

## **Justin Edwards, Chief Executive, CCEA Speech to ASCL Conference – Thursday 5 November 2015 (Hilton Hotel, Templepatrick)**

It is a real honour to be asked to address you today. This is my first conference address since taking up post almost 1 year ago and I welcome the opportunity to talk to such a prestigious audience.

I would now like to take this opportunity to look towards the future. A future where change in regards to qualifications is already underway and, I believe, actually in the near and more distant future presents opportunities for educational professionals, learners and, indeed, even my own organisation.

Before taking up post at CCEA, I was already conscious of the role that the organisation played as an awarding organisation. In my previous role at Belfast Met I was the single biggest purchaser of CCEA GCE qualifications. I therefore had a firm understanding of the cost and return of qualifications in the post-16 market. I, like many education leaders faced with a world of accountability measures, continuously sought ways to improve learner outcomes.

However, it was only after a short period into my role that the true advantages of CCEA became apparent. In fact, I came to understand that my inherited perception of CCEA as an awarding organisation was in danger of concealing the opportunities presented by the broader and unique establishment that it is.

If you would kindly indulge me for a moment, it is worth reflecting on the full range of roles of CCEA; because, as I will hopefully demonstrate, it is the combination of these roles that may provide opportunities for the future.

## ***Driven by the Needs of Learners – not Shareholders***

CCEA has, essentially, three pillars or functions that are enshrined in legislation.

Firstly, it has a regulatory and accreditation function. It is not the Regulator in the restricted sense (such as Ofqual in England or Qualifications Wales in Wales); it also provides advice to the Minister and his officials on regulatory matters. Regulation across the UK is changing and Roger, as the head of this part of CCEA, and his team find themselves facing new and complex challenges each day in this changing environment. I will return to these changes and complex challenges shortly.

Secondly, CCEA provides advice to the Minister and his officials on the Northern Ireland curriculum. The Northern Ireland curriculum is now ten years old and has stood the test of that significant period of time. Even the recent review of curriculum in Wales, the 'Donaldson Review', had significant undertones of the Northern Ireland Curriculum. In the Welsh Assembly acceptance of all the recommendations of this review, Wales will see the introduction of cross-cutting curricular themes and levels that mark the progression of learning. So, it would be fair to say we have a leading curriculum model, which is well supported and often emulated.

Thirdly, CCEA has an awarding organisation. However, this is not a private or charitable entity which must make profit or sustain a level of reserves. It is an arm's length body, funded and supported by the Northern Ireland tax payer. It is, therefore, unique because it does not need to be driven by market share as a measure of the profitability of a qualification. It can be driven by other

values; such as providing qualifications that enable, through appropriate skill achievement, the rebalancing of the Northern Ireland economy.

Such a shift in values has allowed the awarding organisation to offer unique qualifications such as Moving Image Arts or Software Systems Development. Qualifications many of you now use or are planning to use in your establishments.

The component parts of CCEA, on their own, already provide real and tangible benefits for the people of Northern Ireland. However, if we start to connect them we can explore even more new and exciting opportunities.

### ***From ICT to Digital Technology***

For example, let us take 'digital technology'. For some time we have been aware that the digital industry here believes that the ICT qualifications offered are not preparing young people for the world of work. This was encapsulated in a symposium that I attended two years ago, where a leading figure of the software industry claimed that the A-Level ICT qualification was nothing more than, and I quote, 'advanced powerpoint'. I could not help but wince and recognise that something clearly needed done.

You will be aware that we are already well advanced on our journey to revise our A-Level and GCSE qualifications, with most A-Levels being available for first teaching from September 2016. In fact, some of you may have already been involved in events surrounding this work.

However, just refreshing the content of the qualification suite, such as ICT, was not going to be sufficient to address the gap between the qualification and employers expectations.

Conveniently, as we commenced this work, the House of Lords released a report about digital skills challenges and opportunities. A report that identified the need to develop more digital makers or creators, rather than users and consumers of digital services, if the UK is to remain economically competitive.

So I asked staff across the CCEA functions to reconsider what was required for Northern Ireland to address the digital skills issue. Combining thinking from qualifications, curriculum and regulatory perspectives.

