

## Speech from launch of AQA’s Centre for Education Research and Policy at the House of Commons in March:

It’s wonderful to have the opportunity to speak to you all, to give you a flavour of our research.

The timing couldn’t be better - tomorrow is results day for the winter exams.

Students will be receiving their grades for A-level units and for the new modular GCSE units. There’ll be happiness for some, disappointment for others. Our job is to ensure that they receive a fair grade, the grade that reflects what they know and can do.

Leading up to results is a busy time for the research team. Just last week we were working with examiners to set grade boundaries, providing statistical information to support their judgments of the grade worthiness of student work.

Of course awarding grades falls at the end of stages of education, so this work gives us unique windows on what is going on in schools and colleges.

I’d like to share some insights from the awards of the new modular GCSEs. In a modular GCSE students can take chunks of assessment through the course and can re-sit if they are unhappy with their results.

This is the first time that students have been able to sit units for the new GCSE in English Language. It’s only been available to teach since last September. Nonetheless eleven thousand 15 year olds were entered for one of the units. Not to mention a few hundred 14 year olds. These students had had only a term of teaching time but were expected to meet the full GCSE standard, unfortunately not all of them did.

That said, last summer we had early entries in GCSE PE and we had some fantastically high performances – 15 year old gymnasts with outstanding skills! Early entry isn’t necessarily a bad thing if the pupils are ready in academic and emotional terms.

There were also some worryingly high re-sitting rates, 67% of the 7.5 thousand candidates taking one of our History units were re-sitting from last June. Perhaps because last June was too early – they would have only been half way through the course.

These modular GCSEs are new, teachers and learners are finding their way as to how best to use the flexibility inherent in their design. Clearly some of these early entries are schools testing the water. We need to give solid feedback and support.

It is clear from these examples, why for AQA, being involved in the grading isn’t enough, focusing on the end point isn’t enough. We are committed to developing high quality qualifications that engage learners, encourage participation and high quality teaching.

Sounds a simple enough aim doesn’t it? A platitude? Well here are a few of the complexities we need to consider. This overhead describes some of the tensions in qualification design.

Let’s begin by considering a very important factor: the needs of **policy makers**

The content and structure of qualifications are used to steer teacher and learner behaviour. For example, the previous government wanted the stretch and challenge of A-level exams to increase. To encourage higher order thinking skills, extended writing, and the application of knowledge and to stop formulaic responding.

AQA’s research evaluation of the stretch and challenge initiative (done in collaboration with Professor Jo-Anne Baird) suggests that the changes were well placed to encourage the desired deeper understanding, supporting students in the transition to higher education and the workplace.

But is there more we can do? Can we gradually include deeper more demanding material without putting excessive strain on already pressured young people?

Our evaluation gave us fascinating insight into classroom practices. Students described learning mark schemes and essay plans by rote, and intensively practising past papers. As one teacher put it students *“are learning, whether we like it or not, that education’s about taking exams”*.

It’s easy to feel a sense of almost moral outrage when you hear of students learning mark schemes, but from another perspective, it is highly strategic, tactical use of resource! Haven’t we all taken short cuts at some point? We have to make sure our mark schemes are worth learning.

### Let’s next consider **teachers’ needs**

One of the positive aspects of having a competitive marketplace for qualifications is the extent to which awarding bodies seek to tailor their ‘products’ to teachers’ needs. Before any qualification development there is extensive testing of the ‘market’ – what subject content do teachers want? How do teachers want their students to be tested, by exam, by coursework? What suites their needs and the needs of their learners best? This input partly explains the generally high satisfaction and commitment that teachers have to GCSEs and A-levels.

But we should not mistake this market research activity for a true understanding of pedagogy or for a true understanding of the way in which learners learn. Some argue that teachers feel so under pressure to meet targets that pedagogy has become almost sterile, that teaching has become overly didactic, insufficiently crafted to individual learner’s needs. This raises the question of how well teachers are now able to articulate their needs.

Awarding bodies must invest in research that investigates how qualifications can support pedagogy. Here’s an example from our work. Early research into the old O levels and CSEs showed that the least able were being drilled in concepts they didn’t understand. So when the GCSE was created it was available at two levels – foundation tier and higher tier. This was to allow teachers to develop their learners’ understanding appropriately. But subsequent research found that pupils were now labelled and restricted in achievement.

