

Dr Jo Saxton speech at Sixth Form Colleges Association conference

Good morning, everyone. Bill: thank you so much for inviting me. I'm thrilled to be with you, in spirit if not in person.

I first met Bill in something like 2008. I went to see him in his office somewhere high up in Millbank tower. It had the most stunning view across south Westminster. Bill deployed me as a literacy consultant, and not long after, I found myself in a particularly tough new academy in the East Midlands. At that time, challenging educational circumstances on the ground did not include providing and complying with public health measures, and it did not include devising and determining high stakes assessments on top of everything else. Your response to the scale and pace of the change required by the pandemic in the last 2 years is simply breath-taking—more so than any view.

Let me give a sense of scale. Thanks to your commitment and efforts, and those of many thousands of other sector colleagues, despite exams being cancelled, last year 1.2 million students received grades for GCSE, AS and A levels. You, and staff at schools and exam centres, submitted 5.7 million Teacher Assessed Grades for students in England last summer. That includes over 750,000 A level TAGs.

And, in the spring and summer of 2021 alone, thanks again to your efforts, awarding organisations were able to issue over 1 million qualification results to students taking Functional Skills qualifications, Core Maths, International Baccalaureate diplomas, Cambridge Pre-Us, Applied Generals, Tech Levels and others.

2022 is still very young, yet as at today, over 500 regulated assessments and exams have taken place, that's 480,000 entries, or 89% of the January series will have been undertaken, which is extraordinary, given the pressures of the Omicron variant. Once again, in very large part because you have adapted staffing, prioritisation and invigilation, and many of you will have even reorganised your facilities to enable COVID-safe exam sittings to go ahead.

None of us would have chosen this turn of events, and whilst media commentators are right that it has shown the extraordinary purpose, commitment, drive and dedication of those who work in colleges, sixth forms and schools – for which I, and Ofqual of course applaud you – I think there is a bigger point here, and it is about adaptation.

As Darwin and Wallace posited in the 1890s, it is the ability of a species to adapt to its environment that determines its success. The versatility you have all shown over the past 2 years – and the scale of change to qualification and assessment policy and practice that you have realised – must surely exceed that of any generation of educators, certainly in recent history.

And as you know, there are more novel and important adaptations to come, in the form of advance information next month, together with a measured approach to ensure fair grading in the summer. I want to talk to you now about both of these; how they were conceived; why I believe they will help your students, and why they will mark an important staging post in our move back towards normality.

Advance Information

The first point I want to make about advance information is that it's not something we would have contemplated in 'normal times'. In fact, we have gone to great lengths – the whole qualification system has gone to great lengths traditionally – through Ofqual's regulations to reduce the risk of any student or teacher knowing in advance the focus of any exam paper. But we wanted a way to make the exam experience less daunting for students, while also preserving the integrity of the content coverage, as well as preserving the integrity of the assessments themselves.

The whole point is to provide as universal as possible a revision aid for students. And this, combined with the anticipation of a difficult winter, is how policymakers arrived at the 7 February publication date. Any earlier, and content coverage would have been affected; any later and it comes too late in the day for revision to be effective, too late to allow you to recap and review where necessary.

Obviously this is the first time this innovative approach has been taken, and 2022 exam papers were not designed with the publication of advance information in mind. I've no doubt that some people will feel we haven't gone far enough, and others will feel we have gone too far. But the people who matter to me the most are the students – and my sincere hope is that – with guidance from you – they will be able to benefit from the information being shared.

Advance Information is novel for everyone in the exam system. Exam boards have developed it for almost every subject. They've worked at pace to do so in the interests of students. They have done their absolute level best to deliver focused aids, without revealing the questions, and you can imagine that's definitely an art rather than a science. If they'd gone too close to revealing the questions it would have undermined exams and turned them into short-term memory tests rather than true measures of what students have learned, know, understand and can do.

There has been some commentary already about whether advance information will mainly benefit more able students because it might support them to revise for the higher tariff questions.

Of course, much of the advance information gives a steer on how to revise for higher tariff questions, although not all of it.

Bluntly, to focus advance information on low tariff questions would be nonsensical. It would be silly to publish a document that says something like; you will be asked to identify the year in which the Versailles Treaty

was signed, or the year in which Magna Carta was signed. Clearly, at that point, the exam would stop being an exam.

But supporting students to revise for higher tariff questions does not mean that advance information will only support the most able students. Higher tariff doesn't necessarily mean harder content. We know that candidates from across all abilities and demographics gain marks across an exam paper and not only in the low tariff questions. And we hope that the benefit of advance information will mean that students who suffered the most disruption, or those who are less able, may gain confidence to tackle elements of a paper that they might previously not have felt confident to try.

And just as much as advance information is a new phenomenon for the boards and for colleges and schools, so is it new for us at Ofqual. It presents us, as the regulator, with a novel and interesting challenge. We have created a regulatory framework for exceptional measures that would, quite simply, have been unthinkable in a normal exam context. The pandemic has required a range of regulatory reprioritisation and adaptation in the same way that you have had to reprioritise and adapt your normal practice. I am clear that our regulations must align to the interests of students – given the impact on their education experience these past 2 years. So, what does this novel situation look like from the regulator's point of view?

