

Ladies and gentlemen,

We are living through an unlikely revolution. After decades of ever-increasing state interference in what teachers teach and students learn, Michael Gove, as Secretary of State, has taken a self-denying ordinance and is stepping back from what had become an increasingly close involvement of Government in the qualifications system.

On behalf of the Government he has challenged the exam boards to design their own replacements for GCSEs in English, Maths and the Sciences. Each board will present its own ideas for the best syllabus and examination and the Department for Education will choose one board to run each syllabus.

We welcome this, having for many years called on successive Governments to give exam boards a free hand to work with teachers, learned societies, academics and subject experts in order to build robust and motivating syllabuses based on evidence of what works and what students need to learn.

As far back as March 2008 we said, “Most of the innovation in assessment has grown out of awarding bodies listening to schools, universities and businesses. A few examples would be Nuffield Physics and Chemistry in the 1970s, MEI maths (created with schools and the Trust) and CLAIT (created with employers and trainers in the 1990s), Twenty First Century Science (created with Nuffield and York University) and OCR Nationals – now Cambridge Nationals - (created with schools and colleges) in the 2000s. By contrast, centrally directed innovation such as NVQs and GNVQs have been far less successful.”

We did not even mention IGCSE in this list, which was developed and pioneered in Cambridge, and we have introduced several highly successful new qualifications since then including Cambridge Technicals, the Cambridge Pre-U and, most recently, the Cambridge Progression suite. At the same time we have been able to observe the much less happy fate of some centrally developed qualifications such as the now nearly extinct Diploma and the furore around the new English GCSEs. We therefore welcome the Department for Education’s statement that: “We do not believe that qualifications are best designed by Government... This Government does not intend to repeat previous attempts to underpin the quality of our qualifications by setting ever more restrictive central requirements...in general we do not expect to direct the design of new qualifications.”

The DfE does, however, retain a role. Having designed the best syllabus and examination we can, we will be entering a two-stage competition with other exam boards to win the right to deliver the qualification in schools and colleges. The first stage will be for the regulator, Ofqual, to independently assess the qualifications and exam boards against new regulations. The second stage, which is the one carried out by the DfE, will involve independent assessment of the qualifications satisfying Ofqual to identify the very best one in each subject.

Why is the Government taking this approach? The reason lies in the fact that there has been a growing concern in England that exam boards have been competing on the lowering of standards – what has been described by the media as “the race to the bottom This policy will therefore create a single exam board in each of the three main

subjects of English, Maths and Science, a radical departure from the free market arrangements that have previously applied.

Is Cambridge Assessment ready? With curriculum reform, accountability reform and 16-18 (A Level) reform all happening at the same time, it is appropriate to ask this question.

I believe we are. With our international arm's expertise in high-performing international systems and our UK board's relationships with a broad cross-section of English schools, we are uniquely well placed to win one or more of these bids, despite the tight timescale.

Internationally, we have worked with ministries of education, qualifications authorities and examinations boards to help shape and establish education systems. For example, in Singapore our 'Cambridge Connection' – built over decades on mutual trust and understanding – continues to contribute to an educational system that is recognised for high-quality outcomes around the world. Every year, tens of thousands of secondary students take Singapore-Cambridge qualifications.

In the UK, as I've already mentioned we have been going through a particularly creative time in the last couple of years, the latest initiative being a partnership with The Open University to open up a new route into university for vocational learners. Fresh thinking and a dynamic approach to education courses, qualifications, support materials and stakeholders have swept through the organisation.

Underpinning this expertise in assessment is a central Research Division, the largest of its kind in Europe, published widely in peer-reviewed journals and at the forefront of modern research methodology. At Cambridge Assessment we firmly believe in a research-led and evidence-based approach to all educational developments and these are backed by the fundamentals of good qualification design laid out in the Cambridge Approach. This is why we are so highly respected and why our qualifications and tests are trusted around the world.

And, naturally, it doesn't hurt that we are a department of Cambridge University, and that our primary objective, as a not for profit organisation, is the promotion of educational excellence through the provision of high quality exams and qualifications.

The replacement by EBCs of GCSEs in English, Maths and Science gives us the chance to do some radical thinking about how to create the best qualifications for 16 year olds anywhere in the world, and we look forward with relish to seizing the opportunity created by this unlikely revolution.

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