A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF PERCEPTIONS OF TRUST IN A-LEVELS

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SUMMARY

Although trust is central to the credibility of the examination system, little is known about how trust functions in this context. This paper reports on the findings of a qualitative exploration into perceptions of trust in A-level. Four focus groups were conducted with examination board staff, students, admissions tutors and employees to gain an understanding of what it means to trust in A-levels. Amongst the most prominent facets of trust mentioned were; examination standards, the marking of examination papers, the specifications, whether or not A-levels are fit for purpose, mode of assessment, and the validity of A-levels in terms of testing students' ability. Many more facets emerged from the analysis, suggesting that trust in A-levels is an immensely complex concept. Moreover, perceptions of trust seemed to be dependent, in part, on the background and experiences of the individual making the trust judgement. These qualitative findings highlight potential difficulties in the development of a quantitative tool to measure trust in A-levels in the future.

1   INTRODUCTION

Assessment outcomes from high-stakes testing serve a multitude of purposes. Examination results impact upon the educational and employment choices of students, parents and employers. They provide a basis for selecting individuals for higher education courses or particular jobs and qualify individuals to perform certain vocational or professional activities. Assessment outputs are not only used to judge students, but also those responsible for teaching them – teachers and schools may be rewarded or reproved on the basis of their students' performances. Furthermore, examination results can be used in the development of policy arguments for alternative modes of education and training and to compare the educational accomplishments of one society with those of another (O'Neill, 2005). For these reasons, it is important that those who use examination results can trust and have confidence in them.

Public confidence in examinations is a burgeoning area of research. For the past six years, Ipsos MORI have been commissioned by the examinations regulator to conduct research into teachers', parents', students' and the general public's perception of the A-level and GCSE examination system shortly after each summer examination series. Furthermore, since their launch in May 2008, the Office of the Qualifications and Examinations Regulator (Ofqual) has been committed to conducting a 'health check' on the reliability of qualification, examination and test results. Their two year reliability programme will consist of three strands: generating evidence of reliability, interpreting evidence of reliability, and developing a policy on reliability. The overarching aim of the project is to gain an understanding of the reliability of results and what this means to the public. Whilst general perceptions of A-level and GCSE, and perceptions of the reliability of results, are likely to contribute to trust, there is no research to date that exclusively focuses upon the concept of trust in assessment. Nothing is known about

what it means to trust in examination systems, what individuals base their trust judgements on, and what could be done to improve trust.

Definitions of trust are highly context dependent (Goudge & Gilson, 2005). Where little is known about how trust functions, it is recommended that qualitative research be conducted to explore how respondents view trust and trusted behaviour. One area of social life where trust-based research is well-established is the medical profession. Here, qualitative work has been instrumental in understanding trust in patient-provider relationships and trust in health care systems (Thom and Campbell, 1997; Straten, Friele & Groenewegen, 2002). Moreover, the findings from qualitative inquiry have been used to generate items for structured questionnaires. Van der Schee, Braun, Calnan, Schnee, and Groenewegen, (2007), for example, based their questionnaire on public trust in health care systems in the Netherlands, England and Wales on dimensions of trust that had emerged from qualitative research. Goudge and Gilson (2005) argue that quantitative analysis is of equal importance to the study of trust, because it enables large scale investigation and generates data that can be used to explore the statistical significance of the relationship between different variables and overall trust levels.

This paper reports on findings from the first phase of a research study exploring trust in A-levels. It was felt that trust in A-levels (as opposed to GCSE or vocational qualifications) would be the richest area for research, because they are of often thought of as the 'gold standard' of assessment and are a student's main route to university, college or employment. Focus groups were conducted with providers and consumers of A-levels. The purpose of the focus groups was to explore participants' perceptions of trust in A-level. It is intended that the findings from the qualitative inquiry will inform the second phase of the research; the development of a quantitative tool to measure trust in the A-level examination system. Such a tool would be invaluable to those responsible for the setting, marking and monitoring of A-levels. It could be used to: 1) establish and monitor trust levels, 2) identify aspects of the examination system where trust is particularly lacking, 3) identify variations of trust between stakeholder groups, and 4) predict stakeholder behaviour.

