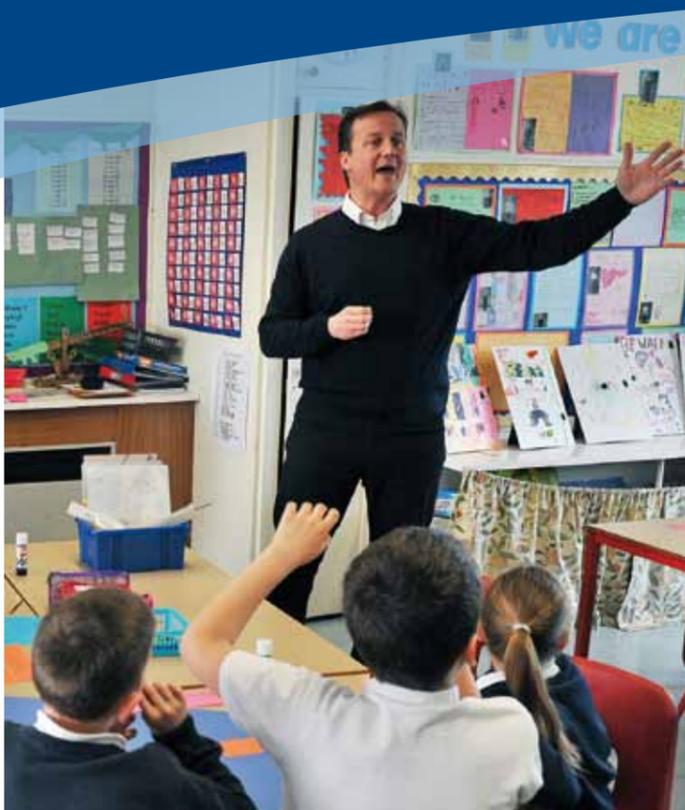


Achieve

Summer 2010



CAMBRIDGE ASSESSMENT



Welcome to *Achieve*

The latest news from Cambridge Assessment, the University's international exams group.

What does the new coalition Government mean for education and assessment?

We explore some of the promises and key commitments. see page 7

Exams, planes and automobiles

Fiat and Air France are now using Cambridge ESOL's business English exam to assess their workforce's language skills. see page 4

Raising the standard

Exam boards bowing to political pressure to make GCSEs and A levels more "accessible" could be one reason for the increase in top grades, a leading academic has warned.

Tim Oates, Group Director of Assessment Research and Development at Cambridge Assessment, accused the past governments of arbitrary and "faddish" changes to the examinations system. In the last 15 years, politicians have banned, then reintroduced, the use of calculators in maths GCSE exams seven times.

His comments were made during a Cambridge Assessment debate to clarify public understanding of the complex and varied issues involved in the different examination standards issues. The event was attended by more than 100 assessment experts, employers and teachers, and watched live online by over 1,000 people.

Bene't Steinberg, Group Director of Public Affairs, said: "We urged educationalists everywhere to join a large-scale project which could change how we talk about exams and standards for good. The aim was to get people talking about the same thing at the same time – which is why we organised a comprehensive and unbiased debate on the matter.

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John Rallison, Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Education at Cambridge University and Professor in the Department of Applied Mathematics and Theoretical Physics.

Educating the global learner

Teachers from around the world will discuss the challenges and opportunities in educating the 'global learner' at CIE's 6th International Teachers' Conference in Cambridge.

CIE Director of Education, Dr Kevin Stannard, said: "We seek to prepare our learners for a much more fluid and dynamic world in which specific knowledge and even particular skills may easily and quickly be rendered redundant by technological, economic and social change. Economic and environmental decisions made in one part of the world can have a profound effect on people in another.

"It's a more exciting, more integrated, more joined-up world; but also a more uncertain world."

During the two-day conference teachers will be able to explore the dimensions of global education, seeking to identify and share international best practice in education for a connected world.

For further details visit: www.cie.org.uk

NEWS IN BRIEF

Crossing the threshold

The 32nd Language Testing Research Colloquium was successfully held in Cambridge this April.

The conference themed 'Crossing the threshold: investigating levels, domains and frameworks in language assessment' brought together key researchers from the language testing world for a series of sessions.

Highlights included Dr Elana Shohamy – one of Israel's leading language research specialists – being awarded the 2010 Lifetime Achievement Award. There was also a special celebration to mark the 15th anniversary of Studies in Language Testing series of research volumes published jointly by Cambridge ESOL and Cambridge University Press.