First, the tenet must hold true that Ofqual does not see exams before they are sat. That doesn't change this year. Each year the number of people that know the content of live papers before they are sat is very tightly controlled by exam boards, and that's right. That's key to fairness for students, and important to minimise the risk of any leaks. The exam boards are accountable to Ofqual for the quality and security of their papers. And this year they are also accountable to us for the accurate and careful introduction of advance information.

So, our approach has been about putting in place principles to ensure that advance information secures the interests of students and we've set the right regulations to enable that.

In practical terms, that means that we have worked with subject specialists and our assessment design team, and the boards to agree over 300 specifications how the advance information will work. You get a sense of what a dramatic innovation that is for us to have adapted our rules to allow this is, if you recall the outrage some years ago when a broadsheet newspaper sent a journalist to attend an exam board event, at which hints about the focus of certain questions were allegedly provided in this meeting. The scale of that shock really puts this year's innovation into perspective.

I see it as a really exciting adaptation. We will, of course, be monitoring its effect closely. Shortly after publication, we will be reaching out to hear your – and your students' – views on how it delivers the intentions. We will do so again once exams have been sat. There is much to learn from what will happen in the coming months and so we will expand a wide-ranging research programme to evaluate the impact of advance information to inform thinking for future years. But I ask that when you receive the advance

information, please do remember the positive intentions behind it – it represents a unique coming together of everybody across the qualification system to act in the interests of students, to provide them with support whilst also enabling the re-instatement of the tried, tested – and trusted – approaches to the awarding of qualifications.

Grading

Our approach to advance information was informed and driven by the views of you and of your students – we heard from teachers who were anxious about their students' ability to cover the full range of subject content. We heard from students about their varied experiences of the pandemic.

This same listening approach was applied to how we've tackled grading too.

It was clear talking to students and their parents, that they wanted to get back to normal, but not to do so in one single leap.

At the end of September, we announced our resulting approach to grading next summer, one intended to be as fair as possible to 2022 students. Fair, because it will provide a safety net to students who have been so affected by the pandemic. Fair, because it will iron out some of the anomalies that have come into play through the non-examined years. Fair because it will secure consistency between subjects and between exam boards. Let's remember too that this year marks the return to exams – the way the qualifications have been designed – with all students assessed in the same way, marked, and graded consistently and externally to the same standard. That, along with advance information which itself provides unprecedented support, represents an unprecedented package of aid.

So, 2022 is a transition year to reflect the realities of the pandemic and that students' education does continue to be disrupted. Remember the package as a whole – it works together as a complete aid and support. You need to not try to pick apart individual elements of it.

The results in 2020 and 2021, when exams were cancelled, were clearly out of line with the results of previous exam years. As we ourselves learn to adapt to living with COVID-19, it is right that we take steps to resume arrangements that are coherent with those from pre-pandemic years. We must do it gradually; and this underpins our so-called midpoint approach.

Let me be clear, there is no single statistical midpoint. There will be no standardisation model to determine students' grades. Grade boundaries for each specification will be set by senior examiners, critically, only after they have reviewed the work produced by students. As a check and balance, of course exam boards will use other evidence, including statistical evidence of how students were graded when exams were last taken, so that grade boundaries do, indeed, deliver this generous midpoint approach. That means you can assure your students and their families that, as regulator, we are doing everything we can to secure approaches to standards which are fair, whichever exam board a student is working with, whichever subject. As regulator, one of the key things that we do is review the results. I started to experience this

process for the autumn series. Results across every subject in every board are reviewed in great detail and Ofqual checks the appropriate processes have been followed; considers anomalies with exam boards, before results are issued.

Because the process of determining grade boundaries must follow the act of script marking, which of course follows candidates sitting papers, what we can't tell you is precisely what these arrangements mean for results. But I can assure you that our grading requirements will provide a safety-net for this cohort and it is likely to mean that results overall are higher than in normal years.

Talking to UCAS, and to employers, they wanted to see grades that were closer to the currency they were used to. They also recognised it was not right to implement this in one go. We've heard concerns that repeating 2021 outcomes would likely lead to universities devising alternative entry arrangements and raising the grades on which offers are based. Contributing to a system where that might happen would not actually increase opportunity for students in practice.

Vocational and Technical Qualifications grading

Coherence, parity if you will, between vocational and technical qualifications and general qualifications is really important – and something that the regulatory framework devised during the pandemic better supports than pre-pandemic arrangements.

Ofqual's specific regulatory framework for awarding vocational qualifications in the pandemic requires awarding organisations to secure, as far as possible, that VTQ students are neither disadvantaged nor advantaged compared with their GCSE and A level peers. That principle has not existed in legal regulatory terms before.