We are using technology to develop a solution. Rather than pupils taking a foundation or higher tier exam that makes presumptions about how they will perform, why not have pupils take short tests, or ‘testlets’ on-screen? These are automatically marked and as the pupil advances through the exam they are given easier or harder testlets. Not only is this fairer in opening up potential achievement, it allows teachers to be more flexible in their pedagogy. We have a programme of research leading to the development of such an exam in GCSE French. Teachers are incredibly positive about the initiative; we had nearly 11 thousand pupils entered for our most recent exercise.

There isn’t enough innovative work of the kind I’ve described in the highly regulated high stakes assessments we deal in. And there isn’t enough thorough research evaluation of how our qualifications influence pedagogy and learning. This should be a fundamental consideration in qualification design and awarding bodies need to lead this area of research.

### So moving on to **learners’ needs**

There is a strong relationship between assessment type and learning. Motivation and achievement are increased when assessments feel relevant to the learner and have ‘real-world’ contexts, when learners are involved in shaping their own learning. It’s crucial that we understand this relationship between assessment design and motivation and achievement.

A good example of our work in this area is our evaluation of the Extended Project Qualification. This is relatively new qualification available to take alongside A-levels and GCSEs. Skills based learning sitting alongside our subject based curriculum. The titles of some the projects give a sense of what the students do and the way in which their imaginations are fired, for example we’ve had...

What are the links between mathematics and magic tricks?

Should we worry about antibiotics resistance and is enough being done to solve it?

A film lover’s guide to Paris

Impressive!

We found students were innovative and creative about their learning. Achievement was linked to intrinsic motivation – the pupils who did well enjoyed the work and the learning in of itself, it wasn’t about doing well to up their UCAS score. There was no rote learning of the mark scheme here!

Pupils did well when they took a deep learning strategy, searching extensively for information, building a comprehensive knowledge base. These are clearly desirable attributes for lifelong learning.

Furthermore, pupils really engaged with the project regardless of their ability, even pupils who had not done well in traditional qualifications could really get something out of the project.

In striving to meet the complex and sometimes contradictory demands of policy makers, teachers and learners, we must not undermine the **quality of our assessments** that is their reliability and validity, and the ability to maintain standards. These are, after all not technical issues but issues of ethics and fairness.

AQA alone offers 64 different A levels and 66 different GCSEs. Variation in teacher and learner needs has led to what Alastair Politt calls the English 'disease of choice'. Optional questions within exams, optional routes through qualifications, alternative qualifications such as the iGCSE. To give you an extreme example, AQA's A-level History offers so much choice that there are a staggering 3042 possible ways of getting your A-level.

Generally speaking the more complex a qualification, the more options, the more challenging it is to set comparable standards and the more potential there is for unfairness. It is possible to award fair grades in a syllabus like A-level History but not without huge investment of time and expertise.

Moreover, in a desire to meet all possible needs we risk producing a confusing system in which employers are no longer sure that grades describe what someone can do. The currency of qualifications becomes increasingly questioned.

Finally I come to **cost**. I'm not going to say much about cost but we'd be foolish not to recognise its importance. We have to be sure that our qualifications offer value for money to society. But there is no easy formula. A GCSE that incorporates teacher assessment might be a more valid assessment of students' abilities than one based solely on exams. It might be more likely to engage and motivate learners, and even raise achievement. Interestingly the cost to awarding bodies may well be lower, as teachers mark the assessment subject to moderation. The cost to the school or college however might be considerably higher when one considers the time taken to do the marking.

### **So in conclusion**

I began by talking about grading, and why for AQA focusing purely on grading isn't enough. Our research shows the ways in which qualification design really impacts on what goes on in the classroom. This is why AQA is so committed to work to understand the teaching and learning that leads to success in our qualifications.

I hope I have also convinced you that developing qualifications is complex, requires technical expertise and robust research. If we want to be internationally competitive as a nation we need high quality examinations that promote high quality teaching and learning. We want us to work together to achieve this.

There are copies some of our research papers here tonight and the brochures you see dotted around describe our work in more detail. Our contact details are in the brochure please do get in touch, or come and ask questions over a glass of wine. While we're drinking our wine highlights of our future research programme will be scrolling on the screen to whet your appetite.

Thank you for listening.