

# Dr Jo Saxton speech at Federation of Awarding Bodies conference

Good morning. I'm Jo Saxton. It's absolutely brilliant to be here with all of you in person.

I'm particularly pleased that it's with you, awarding organisations, that I get to share my first speech as Chief Regulator. It means a huge amount to me because it's in large part thanks to you that students and apprentices, despite the enormous challenges everyone has faced, have become qualified across a wide range of qualifications, disciplines and industries.

I intend to build on the new ways of working that have been forced upon us by the COVID-19 response. I intend to mark this as a new way of regulating and a new era of co-regulation.

An era in which – as far as it is possible to do so – we create the environment in which you can innovate and evolve, so that those that we serve can be even better qualified, even better empowered for the next stages of their education and life. But this will only be attainable if we agree to head in the same direction, we need to be led by a common compass.

True north, for my tenure at Ofqual, will be students of all ages and apprentices. Why does this matter so much to me, and why do I care so passionately about qualifications?

We all know that the pandemic has exposed stark inequalities in society and in education like never before.

Now that we have seen these problems we can't 'unsee' them, and it's up to every one of us to make a difference. I know that you are already playing your part in doing that.

The profile of qualifications has never been higher – we have seen a growth in interest that started during the pandemic and we need to capitalise on that.

Just as an illustration: between April 2020 and March 2021, Ofqual's register of qualifications was viewed 63,000 times more than it had been in the previous year.

Of course, with increased interest comes increased expectation and we need to rise to that challenge collectively.

Education is good for us, we know that. The OECD has documented that quite literally the educated live longer than the uneducated, or the lesser educated. For example, a 30-year-old leaving education around 16 is likely to live 5 years fewer than a 30-year-old who has proceeded through tertiary education. So, although it might not feel like it at the time, education is good for us.

I'm an academic by background, yet I chose to work in some of England's toughest schools because I care that young people get the qualifications they need. Everyone deserves qualifications that will open doors for them, but the disadvantaged desperately need them. That's what really drives me.

This realisation was brought into sharp relief for me while working to improve a group of schools on the Kent coast. Outside the grammar schools outcomes were weak, as were secure employment opportunities for the disadvantaged; and this despite some household-name employers on the doorstep. So I went to talk to them; Eurotunnel, EDF, Port of Dover, among others.

What would it take, I asked, for you to give the management track jobs, the best paid, secure roles to local kids? In part the answer was: 'a working modern foreign language'. That single skill was the gateway to real-time digital engineering under the Channel, to chemical engineering, to collaborating with international colleagues.

Informed by this knowledge, and with a commitment from those employers for working partnerships, I led a successful bid to open a brand new school for the area. One that would bring 'success without selection', that would educate local children to be knowledgeable and skilled – including with a modern foreign language – so that they could be the pick of recruits for these local employers.

When I think of the power of qualifications, I think particularly of a young, aspiring engineer that I knew, let's call him Paul.

When I first met him, his life was extremely challenging, and like many, he had caring responsibilities outside of education. He didn't appreciate at that time how critical his mathematics was to fulfil his aspirations; he was failing at it and he was also undermining the education of others. I sat down with him and we started to talk about his aspiration. Talking in detail about the qualifications he might take post 16 to fulfil this dream, the penny dropped for him that he really, really needed that maths to succeed in the post-16 courses he wanted to do. He agreed to engage with the additional support that the school could offer him and that he would stop undermining the education of others, and I'm pleased to report he's now a qualified and well-paid engineer.

Let me be clear, then, I see the role of a regulator as being champion for the vulnerable and for the disadvantaged. In the case of qualifications that means acting on behalf of students of all ages and apprentices; and especially those with particular protected characteristics.

Clearly Ofqual has a series of statutory responsibilities – I'm not going to rehearse these for you now – you know them well enough. But for me, just as important is Ofqual's unique position.

We have a key role to play influencing, shaping policy, making use of our expertise, the data we hold, and the unique oversight we have of the full regulated qualifications market.

As a sector it's right that we put our collective shoulder to the wheel to tackle the negative impact that the pandemic has had on society and on the economy. We need to improve productivity, support new technologies and address skills shortages. In the years to come, Ofqual will play its part in shaping the future of assessment and qualifications. One aspect of that is, of course, government reform of technical education and the qualifications reviews. Our focus here is going to be on ensuring that qualifications are both high quality and meaningful.

