

Dame Glenys Stacey: speech to AOC's FE Summit, 18 November 2020

Good morning and thank you for inviting me to join you today. Thank you for inviting me to speak today, I do appreciate it.

And thank you as well for all the exceptional work you are doing, to mitigate for your students the truly baleful and ongoing impact of the pandemic on education. I appreciate and applaud everyone's efforts here and your resolve to best educate your students and protect their futures. It is outstanding in so many respects, but it is also what I have long known and respected, in the FE sector. A heartfelt thank you from me

Much of the talk in recent months has been of GCSEs and A levels but today I'd like to focus on vocational and technical qualifications. These are particularly important to many of your students, and they are increasing in prominence generally with the government's Post-16 qualification review and the anticipated FE White Paper.

But first, I do want to make clear that we at Ofqual are sorry for what happened this summer: the distress and anxiety it caused for many students and their parents; the problem it created for teachers; and the impact it had on higher and further education providers. For our part, we are truly sorry for that.

The government has since renewed its commitment to examinations. I welcome that: we know this is generally the best way of testing knowledge and understanding, and the feedback we are getting from recent focus groups at Ofqual shows that parents and students, they are welcoming it too. In this year, because of the pandemic, there are new challenges, in assessing the right things in the right ways, so that even under exceptional assessment and examination arrangements, we still want to get sufficiently valid and reliable results for your students.

Now, awarding organisations with high levels of subject knowledge and expertise have the ability to consider how the right things should be assessed, and how to adapt assessment in this exceptional year. But they must also have a deep understanding of how centres and your colleges operate and their student cohort, as well as the needs of future employers or higher education providers.

So, from my perspective, knowing the challenges on the ground, understanding the impact of change and appreciating how these qualifications are used is critical to developing appropriate assessment – not just this year, but for the longer-term future actually, as well as for this year.

With these things in mind, we are regulating awarding organisations in novel ways, in these extraordinary times. We have got something called the Extraordinary Regulatory Framework – bit of a mouthful, but it allows

awarding organisations to use their judgement to adapt assessments and qualifications where necessary and appropriate.

Just thinking that through, particular skills and levels of practical competence are important for a student to be able to demonstrate their mastery and move into employment. Missed learning in key areas can make the difference between a student understanding safe and unsafe practices in some subject areas – and that is another key issue for us. Any changes proposed by awarding bodies do need to protect these key attributes of particular qualifications

And as AoC are telling us on your behalf, there have been difficulties in students accessing mandatory work placements as a result of the pandemic, so we have that to look at as well.

For those students intending to progress to higher education, often taking VTQs alongside A levels, there are other challenges. We know how important it is that there is coherence with GCSEs, AS and A levels. And so awarding organisations must try, as far as possible, to ensure that adaptations made to assessments do not advantage or disadvantage students against those taking GCSEs, AS and A levels. There needs to be a level playing field there.

Taking into account public health advice such as social distancing constraints, awarding organisations are putting in place a wide range of adaptations for vocational and technical qualifications to free up time for teaching and learning; and make these assessments as manageable and flexible as possible. And we've been encouraging professional bodies and employers to work closely with their awarding organisations so that students are not unreasonably penalised for loss of learning during this difficult time

So some examples then, assessment tasks or briefs may be available earlier or assessment windows extended. Assessments may be streamlined to free up for time for teaching and learning – without reducing the content that is taught. And, of course, there is the introduction of remote assessment and remote invigilation – allowing assessments to take place in different settings.

Now there are risks involved with these adaptations. We are monitoring how awarding organisations make use of these new freedoms, with a keen eye on validity, but also an awareness of the practicalities of assessment for many of these qualifications. For example we hear from you that the January RQF exams are likely to be logistically challenging – we're actively looking at what we can do and we do recognise the need for early certainty.

And we are working closely with the awarding organisations and sector bodies, including AoC, to set in place consistent approaches wherever possible and appropriate. This is not only in relation to qualifications with much in common, such as functional skills qualifications, but also in relation to how and when awarding organisations communicate with you to help you receive the information you keenly need.

So just to finish off, and to look further ahead, we welcome the upcoming White Paper, of course, and government's ambitions for a high quality,

coherent qualification market which offers the right level of choice for all types of learners at all levels. We want to see the detail of that. In the meantime, we are strengthening our capacity and redoubling our efforts in anticipation – so for example, we are gathering and publishing more data than ever before about VTQs, and I will mention here our VTQ landscape explorer analytics tool, it's a nice useful piece of kit that we're updating on our website this week.

To finish, as you balance the necessary changes and adaptations during this pandemic with caring for your students', and your own health and wellbeing, we, together with AoC, the awarding organisations, DfE and many other stakeholders across the whole sector, are working hard to safeguard sufficient validity in assessments but also keeping at heart the student perspective. Above all, we want students to have the reassurance and confidence that they have been treated fairly, and future employers to have confidence in the skills of their new employees.