

## Interview with Tim Ross of PA

14 May 2008



### **Kathleen Tattersall**

Well firstly I am absolutely delighted to have been appointed to chair, as I see from a very personal point of view all my working life I've been involved with promoting the education of and the assessment of young people and older people, but I was a teacher. And in the first 7 years of my career and for the rest of my career I worked with awarding bodies. And my message to my own staff was always that the qualifications that the awarding body provided were only as good as the doors they opened for the people who took them. And I still believe that and I believe that qualifications underpinned by the very sound procedures to ensure quality still open doors, either to employment or into further and higher education. I think they can really motivate young people and I think there is lots of evidence from over the years that that has been the case. So to be chairing this organisation that's just come into existence with a remit to ensure that we have the best possible qualifications system to benefit the learner, whoever the learner might be, either school, college or in the workplace, for me is just in tune with all my personal commitment throughout my career and a personal commitment to make sure that we carry forward this really important agenda in the future.

### **Tim Ross**

What's your assessment so far? Do you think the qualification system is producing courses at the moment that benefit young people? And how do you see that developing?

### **Kathleen Tattersall**

Well you have got to remember we're not coming to an utterly green field where nothing has ever been happening. And I would want to say that the work which QCA has done over the last 11 years and in particular the work which has been done under the leadership of Ken Boston and Anthony Greener I think it has really enhanced the qualification system. The quality assurance procedures that have been put into place I think have strengthened GCSE and A level. The quality procedures put into place to accredit a wider range of qualifications has brought into the picture relevant vocational qualifications. And I think the work that they have done to anticipate new developments like the diplomas gives us a very sound base on which to work. And the other thing that they have done which I think again strengthens the piece is the work to bring into the

frame employers who provide their own qualifications. And again I think that will be of real benefit to the community at large because out there, there are a lot of people who might very well have missed on what we call the traditional or formal route to qualifications, you know gathered and school and moving onto further and higher education. They're in work, they've blossomed in work, they've had good training from their employers, they have got good qualifications from their employers, and I think it is absolutely right that that should be brought into the national framework as it is being done to the procedures that QCA has set up. And I think we have got a lot there to take forward and build on. So I think the scene is really quite healthy, but it will benefit from a regulator which is not answerable to government but which is answerable to parliament, which is truly independent. It is not part of the delivery chain for want of a better term...

### **Kathleen Tattersall**

... of government. And I think we can really stand up and be counted and really stand up for the learner.

### **Tim Ross**

In terms of the separation of powers between Ofqual and the government, with Ed Balls and Gordon Brown wanting to increase confidence in the system. What is your assessment of the public confidence in the exam system at the moment?

### **Kathleen Tattersall**

Well I think my main assessment is that there is not really sufficient evidence to make claims one way or the other. And because there has been a little bit of a vacuum in terms of having some very clear objective means of getting hold of this very complex issue about standards, it enables other people as it were to fill the vacuum by making claims which are not necessarily evidence based. And which then influence the thinking of the wider public. What I think Ofqual wants to do on an issue of that kind is to consider the work which has been done and I am thinking particularly of the standards over time work which QCA pursued over the last 10 years, but which was quite I suppose academic in its thrust. And not necessarily fully explained to a wider public. Also the sort of methodologies that QCA has looked at. I want Ofqual to consider all of that and I want Ofqual to be able to think through a mechanism by which we can address the issue in a different way, a new way, what that is at the moment I do not know. But I am quite certain we can look at it in a different way. And do it in a manner which engages not just the people within the profession and by that I mean the awarding bodies, the schools, the colleges and so on, but actually begins to talk to the public. So that if we did a study over a period of months or a couple of years, and it may be that we

would be taking that sort of time, we would not be waiting for the end to make any sort of announcement. We would be having focus groups, we would be putting things on our website of what our findings were and building up the picture. And I hope in that way really building up the confidence of the public that what we were doing by sharing with them the evidence as we collect it, that they can trust the conclusions we come to, they can see for themselves the evidence that we have used to come to conclusions. And hopefully we will get a better understanding of what the system is all about. Whether there are limitations to what we can expect from the system and I think that is probably the case. And we can then look more objectively at the qualifications and attainments that people come out with in this day and age.

