

**Education Select Committee inquiry into how examinations for
15-19 year-olds should be run**
Submission from the Association of Teachers and Lecturers
7 November 2011

1. Executive summary

1.1. Education for all is at the heart of ATL's policy principles, and we emphasise the necessity that the examination system's role in education serves the needs of all learners. We believe that coupled with the curriculum set-up, high stakes accountability and supported by weakened provision of information, advice and guidance, it does not currently meet this essential aspiration.

1.2. ATL does not have the same confidence as politicians in the unfettered marketisation of children's education. In the examination system our greatest concerns are the escalation of entrance fees and the for-profit practices of awarding bodies and some of their employees.

1.3. The transparency of awarding body operations and their profits is patchy and a weakness in what must be a publicly accountable system. The teaching profession is deeply concerned by conflicts of interest within major exam boards and the ensuing profiteering focussed around publishing text books and offering bespoke coaching classes.

1.4. Ofqual should:

- investigate the impact of exam boards' range of other activities
- force clarity and transparency in awarding organisation structures and financial records
- report more regularly and consistently upon the income aside from exam fees and the full expenditure of awarding organisations – this might include a recommendation on ways of controlling expenditure to reduce unnecessary increases in fees e.g. a limit on marketing spends (in a similar way to election spending limits)
- take responsibility for proportional fee control, developing a sustainable, ethical and affordable national framework of examination fees
- ensure consistent delivery of qualifications and their assessment

1.5. Government should work with Ofqual to ensure the right type of regulation of the examinations system is strengthened, and government must also take into account the broader educational picture. The pressures of a high stakes

accountability atmosphere when coupled with the overly-commercial behaviour of awarding bodies lead to perverse but perfectly rational decision-making by teachers which threatens to undermine the quality of education offered to young people.

1.6. ATL believes that money designated for children's education should be spent in ways that most benefit learning and we propose that the examination system should be run on a not-for-profit basis under the profession's input and guidance.

2. About the Association of Teachers and Lecturers

ATL, the education union

2.1. ATL, as a leading education union, recognises the link between education policy and our members' conditions of employment. Our evidence-based policy making enables us to campaign and negotiate from a position of strength. We champion good practice and achieve better working lives for our members.

2.2. We help our members, as their careers develop, through first-rate research, advice, information and legal support. Our 160,000 members – teachers, lecturers, headteachers and support staff – are empowered to get active locally and nationally. We are affiliated to the TUC, and work with government and employers through partnership and by lobbying.

ATL policy

2.3. ATL believes that teachers as professionals must be recognised for their knowledge, expertise and judgement, at the level of the individual pupil and in articulating the role of education in increasing social justice. Within light national parameters, development of the education system should take place at a local level: the curriculum should be developed in partnership with local stakeholders; assessment should be carried out through local professional networks. Schools and colleges are increasingly encouraged to work collaboratively to offer excellent teaching and learning, and to support pupils' well-being, across a local area. Accountability mechanisms should be developed so that there is a proper balance of accountability to national government and the local community, which supports collaboration rather than competition.

3. Introduction

3.1. We welcome the select committee's inquiry into this important issue, and particularly the emphasis on whether the current system 'delivers the best and fairest outcomes for young people'. Education for all is at the heart of ATL's policy principles, and it is worth emphasising that it is essential that the examination system's role in education serves the needs of all learners.

3.2. It is clear that the British education system has become increasingly commercialised at all levels in recent years. ATL does not have the same confidence as politicians in the unfettered marketisation of children's education. In

the examination system our greatest concerns are the escalation of entrance fees and the for-profit practices of awarding bodies and their staff.

3.3. Though it is over a year since the views were made public, we hope that this inquiry leads to proper political scrutiny of Mick Waters' description of the exam system as 'diseased' and 'almost corrupt'.¹ A variety of subject bodies have expressed concerns about the way 15-19 examinations are run; we are sure they will submit evidence too. We hope that the select committee is able to add to the evidence base in this area and help move debate beyond the anecdotal.

3.4. The transparency of awarding body operations and their profits is patchy and a weakness in what must be a publicly accountable system – we have found it difficult to find a very clear picture of the big organisations, their subsidiaries, parent organisations, which are limited companies and which are charitable bodies, and the money made across these complex structures. The average member of the public, and of course individual teachers and school and college leaders, should not be expected to go to great lengths to find such information should they want to. We are aware that the regulator also finds its job in this regard, and in tracking money in and out, difficult.