Dr Elana Shohamy's acceptance speech of the 2010 Lifetime Achievement Award at the 32nd Language Testing Research Colloquium.

The celebration brought together many of the 38 authors who have written and edited volumes in the series and a special anniversary book in the series was launched.

Qualifications for HE entry – the future...

The recent Sykes review of examinations taken at 16 and 18 recommends a greater involvement of universities and employers in the design and implementation of qualifications. HE is nowadays, by some margin, the largest 'consumer' of students taking A levels, and Cambridge University, through its association with Cambridge Assessment, has a double interest.

Cambridge recruits its undergraduates internationally, and so we deal with a wide range of qualifications from applicants. Experience has taught us that administratively tidy but naïve numerical equivalences do not capture the suitability of different qualifications for our academically rigorous courses. In consequence we publish lists of A levels and combinations thereof recommended as particularly appropriate for our courses. In addition we are open about the examination options required (e.g. for the new Diploma qualifications); and we are explicit about the level of attainment typically required (e.g. by setting offers of admission using the new A* grade). This transparency has often attracted adverse media comment, so we especially welcome the proposal from Sykes and others that publication of such information should become standard for all HE providers in future.

On the other hand I have little sympathy for the narrow, one-size-fits-all standardised University admissions test recommended by Sykes. Such tests can and will be 'taught to'. It is also open to question whether a single test can encompass the diversity of the UK HE sector and simultaneously provide the fine-grained differentiation required to help select between the highest achievers.

The University supports the depth and breadth of the Cambridge Pre-U and International GCSEs that Cambridge Assessment has pioneered. Nevertheless for the time being, we expect, in common with the rest of the sector, that A levels will remain our most common entry route for UK students. There would surely be significant benefit if HE became more involved in the design of A level courses. In my own area, for example, the separation of Physics from Mathematics together with the modular structure of both has done harm. Some prospective students, even talented students, seem unaware that Physics is a quantitative subject, still less that mathematical thinking should underpin and support their scientific understanding. For them, the school/university transition can be correspondingly difficult. The constructive suggestion from Cambridge Assessment of bringing practitioners in HE together to re-examine the A level curriculum is one that I welcome and chimes with proposals made by the incoming Government. Cambridge should play a full part.

Virtual conference talks technology

New technologies in the business English classroom still have many challenges associated with access in some parts of the world – according to leading experts in business English.

Speaking in May at Cambridge ESOL's annual business English World of Work forum – held for the first time as a virtual conference – consultant Gavin Dudeney, a specialist in online teacher training commented: "We hear a lot about interactive white boards and

other classroom technology, but it's still a fact that most teachers around the world do not have access to these kind of things, so we're referring to a minority of teachers and learners."

A gateway to the arts

A new online resource has been launched to assist teachers and learners in the development of Arts, Creative and Performing Media skills.

The gateway created by OCR provides teachers with a wealth of material including detailed syllabus specifications, schemes of work, exemplar materials and marking schemes. It also features galleries of students' work for Art, Music and Drama.

"There is a great deal of synergy between the different subject areas within the Arts," says Neil Cameron, OCR's Curriculum Manager for Arts and Humanities. "In creating this single Arts resource, we can offer a seamless link between the subjects, making access to information and guidance as straightforward as possible for teachers and learners."

For further details visit: www.ocr.org.uk/thearts



Raising the standard

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"It is a bold step to take but it is important that we lead on a topic of such central importance to us. We cannot just leave the debate in the hands of the less well informed."

Other panellists at the debate on 29 April at RSA House, London, included: Professor Roger Murphy, Centre for Developing and Evaluating Lifelong Learning, University of Nottingham; John Bangs, Assistant Secretary of Education, National Union of Teachers; Professor Gordon Stobart, Institute of Education, University of London; and Anastasia de Waal, Director of Family and Education at Civitas.

Professor Roger Murphy commented that exam papers have to change for the simple reason that the curriculum changes all the time. He said that assessment is "not an exact science".

Professor Gordon Stobart agreed that the standards over time debate "goes nowhere" and should be abandoned. He compared exams standards with climbing Mount Everest: "In 1953 two people got to the top of Everest, an extraordinary achievement at the time. Yet on a single day in 1996, 39 people stood on the summit. That might suggest that Everest had become 20 times easier to climb. Yet the mountain remains the same height. Of course, today people have better equipment, better training, better nutrition and so on. In that sense, it is less surprising that more people can climb Everest. But while that may make the achievement less exceptional, it does not change the 'standard' of the mountain climbing achievement."