### **Tim Ross**

You mention limitations as to what can be expected. What have you got in mind?

### **Kathleen Tattersall**

Well I think there is a broad expectation that assessment should be absolutely perfect and accurate. A mark of 50 is a mark of 50 regardless of who actually marks, the time at which it is marked and so on. In other words there was a precision expected of the system. What we need to actually explore is whether that sort of expectation is well founded or whether within the system there are some trade offs between absolute reliability of that nature and the validity of the way in which you go about assessment. So that you might on the one hand have a system of multiple choice where you can say that mark is one thing or the other. But you might have within the system the sort of assessment techniques like ... continuous writing where you are making a judgement as to the quality. And it may be there that the judgement might produce a mark of 50 or 49 and there is nothing intrinsically wrong with that sort of variation because of the nature of the piece. So I think what we want to look at and begin to broaden out the debate with the public and others is what is the nature of the examination system? What do we expect from it? Do we actually expect people to be assessed in a manner that is fit for its purpose? And if it is fit for its purpose can it always deliver absolute precise marks? Now of course at the end of the day what we expect from the system, particularly a high stakes one, is that it will deliver a true grade for people. And so if the system is not quite as precise as it might be in some respects we have always got to ensure that there are safeguards built in to establish standardisation across the piece where there are multiple markers and to ensure that no individual candidate ... falls through a net without some procedures to look again at that candidate's work particularly in subjects which require judgement. And to ensure that the candidate gets the right grade at the end of the process. But I think you know these are very complex issues and there is a simplistic expectation on the part of the public, which I think we have really got to begin to engage

with the public in a dialogue about the nature of the examination system.

**Tim Ross**

Do you think that people have unrealistic expectations of 100% accuracy in marking? And that exams taken in 2008 have the same standard of difficulty to exams taken in 1994.

**Kathleen Tattersall**

I want to explore those issues, I am not saying that they are being unrealistic but I am saying that there could be expectations which are a little bit out of sync with what can be delivered. Now when you are talking about what you have just touched on there...standards over time, I think the responsibility which is always placed on the developers of tests, the developers of the curriculum, which is where it all starts, the curriculum and the syllabuses, the specifications... And then the actual question papers. The duty they are charged with is to carry forward standards. And I think it is a very broad concept really of carrying forward standards. But nevertheless I think what those developers set out to do, be they the developers of national curriculum tests or awarding bodies developing their exams. They set out with the intention of setting tasks for the candidate which are comparable with what has gone before... Now of course a number of factors get in the way and one of those factors that gets in the way is that syllabuses change and it becomes, every time you do have a specification change, the challenge becomes a difficult one to address. But again it is factors of that kind that I think we need to be open and honest about with the public. And have a very clear dialogue and I think this is what Ofqual wants to do, we want to be very transparent in everything that we do. We want to be very open and honest and engage the public and we want to do it in the interests of the students. The students' attainments can be recognised and celebrated with the student. I mean we do need to try to get away from the annual frenzy that you know students' attainment is not what it used to be. And to try to actually really expose is the wrong word, but discuss the issues in a very open manner.

**Tim Ross**

Presumably that includes saying where you find evidence that standards have slipped?

**Kathleen Tattersall**

If we find that evidence. I mean in line with what I have just said, transparency and openness we would say that. Equally if we find evidence that standards have been maintained, have risen, we would also say that. So what we want to do is to ensure that

we have an evidence based judgement... and in truth thinking about that very simplistic statement, slipped or not... I think what we would find is that the situation is somewhat more complicated than that, because of all the facets that go into making an assessment system, examinations, the setting of standards for grading and so on. I think it is a very multi faceted approach that is already in place. And I think whatever statements we make would be recognising the complexities of the system and trying to explain those complexities... But are looking down the line because... at the moment we have not got the evidence.

**Tim Ross**

So you are not yet in a position to make it.

