

Kathleen Tattersall's speech at the event for the 2009 Chief Regulator's Report

Transcript

Good morning everyone. I am delighted that you've all come along to Coventry today for the launch of my first report as Chief Regulator and more importantly the Ofqual lecture. We are delighted to have two eminent individuals, Dylan William and Gordon Stanley with us. Today I will talk about some of the subjects I have touched on in my report:

- what we at Ofqual have done in our first year
- how we aim to earn and maintain public confidence in qualifications
- how we set and maintain standards
- our independent status
- and how we work with the Government and other bodies and our aims going forward.

A year ago - 16 May, to be precise - Ofqual was launched at a grand event in the Motorcycle Museum here in Coventry. What an eventful year it has been:

- new relationships with stakeholders forged;
- an early test for Ofqual in the form of National Curriculum Tests;
- a standards challenge in GCSE Science;
- we have paved the way for the coexistence of Functional Skills and GCSE;
- GCSE and A-level standards reports;
- the development of regulatory frameworks for the new Diploma and the QCF;
- the recognition of new awarding organisations, many of them employers.
- And alongside the day job are all the preparations for Ofqual to be a legally independent entity when the necessary legislation completes its passage through Parliament. The third reading of the bill took place on May 5 and I am hopeful that the legislation will be in place by the end of the year enabling Ofqual to have yet another new beginning early in 2010.

This year Ofqual has had the additional complication of relocation from London to Coventry. The relocation will be complete at the end of this month. Before I go any further I want to pay tribute to Isabel Nisbet and all her staff who have worked so hard in the course of the year to establish Ofqual. As you will appreciate, transitions alone are challenging for all staff - those who are departing, those who relocate with the organisation, and our new recruits. I cannot speak highly enough of the

professional way staff have continued to conduct the business of Ofqual regardless of the impact of relocation on their personal circumstances. I particularly want to thank colleagues who are not relocating from London but who have passed on their knowledge and experience to our new excellent Coventry-based recruits, and to wish them well for the future. They have helped to lay sound foundations for Ofqual and all of us are grateful for that.

The position of Chair of Ofqual carries the title of Chief Regulator. Today marks the release of the first report of the Chief Regulator, which you all have before you. One of the major areas covered in this report is how Ofqual will maintain standards across time, where appropriate, and across awarding organisations. This is one of our main responsibilities, which in respect of general qualifications is shared with the awarding organisations themselves. In the case of vocational qualifications, we share the responsibility with the Sector Skills Councils and the vocational awarding bodies. In relation to their respective qualifications the awarding bodies, the Sector Skills Councils and vocational bodies determine sector needs, develop syllabuses/specifications, set and mark questions and tasks, determine grade boundaries, issue certificates, and, in the case of the new Diploma, make both component and qualification awards. Regulation provides the context, lays down requirements which need to be met at every stage of the assessment process and monitors implementation. Given our different but complementary roles it is essential that all parties work together, particularly when difficult issues inevitably come up in the course of an examination/assessment cycle. Better still, however, is working together to anticipate problems, especially when new qualifications come on stream - in the course of the year I have met the General Qualification Awarding Bodies to agree how to handle awards in the new AS, A levels and GCSEs. But, as our critical March report on GCSE science demonstrated, awarding at the end of the process is not the only control of qualifications. Standards are rooted in criteria, in syllabuses and in the tasks presented to candidates. If these are not up to the mark then awarding in itself cannot fully address the problem. In those circumstances more fundamental action is called for - and in the case of Science we have asked for revisions to criteria and syllabuses to be undertaken as soon as possible.

The maintenance of standards across time is a challenging responsibility particularly where qualifications change to keep pace with new curricula, new skills, new ways of assessing and new technology. How can we make a direct comparison of what was assessed in, say 1951, the year of the first A levels, with A levels in the 21st century? The examination has changed out of all recognition: unitised not linear; a distinct qualification of an intermediate standard embedded within the full A level; in some subjects major curriculum changes - for example, in the sciences where concepts like DNA were unknown in 1951. What does the concept of standards over time mean in relation to vocational qualifications where working practices and skills have been transformed? Again direct comparisons are not helpful: they merely encourage a nostalgic longing for a time which people of a certain age think of as perfect which in turn undermines the achievements of the present learners across the spectrum of qualifications for which Ofqual has responsibility.

