

Education Select Committee inquiry: how should examinations for 15-19 year olds in England be run?

Response of the Association of School and College Leaders

A Introduction

- 1 The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) represents over 15,000 members of the leadership teams of maintained and independent schools and colleges throughout the UK. This places the association in a unique position to see this initiative from the viewpoint of the leaders of the secondary schools and colleges that educate the overwhelming majority of 15-19 year olds.

B Should there be the present range of awarding bodies or alternative arrangements?

- 2 ASCL has no set view on the question of multiple, single or franchised awarding bodies since whenever we have surveyed members there has been no overall agreement on this topic. There are advantages and disadvantages in all three systems and we believe that there would have to be considerable evidence in favour of a change to balance the turbulence it would bring to the system.
- 3 The main problem facing our examination system is one of overload. Young people in England in this age group take more external assessments than in any other country. The whole system is unmanageable for awarding bodies and for schools and colleges, and takes up too high a proportion of school and college budgets. ASCL accepts and supports young people taking external assessments but our young people are losing valuable learning time and are caused unnecessary stress by being faced with so many examinations.
- 4 Added to the overload in quantity there have been constant changes to the examination system in recent years. This is causing huge problems for schools and colleges, which are obliged to retrain staff and alter their curriculum planning, and is adding to the cost of the system. For example, GCSEs have been revised very recently and yet there are now further changes being made in order to remove modularisation and change mark schemes to award marks for spelling, punctuation and grammar. Since we have also been informed that there will be a major revision of GCSEs in 2013 to bring specifications in line with the revised national curriculum we believe that the other changes should have been delayed. Awarding bodies incur costs for these changes which are then passed on to centres in increased exam fees.
- 5 While a reduction in the number of awarding bodies might seem logical there are reasons to maintain the status quo. Our members tell us that their teachers enjoy having choice in which examination syllabus to follow, enabling them to select that which is best suited to the circumstances, interests, needs, and aptitudes of their students. This choice also acts as a spur to improved practice as centres can change to another awarding body if they feel they are receiving poor service.
- 6 Even if it were desirable to have a single awarding body there is evidence (from national curriculum test procurement) that there are very few organisations in the

market for providing a national test or examination scheme (especially one on such a vast scale). There are additional issues connected with the three country agreement with Wales and Northern Ireland which has attempted to keep exams such as GCSE in line across the three countries. If England had one single awarding body, centres in England could still choose to take exams offered by the Welsh Board and it is difficult to see how legislation could be framed to prevent such access.

C How to ensure accuracy in setting papers, marking scripts and awarding grades?

- 7 Early this year ASCL members mostly reported that the accuracy and efficiency of the examination system had improved in recent years. They were therefore disappointed by the increase in errors in exam papers this summer. Such errors are unacceptable and it is to be hoped that awarding bodies will ensure that there is no repetition of errors in such numbers. However, the sheer pressure on awarding bodies of the overloaded and constantly changing examination system have made it extremely difficult for them to operate as efficiently as they would like. School and college leaders would prefer to see awarding bodies putting their resources and energy into improving accuracy and reliability, rather than into making constant changes to specifications and awarding regulations at the behest of government.
- 8 ASCL has provided evidence to Ofqual for its review of the 2011 errors and has made suggestions for future improvement in the system. It is now clearly part of Ofqual's role to check that awarding bodies have the capacity to undertake their duties more effectively. We suggested
- that Ofqual should examine more closely the training provided for senior examiners,
 - that it should examine the processes followed for checking exam papers,
 - that there should no longer be exam papers set by individual senior examiners which are not then checked by others, and
 - that Ofqual should consider pre-testing of items, as happens for example with national curriculum tests.

D The commercial activities of awarding bodies

- 9 Ofqual is now active in the economic regulation of the examination system and ASCL hopes that its actions in this area will be sufficient to bring escalating costs under control. However, in recent years government stipulations about the development of new qualifications or decisions to amend existing qualifications have been made with no attempt to cost the changes either for the awarding bodies (whose costs are passed on to centres as fees) or for schools and colleges. In future, ASCL would like to see all changes to qualifications or assessment systems properly costed, preferably before policy decisions are taken, and certainly before implementation.
- 10 ASCL opposes the suggestion that awarding bodies be fined for errors since fines would inevitably be passed on to schools and colleges in increased fees.
- 11 Given the pressure on schools and colleges to constantly improve examination results and the pressure on young people to obtain the highest grades possible it is not surprising that much use is made of the text books written by senior examiners and published by awarding bodies. Following such courses rigidly can have a negative effect on young people's genuine learning at the same time as improving their chances of the best possible grade. It is clear that this subject cannot be considered independently of the impact of accountability measures on education including the selection of performance indicators and the publication of performance tables.

- 12 School and college leaders are concerned about the commercial activities of some of the awarding bodies and the apparent lack of separation between their awarding and commercial functions. Since Ofqual is responsible for the economic regulation of the examination system we believe that it should keep this under review.

E Conclusion

- 13 I hope that this is of value to your consultation. ASCL is willing to be further consulted, to find one or more of its members with current experience and interest in this area to give further evidence, or to assist in any other way that it can.

Martin Ward
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