

Last summer, Ken Boston, chief executive of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, described the marking of English school exams as “years behind the rest of the world”. While comparing the design of national tests to a Rolls Royce, he likened marking processes to a Morris Minor. His remarks are a reminder that investment in the quality of test design is significant and strategic, but investment in the ‘human capital’ required to deliver those levels of assessment is poor.

The examination system runs at near capacity at key periods of the academic year. For the most part, the 68,000 examiners, moderators and markers in England fulfil the needs of the awarding bodies, but there are shortages in some subject areas and the many ‘first time’ examiners receive relatively little professional training or development. Add to that the increasing numbers of applications for ‘post-results services’ – checks on marking quality after the

awarding bodies have issued results – and you begin to understand Ken Boston’s view.

If the government is going to meet its targets for developing an education system that matches the best in the world, then educational assessment needs to become a more integral part of the teaching process. Better quality education means better quality assessment that rightly recognises the achievements of all students on a fair and equitable basis.

Professional recognition

What’s more, the system of assessment is something that examiners, markers and moderators are involved with but feel unable to influence. Many examiners feel their role in assessment goes unrecognised by their peers. Examiners who were once treated with respect for their assessment efforts are now frequently met with scepticism.

While most professions – doctors, accountants and marketers – rely on the support of a professional body to represent their interests, there has been a vacuum of such a body for educational assessors involved with general qualifications and National Curriculum tests. Earlier this year,

the National Assessment Agency (NAA), a division of the QCA, set up an Institute Programme to finance the launch of such a professional organisation to fill this vacuum.

We’re pleased to announce that the Institute of Educational Assessors (IEA) is now open to members and will provide all of the services that you would expect from a professional body: different membership grades to reflect experience and expertise; a website and magazine providing up-to-date information and insights; a series of regional and national events to network and contribute to professional development. Other benefits include tax advice and discounted professional indemnity insurance. Initial start-up funding has been provided by the NAA, but research has indicated that the new Institute should be a self-financing, independent body with charitable status.

Creating confidence

Once the Institute comes into being, what sort of issues will it help examiners tackle? One of the key concerns is around confidence in assessment. Stories in the press about sending papers offshore or administrative staff marking exams don’t help to professionalise our industry. While the awarding bodies may be creating greater cost efficiencies by investing in new assessment methods such as online marking, this needs to be matched by greater investment to support those who actually do the job.

In February 2005, a report by PricewaterhouseCoopers estimated the cost of the 2004-05 examination session to be around £610m, including £370m on running organisations involved in assessment and £240m in staff time. With this level of investment, the stakes are high and we cannot hope to have confidence in a system to which we do not dedicate the required resources. In the words of Greg Watson, chief executive of awarding body OCR, what we need is



The creation of the Institute of Educational Assessors will help to professionalise an industry that needs more recognition for its efforts

An Institute for you

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In 2004, the National Assessment Agency approached independent research companies MORI and Taylor Nelson Sofres to find out what examiners look for in a professional body. The 1,600 examiners, markers and moderators surveyed indicated three significant areas of need:

- A desire for recognition and status, particularly amongst those expert practitioners who have been contributing to the exams and testing system for many years.
- High-quality information about the wider assessment system, ranging from the real impact of new technology to guidance on improving assessment practice.
- An independent voice for assessors with which to deliver feedback to the government and other key stakeholders in the system.

One examiner surveyed said the Institute would ideally “provide a forum for assessors to meet examination boards on a more equal footing, to raise criticisms. Something that currently, it is difficult to achieve on an individual basis.”

There was overwhelming support for the formation of an Institute: according to the 2004 MORI survey, 95% of respondents believed there was a real need to improve the quality of assessment and 80% believed that an Institute would help assessors realise this aim.



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“better not cheaper assessment”. Putting confidence back in assessment means we need to take a strategic perspective on our current systems, benchmarking our strengths and weaknesses against those of other industries or other assessment systems. Building an education system that is fit for the 21st century means integrating assessment into teaching more holistically. We need formative assessment that informs and supports learning as much as summative assessment that measures a level of achievement at a particular time.

Hopes for the future

Over the coming years the role of the Institute will be to champion better quality assessment through the professionalisation of those involved in examining, marking and moderating of general qualifications, national tests and classroom-based assessment. Only through this process can we really begin to address some of the inherent shortfalls in the system and together develop an assessment system that meets the needs of today’s society.

Many of you will agree with Neil Day, senior examiner for Music Technology, that the formation of the Institute is long overdue: “With all the hard work that students put into their work and the examiners put into marking, the Institute will give a sense of status and recognition. At some stage we will all wonder how we coped without the IEA, and how the our qualifications system managed without it for all those years.”