2   METHODOLOGY

To date, four focus groups with a total of 24 participants have been conducted to investigate perceptions of trust in A-level. The groups included AQA staff, students, admissions tutors, and employees. The session with AQA staff was originally intended to pilot the focus group schedule. However, the diversity of the focus group membership in terms of knowledge and experience of the A-level system made for a particularly fruitful and broad discussion, and the findings from the pilot are discussed later in this report. Students and admissions tutors were selected for inclusion in the study, because they have a direct and unique stake in the A-level examination system. Whilst students have recent experience of studying for, and taking, their A-levels, admissions tutors rely on A-level results to help them discriminate amongst students for admittance to university courses. In the first instance, a focus group was planned with members of the general public. However, it proved difficult to delimit what constitutes the general public, and this group was replaced with employees. Focus groups with other stakeholders, such as teachers, are planned for the future.

The main advantage of focus groups is that "*group dynamics frequently bring out aspects of the topic that would not have been anticipated by the researcher and would not have emerged from interviews with individuals*" (Babbie, 2002, p.301). Group discussions were also thought to be preferable, because discussions with a researcher from an examination board may have diverted discussions away from the central issue of trust and towards discussions about the

procedures used by examination boards and examination board performances. It should be noted that qualitative research of this kind makes no claims to representativeness or generalisability; rather it is concerned with depth of understanding (Krueger, 1994; cited in Parker & Tritter, 2006).

2.1   Participants

The pilot focus group was conducted with AQA staff in May 2009. Assistant Directors from across the organisation were contacted via email and asked to nominate two members of staff from within their department to participate in the pilot focus group. When making their recommendations, Assistant Directors were made aware of the importance of ensuring variability, in terms of participant gender, ethnicity, age and socio-economic status. In total, six members of AQA staff participated in the pilot focus group. There was an even split between males and females. The participants varied in seniority and knowledge of the A-level system, being involved with either the administration of particular subjects, the processing of examinations, centre and candidates support, or human resources.

Three main focus groups were conducted with students, admissions tutors, and employees between June and August 2009. First year undergraduate students from universities local to Manchester were targeted to take part in the student focus group. Advertisements were posted on university careers websites, detailing the nature of the study and sample being sought, as well as announcing that a fee of £20 in music vouchers would be paid for attending the focus group. Six participants attended the student focus group; three participants were male and three participants were female. Participants were reading a variety of disciplines at the University of Manchester, including Biology, Medicine, Medieval Studies, History and Economics. Consequently, the group had experience of a wide range of science-and humanities- based A-levels.

Admissions tutors were also recruited from universities local to Manchester. Admissions tutors were contacted by either telephone or email to ask whether they would be willing to participate in a focus group exploring trust in A-levels. As an incentive to participate in the focus group, admissions tutors were entered into a prize draw to win a £50 voucher for a high-street store. Recruitment for the admissions tutors focus group was disappointing, with only four participants attending the session. It was thought that this was due to the time of year; during the summer months many admissions tutors are either taking annual leave or in the field conducting their own research.   Two of the admissions tutors were male and two were female. All participants were from the University of Manchester; two were admissions tutors for Mathematics, one was an admissions tutor for Dentistry and another for Italian.

A large corporate company based in the UK was approached in order to recruit employees to participate in a fourth focus group. The company is a national supplier of gas and electricity. A member of the company's Community team acted as a liaison whilst negotiating, recruiting for, and conducting the focus group. In total, eight participants from across the organisation attended the focus group. Half of the participants were male and half were female. The broad age range within the focus group meant that some participants had quite recently completed their A-levels whilst others had children currently in the education system. The company offered its support for free.

Table 1 provides an over-view of the number of participants that attended each focus group and their gender.

Table 1: Focus group participants by gender

	Male	Female	Number of participants
AQA Staff	3	3	6
Students	3	3	6
Employees	4	4	8
Admissions Tutors	2	2	4
Total	**12**	**12**	**24**

2.2   Focus Groups

All of the focus groups were held at the AQA's Manchester offices, except for the focus group with employees, which was conducted at the company's offices in Worcester. Focus groups lasted between 1.5 and 2 hours and were led by the same researcher. Each session was opened with an introduction, a statement of the overall purpose of the research, and an explanation of the ground rules e.g., participants were asked not to talk over each other (Finch & Lewis, 2003). Next, participants were split into two groups and asked to complete a warm-up exercise. Specifically, participants were asked to think about 1) the attributes that a trustworthy person has and 2) a company or institution that they particularly distrust and their reasons. Each sub-group recorded their responses on flipcharts. The warm-up exercise was intended to get participants thinking about the abstract concept of trust and to help build a rapport amongst focus group members.