We have already shared the outcomes of early considerations on this matter with teaching professionals and Higher Education. We have also shared this thinking with the cross-ministerial working group on ICT, chaired by the DEL Minister. We have now taken all the feedback and I can tell you here, today, that we plan to move away from ICT qualifications and introduce a range of reformed qualifications called 'Digital Technology'. We will be retaining the Software Systems Development qualification and creating a GCSE that provides a pathway to support progression to the GCE SSD qualification.

There is risk in this decision. One obvious risk is that you as providers may choose to remain with the English awarding providers of ICT. This is, of course, your choice. But, I return to my previous point. The software industry here does not think the ICT qualification is suitable for progression into employment. It has said that it does not think the current approach is fit for purpose. It does, however, welcome the development of the digital technology approach, recognising that this is a step to address their concerns and supply better skills and therefore opportunities for our young people. One may wish to reflect on why, therefore, you would stay with an ICT qualification?

This approach leads CCEA into a new space. A service provider of what is needed over that which may be wanted - Where market share and output takes second stage to curriculum outcomes and learner success. It also places the needs of Northern Ireland first.

### ***Managing Policy Divergence***

For many years, those charged with supporting or implementing qualification regulation across the three nations worked seamlessly to sustain a singular approach to the GCE and GCSE product.

There were THREE obvious benefits to this historic relationship.

Firstly, we sustained clear progression pathways to Higher Education providers across the three regions;

Secondly, we retained a simplified qualifications system for employers operating across the three regions; and

Thirdly, we made it possible for broad choice of qualifications across the three regions by allowing products to cross regional and devolved policy boundaries. We, in essence, enabled choice to remain in the hands of the education providers.

However, this tripartite arrangement has been dealing with differences, sometimes fundamental differences, in how the brands are used and the resulting changes over the past few years.

I am sure that I do not need to cite, to this audience, the policy decisions in England. Nor, perhaps do I have to point out that Wales now has its own

independent regulator, with similar power to Ofqual and allowing Wales to take unique approaches to all types of qualifications there.

I am also conscious that you will all be aware of recommendations from the expert panel review of qualifications and the Minister's acceptance of them.

All these factors result in substantive change. As I pointed out at the start of this address, a change that has already happened.

***The good news is that even with these changes, I believe that the three main benefits still remain.***

Firstly, the benefit of progression and transportability:

Universities are only too aware of the implications of devolved regional policy in regards to qualifications and the fundamental differences starting to appear. I have met with the Russell Group of universities admissions officer to outline the changes we are making and they see no issue, as long as standards are retained.

Standards and content are retained in GCE by the fact that 'non-unique' qualifications use predefined content standards across the three regions in some cases like Maths. We collectively, as three nations, have used the ALCAB subject definitions and requirements, which involved Universities and subject experts to retain and improve standards at A-Level. We have already taken the decision to delay the roll-out of our GCE / A-Level Maths and Further Maths on the basis that England and Wales are delayed and we want to ensure comparability on demand. Where we have unique qualifications, such as Moving Image Arts or Software Systems Development, we work very closely with industry to build a qualification that is fit for purpose and

recognised by local employers. We also work with Universities to help them understand the content and value of these qualifications to ensure access to Higher Education. The University of Ulster, for example, is a very large supporter of the Moving Image Arts and Queen's University, through DE, has been helping teachers prepare for the delivery of the Software Systems Development qualification.

Universities also point out that they are able to cope with complex qualification portfolios. Cambridge, for example, supports qualifications from 147 different countries and, as they pointed out to me, why would it make a difference adding a further 1 to that number. Cambridge has been a vocal supporter of the retaining of the AS qualification, as has UCAS.

I could go on, but I think that on this evidence alone it would be fair to say that transportability is not an issue.

This leads me to the second benefit; that a simplified qualifications system benefits employers across regions.

In this regards there are already differences within the system created by England and Wales policy positions, that forced us to consider, independently, what is right for Northern Ireland.

### ***Getting GCSE Mathematics Right***

Take, for example, GCSE Mathematics. GCSE Mathematics is a widely used qualification by employers for entry level employment. In some public sector jobs (being a teacher or lecturer for example) it is a pre-requisite for employment.

In England we have the introduction of Calculus and changes to subject content within tiers. In Wales we have the introduction of a Numeracy GCSE alongside the Maths GCSE. It is not for me to comment on which has merits. But it is required of us to look at an approach that is right for Northern Ireland.

