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If you would like to comment on any of the articles in this issue, please contact Sylvia Green – Director, Research Division. Email: researchprogrammes@cambridgeassessment.org.uk

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Foreword

Those reading this issue of *Research Matters* should not tire of reading before they reach the final article by Bramley and Wilson. And of course, this is not a cue to skip every other article. Bramley and Wilson have continued assiduously to examine the assets and limitations of expert judgement – this article on judging item difficulty accompanies continuing work on the comparison between 'statistics' and 'judgement' in awarding. The properties of 'comparable outcomes' have been more widely understood by journalists, teachers and the wider population, not least due to the central role that comparable outcomes is likely to play in responding to the undoubted challenges posed by new GCSEs and A levels – these being phased in over a three-year period. But while the official requirements continue to emphasise 'judgement informed by statistics' at the heart of awarding, we should not depart from continued efforts to understand the precise characteristics of expert judgement, applied to patterns of outcomes, and to expectations (not least in the shape of exam questions). The acknowledgement from the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) of Cambridge Assessment's continuing work on the role which judgement can and should play may all too easily be forgotten as 'comparable outcomes' comes to dominate standards in the coming protracted period of intense change. If reminders that the comparable outcomes approach was designed as an approach to manage change are to be heeded (Bramley, Dawson & Newton, 2014), we must all remember that judgement must not permanently be laid to one side.

From the last article, to the first...

A series of articles from Cambridge has explored whether England's 'wide diet at 16, narrowing at 18' is both typical and educationally prudent. Our conclusion (through careful transnational comparison) is that far more countries have this pattern than is presumed. Part of our approach is to see this pattern as part of the total and delicate set of educational arrangements – culminating in high-quality, highly efficient, short-duration first degree programmes. The impact of specialism, choice and future route therefore is of profound interest; Sutch, Zanini and Rodeiro throw key patterns into sharp relief – a vital issue for both individuals, society and the economy.

Tim Oates, CBE Group Director, Assessment Research and Development

Editorial

The first four articles in this issue report on a range of studies in Higher Education (HE) contexts. Sutch, Zanini and Vidal Rodeiro, explore the way in which students' experiences in the secondary phase of education impact on the choices that they make when deciding where and what to study at HE level. These interactions have implications for future earnings and social mobility. In their research, Darlington and Bowyer focus on current undergraduate students of Architecture and the extent to which A level study in Mathematics and Further Mathematics prepared them for their studies. As well as providing insights into the perceived usefulness of A level study, this research highlights the need for detailed guidance so that students can be well informed when making A level choices according to their future ambitions. In his study of the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) tariff, Gill discusses the difficulties in comparing qualifications and the range of factors involved. He recognises that there are no easy solutions to the problems identified in his study given the extremely complex challenges involved. Carroll and Dodds discuss what we can learn about the concept and assessment of creativity through their research into Drama and Theatre in HE education. This is an interesting and perceptive study which provides useful insights into definitions and practices.

Johnson's article takes us in a different direction as he reports on a study into the way in which senior examiners communicate with their team members in a digital environment. His research highlights the importance of feedback, shared understanding and the relationships involved. In their article Wilson, Werno and Smith describe some encouraging findings in the context of the assessment of reading in reformed Modern Foreign Languages. The introduction of a wider range of text types, including more authentic texts, was welcomed by teachers involved in this study.

Research by Hughes and Shaw seeks to identify and explain the problem of under-used marks. This problem can have a detrimental effect on the reliability of measurement and discrimination. The authors make suggestions for strategies to address these problems and to support examiners in using the full mark range. In the final article, Bramley and Wilson describe two methods designed to support the maintenance of test standards. The evidence from their research suggests that their methods could be used to provide additional evidence about the difficulty of questions.

Sylvia Green Director, Research Division