The panel (L:R): Bene't Steinberg, Group Director of Public Affairs; Anastasia de Waal, Director of Family and Education at Civitas; Professor Gordon Stobart, Institute of Education, University of London; John Bangs, Assistant Secretary of Education, NUT; Professor Roger Murphy, Centre for Developing and Evaluating Lifelong Learning, University of Nottingham; and Tim Oates, Group Director of Assessment Research and Development.

John Bangs said: "I think there is an implication there that standards and what goes on in schools in terms of teaching and learning really do need to be more integrated, for example. There is an argument for looking at GCSEs as Tomlinson did, but the idea that somehow we have to return to a tiered system where children are automatically sorted at 14 between vocation and academic routes is the last thing the vast majority of colleagues in the profession want."

And in relation to head teachers boycotting the national tests at age 11 in England because they disapprove of the high stakes nature of the tests,

Anastasia de Waal, said: "We need to sever national accountability from the assessment of individual performance."

Proceedings from the event, a short film and podcast is available on www.cambridgeassessment.org.uk

A full report on Cambridge Assessment's exam standards campaign – which kicked off at the beginning of the year with a parliamentary research seminar and continued with an online debate – will be published in early autumn.

Promoting language learning in UK schools

Schools teaching or planning to teach Cambridge Pre-U Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) have received a helping hand with a new online surgery.

During the week-long surgery, MFL teachers joined examiners, subject specialists, heads and other teachers to discuss the Cambridge Pre-U approach, models of implementation in individual schools, and to raise questions about any aspect of teaching.

A common theme was the observation that students were enjoying and clearly benefitting from the study of a foreign language at this level and had made substantial progress during the course.

The post-16 Cambridge Pre-U MFL courses retain the study of the culture as well as the language of other countries and ask teachers and students to make use of contemporary sources to add breadth to their studies.

Available in French, German, Spanish, Chinese Mandarin and Russian, Cambridge Pre-U MFL certificates are designed to give learners confidence in their language abilities and to

provide a stimulating and challenging alternative to A level study. Cambridge Pre-U MFL are also available as short courses, which can be completed in one year.

The first Cambridge Pre-U Principal Subject examination results will be published on 19 August.

English testing to include European doctors in the UK

A House of Commons report calling for more thorough testing of the English language skills of overseas doctors wanting to work in the UK has been welcomed by Cambridge ESOL.

The report from the House of Commons Health Committee – entitled 'The use of overseas doctors in providing out-of-hours services' – calls for more systematic English language testing for doctors from the European Economic Area (EEA).

Welcoming the report, Dr Michael Milanovic, CEO of Cambridge ESOL, said: "Doctors are in the frontline when it comes to delivering critical public services. It is absolutely paramount that they read, write, speak and understand English to a high level so that they can communicate effectively with patients and colleagues."

Dr Milanovic added: "Currently the General Medical Council (GMC) conducts language assessment on non EU healthcare staff using the International English Language Testing System, one of the world's most effective English language tests. This has ensured that the majority of the professionals working in healthcare have an excellent standard of English. As the Committee has rightly pointed out, current EU legislation prevents the GMC from conducting systematic tests on doctors from the EEA. We believe that a national scheme, based around reliable internationally recognised qualifications would increase public confidence and help to prevent further tragic accidents."

Recognising best practice

In recognition of their teaching skills, two English teachers have been awarded academic scholarships from Cambridge ESOL to attend the annual Global IATEFL conference for teachers of English as a foreign language.

Peru-based English teacher-trainer Ralph Grayson and Germany's Thomas Lenth were awarded Best Practice in Teacher Training Scholarship and Best Practice in Language Assessment respectively.

Ralph, who currently teaches at Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, was presented the Scholarship for his ideas and work on using authentic reading materials in the English language classroom. Thomas Lenth's scholarship was in recognition for his work on the impact assessment has on reading skills.

Speaking at a special award ceremony at the event Ralph Grayson said: "I've been involved in English teaching in Peru for almost two decades and there is a real need to get more students reading authentic material in and out of the classroom. This gives them a closer approach to real-life English and is a great benefit to them in the long run."



Ralph Grayson accepting his scholarship from Cambridge ESOL's Nick Charge.

