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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Foreword

There is much talk about raising attainment in education systems, and accompanying discussion about equity. Each is important, and public policy debate becomes particularly interesting when approaches to improving both are the focus of attention. For sure, we have seen responses which improve one and not the other, or indeed improve one with deleterious impact on the other. Raising attainment and improving equity is not a Holy Grail – it can indeed be achieved, as Eric Hanushek's seminal work[1] on setting and streaming shows.

But when UK universities try to widen participation, they run straight into the issue of subject choice at A Level – the subject of Carmen Vidal Rodeiro's reprise analysis. Choose the wrong subjects, and some courses will be closed to you, for entirely understandable reasons. With schools judged largely by their grade outcomes, and immediate learner preferences often driving choices (Martin Bloomer's 'local rationality' argument[2]), premature closing of options is bad for individuals and bad for our society and economy. And despite gender balance and participation improving in A Level physics, it is still the case that in 2018 only 22% were female. Subject choice remains adversely affected by many factors – and feeds straight into inequality in options and progression. Aimed squarely at enhanced equity, Government policy on post-16 Maths and English has signalled clearly the link between good attainment in these subject and life chances (and thus social justice) but Jo Ireland's article shows clearly the critical practical issues which need to be worked through to enable the policy to achieve its laudable ambitions. Social justice questions also permeate the question of predicted grades – The Government's 2011 analysis and Tim Gill's previous analysis have indicated that differences in social background previously have affected predictions, while his latest analysis suggests a genuine effort by professionals to enhance their accuracy.

Attainment and equity; there are many things which affect each. Enhancing both without improving one at the expense of the other requires the kind of analyses we present here, and continued sophisticated public policy effort.

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

Editorial

How should we define what is the 'correct' mark to give the response to an exam question (and the paper as a whole)? Should it be what the most experienced marker would give it, or the average 'wisdom' of a (small) crowd of less experienced markers? This fundamental question is addressed by Tom Benton in the first article in this issue of *Research Matters*. How we choose to define 'correct' has implications both for how we mark, and how we monitor marking.

The second article by Tom Gallacher and Martin Johnson takes a critical look at how some of the recent literature about 'learning progressions' fits into the larger picture of academic thinking about teaching, learning and curriculum design.

The third article by Carmen Vidal Rodeiro presents some key findings from a larger study exploring what HE courses are taken, and at what kinds of HE institution, by students with different subject choices at A Level.

There has been a lot of debate recently about the merits or otherwise of making students who do not achieve a grade C or 4 at GCSE in English or Maths continue to study these subjects as part of their post-16 curriculum. Jo Ireland draws out some themes from the different aspects of this debate in our fourth article.

In our final article, Tim Gill reports on a survey of a relatively small number of schools in three different subject areas aimed at finding out how they went about making their predictions of A Level results for individual students, how accurate those predictions were, and how they compared with the findings from a similar survey carried out before the reform of A Levels.

The five articles in this issue thus cover a variety of topical issues in education and assessment – I hope you enjoy reading them.

Tom Bramley *Director, Research Division*

1. Hanushek, E., & Wossman, L. (2006). Does educational tracking effect performance and inequality? Differences-in-differences evidence across countries. *The Economic Journal, 116*, C63–C76.
2. Bloomer, M., & Hodkinson, P. (2013). Learning careers: continuity and change in young people's dispositions to learning. *British Educational Research Journal, 26*(5), 583–597.