Before I am quoted as dismissing the concept of standards over time, let me make clear that I consider it to be central to the well-being of all qualifications, academic

and vocational - in terms of a consistency of high demands: qualifications open doors to employment and further learning and in any given year those competing for places as apprentices or higher education students will have taken their qualifications in different years. Users expect that the grades students have attained will be comparable in some measure from year to year; otherwise they have no firm basis for decision-making. We have a duty, therefore, to maintain consistent standards in relation to the demands made on candidates regardless of the structural or curricula changes which are made when qualifications change. In the case of the new Qualifications Credit Framework, the units lodged within it will be used flexibly to form qualifications - and central to the concept of flexible use is consistency of standards across units.

Given the importance of the concept, whenever changes take place in whatever type of qualification, comparability of demand is central to the thinking of designers of qualifications and assessments, and to awarders, so Ofqual's monitoring procedures focus on syllabus and examination demand as well as the quality of candidate responses. If - as happened in the case of Physics which we reported on in March - we find that consistency has been compromised on any of those counts we will ask for changes to be made to halt the perceived drift.

One message which comes across from our monitoring work is the need to get things right first time and not to endanger the well-being of students by launching qualifications without proper preparation and piloting. There is always an understandable desire to implement what are perceived to be necessary changes sooner rather than later. But the old adage, "more haste, less speed", needs to be borne in mind. What value is it in the long run to have too little time to develop good specifications and assessments and to iron out problems? Learners' interests are best protected by the cautious introduction of new or changed qualifications: piloting in my judgment is essential and a set of principles which Ofqual expects to govern new developments is articulated in the Report we have published today. Those principles we believe will not only protect learners but will make better and more efficient use of awarding organisations' and government's resources and investment in developments, and give better value for money. With regard to the Diploma, it should be noted there is a phased introduction and a gateway process controlling the number of students taking this qualification which provides the opportunity to consider issues as they arise.

That brings me to another dimension of Ofqual's regulatory powers: we are the economic regulator for the sector and, within the powers of current legislation, are working with awarding organisations across the range of qualifications to establish the basis of fee setting and determine the efficiency of the system. This is territory which has been largely unexplored in the past and so the going is not always as smooth as it might be in due course. But is necessary work: the true costs of the system and where they fall should be clear to both providers and users. If there are efficiencies to be had they too should be in the open. Of course we need to have regard to the different status of awarding organisations and to commercial sensitivities but these cannot obscure the need for the qualifications system to be open and transparent to the public. Public understanding of the system, how it operates and the value it brings to individuals and society is a prerequisite of trust.

Public trust and confidence in the system are essential ingredients to the success of qualifications, as we saw in 2002 when new A levels came on stream and again in 2008 when there were problems with national curriculum tests. Public confidence is fragile - it is easily lost and regained only with difficulty. So Ofqual is intent on opening the system to the public in ways that will increase their understanding and give people a stake in the system which goes beyond their immediate interest in their children's success. A year ago at the public launch of Ofqual we gave the issue of reliability centre stage and indicated that we would undertake studies into every facet of reliability and involve the public in forums, in opinion surveys and ensure that our findings were made known as studies progressed. That work is ongoing and it is interesting to observe that the public is generally more understanding of the fallibility of a system which depends to a large extent on human judgment than we sometimes credit. Today the issue takes centre stage again with two speakers, Dylan William and Gordon Stanley, who will each bring a personal perspective to the issue.

