An international focus group to investigate the regulation of examinations and qualifications

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Executive summary

This is a report summarising findings from a focus group conducted with 12 senior education officials from nine countries between 3rd and 5th September 2008. The group addressed issues relating to the regulation of examinations and qualifications.

The focus group followed up research conducted in 2007, and addressed hypotheses in the following areas:

- Technical excellence versus political legitimacy
- Organisations involved in exams and qualifications
- (De-)centralisation of exams and qualifications systems
- Intervention: What do countries do when things go wrong?
- The future: globalisation and technology in assessment

The focus group's discussions cast light on all the areas, even when the group did not accept the proposed hypotheses in their entirety. The group gave most support to the idea that public confidence in exams and qualifications systems can be improved by having a judicious balance between centralising and de-centralising features.

The report concludes with a section in which the extent and nature of support for each hypothesis are discussed. Where possible, hypotheses are reconceptualised and/or reworded in ways that seem to provide better insight, in the light of running the focus group.

Principal amongst the revised hypotheses is the proposition that political legitimacy can be seen as a key concept for understanding whether or not an examination or qualifications system is successful. The technical excellence of the system is a key contributor to this political legitimacy, but not an alternative to it.

Introduction

Ofqual is the regulator of examinations, qualifications and national tests in England (see: www.ofqual.gov.uk). Given its remit, it is natural that this organisation is interested in regulation. Also, Ofqual believes that it can gain insight by studying practice in other education systems around the world. For these reasons Ofqual has conducted some international research into the regulation of exams and qualifications.

Regulation is a shifting and contentious topic. In the course of this broad research project, two events have impacted on the researcher's understanding of the concept of regulation. These are:

- the setting up of Ofqual as a regulator separate from the body responsible for delivering government curriculum and assessment policy (the Qualifications & Curriculum Authority – QCA) and independent from direct Ministerial control

- the ongoing banking crisis, which has also been described as a crisis for 'light-touch regulation'.

These major changes to the external context have brought complexity to the project. Such complexity influenced the researcher to choose a relatively broad definition of regulation:

> Regulation in the context of exams and qualifications systems can be understood as: actions taken by or on behalf of government, arrangements put in place, or states of affairs that exist that (are intended to) give the public confidence in the exams and qualifications system.

This research has had two main phases. The first phase was conducted in the summer and autumn of 2007 (see: Boyle, 2008). This phase of the research was exploratory and hypothesis generating. The work consisted of three data collection exercises:

- A review of literature describing international examination systems

- The generation of summary documents from the archives of the INCA and Eurydice international education information resources (see: www.inca.org.uk and www.eurydice.org).

- The completion of a constructed-response questionnaire by international education experts.

The main hypotheses generated by the 2007 phase of the research included:

Centralisation & de-centralisation in examinations systems

- All jurisdictions ensure public confidence in the exams and qualifications process.
- Jurisdictions' techniques for defending public interest typically contain a mixture of centralising and de-centralising features.
- Centralising and de-centralising features can occur at different points in examinations and qualifications processes (for example defining qualifications standards, assessment, awarding certificates).
- Jurisdictions can change their orientations from centralised to de-centralised (or vice versa) over time.

Vesting of powers relating to exams and qualifications

- Several jurisdictions in the study had set up national bodies performing technical tasks concerning exams and qualifications which were independent from (or 'at arm's length from') political control.
- Such independent bodies had substantial provision and distribution functions and so were not regulators, but each of them carried out one or more tasks that would be carried out by the regulator in England.
- In some ways, setting up an independent body to carry out exams tasks is a de-centralising measure. However, most jurisdictions with such arm's-length organisations also mainly used external assessment – a centralising tendency.

Use and regulation of e-assessment

- For the majority of jurisdictions responding to this questionnaire, there was either no use of e-assessment or initial use for high-stakes qualifications or exams taken at the end of post-compulsory schooling.
- The two jurisdictions in the sample with the most use were *Queensland* and *the Netherlands*. Their use of technology for assessment reflected their overall approaches – *Queensland* used technology to support teacher assessment, whereas *the Netherlands* had various approaches to running e-tests.
- There were several sets of quasi-regulatory standards or guidelines documents in the English-speaking world. Such documents varied along the following dimensions: scope, audience, enforceability, wording, granularity of detail, relationship with other sets of standards and vision of education quality.

