



Education Committee

Oral evidence: Appointment of the Chief Regulator of Ofqual, HC 512

Tuesday 6 July 2021

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Members present: Robert Halfon (Chair); Apsana Begum; Jonathan Gullis; Tom Hunt; Dr Caroline Johnson; Kim Johnson; David Johnston; Ian Mearns; David Simmonds; Christian Wakeford.

Questions 1 - 66

Witness

I: Dr Jo Saxton, Government's preferred candidate.

Written evidence from witness:



Examination of witness

Witness: Dr Jo Saxton.

Q1 Chair: Good morning, everyone. Thank you for coming today and to Dr Jo Saxton. This is a pre-appointment hearing for her role as chief executive of Ofqual. Could I ask you to introduce yourself, Jo, for the benefit of the tape and those watching on Parliamentary TV?

Dr Saxton: I am Dr Jo Saxton, preferred candidate to be the next Chief Regulator of Ofqual.

Chair: Thank you. I want to start just by asking you about grade inflation. Grade inflation in 2020 was very high. The proportion of Year 11 pupils who were awarded GCSE Grade 4 or above rose by around 9.7% in GCSE language. An Ofqual document at the time said that these differences are unlikely to reflect changes in attainment. The proportion of A-level Grade A or A* increased by 12.9 percentage points and as much as 16.9 percentage points in further maths, 18.5 percentage points in computing, 22.3 percentage points in music. Again, the Ofqual document said, "Such differences are hard to explain in terms of student attainment".

We know that grade inflation in 2020 was never intended. It was a non-deliberate result of a major error in the ways that grades were assessed and the Secretary of State at the time made it very, very clear that Ofqual should ensure, as far as possible, that qualification standards are maintained, and the distribution of grades follows a similar profile to that in previous years.

Neil Sheldon, a former examiner and fellow of Royal Statistical Society and a member of the Ofqual expert advisory group, advising on exams during the pandemic, said, "Just bumping everyone up by half a grade doesn't achieve anything, it doesn't do anything for relative disadvantage". Do you agree that raising the inflationary tide to lift all boats will do nothing to change the relative gap between disadvantaged pupils and their better off peers?

Dr Saxton: If I may, Chair, before I address your question on grade inflation, there are two things that I would like you and the Committee to know about me and why I believe I should be the next Chief Regulator.

Chair: One minute, please. We will definitely come on to that, but I specifically want you to answer that question.

Dr Saxton: My professional driver to be the next Chief Regulator is I want to put the interests of children and young people genuinely at the heart of the decisions that Ofqual makes, because they affect children, young people, learners on the frontline and that is the experience I bring.

With respect to your question about grade inflation, of course, looking at how we approach grading for 2022 is going to be at the top of my to do list and priorities as I become the next Chief Regulator. I think the



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Committee would want me to act on the evidence. We need the 2021 results to make a fully informed and appropriate decision on the way ahead.

Q2 Chair: Do you agree that baking inflation into the system is damaging to educational standards by, for instance, undermining the currency of grades in the job market?

Dr Saxton: Ofqual obviously has a very difficult role. It has to balance the interests and needs of learners with the objectives of maintaining standards. In the abstract, of course I agree with you, Chair, but I think we must not forget the circumstances that we have been operating in. We are in unprecedented circumstances, a global pandemic, and the priority and the arrangements of both 2020 and 2021 has been to make sure that young people get the qualifications that they need to move into the next stage of their education and their lives.

Q3 Chair: Where should the recycling of grade inflation end and when should we return to a normal distribution of grades, and which year group will now accept a return to normal given that they will be competing for jobs with beneficiaries of inflation the year before? How are you going to make sure these cohorts are not judged detrimentally by employers?

Dr Saxton: Throughout my career I have worked very hard to form positive relationships and work with all stakeholders. I think I am known for listening and taking actions that reflect the interests of stakeholders. As Chief Regulator, I would continue to do that, and I would work with stakeholders. I would also be informed by the evidence to make sure that, going forward, we took decisions that made sure that the integrity of the qualification system did not come at the expense of the needs of individuals.

In terms of a specific year group, I would like to have the benefit of seeing the 2021 data before I made that decision. If I could add—I hope the Committee will forgive me—I am not sighted on the 2021 data, for the avoidance of any conflict. I think that we need that evidence before we can talk about—

Q4 Chair: Do you believe action should be taken to make sure that we don't bake grade inflation—a sort of hard rock cake grade inflation—into the system?

Dr Saxton: I think we have to balance the interests of individuals with the integrity of the qualification system. If there is a lesson from last summer, we need to make sure that the qualification system, and the maintenance of standards, is not at the expense of individuals. Equally, I am conscious that when Mervyn King was governor of the Bank of England he said that his mission was to make sure that a £10 note when he started was worth the same when he finished.

I think that the Committee would expect me to weigh up all the evidence and advise Ministers to make sure that they are aware of evidence on all



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sides, but my particular passion will be to ensure that the interests of children, young people and learners are—

Q5 Chair: Thank you. If I could move to plans for assessment next year. New analysis of attendance data reveal that the average Year 10 pupil who will sit GCSEs or BTECHs next summer has missed one in four days of face-to-face teaching. We know that pupils across the board who are due to sit exams next year have suffered substantial learning loss. According to an Ofqual document setting out its rationale for decisions on 2021 grading, its approach did not address individual differential lost learning.

What steps would you suggest taking to factor the learning loss into next summer's exams, for how many more years would you introduce these sorts of adjustments, and how reliably could we benchmark learning loss? How would you account for the differential learning due to the varying impact of Covid on pupils across the country?

Dr Saxton: One of the things that has been incredibly difficult about the pandemic is just how unpredictable it has been, so I think we have learned a lesson around optimism bias and not saying things too concretely that might later need to change. Obviously, whether or not exams go ahead next year is a decision for Government and the Secretary of State has been clear that the plan is for exams to go ahead in 2022.

One of the central pieces for 2021 was that teachers who knew children should be making the decisions rather than taking a calculated approach. It should be teachers rather than algorithms making the decision, so the 2021 arrangements put teachers at the heart of all of the decisions because they know what young people have been taught and what they can achieve.

In the situation that you describe, Chair, where so many young people have missed learning—and, in fact, it is not just the young people but teachers themselves who have not been in the classrooms as they normally would be—in that situation it is absolutely right to go with a teacher-led approach.

For 2022, we have heard very loudly from stakeholders pretty much across the board in the schools' system that they would like exams to go ahead. I think the Secretary of State recently said that he feels strongly that there need to be adaptations. We need to find the right form of support to ensure that exams, technical qualifications and other assessments in 2022 are fair. I will continue to work with stakeholders to ensure that everybody feels they are fair.

Q6 Chair: To conclude my questions before I pass over to colleagues, I want to ask you about centre-assessed grades. I understand why they were introduced because of the differential learning loss being quite substantial across the country but, given that we have this system, it is important



that there is a robust way of quality assuring each school or college's approach. Instead, as I understand it, the plan is to introduce spot checks. There is considerable scope for variation in the way that schools will assess their pupils, which may not get picked up across the whole sector. Schools and colleges are going to be under substantial pressure from parents to mark generously. There is an incentive for teachers to lean towards the generous side on the basis that they think other schools would do this and would not want to do their pupils a disservice. Ofqual has published some information on its methodology for sampling and it is concentrating mostly on outliers.

This means the cumulative effect across schools that are not checked could be substantial, so my question is: the method of assessment and quality assurance proposed for 2021 is now about as open ended and checked as it could be. Are you worried that this would amount to a free for all and what would you do to tighten things up? Do you think the Department should have opted for a more system-wide method of quality assuring schools and is there anything that could be done to adjust for any unfair anomalies now that teachers have submitted their grades?

