

Speech by Kathleen Tattersall, chair of Ofqual, at ATL Conference 2009

Check against delivery

Thank you for inviting me. As a former teacher I feel very much at home here – and indeed, Liverpool is the city closest to my home. I hope that you're enjoying yourselves – from all I hear of and read about the conference you're having a lively time.

I want to say a little about Ofqual, which a year ago came into existence as the *new* regulator for qualifications and tests. A year ago we were universally loved; a year on we've rattled a few cages and some are a little more wary of us. That says to me that we've begun to make an impact on the system.

We have a very clear objective: to safeguard the interests of learners. Learners are at the heart of what we do – regulation of the system is in their interests. And by their interests I mean the maintenance of high standards in all qualifications which in turn means that qualifications will be respected by users – Higher Education and Employers in particular – and command public and political confidence. If we were to bring to an end the annual media frenzy about falling standards, I would retire from my role as Chair of Ofqual a truly happy woman.

Standards are a tricky and complex business. Legislation which is currently before Parliament which will give Ofqual its full independence from Government and from QCA, places on us the responsibility to maintain standards across providers and across time "where appropriate". So, in the case of GCSE and A-level examinations whose provenance goes back to the 1917 School and Higher Certificates, we and the awarding bodies are charged with ensuring that the demands of current examinations are commensurate with those of previous examinations. That's a tall order when curriculum changes, particularly in the sciences, where structures and examination techniques change. But where we perceive that standards have drifted we speak out, as we did the other week in Science where our monitoring of the 2005 specifications which were examined in 2007 and 2008 indicated that a fall in standards. We therefore required awarding bodies to take whatever corrective action possible in 2009 and beyond and also asked QCA to take our concerns on board in their review of the science criteria and specifications for the longer term. That's what regulation is about.

Standards over time is not a concept which has the same force in vocational qualifications where working practices and the skills required change as new technology comes on stream. Those changes are rapid in today's society. So in the case of the vocational qualifications which we regulate, we work with SSCs and employers who will decide what is needed by industry and commerce in respect of the content and skills of qualifications which then must meet our regulatory criteria for quality and rigour.

A regulator that thinks it can speak from on high without working with partners would be totally out of touch with reality – and that goes across the piece: Ofqual will work with stakeholders such as yourselves to ensure that we have a qualifications system which is fit for purpose and rigorous. And, as an economic regulator we also seek a qualifications system which is efficient and gives value for money.

At the heart of good and respected qualifications is reliability – for example, reliable marking and grading. A year ago Ofqual indicated that it would undertake a major

study into what makes for reliable assessment. We have embarked on that and are engaging the public in discussions on this and other issues – focus groups, learner groups all make for part of our network. The public is not stupid – they appreciate that a system which has within it human judgements is fallible. They also expect that as far as is humanly possible the error factor inherent in human judgement will be minimised. The awarding bodies already take great steps to do that through the standardisation of markers and as new technology comes on board that process can be refined and improved. But we want to explore what more can be done even though we are aware that by exposing issues regarding reliability we might risk a temporary dip in confidence. But the issue cannot be avoided or swept under the carpet – transparency and public understanding are essential to confidence in the longer run

There are some who would say that the answer to reliability is to reduce human involvement – to set questions which can be machine marked, for example. I am not one of those as I do not believe that at the present time the state of mcq questions is such that we can test higher order skills. Validity goes hand in hand with reliability. I also fear that a simplistic qualifications systems which does not demand extended answers from students, which does not allow them to show their powers of thinking and evaluation, could lead to sterile teaching. Teaching to the test is not a modern phenomenon, it has always been present – but the qualifications system should not encourage it.

I referred earlier to the annual media frenzy which claims that standards have fallen. That claim has been made for as long as I can remember. As someone who has worked in the system for a long time I've had the benefit of reading more examination board annual reports than most people – the 1920s reports which referred to candidates who couldn't spell and whose grammar was awful, whose numerical skills were weak. And this was a day and age when examinations were taken by a small elite. In 1960 the Joint Matriculation Board's annual report referred to undergraduates whose command of English was so poor that they needed remedial lessons at university. And so it goes on. So what can we do to address this annual problem. I've said that in Ofqual we will be transparent in all that we do, rigorous in the demands we make of test and examination providers – national curriculum tests and science come to mind – speak out when the evidence points to standards being maintained – as demonstrated in the recent reports on English Lit and Mathematics standards over time. But I believe we also need to demonstrate the work which candidates actually present – both the artefacts that they produce for their course work and their written scripts. The sceptics might say that will prove nothing but I'd like to hear from them what else we might do.

Finally, a word about the legislation which is currently going through Parliament. We are part of a very large Bill but have attracted a fair share of attention. There is general support for a regulator. There is great support for the regulator being independent of government and answerable to Parliament and some of the debate has been about the relationship with the Secretaries of State in DCSF and DIUS. I am very clear in my mind that policy making is a matter for the elected government of the day. I am equally clear that a regulator has a responsibility to advise on those matters which impinge on qualifications – and whether the advice is taken or not to then regulate the system which government puts into place. An example of advice we gave and which has been accepted is Functional Skills where we advised against higher GCSE grades being withheld until a student had attained functional skills in a separate qualification. That seemed to us unfair and against natural justice, even though we support entirely the policy objective of improving functional skills. Ministers

have accepted the advice knowing that functional skills will be more prominent features of the new GCSE specifications in English, Mathematics and Science but asking for a review of the situation in the light of experience. That, I believe, is a proper and independent relationship which a regulator should have with a Secretary of State whose responsibility is for policy.

All being well, Ofqual will emerge in its fully independent form early in 2010. Until then we will continue to act independently and fearlessly to ensure that the system delivers the best it can - in the interests of all learners in education, training and employment.

Thank you for listening – I am happy to take any questions.