Boards will take account, therefore, of the approach for GCSEs and A levels when setting standards in their own vocational and technical qualifications. We, as regulator, will closely monitor the arrangements and look at what awarding organisations are putting in place for their qualifications to ensure they are delivered fairly and are appropriately adapted in the interests of students.

Contingencies

I am really aware that some of you, and your students, would dearly like us to switch off contingencies given the government's confidence and commitment to exams going ahead. But I'm afraid that the need to collect evidence of student performance in case exams don't take place is important. It won't surprise you that I can't agree to turn off those arrangements. Not, of course, that it's entirely in my gift.

As well as showing us your incredible resilience and ability to adapt, the pandemic has also been unpredictable. That's the one predictable thing about

the pandemic; it's continually surprised us and caught us off guard. It wouldn't be doing justice to you and your students to stand down contingencies at this time.

I am, nonetheless, hugely sympathetic to how challenging operationally and emotionally for you and your students it is to ride both these horses, but there are no plans to turn off Plan B.

Ofqual: expert and human, regulating in the interests of students

I promised Bill to leave time to take your questions, but before doing that, please allow me to share a little bit about myself, given this is my first chance to speak to you.

I am here today as Chief Regulator, but I am above everything else, like you, an educator.

I thrive in challenging environments – and actually anyone who knows me will tell you that I actively seek them out. Whether that is leading schools in disadvantaged communities, working in central government in the eye of a pandemic, or coming to Ofqual as we move further through the demands and opportunities the pandemic has forced.

For me, there is nothing more important in education than young people getting the qualifications they need to unlock their future. This is something I live and breathe.

I live and breathe it because that was precisely my own experience.

My qualifications opened all sorts of doors for me – including studying and working in six different countries around the world, and I want everyone to have those same opportunities – but especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

That's why I am here. Every day I think about those students – those with caring responsibilities at home; those who have a fractured or chaotic home life; those whose families are working second, or even third jobs, to keep their homes warm and food on the table – I want qualifications to work for them in the best way possible, to open doors for them.

These are the students who I've started to talk about as being my compass. Their interests are my true north. And this true north breathes life into Ofqual's statutory objectives.

What flows from that, is an Ofqual which is expert, absolutely, but an Ofqual that must also be human. That means listening – to students of all ages, but also to you, those who teach and lead them. You who make the longlist of qualification choices for them, you who support them as they work towards securing qualifications that have the potential to change their lives.

Over the coming weeks and months, I will be spending time with colleges,

sixth forms, schools, different education and training providers in every region of England, so that I can listen to you, to students, to governors and to parents. I want to hear directly about the challenges faced in the qualification system. It's only by hearing and responding to these challenges that I and we at Ofqual can improve how assessment and qualifications work. Some of these things that we'll hear about, Ofqual can do something about. There are others that won't be in our gift, but we can do our best to play our active part in the system which we regulate on behalf of students.

I've so far been lucky enough to visit some colleges in the West Midlands and some schools in the south west. Some of this listening work will happen virtually so that the pandemic doesn't slow us down, nor interrupt your day too much.

What's important is that the insights we gain from you, your students and their families, inform our decisions. To those who think accessible qualifications are dumbing down, I say there is no better illustration of the importance of the power of the functional skills curriculum and those qualifications that enable entry into employment, than what I saw at Hereward College. There I met Sophie and Akram who were developing and practising functional skills in the college's hospitality training centre. Graduates of the college dramatically exceed national averages of employability for those with SEND, and those 2 were well on their way to being able to be employed by a national hotel chain. I am proud that one of the first decisions taken during my tenure as Chief Regulator was to publish a consultation on improving the accessibility of assessments, and another decision on the regulation of reformed digital functional skills. These are live examples of acting in the interest of students.

From visiting Walsall College, I gained real insight into how working with a range of awarding organisations can really meet a college's needs. The Walsall team shared how, while the larger AOs (awarding organisations) have the breadth and can deliver at scale, it is often the smaller ones – many of whom offer the end-point assessments for apprentices – who offer a personal and flexible approach to assessment bookings, which is really useful to help provide confidence and support, and take an element of stress out of the system as apprentices get closer to being ready to take their end point assessment. Accordingly, we will continue to be nuanced in our consideration of applications by organisations seeking entry to this sector and to our recognition. Assessment and organisational capacity must be balanced with a student-centric culture.

Conclusion

Listening to and acting in the interests of students is the true north for everything I will do as Chief Regulator. The context we must navigate together is one of adaptation and innovation, crystallised by the pandemic. But it also a time of reform, already in train pre-pandemic – T Levels, apprenticeship expansion, among others.

I have not even touched on the possibilities afforded by technology and other

innovations. I am convinced of the opportunities they present to improve assessments for students and apprentices – to make them more accessible, more valid, more reliable. We will work together on these in the coming years. We need to ensure that both what we assess and how we assess it stays relevant to needs of employers and society at large.

We share, I have no doubt, a commitment to ensuring that qualification evolution is squarely in the interests of students and apprentices. I am hugely grateful to teachers in colleges, schools and training providers across the country, for the vital part they will play as we navigate the way forward together.

Thank you.