Dr Saxton: First of all, I would respectfully disagree, Chair, about the quality assurance arrangements this year in that every centre will be touched by the quality assurance. It has been an incredibly rigorous process that began with training for teachers and centres on awarding, which was not something that was able to happen last year. Every centre policy has been reviewed. Every single centre has had conversations with awarding organisations. Every single centre is touched by the quality assurance process.

Where there are particular concerns about the data as it comes in, you are right, then there are actual visits, and every single centre has also sent in evidence to the awarding organisation so that it can be reviewed. The priority for this year was to recognise that only teachers would know what their young people had studied and were capable of. I think this is the most rigorous means of achieving standardisation that is possible in the context of a pandemic.

On going forward, I am sorry, Chair, I have forgotten what the second part of your question was.

Chair: I was asking what you would do to tighten things up and whether or not the Department should opt for a more system-wide method of quality assuring schools and addressing what could be done to adjust for any wild or unfair anomalies now that teachers have submitted their grades.

Dr Saxton: I suppose, while I am not here to defend current Government policy, I think that the Government and Ofqual have actually pushed the system incredibly hard in term of making the quality assurance for this year as rigorous as it possibly could be. I commend teachers, leaders and school staff who have worked tirelessly to ensure



that young people get the qualifications that they deserve and have been incredibly attentive to the training and the rigorous process that they have had to go through. In the context of the pandemic, I cannot at the moment think of anything that could be done better but in the situation where young people and their teachers are predominantly back in school—which, following the Prime Minister’s announcements last night, I think we all hope will be the case—traditionally nationally standardised exams and assessments is absolutely the most reliable way to go, and I would very much hope that they could go ahead next year.

Q7 Chair: Could I ask you very briefly about the appeals system? Do you think that disadvantaged families will realistically have the same access to the appeals system as their better off peers, particularly when it comes to time and resources, and would you put in place any additional steps to support these families and, just to confirm, will there be a proper helpline that families can call to guide them through the system if they feel that their grading has been unfair?

Dr Saxton: In terms of appeals, obviously it was one of the really important reflections from 2020 that individuals should have the right to appeal. It should not only be for centres. I think there has been unprecedented investment from Government to ensure that there would be no costs to candidates for an appeal. I know that Ofqual has worked incredibly hard to use tools like social media, which we know reach the young, so that they are aware of how they would make an appeal if they felt that there was an error in their grade, and to make them aware that there would be no cost to them to do so. I believe that the National Careers Service is on standby to provide the helpline that you describe.

Q8 Chair: My concern about some of your answers is that basically you think that everything is hunky-dory—that you are not worried about grade inflation and that you will not have a plan when you take over in the autumn to unbake grade inflation out of the system.

Dr Saxton: I am not quite sure I said that everything is hunky-dory, but I can absolutely assure the Committee that, from what I see here in the Department, the Department, Ofqual and all stakeholders in the sector have worked really hard, not only to learn lessons from 2020 but to do everything possible to avoid unfairnesses to—

Chair: But what would you do to minimise the grade inflation?

Dr Saxton: In terms of grade inflation, it is difficult for me to answer that question when I have not seen the 2021 data.

Chair: I quoted to you significant statistics in the beginning of the huge grade inflation that there has been in the key subjects. I also quoted an Ofqual document that said these differences are unlikely to reflect changes in attainments. I have quoted you public figures. As I said, the proportion of Year 11 pupils who were awarded GCSE Grade 4 and above rose by around 9.7% in GCSE English language. The proportion of A-level Grade A or A* increased by 12.9 percentage points, as much as 16.9



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percentage points for further maths, 18.5 percentage points in computing, 22.3 percentage points in music. Quoting the Ofqual document again in 2021 it says, "Such differences are hard to explain in terms of student attainment". The data is available so you cannot say it is not available.

Dr Saxton: The 2020 data is absolutely available. The thing that we must not overlook is that the grades in 2020 were not awarded through examination, so there were no materials on which to act. I have absolute confidence in examiner judgment. I have done examining myself and I have seen how rigorous the processes are. In an examiner system, with subject experts who have almost an ingrained sense of what standards are, when they are able to work with those materials, I have every confidence that appropriate grading will occur.

In terms of the statistical activities that need to go on around grading and ensuring that it has integrity, we do need to see what happens in 2021 to understand whether any kind of national adjustments need to be made or not but my faith rests with the expert examiners who work in the awarding arrangements.

Q9 David Simmonds: Dr Saxton, this may be the opportunity to say some of the things that I think you were trying to say at the start. In terms of your CV, you have been a school leader and you have had a lot of policy experience. I am particularly interested in what it was that specifically made you want to apply for this role. A specific line of inquiry I would like to pursue is that, clearly, one of the challenges the Committee has seen with Ofqual—and not only with Ofqual but a number of other departmental bodies—is some of the hygiene factors, in particular the capacity of the organisations to step up their activity during the challenge of Covid and as we look to recovery.

Would you be able to say a little bit more on the basis of your CV about your management experience and how you will fulfil the chief executive element of the role in ensuring that Ofqual is able to meet expectations, to escalate concerns to Ministers and be in a position to manage whatever the next few years are likely to throw at it?

Dr Saxton: As you can see from my CV, I have approximately 20 years' experience between some of the world's top universities and serving disadvantaged communities in some of England's toughest schools and improving outcomes for the disadvantaged.

In terms of my management experience, the organisations that I have been chief executive and accounting officer of have similar, if not more, numbers of staff colleagues as Ofqual has, and as an accounting officer I have been responsible for taxpayers' spend against similar budgets and again operated in a highly regulated sector. I think the Committee can have confidence that I have management experience and accounting officer experience of a similar scale.



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In terms of the capacity of the organisation, I am conscious of the enormous and incredibly exciting work on vocational technical qualifications that Ofqual is doing, and I will be wanting to keep a really close eye on whether it has sufficient capacity. I know that it has doubled the size of the vocational technical qualifications team relative to the general qualifications team, but making sure that that is appropriate, and funded and resourced going forward, is something I am very conscious of.

In terms of what would I do were I concerned about capacity and resources, I think one of the benefits of my candidacy is that I have developed effective working relationships with officials across all levels of the Department for Education this past year and I would use them to act in the interest of Ofqual. Obviously, I am conscious that as Chief Regulator, both I and Ofqual would report to Parliament, to you, this Committee and—if needs be—I would come to you if I had serious concerns about capacity.

Chair: Jo, could I just ask very gently—I know there is lots to say—if you could be concise as possible because we have a lot to get through. I mean that very gently and I know this interview is important, but thank you.

Q10 **David Simmonds:** Subsequent to your appointment, are there areas where you feel you have a need for development? What are the areas where you think you need to add to your own capacity and areas of skills in order to fulfil all the requirements of the role?

Dr Saxton: That is a good question. On paper, it might look as if I am less experienced in vocational technical qualifications than general qualifications, but in fact in my school experience, I have been incredibly passionate about that, and I am happy to talk about it more, if appropriate.

In terms of regulation, that is the newest area in my portfolio of expertise, but I have spent a significant amount of time in this past year on the regulation of schools, doing everything from strategic projects through to improving elements of technical guidance. In fact, I am so fascinated by regulation that I have studied at the London School of Economics in my spare time. Therefore, while I do not have as much experience in being a regulator, I have worked in highly regulated sectors and I would obviously continue to learn.

Q11 **Kim Johnson:** Good morning, Dr Saxton. I want to scrutinise your CV a little bit because you have just mentioned that you have extensive leadership, and you cited your CV. I would like to ask you to explain the gap in your CV because it finishes in 2003 and starts again at 2008.