Method

The 2007 research phase established some (more or less secure) hypotheses and propositions (listed on previous page). A follow-up research activity was planned for 2008 to further investigate posited hypotheses.

It was clear from the nature of the topic that qualitative international research best suited this follow-up exercise. Further, it was decided that the most appropriate qualitative international research format would be a multi-session international focus group. At this event, international experts would be invited to participate in themed discussion sessions.

The discussions would consider previously-established hypotheses in depth. This consideration would lead to a more thorough understanding of such propositions, and hence to a more clear-cut statement about the applicability of the propositions by the end of the research. Qualitative research does not allow for the acceptance or the rejection of hypotheses in the clear-cut way that quantitative research does. At the end of this report, an indication of the extent to which each hypothesis appears to be supported by the data is given. Where appropriate, suggestions are made for ways in which the hypotheses could be rethought and reworded, and/or suggestions for possible future research questions are made.

In preparing for the multi-session focus group, the hypotheses from the autumn 2007 work were reviewed in the context of literature from a range of disciplines. This re-thinking of relevant themes informed the selection of topics for the event. The topics chosen for the event were:

- Technical excellence versus political legitimacy
- Organisations involved in exams and qualifications
- (De-)centralisation of exams and qualifications systems
- Intervention: What do countries do when things go wrong?
- The future: globalisation and technology in assessment

In respect of these topics, the hypotheses that had been formed in autumn 2007 were revised so as to form the following propositions:
- When thinking about the 'success' of examinations and qualifications systems, one has to consider whether the key explanators of success are the technical excellence of the

exams and qualifications under consideration, or the political legitimacy of the system as a whole. The view of this research is that the political legitimacy of an exams and qualifications system is the most power explanator of its success.

- 'Arm's length technical bodies' can be observed in several jurisdictions. Arm's length bodies could be conceived of as a decentralising (or depoliticising) measure. However, arm's length bodies have tended to run exams systems (a centralising tendency). It will be important to establish causation – are technical bodies typically set up to carry out pre-existing technical remits, or is it that 'apolitical' bodies are set up, which then go on to establish standardised exams regimes (which are in fact a political, centralising measure)?

- Arrangements for regulating exams systems typically contain a mixture of centralising (standardising) and de-centralising (localising) features. Both standardising and localising features can function to reassure the public about the exams and qualifications system. In England taking regulatory action has typically been synonymous with standardising aspects of the exams and qualifications system.

- Regulation as a concept necessarily includes understanding what governments do when things go wrong with the exams and qualifications. Thus, this research should seek to establish typical approaches that international jurisdictions have to dealing with problems in exams or qualifications systems.

- In the future the use of technology in assessment and globalisation will influence regulation. To date, the English regulator has done more to address the former rather than the latter. This may be unfortunate, since the latter may be the more important influence on exams systems in the long term. Indeed, it is arguable that the main importance of e-assessment is as an aspect of the globalisation of exams and qualifications practice.

Detailed yet flexible discussion guides were written to explore each of these propositions. Each focus group session lasted an hour and a half. Each session was recorded and then transcribed by a professional agency. Transcriptions were checked by session facilitators and amended for accuracy.

The transcriptions were then studied and key points were annotated and extracted to summary tables. These tables then directed the issues to be reported in this report, although there was also a looping back to the transcriptions. Issues have been selected for report so as to represent the most important points made at the event and to represent the views of the diverse body of group members.

In order to give the reader context, the report attributes views to particular nationalities of respondents where possible. However, in some cases statements are not attributed. This is done so that controversial, yet important matters can be mentioned, but without causing unnecessary embarrassment to candid informants.

Data

The focus group sessions were run between 3rd and 5th September 2008. Delegates from the following countries attended the event:

> Estonia, Greece, Korea, Latvia (2 delegates), The Netherlands (2), Poland, Queensland (2), Slovenia, Spain

The delegates were senior officials from exam boards and education ministries. Most delegates were not the people who had completed questionnaires in the previous phase.

Seven-and-a-half hours of recordings were available, and these amounted to over 150 pages of transcriptions. As mentioned above, a short summary table was constructed for each session.

Findings

Political legitimacy versus technical excellence

Hypothesis: When thinking about the 'success' of examinations and qualifications systems, one has to consider whether the key explanators of success are the technical excellence of the exams and qualifications under consideration, or the political legitimacy of the system as a whole. The view of this research is that the political legitimacy of an exams and qualifications system is the most power explanator of its success.

