

Simon Lebus speech at the AELP National Conference 2021

Good morning. It is a great pleasure to be here with you today at the AELP Spring Conference. My name is Simon Lebus and I am the Interim Chief Regulator at Ofqual.

I am especially delighted to have the opportunity to speak to you today as it feels as if we are really at the start of what feels like a pivotal time for vocational skills and training.

It is a time when a new survey has found that almost as many middle-class parents now want their child to take a vocational qualification (43 per cent) as want their child to go to university.

It is a time when innovation in e-invigilation and e-assessment has been driven forward at a hugely accelerated pace – something which would have taken years previously.

And it is a time when the government is promising a lifetime skills guarantee and undergraduate-type loans for all training, not just academic degrees.

Today I'm going to talk to you about Ofqual's role as a regulator in supporting the paradigm shift for skills that we can all see on the near horizon.

I'll also talk a bit about how we have been seeing the regulated community respond to the challenges that have been presented in awarding qualifications over the last couple of years.

And I'll finish with a brief look ahead to 2022 and beyond.

In a recent piece in The Times, William Hague said that "Education... is the crossroads of government policy, and if it isn't done well every other idea will end up idling in a traffic jam, waiting for the right skills to be in the right place."

I think it's fair to say that the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill has been designed to ease that traffic jam and open the road, and in the spirit of making that journey as straightforward as possible we have been working closely with the Department to take on board those elements of the bill that relate to ourselves.

We see the bill in particular as underpinning current arrangements between Ofqual and the Institute. We already have well-developed collaborative approaches to reviewing qualifications and assessments before they are approved by the Institute. The bill expands the remit of the Institute in approving and monitoring technical education qualifications and, therefore, the scope of the areas of our collaboration.

One area on which we already collaborate closely is External Quality Assurance – EQA and I think it would be worth now saying a few words about that.

EQA is about ensuring quality in end-point assessments for the apprentices and employers that rely on them to demonstrate that apprentices are competent in the occupation they have trained for.

It ensures that there is a consistent quality approach to assessment across an apprenticeship standard, regardless of which end-point assessment organisation is delivering the assessment and where and when this is carried out. And that the end-point assessment captures what employers set out to capture in the Apprenticeship standard.

Ofqual works directly with employers on how end-point assessments are delivered, and we meet with a number of professional bodies and employer representative groups to improve our understanding of how regulation impacts their sector.

For example, we are working with the Sports Ground Safety Authority, as assessments in this sector have been adapted considerably due to live venues such as football stadiums being closed for some time. As with many vocational qualifications, public safety is paramount so it is important, as a regulator, that we have a good understanding of these adaptations, and understand whether there will be any risks to being able to conduct assessments of occupational competence, where these can only take place at live events, given current industry challenges relating to staff shortages and a lack of live events taking place.

In January 2020 we ran our first ‘sector’ or ‘route’ forum. As the EQA provider for all the standards in the hair and beauty route, this made it a logical place for us to start. The forum was attended by the trailblazer group, EPAOs and the Institute.

As a result of this forum the trailblazer group agreed to develop a set of frequently asked questions to use alongside the relevant assessment plan, to ensure consistency between end-point assessment providers.

The EQA Framework states that delivery of end-point assessments should be carried out by organisations that are proven to have the right level of both sector and assessment expertise. This means that all EPAOs who deliver end-point assessments for which Ofqual is the EQA provider need to be recognised by us.

The process of gaining recognition is rigorous – as is the ongoing need to comply with our general conditions of recognition once recognised. But applying rigour does not mean that we stifle creativity or innovation – not at all.

We encourage awarding organisations to think creatively about what they do – never more so than in their response to awarding qualifications during the pandemic. We have seen some excellent examples of remote assessment and

remote invigilation which, when done well, can bring convenience for providers and for students, and allow results to be awarded that may otherwise have been delayed. So, thank you all for being so keen to adapt and willing to innovate in your own assessment activities as a result – it has made a difference.

Other innovations include the emergence of micro-credentials – mini-qualifications that demonstrate skills, knowledge or experience in a given subject area or capability. Giving candidates the ability to study for soft and hard skills, in subjects such as self-management, teamwork, digital marketing and data analytics, micro-credentials offer employers a clearer understanding of that candidate's professional knowledge and their ability to apply it.

There has also been a shift in focus to the needs of small and medium-sized enterprises with the government's plans to introduce portable apprenticeships to support apprentices and employers in making use of apprenticeships in sectors where short-term, project-based employment is the norm. With the ability to take a 3 year approach over a series of 9 month contracts, learners can 'port' their qualification around different employers. Of course, a really strong high-quality provider base is going to be critical for all of that, so that employers and apprentices can have confidence in the quality of the training, and that is where you come in.

And what does all of this exciting innovation and flexibility in learning and the awarding of vocational qualifications mean for those of us here today?

It means that we will need to adapt how we operate and have the conviction to work together to make the changes that will be necessary to not just our systems and processes, but to our attitudes. Ofqual will need to ensure that its regulatory model is fit for purpose and that we continue to be part of opening up that road.

To help us do that, we speak directly to colleges and training providers so that we can understand how our regulation of awarding organisations is being experienced by those who are closest to it.

We know, through providers, and through our conversations with AoC, AELP and HOLEX, that the sector remains concerned about the Department's policy for the awarding of FSQs this summer. I have personally spoken with Jane Hickie about this, and we will continue to listen to the concerns of the provider community on all aspects of the awarding arrangements and how they are working for them.

As you will know, in summer 2021 – A levels and GCSE results will be coming out in the same week, and many level 2 and level 3 vocational qualifications will be coming at the same time so as not to disadvantage students who will be using them to progress. But although results days will look different on the surface, it will be, as always, an anxious time for learners.

Just as they have needed their parents' and teachers' support, they will also need the support of employers, who may find that they are taking on new

employees who have a slightly different skill set than those they are used to. Employees who, although they may have been disadvantaged by being out of the classroom a great deal over the last 18 months, will have developed other skills from learning in a different way, such as expertise in using video conferencing platforms and other business tools.

However different the experience of those new employees is, they will nonetheless have achieved their qualification and are now ready for the chance to show what they can do.

I would also like to take this opportunity to assure you that arrangements for 2022 are already underway. We recognise that students who will be taking exams and assessments next year will have had significant disruption to their education this year. Alongside the Department, and with the awarding organisations and wider stakeholders, we are considering what might need to be done to ensure that students are able to sit exams and take other assessments safely and receive grades that are fair, even if further disruption does occur. This will of course, draw on lessons learnt during the pandemic.

Finally, I would like to note that Alison Wolf's landmark report in 2011 stated that many good vocational courses and institutions existed "in spite of" the funding and regulatory system. Let's look to the promises made in the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill to make the funding and regulatory system really work for the benefit of learners of all ages.