

Keynote speech by Jill Duffy, OCR Chief Executive

'Lessons learnt from the 2020 exam season and key priorities moving forward'

Westminster Education Forum event: 'England's exam system - the impact of COVID-19, priorities for exams and assessment in 2021, and the future use of technology'

3 March 2021

Good morning and a sincere thanks for the opportunity today to deliver the keynote at this Westminster Education Forum. As you may know, OCR are sponsors of this Forum and I am particularly grateful to speak to you today.

We all know we are living in very challenging times. The norms and routines that we have taken for granted for so many years have changed suddenly, and we find ourselves having to adapt with speed and agility. And although we all hope we can see an end to this latest, long lockdown, exams are going to be cancelled for a second successive year.

I understand how difficult this has made life for students, their parents and carers and their teachers. I know that many of them have had to self-isolate and students have missed different amounts of teaching and learning time up and down the country. Access to schools and colleges and to remote learning has been uneven, with many of the most disadvantaged bearing the greatest burden.

Teachers and school and college leaders have had to work in exceptional circumstances, teaching students both in school or college and at home and parents have often had to juggle working and home schooling. No one doubts just how relentless and demanding this has been and I acknowledge, with great appreciation, the resilience of everyone involved.

To guide us, OCR has adopted five principles for the process for awarding grades this summer. And I want to use this session to talk through some of these principles touching both on lessons learned from last year and the issues and challenges facing us this year and beyond.

The first principle we developed emphasises the importance of ensuring the physical safety and mental health of students, teachers and everyone in schools and colleges at all times. This means that whatever processes we put in place should be sufficiently flexible to accommodate whatever circumstances people find themselves in. This may include making use of technology so that students can continue their studies and take assessments at their school or college, *or* at home.

The mental health of young people, teachers, school leaders and exams officers needs to be given full consideration. There needs to be space and time for everyone when schools return on the 8th of March - space and time to understand the new demands that will inevitably be made upon them, time to make plans and time to adjust to their new circumstances. This is critical, but it won't be easy. A great deal has been asked of teachers and students and more will be asked over the coming short months.

One lesson we can draw from last summer is that teachers proved remarkably resilient. They proved that they can adapt quickly to change and that they are prepared to go the extra mile to do right by their students. But we can't take this for granted – the last year has been relentless and exams, or the lack of them, has only been a small part of the burden.

As we look at the timelines for this summer and beyond there is little opportunity to reflect and none for the recharging of batteries.

Notwithstanding all their other duties, schools and colleges will be submitting grades for their young people to exam boards on the 18th of

June. To do this they will need to have reviewed what evidence is available and what further evidence is needed. They will need to have kept records of this evidence and of processes by which judgements were made, so that they can make them available, if required, as part of the external quality assurance process.

Once final grades have been issued by the boards on the 10th and 12th of August students will, quite correctly, have the opportunity to appeal and some teachers will be needed to respond to these appeals at a time when they might have looked forward to a moment's respite. Meanwhile, it seems quite possible that teachers will be asked to provide schooling over the summer to help students catch up with lost learning.

This context of teacher workload, takes me to our second principle – that we should strive for deliverability and simplicity. Taking full account of teacher's workloads is key and as exam boards we need to provide clear, accessible, and succinct advice and support. This advice, and the support that goes with it must be provided by the boards swiftly. Although this is not an easy task, I know that colleagues at OCR are working flat out to provide what teachers need as early as possible. And we are working closely with the Joint Council for Qualifications to make sure our advice is consistent and coherent across the boards. This consistency is something we know schools and colleges want.

But we know from last year that simply issuing timelines and instructions is not enough. This is why our third principle highlights the importance of collaboration and transparency between schools, colleges and exam boards, ensuring that everyone is invested in this process. When the education select committee reviewed lessons learned from last year, it was

critical of what it argued was a lack of transparency about what was being proposed.

So, let's be clear about what is proposed. Teachers are being asked to make judgements about how a student is performing in their subject, based on evidence generated during their course of study, including in the coming few months. They are **not** being asked to estimate what grade a student would have achieved if they sat an exam this year (which is what was asked of teachers last year), nor are they being asked what grade a student might have achieved had there been no pandemic.

In order to make allowances for lost learning, the requirement is that students should only be assessed on those topics or areas that they have had the opportunity to study. As we know this will vary from school to school and from student to student so national tests taken by everyone will not be possible. Exam boards will provide sets of questions which teachers can use, if they wish, and they will be free to use these questions to compile assessments or tests that will reflect only those areas that their students have studied.

I think this approach has great merit – students are being assessed on their performance and this is being evidenced to justify decisions made – it should provide a clear audit trail which can be used in the event of an appeal.

But I can see why it might be seen as unfair that some students who, through no fault of their own, have missed out on a great deal of their schooling and, therefore, will simply not have developed the level of skills and breadth of knowledge that they would have done in a covid free year. People may feel, intuitively, that this is unfair and we need to have a public discussion about this now, not after results have been issued. There is a

risk that the most disadvantaged will lose out the most as a result of this approach and we need to consider very carefully what that might mean this summer.

Worryingly, the social mobility commission has anticipated in a recent report that the proposed approach will mean that: *“the destinations gap between the disadvantaged students most impacted by COVID-19 and their peers will yawn wider than ever.”*

I recognise that there is no easy solution to this issue, but I strongly believe that, since many stakeholders will feel intuitively this is unfair, that we need a public debate about this now. Without this, some of the severe difficulties faced last year might be repeated.