Dr Saxton: I am a mother of three young children, so during those years I worked flexibly and part-time. It is not a gap so much as a series of shorter-term arrangements with universities and others around my three young children.



Q12 Kim Johnson: Could you say a little bit about your day-to-day role in the Turner academies because I am aware that there has been some criticism of the schools, particularly in terms of finances, and that is a key role in terms of this job, and there have been some issues in terms of high numbers of permanent exclusions? Could you say a little bit about your day to day role and some of those criticisms levelled against the Turner academies?

Dr Saxton: With pleasure. First of all, I am incredibly proud of the things that the team and I achieved at Turner Schools, including a school that had never before had an Ofsted 'Good' for as long as Ofsted had been inspecting. It got 'Good' on my watch. If I take the three elements in term if I—

Chair: In a nutshell if you can, Jo, thanks.

Dr Saxton: In terms of finances, we saved many thousands and the outstanding amount to the Department for Education on the record was an emergency loan following the need to move short term out of sixth form accommodation that was privately owned and back into the school. It was to temporarily expand our facilities for the sixth form.

On my watch there were two permanent exclusions, but they had actually been begun by a previous leader. There was a year of particularly high exclusions in one of the secondary schools, where there was a serious behaviour difficulty. It is one of the largest schools in Kent and the exclusions were very high for a short time. They stopped. Attendance there has now improved, including for the disadvantaged and, again, that was a temporary measure to reset behaviour for learning.

Q13 Kim Johnson: Thank you. I read about the schools haemorrhaging pupils. Would that be a correct assertion?

Dr Saxton: It is not. We were strategically trying to rearrange pupils. As I said, this was a very challenging school that had really lost its way when I first found it. It was at the time the largest school in Kent with over 300 children in every year group. The local authority was clear that more places were needed.

My trust opened another secondary school nearby and, again working fully and openly with the local authority, we agreed that we would rebalance so that we would end up with two secondary schools of equal size, one of which would put young people on a pathway to apprenticeships and a vocational future and the other that would offer a success without selection, more conventional academic approach, so absolutely no haemorrhaging of pupils.

Kim Johnson: So everything is hunky-dory in the Turner Schools now?

Dr Saxton: I am incredibly proud of everything Turner Schools have achieved.

Q14 Kim Johnson: What will be your main priorities taking up the role and



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longer term? I know for your interview you were asked to give a presentation. I would be interested in what you said you would do.

Dr Saxton: Let me flick back to my interview.

Kim Johnson: What were the key challenges facing the qualification system in the last five years?

Dr Saxton: I talked about, as we recover from the pandemic, the importance of re-establishing national assessments and examinations in a way that will be fair to all learners. I was clear that my overarching priority would be to regulate on behalf of learners, rather than abstracts such as standards.

I was clear that my next priority would be to build on the landmark activity around skills and vocational education, which is ongoing at the moment. Ofqual has an absolutely seminal role to play in that. It is incredibly exciting that apprenticeships will get an Ofqual Kitemark on the endpoint assessment. That is something that I really want to build on.

In terms of where would I like things to be in five years' time at the end of my tenure, I would dearly love to have helped support more disadvantaged young people to have clarity, quality and choice in their qualifications. Ways in which that might be evidenced would be more disadvantaged youngsters achieving their English and maths GCSE, more disadvantaged youngsters going on to apprenticeships and there being fewer NEET statistics. Those are things that I would love to be the outcomes of my tenure.

Q15 **Kim Johnson:** How do you think that happens if schools do not have the right resources to be able to do that in terms of Kevin Collins and his catch-up?

Dr Saxton: I am not here to defend Government policy. The thing that I have seen on the ground that makes the biggest difference are brilliant teachers who are excited about subject knowledge in front of their pupils. That is the most transformational thing. For me, the key priority is getting all children and all teachers back in school as safely and as quickly as possible. In my experience of where disadvantaged young do not achieve—and many of the factors that the Committee published in its recent report I found absolutely to be true—I found in particular that attendance was key. When our disadvantaged young attended at the national average, they achieved—they fulfilled their potential. That is why we gave free breakfasts to all. But the importance of reading is critical to the disadvantaged achieving.

Q16 **Kim Johnson:** Finally, how would you describe Ofqual's board? Would you describe it as diverse and does any work need to be undertaken to make sure that boards are representative of communities?

Dr Saxton: The short answer is that there is some diversity on the Ofqual board. Of course it could be improved. I would actually like to



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work on diversity in the senior executive of Ofqual and I welcome the diversity and inclusion strategy that Ofqual has recently published. Again, a priority will be making sure that it is enacted so that Ofqual upholds its desire to match the civil service goals of being a truly inclusive employer.

Q17 Jonathan Gullis: I am concerned that we are still using the language of “exams may go ahead”. In your professional opinion, should exams be going ahead next academic year, yes or no?

Dr Saxton: Yes. If I can caveat that, we have learned that the pandemic is unpredictable. Nobody saw the Kent variant coming. That changed everything in December. The delta variant is the most recent unpredictability. None of us can know what variants may be thrown but, medical health allowing, yes, exams should go ahead next year.

Q18 Jonathan Gullis: Fantastic. With the exams for this year, a concern I have heard from sixth form colleges and schools is the fact that they have to pay these exam boards fees when those fees are not necessary because exam boards are not having to hire anywhere near the numbers of staff normally required to mark examinations. The Secretary of State said before the Committee recently that he expects exam boards to reimburse schools. Do you support that?

Dr Saxton: First, I feel for school leaders. I know what it felt like, managing a budget.

I endorse what the Secretary of State said. I can add to the record that the chief executives of the awarding organisations have all been clear that none of them has turned a profit from the pandemic. If they were in front of you, they would be saying that they may not have had as many markers as normal but they have required all sorts of other staff to build the technical systems required for the quality assurance arrangements for this year.

I am confident that they will be giving rebates. In fact, they have committed that they will give rebates. They are independent entities, so I cannot speak to the level of those.

Q19 Jonathan Gullis: With regard to the tweaking of examinations, which has been raised and discussed, I am concerned. I am going to bore you, Dr Saxton. The Committee knows that I am a former teacher of eight and a half years. It is a running joke on the Committee at the moment. I mention this every time we have someone here.

I am concerned about what tweaking looks like and how it will be consistent. We should not be muddling with exam papers because, ultimately, the year group below will ask if they could have their exam papers played with. It will end up as a big mess. We need to go back to exams as per normal and marking needs to reflect the impact of Covid when it comes to it. That way kids will sit normal exams, but the markers will be asked to have a much more relaxed approach to certain things in those big mark questions to meet that.



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Lastly, this is controversial, but I would like to get your views. Do we need to move to a system with just one centralised exam board?

Dr Saxton: There is a lot to take in turn there. I cannot speak about Government policy and I know that the Secretary of State is working hard to make sure that school leaders and young people have the certainty they need, moving forward into the new academic year.

On my personal preference, I agree with you, Mr Gullis, changing papers is difficult to reverse. You will know as a teacher how useful it is to see past papers and to help familiarise your students, particularly the disadvantaged, with the kinds of formats they will be faced with. There is powerful research about advance notice and how giving an indication of areas that will come up is important in helping young people streamline their revision. Research from New Zealand shows that sort of approach is effective. I am personally interested in whether that could be applied.

On a single exam board, as Chief Regulator, it would be my job to make sure that if the Government made such a decision, they were aware of the pros and cons. I know from my regulatory studies that there are lots of arguments against monopolies and, equally, there are arguments for. As Chief Regulator, it would be my job to present those arguments to Ministers to help support them in deciding. My main caution around it is to make sure that we think through how to avoid any single point of failure if there was a monopoly arrangement.