4. How the exam system contributes to undermining education

4.1. ATL believes that, within a light national framework of entitlement, the curriculum should be developed locally. It should start with pupil needs and interests and be designed in terms of the skills and attitudes that we want pupils to acquire and develop.² Whilst it is important for schools to be accountable, we think it is right that this sits more comfortably alongside professional autonomy. There is a need to re-balance the accountability system which gives undue weight to central government in comparison with other stakeholders to whom schools have a responsibility.³ At the heart of this are performance tables with the consequences of high pressure on schools and the proliferation of perverse incentives

4.2. Amongst those perverse incentives are the need for schools to prioritise the passing of exams over the depth and quality of teaching and learning. It is not hard to find critics of dependent learning and teaching to the test, and ATL has been amongst the most outspoken. This is a sad reality to those in the profession and undermines the development of young people's skills for life and employment as well as their love of learning. The way the examination system has developed has led to awarding bodies' primary concern being to sell examinations to schools. As one stakeholder, the Campaign for Science and Engineering in the UK⁴, puts it: "They are therefore incentivised to offer schools attractive packages. Schools, via league tables and other mechanisms, are incentivised to achieve the best

¹ In *Reinventing Schools, Reforming Teaching* (2010), Bangs, MacBeath & Galton, Routledge – as reported by *The Independent* (<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/system-of-exam-boards-corrupt-and-diseased-says-leading-schools-adviser-2081694.html>) and other media outlets. Mick Waters is the former head of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority.

² <http://www.atl.org.uk/policy-and-campaigns/policies/subject-to-change-new-thinking-on-the-curriculum.asp>

³ <http://www.atl.org.uk/policy-and-campaigns/policies/new-accountability-for-schools.asp>

⁴ <http://sciencecampaign.org.uk/?p=2829#10>

examination results for their pupils. If one way for schools to achieve this is to choose a more attractive examination package, then they may well do so. Over time this may lead to degradation in standards." Whether this is borne out in practice or not, the risk of it being so should be of the utmost concern to all involved in education.

4.3. In a 2010 article Warwick Mansell offers further anecdotal evidence of how decision-making in schools can be influenced – from looking for exam boards with 'predictable' papers to being advised by senior examiners of difficult areas of teaching and learning that can be avoided without risking grades.⁵

5. Conflicts of interest

5.1. There is a strong feeling in the profession that exam boards have cornered the market in text book provision. Edexcel's text books which are directly aligned (or "grade-focussed to help every student succeed" as the organisation markets them themselves⁶) to each of the A Level modules are difficult for heads of department to ignore. This puts particular pressure on school funds when marginal syllabus changes are matched by refined text books every two to three years. The limited shelf life and premium prices take more money than is necessary from the public to the private sector.

5.2. Of course text books are only published if they will be profitable. So schools looking to take on syllabus options that are less popular nationwide may find that their students have less access to support than those who study the most popular modules. Uniform courses emerge and innovation and choice are stifled. As with the dilemma schools face when considering a specification change and taking on board the cost of changing text books, motivations on an educational basis can easily become secondary to other pressures.

5.3. ATL's members have also expressed their concerns with regard to the conflict of interest of senior examiners running revision classes for students sitting the papers they have set. In some instances these same examiners continue to take classes in schools and colleges in the subjects they have compiled exams for.

6. Money in examinations

6.1. An ATL headteacher estimates a cost to a medium-sized secondary school of £100,000 a year for entering students into external exams as a five-fold increase in costs over two decades.

6.2. According to Ofqual, the amount secondary schools in England pay for qualifications fees rose from £154 million in 2002-3 to £281 million in 2008-9.⁷ The regulator estimates that the total market for school and college spending on exam boards' services is worth £453 million – which is worth pause for thought, particular in the difficult economic and policy climate currently being faced.

⁵ Mansell, W (2010), Conflicts of interest with exam boards, in *Education Journal*, issue 125

⁶ *ibid* (cited)

⁷ <http://www.ofqual.gov.uk/files/2010-03-19-Annual-Market-Report.pdf>

6.3. Bearing in mind the concerns of conflict of interest and profiteering we have raised, ATL is not surprised to see that Edexcel has such considerable income, and recorded almost a 40% rise in income between 2005 and 2009.⁸

6.4. These figures demonstrate the money swimming around examinations in British education and they are concerning when the priority should always be the education of every young person. ATL would prioritise work towards fee control above wholesale restructuring of the number of players in the market.