The international expert group did not accept in any straightforward way that political legitimacy was a better explanator of public confidence in exams and qualifications than technical excellence. Rather, their instincts seemed to be to reject such a proposition. However, through their discussions they did address the matter and their reflections permit a more nuanced understanding of the point under consideration.

In an initial brainstorming session the delegates listed factors they felt caused the public in their countries to have confidence in exams and qualifications. Such factors were then grouped into cognate categories. The most frequently mentioned categories were: transparency, security and professionalism (of exams processes). In a sense this refuted the hypothesis proposed, in that it suggested that a well-designed exam and qualification,

delivered without procedural error, would be likely to gain public acceptance regardless of the political context.

The Greek delegate observed that most of the suggested causes of public confidence related to processes and procedures, rather than the actual content of exam papers (or similar instruments). She went on to argue that publics may value a legitimate (due) process, even if they do not agree with the outcomes in every specific case. In this sense exams and qualifications systems may be perceived to be fair in the same way that legal systems are.

There were further statements that articulated interactions between political legitimacy and technical excellence, and refuted any contention that these two concepts were mutually exclusive. A Dutch delegate noted that examinations often substantiated what publics believed to be important in education, by the choice of what did or did not go into the examination syllabus.

The two Dutch delegates discussed how political acceptability could constrain technical excellence. Sometimes, technically superior measurement techniques had to be eschewed in favour of apparently more transparent, yet technically less precise, test scoring approaches. This was because the general public could be suspicious of seemingly non-transparent scoring techniques such as differential weighting of right answers.

Another delegate told the story of how substantial political controversy had ensued in his country when just a single multiple-choice question had been alleged to have an incorrect answer key in a high-stakes exam. The delegate felt that such low tolerance of mistakes in exams could be explained by features of his country's political culture.

In contrast, a Queenslander suggested that extensive consultation in his state allowed diverse stakeholders to gain confidence in the qualifications system. In similar vein, a Dutch delegate suggested that relatively high levels of consensus in his country were likely to account for confidence in the examination system. He went further and suggested that sometimes commentators focus on alleged technical problems with exams, but in fact the objection had more to do with a lack of consensus about the goals of the qualification or education system:

> … sometimes … consensus is missing and then if you have a technically fine but complicated system, some people will blame the technicality. And then we will get difficult situations because [technical solutions] are good but never perfect. That's the … story about [a] very good examination and one question where there could be

some discussion. If there's no consensus about the system then people start focussing on that.[1]

Organisations involved in exams and qualifications

Hypothesis: 'Arm's length technical bodies' can be observed in several jurisdictions. Arm's length bodies could be conceived of as a decentralising (or depoliticising) measure. However, arm's length bodies have tended to run exams systems (a centralising tendency). It will be important to establish causation – are technical bodies typically set up to carry out pre-existing technical remits, or is it that 'apolitical' bodies are set up, which then go on to establish standardised exams regimes (which are in fact a political, centralising measure)?

In a similar vein to the previous section, the participants appeared somewhat sceptical in their response to this proposition. However, their discussion helped to delimit some important facets of the concept.

Delegates suggested that technical solutions to qualifications issues did not result from institutional bias on the part of arm's length technical bodies. Rather, they listed substantive reasons for the institution of comparable, reliable examinations systems. In the 1990s Poland had experienced teacher opposition to a non-comparable teacher assessment system. In the same era, Slovenia had experienced high levels of drop-out from year one undergraduate courses, and therefore reformed its examinations system.

Some delegates suggested alternative explanations for the proliferation of arm's length bodies carrying out examinations tasks. A Dutch delegate suggested that politicians found it difficult to exercise powers relating to exams and qualifications at an appropriate level of generality. When politicians did get directly involved with exams and qualifications, they tended to take actions at inappropriately micro levels of detail. It therefore became necessary to have formal 'walls' in place keeping such technical activities out of the direct control of politicians.

