

# Speech at the Ofqual launch event

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My Lord Mayor, Lady Mayoress, Minister, ladies and gentlemen.

I am delighted to welcome you all to this the launch of Ofqual, the Office of the Qualifications and Examinations Regulator - the new regulator of the qualification and examination system in England. Today is the culmination of a process which Ed Balls, the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families and John Denham, Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills, initiated last September when they announced the intention to set up an independent regulator. Following consultation in which the concept of an independent regulator was widely welcomed, Ofqual came into visible existence in April 2008 and I am proud to have been appointed as its first Chair.

Today, our public launch, gives me an opportunity to say a little about who we are, what we intend to do, how we intend to go about our work and the relationships we want to develop with the providers of qualifications, examinations and assessments, the general public, politicians and – most importantly – learners of all ages whose interests will be at the heart of all that we do. Ofqual is the public champion of the learner. We will set a distinctive tone and direction from the start, and we are pleased that the Government and QCA have recognised this. The Green Paper published this week sets out the Government's intention to legislate in the autumn to set up Ofqual as a separate organisation reporting directly to Parliament and to give us the statutory tools to do our job. Meantime, as a distinctive part of QCA, we have a new job to do from today onwards.

I am also delighted to welcome you to the West Midlands. Ofqual opened its doors in its new offices in Coventry in April. As a central player in the education landscape it is fitting that we have our home in heart of the country. Lord Mayor, we are very much looking forward to working with the community in Coventry, welcoming new employees from around the area and working in partnership with local institutions of educational excellence such as Warwick and Coventry Universities. There is a tremendous range of skills and knowledge in the West Midlands area and we intend to draw on this to support the important work of Ofqual. We are also looking forward to making links with local schools and colleges. You will hear more from students from a local school later this morning.

Although we are a new organisation, we have the benefit of people with a wealth of knowledge, who for many years, have worked in the field of regulating qualifications and assessments, within the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority. Our Acting Chief Executive, Isabel Nisbet, led that team. We carry into Ofqual, therefore, considerable expertise and knowledge in the field of qualification regulation. At this point, it is appropriate for me to acknowledge the excellent work which QCA has done in the last 11 years to safeguard the qualifications and examinations system in the interests of learners, in particular in the last 6 years under the leadership of Ken Boston and Sir Anthony Greener. Ofqual has a proud tradition to build on.

Ofqual has its own Board within the QCA – the "Ofqual Committee" – and it recently had its first meeting. We have members with experience in HE, colleges, industry, in representing the interests of parents and in the regulation of another industry. We are advertising for a practising headteacher to join us. For myself, a former teacher and Chief Executive of awarding bodies, I bring knowledge of the system to the table. All of us – members of the Committee and our staff – have a total commitment to ensuring the highest standards, quality and fair play for all learners of all ages.

Essentially, we are here to regulate effectively the providers of qualifications, examinations and national curriculum assessments – the awarding bodies and the NAA. Our aim is a qualifications market which is fit for purpose, efficient and which gives value for money. Our qualifications must be fair, with secure standards in which the public can have confidence. We want Ofqual to be regarded by all as the public champion of the learner.

To achieve those aims we will build on the work of QCA in several ways:

- We will require organisations that offer and deliver qualifications (awarding organisations) to have good systems in place, and that they are held to account for their performance
  
- We will make sure that all qualifications offered by awarding organisations are fair, are comparable with other qualifications and meet the needs of learners and employers, with fair access to qualifications for all candidates
  
- We will monitor standards in qualifications, examinations and tests, reporting on our findings and encouraging debate about standards and other important topics relating to our national assessments
  
- We will ensure the quality of marking of examinations, tests and other assessments so that learners will get the results they deserve and
  
- We will encourage debate about important topics, such as standards of examinations and qualifications.

In these and other areas, we will work with our regulatory partners in Wales and Northern Ireland, recognising that students and their qualifications cross national boundaries. Comparability of standards, the maintenance of public confidence and the protection of the interests of the learner are fundamental objectives which we all share.