Both winners were presented with their award at IATEFL 2010 conference which was attended by over 2000 teachers from around the world. Other highlights included a talk by Professor John Hawkins showing some of the groundbreaking work that the English Profile project is doing to profile learners' level of ability in more detail than has ever been done before.

Exams, planes and automobiles

This summer, transport giants Fiat and Air France will begin using Cambridge ESOL's top business English exam BULATS to assess the language skills of their workforces.

This is part of a growing trend for businesses, from a range of sectors, that are now recognising the need to have good levels of English language ability in order to remain globally competitive.

Italy's Fiat group confirmed the appointment in April and will shortly begin using the test to assess the language skills of its managers. This followed confirmation last March that Air France would be working with Cambridge to replace the existing language assessment tests used by the group to evaluate nearly 6,000 employees each year.

Dr Michael Milanovic, Chief Executive of Cambridge ESOL, said: "English is the global language of business

and in today's highly competitive global economy, effective communications is a must for businesses that have staff and customers spread across the globe. BULATS was designed for companies like Air France who need an accurate and reliable business language testing service for training and staff development. The aviation industry relies so heavily on communication and this project will allow the airline to benchmark the English language skills across their entire organisation."

Air France and Fiat join the 10,000 organisations around the world which recognise Cambridge ESOL tests as reliable proof of English Language ability.



Challenges of Assessment Reform

The 5th Cambridge Assessment Conference will address the challenges of assessment reform with some of the best experts the UK can provide. They'll discuss: what ensures its success? What undermines it? What lessons can we learn from reforms past and present?

Assessment is under reform all over the world. Some countries are embracing national testing, while others are abandoning it. Many are struggling to understand how best to integrate Assessment for Learning within everyday classroom practice.

The potential gains from reform may be high but the processes of change are complex and the consequences of getting it wrong can be severe. In the past decade alone, England has witnessed numerous crises of assessment reform; from the introduction of Curriculum 2000 A levels which led to the grading furore of 2002, to the appointment of a new contractor for marking national curriculum tests and the marking crisis of 2008. Current reforms include the introduction of stretch and challenge at A level, diploma qualifications, revised arrangements for national testing, functional skills testing, controlled assessments, project qualifications and more.

Dr Paul Newton, Director of the Cambridge Assessment Network, commented: "We are very pleased to announce that Professor Paul Black from King's College London, will be one of our keynote speakers. Paul is an eminent professor of science education who has worked on many assessment reforms in the past, from the development of early Nuffield A level syllabuses to the Task Group on Assessment and Testing which developed early plans for national curriculum assessment, in 1987/8."

The second keynote speaker will be Dr Philip Davies from Oxford Evidentia Ltd.

For the first time, this year's conference will also feature a panel discussion, chaired by Mike Baker, former BBC Education Editor. Panellists including Dr Mary Bousted from the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, Kathleen Tattersall from Ofqual, and Richard Daugherty from Cardiff University will be invited to respond to questions submitted by audience members.

Seminar speakers will be Professor Jo-Anne Baird from the University of Bristol, Professor Frank Ventura from the University of Malta, Professor Peter Tymms from the University of Durham, and Dr Geoff Hayward from the University of Oxford.

Further details of the conference, including details of the programme and how to book your place, can be found on www.assessnet.org.uk/conference2010

How well do Europeans speak other languages?

As the experts gear up for a ground-breaking survey of language competence across Europe, we ask language specialist Dr Neil Jones from Cambridge ESOL how the recent trials of the survey in March 2010 panned out.



Dr Neil Jones, Assistant Director, Research and Validation, Cambridge ESOL.

"The results from SurveyLang will provide the data that decision-makers in Europe need to make evidence-based policy decisions on language learning," according to Dr Neil Jones, who is also the project's Vice-Director.

The brainchild of the European Commission, SurveyLang is the first of its kind and will assess foreign language ability of school-age students in European countries providing comparable second language competence data throughout Europe.

So what's been happening with SurveyLang?

In a nutshell, all the systems are in place and the testing tool for the project is now ready. We have completed trials in 40 sampled schools in each participating country, which will show what final refinements are needed to the testing tool before the main study next year. The results of the main survey in 2011 will help form evidence-based policy making decisions all across Europe so there was a lot banking on getting this pilot right and I'm pleased to say it was a success.

How will SurveyLang affect the way we learn languages across Europe?

Well, we'll see. For the first time, key policy makers will have access to comparable data on foreign language competence and knowledge about good practice in language learning. This can only be a good thing as it will help governments form important policy decisions around the way language is taught across Europe.