Several delegates recounted their experience that working for an arm's length technical body did not necessarily preclude engaging in substantive policy debates. Several such agencies had an accepted role in policy debates: for instance by helping to develop legislation or subsidiary regulations or by commenting on qualifications issues in public. This was not to

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[1] In direct quotations in this paper, any linguistic infelicities from non-native speaker colleagues are amended, while keeping the original sense.

say that the relationship between arm's length bodies and their political masters was always straightforward. One representative of an arm's length body remarked on his 'at times very testy' relationship with his sponsoring education department; the latter feeling the need to assert its role as the primary maker of policy. Another delegate reminded the group that most modern states had several arm's length bodies addressing closely related aspects of education and there could be 'turf wars' between different bodies. Finally, a representative of a body that had recently been re-constituted outside the education ministry expressed the concern that the *de jure* rights that his organisation now held might be less effective than the *de facto* influence that he had previously enjoyed with his ministry colleagues.

(De-)centralisation of exams and qualifications systems

Hypothesis: Arrangements for regulating exams systems typically contain a mixture of centralising (standardising) and de-centralising (localising) features. Both standardising and localising features can function to reassure the public about the exams and qualifications system. In England taking regulatory action has typically been synonymous with standardising aspects of the exams and qualifications system.

The focus group discussions with respect to this hypothesis supported the proposition rather more strongly than the discussions on the first two points did. However, they did not give unequivocal support.

The discussions confirmed the suggestion that both centralising and de-centralising mechanisms could help to assure public confidence in examinations and qualifications systems. Indeed, there were examples of ways in which de-centralisation could provide re-assurance which may be overlooked in countries where centralisation is thought to be uniquely associated with public confidence. However, neither centralisation nor de-centralisation should be seen as a panacea in their own right; what was more important was for countries to get a judicious mixture of the two tendencies. What was judicious would be influenced by many factors, especially a country's culture and traditions vis-à-vis centralisation and de-centralisation.

Representatives in the group expressed differing views about the appropriateness of de-centralisation for their systems. The Queensland delegates were strong advocates of their mainly teacher-assessed school-leaving qualification. However, they emphasised that this was an 'externally-moderated, school-based assessment system' and which was capable of providing standardised results which could be compared to those derived from external examinations in other Australian states. The Dutch group members asserted that the major

role for school-based assessment in their system had a positive impact on public confidence. In contrast, the Korean representative said that his country's history of having an external civil service examination since the ninth century had stymied efforts to introduce more de-centralisation into the qualifications system.

Some delegates from other countries expressed a general support for the notion of de-centralisation as a supporter of public confidence. But they also cited specific incidences in their countries that caused them to doubt whether de-centralisation would work in practice. For example, there were the reports from Greece and Slovenia that grade inflation on teacher-assessed components of qualifications was a matter of controversy in those countries.

Intervention: what do countries do when things go wrong?

Hypothesis: Regulation as a concept necessarily includes understanding what governments do when things go wrong with the exams and qualifications. Thus, this research should seek to establish typical approaches that international jurisdictions have to dealing with problems in exams or qualifications systems.

The findings in this section are different from those in the other sections. Firstly, this issue was added to the focus groups although it had not been addressed in the 2007 phase of the research. This meant that the findings expressed here are a first stab at the issue, rather than an attempt to confirm existing hypotheses as is the case in other sections. Also, this part of the findings relates to particularly sensitive subject matter. For this reason, problems with exams and qualifications systems will be described, but not attributed to countries. Then, a second part of this section will summarise delegates' views on why problems with exams and qualifications systems happened, and what they meant. Attribution will be used in that part.

The list of problems with exams and qualifications that participants divulged is long and diverse. At one end of the spectrum, there was a story of how the answer key to a single item in a high-stakes examination was disputed (the exam board concerned did not admit outright that it had made a mistake). That dispute was engaged widely in the media and became a matter of public and political debate.

Also, various country representatives told how exam papers had been leaked to the internet, how exam questions had been released to 'cramming schools' or how confidential data had been hacked from an examination centre website.

Technology could aid students attempting to cheat. There was a story of how a student using a computer as a reasonable adjustment to support his access to the qualification despite disability had accessed the internet and pasted large sections of text into his exam response. In a different country, test takers had used sophisticated devices to try and communicate with the outside world from within the exam hall. This had resulted in the exam board providing every candidate with a standard issue pencil and banning wrist watches.

Countries could take a range of steps against those who had behaved dishonestly. For example, police action was taken against alleged examination wrongdoers in several countries.