Chair, this is such a big strategic thing. There are not discussions about this going on as far as I am aware. If there are, because of all the conflict-of-interest mitigations put in place here at the Department, I am not aware of those. I am talking entirely theoretically.

Q20 **Ian Mearns:** As an observation, when I speak to people in the profession, an awful lot of people would welcome the exam boards being totally independent and separate from the publishing companies, but that is neither here nor there because they do have a direct interest in how all that works.

I am a fairly simple soul, Jo. Coming back to the Chair's point about grade inflation, you have been advising Ministers now for over a year directly. Ministers keep telling us that we have more children in good and outstanding schools and a better qualified and more professional teaching cohort than we have ever had before.

Given that context, why would we not expect children to outperform their predecessors year on year?

Dr Saxton: That is a great question. A tool in Ofqual's arsenal these days is the National Reference Test. Its work has been interrupted by the pandemic, but the evidence we do have from it so far shows exactly what you say. In mathematics, standards are increasing. If standards have increased, then of course grading should be increased. In the current



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grading arrangements, there is no fixed quota for who can achieve what. I agree with you, Mr Mearns.

Q21 Dr Johnson: I want to come back to grade inflation and some of the things you said in response to questions from David Simmonds and others. You said you see it as your job to regulate on behalf of learners, not abstract concepts such as standards, and if the learners are happy with their grades, that is okay.

How does that give employers going forward confidence that they will understand what a grade means? How does that give learners, particularly those perhaps striving for the highest standards, confidence that their grades will continue to mean what they did when they achieved them?

Dr Saxton: To be clear, I am conscious that Ofqual has five statutory objectives, and the maintenance of standards in qualifications and the maintenance of standards in assessment are the first two. I am not in any way suggesting throwing those out, but the Chief Regulator and the Ofqual board do have some discretion about the emphasis placed on them. I would like the interests of learners to take a high priority on my watch.

The other Ofqual objective, the one that excites me most, is the awareness objectives. I want to continue the great work that has been started to make employers understand qualifications and what they tell you about what young people know and can do, and to continue to improve the efforts for clarity and quality in the entire qualifications market. I have a track record as a school leader of working with employers on what they need and what they are looking for in young people. I would continue, as Chief Regulator, to work in that way.

Q22 Dr Johnson: I am not convinced that the learners' objectives are ultimately achieved by anything other than a robust standard. Perhaps we will have to disagree on that.

It was interesting that you said in response to David Simmonds that you wanted to make it your priority to see more disadvantaged children get better grades. I can see why enabling disadvantaged children to achieve their full potential would be a target of the Government, teachers, parents and suchlike. But how could Ofqual, whose job is to see what standard somebody has reached at the end of their term or at a fixed point in time, achieve such a thing?

Dr Saxton: I specifically talked about English and maths GCSE as examples where I would like to see more disadvantaged young people passing.

How could Ofqual help with that? A key duty and function of Ofqual is undertaking research. While I was on the board, I was on a committee looking at the role of digital technologies in improving marking reliability, for example. I am interested in exploring whether digital technologies



could play a role in something like GCSE English and maths, perhaps in the resit versions where too many young people do not attend and have lost interest in the content, where it could be much more interactive and where technology would allow the reteaching of elements.

I am not talking about sweeties for all—absolutely not—but I am talking about perhaps a student voice panel going forward. A big lesson for 2020 was that the individual needed an appeal, not just centres. Those are the sorts of interests of learners that I am talking about putting at the heart of decision making.

Q23 Dr Johnson: Does the current system mark disadvantaged children's papers differently? Are markers not currently examining them fairly?

Dr Saxton: No, that is definitely not the case, but from my experience in classrooms and with the pattern of the schools that I led, often the disadvantaged did not attend at the national average and there was a direct correlation between attendance and attainment. Those who attended at the national average achieved.

I also saw that there was a strong correlation with reading age. I worked with cohorts that had an average reading age of eight and were facing GCSEs when the average reading age needed is about 14. I am interested in the research Ofqual could do looking at reading age.

We hear a lot from stakeholders concerns about the reading age of the current mathematics GCSE and if it is actually assessing literacy more than numeracy. As Chief Regulator, it would be my job to make sure that the qualifications are assessing the things we want them to assess—maths is assessing maths and not literacy—the readings ages are appropriate, and innovative technologies are deployed and harnessed if they could help improve marking.

Q24 David Johnston: First, I declare that I was a governor of Future Academies from 2008 to 2017 and Dr Saxton was chief executive of that group from 2012 to 2016. I was not involved in her appointment and I do not think we have had a conversation since 2017.

Dr Saxton, when you were on the other side of this, running schools, what was your view of Ofqual then and what do you imagine schools' view is of Ofqual right now? If it not what you might want it to be, what will you do to try to fix that?

Dr Saxton: My perspective on Ofqual as a school leader was that it played a critical role and its research helped me to equip my teams, for example, through qualification reform and the sawtooth effect, which helped us understand grading and curriculum change, which was seminal in empowering teachers to help children. I definitely saw it as an incredibly safe pair of hands that did fascinating research. That is why I put myself forward to be on the board for it a few years ago.



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In terms of how it is perceived now, we can all agree that Ofqual has done a good job of regulating exams and qualifications. It was put into entirely new territory when it was asked to support the awarding of qualifications without exams.

Ofqual now needs the appointment of a former school leader who has good relationships with other school leaders to reassure the wider sector that it understands what school leaders need and what the young people they serve need, and who is open to positive relationships with them going forward.

Q25 David Johnston: That was quite a positive view of Ofqual when you were on the other side of it, but it sounds like you are saying that perhaps school leaders do not feel that Ofqual does entirely understand what they need. What did you feel were its limitations when you were on the other side? I totally accept that there was good research you relied on, but did you feel that it had problems, issues or things it was not as good at when you were on the other side?

Dr Saxton: In my experience of joining the board, I saw expert people who cared passionately about the power of qualifications to change life chances. Partly that experience has led me to feel strongly about wanting to be clear that going forward Ofqual will regulate on behalf of learners. We need that compass in every decision we take. I am not saying that it was not thinking about learners but, as the legislation is set out, standards and the five objectives might be interpreted as having a higher priority than the interests of learners and employers. As Chief Regulator, I will make sure that that is our compass in decision making.

Q26 Christian Wakeford: If you are appointed to the position, I am not sure if you know but you will be the fourth Chief Regulator in just over a year. To what extent have you spoken to your predecessors already about the role and why they left and, if you have done, what advice have they given you to potentially avoid some of the mistakes made previously?

Dr Saxton: I interacted with previous Chief Regulators when I was on the board and also more recently in my work here in the Department. I have not talked to anyone other than the current incumbent about my candidacy. He kindly picked up the phone and called me when my candidacy was announced and was incredibly encouraging about this brilliant and fascinating role and wished me well. I am not sure there is anything more substantive to add to that, Mr Wakeford, I am afraid.

Q27 Christian Wakeford: In regards to having four Chief Regulators, after the damage to the Ofqual's reputation with the A-level and GCSE results and those turbulent times from last year, how can you help to restore some of the confidence in Ofqual both within and outside the organisation?

Dr Saxton: I thought of something about your previous question, Mr Wakeford. The current incumbent said how pleased he was that the



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prospective new Chief Regulator knew Ofqual well and knew the system well, so would be able to hit the ground running. That was his phrase.

In terms of how I can help going forward, I bring my 20 years on the front line of education. My method of working is to be collaborative and to try hard to listen to people and understand their needs. I would continue to work in that way as chief regulator to build on the expertise Ofqual has.

