

Cambridge Assessment 2010 Network Conference: opening remarks

Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to the fifth Cambridge Assessment Network Conference on 'Challenges of Assessment Reform'. One of the great things about organising a Conference on assessment reform is that there is no danger at all of there being any shortage of things to talk about, as a new wave of major reform seems always either just about to be unleashed or recently to have been completed!

In education policy development, assessment reform occupies a semi-permanent place at the top of the agenda, high on politicians' and administrators' list as a tool with which to improve education, and equally the subject of criticism from many educators and users as something that distorts education, and fails to produce adequately educated citizens – the 'too many exams, not enough learning' school of thought. What we hope to do at the Conference today is to provide some context for this discussion, and, insofar as a semi-permanent state of change within our assessment system seems to be a given, to think about the practical consequences.

The importance of this was brought home to me vividly soon after I joined Cambridge Assessment. This was in July 2002, just in time for the great A level crisis which followed the introduction of Curriculum 2000. I was attending a Conference at which the opening speech was given by the then Schools Minister, David Milliband. A propos the crisis, somebody asked a very sensible question about the wisdom of introducing changes before they had been fully trialled. The Minister responded by saying that when politicians had good ideas for change, their instinct was to implement them immediately. This was because if they were good ideas and they weren't implemented straight away, it was a lost opportunity.

I have no idea whether his subsequent experience as a Minister caused him to revise this doctrine. However, I suspect it is a perspective many politicians share. It is also a perspective that, in the context of public exams, recklessly fails to take into account the risks associated with change. Reflecting on this at the Standards Debate which we held earlier this year at the RSA (details of which can be found on our website) we identified some 24 changes that had been made in national assessment over the last decade. These were all well-intentioned at the time, but the cumulative effect has been to make it much more difficult to hold standards in the public exam system, not least because constant change makes it difficult for the major players in the system to 'internalise' the standard. Given this, I hope that Ofqual, as part of its objective of maintaining public confidence, will now give some thought to how it can manage the regulatory cycle so as to promote stability rather than entrench an expectation of automatic change.

This is not, of course, to say that the system should be preserved in aspic. In the last few decades, in particular, changes in the structure of knowledge have revolutionised certain disciplines, and created new ones, and there need to be changes in assessment to reflect this. Technology also offers the

tantalising prospect of less intrusive assessment, embedded within the learning experience, rather than coming all at once as a high stakes, high anxiety conclusion to it.

However, in responding to these major, secular trends we should aim to preserve what works best within the existing arrangements. In this context, I want to take the opportunity to speak up for A levels. Like all successful evolutionary organisms, they have changed significantly in the sixty years of their existence. Originally designed as a means to support admission to HE by rank ordering the small elite that went on to study there, they are now taken by the bulk of the school age population. Their great strength is their flexibility. Recent research that we undertook showed that they were being taken in more than 22,000 different subject combinations, and that even the most popular combination, which was maths, physics and chemistry, was only taken by around 4% of candidates. They offer therefore a responsiveness to student needs and a scope for personalisation according to individual learners' interests which is unparalleled, and which is difficult to achieve within the complex rules of combination of Diploma style qualifications.

What are the disadvantages? In transforming itself from an exam designed for only a small elite into a universal qualification, it has unquestionably lost some of its capacity to cater for those at the top end of the ability range, something that the 'Stretch and Challenge' programme and the introduction of the A* have been designed to deal with. It is also now less closely aligned to the admissions needs of HE. This divergence has unfortunately taken place at a time when the number of young people applying for University places has doubled and the amount of money available to HE to spend on the admissions process has more or less halved. HE therefore depends now more than ever on the public exam system generally and A levels in particular in order to make its admissions decisions, notwithstanding that they have evolved beyond the point where that is their primary function.

It is against this background that the suggestion HE should be more involved with the secondary school curriculum is so welcome. If HE – or relevant groupings within HE as we should recognise that HE is not a monolith - can articulate clearly what skills and knowledge they require young people to have, we as Awarding Bodies would be willing and able to respond quickly.

In order for this idea to fly, however, proper institutional support arrangements will be needed. In particular, there will have to be career recognition for academics who become involved, possibly through some of the metrics to be included in HEFCE's new Research Excellence Framework (REF), and there will also need to be funding, perhaps attached to recognition for such activity in HEFCE's institutional audits.

We need to make this investment urgently to ensure that A levels continue to offer adequate preparation for undergraduate study, specifically the 3 year degree that is the norm in most English Universities, and which continues to attract such high levels of international recognition and demand. Otherwise, as a result of failing to ensure proper alignment between what takes place in

school and University, we may find that we end up inadvertently and expensively drifting into a Continental system of four year degrees. If we are successful, however, we can create, through the interaction of schools, HE institutions and awarding bodies, 'communities of interest' which can maintain and internalise standards, and which will protect us from grade inflation and some of the malign effects of that constant change that is so corrosive of the integrity of our national assessment system.

Another change on the horizon is the possible introduction of an English Bac. The English system has had mixed success with Diploma style qualifications, which have often reflected wishful thinking on the part of the politicians or enthusiasts who introduced them rather than any real underlying need. The proposed English Bac, with its requirement that students take GCSEs in English, Maths, Science, a Modern Language and a humanity, bears a close resemblance to what Universities used to demand until only fairly recently as a matriculation requirement. With the experience of Diplomas still fresh in our minds we can see how difficult it can be for major assessment reforms to succeed, even with all the apparatus of state behind them. If the commendable concept of an English Bac is to succeed, therefore, I think we probably need to consider an appeal to young peoples' pockets as well as their educational aspirations. This could be achieved, for example, by offering some sort of discount against the interest rate on loans for student fees. This is not, of course, very idealistic, but reflects, I think, that combination of realism and clear-headedness that is an essential ingredient of successful assessment reform.

There is finally a cultural dimension to be considered. In measuring the achievement of politicians and reformers, we tend to look at the record of the changes they have made instead of recognising and appreciating the continuity and stolid but inconspicuous managerial virtues that are generally to be found underpinning successful public exam systems. Because, as a result, we have become so habituated to change we have lost sight of its impact. Each time a syllabus or a qualification changes, huge investment goes into developing new teaching materials and best practice. This consumes financial and system capacity, and disrupts that 'internalisation' of standards that is a feature of the most successful assessment systems.

In conclusion, therefore, my own sense is that one of the main challenges of successful assessment reform is to try to ensure there is not too much of it. Assessment is one of the most powerful instruments we have available for achieving improved educational outcomes. However, it can also cause havoc and create all sorts of perverse incentives. It therefore needs to be grounded firmly in the education that it is designed to support, and the practical issues that are a central part of successfully delivering change need to be carefully identified and worked through. I look forward to what I am sure will be a lively day discussing how best to achieve this. Thank you.

Simon Lebus
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