What else has been happening with SurveyLang?

The year leading up to the Field Trial was really hectic. We developed and pretested over 2,000 items in five languages, set up communication and support channels for the national teams administering the survey in each country, produced over 90 manuals and documents, and ran in-depth training sessions. We've launched an informative multilingual website, including sample test materials and instructions in all the languages spoken in the countries participating in the survey.

And finally, what's next for SurveyLang?

We're currently busy working with our partners across Europe to analyse the Field Trial results. Among other things we'll be validating the innovative approach we've taken to the marking of Writing. There's a lot going on in the SurveyLang project which I think will be of interest to language testers generally.

Creative approach to poetry

Students using performance, art, dance, music and technology to explore and interpret selected poems have been captured on film to help teachers in the classroom.

A new DVD 'Virtual Visions' will be available as a resource to support OCR's new 2010 GCSE English specifications.

Debbie Daniels, OCR's seconded English teacher, said: "It was a pleasure to work with so many creative schools and to see the different approaches used in teaching poetry. For example, Year 10 at Matravers School in Bath have explored Carol-Ann Duffy's poem 'Who Loves You' through the medium of drama, and they also produced a dance interpretation of Thomas Hardy's 'The Voice'. I'm confident that teachers will be inspired by the range of interpretations schools have provided for us. I think that this DVD will really help teachers

delivering the new OCR GCSE English specifications and offer a unique resource that will help to promote our offering."

Supported by guidance notes, including examiner tips and an expert panel discussion on poetry, 'Virtual Visions' has been designed to: stimulate discussion and interest in the poems; demonstrate a variety of creative teaching approaches to engage learners; and show the different ways in which pupils in a range of schools have explored the poems.



Behind the scenes of 'Virtual Visions'.

Supporting Egyptian schools

A new group of schools being piloted in Egypt is getting an extensive range of education and teacher support services thanks to CIE.

The first five Nile Egyptian Schools will be fully open by July 2015, with approximately 1,000 learners in each school aged 4 to 18.

CIE is developing English and Arabic medium curricula and assessments in eight subject areas. These are benchmarked to Egyptian and international standards. Learners will gain internationally accredited certificates at Grade 10, 11 and 12 (ages 16 to 18).

David Jeffery, CIE Assistant Director, Educational Partnerships, said: "Learners at Nile Egyptian Schools will develop the knowledge and skills that are relevant to their own local context, as well as those which are developed by learners at a comparable level around the world."

The Nile Egyptian Schools are not-for-profit schools, with the majority of funding coming from the Educational Development Fund of the Office of the Prime Minister. The project will extend access to families for whom private education is out of reach.

CIE is recognised around the world for developing course content and assessments that can be offered within or alongside local education programmes, while maintaining internationally benchmarked standards. The exam board is also offering teacher and leadership training, and professional development for teachers; all benchmarked against international standards.

No “magic bullet” for admissions conundrum

There is no “magic bullet” for universities to solve the competitive admissions conundrum, according to a top academic.

Speaking at a recent seminar to highlight the issue of competitive admissions to Higher Education (HE), Tim Oates, Group Director of Assessment Research and Development at Cambridge Assessment, said: “The societal expectation around participation in HE has increased dramatically in recent decades, and yet today we have a limited number of places available and therefore the topic of competitive admissions to HE is of increasing public interest.

“The mechanisms of how we select and the instruments used in the selection process, are of great importance. It’s a complex decision-making process and we’re not looking here at anything which could constitute a ‘magic bullet’. What we need – and this indeed is emerging in some institutions – is sophisticated use of ‘baskets’ of data and information, finely tuning the decision process to the requirements of specific courses.”

His comments come as news that UCAS applications to UK HE institutions have increased by over 22 per cent in 2010 (UCAS, January 2010), levelling off to 16.5 per cent by March 2010. Yet universities in England are simultaneously faced with a Government cap on undergraduate places. In this context, the increasing numbers of well-qualified applicants present institutions with a real challenge: how can they choose between applicants in a way that is consistent, fair, transparent and predictive of their future academic success?



Janet Graham, Director of SPA, speaking at the event.

Other specialists who took part in discussions included Janet Graham, Director of SPA (Supporting Professionalism in Admissions Programme), who discussed the impact of the Schwartz Report’s recommendations on transparency and fairness in admissions and widening participation, including the issues around the use of contextual data. Dr Robert Wilkins, Coordinator for Admissions to Medicine at Oxford University, outlined the admissions process for Oxford’s medical course and how various forms of assessment were used to help with differentiating between applicants.