Northern Ireland has a great heritage of engineering and mathematics. Our mathematics entries at GCE are growing at a faster pace than our counterparts in England or Wales. Our GCSE outcomes continue to rise. We have a history of doing Further Mathematics with 16 year-olds that gives them adequate preparation for GCE AS content a year early. We, you, are clearly leaders in this area.

So, as we did with digital technology or software systems development, I asked the team at CCEA to ask the industry and leading teaching professionals what we should do. I also asked that we simultaneously implemented the wishes of the Minister through his key recommendations from 'the review'. The CBI, which has been very supportive, had concerns about the introduction of a separate GCSE, as was proposed in Wales. Many employers from the engineering and mathematical field told us that we did not need Calculus, but rather a focus on Algebra and Probability would be desirable.

We also looked at GCSE Further Mathematics. Further Mathematics, when taken by a learner at 16, has a dramatic positive impact on the outcomes of learners in AS and A2. Not just in Maths, but across the sciences. Not, unsurprising you might say, but this is the first time we've looked at the supporting evidence.

If I may digress for a moment, there was a statistic that we observed in regards to Further Maths. When looking at those who take GCSE Maths at



15, approximately 88% get A\*-C. This same 88% then make up the cohort for Further Maths at 16. Aspiration in Maths, it would seem, may not be limited to the discussion about lower ability learners. Perhaps I may encourage delegates to consider how mathematics aspiration in middle and upper middle ability learners may also be encouraged.

To return to my original thought about mathematics, the team at CCEA has now come back with a series of proposals which we will be taking to Council. We will be proposing to increase the subject content within GCSE Maths to include Algebra. We will be advocating the retention of GCSE Further Maths. But we would like to see the content overlap with AS reduced and more Complex and Non-Routine questioning appearing within this qualification that encourages problem solving and application of knowledge in-line with the OECD report into mathematics in innovative societies.

By taking this approach, we are leaving the concept of the open market untouched. You may choose to take the English awarding organisation qualifications if you so wish. But, as with digital skills, we have listened to the employers around us and provided a qualification that prepares learners for employment with them. Not just local employers, but large international organisations, such as Intel.

The result is challenge, and levelling remains intact and therefore the first benefit of transportability remains consistent. But we have an added benefit for attaching our qualification to the real needs of the Northern Ireland economy.

We will also be considering how to measure the achievements of 16 year olds in functional mathematics, a term coined by the CBI, as part of the output of participating in our assessment arrangements. With CCEA's own

innovations in item level metrics and e-assessment we believe we can meet the Minister's objectives in this regard and provide an innovative solution. Both the English and Welsh regulators are interested in the approach we are taking.

One area that still remains for clarification that is whether revised GCSEs in Northern Ireland will be graded A\* to G – as has been retained in Wales, or 9 to 1- as has been decided in England. In this matter there are many different facets to consider and CCEA awaits the Minister's decision. Regardless of the decision, we will be able to communicate with employers and provide understanding of the systems used between the three regions.

All of these factors considered, I do not see a loss to the second historic benefit, as long as CCEA clearly communicates the contextual differences between the regions with employers.

### ***An Open Market Promoting Quality, Innovation, Modernisation and VFM***

The final benefit of the historic system was the operation of an Open Market for qualifications. The idea that qualifications from any of the three regions may be used here, and that the choice remains with schools, remains.

We inevitably come at this point to the decision in regards to science and the retention of the science practical as part of our GCE qualifications. Some might speculate that this decision was to the advantage of the CCEA awarding organisation. However, as I have explained at the start of this address, we must start to view the value and purpose of a publicly funded awarding organisation in a different context. Not driven by market share, but controlled to produce a service that is in the interest of learners. The decision taken here in regards to science practical is unanimously supported by

learned societies and representative bodies. It was the right decision taken to benefit learners. The concept of an open market exists and awarding organisations are very welcome to continue to provide their services here, provided they meet the requirements that are in the interests of learners.

I have only recently met with the new Chief Executive of OCR to outline my clear desire for OCR, the most significant alternative supplier of science GCE qualifications, to remain in the market place here. It is, of course, a commercial decision for them, but I have been active in my encouragement for OCR to see beyond the commerciality and, as a charitable body, to see the benefit to the learner. The Chief Executive has committed to look at this matter more closely.

Whilst the 'open market' policy remains, we will assist DE in operating an open market here. I will actively seek to promote the opportunity of the market to other awarding organisations. Competition for the CCEA Awarding Organisation is healthy. It promotes the values of quality, innovation, modernisation and value for money in my own organisation. The market share of CCEA, therefore, becomes representative of these important values, not of revenue, content or standards.

