

No change for Ofqual priorities – “We will hold standards steady”

Ofqual will continue to focus on validity, on providers of vocational qualifications and on apprenticeship assessment over the next three years. In its [corporate plan 2015-18](#), the Regulator outlines its programme of work to fulfil its statutory objectives in relation to both established and reformed qualifications.

The plan focuses on three distinct goals: regulating and reforming general qualifications; regulating vocational and other qualifications; and developing its people, resources and systems. Ofqual’s objectives within these goals are centred around regulating the validity of qualifications and national assessments throughout their life cycle, overseeing the introduction of reformed qualifications, promoting a “healthy” vocational qualifications market (including regulating functional skills qualifications and apprenticeship assessments where requested, and introducing a replacement qualifications framework), and building its own capacity to make improvements.

Whilst recognising the possibility of a change of government and policies within the next few weeks, Ofqual states its hope for educational stability in the near future to help ease the burden on schools and colleges.

Learner journey central to UCAS plans

The [UCAS corporate strategy](#) sets out its vision for the next five years, putting learners, the learner journey and access to information for learners at the heart of its plan. UCAS – the University and College Admissions Service - states that its aim is to be a single, fair, transparent service that supports progression to higher education. In doing so it acknowledges the changes that are likely to be exerted on higher education as a result of policy, student advocacy and changing commercial dynamics. It recognises that whilst the standard three-year undergraduate programme will remain the norm, other choices such as higher apprenticeships, employer training, and study abroad are also likely to grow.

With the lines between admissions and recruitment becoming increasingly blurred, UCAS recognises that a key part of its service to higher education providers is strong advocacy for the benefits of higher education, attracting potential applicants to use their admissions services, and ensuring that learners have access to information which will help them make informed choices about their applications.

UCAS’ key objectives include:

- To be known as an independent and trusted commentator on the currency of qualifications for progression.
- To provide a trusted source of information for teachers, parents and advisers to support and motivate learners as they progress in education.
- To improve public understanding about education progression by developing and sharing insights with customers and stakeholders.
- To give higher education providers the opportunity to build affinity with prospective students and provide services which support the active recruitment of students.
- To offer innovative analytical products and services which support the effective planning and management of admissions and widening participation
- To be the recognised primary source of intelligence about demand, progression, participation and admissions in UK higher education.

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New National Reference Tests to launch in 2017

Ofqual is introducing National Reference Tests to provide additional information to support the awarding of GCSEs. The purpose of the tests is to provide evidence on changes in performance standards over time in GCSE English language and mathematics in England at the end of Year 11. The new tests will be developed over the next two years by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) and the first National Reference Tests will be taken in March 2017.

Each year in March, ahead of their GCSEs, a random sample of students at about 300 schools will be asked to take a test in maths or English. The test will take a student under an hour to complete. The results will be analysed at national level only; there will be no results for individual schools or students.

In future years, Ofqual and the exam boards will take into account the information from the tests when GCSEs are awarded.

More focus needed on four-year phase for upper secondary education

A well-defined upper-secondary system will ensure a broad, stretching programme of study for all students over a four-year period. The Institute for Public Policy Research's report, *Moving on up: Developing a strong, coherent upper-secondary education system in England* makes the case for a defined and unifying view of upper-secondary education, proposes a vision for the 14–19 phase and sets out a picture of what a young person should be capable of at the end of this phase.

The report argues that the system needs to be underpinned by:

- **a clear vision and agreement on an overarching curriculum** – including an agreed focus on the whole four- or five-year period from the age of 14, and a national curriculum that both ensures students attain core, essential skills and knowledge, such as literacy and numeracy, and anticipates and prepares students for the variety of pathways through academic, vocational and mixed higher education and training
- **a more open transition at the beginning of the phase** – including improved access for students and parents to information about alternative schools and institutions taking students from age 14, to shift emphasis away from moving school at age 16, which currently creates an arbitrary break at the halfway point of a young person's upper-secondary education
- **an accountability system which encourages responsibility for a learner across the whole period** – including shifting the focal point for performance assessment away from attainment at age 16 and towards progress across the whole 14–19 period
- **clearer local oversight to be able to deliver the vision** – including the introduction of schools commissioners, to oversee
- **fairer funding across the phase** – including consideration for equalising funding arrangements across the whole schooling period, unlike current plans which protect funding for 5–15-year-olds but not for 16–18-year olds.