Q28 Ian Mearns: Following on from Christian's questions, you referred earlier to the importance of the integrity of the system. One of your predecessors, Dame Glenys Stacey, the then acting Chief Regulator, at our hearing on 2 September 2020, acknowledged that "exam grades are reliable to one grade either way". Also, according to the Education Act 2011, Ofqual has a duty to secure "a reliable indication of knowledge, skills and understanding".

Is "reliable to one grade either way" reliable enough? If not, what do you propose to do about it?

Dr Saxton: I have had lots of conversations with Dame Glenys, although we never actually talked about this. As I understand it, the research shows that marking quality in England is pretty much the international gold standard and in things like mathematics it is even more reliable than the statistic you quote. There is a question about analysing marking reliability in the more extended subjects like history and English. The grades are within one percentage point of a boundary, which is where the interpretation either way comes from.

Overall, this is so critical and it is one of Ofqual's key duties. It is important that we do everything we can to make sure that marking is as good as it possibly can be. I would be willing as Chief Regulator to reopen that research and look at it again. My experience having done marking at university level is that the judgment of examiners is paramount. I hope that we would find marking is more reliable than the research has interpreted to date. I agree that it is critical and we should leave no stone unturned in ensuring that the public has confidence in the grades young people are awarded.

Q29 Ian Mearns: The important point is the public confidence. Ofqual would not want to unleash an avalanche or tidal wave of exam grade appeals by people because they did not have confidence in the grades being awarded. Of course, we do know that if grades are reliable to one grade either way, some of them will be higher than they should be and some of them will be lower than they should be. There is always a question about that. You do need to focus on that.

Dr Saxton: Sorry, Mr Mearns, to interrupt you. We are talking about academic judgment and points either side of a statistical boundary. When you do comparative judgment and you put pieces of work side by side,



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our expert senior examiners do have a strong sixth sense. I would look again.

We must not forget that this is also why the appeals system is part of any of the normal arrangements. When individuals feel that their grades have not done them justice, they can appeal.

Q30 **Ian Mearns:** You do still need to concentrate on that in terms of that reliability of grades across the board.

Dr Saxton: I will be looking at that, yes.

Q31 **Ian Mearns:** The 1% you have referred to is probably not right, but I would double check that if and when you are appointed.

You are currently a policy adviser to the Secretary of State for Education. Do you intend to stay on in any role such as that if appointed?

Dr Saxton: The Chief Regulator of Ofqual is a full-time role and I would throw myself into that wholeheartedly.

Q32 **Ian Mearns:** As a current policy adviser to the Secretary of State and having had that close role with the Secretary of State and his ministerial team, are you too close to the Government to lead an independent regulatory function?

Dr Saxton: Anyone who knows me knows that I am not afraid to speak my mind and act independently. Through my 20-year career, I have spent only the last year or just over 12 months now working here in the Government with the Secretary of State and with other Ministers and officials.

Am I independent? I am not a member of a political party. I was involved in the Labour Party review of the National Curriculum. I am interested in children, young people and learners. I am interested in policy, not politics. I have an entirely professional relationship with the Secretary of State, whom I had never met until he interviewed me in February 2020.

Q33 **Ian Mearns:** Therefore, do you think you will find it not too difficult to bat away any potential criticism in terms of protecting Ofqual's total independence from the Government?

Dr Saxton: I am not worried about that. The legislation and the way Ofqual is set up will help me. Ofqual is constituted as an independent entity. I would be answering to you, working with and communicating with Ministers, but my duty and the people I am interested in serving are children, young people and learners.

Q34 **Ian Mearns:** While in the post of policy adviser, I understand, qualifications were added to your remit due to the demands of the pandemic. What role did you have in the calculation of last summer's exams and the algorithm that replaced them? What specific advice, if any, did you give to the Secretary of State and his ministerial team on how to handle exams and assessments in 2020 and 2021?



Dr Saxton: In terms of qualifications being added to my remit, my first day in post was the day after schools had been closed, so I arrived to an environment of pandemic. You will remember. It was a frightening picture at the time. We had no idea how serious or not the public health situation would be. I arrived in the Department with the unique experience of 20 years on the ground in education but also I had been on the board of Ofqual for the previous two years. I stepped down to take up this post.

The decision to close schools, to cancel exams and to use a calculated grade to award young people their qualifications were not taken when I was involved in qualifications. Following those decisions being taken, I worked with officials, Ofqual, the sector and the Secretary of State.

It is important to understand that Ministers make decisions and the Secretary of State makes decisions. But as with Ofqual, the role of the adviser is to look 360 degrees and to give a fuller picture of all sides of arguments so that when a Secretary of State decides, he is informed. As the Committee will be aware, the job of officials is to make recommendations to the Secretary of State. The benefit of an adviser is to be independent of officials and show the 360.

Q35 **Chair:** Could I ask you about the independence? The exams controversy last year did raise a number of questions about the relationships between the DfE and Ofqual such as who had the ultimate authority and accountability and the extent that Ofqual was able to fulfil its role as an independent body.

Going back to 19 August, a DfE statement suggested that Ofqual took the decision to allow pupils to use centrally assessed grades and that the decision was one that it agreed with. But other statements, such as the direction from DfE for Ofqual to avoid grade inflation, suggests that it was the DfE who had ultimate authority over the grading process. Another incidence also paints a similar picture on 15 August 2020 when Ofqual published and then hastily withdrew guidance on the use of mock grades as a platform for appeal. You will well know what happened over that weekend.

The further thing I will raise is that when all this exams controversy took place, Ofqual effectively shut down and referred all media inquiries to the Department for Education.

I wanted your views on that. What is your understanding of the official relationship that should exist between the DfE and Ofqual? What steps will you take to ensure that Ofqual is a strong independent body that is accountable and commands public trust?

Dr Saxton: In terms of how Ofqual commands public confidence and trust, it is critical that it is clear that it is acting in the interests of learners. In terms of the official relationship, Ofqual needs to use all of its powers to speak out about Government policy if it has concerns about capacity. I would speak out if I felt that any of Government's decisions



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were going to undermine the interests of children, young people and learners.

Independence does not mean that you cannot have effective working relationships. If anything, I have gained in this last year effective means of communicating with officials, as with Ministers. I have full and frank discussions with everyone. That effective and open communication is critical to underpinning the ability to act independently. Independence should not mean that nobody can understand what the other is thinking or doing.

Q36 **Chair:** Will you be independently accountable to the media or will you refer everything do the DfE, as your predecessor did last year?

Dr Saxton: I cannot speak to how my predecessor acted or why. We should remember that events moved incredibly quickly last year. It was a fast-moving situation. I will work as Chief Regulator incredibly hard to build on my track record of listening to and working with stakeholders, continuing to be out in centres, meeting stakeholders going forward and doing everything I can to uphold public confidence in qualifications and in Ofqual.

Q37 **Chair:** Would you be accountable in the media as well as Parliament and the stakeholders?

Dr Saxton: The media has a key role as the fourth estate in terms of making sure that the public understands what is going on. I would be acting in the interests of children and young people, reporting to Parliament and working with the Government.

Q38 **Chair:** I am trying to understand whether, if something difficult happened, you would refer everything to the DfE, which blurs lines of independence and accountability, or whether you would be prepared to speak to the media yourself and be accountable to media and other stakeholders.

Dr Saxton: I would.

Q39 **Chair:** Finally, the Department for Education has not always been forthcoming in sharing minutes of some key meetings that shaped its decision regarding the 2020 exams. Given the huge decisions being made by the Department for Education at the moment and the profound effect on the lives of children—and you say that is your priority—do you agree that we should have a more transparent way of arriving at those decisions? If appointed, will you be prepared to publish minutes of Ofqual’s deliberations with the DfE on key issues?