The speakers concurred that, whilst a number of different forms of assessment are available to institutions to help differentiate between applicants, it is important that the assessment instruments used are fit for purpose, in that they are fair and valid.

A podcast and highlights video from the event is available on www.cambridgeassessment.org.uk.

For more details about Cambridge Assessment’s HE admissions tests, visit: www.atsts.org.uk

Dutch students top of the class at reading English

Dutch speaking students are the best at reading in English, according to figures from Cambridge ESOL – the world’s leading language assessment provider.

Compiled this spring, the results illustrate the 2009 performance of students who took the International English Language Test (IELTS) – an English test taken by over a million people each year. Dutch speakers came top of the class for their performance in English reading skills with an average score of 7.79 on a scale of 0–9, which means they can “handle complex language well”.

Dr Michael Milanovic CEO of Cambridge ESOL, which set and developed the test, said: “We find that those who read authentic materials both in and out of the English language classroom have the edge over their counterparts and the results we’re seeing in the Netherlands are very encouraging.”

Other groups of students that appeared in the top five for reading were German speakers (7.22), Romanian speakers (7.13), French speakers (6.80) and Portuguese speakers (6.78). Outside Europe, Malay and Tagalog speaking students also scored very highly for reading (with scores of 6.76 and 6.60 respectively). Each year, students from all over the world use the English test to prove their Language ability for work or higher education. The test – available through British Council and IDP: IELTS Australia – has been taken by around 7 million students globally since 1989.

Pupils take business skills to premiership level

A pioneering group of Surrey pupils joined forces with premiership soccer club, and this season’s Europa League finalists, Fulham to boost their chance of scoring a success in an OCR qualification in business and enterprise.

The pupils – from Coombe Boys’ School and Raynes Park High – took their chance to show off their business skills at an event hosted at the London premiership club’s headquarters, the famous Craven Cottage.

Their rapt audience included two high profile backers of the initiative, Richard Scudamore, Chief Executive of the Premier League and Lord Davies, the then Minister for Trade, Investment and Small Business.

The pupils are all working towards the OCR Enterprise Academy Certificate in Business and Enterprise. Students taking the qualification are educated about the inner workings of a football club from a business perspective, learning about all the different sections of the organisation that help a club operate successfully.

Looking out for the next generation of UK business entrepreneurs, OCR joined representatives from the Premier League, Enterprise UK, and the Department for Business Innovation and Skills at the special event showcasing a real-life marketing campaign for Fulham Football Club by Year 9 students from Surrey.

The Apprentice-style challenge was part of the Enterprise Academy, a business skills development



Y9 pupils from Coombe Boys’ School and Raynes Park High School.

initiative which aims to help 400 pupils aged 11–19 from schools in the Fulham area.

Explaining the concept of the Enterprise Academies, Richard Scudamore, said: “We at the Premier League have been using the power of football to try and make a difference where we can. It’s all part of our overall creating chances programme which aims to inspire young people to raise their horizons and look forward to see what they can do in the world of business. Clubs are an interesting microcosm of a whole lot of



(L:R): OCR’s Richard Powell, Scott Cain, Richard Scudamore and Lord Davies.

businesses – sales, marketing, safety, logistics, catering – this is the focal point of the initiative.”

Fulham Football Club is one of 12 Premier League clubs – and the first London club – to deliver the Enterprise Academy Certificate in Business and Enterprise in local schools. The target is to have every Premier League club engaged with the programme by the end of the year and it is envisaged that 5,000 students will achieve the OCR qualification within the next three years.

What does the new coalition Government mean for education and assessment?



After the campaign trail is over, the leaders' television debates have been analysed, election night has passed, and five days of negotiating not known for 65 years in British politics have reached an outcome, what are we left with? And what will be the impact on education policy in particular?

Both coalition partners have made education policy a priority area in recent years – with both having had senior Members of Parliament (MP) occupying the brief. Indeed, until the last moment it was unclear whether the Conservatives or the Liberal Democrats would take the education portfolio. In the end, the job went to the Conservative MP, Michael Gove, who has held the shadow cabinet position since 2007.

Not only has there been change at the top, but also a new name for the department, now the Department for Education. It remains to be seen what the impact of this will be – the actual remit of the department appears to have changed little, with further and higher education remaining as part of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. However, early communications from Gove suggest that he wants to “refocus the department on its core purpose of supporting teaching and learning”.

