

Worshipful Company of Educators

Education Committee

Discussion Evening

12 October 2015

'Whose exam system is it anyway?'

Andrew Harland

In a wide-ranging and thought-provoking presentation, Andrew Harland took the audience on a journey of exploration through the English examination system. He encouraged the Educators gathered at Gresham College to 'open our hearts and minds and let's have a re-look at what we can see as the established education and exam system with a new set of eyes'. The talk focused on mainstream exams which impact on 11-18 year olds. The audience was reminded that when exams are mentioned in the media or in general discussion most people think of GCSEs or A-levels but alongside these are vocational or technical qualifications which are just as important from the students' viewpoint.

Andrew explained that he would show the structures, practices and processes which support and hinder exam delivery which impact on educational aspirations. The history of examinations can be traced back to seventh century China. Through a series of slides Andrew showed how in England the last fifteen years have seen enormous changes to the structures of the exam system and questioned whether such constant change was good for students' learning. With the promotion of GCSEs and A-levels as 'high stakes' exams, there is an inference that vocational qualifications are in some way 'low stakes' exams.

Successive governments have emphasised the need for accountability in the education system which is judged increasingly on its exam results. That places exam bodies, awarding bodies and organisations in a central place within the education system. That has led to a perception that 'the whole exam system we see today is created, managed and orchestrated by exam bodies because of the historic way they became totally ingrained in the fabric of educational provision'. Exam and awarding bodies (there are 160 of them) are now businesses and have to compete with each other in a market-led environment. However, there was little or no choice for learners and most exam centres have no choice once they have bought into a particular awarding body's offer – and that awarding body has to provide examinations that conform to government policies and programmes of study. As commercial organisations awarding bodies had to ensure profitability while responding to government demands for examinations. That meant that examining bodies might have to take difficult decisions to narrow the scope of awards or even discontinue examinations within the context of a competitive market. There was a tension between operating in a market environment and providing what exam centres want.

The work of awarding bodies extends far beyond offering examinations. Their remit starts with the tendering process and providing specifications and, if successful in their bid, extends to developing resources and providing training often two years prior to the exam's first appearance.

Exam centres may be clear about what it is appropriate to offer their students in the form of exams but these may not be available because market forces have dictated that some awarding bodies decide not to offer certain exams because they are not financially viable. Andrew noted: 'Does this therefore, by default, give awarding bodies too much power and influence in the education system where they are seen as the creator, judge and jury on future provision?' While awarding bodies may feel that educationists want everything for nothing and that this is unsustainable, teachers and exam centres should demand exams that meet learners' needs.

Some may view the examining boards as being at the root of all the problems but the boards have had to respond to government reforms like everyone else in the system. The boards do have representative bodies. The Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) is the single voice for its member awarding bodies focusing on general qualifications and works in close association with the Federation of Awarding Bodies (FAB) which has a membership of 130 from an eligible 165 awarding bodies and focuses on vocational qualifications. The JCQ has established the A2C system which allows exam boards to share product details and other data across all the participating organisations. This brings together general and vocational qualifications.

A Unique Learner Number (ULN) has been developed, via the Skills Funding Agency, for tracking learners, the purpose of which is to provide a unique identifier for each individual's Personal Learning Record. Although this should be a universal system, it does not embrace independent exam centres or overseas qualifications that are delivered by certain exam boards.

Andrew then described the overall structure of exam provision and showed how the established exam centre is pivotal not only to the process but also for access to the system. This works well for those in mainstream education but access for private or external candidates, e.g. children 'educated otherwise', may not be easy. These students could find themselves excluded from the exam system or, indeed, the curriculum as offered in schools and colleges.

The JCQ requires exam centres to make appropriate arrangements (the Access Arrangements Service) to ensure that candidates have full access to centres and the exams themselves. These arrangements are subject to the inspection procedures of JCQ.

Turning to issues of access for learners, Andrew described the Access Arrangements service and how it is operated and run by JCQ on behalf of its members and exam centres. The scheme is one which emphasises a need for 'a whole centre approach to access arrangements' and which expects there to be an effective use of assistive technology¹, which is defined as 'any object or system that increases or maintains the capabilities of people with disabilities'.

In recent JCQ publications the school SENCo, and rightly so, is seen as the lead person to sign off all Access Arrangements, but is the exam office community which has the responsibility to implement such activity on the days of exams. In a recent Examination Officers' Association (EOA) survey in 2015 it was found that many exam officers felt very dislocated from the process and were quite often unaware of assistive technology that supports Access Arrangements and how this might support exam candidates.

While our exam system is still dominated by paper-driven exams, exam candidates have an ever-increasing access to technology in the home and on a personal and mobile level. They are familiar with technology in a wide variety of forms and teaching and learning are starting to reflect those technological applications. There is a clear case that exams should also embrace modern technology

¹ Assistive technology in education will be one of the topics in the Master's Seminar series 2016

and thus promote greater access. Technology also has implications for the dissemination of exam results, for marking and grading and for ensuring the integrity of the exam system as a whole.

Through a series of quotations, Andrew demonstrated some of the pressures on exam candidates and various views on the current and future development of examinations. His association was committed to improvement through developing its members and providing professional support. He concluded that all the players in the system must work together for improvement. The system was not intrinsically bad or broken but, quoting a recent comment about the future of English rugby, 'lots of good talent. All they need is another chance to prove it'.

There was then an opportunity for discussion. A member of the audience asked whether awarding bodies were now solely commercial organisations. Andrew responded that although the exam boards had originally been linked to the universities they were now subject to market forces and that was what dictated the type and range of exams they offered. In the FE sector he felt that larger colleges were able to adapt but small colleges were less able to do so.

Another questioner wanted to know if exam systems are straitjacketed into a particular mode of assessment. Andrew pointed out that the government specifies what is to be taught and the exam companies respond to this but frequently do not offer alternative approaches to assessment. Schools, colleges and exam centres respond to government demands and specifications and are very conscious of how exam results will feature in so-called league tables.

The issue was raised of whether there was now a need for a national examinations board to regularise what often seemed to be a confusing situation. However, it seems that schools and colleges like to be able to choose between boards. Nonetheless, there is not unconstrained choice: for example, only certain boards offer particular modern languages. France is thinking of diversifying its exam system whereas, it is argued, the abolition of AS levels puts this country back to the position that obtained thirty or forty years ago. It is the case that the exam system and its requirements dictates what happens in schools and colleges.

In thanking Andrew, Dr Martin Gaskell (Upper Warden) acknowledged the constraints that examinations imposed on the education system and the many attempts there had been to explore different forms of assessment. The audience had benefited from a rather different perspective on exams and the evening had provoked a lively discussion which continued afterwards in the now-traditional 'pie and a pint' venue next door.

*Andrew Harland a founder member and CEO of the Examination Officers' Association.
(www.examofficers.org.uk)*

Mission Statement

The EOA is an independent, not for profit professional body and registered charity whose key role is to support the professional development of all exam office personnel working in centres throughout the UK and abroad, so they can support an exam system that will benefit all learners.