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If you would like to comment on any of the articles in this issue, please contact Tom Bramley – Director, Research Division. Email: researchprogrammes@cambridgeassessment.org.uk

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Research *Matters* / 25

A CAMBRIDGE ASSESSMENT PUBLICATION

Foreword

The topics covered in this issue of *Research Matters* seem like a microcosm of education, which is forever seeking stability and yet permanently in transformation. We have theory which explains this state of affairs: Critical realism tells us that in social systems, such as education, things will only happen on a predictable basis when all the factors impinging on it are stable. Which, given the shifts in youth culture, the economy, families and so on, seldom holds true for long. This necessary feature of social systems commits policymakers to constant evaluation, fine-tuning, innovation and optimisation. Unintended consequences and collateral impacts are legion.

In this issue we have articles which focus on the impact and effect of core aspects of contemporary policy as well as potential innovations which go beyond common assumptions. Balancing stability and innovation is a constant challenge. We know from the historical record that stability in assessment has assets: Public confidence can accumulate; understanding of qualifications can grow in society; and learning programmes can carefully be refined and enhanced. Conversely, repeated changes can undermine confidence; can cause the hard work behind lesson plans and resources to be redundant; and introduce confusion into how assessments should be used and interpreted. In various papers over the past decade, researchers at Cambridge Assessment have argued that, too frequently, qualifications are seen as 'the thing to change' as a means of implementing wider policy aspirations – not least because they are relatively easy to change, compared with other key factors in education and training arrangements.

Undue change indeed decreases capacity in education. But holding on too long to things which are known to be problematic or defective has a bad history – the '5 grade A*-C' performance measure for GCSEs; some vocational equivalents to GCSE; high levels of coursework in a setting of hyper-accountability. Sound research – well constructed in its focus, method, scheduling, and reporting – is an essential foundation to policy which can achieve this balance between innovation and stability.

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

Editorial

There is currently much interest in the '21st century' or 'transversal' skills that young people need to acquire in order to be ready for the workplace and life in general. Among these is 'reflection'. Like many of the transversal skills, it is difficult to define and even more difficult to assess. In the first article of this issue, Stuart Shaw, Martina Kvalja and Irenka Suto describe how reflection has been conceived in the education and assessment literature, and show how it can be assessed, at least in part, in a high-stakes context. In the second article, I consider possible justifications for using fixed pass marks. They have the advantages of simplicity and transparency, but can these outweigh potential unfairness when tests vary in difficulty?

Vicki Crisp in the third article investigates experimentally the process by which schools ensure that their teachers are marking non-examined assessments to the same standard ('internal moderation') prior to the work being externally moderated by the awarding body.

The fourth article by Carmen Vidal Rodeiro contributes to the current debate on whether students who do not achieve a 'good pass' in GCSE Mathematics and English should have to retake them in the sixth form. She finds some evidence that those who retake do slightly worse in their Level 3 qualifications than comparable students who do not. In the fifth article, Tom Benton shows how to go about predicting the number of students who will achieve 'straight' grade 9s in the reformed GCSEs. It is not straightforward! Many readers will probably be content just to wait and see....

The final article addresses an important aspect of reform to A levels: What is the effect on the transition from school/college to higher education? Simon Child and colleagues use observation of additional support classes in Biology at three universities (carried out prior to the reforms) plus interviews with A level teachers, undergraduates and lecturers, to shed light on the issues from different perspectives.

Tom Bramley *Director, Research Division*