Making Post-Qualifications Admissions work – the logistics
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Below is a transcript of a presentation by Simon Lebus at the Westminster Forum event 'University access and admissions – the next steps' on 22 November 2011

Morning, it's a pleasure to be here. I should just explain Cambridge Assessment interest in the measure, we're a department of the University of Cambridge, which owns and operates its exam boards which are OCR, CIE and Cambridge ESOL, so we are responsible for A-Levels, GCSEs, the Cambridge Pre-U and we also have an admissions and special tests unit which has runs the HAT, the MAT, the IMAT, the BMAT, and many other acronyms you couldn't even think of, so we are quite heavily engaged in this issue.

I thought I would start with a quotation from Stephen Schwartz who is the author of the 2004 Report on Fair Admissions to HE, which was the last time the whole issue of PQA was raised, and he made the following comments in an interview with the THES. 'If adjustments have to be made to do the right thing, you would think that people would want to do that. It's just too bad if people want to put administrative convenience ahead of justice'. Now I think that's quite an interesting quotation because it recaptures the rather sort of loaded way in which this debate has often been couched and I think it's rather good to get Mary's rather sort of neutral account of it so that we don't get confused with some of these issues, but what I want to do in this talk is firstly talk about some of the adjustments that he refers to so far as they affect awarding bodies, and then perhaps make a few comments on whether they serve justice, at all, to use his expression.

So to start with some of the practical issues relating to awarding bodies, there's been lots of discussion about timetabling and the fact that that will be compressed, the exams would start some three weeks earlier and they would be taken over a 5, rather than a 7 week period. Now that's not quite as greater compression as you might imagine, because two of the weeks of the 7 week… current 7 week timetable are not very heavily used, but once you've factored in bank holidays, various religious holidays and one or two other issues, it does nonetheless mean that we've got a 13% reduction in the time table, so it is quite a significant reduction in the timetable, and of course by bringing the start date forward, in effect to the last week in April, you do reduce teaching time by about 3 weeks, but I think also more significantly there's a wash back effect, because in effect I think it probably means that much of the Easter term ends up being taken up, or even more of the Easter term ends us being taken up with revision than it is at present. And also ultimately I think that probably means that there's some sort of knock on effect in terms of content. I know that Ofqual will be responding to the consultation, but there are issues in terms of maintaining standards over time, if in fact one of the results of what's essentially designed as administrative reform, actually leads to the educational consequence that you have to reduce the content of your syllabus, because of reduced teaching time.

I think also there are issues about increased pressure on students, especially those taking A-Levels in a linear fashion, i.e. taking AS levels and A-Levels together and there are an increasing number of students doing those, and you could potentially end up moving from a regime where generally it's the case that students don't have to take more than 2 exams a day to one where they have to take 3 exams a day, so we would be, if you like, substituting the stress that some of the students feel now as a result of the current, slightly weird admissions systems for stress that they are then subject… or increased stress that they are subject to as part of the examination process.

I think there are also increased difficulties about managing timetable conflicts, and we will be hearing from some school practitioners later on, but I am aware that timetabling conflicts are already very difficult to manage, and I think that pressing the timetable will add to that.

And then, of course, there are also knock on effects on practicals, language, orals, coursework, music, performance studies, science planning and so on, all of which again will be just placed back earlier into the Easter, so I don't think we should trivialise or underestimate quite how significant some of these impacts on timetabling could be.

The other thing to bear in mind, it's not perhaps the most important of the issues, but it is nonetheless relevant, in combination with GCSE, where I assume the timetable will remain unchanged, you effectively take out school halls and gymnasia for almost until the end of June, so you have an entire summer term with both those quite significant resources basically conflicting.