7. The right type of regulation

7.1. At the heart of dealing with the issues raised in this submission and prioritising action is the strengthening of formal regulation of exam boards via a powerful Ofqual.

7.2. An ATL member working in an FE college raises the inconsistent delivery of BTEC qualifications across institutions, and the role of the awarding organisation in encouraging short cuts (to good grades):

“Our primary long course offer is made of the Edexcel qualifications at levels 1, 2 & 3 which we deliver as vocationally as possibly, using local facilities and partnerships with employers. We are finding that other local institutions are offering the same qualifications but delivering them in half the guided learning hours or without any vocational grounding which means that students do not have a firm understanding of the application of practise to theory. This seems to devalue the qualification and leads local employers to question its worth. Furthermore, Edexcel have removed the role of external verifier in favour of a locally appointed internal verifier. This has led to certain local institutions award a very high number of distinction stars, however when the students have arrived at our college, we have not noticed the student demonstrating this exceptional grasp of their subject. In general we feel that Edexcel are allowing institutions to deliver the BTEC qualifications in a fashion that will lead to the undermining of the qualification in the eyes of employers.”

Ensuring consistent delivery is exactly the sort of intervention that the regulator should be making. Compromising guided learning hours will only become a greater issue with the government’s move to not count vocational qualifications as multiple GCSEs in performance tables.

7.3. Ofqual should:

- force clarity and transparency in awarding organisation structures and financial records
- investigate the impact of exam boards’ range of other activities and consider SCORE’s⁹ recommendation that Ofqual works to break the link between specification/assessment development

⁸ *ibid* [page 28] and its 2011 (August) equivalent [page 33]

⁹ The Science Community Representing Education – see <http://www.score-education.org/media/6288/ofqualja2011.pdf>

and the commercial publications that provide resources in support of a specification

- report more regularly and consistently upon the income aside from exam fees and the full expenditure of awarding organisations – this might include a recommendation on ways of controlling expenditure to reduce unnecessary increases in fees e.g. a limit on marketing spends (in a similar way to election spending limits)
- take responsibility for proportional fee control
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8. Other comments

8.1. There are pros and cons in moving from an examinations market to a single awarding body. On the plus side it would reduce the profiteering of a competitive marketplace and make it easier to run a not-for-profit service. The downsides would include the risk of greater fees increases in a monopolistic situation and a possible reduction in the desire to innovate. Representing staff across education, ATL would be concerned that the post-16 sector and its learners would be losers as a single body consolidated efforts around a core service and was not pushed into a range of qualifications suitable for diverse cohorts of young people. Having specialist bodies, often small in size, for vocational qualifications is a stand-out benefit of the current system.

8.2. Whether one awarding body or more, what is important to young people and the schools and colleges they attend is that there is an adequate yet sensible number of qualifications offering a suitable range of choice in subject, learning style, skills developed, assessment methods and so on. It is essential however the examination system looks that impartial information, advice and guidance is accessible to all pupils to help them navigate the decisions that lie in front of them. The government is currently doing precisely the opposite in cutting services and amending existing legislation.

8.3. The vast array of qualifications and assessments and consequent size of the major awarding bodies' operations may be one potential cause of the script errors of summer 2011. The inaccuracy of papers poses huge problems for individual students in high stakes situations and, as last summer showed, creates a loss of confidence in the system and speculation around the suitability of awarding bodies' methods of correction once the papers have been sat. ATL trusts the regulator to find an appropriate and proportional way of dealing with such occurrences both in retrospect and in assisting awarding bodies to eliminate these errors in the first place.

9. Conclusion

9.1. Irrespective of the number of awarding bodies that exist and the structure of the 'market' ATL believes that money designated for children's education should be spent in ways that most benefit learning and we propose that the examination system should be run on a not-for-profit basis under the profession's input and guidance.

9.2. Government should work with Ofqual to ensure the right type of regulation of the examinations system, and those organisations operating (within) it, is in place. In improving the way the examinations system works, government must also take into account the broader picture, in particular the weaknesses of its approach to curriculum, careers advice, and school and college accountability. The consequent pressures of a high stakes atmosphere when coupled with the overly-commercial behaviour of awarding bodies lead to perverse but perfectly rational decision-making by teachers which threatens to undermine the quality of education offered to young people.