

A BETTER APPROACH TO HIGHER EDUCATION / AWARDING BODY INTERACTION FOR POST-16 QUALIFICATIONS

A POLICY CONSULTATION

1. Introduction

The Government's recent White Paper *'The Importance of Teaching - the Schools White Paper'* states that *"A levels are a crucial way that universities select candidates for their courses, so it is important that these qualifications meet the needs of higher education institutions."*

Cambridge Assessment, consisting of three awarding bodies and a large research capability, agrees that HE should have a greater role in the design of post-16 qualifications in the UK. We have concerns that over recent decades the 'users' of qualifications, i.e. Higher Education and employers, have become divorced from the 'producers' of qualifications, i.e. awarding bodies.

The question of the design of post-16 qualifications is entangled with the question of exam standards. A crucial question for us at Cambridge Assessment is how we can hold the standard of qualifications whilst at the same time ensuring that HE receives students who are prepared to take on the demands and challenges of a higher education course.

In order to find ways to reintroduce a discussion between HE and awarding bodies, unmediated by state agencies, Cambridge Assessment has launched a policy consultation on a strategy for real engagement between the two groups. This builds on the work both of our UK exam board OCR which has recently set up practical HE discussion forums and our international exam board CIE which worked closely with HE to produce the new Cambridge Pre-U qualification.

2. Why there is a problem

Over the past forty years, the 'producers' of qualifications, awarding bodies, have become ever more concerned with technical accuracy while 'users' of qualifications, including HE and employers, have had a number of other issues to preoccupy them. As a consequence, the British state has taken an ever-increasing role in mediating between HE, subject communities, professional societies, employers, teachers and those developing and providing examinations. The state's greater role in defining the content of syllabuses and the way in which they are examined, has led to a kind of divorce between the 'users' and the 'producers' of qualifications. Qualification producers have continued to carry out their task with increasing accuracy but lack of direct contact with users has meant the purpose of qualifications has sometimes been overlooked.

3. A future model

Taking forward a new model for the development of post-16 qualifications needs to consider how to build better mechanisms of interaction between HE and awarding bodies. However, it also needs to consider how the standard of these qualifications can best be maintained.

Ministers have already stated that they are not interested in the direct regulation of 'products' and are abolishing the QCDA. The QCDA has previously been responsible for defining qualification (design) criteria – such as the number of units, the grading structure and methods of assessment – and subject (content) criteria.

We agree that there is a role for a regulator to protect qualification standards and to ensure their currency endures. However, it is also necessary to deal with some of the current problems which have emerged from an over-regulatory approach. For example, an unhelpful part of the process is the frequency of qualification 'accreditation cycles', driven by regulatory pressures rather than subject and pedagogical changes. This process has reduced the likelihood of quality engagement between HE and awarding bodies.

The model that we have laid out below takes both these views into account. Firstly, the need for the qualification development process to include a mechanism for maintaining standards. But secondly, the need to move away from an overly centralised and regulatory approach, where those with expertise in subject knowledge and pedagogy have not been able to have a major input.

The best international qualifications (IB, Pre-U, IGCSE) are such because they have a minimum of state intervention, with producers and users of the qualification creating a community of interest that takes upon itself the responsibility for maintaining the standard of the qualification. If one gives users of qualifications a leading role in determining the content of qualifications, the role of a regulator changes. It moves from being a body which makes its own decisions on individual qualification standards, to a body which enables those with an interest in maintaining the standard the opportunity to do so.

One proposed model is summarised below:

4.1 Role of higher education

Users, in this case HE, need to take the major role in specifying the content criteria of qualifications – enabling them to help set the standards.

The Government has stated on a number of occasions that HE should have a greater role in determining the content of A levels. The recent White Paper states that *"A levels are a crucial way that universities select candidates for their courses, so it is important that these qualifications meet the needs of higher education institutions."* Cambridge Assessment agrees with this statement.

Under our proposed model, subject professionals take the major role in determining the knowledge, skills and understanding they expect of a candidate in a subject. Those professionals have a direct interest in preserving the currency of the qualification for their subject and this model gives them a way to uphold that currency.

Government and HE should make clear that the primary purpose of A levels is for HE entry; this sends signals to the exam-taking cohort as to which qualifications are worth taking and that HE is prepared to take a major role in preserving the currency of the qualifications used for entry to it.