Before I introduce our speakers I want to say a little about regulation when the new legislation has come into force. I hope that you will have gathered from what I have said already that Ofqual intends to fulfil our remit in partnership with those organisations we regulate; excellent design and delivery of qualifications on their part is essential to the well being of the system. We cannot and will not micro-manage what the awarding bodies do but we will lay down clear regulatory principles and procedures for them to adopt. "Light touch" regulation has got a bad name in the last year so I won't use that description of the risk-based approach that we will take. But we do intend to focus our regulation where it is needed rather than dissipate our resources and efforts across the system. That means having a clear view of the risks which the systems and the qualifications within it face and taking steps within the limits of the regulatory role to safeguard new qualifications. And as a regulator which wishes to encourage and foster professionalism across the sector we will give breathing space for new thinking and encourage innovation so that the system makes the best use of technological advances without compromising quality.

We will collaborate with other stakeholders, including the new Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency whose responsibilities will include the determination of criteria for the GCSE, AS, A Level qualifications and for advising awarding bodies on specification design - their role too is crucial for the well-being of the system. The Sector Skills Councils are equally crucial to getting right the needs of different sectors and we will work with them and UK Commission for Employment and Skills to ensure that we have the best possible vocational qualifications which will help individuals and the nation get through the present recession and back to prosperity. We will work with employers who seek recognition of their excellent training schemes through their recognition as awarding bodies. Our ability to compete in the world is essential to the well-being of all of us and our qualifications need to be valued beyond our own shores: the QCF developments and the relationship with the European Qualifications Framework will be at the top of our agenda. We will also play our part in supporting the Diploma alongside the deliverers of the component parts of the new qualification and the qualification as a whole - this will be a test of cooperation and collaboration across the providers of the Diploma as well as of the robustness of the regulatory requirements. We all need to get it right in the interests of the learners already on

course for awards and for future learners who will benefit from this new approach to learning.

Our relationship with government will be on a sound footing after legislation: as a non-Ministerial Government Department we will be fully independent and will be accountable to Parliament and not to the Secretaries of State of DCSF and DIUS. We will seek to have good relationships with both departments and build on what we have achieved in the course of the last 12 months but we will report directly to Parliament.

But there is one relationship which value over all others. That is our relationship with the learner. We exist to safeguard the qualifications, tests and assessments they take and it is they that are at the heart of everything we do. We know that it is essential that we listen to learners, that we engage with them whenever we can and that we keep them fully up-to-date with what we are doing. Only by doing this can we be certain that we are creating and maintaining a system which suits their purposes. Engaging with learners of different ages and from different backgrounds is not an easy task. To do so effectively we have used a variety of methods, including learner panels, which take place at least twice a year. The panels take place in a variety of settings, including schools and colleges, and provide us with an opportunity to talk to learners face-to-face to find out what they like about the qualification system and what they want to change. We will show you some films made at these panels later today.

Secondly we have held a series of focus groups in which learners, employers, parents and carers, teachers and examiners have participated. These groups, which were held as part of our study into reliability, aimed to find out more about how learners and the people using the qualifications system perceived the reliability of results. The findings were very interesting, showing the public had a realistic perception of reliability. The findings formed the basis of a report, published this week on the Ofqual website.

Finally, we will be releasing a series of videos which explain more about issues which affect learners. The first centres on the aims of our work on reliability. It aims to put the purpose of the project over in a simple and engaging way. I'd like to show you this video now.

Thank you. I must admit the concept of reliability is not an easy one to understand but we hope that this video goes some way to explaining it for a non-technical audience. We will be returning to reliability in a few moments when our first speaker takes the stage.

Finally I would like to close by assuring you that everything that Ofqual does will be to safeguard the system. We will always act to protect the interests of the learners for whom qualifications are their passport to future success. If qualifications are not valued by users, if public trust and confidence in the system is lost, it is the learner that suffers. As the regulator Ofqual cannot allow that to happen - all our efforts will, therefore, be geared to ensuring that the system remains in good health and commands the respect of users and the wider public.

Before I introduce our first speaker today, Professor Dylan William, I'd like to turn the spotlight on you and ask if you have any questions for me. There is a microphone which we will pass around to any speakers, so do put up your hand and make yourself known, and please wait for the mike to reach you before you ask your question. Does anyone have any questions?

Thank you everyone for some very interesting questions. It now gives me great pleasure to our first speaker today, Professor Dylan William.