Whilst we know that education policy, the pupil premium in particular, was a key part of the

negotiation proceedings, the full coalition agreement only provides some clues to the direction of policy under the coalition. The devil will therefore be in the detail.

Pre-election Conservative and Liberal Democrat policy on HE funding and academies indicate areas for divergence, but in other areas a level of agreement existed even before the election. As an overarching policy theme, both parties have focused on the need to cut out political interference in education – the Conservatives in their proposals for Swedish style free schools and removing political intervention in qualifications, and the Liberal Democrats in their proposals for an Education Freedom Act, to prevent politicians meddling in the daily running of schools.

In terms of the curriculum, there is a level of convergence around the need for reform, although exactly what that reform should look like may differ between parties. The Conservatives have said that they would “reform the National Curriculum so that it is more challenging” whilst the Liberal Democrats have said that they would replace the National Curriculum with a slimmed down ‘Minimum Curriculum Entitlement’. For the time being, the coalition agreement simply states that the parties want to ensure “that all schools have greater freedom over curriculum”.

Both parties have also spoken favourably of the International GCSE, the Conservatives going so far as committing to “immediately allow all state schools to do the International GCSE starting this September”. This commitment survives the coalition agreement, with the promise that state schools will be able to offer qualifications like the IGCSE. It will now be up to the Government to provide a clear timetable for implementation so that state schools are able to plan for the future.

Again, both parties talk about the need to reform league tables in their manifestos. The Conservatives say that they will introduce reform “so that schools can demonstrate they are stretching the most able and raising the attainment of the less able”. The Liberal Democrats want “to give parents more meaningful information which truly reflects the performance of a school” and, in a similar vein to Conservative policy, to end incentives to focus on those at the C-grade borderline. So reform of some kind is on the cards, and the coalition agreement makes clear that its aim is to allow schools to focus on the progress of children of all abilities. However, there has been little indication about how this desired outcome will be achieved.

Inevitable budget cuts are likely to have an impact on education quango budgets in particular. The Liberal Democrats have called for an independent Educational Standards Authority to replace Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency, Ofqual and Ofsted. This is unlikely to be supported by the Conservatives who will have concerns about creating another quango. However, both parties are likely to agree that the QCDA is a potential place to make budget savings.

The future around diplomas is also uncertain, and the parties differ on their policy in this area. They have never been strongly backed by the Conservatives, whilst the Liberal Democrats have favoured a new General Diploma, mixing vocational and academic learning. The coalition agreement merely signals that the Government wants to “improve the quality of vocational education” and that this involves increasing flexibility. Technical Academies, also supported by the previous Government and being pushed forward by former Education Secretary Lord Baker, are unsurprisingly seen as part of that plan.

In terms of other policy areas, the most prominent Conservative education policy, the Swedish free schools model, has been given the go-ahead by the Liberal Democrats, with the coalition agreement stating that the Government will give parents, teachers, charities and local communities the chance to set up new schools and an Education Bill to give schools academy style freedoms promised by the end of the month. However, the Liberal Democrats' support for local council 'sponsored' schools in their manifesto suggests that agreement in this area is not going to be easy.

So overall what are we likely to see? Removing political interference from education, particularly the everyday running of schools, seems to be the common thread that unites the two parties as they search for a narrative that extends beyond pure pragmatism. The test however, as former Education Secretaries alluded to in a recent session of the Select Committee, will be how in reality they deal with the ever present tension between central and local responsibility now they are in office.

WHAT DOES THE COALITION PROMISE? Some of the key commitments:

- We will promote the reform of schools in order to ensure that new providers can enter the state school system in response to parental demand; that all schools have greater freedom over the curriculum; and that all schools are held properly to account.
- We will give parents, teachers, charities and local communities the chance to set up new schools, as part of our plans to allow new providers to enter the state school system in response to parental demand.
- We will simplify the regulation of standards in education and target inspection on areas of failure.
- We will publish performance data on educational providers, as well as past exam papers.
- We will create more flexibility in the exams systems so that state schools can offer qualifications like the IGCSE.
- We will reform league tables so that schools are able to focus on, and demonstrate, the progress of children of all abilities.
- We will improve the quality of vocational education, including increasing flexibility for 14–19 year olds and creating new Technical Academies as part of our plans to diversify schools provision.