The remainder of the session took the form of a group discussion. Participants were asked to describe past experiences that had led them to trust in the A-level system, and past experiences that had caused them to lose, or not establish trust. The session also included a discussion of the media's impact on trust in A-levels, and what organisations, such as the AQA, could do to help engender trust. The focus group schedule is available in Appendix A. In each focus group, the role of the researcher was to encourage comments from all participants (e.g. asking "what does everyone else think?") to guide the discussion back to the central issue of trust in A-levels, and to ask for clarification or expansion on comments (Krueger & Casey, 2000). An observer was also present at each session to take field notes regarding the mood, non-verbal communication, and the order that participants spoke in to aid later transcription (Parker & Tritter, 2006).

Each session was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. At the beginning of the focus group, participants signed a consent form (see Appendix B) giving their permission for the data they supplied to be audio-recorded, transcribed and analysed. Participants were also made aware of the ethical protocol; all the data would be made anonymous, specific individuals would not be identified in resultant reports, and they could withdraw from the research at any time.

2.3   Analysis

The focus group transcripts were analysed using content analysis. Content analysis entails the identification of themes, *"with the researcher focussing on the way the theme is treated or presented and the frequency of its occurrence"* (Spencer, Richie & O'Connor, 2003, p. 2000). The transcripts were read several times to allow the initial identification of themes and later analysed using the qualitative software package, NVivo. In the first instance, coding was conducted by the researcher that facilitated all four focus groups. A second researcher then independently reviewed clean copies of the transcripts, and a brief meeting was held to discuss the dominant emergent themes. Due to time restraints, and the large volume of qualitative data,

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it should be noted that the task of the second researcher was not to code all of the data, but simply to identify key themes. A high level of agreement was found between the two researchers. It was hoped that this process would go some way to removing researcher subjectivity from the coding process. Participants' comments are used below to illustrate each theme.

3   FINDINGS

Each group of participants had a different stake in the A-level examination system, and consequently brought with them different experiences and expectations. Whilst diversity was desirable within the study, as it meant that trust in A-levels could be conceptualised in the broadest sense (and hopefully lead to the development of a valid tool to measure trust), it resulted in the identification of a large number of themes – nineteen in total. The five most dominant themes will be discussed in detail below. Comparisons between the groups' perceptions of trust in A-levels will also be drawn. Appendix C provides an overview of the themes not discussed in the main report, along with illustrative comments from participants. It should be stressed that the findings discussed in this report are based on participants' *perceptions* – whether or not these perceptions have any factual basis will not be commented on in any detail.

3.1   Examination Standards

Examination standards represented the most dominant theme in the group discussions. The chief concern raised by participants was comparability between the different English examination boards. Participants viewed the existence of multiple examination boards to be problematic:

> *'I've got lack of trust in it [the A-level examination system] because of the multiple organisations involved'*
>
> Employee

Specifically, participants from across all four groups commented that the co-existence of boards may introduce inconsistency into the A-level examination system, with awarding bodies offering different specifications, and potentially setting different examination standards.

> *'I think just the fact that…there are a number of awarding bodies shows that there's a problem because the difference between what one awarding body would kind of set as a curriculum and then mark is different to another…And I actually think that's fundamentally at the root of the problem, it's that you haven't got a consistent approach. You should have one awarding body surely so that it's fair.*
>
> Employee

> *'[My main concern is] inconsistency between awarding bodies and I think that inconsistency is borne out err, between subjects, across different boards, and, that is a huge thorn I think in the side of the exam system at the moment'.*
>
> AQA staff

Participants recognised the perverse educational effects that differential standards between boards may bring about; with schools and teachers potentially favouring certain examination boards over others because they offer the 'easy option' and are likely to award better grades, rather than for the educational value of their specifications.

