

Why the Ofqual DfE consultation just isn't asking the right questions

By Carol Holmes

This week I completed the Ofqual/ DfE consultation on examinations for summer 2021. I responded to each question, waiting for the survey to address the key issues facing us this summer... but it didn't. Please don't misunderstand me here – I'm not some survey addict who thinks 64 questions (plus the ones on your background) isn't enough. However, the survey itself seemed to ignore the biggest issues facing the educational sector, and society at large, this summer exam series.

We need to face the harsh reality that, in Summer 2021, the national cohort of students will not perform as well academically as student cohorts in previous years. How we deal with that is not just a matter of assessment and exams. We need firstly to devise an assessment system that can be used fairly and accurately to differentiate between students and put them in a rank order. Then, we need to decide whether to award grades to students who haven't actually met the usual standard. This isn't just a practical issue; it's a moral one.

While some students have coped well with remote learning and thrived academically, others will have made less progress than usual because of issues of motivation, social deprivation, mental health, home environment and access to online learning. As a nation, we face a choice. Do we award grades on the basis of performance, using criterion-referencing against agreed national standards (only those who can do the work will get the grade)? Or do we award grades on the basis of the range of attainment, plotted on a normal distribution curve (the better you do compared to everyone else, the higher your grade)?

Both approaches have problems. By awarding grades linked to actual levels of academic performance by summer 2021, the students who have been worst affected by the pandemic will perform far worse. These are the young people who have been left behind, and it's not just a few. Many thousands of teenagers have experienced a lack of motivation, mental health issues, and a sense of isolation even when their economic and family circumstances are apparently stable. Those with disadvantaged home backgrounds, coping with the impact of financial insecurity, family turmoil and lack of online access fare even worse. Put simply, they haven't made good progress over the last year, because they are the collateral damage of a global pandemic. They haven't reached the standard they would have done if the pandemic hadn't happened. If we choose now to award criterion-based grades, these young people will fail, and be disconnected from opportunities for further study and employment.

On the other hand, awarding grades based on 'what might have been' is also a dangerous choice. The use of statistically-derived 'expected' grades to calculate what students might have achieved without the pandemic is easy enough on paper, but who will pick up the pieces later? Firstly, it will lead to students accessing the next stages of education and training without having attained the skills and knowledge needed at entry level. Academic and vocational courses and apprenticeships will need to adapt to meet the needs of entrants without their usual firm foundation. Will this mean lowering the expected standard of attainment from these young people throughout their subsequent study and training? Or will we just defer till later the experience of 'failing' courses because they haven't attained the required standard? As a society, we need to consider this because in many areas of life, those criteria can't just be waived. After all, none of us wants to rely in years to come on an electrician, a nurse or a civil engineer whose qualification was made easier due to covid-19.

The use of examination papers this summer was the key focus of this consultation, but even the questions directly linked to that missed key issues about the nature and purpose of educational assessment. The core purpose of any exam paper is to differentiate students accurately - to provide a spread of marks along a normal distribution curve that reflects their performance in the subject.

A good examination paper is based on the clear identification of the 'construct' of the assessment - that is, an understanding of WHAT is to be assessed. In any exam or assessment, there will be a range of skills and knowledge to be measured - the assessment objectives. These are not equally weighted because they are not equally important, or equally difficult.

Because students have learned different parts of their courses face-to-face, their strengths will be in different parts of the curriculum. In some schools, they may have done the difficult topics and assessment objectives before the pandemic hit; in others they may have done easier parts. Not all subjects are taught in a sequential or progressive way like maths; History, for example, is not. Therefore, it is not possible to maintain a nationally standardised 'construct' for the design and use of exams this summer. Exam papers, if used, can only form part of an assessment process; they are not fit for purpose as the full means of assessment.

Teachers need to be able to rank-order their students using the assessment objectives and topics they have covered. Teachers can do this fairly and accurately by selecting from the whole range of evidence they have about student performance; they may even also be using summer 2021 exam papers like those proposed in the consultation. Teachers know how to assess! But in any examination series, there are two processes: the assessment process and the award process. What teachers need now is a national consensus on the awarding of grades to the thousands of our young people left behind by this pandemic.

Carol Holmes FCIEA

Carol is Chartered Educational Assessor with experience in setting public examination papers and in the Awarding process. She works as Assistant Headteacher at Westhoughton High School, Bolton.