

Education Select Committee hearing: the work of Ofqual

Evidence from the Wellcome Trust

2 October 2015

Key points

- Changes to examinations and qualifications must be based on the best available evidence. Drastic changes to examinations and qualifications that are not based on evidence risk negative outcomes for pupils and schools. Significant changes to qualifications should be piloted prior to national roll out. This must include sufficient time to implement any necessary changes that arise through piloting.
- Consultations should enable a range of individuals and organisations to feed into the reform process in a useful and efficient way. When Ofqual collates respondents' views, they should be more transparent about how statistics reflect the number and nature of respondents to give a fair representation of the outcomes of the consultation process.

Introduction

1. The Wellcome Trust is a global charitable foundation dedicated to achieving improvements in health. It has a long standing commitment to making inspirational, high-quality science education available to all young people, spending around £12 million each year towards this aspiration.
2. The Wellcome Trust has actively engaged with the assessment and qualification reform process, particularly relating to the assessment of science at GCSE and A level. We take an evidence based approach, where possible, and seek to gather further evidence to inform the education sector. This submission is mostly focused on our experience working with Ofqual on science GCSEs and A levels, but could be applied to broader areas of their work.

Evidence

Importance of evidence in reform

3. Education reforms should be based on robust evidence to ensure that they have the intended improvements without unintended negative outcomes.
4. Ofqual has dramatically changed the nature of practical science assessment, such that no direct assessment of practical skills will be reflected in science GCSE and A level grades. We, and many other scientific organisations and individuals, expressed grave concerns about this change and the lack of evidence available on how it would impact assessment, teaching and learning.
5. Although we agree that the system of teacher assessment of A-level practical science skills was in need of some improvement, we have questions and concerns about the way that Ofqual drew conclusions from the evidence supplied by awarding organisations and other interested parties.

6. Ofqual has also said some practical skills will be assessed in the written examinations, but evidence to support this assertion has never been produced.
7. When further challenged on plans for practical science through the consultation process and when giving evidence to the Science and Technology Committee¹, the response was often that they felt no better solutions had been presented². We did not feel that this was an appropriate response. It would be interesting and useful to discuss which organisations have a responsibility to invest long term in research to improve assessment. A large change like this should not be taken because there was no other option, it should be decided on because of robust evidence and piloting to ensure it will work to benefit schools and pupils.
8. A limited and small pilot was carried out to test the implementation of new practical science arrangements at GCSE and A level, but the timescale of the pilot was so short that any major issues it uncovered would have been impossible to implement. We appreciate Ofqual's plans to test new qualifications but would urge them to leave sufficient time to pilot changes effectively. **The Education Select Committee could question Ofqual on future plans for piloting significant new assessment systems and qualifications.**
9. Ofqual have a hugely important role within the education system and we recognise the pressure they are under and the difficulty involved in improving the assessment of practical science. We also firmly believe that science qualifications should reflect a measure of practical skills in the grade. Ofqual should ensure that qualifications assess what is really important for pupils, further and higher education, and employers, including those which are more challenging to assess in written examinations.
10. **The Education Select Committee could ask Ofqual about how they aim to incorporate important skills within GCSE and A level grades in future.**

Consultation process

11. It is not always clear how Ofqual weights evidence provided from individuals and organisations, for example we have had concerns that a single response from multiple organisations presenting a sector position may be counted in the same way as a response from a single individual. Such responses should not be weighted the same when quoting statistics reflecting, for example, the percentage of respondents who agree or disagree. Sending one response per organisation, or joint responses from similar minded organisations, is a much more efficient way of giving evidence, but we cannot do this if Ofqual does not weight responses accordingly.

The Wellcome Trust is a global charitable foundation dedicated to achieving extraordinary improvements in human and animal health. We support the brightest minds in biomedical research and the medical humanities. Our breadth of support includes public engagement, education and the application of research to improve health. We are independent of both political and commercial interests.

¹ <http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/science-and-technology-committee/inquiries/parliament-2010/practical-science-in-schools/?type=Oral#pnlPublicationFilter>

² <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/science-and-technology-committee/practical-science-in-schools/oral/9704.html>