



- 1 **Foreword** : Tim Oates
- 1 **Editorial** : Sylvia Green
- 2 **Changing times, changing qualifications** : Nicky Rushton
- 9 **A level reform: Is the Government in tune with its stakeholders?** : Irenka Suto, Sanjana Mehta, Simon Child, Frances Wilson and Elizabeth Jeffery
- 15 **Comparing progression routes to post-16 Science qualifications** : Carmen L. Vidal Rodeiro
- 23 **Early entry GCSE candidates: Do they perform to their potential?** : Tim Gill
- 40 **Reaching for the A* : Exploring the extent and effect of resitting at A level** : Tom Sutch and Frances Wilson
- 49 **Comparing difficulty of GCSE tiered examinations using common questions** : Vikas Dhawan and Frances Wilson
- 56 **Statistical Reports** : The Research Division
- 57 **Research News**
- 58 **Question Writing Course**
- 59 **Back Issues**

If you would like to comment on any of the articles in this issue, please contact Sylvia Green.
Email: researchprogrammes@cambridgeassessment.org.uk

The full issue and previous issues are available on our website:
www.cambridgeassessment.org.uk/ca/Our_Services/Research

Research Matters : 16

A CAMBRIDGE ASSESSMENT PUBLICATION

Foreword

By virtue of having developed and managed qualifications for well over a century, Cambridge Assessment has accumulated considerable 'policy memory' regarding change in assessment and education. History tells us that change is neither a universal good nor a universal evil. Well-managed innovation has brought us assessments which measure with greater precision, have brought the benefits of education to a wider and more diverse range of candidates, and offer a better balance of cost and benefit. Whilst each innovation needs to be considered for the particular benefits it offers, 'change' needs to be considered in its own right, due to the challenges it presents and the pressures it places on individuals and systems. A period of change in qualifications and assessment inevitably reduces the capacity of education and training systems, since it directs effort away from 'normal' operation of the system and 'fine tuning' of existing qualifications. Continuous, ill-considered change in qualifications policy and regulation can lead to significant disruption in arrangements, reduction in confidence in qualifications, and unnecessary cost.

The UK has seen an extraordinary level of changes in the form, content and regulation of assessment – Nicky Rushton's article in this edition provides a fascinating overview of these revisions and 'system nudges'. In the face of this fast pace in change, calls for 'taking education out of politics' are increasingly heard. But both theory and practice tell us that it is impossible to 'take politics out of education', since education is intimately tied to social systems and political arrangements. It is, however, possible to take educational change out of 'the political cycle' – that is, a domestic electoral cycle which can, on occasion, encourage short-term thinking and ill-framed reform.

Without a flow of high quality evidence, 'evidence-based policy' is impossible. The studies included in this issue aim to ensure that this flow is sustained.

Tim Oates *Group Director, Assessment Research and Development*

Editorial

The articles in this issue address a range of investigations and perspectives on the theme of 'change'. Not only the details and descriptions of what has changed are addressed, but also how change can be best informed and what the intended and unintended consequences can be. In her article Rushton documents some of the changes that have occurred in secondary school education and general qualifications since 2000 and highlights the scale and scope of change over a relatively short period. Suto *et al.* consider change in the context of government policy and reform of GCE A levels in England, giving a chronological account of recent developments and reports on studies undertaken to research the views and experiences of stakeholders in schools, colleges and universities. The studies outlined exemplify ways in which a strong evidence base can be built to strengthen the development of qualifications.

Vidal Rodeiro discusses how attempts to widen the choice of qualifications in a subject can impact on the progression routes available to students. The analyses of national data reported here suggest that there is cause for concern in terms of opportunities afforded to certain groups of students according to the qualifications that they chose to take and the extent to which choices were made for them.

The next three articles illustrate how changes to assessment systems and structures can have both intended and unintended consequences. In the first of these Gill investigates patterns and effects of early certification in GCSEs in recent years. There has been concern that since the scrapping of Key Stage 3 tests candidates have been entered early and that this has meant that some have not achieved their potential. Added to the system change at Key Stage 3, it has been suggested that the pressure of the league tables and the accountability system has encouraged early entry to ensure achievement of Grade C which is a key performance measure. Gill also explores the impact of early entry at GCSE on uptake and performance at A level. The aspects of change highlighted in the work of Sutch and Wilson focus on the structure of A levels, the introduction of the new A* grade and the impact of both of these structural changes on the extent and outcomes of resitting by high performing A level candidates.

This work provides interesting findings in an area that has been under researched while also correcting some widely held misconceptions about the extent of resitting at A level. The final article also explores the difficulty of common questions between tiered components to determine whether the tiered papers were functioning as intended. Dhawan and Wilson discuss possible reasons why some of the items may not have behaved as intended and they recommend ways of addressing some of the difficulties of tiering.

Sylvia Green *Director of Research*