Dr Saxton: Overarching that, I would need to take advice about that in respect of the Cabinet and Government office propriety rules to follow, which as a relatively new civil servant I do not know as well as other colleagues. I hope the Committee will forgive me for that.

Q40 **Chair:** Is it your first principle that sunlight is the best course of action?



Dr Saxton: I fully support all of the Nolan principles and I am conscious that openness is one of them. Ofqual has published over 30 sets of board minutes. That is transparent. Ministers and Government have the right to receive advice in confidence and I know the Secretary of State has answered to this Committee, as has the Chair of Ofqual, entirely in the spirit of openness, honesty and transparency. I would continue acting within the propriety of government operations.

Q41 **Ian Mearns:** I asked a question on a number of occasions about releasing the source data about what occurred last year and I was told it would be published. It was not and then it still was not. Would you make that a priority task? Other people out there would like to see that source data so they can make an independent assessment of what occurred.

Dr Saxton: Yes, I agree with you. We need people who are capable and qualified at analysing that data to have access to it. Ofqual's current officers would agree. As I understand it, they are working on it but, apparently, there are technicalities to do with legal clearances and things that I am not fully aware of. I am sure that they could write to you to give a further update on it. I agree that that does need to get into the public domain as soon as it is appropriate.

Q42 **Ian Mearns:** Even given the technicalities and the legalities, they are taking their time. We are now a year on and it has not been timely enough. If we are to have proper analysis of the source data to learn lessons, when do we want to learn the lessons? The sooner the better from that perspective, surely.

Dr Saxton: I agree that the source data needs to get into the public domain and I know that Ofqual is working on it. When I am in post, if it has not already been released, I commit to work on that and update the Committee about the progress of it.

In terms of lessons learned, hopefully we will not be in a scenario where we need to use a calculated arrangement again and we can have traditional exams.

Q43 **Christian Wakeford:** I am not too sure what more Ofqual needs to do in regards to releasing the data. Ofqual had it last year. It is just a case of publishing it.

To move further on from the Chair's last question on the impact that the algorithm had not only on young people but on teachers and the sector as a whole, what will you be doing to engage with young people from all backgrounds to make sure their views are being reflected in any changes to policy from Ofqual moving forward?

Dr Saxton: As I understand it, Mr Wakeford, making sure that no individuals can be identified from the data is being worked through.

In terms of engaging with children and young people going forward, I would like to explore with the Ofqual board and executive is a student



panel of some kind that is fully representative of young people. I also intend to spend as much time as is reasonable out in schools, colleges and centres meeting young people and also employers and listening to their needs, aspirations and issues.

Q44 Christian Wakeford: I would welcome a student panel but, while we have had mention of diversity before, how would you make sure that regional diversity is included as well so that there are representatives from all parts of the UK involved?

Dr Saxton: That is an important point. Having represented multi-ethnic inner-city schools and white working-class coastal schools, I can speak from personal experience about how different they are. The things that worked with my cohort in London are not the things that worked necessarily on the coast. It is important.

I do not know yet exactly how I would do that, but I would work with others to help make sure that the different issues and needs of the regions were also represented or voiced.

Q45 David Simmonds: The Committee wrote to the Secretary of State earlier in the year expressing concern about the system of teacher-assessed grades and the impact of those two consecutive years of grade inflation will have on future cohorts. I understand fully from having engaged with my local head teachers why there has been upward pressure on the grades.

Do you share that concern? Do you have a view about how in your role that impact could be mitigated?

Dr Saxton: It is important that grades have currency. They need to represent what young people know and can do so that the young people feel confident about them and also so that the users of the grades—employers, FE or universities—know what they mean. The issue is more that we have had two years of trying to award qualifications without examinations. In those arrangements, everybody could have a good day. In examinations, you are accountable for the work that you do or, in the staged assessments, the work that you have done.

Going forward to 2022, the mechanism of awarding grades through examinations is the most tried and tested and reliable approach. We need to reinstate that so that we can return to a situation where there is no question at all about the appropriateness of grades.

Q46 David Simmonds: Do you have a view about how that will be achieved?

Dr Saxton: Young people showing what they know and can do, sitting exams and taking staged assessments is what we need. It is so critical that young people know that they were involved and that they took an active step into the grades they were ultimately awarded.



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The arrangements for 2021 have tried hard to put teachers front and centre and able to work with young people on actual pieces of work so that everyone has clarity and tangible things to work on. In essence, we have to have tangible materials that return grades.

Examiners are a central part of this. We have professionals who understand what standards look like over time. You get to a point where you have marked enough scripts that you almost have an inbuilt sense of what an A looks like and what is really A*. You have a bank of scripts from the past that you are able to compare them with. We need to get ourselves back into a situation where young people have had agency, where experts have been involved and where a long train of materials from the past helps us all be confident in the standards awarded.

Q47 Chair: I was hearing you in the interview and you have given thorough answers. You clearly have a passion for this role.

I still remain slightly concerned about how seriously you take the grade inflation issue and whether there is a serious plan to deal with it, even with the realities of Covid and the effect it has had on children and exams, next year.

Dr Saxton: Chair, it is critical because, ultimately, if we do not get grading right, qualifications will not have currency. My own life has been transformed by qualifications. They have allowed me to work and study in seven different countries. I want that choice and opportunity for all young people.

I am avoiding being drawn specifically on grade inflation because it would not be appropriate to speculate. As I said, I have not seen what 2021 data looks like. As Chief Regulator, it is vitally important that I act in an objective, informed way, listening to experts who have had proper time to analyse the data. I cannot talk about what my approach to that may yet be. But I can commit to you that I will do everything in my power and I will use all of Ofqual's statutory objectives to ensure that grades retain currency for the young people and learners who need them.

Q48 Apsana Begum: I have a question on a slightly different tangent to what has been discussed.

In our letter to the Secretary of State in March, while we of course raised the issue of grade inflation, we also raised our concerns on the issue of unconscious bias. Ofqual's own analysis found that last year's teacher-assessed grades showed evidence of a bias against disadvantaged pupils and pupils with SEND and, in fact, a slight bias in favour of girls.

Will there be enough checks to mitigate against unconscious bias this year?

Dr Saxton: I agree that this is an important area. As somebody who has grown up with people with disability around me, I know how vital it is.



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There are a whole range of biases, primary bias and unconscious bias being two of them.

In learning the lessons from 2020 and also the lessons from teacher assessment more widely, Ofqual and the Department and awarding organisations this year are united in making sure that as much training and resources about the avoidance of bias are available to teachers, heads of centres and school leaders. There has been a consciousness about it and how to avoid any kinds of bias in awarding results, which has been a brilliant part of professional development for the whole of the school and assessment community this year.

I am hopeful that the quality assurance arrangements are filtering results and looking to make sure that the kinds of bias you talk about are not being returned by the results as the data is being returned this year.

Q49 **Apsana Begum:** The big focus has been on professional development and making sure teachers are trained and equipped to ensure that the biases are mitigated against.

Dr Saxton: Yes.

Q50 **Apsana Begum:** My next question is about the appeals system. A recent survey by the Social Mobility Foundation last month found that 38% of pupils from low-income families are not confident that their grades this year will reflect their ability. Other research has found that over half of pupils from low-income families think they will be unable to appeal against their grades this year.

You will be starting in post on 17 September. That is the same date as the deadline for students to submit appeals. How do you plan to manage the appeals system so that it is fair for all pupils?

Dr Saxton: I am hopeful that the arrangements in place will have worked well enough that the appeals system, although it is ready and standing, is not needed. I am sad to hear that some people in the sector are not aware of the appeals arrangements because they have been better advertised through social media and have been funded. The extent that the sector has tried to share that information is unprecedented.