**Kathleen Tattersall**

I am not going out next week and going to be making statements.

**Tim Ross**

Fair enough. Do you think it is realistic that the creation of this body is going to silence the critics?

**Kathleen Tattersall**

I think we are at the beginning of a process. I would like to think I could wave a magic wand and say something wonderfully new and novel on a day in August and people will say, 'Ah wonderful we have now got the answer and we will not have this debate.' No it is not going to happen like that. I think education is a long process. But I do hope that we can add to the annual debate about standards in a manner that people will actually respect what we have to say and listen a little more carefully to the evidence and look more carefully at the evidence.

**Tim Ross**

How important is it for the long term stability and integrity of the system for ministers to come clean about the future for A levels?

**Kathleen Tattersall**

Well the only view I can express is one in terms of how Ofqual will work and that is Ofqual will be transparent about what it is doing. I do not think I can really comment on

how ministers go about their business. And I would expect ministers to leave Ofqual to get on with its business. I really have to respect the fact that they will get on with theirs in the way that they intend. So I do not think I would want to be drawn particularly on that.

**Tim Ross**

What about the development of diplomas?

**Kathleen Tattersall**

From the point of view of Ofqual what we have got to ensure and it is the principle as much as just to comment on the diplomas, that wherever the system changes, there are systems and procedures in place to ensure that the transition is as smooth as possible and that anything new is introduced with the best of the quality procedures underpinning it. And further that where problems come to light and people who would be knowledgeable about the problems coming to light are the awarding bodies who would be responsible for the award of the diploma or whatever qualification it might be, that those problems were shared with us at an early stage. So that we could work with them to address the problem before it became something that affected the student. So we will be watching very carefully the progression of the diplomas, when we do not have responsibility for every last bit of the diploma because the diplomas are being managed by other people. But we do have a responsibility to ensure that the standard of the qualification is as it is stated to be, is appropriate and that it benefits the people who will be entered for it. So we will be watching very carefully but what I have said would apply to a change in GCSE, it would apply to a change in A level, it would apply to a change in a vocational qualification because qualifications are at their most vulnerable when it is a start up time. And I know that from personal experience having been around the system when GCSE was introduced... and also when the new A levels were introduced in 2000. And that is when you have got to be exceedingly careful that everything goes to plan. So we as the regulate will be watching everything so that it goes to plan.

**Tim Ross**

Where do you see potential weak points for diplomas?

**Kathleen Tattersall**

The diplomas cover a fairly broad range of learning experiences. Which is actually a strength because in terms of the widening the experience, widening the skills, widening the knowledge base that students will have, giving them the skills which employers say that they want. And particularly the functional skills which they say they want. So the

weakness if any and it has not appeared as a weakness as yet, but clearly the broader the range of skills ... components within a qualification, the more you have got to have very careful management of that. So ... we will want to ensure that the awarding bodies both those responsible for the component parts of the diploma and those responsible for the award of the diploma as a whole have the systems in place to manage the process. And also talk to each other so that nothing falls down a black hole. So that there is some cross discussion going on. I think the other thing that we will want to keep a close eye on is that those aspects of the diploma which require management within the school or college again are underpinned by sound systems and that teachers have all the support they need to play their role in the assessment of the dimensions which fall within their remit. So I think our responsibility is really to ensure that the systems are in place, that the organisations and people responsible for delivery are working to the criteria which are set and that as I said earlier, that people are open and honest if a problem emerges and particularly one where our advice and help can actually help to avoid it.

**Tim Ross**

You must have heard concerns that have been raised by Jerry Jarvis and teachers' organisations and head teachers; that schools are not prepared.

**Kathleen Tattersall**

But I have to say that ... this in a sense falls outside Ofqual's remit. I think it is right and proper that we have an expectation that while we live with the standard that we are expecting, we will be there, but the bodies that have a responsibility to ensure that the support is provided, that teachers are prepared, that the underlying IT systems and the rest are appropriately designed. Are the department and possibly QCA... continues to have a role there. So we clearly will need to work with partner organizations where their work touches on ours. But I think the responsibility for delivering the sort of thing where the concerns have been expressed would rest with the department and others.