The second element of Ofqual's role that I really want to emphasise today is our ability to bring the sector together, and we do so in the interests of students and apprentices. This is our convening power – you might say.

Over the past 18 months you and Ofqual have engaged more as a regulated community than ever before. As regulator, Ofqual has worked with you to create an environment that is conducive to innovation. Many of you have seized the opportunity to harness technology to deliver innovative solutions.

Ofqual's ability to refine and reform its framework has supported and encouraged you to do that. There have been great examples of careful and considered implementation of remote invigilation, and new uses of remote assessment – both of which enabled students and apprentices to complete their qualifications and progress in their lives. I look forward, for one, to seeing much, much more of this student-focused innovation in the weeks, months and years to come.

Driven by the challenges of the pandemic, we've seen the positive effect of true co-regulation for the first time. We've seen first-hand that you can achieve more together than you can in isolation. We've seen that this is as good for you as AOs, as it is for students.

The work that was done together in relation to Functional Skills is an excellent example. Together we each played our part to deliver government policy, right in the eye of the pandemic. Ofqual reinforced the policy position through our regulatory framework, and this supported you to uphold it. You worked together to achieve a consistent approach and continued to deliver assessments in an unprecedentedly challenging environment. You made sure that those students who couldn't access assessments were able to get a result, nevertheless, to progress.

We assured government of your commitment to deliver, through our collection and presentation of your assessment data. For me, this is a blueprint of how we should work together for the future.

Where you work proactively with us, we can do our bit to make sure that our approach to regulation is right, that it is in the interests of students, and that we help to communicate and land that with students, centres, government and the public.

So I start my tenure recognising the pivotal role Ofqual must play in facilitating innovation, collaboration and driving up quality. We will continue to explore and use effective co-regulatory approaches. It's been

great to already start to have that conversation with the Federation.

I encourage awarding organisations to discuss challenges and solutions, not only with us, but with each other; to address risks, define good practice. Let's do that together.

Ofqual may not always be able to provide all the answers, but we are very much part of the solution.

It is of course true that we need to continue to regulate effectively. Co-regulation is not to be confused with soft regulation. That wouldn't be in your interests, nor in those of students and apprentices.

You want to know where you make substantial investments into the quality of your products that we will intervene to prevent other regulated organisations from taking short cuts. You want us to hold you to the same high standard, so that together we can achieve a market where quality is the true competitive advantage.

I want the Ofqual 'kite-mark' to give additional confidence to students and apprentices choosing their next step, to employers making recruitment decisions. It should be clear to all users that a regulated end point assessment is the right way to go.

I'm grateful to the Institute for the milestone decision it took last year to establish a fully regulated apprenticeships system.

I'm confident that we will continue to have a thriving market of Apprenticeship End Point Assessment Organisations to meet both apprentice and employer needs. You can be confident that our recognition bar will not drop. Quality end point assessment can only be delivered by organisations that have the expertise, governance and resource to deliver.

I hope it's clear that my focus will be on quality for students of all ages and apprentices. Ofqual's greatest strength in regulating on their behalf lies in our independence.

Ofqual is independent of Ministers but works closely with officials to ensure that government policy is deliverable and effective.

Of course, we are also independent from you – our regulated community. Ofqual holds each of you to account for delivery. And I firmly believe that scrutiny helps to ensure a level playing field.

When we ask you for data we can use it to monitor your performance, yes, but we can also monitor the performance of your competitors. We can use that data to assure Ministers you are on track to deliver timely and reliable outcomes, and we use it to influence policy in everybody's interest.

The functional skills revisions are a really, really good example of that.

I spoke earlier of where my passion for qualifications comes from. All of us have a Paul who we've met along the way – perhaps it's your own story or your

own qualifications that motivate you.

I'd like us each to hold our Pauls in mind; not to lose sight of them in the day to day of what we do. These have been extremely difficult times for everyone, but the power of working together in the interests of students – of all the Pauls that we've met and have yet to meet – should be what drives our decisions, our behaviours and our actions. They are our true north.

Thank you.