A discussion of how best to manage problems with examinations gave rise to an interesting crossover with the findings on centralisation and de-centralisation. A delegate suggested that centralised systems were bound to generate negative press coverage. The delegate said: 'everything is under the microscope when it's a centralised system'. A Dutch delegate recounted his experiences with codes of practice for the school-based portion of the Dutch school-leaving qualification. He said that his agency had come under pressure to standardise procedures in the administration of the school-based exam. He had resisted such pressures, feeling that it was better for responsibility to remain at the local level. He felt that if codes of practice were developed by bodies such as the Headteachers' Association, Heads and other teachers would be more likely to feel 'ownership' and thus to take sensible decisions. In contrast, if a centralised code were imposed, schools would stick to the 'letter of the law', but be less likely to use their own good judgement to resolve issues.

Views were expressed about how best to communicate with the public when things went wrong with exams. The Slovenian delegate felt that communications should be pro-active; if 'small' matters were not addressed by the various organisations involved, they could become bigger issues in time. Some speakers regretted that exam authorities could be blamed in public for matters that were not technically part of their remit. Another delegate regretted the fact that university professors with no background in assessment seemed to be treated as experts whilst exam board staff were perceived as being partial. A Dutch delegate expressed his view that, whilst communication was important, it was important that public relations concerns always came second to matters of substance. He gave an example of the use of dictionaries in exams:

> … the public relations department … is always afraid that things are going to be a huge problem and they tend to overreact. One time there was someone who found

out that we [had started allowing] dictionaries … [in] … exams, and not all the dictionaries are the same, and for some tests one dictionary might be a bit better than the other dictionary. So the department of public relations said, "Why didn't you prescribe in schools which dictionary to use and why didn't you check all tests to be equal to all dictionaries, and things like that?" It's a nice idea but it's trying to find the funding so we can do things like that. And the answer is quite simple; we just tell the press there may be some difference between dictionaries and there may be some difference between teachers as well so what are we talking about? It works fine.

The future: globalisation and technology in assessment

Hypothesis: In the future the use of technology in assessment and globalisation will influence regulation. To date, the English regulator has done more to address the former rather than the latter. This may be unfortunate, since the latter may be the more important influence on exams systems in the long term. Indeed, it is arguable that the main importance of e-assessment is as an aspect of the globalisation of exams and qualifications practice.

The final session dealt with two issues. These are reported in turn.

The group felt that globalisation was having a relatively minor impact on general education in schools, in comparison to the impact it was having on Higher Education (HE) and Vocational Education and Training (VET). In particular, some of the European delegates felt that EU policies had more impact on HE and VET than on general education. These delegates did not spontaneously mention EU key competences for lifelong learning nor the European Qualifications Framework as issues affecting the regulation of examinations and qualifications.

There were two ways in which globalisation could impact on general qualifications. Firstly, international survey assessments such as PISA, TIMSS and PIRLS could serve to define (and homogenise) the content of examination syllabuses. The Korean delegate suggested that such tendencies were more pronounced in maths and science than in languages or humanities. This was because, in humanities, nations needed to protect localised content in a way that was less necessary in sciences.

International assessments could also impact on the content of subjects in nations where regions had a strong influence on curriculums. The Spanish delegate described the influence of the PISA assessment system on regional curriculums as follows:

> … in Spain the international assessment PISA has had a strong influence on the revision for [the current] national curriculum … for instance it has more emphasis … on the concept of literacy and the concept of competence. So the regional authorities are also elaborating this revision of the curriculum … with this tendency.

The fact that PISA conceptualised a subject in a particular way made it easier for regions and central government to agree on definitions of the subject.

International survey tests could also affect the emphasis that different subjects received. For example, the most recent PISA survey had focused on science, and this in turn had lead to more political focus being put on science results in national examinations in several countries.

A separate way in which globalisation could impact on national examination systems was by students seeking to use international qualifications (such as the International Baccalaureate – IB) to enter university. Countries had varying responses to candidates wishing to use the IB for university entrance. For example, The Queensland Studies Authority (QSA) had a function that enabled it to recognise components of the IB program for the purpose of certification. Students made separate application through the Queensland Tertiary Admissions Centre for university entrance. In Korea some universities used the IB as a supplementary to allow international students to get in university, whilst in Greece IB holders had to sit for the national examinations like all secondary school graduates.

It was pointed out that the issues of e-assessment and globalisation were inter-related. This had two senses. Firstly, the ability to hold assessment content on internet servers beyond national borders would be a challenge for the national regulation of examinations and qualifications. But also, it was observed that international projects' use of e-assessment provided some nations with good examples of how the medium could be used in their national contexts.