Further plans to support professional development of teachers

Plans to support the creation of a new, independent college of teaching that will help to put teachers on a par with other high-status professions like law and medicine, and a new fund to champion more high-quality professional development for teachers, have been announced by Education Secretary, Nicky Morgan, and Schools Minister, David Laws.

The plans include:

- making funding available to the 'claim your college' consortium - a coalition of leading organisations in the education sector - to support them in their endeavour to establish an independent college of teaching, which will be owned and led by the teaching profession
- providing funding to establish the first phase of a new professional development fund to support more high-quality, evidence-based and rigorously evaluated professional development programmes, delivered by the network of 650 leading teaching schools
- establishing an expert group to develop a new standard for teachers' professional development, helping teachers to become better informed about the types of professional development that make a real difference
- working with the sector to develop and deliver a new online professional development portal allowing teachers to access and share properly evaluated and quality-assured evidence and research about the approaches to professional development that will deliver the most impact.

Also, Sir Andrew Carter has [published his review](#) of the quality and effectiveness of initial teacher training (ITT) courses in England. The report highlighted that the system in England is performing well but that more needed to be done to ensure all trainees receive some core grounding in the basics of classroom management and subject knowledge.

An independent expert group and the Teaching Schools Council have been commissioned to take forward work to improve initial teacher training systems in England; the expert group will be chaired by Stephen Munday CBE, Chief Executive of Comberton Academy Trust to develop a core ITT framework. The Teaching Schools Council has been commissioned to develop a new set of aspirational standards for school-based ITT mentors.

Calls for more high quality careers and employability support in schools

A new [Foundation Code for Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance](#) has been launched for the education sector by eight organisations that represent schools, colleges and other learning providers across England. The Foundation Code, developed by ASCL, AoC, 157 Group, ATL, AELP, PPC and SFCA, takes shared ownership of the values and behaviours needed to deliver high quality advice and guidance that will lead to better outcomes for young people. Key proposals from the code include:

- Careers education and advice should be part of the curriculum and be led by a senior leader.
- Partnerships should be built with businesses to give young people work experience and other opportunities to help better prepare them for work.
- Young people should be given opportunities to speak to the full range of education and training establishments and employers, so they can make the best decision on what is right for them.
- Staff providing careers information and advice should receive regular professional training to keep them up-to-date with labour market information and qualification pathways.

Teach First has also made a case for better quality

teacher training and CPD to help address issues around young people's employability. [Careers education in the classroom](#) highlights:

- There is a particular need to increase the status of careers leadership in schools, creating a 'pipeline' of senior leaders committed to championing employability.
- Clearer guidance for schools is needed, along with better accountability for destination data.
- Careers and employability education will be integrated into Teach First's Leadership Development Programme for all trainee teachers.
- Teach First will pilot a careers middle leadership training programme with 15 Teach First ambassadors initially selected to become careers leaders in their schools, and
- It will pilot more detailed professional development on supporting work-readiness skills and integrating careers content into subject teaching.

The DfE and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills have published updated versions of their statutory guidance on careers guidance and inspiration for [schools](#) and for [FE and sixth form colleges](#).

Major push to get more maths and science teachers into our classrooms

David Cameron has announced further plans to get career changers, former teachers and top graduates into maths and science teaching:

- From April 2015, one-to-one support will be available to all trained maths and science teachers seeking to return to the profession.
- Skilled professionals in sectors such as engineering or medicine will be able to retrain as teachers, and new part-time training routes will allow people to train while continuing to work or look after a family.
- Up to £15,000 will be available to top maths and science undergraduates while at university, in return for a commitment to teach for three years after graduating.
- New physics degrees will be piloted in 10 universities, allowing students to get a teaching qualification.
- The government will expand the maths and physics chairs programme, recruiting experts with PhDs in these subjects to teach in schools and train those around them.
- Paid internships will be available to maths and physics undergraduates from summer 2016 to give them the opportunity to experience teaching before they commit to it as a career.
- £24m will be available to upskill 15,000 existing teachers who do not specialise in maths and physics.