**Tim Ross**

So you are saying that you would be looking into the operational aspects of it. It would be the technicalities around the standards and whatever level they are supposed to be.

**Kathleen Tattersall**

Yes yes... if you think about that Ofqual's role it is ensuring that the bodies delivering the qualification meet our criteria for accreditation. That is the case we put in ... awarding bodies as well ... awarding bodies in other respects. And that what is being accredited

as the qualification, whether it is the subject or particularly when you are dealing with a vocational dimension again meets the criteria for that particular subject or unit. In terms of the management aspect of how the awarding bodies go about their business or how schools go about their business or how those who are putting the resources into schools go about their business, that is not ours. Clearly if we had a concern about standards then that is where we need to talk to other bodies that are being... wrong delivered. If we feel it is going to impinge on the standards. But we have not got to that point yet. We have not even started the diplomas. But that is how I would envisage... the thing developing.

**Tim Ross**

Do you think the standards debate has become too politicised? Is it Ofqual's role to take the heat out of that debate?

**Kathleen Tattersall**

I think in terms of our independence and possibly an advantage of being an independent organisation with no accountability to government, then you do begin to separate the issue of standards from the politics. Having said that, I am very conscious that governments will always have their own interest in the standards debate for their own reasons. And I do not think you will ever get away from that. But I am saying that in terms of regulating the system, observing the system, drawing conclusions about the system, the conclusions coming from an independent body as opposed to a body responsible to government should at the least give the debate an objectivity which it currently does not have.

**Tim Ross**

Why is that objectivity missing?

**Kathleen Tattersall**

Well simply because of the role of QCA has actually been a body answerable to ministers. And QCA would say that. QCA, my understanding, argued that there should be an independent regulator, because it could perceive those weaknesses itself. And the fact that Ofqual although we continue to exist as it were in the QCA ... because we do not have our own legislations yet, but the fact that Ofqual as an independent body has the full support of the QCA board, QCA chief executive and the QCA chair, and I have to say the full support of ministers... they all see that the advantages I have just articulated like being able to bring to bear an objectivity, will actually advantage the

students who are taking qualifications. And although the standards debate might very well continue, it will continue in a different manner because of a body which stands apart from the political process. And we will report to parliament as a whole but we will not be reporting to a government which has set its own targets ... they are not going to be part of that delivery mechanism. And there may be occasions when what we have to say is uncomfortable for government. There may be occasions when they do not like what we say. But that is not the issue. The issue is we will say it.

**Tim Ross**

Do you think the critics are right, that some courses have become easier in recent years?

**Kathleen Tattersall**

I honestly cannot answer that question. I have been out of the system quite a while. And I have not for the last 5 years been reading reports or looking at syllabuses and pondering on it and say it is high time I got back in, in order to save the system from disaster. That is not how ... I did enjoy myself... So the answer is without the evidence I am not prepared to make a statement. I think if I expect this organisation to be evidence based, I will make a statement when I have evidence.

**Tim Ross**

Does it matter if standards of exams have not been maintained?

**Kathleen Tattersall**

Does it matter to whom?

**Tim Ross**

The people that you are responsible to. The students.

**Kathleen Tattersall**

I think if we had a situation where qualifications, and this is a theoretical point, it is not a point rooted in any sort of thoughts about the system as it stands; but if we have a situation where the qualification system was producing qualifications which were not accepted by universities for entrance and I am thinking particularly of A level and its vocational equivalents; or employers did not accept largely vocational but other types of

qualifications as being relevant to what they wanted, then that would be a great worry. Because the students would not have the means of entry into employment or another form of education. Now there is no evidence that that is happening, as I understand it, certainly not at the university level. Perhaps I should say one of my other roles is as governor, I sit on the governing body of one of our large universities and from that perspective the qualifications continue to open doors into higher education. So I don't think the evidence is there that we have the sort of system that you said. But were it to be the case, that the doors were not being opened, then yes that would be a great worry to everybody. Hence we need to be very certain, very sure and sure as we possibly can be I should say, that the qualification system remains highly respected, highly wanted, opens doors for the people taking the qualifications, and they attain the standards expected by society at large.