We have worked hard to make sure that appeals could be prioritised based on urgency. The appeals from those young people who need them to ensure progression to HE should be coming in first. The exam boards will triage appeals based on need. If there are appeals still ongoing at the point I take up the post, the most urgent activity will be to make sure that they are all heard and resolved as quickly as possible.

Q51 **Apsana Begum:** It was interesting that you mentioned the way in which it was communicated. We have seen highlighted more during the pandemic in this particular area how many low-income families are digitally excluded. Even thinking about my constituency last year, a number of people did not know how to access the information. A number



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of families did not know what the appeal system was and how they would go about navigating it. In the Committee we have looked at things like social capital, contacts and networks to understand how to challenge a decision that someone may feel is unfair.

Are you thinking about particular measures in terms of managing the appeals system that take into account that low-income families often feel excluded, do not have the social capital that others may have, would find it a hard system to navigate and therefore might not come forward in the first place?

Dr Saxton: We know that young people and their families know what their school is. That is one of the key reasons that in the appeals arrangements this year the first port of call is the school. Youngsters and families know who to go to. They know who the heads of the schools are. Hopefully, that will overcome these concerns. Head teachers have communicated to their families and will continue to do so in the run-up to results to make it clear what they can do.

My own experience with inner-London schools and then coastal schools is that—you are right—there is a digital divide, but most families will have a mobile phone, even if it is a shared device. I know that Ofqual has used that to try to make sure that communications are mobile enabled so that where families engage with social media, they can do it that way.

This year, the immediate issue is making sure that families are aware that their school is the first port of call. School leaders continue to reach out to families to make sure that they are aware of their options if they have concerns about their grades.

Q52 **Kim Johnson:** Dr Saxton, there was evidence that there is bias towards those children of low socioeconomic status and black pupils. How would you mitigate against this?

Dr Saxton: In the global context and in the research I am aware of, in results to date one would expect to see bias more closely in teacher-led processes than in exams. That is one of the reasons people like the Secretary of State talk about exams being the fairest form of assessment. Marking is done by people who do not know the children and cannot bring any biases into their marking. They just have the materials in front of them to work on.

We have been in a totally different context because of the pandemic. The arrangements this year for fairness required that no expert marker and no machine moderation could know what young people had or had not studied and what they were capable of. Brilliant teachers needed to make the decisions to meet the needs of their young people this year. Because of everyone's agreement that biases must be avoided, such a lot of resource and time has been invested in training and support materials.

Q53 **Kim Johnson:** Are you hopeful that black kids and working-class kids will not be disproportionately affected by teacher assessments in this process



this year?

Dr Saxton: Yes, I am hopeful of that because of the extent of the training and support materials that have been put in place. As Chief Regulator, I would be particularly excited about the powers of the awareness objective. Biases in assessment have gained prominence, unfortunately, through the pandemic. I want to make sure that we continue to build on that work until bias is eradicated from qualifications.

Q54 Christian Wakeford: In regards to upcoming reforms, it was Ofqual's response to the Department's review on post-16 qualifications that stated that the cuts that are likely to be made are more likely to affect a higher proportion of learners with protected characteristics, whether disability, ethnic background or gender, who would normally be considered as being disadvantaged. How do you plan to serve these groups if these cuts go ahead?

Dr Saxton: In terms of the ongoing qualification review, I fully support its intentions, which are to increase the quality of the qualifications that are on offer to young people and learners and also increase clarity. Ofqual's important duty is to make sure that the qualifications are clear to young people and that there are not too many qualifications around a similar area at the same level. I see this activity as exercising the principles of good regulation to make sure that qualifications are necessary and high quality and that it is clear to the users what they are for.

Q55 Christian Wakeford: You mentioned improving quality and clarity. I support the notion. Do we also need to improve choice for candidates moving forward? To what extent are these cuts hindering that process?

Dr Saxton: I completely agree with you about choice. For me, this is why this role is so exciting. I see it as an opportunity to make sure that young people understand and realise the choices they have.

In terms of qualification choice, there are some myths about the review at the moment. For example, I worked with young people who often would take two A-levels and one applied general qualification. There is no intention to remove that sort of route. But there are over 100 level-3 qualifications about English for speakers of other languages. That is incredibly confusing. How is a young person to know which of those 100 is appropriate? I am not saying that any of those are subject to the review, but that is an example of why clarity is needed. Where there are choices, it has to be clear why there are choices and the choices cannot be confusing. Young people should not just be doing qualifications that other people have done before them.

Q56 Christian Wakeford: This Committee has made a great number of references in regards to full careers guidance in schools. In extending and promoting that choice, to what extent is there a big push back onto the schools? If there are 100 courses all offering almost the same thing, what is the career guidance saying? What can you do through Ofqual to make



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sure that schools, the Department and everyone else is hand-in-glove to make sure that the real guidance children need is there so they can make that best choice?

Dr Saxton: I could not agree with you more about the importance of career guidance. In fact, in schools that I have led, we started working with young people from the age of eight on career guidance.

One of the positive things about the changes to the Ofsted school inspection framework is that they started a whole movement of teachers discussing curriculum and therefore qualification specifications not just with each other but with parents and families. That work sits nicely with these reforms to make sure that everybody in schools at all levels is aware at a detailed level of the choices that exist. Ofqual's awareness duty is critical to building on that.

Q57 **Tom Hunt:** I was interested when Apsana asked an important question about unconscious bias with teacher-assessed grades. I am particularly interested in special educational needs and how that can be an issue.

I am an associate governor at a special school where most of the kids probably will not do the traditional GCSEs next year. What is your experience, knowledge and approach to qualifications that are more suited to young people at special schools? How would you assess them and the quality of those qualifications? What should the approach be?

I was interested in hearing a lot about post-qualification admissions at the moment and how the Government might look at that. What are your views on that? Could that potentially benefit young people from disadvantaged backgrounds or potentially make things harder for them?

Thirdly, to do with your CV, I know you have had some experience with apprenticeships but it does seem that you have very much an arts background. Are you confident that if you do take on this role, you will be able to surround yourself with other experts who have scientific backgrounds or other backgrounds so that you can draw upon that expertise and do not view things from just one perspective, potentially?

Dr Saxton: If I start with the last one, you are right that I have an arts background, but that makes me quite sympathetic to applied, vocational study. I did not take a traditional academic route into school leadership.

In terms of apprenticeships, I was involved in the development of the teaching apprenticeship standard and I very much hope that more work on those continues so that over time it is not just a graduate-only route.

I set up an entire free school, the purpose of which was to lead young people towards apprenticeship routes, not only degree apprenticeships but including degree apprenticeships. I worked closely with the two major employers in the town, Eurotunnel and EDF, which were not employing local young people. The point of it was to make sure that they would and that they would get involved with the school curriculum from the first days. The interesting careers there were in digital.



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The thing in common between EDF, Eurotunnel and the Port of Dover was that they were not employing young people. A large factor was that they needed more foreign languages. They were working in 26 different languages. This free school was clear about success without selection, opening the door to apprenticeships by close relationships with the employers, and also then how having a modern foreign language would help these young people secure those apprenticeships.

Reversing the order, if I may, I could probably talk to you for another hour about PQA. I am completely passionate about it. When the Secretary of State was interviewing me, he asked me, if I could do anything if I were him, what would I do? I said, "PQA". Having worked in elite universities and in university admissions in schools in tough areas, I have seen far too many times bright kids not get to the destinations they could because they were not confident about the outcomes they might get and, when they get results that are better than they expected, they cannot stare down a whole year because they have caring or other responsibilities. It would be transformational to the disadvantaged if we could get to post-qualification admissions. I hope that in post in Ofqual I can work with the sector to try to deliver it, although I accept that there are some big systemic hurdles.