Speaking business English, 21st century style

The new version of Cambridge ESOL's top business English test BULATS will soon be available with a fully online speaking and writing element. This will improve the service to those seeking to improve their language skills for the workplace as it will mean a faster turnaround of results.

BULATS is designed for companies and individuals who need a rapid, accurate means of assessing language skills for recruitment, training, benchmarking and staff development. It is a multilingual system, available in English, French, German and Spanish. This enables multinational businesses to establish the same standards for language proficiency across their entire organisation.

BULATS was developed and is jointly run by Cambridge ESOL, the Alliance Française (France), Goethe-Institut (Germany) and the Universidad de Salamanca (Spain) in more than 30 countries.

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Volcanic eruptions – all in a day's work for exam board

There is always a first time for anything in the exams business. So when the ash cloud from the Icelandic volcano disrupted international air travel CIE had to pull out all the stops to ensure pupils around the world received their question papers on time.

The first eruption of the Eyjafjallajökull volcano grounded all flights in and out of the UK and many airports in Europe. Unfortunately, the eruption coincided with CIE's time-sensitive despatch of confidential question papers to schools in no fewer than 160 countries.

After leaving Cambridge, many of the question papers became 'stuck' in the UK, with no flights available to air freight them out of the country. The scale of the problem grew when airports in key transit locations closed throughout Europe.

The flight ban presented a massive logistical problem for CIE. Question papers for candidates in Bahrain alone weighed over 4 tonnes. Another big CIE customer, Pakistan, required the despatch of 37 pallet loads of question papers from the UK. The original fall-back plan was to hire four lorries to deliver them by road to Pakistan via Madrid but news of a 10-mile tailback in Madrid meant that had to be dropped. Instead Athens – where flights were running – was chosen as an alternative transport hub.

Because they are top secret until the day of the examination, question papers are printed in the UK under secure conditions. This process is an essential part of protecting the integrity and validity of CIE's assessments.

Although CIE has emergency procedures to enable small numbers of schools to print question papers locally under secure conditions, this becomes impractical for larger centres with several thousand students – and impossible when a volcanic eruption delays despatches to all centres.

All available contingency plans were put into action, including emergency reprints of papers that had become hopelessly entangled in the growing backlog. Eventually, and fortunately, Eyjafjallajökull's eruptions slowed enough to allow airports to reopen. CIE was delighted to report that all schools received their question papers in time for the scheduled examinations – although anecdotal feedback suggested that the students weren't quite so pleased!

International Maths takes off

Cambridge IGCSE International Mathematics has proved to be a runaway success with schools worldwide.

Although one of the newest Cambridge IGCSE qualifications from CIE, it has already been enthusiastically adopted by 45 schools in more than 30 countries despite only being launched last year. As a result, the IGCSE will be included in this year's November examination session.

Developed for international schools, the new maths syllabus complements the International Baccalaureate IB curriculum, offering an assessment and certification at the end of the Middle Years Programme.

Cambridge International Mathematics reflects the way today's students like to learn: they will acquire a solid foundation of mathematical skills and learn how to develop strategies for solving open-ended problems. The course also allows students to develop and sharpen their investigation and modelling skills, and introduces them to the use of graphical calculators – a necessary part of the IB Diploma.

Sharing expertise over the border

Following the British general election, school reform is on the agenda in England – but in other parts of the UK it is business as usual.

That is because education policy is a matter that is devolved to the national governments of Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales.

Since the Welsh Assembly gained powers over education, almost a decade ago, the school curriculum and assessment has become increasingly distinctive. Among the most significant have been the expansion of vocational learning for 14–19 year olds and the launch of the Welsh Baccalaureate.

As experts in assessment, Cambridge Assessment and its UK exam board OCR, has been engaging with the elected representatives in the Assembly to discuss the present and future direction of education policy.

Among the matters discussed was the opportunity for OCR to offer accreditation of the Welsh Baccalaureate.

Robin Hughes, OCR's National Manager in Wales, said: "Getting a dialogue going between us and the policy-makers is a good thing. The Welsh Assembly has fixed terms, so everybody knows that there will be an election in May 2011. I hope our conversations will inform the discussions that Assembly members have as they shape up their Welsh manifesto commitments."

OCR has had an office in Wales since 1994 and is working with providers and stakeholders to increase the range of assessment that is available for learners in Wales, including assessment in the medium of Welsh. OCR supports over 400 learning organisations throughout Wales and delivers over 100,000 OCR qualifications every year to learners of all ages.