

November 18, 2008

Dear Colleague

## **Open letter to college principals and teaching associations about Ofqual's reliability of results programme**

This is the second in our series of open letters which will set out Ofqual's views and expectations on a given subject. While addressed specifically to you, open letters will be published on the Ofqual website and reported in the Ofqual e-newsletters. This letter will appear on the Ofqual website on November 26 2008.

This letter addresses the progress of Ofqual's reliability of results programme, a topic I will speak about at the Association of Colleges annual conference in Birmingham today.

As you may be aware, at Ofqual's launch event on 16 May, I announced our plans to conduct a comprehensive study on the reliability of results of external qualifications, examinations and assessments. This two-year programme is the first major study of reliability conducted by a regulator. Although many important studies on the subject have taken place, the reliability of results is still, at present, an under-theorised, under-reported and often misunderstood area.

Ofqual's study aims to shine a light on this important issue. We want to find out more about the consistency of results, and, perhaps even more importantly, exactly what learners, teachers, employers, higher education bodies and the general public think and feel about reliability. Would they consider some variability of results to be acceptable, for example, if a learner were to perform differently on different days? What if two markers were to reach different judgments on the same piece of work? Would that be acceptable? Our aim is to explore all the areas which may affect the reliability of results and to discover the effect these variable factors have on the grades awarded to the learners.

Our study comprises three strands. The first, which we are working on at present, centres on generating evidence and determining the methodology of the programme. The second strand will focus on interpreting the evidence and pinpointing exactly what

it means for the general public. The third strand will focus on communicating the study, finding out more on the public perception of reliability and developing a policy.

I am pleased to report that our study is making good progress. We have now appointed a panel which will guide the programme, comprising technical experts on testing from all over the world. The panel recently met to discuss ways in which the evidence will be gathered and which qualifications, tests and examinations we will be looking at.

We will also be asking teachers, learners and the general public questions on reliability as part of our annual Ofqual survey, which will be conducted by Ipsos MORI before the end of the year. The results will be published on our website in the New Year. We will follow this with a series of workshops involving the public in 2009. Updates on this work will be published on our website.

We would like to ask for help from you too. We know that you in your role as college principals and teaching association members, are experts in what learners expect of the reliability of their results. Do you feel there are problems? If so, where do they lie? Are some examinations more reliable than others? Do we have different expectations of reliability in different types of qualifications, and if so, why? What factors do you feel influence reliability – and of these, which could we do more to control? The information you give us will be invaluable in terms of helping us understand more about this difficult subject, and ultimately will help us to formulate our policy on reliability.

Ofqual's head of assessment research, Dr Paul Newton, will conduct a breakout session on this subject at the AoC conference, and we hope to have spoken to many of you on that occasion on this topic. For those of you who could not attend, we enclose a leaflet which explains more about our work.

The consequences of assessment results are far-reaching and affect everyone, including employers, those in higher education and most importantly learners studying for examinations and tests today. The examination grades learners achieve are carried with them throughout their lives and open doors into further learning and employment, so for these reasons it is essential we understand as much as possible about the reliability of the qualifications system.

Please contact us with your thoughts and feedback by emailing us at [reliabilityprogramme@ofqual.gov.uk](mailto:reliabilityprogramme@ofqual.gov.uk). Alternatively please log onto [www.ofqual.gov.uk/reliabilityprogramme](http://www.ofqual.gov.uk/reliabilityprogramme) for more information.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kathleen Tattersall', with a long, sweeping underline that extends across the width of the signature.

Kathleen Tattersall  
Chair