Countdown to General Election 2015

We continue our monthly round-up of pre-general election news taking a look at the manifestos of the main political parties, focusing on key education and skills policies. In broad terms there is some consensus across the parties on the following points as post-election priorities:

- Promotion of high quality vocational routes;
- Policies to significantly boost apprenticeship uptake;
- Universal support for establishment of some sort of college of teaching;
- All teachers to be qualified;
- Policies towards continuing study of maths and English post 16.

Conservatives

Education

Key Manifesto items:

- Create 500 new free schools;
- Ensure there will be a University Technical College within reach of every city;
- Create an independent College of Teaching;
- Train an extra 17,000 maths and physics teachers over the next five years;
- Abolish the student number cap for higher education;
- Continue the £9k tuition fee system and introduce a postgraduate loan system for taught masters and PhD courses.

Schools:

The Conservative manifesto focuses on standards in secondary education. The Party will make the EBacc (English, maths, science, a language and one of history or geography) compulsory at GCSE level and ensure that Ofsted is unable to award its highest ratings to schools that do not teach these subjects. They will continue to target underperforming schools, turning 'failing and coasting schools' into academies and, in schools judged by Ofsted as requiring improvement, replacing school leaders with head teachers backed by expert sponsors and high-performing local schools. 500 new free schools will be created and there will be a University Technical College within reach of every city. A Conservative Government will continue to protect per-pupil school funding.

Teaching:

A new independent College of Teaching will be created to promote

high standards of teaching and school leadership. 17,000 new maths and physics teachers will be trained over the next five years and the number of teachers able to teach Mandarin will be increased.

Further Education:

A Conservative Government will 'continue to improve' further education through National Colleges, and by publishing more earnings and destination data for FE courses and require accreditation of courses by employers. However they will also continue to replace lower-level classroom-based FE courses with apprenticeships.

Higher Education:

The Conservatives commit to removing the cap on higher education student numbers by abolishing student number controls. The manifesto also promises to introduce postgraduate tuition loans for taught masters and PhDs (also previously announced), encourage universities to offer more two-year courses, and require more data to be openly available to potential students.

Employment

Key Manifesto items:

- Help businesses to create two million new jobs;
- Support three million new apprenticeships in the next five years;
- Abolish National Insurance contributions for apprentices under 25;
- Replace the Jobseeker's Allowance for 18-21 year-olds with a Youth Allowance.

Apprenticeships:

The Conservative Manifesto promises three million new apprenticeships in the next parliament. The Party will also abolish employers' National Insurance contributions for apprentices under 25 and roll out more Degree Apprenticeships.

Benefits:

Like Labour, the Conservatives will replace the Jobseeker's Allowance for 18-21 year-olds with a Youth Allowance for up to six months, after which recipients will be required to take up an apprenticeship, a traineeship or do daily community work for their benefits.

Labour

Education Spending:

- Labour will protect the entire education budget, including the early years, schools and post-16 education, so that it rises with inflation.

Vocational Education:

- Will raise the standard and status of vocational education;
- Create a high quality vocational route from school through to employment;
- Technical Baccalaureate will combine a gold-standard qualification accredited by employers, with a quality work placement;
- Will transform high performing FE colleges with strong links to industry, into new specialist Institutes of Technical Education, with a remit to deliver the Tech Bacc and higher level skills;
- All to study English and Maths to 18;

- All to undertake work experience between the ages of 14-16.

Apprenticeships:

- Guarantee every school leaver, who gets the grades (2 A Levels or equivalent level 3 qualifications) an apprenticeship;
- Create thousands more apprenticeships in the public sector. Every firm getting a major government contract, and every employer hiring skilled workers from outside the EU, will be required to offer apprenticeships;
- Give employers more control over apprenticeships funding and standards;
- Will re-focus existing spending away from low-level apprenticeships for older people, towards apprenticeships focused on new job entrants, lasting at least two years and providing level 3 qualifications or above. *(NB Despite no mention of level 2 apprenticeships in the manifesto, it has since been reported that Labour would scrap them if elected);*
- Ensure that apprenticeships can lead to higher level qualifications by creating Technical Degrees and supporting part-time study. They will be co-funded, co-designed and co-delivered by employers and will be the priority for expansion within the university system.

Schools:

Will introduce new Directors of Schools Standards at a local level to monitor the performance of schools and intervene in underperforming schools and support them to improve;

- End the Free School programme;
- Private schools – as a condition for continued business rate relief, private schools will be required to form partnerships with a school, or cluster of schools, in the state sector.