4.2 Role of awarding bodies

Awarding bodies need to agree between themselves on design criteria – enabling them to maintain the standards in relation to each other.

Assessment expertise is primarily located within awarding bodies. Design criteria are therefore best developed by assessment experts working in close consultation with HE, the teaching community, and the subject community. This allows the preferences of the various communities to be taken into account set against the practicalities of assessment practice.

Different subjects may well choose different styles of examination that suit the teaching and assessment of their subject. Given that HE would be the guarantor of the standard, there is no need for a regulator to insist on similarities between approaches to different subjects.

By giving awarding bodies greater ownership over the development of criteria, they become more accountable to users. Rather than acting as a conduit between the state's requirements and HE, direct interaction with HE means that awarding bodies are incentivised to be more accountable.

4.3 Role of communities of interest

'Communities of interest' need to be set up around each qualification – enabling the standards of each qualification to be maintained by all those with a direct interest in them.

In order to hold the standard over time, it is vital that 'communities of interest' are created. These bring together subject communities, professional societies, employers, HE, and schools, colleges and teachers to share a particular view of what constitutes the standard in relation to a subject level.

They work together to own the standard and protect it on a day to day basis against the vagaries of pedagogical or political fashion. This is way in which the IGCSE, the IB and the Cambridge Pre-U manage standards – without the agency of the state.

The maintenance of a post-16 qualification such as A level would therefore be undertaken by communities of interest that include HE.

4.4 Role of the regulator

Under such an approach, the role that the regulator then plays can be redefined.

With this new approach, the regulator is set free to focus upon standards more effectively. Because responsibility for the standard of each individual qualification would now be taken up by the communities of interest, the regulator would no longer accredit individual qualifications. Instead it would accredit awarding bodies as fit and proper organisations to be producing qualifications.

The regulator would also be accountable for maintaining the standards of qualifications through its supervision of the governance arrangements which determine the way in which awarding bodies interact with communities of interest.

And finally, the regulator would underpin inter awarding body agreements which determine the design criteria of a qualification, to ensure a level of equivalency of qualifications – for example that one exam board's Maths A level was equivalent to another board's Maths A level.

5. How to ensure HE / awarding body interaction?

It is our view that the call for greater engagement between HE and awarding bodies should be supported by proper institutional support arrangements. For example:

1) The QAA might include engagement with awarding bodies as one of its criteria for defining a 'quality HEI' or the QAA Code of Practice on Programme Design (Section 7) could usefully include

reference to the need to take note of the incoming knowledge and skills of students when designing a course.

2) Elsewhere, HEFCE might inherit some of the money saved from the abolition of the QCDA for funding engagement activities. It is likely that a small funding stream will need to be made available in order that universities can allow staff adequate time to engage in this process, thereby ensuring 'quality' rather than 'tick box' engagement. It may be that seconding academics to awarding bodies during the early stages of the design process to ensure the standard was properly set would be a good use of seedcorn monies. Certainly, continuous engagement from early design through to production will require some element of incentivisation, given the vast range of other duties expected of the modern academic.

3) The impact criteria of the REF could also provide a helpful lever. There is a perfectly reasonable case to be made that disseminating knowledge to the next level down of the education system is nearly as important as some other REF criteria. Clearly, it would not rate as importantly as the publication of a serious piece of work in a peer-reviewed journal but is of great importance to the long-term health of Higher Education and, therefore, the nation.

4) It may well be that the HE Academy could usefully turn its mind as to how it might provide a service both to HE and wider education by providing structures and resource to encourage engagement.

6. What next?

We have been asking for feedback from Higher Education Institutions on our policy proposals. Following our consultation process, we will be submitting our findings to the Department for Education as its work around this area develops.

Respondents to the consultation have been asked for their views on:

- the extent to which HE should specify the content criteria of post-16 qualifications;
- your feedback on the idea of qualification 'communities of interest' which include HE;
- whether the suggested mechanisms for long-term engagement between HE and awarding bodies might work, and how these could be built upon;
- any alternative mechanisms for long-term engagement between HE and awarding bodies.

Contact us

Group Public Affairs
Cambridge Assessment

Email: public.affairs@cambridgeassessment.org.uk
Tel: 01223 556018