Q58 Tom Hunt: I assume, therefore, bearing in mind what you said about vocational education and the ability of business to shape curriculums and so on, that you welcome these skills improvement plans, which were in the FE White Paper. I imagine you would have a role in trying to work out how that would work in practice and how local business would shape curriculum offers at FE colleges.

On that final point about post-qualification admissions, I have heard that potentially the personal statement had been dropped from that. I guess you were thinking that maybe the personal statement benefits those who go to a particular school. But surely, on the other hand, if you come from a more difficult background, the personal statement gives you an opportunity to outline some of the challenges you may have experienced. I would not want the personal statement to be dropped and for potentially there to be unintended consequences and for some of those from disadvantaged backgrounds could miss out.

Dr Saxton: In terms of PQA, I am not involved in the policy detail but I fully support the intention and I would do whatever Ofqual could to help deliver it. The Government has confirmed its intention to do that.

In terms of the further education White Paper, I welcome all of those moves. I am also conscious that a lot of this will be in the jurisdiction of the Institute. I know there is an effective working relationship between the Institute and Ofqual at the moment. It is right that the Institute will have the relationships with employers over the curriculum and those quality choices. Ofqual's critical role will be to give the Kitemark to the assessment at the end of apprenticeships. Yes, I welcome this reform.



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In terms of special needs, if I may, as a school leader I have run special needs provision across five schools. I have run three different provisions ranging from autism spectrum disorder and moderate learning difficulties. I have experience in that as a school leader. It is important that we make sure that all young people have access to the qualifications that give them choices over their futures. That experience is understanding what it is like to be a child with special needs going through the qualification system. That is the lens with which I would act as Chief Regulator.

Q59 Tom Hunt: Do you therefore accept that it could be the case for certain children perhaps with quite significant disabilities that the conventional GCSEs may not necessarily be the right option?

Dr Saxton: Before I committed to a statement like that, I would like to look at how digital and assistive technologies could help so that young people with SEND would not need to rely on scribes, for example. There are things that we should do. We do not want to get into a scenario where we have a two-tier system. We want everyone to achieve the best possible qualifications they can. It would be interesting to see if digital technologies could help support that.

Q60 Chair: I have been encouraged by what you have said about your passion for vocational education and apprenticeships. I do not know whether Ofqual is fulfilling the 2.3% target for the number of apprenticeships in public-sector organisations. You may or may not be aware of that. Whatever the figure, what would you do to open up jobs and opportunities for apprentices into Ofqual? Could you offer every job, subject to certain conditions, to an apprentice? It could be a higher degree-level apprenticeship right down to level 2.

Dr Saxton: I do not know specific numbers but I could write, if helpful. I asked Ofqual about this just last week. It does have a few apprentices employed. As I understand it, at the moment they are largely in the finance, HR and operations directorate. The chief operating officer and the chair expressed real difference in looking at where else within Ofqual there could be apprentices. I know that a couple of its new appointees are former apprentices. Ofqual has worked with apprentices and then taken them on, if that makes sense.

My experience of apprentices has always been positive and brilliant, so I welcome that, but I need to get my feet under the table a bit and will be able to come back to you about where else Ofqual could use apprentices.

Q61 Chair: As chief executive, I believe what you are saying about apprenticeships and skills. It has been encouraging to hear you say that. If you wanted to make it happen, you could transform the organisation by hugely increasing the number of apprentices that gained employment.

Dr Saxton: I agree that apprentices can be transformational to organisations. I am conscious also though that I do not know Ofqual that well. Its expertise is important and so—



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Q62 **Chair:** Yes, subject to clear conditions, but where possible, if you had the vision and the will as the chief executive, you could bring in a lot of apprentices.

Dr Saxton: I would be happy to come back to you about that when I am more informed, Chair.

Q63 **Chair:** Could I ask about your feelings about the Skills Bill, which will give the Institute the final decision on which regulated technical qualifications will operate in future? The Government's level 3 and below review, according to Ministers, could reduce the number of vocational qualifications in this space by about 60%. If GCSEs and A-levels were managed more directly by the Department, what would Ofqual's role be? How will you manage the relationship in managing qualifications between Ofqual and IfATE?

Dr Saxton: If we think back to why Ofqual was created in the first place, as I understand it from talking to people like Sir Jon Coles, who were involved in its creation, there was a strong concern at the time that policy and curriculum decisions were trumping regulatory decisions and that for qualifications to have meaningful ongoing currency, regulatory decisions needed to be given the power to be made on their own and certainly outside of ministerial decision making. All of those conditions still apply.

The ongoing work with the qualification review, with skills, with the development of T-levels and all of these apprenticeship standards, in aggregate, there is more qualification and assessment choice than there has ever been. I would argue that the need for rigorous and independent regulation is greater than it has ever been.

Q64 **Chair:** What will be the relationship between Ofqual and IfATE in terms of deciding which qualifications are inspected by which organisation, for example?

Dr Saxton: At its simplest, the curriculum side of it sits with IfATE. Once the curriculum has been agreed and approved to go forward, Ofqual's job will be to make sure that any endpoint assessments and examinations continue to assess the curriculum that has been determined by IfATE and the employers and that receivers of the endpoint assessments and qualifications know that the awards they end up with accurately reflect what they know and can do. The relationship should work well. At its heart, it is essentially a separation between curriculum and regulation.

Q65 **Chair:** In the past, especially after what happened last year, it was felt that skills, particularly BTECs, were often forgotten and were last-minute and everyone was focusing on what was happening in schools. There was a lot of anger from the skills/further education community about what had happened and the fact that sorting out the BTECs took quite a few more days in the middle of the controversy.

Will you ensure that you will give skills and FE study in your role a parity of esteem with traditional academic education and make sure that it is



not seen as second to do rather than first?

Dr Saxton: As I said at the beginning when Ms Begum asked me about what I said in my interview—and I absolutely mean it—building on the work about vocational technical qualifications and skills that has begun is the key strategic mission. I can give you that commitment, Chair.

My heart goes out to the young people who were affected by the delay last summer that you referred to. I can assure you and those young people that it was not intentional and in no way did it reflect any issues about parity of esteem. In fact, if anything good has come out of the pandemic, it is around the parity of esteem we have given to general and other vocational technical qualifications because, for the first time, Ministers meet monthly with providers of vocational technical qualifications, which had not happened before the pandemic.

The framework with which Ofqual regulates vocational technical qualifications has been reviewed. Historically it operated on a risk-based approach and now it is very much driven by principles. That principle-led approach is central to the parity of esteem. I am conscious that Ofqual has invested significantly in this area. As I said, the vocational directorate is now twice the size of the general qualifications directorate. I support that and I will be closely attentive to Ofqual having the expertise and the resources it needs to continue this important work.

Q66 **Chair:** You have a passion for FE as much as you do academic?

Dr Saxton: Yes. As I said, I have worked with young people who wanted to do a hybrid approach. As an interesting example that illustrates my commitment to FE, as a school leader, I inherited a school with some courses that I knew the local FE college was delivering with better outcomes and much better facilities. I took the approach that as a town we were there to serve our community and I moved some students into the local FE provider because I believed it was in the interests of those learners. The relationships between schools and FE providers should be much more collaborative. We should be acting together in the interests of the communities we serve.

Chair: Thank you very much. I appreciate your coming here today. You are clear that the concerns of the Committee are about grade inflation, exams next year, FE and skills, and also unconscious bias and disadvantaged pupils being unfairly impacted. I appreciate your answers. On the whole, they have been pretty thorough. You have sustained nearly two hours of questioning. Good luck and thank you very much indeed for your appearance today. It is much appreciated.