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Foreword

As this copy of *Research Matters* goes to press, with three articles focusing on A level, there is emerging a conundrum in national policy in respect of the policy on increasing the involvement of Higher Education in the design, administration and evaluation of A levels. The conundrum is this: the institutional response to the recent consultation on 'HE engagement' has been muted at best, and negative on some of the key aspects of the policy. By contrast, the response of individual academics has been overwhelmingly positive. Reflecting this contrast, the effort which Cambridge Assessment has put into commissioning HE subject forums has ensured the systematic involvement of very large numbers of academics, from across the entire HE community, not just 'elite' institutions. This endorses the approach of the Group to increasing HE engagement, which can be summarised as: 'new relations, not new institutions'. New institutions can escalate unwieldy and expensive bureaucracy, whereas carefully-constructed new relations can help positively and efficiently with re-alignment, re-design and updating of A levels. The Group's research programme is feeding systematically into these new relations, including the work contained in this volume: analytic work on '21st Century skills', examination of validity in advanced level qualifications, and elements of A level studies which constitute preparation for study at higher level.

Although contributions to enactment of evidence-driven national policy tend to assume centre stage, it is vital not to overlook Martin Johnson's brief, but highly important piece at the end of this volume. It is focused on method. Assessment is located in complex systems; for research evidence to be dependable, research design must be robust. Alongside the stream of focused research projects, the research teams in Cambridge Assessment engage in a parallel, linked programme of discourse and critique of method in educational and assessment research. I still experience a lift when I witness conference presentations based on excellent design; conversely, a deep sigh is still too often present listening to studies in important areas but with inadequate design. Design and method must remain a key area of conscious deliberation and continuous refinement if we are to convince practitioners and policy-makers of the veracity of the new knowledge we create.

Tim Oates *Group Director, Assessment Research and Development*

Editorial

This issue addresses a number of themes that are both topical and challenging. The first article from Irenka Suto opens with a quotation from Andreas Schleicher which illustrates the extent of the challenge facing us as we attempt to define 21st Century skills and to support their development in young people. As well as considering curricula and pedagogy, Suto addresses the difficulties faced by those who seek to assess such skills. Independent research and investigative skills are identified in the literature as skills that should be fostered in the 21st century and in their article Mehta, Suto, Elliott and Rushton explore the perspectives of teachers and students who engage in independent study at A level (Advanced Level General Certificate of Education). This research provides insights into the preparedness of students who progress to university where they are expected to engage in independent study and research-related tasks. It also explores how such skills could be embedded in A level courses of study.

Shaw, Johnson and Warwick discuss Assessment for Learning (AfL) practices in international contexts. The Assessment for Learning in International Contexts (ALIC) project highlights the values and practices that seem to be important to teachers across diverse national contexts. This analysis of assessment practice on the ground suggests that different factors impact on teachers' aspirations and interpretations and that research such as this is extremely valuable in identifying how the principles of initiatives such as AfL can be realised.

The final article in this issue focuses on the methodological challenges faced by Greatorex, Shaw, Hodson and Ireland as they attempted to use scales of cognitive demand in a validation study. Although there were difficulties in applying the method, the research indicated the potential for use of demands analyses and contexts in which such scales could be used in future validity studies.

At Cambridge Assessment a Qualitative Research Methods Reading Group was first convened by Martin Johnson, a research officer working in the Research Division. Over the last 5 years this group has grown both in size and remit. It is an invaluable focus for discussion and has helped to develop shared understandings which have strengthened research across the organisation as members have learned new skills and identified a range of potential methodologies.

Sylvia Green *Director of Research*