Coming on to other practical issues, marking, well obviously there is a shorter marking period. Our own estimate at the moment is that we could probably take about 10 days out of the whole process without too much discomfort, much more than that and you really do begin to creak at the edges, you are leaving very little room for contingencies. There's also the issue which Siôn referred to that marking takes place during term time and this assumes (a) that teachers would be free to mark as well as to carry on with their teaching responsibilities, or indeed that alternative arrangements could be made, but also that teachers would be ready to mark during the summer half term, I don't know whether they would or not, but that's certainly one of the things that would be required. I think also there are potential issues related to just the operational management of the whole system. At the moment, I think certainly in our case, about 60% of our scripts are marked online, you would probably have to increase that to about 100% to get some of the benefits of online distribution. It can, of course, be done but there's cost associated with that. There's also a loss of contingency type, most high volume processing systems, and to some extent the exam system, is one such, tend to operate optimally at about 85% of capacity and what this does, I think, is to actually pushes it up to 100% capacity, and that's when you get sort of real system strain showing, there's a loss of contingency, there's a loss of system resilience.

And finally I think we also need to bear in mind that there will be much less time to process enquiries after results re-marks, appeals and so on, so we would have to think quite carefully about what the consequences would be for picking up some of the problems that can occur during the exam process.

And then finally I just want to talk briefly about the educational implications, there's been a lot of talk about this as being something that will lead to the death of modular A-Levels, to the death of AS levels, and I think I would want to make the comment that those were all introduced as part of the curriculum 2000 reform, they were introduced as a curriculum reform with all the process of debate and discussion that normally accompanies curriculum reform, and I think it would be highly regrettable if they were to end up being ditched because we are making administrative changes to the university admissions service. Again I think it's quite important to remember that about 70% of young people go on to stay on after 16, of whom only about 50% are involved in university admissions, so there's a whole 20%, many of whom actually take AS levels as a first step and then may go on to BTECs or other vocational studies, but for them, AS level actually serves quite a useful filtering function, I think it will be very regrettable if that were to be a casualty of this process.

So that's some of the administrative issues, some of the… what Stephen Schwartz called the practical things. What about what he called the justice issues, will it promote social inclusion? Mary talked about the whole issue of predicted grades and how those work and how they distribute. At present 80% of over predicted grades… sorry 80% of wrongly predicted grades are over predictions, the majority of those relate to pupils from the maintained sector and I think one has to sort of bear in mind, therefore, that the argument that this is a way of dealing with people underbidding is probably a bit flawed at the moment, using predicted grades generally favours people from the maintained sector. That's not an argument for continuing with the system, and I think it's something to bear in mind. I think there's also an issue about the three week make your mind up window in the proposed system post 2016, and my own sense is that actually those with social capital and existing connections who know and understand the system are likely to benefit from that much more than happens at present, at present people do actually have quite a long opportunity to get to know the institutions, to engage with them in a practical way, and my own sense is this actually may act against the interests of those who don't have that sort of social capital.

And the other big issue, of course, is that it means that universities, and again I take Mary's comment that the sector is not uniform, but certainly so far as selector institutions are concerned, there's much more transparency about the basis on which they are making their offers and on which they are carrying out their admissions and I think that would exclude some of what goes on at present where people have a bit of flex about how they implement their offers, and again that's generally been used to favour people from less advantaged backgrounds. I think you might lose some of that.

I think there's also an issue about how you manage allocation of places to oversubscribed institutions, there's still a lot of gaming of second choices that's going to go on, and that will disadvantage some of the less sophisticated applicants. And I think also, of course, what happens about admissions tests, the number of these are going up exponentially, the number of institutions using them has risen by 50% since 2009 and there are now 114 different tests coving 349 separate courses, where do they fit in to all of this? If we end up with a PQA system and then a great multiplication of admissions tests, that's not going to help.

So, a couple of ideas of other simpler ways perhaps of dealing with this. One is use predicted grades submitted to exam boards in May, I believe they are somewhat more accurate than the predictions used for university admissions, but we don't have hard data on that at the moment. Another thought is actually requiring the cashing in of AS levels, declaration of UMS forms are evidence, and the evidence from Cambridge is actually the very good correlation between UMS and exam results.

So in response to Stephen Schwartz's question, is it the right thing? Rather like UCAS, it's not for awarding bodies to say, but there are trade-offs, and I think certainly in overall terms it does significantly increase system risk.

Thank you.