### **Tim Ross**

One particular reform coming in is the A\* to A levels and there have been concerns expressed that that will mean proportionately more students from independent schools getting to the top universities. Is that a problem?

### **Kathleen Tattersall**

Firstly that is speculative isn't it as to where the best students will come from, in the sense of the A\*. My understanding...

### **Tim Ross**

It is based on analysis of the previous year's A level results.

### **Kathleen Tattersall**

OK. But ... in terms of how you set the A\* boundary, the important thing is that it is set in relation to the work which is produced in any given year. And my understanding of the expectation and this was obviously a decision made prior to Ofqual coming into being, is that it will be ... top 10% of the UMS score I think, I think that is what it says. And you have got to display a grade A in every unit that you have taken. Both AS and A level. Which is a tremendously demanding, it seems to me, and high expectation. So that the A\* will trigger ... of the attainment. Now it may well be that candidates from a particular group will come out with more A\*s but given the high level I would think that the impact it will have in terms of entry into university will not be so great because we are going to be still talking about students with grade A having themselves reached an incredibly high level of achievement. So I think we will need to actually monitor the system as it

develops. What we have in the first instance is the A\* being introduced prior to the reform of the papers themselves to actually have more stretch and challenge in the papers; and I think Ofqual will need to be looking carefully at how is the system working, does it need refining as we move into a different sort of A level paper. Always though I think what we will be expecting is that the requirements of A\* were fixed in respect of the work produced in the examination. And we could not be and it would be quite wrong I think for an organisation like ourselves to as it were manipulate the system so that it favoured one group of students rather than another group of students. Or tried to offset some of the problems that you were anticipating in your question. I think the main requirement of any grade boundary is that it is set in respect of the work produced.

**Tim Ross**

Would you see it as a problem if the A\* ended up...?

**Kathleen Tattersall**

... In many ways because they are the same point in the grade scale, meaning there may be other allowances, one group of students who seem to be doing better in a particular sort of exam, particular sort of assessment, than another group. Examinations cannot solve all those problems I do not think. However you design them there will always be some down side to them. One might regret it on one level and you might work hard to ensure that the examinations that we set are balanced and use a variety of assessment techniques to try to offset some of the known... for example it is said that girls do better in course work, boys do better in more straight forward exams. And you have got to have a range of assessment techniques both to assess what is the subject and also to offset the sort of ... that we are aware of through research which benefit one group or another. But at the end of the day you have got to assess what is there, you have got to assess what students do. Exams cannot solve society's problems at large.

**Tim Ross**

Or the inequalities in the school system.

**Kathleen Tattersall**

Well again that is outside our remit. Totally outside our remit. You cannot wave a magic wand and say that everything is going to be wonderful now that we have got an independent regulator. We are regulating the qualifications and testing system. Lying behind that is the curriculum, the structures and the rest of it. All of that ... is somebody else's responsibility. Otherwise I do not think I would be sleeping at night.

**Tim Ross**

Are there particular areas that you think need attention?

**Kathleen Tattersall**

When you say areas...

**Tim Ross**

Your remit is to regulate the qualifications and testing system. Within those areas are there particular elements that you think should be Ofqual's immediate priorities?

**Kathleen Tattersall**

I think the true priorities we have are 1 the standards matter that we have touched on. That is something that we will begin to think about and try to put in place systems to begin to address that issue. And the other one, it is not unrelated, is again something we touched on earlier and that is the reliability of the system. And to start a programme of work which actually begins to engage on that particular issue. Now those are 2 key dimensions of qualifications and tests regardless of their specific nature. So if it is diplomas, if it is A levels, GCSEs, NVQs or national curriculum tests, those 2 dimensions are common across the piece. So I think we will be giving some priority to those 2 dimensions. In terms of the nature of the system, then that is for other people to decide. We are not the ones who are going to decide that you shall have diplomas, you shall have A levels or whatever. That is somebody else who will decide that. We will work within the policy framework which is laid down.

