

Written evidence submitted by Mrs Heather Akehurst

I am the Chief Executive of Open Awards, and Awarding Organisation for Ofqual regulated qualifications and an Access Validating Agency for Access to Higher Education Diplomas. We also undertake external quality assurance on those Standards that The Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education are responsible for. Finally I am the Mother of a 14 year old and 18 year old. Open Awards specialises in Entry Level to Level 3 qualifications (including Functional Skills) and particularly works to support SEN schools and prisons. Our offer means that we mainly work with young people and adults outside of mainstream schooling. We have over 650 Centres using our qualifications.

Open Awards has remained open during Covid-19 and has not furloughed staff. We have no plans to do so and are providing as much support to our Centres as we can keeping them up to date with changing guidance and getting them ready to ensure we can award this Summer. However this is a challenge for us and the moves to award Functional Skills, VNVQ and Access to HE Diplomas through predicted grades will mean more work for us in quality assurance. In addition and as a small contribution we are now offering free recognition for voluntary work during this period and to recognise front line staff. We have already issued over 200 e-certificates and know that some organisations are planning on using them when they can properly celebrate their successes.

Whilst Open Awards has worked hard with Ofqual and QAA to put in place processes (still being agreed) we believe there are some significant challenges and have real concerns in some areas. I will touch particularly on Functional Skills, Access to HE Diplomas and Apprenticeships.

In some ways Open Awards is better prepared than other Functional Skills providers as we have used remote invigilation for some centres already and indeed have received funding from Ufl VocTech recently to progress this and pilot other means of invigilation. However, the vast majority of centres will use predicted grades. For some centres they have used our preferred 'mock' papers that we provide and this plus teaching from there will provide the best model to predict grades. However training providers will face a difficult task estimating who would achieve a pass and then the Awarding Organisation (AO) will need to test that based on evidence and previous performance. For Level 2 Maths it is not unusual for over 50% of a cohort to fail first time – how will training providers be able to choose who fails and AOs then check this. In addition, it would be relatively easy for that provider to then re-submit saying there has been additional teaching (even if there hasn't) and claim the certificate. I believe this year will unfairly advantage this cohort and those that may also be treated this way depending on how long the extraordinary regulatory framework remains in place. Unless handled well it also has the potential to cause discord between training provider and AOs at a time when partnership working is essential.

Many AOs have also taken the very early decision to furlough staff and this will undoubtedly affect their ability to provide robust quality assurance that is rigorous and consistent. Privately we have already heard from 1 AO that unless additional funding is granted they will not quality assure the results provided by their training providers.

The concern about the decision to predict grades for Access to HE learners is much deeper than that. For most centres (particularly Colleges) Diplomas were two thirds of the way being taught when lockdown occurred. This means that many subjects will not have been taught

and may have no crossover at all from other subjects. For example if someone is on a Combined Sciences Diploma (that could lead to Degrees in Medicine, Physiotherapy, Dentistry etc) they may have done the Biology and Physics units but not started on Chemistry at all. Providers are therefore being asked to predict grades with no evidence.

Additionally most Access to HE learners will gain confidence throughout their course and see their attainment increase but unless they were already on that trajectory will now lose that opportunity. Moreover they will start an expensive first year at University having not completed a full study programme and may well struggle to cope with the course (having not completed their Diploma) and rigours of study. This may well impact on the retention rates of Access to HE learners in their first year and I would like to see the Office for Students not only monitoring this but requiring Universities to provide additional support. This is very different to an A Level student who had mainly finished their study and had the benefit of mock examinations.

Access to HE learners are being told if they don't want their grade to be predicted they have to re-sit the course. However financially this is not viable for them, many of whom are juggling caring responsibilities and/or working whilst studying. If this is to be a genuine offer they should not have to pay to repeat their course (or that part of it).

I believe providers were prematurely advised to stop delivery on Access to HE courses as it would have been relatively easy to move to online provision and adjusted grades to account for the change. Many providers sought to do this and have been told to cease by QAA.

I have mentioned Apprenticeships as there are changes that could be adopted to help them through these times. I am not in favour of allowing them to do their Functional Skills later and after their End Point Assessment where this is a barrier to them entering Gateway. This is partly because of the lack of data available (more later) as to failure and then dropout rates because of a failure to achieve, particularly Maths Functional Skills. Passing the EPA and then failing the Apprenticeship because of Functional Skills would be severely damaging for the integrity of the programme and lead to high levels of public dis-satisfaction. Similarly when would the EPAO be paid – there is a risk they could undertake EPA activity for which they would not be paid. The alternative is to of course consider whether Functional Skills are required and this could be done as a risk analysis for each Standard. It does however raise a later question about whether they were necessary in the first instance.