Qualifications and Curriculum:

- The reforms to AS/A Levels would be reversed – the qualifications would be recoupled;
- Will introduce compulsory age-appropriate sex and relationships

education in schools;

- Encourage all schools to embed character education across the curriculum.

Teachers:

- Every teacher will need to gain qualified teacher status;
- Teachers will be expected to update their knowledge and skills as a condition of remaining in the profession;
- Support plans for a new College of Teaching.

Careers Advice:

- Introduce a new, independent system of careers advice, offering personalise face-to-face guidance into university and apprenticeships;

Higher Education:

- Cut tuition fees from £9,000 to £6,000;

Employment:

- Jobseekers will have their English, Maths and IT skills tested within six weeks of claiming benefits.

Liberal Democrats

Education

Key Manifesto items:

- Protect the education budget in real terms from early years to 19;
- Improve the quality of vocational education, including skills for entrepreneurship and self-employment, and improve careers advice in schools and colleges;
- Review access to transport for students and apprentices in rural areas where no scheduled services may be available;
- Establish a cross-party commission to secure a long-term settlement for the public funding of reskilling and lifelong learning.

Teaching:

The Party would ensure that all teachers in state-funded schools are fully qualified or working towards a qualification by September 2016. They will also establish a new Royal

College of Teachers to oversee professional development. Teach First would continue, particularly to aid STEM subjects, and there would also be work to tackle teachers' workload.

Curriculum and Qualifications:

An independent Educational Standards Authority (ESA) will be established under the Liberal Democrats, to remove ministerial interference with curriculum and examination standards. A slimmed down core curriculum will be taught in all schools. The Party also wants to improve the quality of vocational learning, including skills for entrepreneurship and self-employment, and improve careers advice in schools and colleges.

Further Education and Vocational Training:

The Party will commission a review into the funding of lifelong learning and reskilling, into the VAT treatment of Sixth Form Colleges and FE Colleges, and also access to transport for students and apprentices in rural areas. They will continue to develop National Colleges as national centres of expertise for key sectors and will expand higher vocational training including foundation degrees, Higher National Diplomas, Higher National Certificates and Higher Apprenticeships.

Higher Education:

The Liberal Democrats would legislate to improve regulation of higher education, improve student protection and review HE finance.

Employment

Key Manifesto items:

- Develop a national skills strategy for key sectors to help match skills and people;
- Aim to double the number of businesses who hire apprentices;
- Increase the number of apprenticeships and improve their quality;
- Establish an independent review on how to set a fair Living Wage across all sectors.

Jobs:

The Liberal Democrats will develop a national skills strategy for key sectors, including low-carbon technologies, to help match skills and workers. They will maintain flexible employment contracts (i.e. “zero hours” contracts), but will also create a formal right to request a fixed contract.

Apprenticeships:

The Liberal Democrats want to increase the numbers and quality of apprenticeships, extending the Apprenticeship Grant for Employers for the remainder of the next Parliament. The Party aims to double the number of businesses who offer apprenticeships, singling out the creative and digital industries as new sectors where growth could occur.

UKIP

The party will:

- allow other establishments to become vocational schools or colleges similar to those promoted in Germany and The Netherlands, so pupils develop practical skills.
- introduce an option for students to take an apprenticeship qualification instead of four non-core GCSEs.
- encourage students to choose careers that will help fill the current skills’ gap.

Greens

- The party will oppose the privatisation of further education and return further education colleges to the democratic control of local government.
- The Green Party will reinstate the Government’s duty to provide an apprenticeship to all qualified young people aged 16-19 who do not have one but want one and extend the duty to age 25.
- The Education Maintenance Allowance will be restored for 16 and 18 year olds under plans from the party.
- The further education sector will be provided with £1.5bn a year extra funding by the party.
- The Green Party will allow sixth form colleges and further education colleges to reclaim VAT on goods and services.

The Last Word

Paul Steer, Head of Policy and Public Affairs, comments on some of the issues featured in this issue.

The Ofqual Corporate Plan 2015-18 reveals a regulator with big plans to extend its regulation of the English qualifications system. With a projected core spend of £15.8 million in 2015-16 alone we can anticipate an active and very hands-on approach, something which is evidenced by its ambitious setting out of its priorities.