We have already started the important dialogue with you and others about the expectations of Ofqual. They are high! For example

- An A level student told us: “I’d like a new regulator to be able to end the argument with the media so that they don’t discredit the things we work hard for.”
- A parent of a GCSE student said: “It’s important that examinations are regulated so that we can be confident that the people taking them are getting the results they deserve”.
- A headteacher looked for: “A regulator who will ensure that the qualifications that my students take here are assessed well, accurately, and fairly reflect their achievements.”

And, here's what some of the awarding bodies and students think Ofqual should be doing

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So, we have quite an agenda and one that we can achieve only by working collaboratively with the awarding bodies and our stakeholders, including learners and the wider public, to agree the principles which should underpin the system, the governance arrangements and procedures which should be in place, common codes of ethics and professionalism to engender trust within and outside the system. And trust requires total honesty, openness and transparency and Ofqual is committed to those principles. We want to shine a light on the system so that there is a better understanding on all our parts of what the system can do and what its limitations are so that we can match expectations to the system's capacity to deliver. And, as a new organisation, we have the opportunity to look afresh at the system, without historical or political baggage, to ensure that it is as good as it can be.

It is also appropriate for me to say what Ofqual is not: We ARE NOT the voice of government, nor are we the voice of the awarding bodies, nor that of teachers nor that of employers. We will of course listen to the views which they, and others express, as we form our opinions and, as an independent body which will report to Parliament, issue our reports.

So, what are we? We ARE the voice of the learner and as such we want every learner to get the best and fairest deal from the qualifications system. And that requires us to set high standards and challenges, to encourage the awarding bodies to give the best customer service, to innovate and to make best use of new technology. We need a constant cycle of improvement in our national assessment systems to keep abreast of changing educational expectations. And we need safeguards, both in stable periods and in changing ones, to protect the learner.

One of Ofqual's main tasks is to ensure the public can have confidence in the examination system. This job starts now as thousands of learners embark on their national curriculum tests, GCSE and A level examinations. It is for this reason that this summer we will, for the first time, report on aspects of awarding bodies' readiness for the summer examination season. We have looked at their customer service systems and their operations for electronic marking and we will issue our first report before the end of this month on our findings.

Ofqual comes into existence at a time when there is considerable focus on qualifications and testing and a number of changes ahead:

- In the case of national curriculum tests we will be looking closely at the new arrangements – introduced this year – to underpin excellence in marking and guarantee fair outcomes.
- We are also keen to see sound arrangements for the management and delivery of the new 14-19 Diplomas which come on stream in September. Start-ups of systems are always challenging and the Diplomas will be no exception: it behoves all of us, particularly Ofqual, to ensure that we have a solid system in the interests of the first learners to participate in the new Diplomas and, looking to the long term, in the interests of future learners. Diplomas are an opportunity to clear away the residual barriers between academic and vocational learning so that young people acquire through their learning the range of qualities and skills which they need to function in an ever changing society.
- Then there is the range of vocational and employer-led qualifications, many of which are already in the national framework and which will contribute to the Qualifications Credit Framework, the QCF. The QCF

offers real opportunities to create a flexible qualifications system in which learners can acquire qualifications which are valued and needed by employers in timescales dictated by an individual learner's circumstances. The Framework must be fit for purpose and coherent so that users can be confident in the value of the achievements of students.

- We will build on the work which QCA has done to bring into the awarding family employers who provide good training and qualifications and who are willing and able to meet the accreditation criteria for awarding bodies. Only by being willing to do that will we address in a proper manner the skills requirements of a modern industrial society and recognise the considerable and diverse achievements of individuals.
- And we must ensure that both existing and future qualifications can be accessed by *all* students, not just because the law lays a responsibility on all parties to provide equitable and fair access for all, but because it is so obviously the right thing to do in order that all individuals have their achievements recognised.

When you consider qualifications in our present age what stands out is how the landscape has changed in the last half century. 50 years ago the only qualifications which existed for learners of school age were GCE O and A levels. In 1951 when A levels first started, they were taken by only 37,000 students – about 1 in 14 of all young people. Then a mere 5% progressed to Higher Education. Vocational qualifications tended to be pursued at night school by those with the will, perseverance and energy after a long day in work. Overall, the majority of the population was unqualified. The situation now is so different: a transformation in schools and colleges with a focus on qualifications to motivate learners, to give them a sense of pride in their achievements. A levels are now taken by around a quarter of a million students each year and the participation rate in Higher Education is

increasing. And, as I've already said, there are now more employers providing rigorous and well regulated qualifications.