The real issue with data on apprentices is that we have very little of value. ESFA does not track them on their journey so we do not know how many drop out before Gateway and why, how many leave the programme but remain employed by the same employer, how many take resits and how many fail because of the Functional Skills requirements.

Regardless of the qualification losing so much study time is detrimental to any learner. Greater emphasis needs to swiftly be placed on moving schools, colleges and training providers to positions where they can offer far more robust blended learning. This can widen the curriculum considerably and allow for much greater resilience at an individual and national level. There will be groups that have benefitted from the move and its important to learn these lessons quickly.

Mental health of learners will be a major issue in any return and during the Covid-19 response now. We know from our constant contact with our Centres what innovative measures they are putting in place to deal with this but they will need strengthened support the longer this continues. Schools have been left to devise their own communications strategy appropriate for their age levels and it would be helpful to have age appropriate tools

and guidance for teachers to use about Covid-19, dealing with grief and death and planning to return. (Open Awards would be happy to design them at a very reasonable cost!)

The affect will also differ greatly depending on personal circumstances. A child who has been able to stay at home with a garden, a personal laptop, access to Netflix (other providers also available), online 'other' lessons (my daughter has her dance lessons via Zoom), space in the house to work and parental support to do lessons (and do them well) will fare significantly better than a child whose family is struggling financially, lives in a flat, has no/shared PC access and no garden. Similarly there will be a much larger number of children and young people who have to deal with grief and bereavement than we have ever seen in our lifetime and without their peer support. In addition we should under estimate the stress felt by children, young people and partners/carers where their family has frontline workers, particularly in health and social care.

We need counselling available at each setting and access to other health and wellbeing strategies such as Mindfulness, Meditation for students and for their teachers but properly trained and resourced – not an 'add-on'. Equally I would be looking for resources into youth work outside school – this generation need somewhere to go, to release their energy, stress – it's needed as soon as lockdown eases otherwise we face an explosion of youth crime. Young people are struggling with this and this will grow as we approach what would be school holiday time.

For young people approaching transition – into secondary school, into Sixth Form or joining University additional guidance is needed early to fill a current vacuum. I would welcome provision of virtual days and early support out of lockdown. We must also not forget those 16 and 18 year olds who had plans to begin an apprenticeship and are now finding those places withdrawn and unlikely to be replaced in such numbers in the first 12 months. I would like to see consideration of a pre-apprenticeship programme that bridges that gap, is publicly funded and maintains continuity for when the economy begins to recover. I would be happy to be involved in discussing this further.

Open Awards works with many SEN schools and in more usual times host a quarterly physical SEN Forum in the North West where we bring people together to share best practice, moans and funding advice. An SEN teacher in a mainstream school can feel very lonely. Since lockdown we have had to provide (at no cost and open to all) weekly online SEN Forums (rising to 2 a week from this week) because of the need to receive and give support across this cohort. Interestingly lockdown has suited many of these young people and their attainment may well rise but a return to school will prove challenging for them.

There is also a financial impact for those Awarding Organisations that take their responsibilities even more seriously at this time. We have to spend far more time working with our Regulators to produce the new frameworks, then disseminate that to Centres and deal with their queries before beginning the task of quality assuring the predictions given by schools, colleges and training providers.

What should we do moving forward?

I have already given some ideas regarding:

- A pre-apprenticeship programme (use benefits as wages)
- Support for schools and colleges on return
- Funding to youth provision
- Transition year support

Additional measures should include:

- Provision of laptops to all school age households – this made a massive difference to those accessing home schooling
- Provision of laptops to some college students – this is harder – maybe linked to parental income like the University Maintenance Allowance
- Learn the lessons – what has worked well
- Increase the blended learning offer in schools and colleges
- Scrutiny on AOs and AVAs who are required to have Business Resilience Plans but particularly those who accessed furlough funding
- National mandatory training for school teachers and lecturers on preparing and delivering remotely
- Requirements for all schools and colleges to capture assignment, exam information electronically so it is much more available, if needed
- Guidance on 'returning' and managing the ebb and flow
- Pulling the IFATE consultation on Simplifying External Quality Assurance

I am happy to provide more detail on any aspects.

Heather Akehurst

28 April 2020

April 2020