**Tim Ross**

What did you make of the Select Committee's report?

**Kathleen Tattersall**

Well that comes back to the work I have just said on standards. I think there are 2 dimensions of the very full committee report and I am sure you have read it cover to cover. I am looking at you...

**Tim Ross**

Not quite.

**Kathleen Tattersall**

... And I found it an incredibly interesting report. Much of which is directed at government and I do not want to comment on that. But I think there were a couple of dimensions which do track very much with what I have said. What light can we throw on the system that will enable people to say with some certainty about standards being maintained? What work can we do to redress that issue? And I think in fact Grade did throw out a challenge to us in one of the paragraphs, I cannot remember which... to that effect. Secondly...

**Kathleen Tattersall**

Well I have just said that we will. I mean we are not taking it up in the sense that we see our remit coming from them... because this is already our thinking on this issue. But it is interesting that the issue should come up in the Select Committee report... just as what we had already decided, and I will be saying something about this on Friday, is that we will be looking at the reliability. I am mentioning we talked to the awarding bodies and they are also very interested to work with us to look at that dimension. And it is interesting that the Select Committee then says, we really do need to have more work done on reliability because reliability, and that was a very very good section, I would advise you to read it, I cannot remember where it comes. But there is a really good discussion about all the factions that actually make up reliability and how complex the entire area is. So again I think what we want to do will resonate very much with what the Select Committee has said on that issue.

**Tim Ross**

On the standards issue, which is obviously the hot potato, do you have plans for a specific enquiry or investigation from Ofqual in the near future to look at A level standards over time?

**Kathleen Tattersall**

I would not use the word enquiry. I do not have any power to enquire because we recognise that this is as you said an ongoing issue. But as I said earlier there is nothing specifically that I feel we would want to address because the qualifications ... are useful to students, there is no evidence that I am aware of that standards have declined or whatever. There is lots of assertions but there is not evidence. So the work we do will

begin to expose what makes a standard, how can we judge and evaluate standards? And we will carry on and build on the work that has been done. At this particular stage and we are only 6 weeks into Ofqual coming into existence, in fact 5 weeks, we have not built up any particular line that we would actually go down. And the Ofqual committee would want to consider that before we actually decide. So although I would prioritise this as something that Ofqual will always need to address because it is right at the heart of why Ofqual has come into existence, I would not want to give the impression that we are doing so because all of a sudden we are worried about some particular aspect of the system. We are not.

### **Tim Ross**

But you do see it as being central.

### **Kathleen Tattersall**

You also know the nature of that... whether it is Ofqual or whether it is Ofwat or whether it is Of whatever the other things are, it is all about standards isn't it? It is about standards of service, it is about standards of outcome, it is about standards of experience. All of those things are all about regulation, making it as good as it possibly can be for the person who whatever the system is serves. And as good as it can be means that we have the best qualification system, whose standards are respected. So I see that not just as a piece of work that Ofqual will do like that, but as something that will underpin all our approaches and may at some point emerges the issue we want to focus on. But always will be the issue that we are keeping at the forefront of our mind because we need to make sure that the best possible qualification system always. So that is how I regard the standards issue... Every now and again it blips up doesn't it? August everybody says, 'Ooh you know standards have fallen.'... because the results go up every year. So OK why do results go up every year? What we need to do is begin to explore that, what are the factors that lead to it? And to discuss it in much more open manner with the public. So I think it is the openness and the transparency which make the real difference in the sense that too often I think any profession, whether it be medical, be legal, be education, talks to itself and they forget that out there there is a public that expects to be drawn into the debate in a way that is transparent, does not use acronyms all the time. The number of acronyms I come across in the last... I... today and I had to look at these things and I am... And somewhere along the line it would then be explained. Somewhere if you look in the document... I want to go away from that, I want to talk proper, straight forward language to people. And I think my public is an intelligent... public, let us engage them in the discussion.

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