The third benefit therefore remains, provided commercial organisations are willing to consider the real benefits of operating in the innovative and leading education market that is Northern Ireland. It does require all awarding organisations to consider their role in society and what is of real value.

Delegates, at this point I realise I have covered considerable ground. I have perhaps given a sense of the complexities inherent in changing qualifications and assessment. However, I do hope I have outlined that none of these complexities are insurmountable, nor do they remove any real historic

benefits to learners and learning organisations. What these changes do create is opportunity. The opportunity of a learning experience for all learners, of all abilities. An opportunity that promotes not just outputs, in the form of grades or certificates, but outcomes in the form of sustainable employment opportunities in a rebalanced Northern Ireland economy. There is an opportunity to reposition CCEA as a bridge between employers and educators, translating and informing both sides of needs and desires. To finish then, I would like explore the more distant future.

### ***The Longer-Term Future of GCSE and A-level Qualifications***

You may be aware that the Minister has commissioned an expert group to carry out and report on the longer-term future of GCSE and A-level qualifications. This group, chaired by Norman Apsely from the Northern Ireland Science Park, is already progressing thinking and has carried out some substantive engagement with industry. I would anticipate some forward and innovative thinking from this group in the New Year.

In the meantime, perhaps I may provide delegates with some items for thought and discussion during the remainder of the conference. In September, I retweeted the OECD education team saying 'Technology is key to success but the world no longer pays you for what you know but for what you can do with what you know'.

Time and again we hear the importance of application and skills as being the critical component to success in a globalised economy. However, our assessment system as it is currently formulated, still focuses at 14-19 on discriminatory learners, in the majority, on knowledge and understanding. I believe that one of the factors for this is not a willingness to accept the need

for application and skills, but rather security and creativity in alternative assessment methodologies.

We are comfortable with the assessment of knowledge and understanding because we are comfortable with a standards based assessment process that, for the most part, is 100 years old.

In his book 'Who's afraid of the Big Bad Dragon?' - Yong Zhao, Professor of Education at University of Oregon, describes that this is actually an issue that China recognises as an issue or inhibition to global success for them.

I believe that there may be answers on the horizon and technology may play a role in addressing this situation. Early experiments in Online Adaptive Comparative Judgement, a methodology used recently by Ofqual to assure the standards of Maths examinations, has shown very high degrees of accuracy in rank ordering students on ability in comparison to standards based assessment. It is very early days for such approaches, but at least there are potential solutions to assessment challenges.

In addition, we cannot rule out the importance of controlled assessment, purely on the basis of the fact that it is difficult to regulate. Empowering teachers to make informed judgements about learner abilities – particularly application of skills is an important aspect of the Finnish system.

Paul Sahlberg in his book 'Finnish Lessons: 2.0', cites the important role teachers play in the National Matriculation Examinations and the Vocational Proficiency Assessments there. Indeed since 2005 there has been continuous debate in Finland about how teacher assessment and the demonstration of skills proves proficiency, but placing trust in teacher assessment has not stopped Finland from consistently performing highly in

global benchmarks. It is a trust, however, that must be nurtured and valued if it is to be successful. The opposite to such a trust mechanism can be over regulation and simplification to 100% external assessment.

I believe that only this week ASCL's own General Secretary echoed some of my sentiments, stating: 'We also need to reassess our approach to assessment.....There are enormous pedagogical benefits to informed assessment practice in the classroom.'

To conclude, I thank you for your considerable patience in listening to my address and look forward to your questions. Before I do take questions, I feel I must finish with another quote, this time taken from the leading Harvard University thinker Daniel Koretz and his quite marvellous book 'Measuring Up: What Education Testing Really Tells Us?'. This book was a very helpful gift from the Chief Regulator of Ofqual, Glenys Stacey, and Chair of Ofqual, Amanda Spielman, when I first took up post. The end of the book states:

*'...educational testing is like a powerful medicine. If used carefully, it can be immensely informative, and it can be a very powerful tool for changing education for the better. Used indiscriminately, it poses a risk of various and severe side effects.'*

Let me assure you, we will monitor diligently for such side effects. I do however, believe that a prescribed dose of objective pragmatism in regards to assessment and qualifications may be required if we are to make our education system even better.

Thank you.