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# Research Matters : 19

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## Foreword

As this issue of *Research Matters* goes to press, two important matters remain highly controversial issues in qualifications policy in England – the move in Science from assessment of practical work, and the 'de-coupling' of AS and A level examinations – to a position where AS level will continue to exist, but performance in the AS level will not contribute to the grade in the corresponding A level. Practical work in Science is vital, for developing an awareness of handling of materials and equipment, for encouraging deep learning through engaging activities, and for developing competence in design and control, observation and reporting. But, in specific qualifications, by 2013 we had moved to a position where we lacked clarity in its precise purpose – as my own and Robin Millar's work has highlighted – and we have pursued highly dependable assessment at the expense of rich learning. The compromise position adopted by Ofqual aims to re-set this relation and introduce clarity into purpose. As a nation we now need to monitor closely the impact, on learning programmes and on attainment, of the revised assessment requirements. The sense of controversy around the new qualifications will only subside when evidence of a retention of high-quality practical work emerges from schools and colleges. Likewise with AS level; prominent voices continue to be heard on both sides of the AS debate. The analysis of 'four AS followed by three A levels', presented in this issue, highlights the interesting benefits of being able to refine subject choice by discontinuing study in a subject, at the end of the first year of advanced study. This does not mean that AS needs to contribute to the final A2 grade; but – as with Science coursework – assessment-dominated thinking has led many schools to move from four AS to three A levels, despite the advantages of (i) gaining individual, social and economic benefit by helping students focus on subjects which they enjoy and/or in which they excel; and (ii) providing Higher Education institutions with dependable information at the end of Year 12, which enhances Higher Education offer-making. The approach in Science need not reduce the amount of engaging practical work – but it may so do. The de-coupling of AS level need not reduce the numbers using AS to refine their choices – but it may so do. The proof of the pudding will be in the eating.

**Tim Oates** *Group Director, Assessment Research and Development*

## Editorial

The importance of a sound research evidence base to underpin qualifications reform is reflected in the articles in this issue. The first is an extension of the work conducted by Child, Darlington and Gill reported in Issue 18 which explored the choices of topics and units made by students and teachers in A level History. Their more recent research examines the factors that influence those choices and analyses the motivations underlying those decisions. Wilson, Evans and Old focus on Science and the need for sustained growth in uptake following a recent increase in the percentage of A level entries for Science. As a result of concerns about students' abilities in applying scientific concepts, they examine a context led approach to Science courses which have been developed in an attempt to address these concerns. Assessment of Citizenship is another challenging area in qualifications development. Carroll, Child and Darlington discuss the assessment of GCSE Citizenship. They explore definitions of Citizenship, international approaches to its assessment, and different approaches to external examination of the subject.

The next two articles address more technical aspects of reforms to qualifications. Vidal Rodeiro's research aims to gain an understanding of the numbers and types of students who start but do not complete their AS and A level qualifications amidst concerns about the decoupling of AS and A levels. Current reforms have also led to changes in models of assessment including those involving inclusion and balance of examined and non-examined assessment. Gill summarises the processes undertaken by Oxford, Cambridge and RSA (OCR) to moderate coursework and controlled assessment. He discusses the aims and processes of moderation as well as the principle of fairness for all candidates.

Assessment strategies are important for the development of the reformed qualifications and validity is central to any assessment strategy. Shaw and Crisp make a timely contribution by reflecting on Cambridge Assessment's validation research which led to the development of a framework for evidencing validity in large-scale, high-stakes examinations. Over the last five years the framework has been amended and strengthened.

The final article looks to potential future developments in a different field. Zanini and Dhawan focus on statistical and Computer Science techniques which have been developed to analyse text data. They discuss new sources of text data such as text messaging, social media activity, blogs and web searches in the context of the Big Data trend. This is an expanding field and offers the opportunity for new areas of research and new methodologies.

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