That transformation from qualifications for the few to qualifications which recognise the diversity of achievement of the many is fantastic and one we should celebrate. However, inevitably, this increase in the number of qualifications and the greater number of learners with qualifications raise questions about standards – are they being maintained, are they rigorous and consistently applied by all parties, are marking standards consistent, are the learners getting as good a deal as we can give them? Those are all proper questions for society to ask and proper questions for the regulator to address. Behind those questions is the legitimate expectation that we have the best possible qualifications and examination system for every generation of learners. Comparability across providers, qualifications and years is fundamental to confidence and fairness in our system. For awarding bodies this concern is at the very heart of their work; as regulator I want us to have opportunities to review these process so that everyone can continue to have confidence in the system.

Confidence in our system is based on results being comparable, valid and reliable. By "reliable" I mean satisfying questions like these - Would a student have received the same result if she happened to have taken a different version of the examination?, on a different day?, with a different examiner marking her work? How reliable are the assessments made by teachers of work undertaken under controlled conditions during the course? – a most important question as we look, through the Diploma system, to widen the base of knowledge and skills that young people need to function in modern society.

As the regulator of qualifications in England I believe that it is essential for all of us to understand better the reliability of assessments in our national systems - whether they are conducted by examiners in an awarding body's examinations or by teachers

in the learning environment - and how reliable we should expect them to be. I can, therefore, tell you today that Ofqual will undertake an in-depth programme of work - call it a health check - on the reliability of tests, examinations and teacher assessments, in this country. We intend to put this at the forefront of our agenda and we shall shortly appoint an expert panel to oversee the work.

Ofqual will undertake this work in an open way that will involve listening to learners, parents, teachers, awarding bodies, research experts, employers, higher education and the wider public. We will use our website to stimulate and inform public discussion.

Ofqual is committed to an open and collaborative approach to all our work as a regulator. We shall set out the issues as clearly as we can for the public to judge and we shall speak as we find. Qualifications, examinations and tests can open doors for learners in ways that can transform their lives. So it is right that the public is involved in work led by THEIR new regulator to make sure that assessments in our national system are as good as they can be.

Earlier this week, the House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee published their report on "Testing and Assessment". It's been a testing time for all of us, and I expect that Jim Knight is relieved to have escaped today from Whitehall to the more civilised environment of motor-bikes and regulation. I hope that all of us – but particularly those involved with qualifications and assessments - will look beyond the headlines and read the report in full. There is a very good discussion there about reliability of assessments that calls for work very much along the lines that I have told you that Ofqual will be pursuing. It cites several eminent witnesses as calling for work to enhance the reliability of external and teacher assessment and increase understanding of each. I hope that Ofqual can contribute significantly to that understanding.

This work, together with the work we will do on an ongoing basis to ensure that qualifications are rigorous, reliable and fair, will, I hope, go a long way to gaining the trust of all parties, particularly the public. We will provide leadership on important areas for debate and will work with employers and disability groups at regional and national levels and groups such as the English Secondary Students' Association. We will also establish an Ofqual learner panel to engage directly with learners to understand better the issues that concern them.

The aims of Ofqual and its aspirations are all achievable, but only if we work together. I am confident that we will, not for the well-being of Ofqual itself or of the organisations we regulate, but for the well-being of learners. They are the ones who benefit from qualifications and from the trust and confidence which the public has in them. Let us work together to ensure that all learners' achievements are recognised and celebrated through the excellence of the qualifications they acquire. I know you are going to leave us with a formidable In-tray this morning. I look forward to reporting to you on our first year of working with you on behalf of learners."

Thank you.....

I would now like to welcome our next speaker. The fact that the Minister of State for Schools and Learners is with us today I think shows the government's commitment to setting up an independent regulator, Ofqual. Ladies and gentlemen, Jim Knight....