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If you would like to comment on any of the articles in this issue, please contact Sylvia Green.

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Foreword

Welcome to the first issue of *Research Matters*, a biannual publication from Cambridge Assessment. The aim of this publication is to share assessment research in a range of fields with colleagues within Cambridge Assessment and in the wider assessment community and to comment on prominent research issues. It includes short summaries as well as more lengthy articles and papers reporting on current and completed research. Contributions are from Assessment Directorate research staff working across many areas of assessment and examinations. I hope that you will find *Research Matters* interesting and informative.

Ron McLone *Director-General of Assessment*

Editorial

In this issue we report on a wide range of research topics from standards over time to auto-marking of short textual responses. In the opening article Alf Massey describes a major, influential research study on the comparability of national test standards over time. This was a three year study commissioned by QCA and was carried out from 1999 to 2002. The article outlines the methodology and main findings, and considers the implications and impact of a study that is still giving rise to debate.

The theme of standards, reliability and validity are continued in Tom Bramley's summary of his article 'Accessibility, easiness and standards', published in *Educational Research*. He considers the challenges of setting cut-scores as part of the test development process and discusses the meaning of 'standards'. The summary of his second article, 'A rank-ordering method for equating tests by expert judgement', published in the *Journal of Applied Measurement*, investigates the use of judgements in scale construction, in particular an extension of the Thurstone paired comparison method to rankings of more than two objects.

In her article on grade descriptors Jackie Greatorex continues the theme of expert judgement in a different context. She outlines four studies about developing grade descriptors and using them for teaching and learning. This is followed by Victoria Crisp's and Ezekiel Sweiry's article that considers issues of validity and question difficulty with regard to the use of illustrations in examinations. This work formed part of an extensive research programme that focussed on factors unintentionally affecting the difficulty of examination questions.

Turning to John Bell's article, 'Gold standards and silver bullets', we have a discussion on a topical issue, the problem of the assessment and selection of high attainers. In his article John considers a number of options to overcome the problem as well as their potential consequences.

The final article, by Jana Sukkarieh and Stephen Pulman of Oxford University and Nicholas Raikes of Cambridge Assessment, introduces an UCLES-funded project that investigated automatic marking of short answer textual responses. The results of a thorough evaluation will be reported in a future issue of *Research Matters*.

We finish with 'Research News' which includes conferencing information and details of the Cambridge Assessment Conference in October.

Sylvia Green *Head of Research Programmes Unit*