In the 2007 phase of the research, it had been found that the Netherlands and Queensland had substantial e-assessment programmes under way. This round confirmed that. Also, countries such as Latvia and Estonia had ambitious development plans in the pipeline. However, there was some scepticism in the group both about the pace of moves to e-assessment in particular countries and about whether the medium was in-and-of-itself educationally valuable.

Discussion

In this part of the paper, a statement is made about extent to the focus group evidence supports each hypothesis. Also, when appropriate, an attempt is made either to reconceptualise hypotheses and/or to express them in more appropriate words. Suggestions for possible further research are also made.

Political legitimacy versus technical excellence

This proposition was central to much of the thinking in this research. However, the expert group did not accept the argument that political legitimacy was the most important explanator for the success of examinations or qualifications systems. This is an important setback that must be considered carefully. It may be that, if this proposition were to be tested with a group with a different profile (for example academics who were critical of examinations systems), then it might receive a more favourable reaction.

Also, it might be that the way that this proposition was organised made it more difficult for the delegates to support. Specifically, it may be that the direct juxtaposition of 'political legitimacy' with 'technical excellence' was wrong. Perhaps this implied that accepting the 'political legitimacy' argument meant being sanguine about political expediency in assessment policy or interference with fair testing principles, or that 'political legitimacy' and 'technical excellence' were 'either-or' alternatives. This was unhelpful. A better way of putting the argument might be to say that a national examinations system is a public service provided by or on behalf of a government. In this sense it is similar to a national health system. In a democratic system, the public has to (at least implicitly) give consent to the government or its agencies in order for that public service to continue. This is the key determiner of whether a national examinations or qualifications system is a success.

This concept could then become an overarching indicator of how and whether an examinations or qualifications system enjoyed public success. The technical excellence of the exams system would be an important determiner that contributed to the success of a system. But technical excellence alone would not be sufficient to guarantee the success of an examinations system. A model of the success of an examinations or qualifications system could look like the one in this figure:
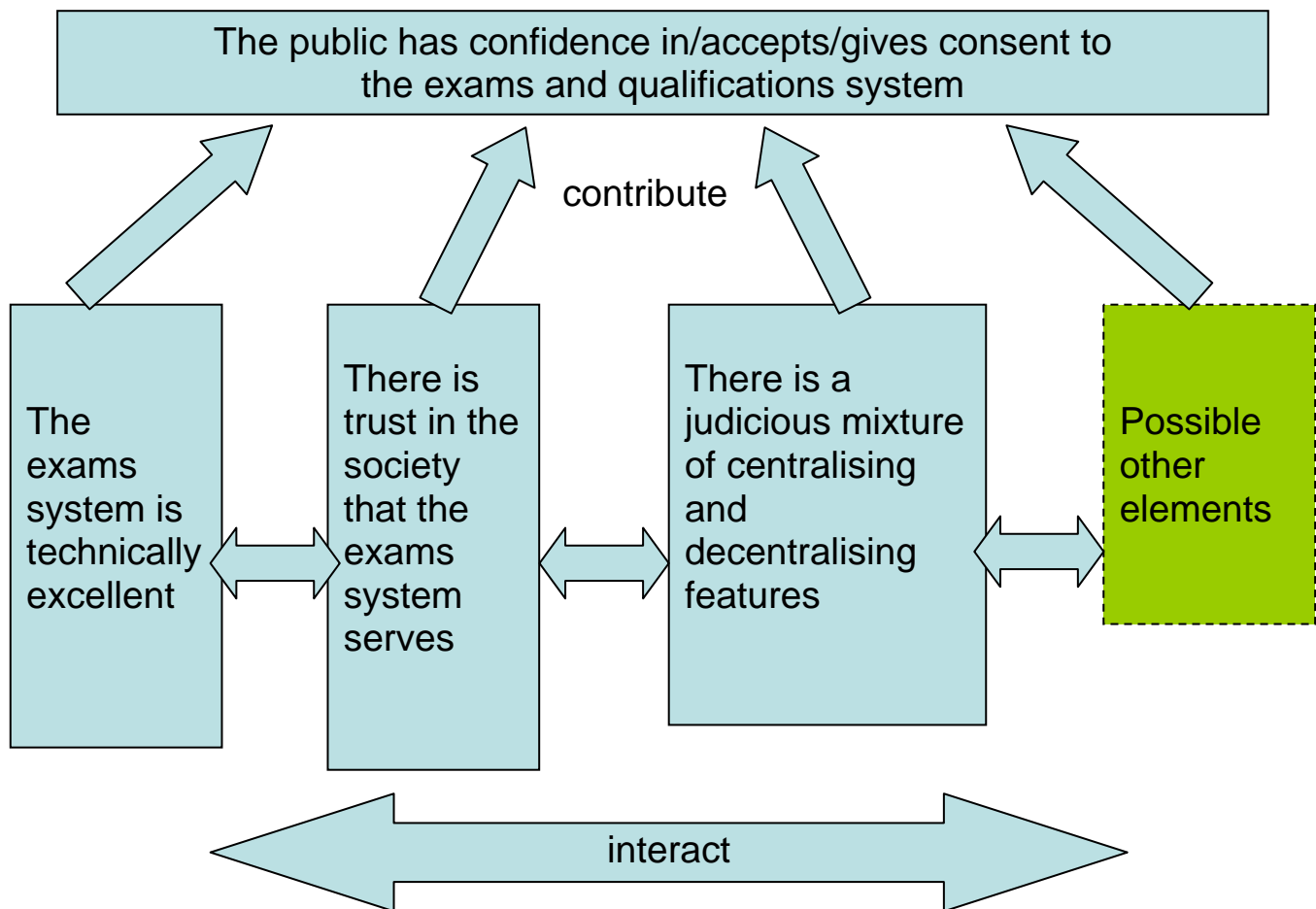
Figure 1: A possible model for the success of an examinations or qualifications system