Here are just some of the highlights for 2015-16: a wholesale review and redevelopment of results inquiry and appeals processes; a programme of monitoring the first teaching year of new GCSEs and A Levels; a campaign to communicate changes to a potentially bewildered public; the imposition of end-to-end audits of qualification performance by exam boards; a programme to look at inter-subject comparability; the withdrawal of the existing code of practice in favour of new regulatory controls; a programme to monitor fees charged for general qualifications; the development of a new IT platform to replace the existing ‘RITS’ database of regulated qualifications; close monitoring of the appropriateness of provision of support materials and text books linked to examinations; a study of the ‘market efficiency’ of vocational qualifications; a programme to ensure comparability of standards for Functional Skills qualifications between exam boards; the dismantling of the Qualifications and Credit Framework to be replaced with a new qualifications framework; the introduction of new rules for defining and measuring guided learning hours; securing the removal of any vocational qualifications deemed ‘not sufficiently valid’; an ambition to be invited to play a key role in shaping approaches to assessing performance in apprenticeships; an in-depth review of school-based vocational qualifications... and so on, all with a recurring theme of tighter monitoring of the ‘validity’ of qualifications.

It is difficult to argue against the value of most of these activities although some, like inter-subject comparability, have been looked at many times before. There is, however, a cumulative effect to all this as every change and every review spawns further recommendations, more developments and yet more reviews. The impact on those in the education and training system who bear the costs of anticipating and responding to policy and regulatory change will be high and the cost, buried under many different budgetary headings, will outstrip £15.8 million by a mile. Hopefully, Ofqual and policy makers will step back after the election and take time to look at the coherence and interrelatedness of the whole system which is much more complex than the term ‘market’ suggests. It would be worth using some of Ofqual’s increased capacity to look into why, for example, so many teachers are leaving the profession and why exam boards are signalling a need to walk away from lesser taught GCSEs and A Levels such as anthropology and modern foreign languages like Gujarati and Turkish.

The projected £15.8 million is only part of the story. We learn that additional, unspecified funds are being provided to

support the GCSE and A Level reform programme. There are also separate funds to support the proposed National Reference Test – an Ofqual-managed contract recently awarded to NFER (National Foundation for Educational Research). There are mixed views about the wisdom of this project, which aims to create an empirical measure of the overall ability of a cohort on an annual basis. It will consist of maths and English tests which will be administered in advance of the same cohort taking their GCSEs. The tests will then be used to provide data to inform judgements about the setting of grade boundaries at GCSE. Additional data to support awarding of GCSE can be very helpful, especially as the current data used from Key Stage 2 tests in English and maths is far from perfect. It could provide another measure of the overall performance of the schools system, giving politicians new metrics by which to gauge improvements or otherwise in educational standards. However, designing tests which are a valid reference point for GCSE performance will be challenging. The administration of them is also likely to prove controversial, with a sample group of schools and pupils needing to be identified, and then schools, and by default, pupils being mandated to take the tests. This will raise questions about how motivated pupils will be and how that may impact on their performance. Only after a number of years of administering the tests, will we be able to evaluate the validity and usefulness of this ambitious project.

Another organisation with big plans is UCAS. Under the clever stewardship of Mary Curnock Cook, this organisation is busily transforming itself from an organisation with a key but narrow function of supporting the university admissions process to one with far more dimensions. The UCAS Corporate Strategy 2015-20 sets out an ambition for UCAS to become the leading authority on 'educational progression'. This involves developing new roles in supporting progression between non-HE institutions and expansion into choices at the age of 16. It wants to build on the data it already collects to provide information, advice and guidance on the effectiveness of different progression routes and the consequences of different qualification choices. It has set an ambition to improve public understanding of choices available to young people at key junctures in their educational careers. Importantly it has identified young people as key customers of its services seeing their savvy use of social media and internet services as a way of engaging with them in customer friendly ways on a grand scale. As the dynamics of HE selection and recruitment continue to evolve in a competitive market and as other choices, such as apprenticeships, come to the fore, UCAS seems to be positioning itself wisely to take advantage of these changes.

Information is correct at the time of writing. OCR can accept no liability for any decisions made on the basis of the information given.