

## **Opening remarks**

**Simon Lebus, Group Chief Executive, Cambridge Assessment**

Ladies and Gentlemen, it gives me great pleasure to welcome you today to the fourth Cambridge Assessment Network Conference. The Conference theme of “Issues of Control and Confidence: the role of the state in assessment systems” is one that our two keynote speakers are well qualified to address. Professor Wolf has a special interest in the relationship between education and the labour market, a focus of particular policy attention in the current economic climate, and Professor Alexander has just completed his Cambridge Primary Review, which will be officially launched this evening at the RSA, and which has been described as the most comprehensive survey of pre-11 schooling since the Plowden report in 1967.

That was, of course, a very different world, almost unrecognisable in terms of the institutional arrangements governing assessment, and one where social changes and anxieties about totalitarianism meant that central control of education was regarded with considerable suspicion.

Jim Callaghan summed this up when he observed of the reaction to his 1976 Ruskin speech that it was thought “by some of the educational elite.....to be an unseemly intrusion of the Prime Minister to poke his nose into educational matters and stir up trouble on matters best left to those who know most”. In his memoirs, Bernard Donoughue, Callaghan's policy director at No 10, recalled the Department of Education being "deeply shocked that a prime minister should have the impertinence to trespass into its own secret garden". The scope for Ministerial involvement was also much more limited. It is, for example, difficult to imagine a Secretary of State today proclaiming, as Ken Clarke did to the Education Select Committee in March 1991 “My writ does not run in any serious respect over the day-to-day organisation of a solitary education establishment in the country....As a Minister, I would never take responsibility for things which are utterly beyond my control. The day to day management of schools is not within my responsibility”.

In the eighteen years since then there has been a seemingly unstoppable trend of centralisation, well illustrated this summer when it was claimed that Head Teachers receive almost 4000 pages of e-mailed Government guidance a year - 1,269,000 words in the twelve months between April 2008 and 2009. This increase in levels of central control has been evident too in assessment and we have an opportunity today to reflect on the consequences. It is also timely to do so following the Cambridge Review's recommendation that National Curriculum Tests be stopped and the Committee debate last week in the House of Lords on the Apprenticeship, Skills, Children and Learning (ASCL) Bill, which establishes a new independent regulator, Ofqual, and is the result of a Government initiative to distance itself from qualifications regulation in the hope that this will improve trust in the system, and put an end to the annual dumbing down debate.

Will it work? One of Ofqual's main objectives, written into the legislation, is to promote public confidence in the qualification system, and there is no doubt this is at a low ebb. Only last week, Terry Leahy, Chief Executive of Tesco, attacked standards in British schools and Michael Rake, Chairman of BT, called for GCSEs and A levels to be replaced. However, I do not believe the arrangements introduced by the new legislation will be sufficient on their own to restore trust.

This is partly because the long hand of central control continues to exert its influence through Government ownership of the curriculum. Whilst there is a legitimate issue of accountability here, the realities of bureaucratic activism and the need to reconcile competing interests among stakeholders make this self-defeating. Originally well intentioned efforts to ensure consistent minimum standards soon lead to overbearing and overloaded programmes of study. We can see this if we look at what has happened to the National Curriculum in science. Here, the curriculum reflects the tension between the desire to promote general scientific literacy among non-scientists and the need to educate the next generation of practising scientists. This has had a number of consequences. Content has been changed many times and reduced – probably a good thing in terms of the scope for improved coherence – but for the wrong reasons. The Statutory Content for Key Stage 3 Science, for example, no longer lists photosynthesis as a necessary part of the 2008 programme of study for Science (in contrast to the 1999 programme) but does require that pupils have the opportunity to consider how knowledge and understanding of science informs personal and collective decisions, including specifically those on substance abuse and sexual health.

The emphasis therefore has been on producing a motivating National Curriculum which includes coverage of all sorts of contemporary social issues rather than a succinct statement of a common core of learning that lists key concepts and processes and establishes them within a sensible framework of conceptual progression. This was well illustrated three weeks ago, when the QCDA felt impelled to advise secondary school teachers to do more to incorporate food and farming into their lessons, advice explained by QCDA's Director of Curriculum on the grounds that "The curriculum encourages rather than prescribes going out in to the countryside and in to farms".

This is very odd. We should not expect the National Curriculum in Science or anything else to be either motivating or de-motivating, or either to encourage or discourage excursions into the countryside. What we need of it is a map of the key concepts ordered in the correct sequence – a list rather than a manifesto. The consequence ironically is that the generalised statements of scientific activity and application the National Curriculum actually contains are open to all sorts of variation in interpretation - thereby creating scope for precisely that variability in teaching and learning that the National Curriculum is designed to prevent.

We thus have the paradox that the instrument of central control – in this instance the National Curriculum – destabilises the learning it is designed to protect, a good illustration of how concentration of control in the centre can generate its own entropy and a good justification for an approach along the lines of that locally-responsive 'community curriculum' proposed in Professor Alexander's review.

This also applies in Years 12 and 13 when the National Curriculum is replaced by qualification and subject criteria. As I mentioned earlier, part of the rationale for setting up Ofqual is the idea that it will place the whole issue of standards beyond any taint of suspicion of government control. Supporting this, there is an implicit assumption that standards and their maintenance can stand alone, framed round but somehow separate from curriculum. Around the world, however, it has become clear that the best educational results are achieved by aligning curriculum, teaching and assessment. Whether that is undertaken top-down or bottom-up clearly rests to some extent on the administrative culture of the country, and here, where there is a strong tendency to centralisation, the history since Jim Callaghan's speech has been of a progressive reduction in the space for bottom-up initiative.

There have been calls recently, reacting to this, for HE institutions to become involved in the development of subject syllabuses for A levels. This is an attractive idea as it would permit HE, schools and awarding bodies to re-connect and re-establish ownership of the curriculum, instead of its being mediated as at present through regulatory and other central points of control. Awarding Bodies would welcome such a development and would be able to respond quickly and effectively.

I would argue, therefore, that we should now have an urgent debate about how to move this forward not least as, to be effective, there would need to be recurrent funding streams and the HE engagement would need to be coherently structured to involve the sector as a whole rather than just individual institutions.

We also need, more generally, to think about how to achieve a shift in control so that we establish a better balance between a less ambitiously stated 'framework' National Curriculum and giving room to teaching professionals, awarding bodies, representatives of HE and other interested bodies to create interesting and challenging learning programmes on the ground, programmes in other words, which incorporate a slimmed down National Curriculum but go well beyond it.

This would need to be a long term strategy and there would be risks – although ultimately we might expect 'a hundred flowers to bloom' there would be some that wilted in the process. A future Secretary of State, echoing Ken Clarke, would as a result again be able to assert that these matters were, if not wholly, at least to a significant extent beyond their control; they would do so this time, however, with satisfaction rather than regret.

I trust anyway that you will have an interesting day discussing these issues and I will now hand you back to Paul Newton who will introduce our first speaker.....

**Simon Lebus**

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