The viability of this model could then be evaluated. For example, it could be said in its favour that it was broad and flexible and permitted the addition of new elements. A criticism of it might that – by being so broad – it became somewhat trite, and was impossible to resolve. Such reflection on a model such as this might constitute useful follow-up research.

Organisations involved in exams and qualifications

As was the case with the previous proposition, the focus group was sceptical to the suggestion that arm's length technical bodies might choose centralised examinations as an assessment method due to some institutional bias. They cited other causes for the institution of exams systems, such as perceived failures of previous teacher assessment systems, long-standing national cultures, and so on.

The logic of bodies operating at arm's length from government to perform examinations and qualifications tasks may suggest that more independent exams and qualifications regulators will spring up, as a check and balance to arm's length technical bodies. The focus group contained a representative from an examinations committee that had many regulatory functions, which had recently been reconstituted outside the education ministry. However, creating multiple independent quasi-governmental organisations to scrutinise each other may be a particularly Anglo-Saxon method for ensuring the public interest. This might be a hypothesis that could be investigated in any further research.

(De-)centralisation of exams and qualifications systems

This proposition raised the highest amount of group support amongst the three evaluated so far. This is an interesting finding; and its relationship to the assertions of apolitical technicality and dispassionate technical bodies could be further explored.

When considering 'using' de-centralisation as an 'engineering tool' to improve public confidence in assessment systems that have typically been centralised, several questions arise. Firstly, what 'amount' of de-centralisation is appropriate? Might a small amount of de-centralisation have a substantial, even disproportionate effect? Or would it be necessary for de-centralisation to be major in order to have an impact? Similarly, would de-centralisation necessarily have to occur at the controversial examinations-versus-teacher-assessment interface? It is possible that de-centralising measures could be introduced at other points in examinations and qualifications processes and yield benefits but avoid areas where the public was known to value centralised approaches.

Intervention: what do countries do when things go wrong?

The focus group informants suggested that many countries had experienced problems with examinations and qualifications. When serious dishonesty was involved, some countries would not hesitate to refer offenders to the police. However, there was also advice that taking a heavy-handed approach could sometimes be counter-productive. Rather, it could be better to leave responsibility at the local level.

However, this argument in favour of de-centralisation had to be considered against the observation that some countries had experienced problems of maintaining standards when using internal assessment. It may be that, in some contexts, such methods avoid set-piece controversies, but do not actually do the job for which they are designed – maintaining a consistent examinations standard.

The future: globalisation and technology in assessment

This group somewhat confirmed the view that globalisation had had a larger impact for their countries than e-assessment. However, it could be observed that neither was yet a major current concern for the members of the group. It may be that other groups of informants might provide more information about varied regulatory issues. For example, assessment experts from the United States might have more experience of the regulatory implications of e-assessment. Also, a group with a focus on VET might have different views of the globalisation of labour markets and consequent regulatory issues.

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