The need for transparency is inextricably linked to another principle – that assessment should be as fair as possible. This means making sure that we adopt approaches for vocational qualifications that are as consistent as possible with those applied to general qualifications. It means ensuring access to assessments for all learners including those with protected characteristics and, of course, private candidates.

Above all, students must be given a full understanding of the assessment process and where they fit into this. They need agency in that process – and this means having a full understanding of where they are now and what they need to do next. They need to have a feel for the grade they are currently likely to achieve and what they can do to improve their grade over the few precious months of schooling left to them. This is important if they are to be motivated and because it puts the emphasis on continuing to study and learn more. A process of merely gathering evidence of things already learned would have the opposite effect.

In recent press coverage, OCR has been portrayed as promoting the view that final grades should be made known to students before these are sent to the exam boards. In reality, our argument is more nuanced than that. Without some sort of orientation as to where they are and what they should be aiming for, not only will students become stressed and demotivated, the final grade they receive could come as a surprise. A 'big reveal' of that nature could lead to unnecessary appeals and damage trust between teachers and their students.

Our final principle is about progression. We want all students to be able to progress to the place they aspire to. Further education colleges, sixth form colleges and universities know that the cohorts they recruit following this summer's results will have gaps in their learning. They expect them to require additional support and catch up sessions to fill some of these gaps and will want to be sure that they are able to thrive as they undertake the next stage of their learning. It seems to me sensible that students should make that transition knowing what they have missed and what they need to do to catch up. The dialogue that teachers have now with their students will help them to understand and articulate the areas of lost learning that they will need to prioritise.

And it is imperative that we are entirely honest that there may be some young people, albeit a small number, who have lost so much learning that it will be difficult to award them a grade at all. This may seem harsh, but it would be very wrong to place someone on a course for which they are ill-prepared, where they will struggle to keep up with their peers, and which they not complete. We will need to provide whatever it takes to give these young people, who will be in the minority, the chance to catch up. This

could be through a summer school, or it could be that such students, if they wish, should have the opportunity to retake a full year of study.

Finally, I'd like to say a few short words about the future of assessment and the curriculum. We know that post Covid-19, we need a national debate about the future of education. The pandemic has made us question much and may well prove the catalyst for speeding up change. Technology surely has a major further role to play in education and I am sure that the debate about technology will come to further prominence, particularly for teaching and learning, but also for assessment.

Although we are now in a more positive position with mass vaccinations arresting the rate of infection and saving a great many lives, we also know that we are only just at the beginning of the fallout of the disease. These fallouts can damage, if we are not careful, well-laid foundations and this is our worry for education in England, the UK and the wider world.

Little of our current education and assessment system has escaped attention. Some commentators with long-held concerns have taken the opportunity to re-affirm their views. Others have been perhaps more opportunistic, shouting loudest at a time when answers to important questions are being sought.

Students, their parents and teachers, are being regularly presented with ideas about what should change in education, whilst also having to navigate a great many daily challenges at the front line of our educational response to this pandemic.

There are those that think that the national curriculum should go or that textbooks are a thing of the past. However, secure, well-grounded evidence says otherwise.

Then there are calls to scrap GCSEs and questions about the future of A-levels but both have been an extraordinary national success. They have longevity and have value because they have evolved and adapted to the changing educational and social needs over the past 50 years – there are no reasons to think that they cannot evolve again, driven by the very best evidence about quality.

But again, I believe the time for a debate is becoming due. Notwithstanding the step change in the use of technology that we have seen – and there will be more discussed about this during this forum – there are social and economic changes which we need to consider in relation to our curriculum and our assessments. I would point to several areas we should give consideration to.

The first is the mental health of our young people – we need a system that acknowledges the fragility of the well-being of so many of our young people, not least because of the impact of covid and so we need to ensure that future approaches are as supportive as possible.

We also need to recognise the growing social debate about diversity. Our curriculum and our exams have to be relevant and accessible and they need to tell everyone's story and acknowledge the breadth of experiences and cultures that exist in our society.

We also need to recognise that the economy of the future will never be quite the same again and that young people need access to vocational and practical learning that will equip them with the skills, creativity and resilience that they need.

And finally, we have to recognise that our young people have inherited a planet facing a climate crisis. Young people are demanding a curriculum

that will provide them with the full range of skills that will be required to tackle the coming challenges and we must serve them well.

Before I finish, I would just like to share with you a couple of accounts from headteachers, provided to OCR, which set out some of the difficulties they and their learners have been facing. The first is from a headteacher in the North East, written at the height of the tiered lockdowns:

- *My staff and I are dealing with a large number of students who are unable to focus properly on their education. Several have parents who have lost their jobs or who are unwell. Some have witnessed domestic tensions at home for the first time. Some have been faced with bereavements of family or peers. Most are worried for their future in a way I have not seen before.*

Another headteacher wrote the following:

- *My staff are... stretched, exhausted; some are vulnerable and worried. Two are ill and too many others are self-isolating; we lost 51 hours of direct specialist teaching today and I have 40% of my staff team who cannot come into the building. But most of all they are concerned for our students and their wellbeing.*

I think this brings it home to us how important it is we get it right this summer for our teachers and, most of all, for our young people.

Thank you for taking the time to listen.

ENDS