need to be at the point where we can again offer fully regulated national examinations, and this year we cannot.

Let me at this point risk what I think is a relevant reflection on last year. The GCSE grades that teachers and centres assigned in 2020, which in most cases were what students ended up with as their actual grades, were assigned by teachers and centres on the basis of pretty limited guidance. In one sense however they turned out actually very accurate.

Let me explain. Yes, they were higher than we would have expected in comparison with 2019 or previous years. But the distribution of grades, the shape of the graph if you like, actually gave us at least as good a correlation with those students' prior attainment as 2019's exam-based grades. Of course, there were exceptions, however they arose, but overall this was a small minority. Moreover, on careful analysis, there is no evidence of systemic bias or discrimination in the grades awarded, despite fears to the contrary. Overall teachers are demonstrably capable of producing a set of grades which are fair and do correlate with students' abilities and performance.

Let me come back to this year. Because this year's approach is essentially based on evidence of student performance on content which they have been taught, we have said, as a principle of transparency, that candidates should know on what evidence their grade has been determined.

However, let me be crystal clear about the following point. That principle, which we believe is right and appropriate in the context of this year's grading, does not mean that either the selection of evidence, or the decision about the grade which the evidence supports, are somehow topics for negotiation between teacher and student, or indeed teacher and parents. They are not.

These are matters of teacher professional judgement, and teachers, in making these judgements, will be required to work within the framework of exam board guidance, the policy their school or college puts in place in the light of this guidance, and to be accountable to their heads of centre for doing so and acting with professional integrity.

It would be quite wrong, and fundamentally unfair, both on teachers and students, for these decisions to be subject to pressure or interference from those with a vested interest. That would risk discrediting the process and ultimately could end up with young people in destinations for which they were ill-prepared, potentially displacing those better suited to them. We must all, teachers, students, and parents, respect the process.

I turn now to quality assurance (QA). Unlike last year, we are this year requiring the exam boards to put in place a system of external quality assurance alongside schools' and colleges' internal quality assurance. The prime purpose of this, when seen alongside the guidance and support, is to give teachers, schools and colleges a framework within which they are enabled to do what I believe teachers and school leaders want to do, namely the right thing. Robust quality assurance not only provides incentives to do the right thing, but also is helpful in resisting any pressures which may still come our way to do otherwise:

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

As the regulator, we will be requiring exam boards not only to make direct contact with the vast majority of centres undertaking this process, but also to undertake both random and risk-based QA checking exercises. The random exercises will take in all types of school and college, both state-funded and independent, because we expect all actors in the system to play by the same rules.

The risk-based QA will identify, amongst others, those cases where patterns of grades submitted appear surprising when compared with recent history from 2019 and before. That, of course, does not mean that those grades will always be wrong, or unduly inflated, but it does switch on a warning light that means, in the interest of fairness to all, that boards should take a good look at the evidence to make sure it really does support the grade judgements that are being put forward.

I spoke earlier about the solid consensus we saw emerge in the consultation

about many aspects of the proposed approach for this summer. One area where we were challenged was on appeals. It became clear both from comments made in response to the consultation, and in discussions with representative bodies, including this Association, that our original plan to focus the appeals process on centres would not be the right way to proceed.

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

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

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

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

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

Appeals are likely to play out rather differently this year to in a normal year. In normal years we all have available to us both numerical marks derived from exam scripts and grade boundaries. This information often informs decisions at individual and collective level about whether or not to challenge the grade awarded. 'I missed an A by one mark – maybe a review of my script will find one more mark for me'. In 2021 however we will have only the grade, representing a holistic judgement on the evidence of performance. It will not be possible to identify therefore which grades are close to upper or lower boundaries. It will be important for students, and staff advising them, to be aware of the implications of this when considering appeals.

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

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

This is being worked on intensively currently. We will consult with stakeholders and representative bodies, including this Association, and hope that the processes can be worked through speedily as I am all too aware of

the sense of urgency on this from young people and their teachers.

Finally, let me offer a few brief thoughts about the future. We have all learnt a lot about our systems as a result of the pressure the pandemic has brought. We certainly need to do some serious thinking about the resilience of our national qualifications, and delegates will want to be assured that this work is in train. Very often innovations developed at speed during a crisis enable us to do things we were not able to do before the crisis. While the COVID pandemic is a crisis of generational proportions, it is not the first to affect the awarding of qualifications.

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

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

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