> *'There needs to be a standardisation [across examination boards] otherwise how does the school pick between them? Do they look at the course and say yeah we think that one is probably easier as the school's looking out for which one of them is getting the better grades.'*
>
> Employee

> *'I think the schools have probably picked the awarding body that provides either the easiest [specification] for their staff to teach or the easiest for exams or assessment so that their school looks good because they'll get good grades.'*
>
> Employee

> *'I think my biggest concern would be if there's so many bodies and if one is more popular, one body's more popular then it might be seen that that's actually the easiest option.'*
>
> Employee

Interestingly, however, there was also a perception amongst participants that the comparability of inter-board standards has improved over time. One admissions tutor commented that greater comparability between examination boards aids the process of selecting students for university courses:

> *'There used to be a lot of difference between different exam boards. So you know, an A there was not necessarily an A somewhere else. Erm but I, I don't get that perception as much now as we used to, so I think there's been more standardisation between different exam boards which helps us because it gives us more consistency.'*
>
> Admissions tutor

Other sub-themes included standards over time and inter-subject comparability. Interestingly, participants seemed sceptical of the claim that examinations are getting easier, which is touted by the media each year. They questioned the validity of the argument that rising pass rates are symptomatic of lowering standards; suggesting that teaching standards have improved and that it is in inappropriate to compare modern day A-levels with qualifications of yester-year.

> *'I don't actually believe in this debate about falling standards. I think that there are different types of assessment and different types of activities….'*
>
> Admissions tutor

> *This idea that if the number of A grades is going up therefore the standards must be dropping, I mean I don't even think that obtains as a principle because perhaps it means that that teaching is better and people are doing really really well erm. And of course it's different to the A-Level of thirty, forty years ago where only a tiny part of the population did A-Levels.*
>
> Admissions tutor

> *'It's difficult to compare the different generations. I think the main thing is to compare everybody that does it that year.'*
>
> Employee

In keeping with the media portrayal of A-levels, there was a perception that some subjects were 'softer' than others. Such assertions imply all A-levels are not viewed as equal; individuals may place greater trust in the information provided by examinations in traditional subjects than less

traditional subjects. Moreover, they may be indicative of a general feeling that the introduction of more contemporary subjects to the A-level suite has lowered educational standards. Some of the comments made by participants were as follows:

> *'I think the availability of subjects which are perhaps easier are more available now than ever. For example, if you do a Maths or a Science based A-level it will be a hell of a lot harder than … I'm trying not to offend anyone who has probably done it at A-level but you get like, I've seen ones like surfing studies and hairdressing and stuff like that.'*
>
> Employee

> *'The core ones [A-levels] aren't easier and people are thinking that when someone says I've got five As, I don't think people just say like aw brilliant, I think they are like oh what did you take? And then I think that gives the different like reaction if you say Maths, Physics, Chemistry, French and Biology or if you said like Media and Drama.'*
>
> Employee

3.2   Marking of Examination Papers

The marking of examination papers also proved to be central to participants' perceptions of trust in the A-level examination system. In particular, participants were concerned about the reliability or consistency of marking. Participants referred to both GCSE and A-level qualifications when talking about marking reliability suggesting that, in this particular context, the two are considered to be synonymous. Many of the participants drew upon personal experiences, or experiences of friends or family, to describe situations where marking had been found to be erroneous. These experiences had undermined their trust in A-levels, and national examinations more generally. Emotions tended to run high when participants discussed cases where marking had gone awry; there was a strong sense that, due to the high-stakes nature of national examinations for students, teachers and schools, mistakes were inexcusable. Furthermore, participants viewed negatively the facility offered by examination boards to request a re-mark. The fact that re-marks can, and do, happen seemed to undermine their trust. The following quotes below illustrate their thoughts on marking reliability:

> *'When we did our GCSEs erm one of our GCSEs that we all sat and everyone got really low grades and erm all the parents complained especially the people who were expected to get higher grades. Then it [the examination papers] went back, they re-marked them all and we all ended up with higher grades. I was given a C and when it went back I was given an A…and then we were thinking well if our parents hadn't complained we would have all gone away like for college or whatever, with a C when we shouldn't have had a C.'*
>
> Employee

> *'I know that from my school…erm we followed one of the exam boards for about 7/8 years but then we actually stopped using that particular exam board mainly because a lot of the students requested re-marking and found that quite a lot of the times after re-marking they had a higher mark, considerably higher mark afterwards and that lost the schools trust in it.'*
>
> Student

> *'The fact that you have the opportunity to get it re-marked kind of gives the idea that maybe it's not marked correctly.'*
>
> Student

A second sub-theme concerned trust in the marking of individual examiners rather than the examination system more broadly. Participants expressed concern that the mark a student receives could be dependent, in part, upon the examiner marking the paper i.e. whether they were fatigued. Furthermore, participants questioned the motives of examiners, suggesting that they may mark papers quickly for monetary gain and may not have students' best interest at heart:

> *They [examiners] can be doing it [marking] through the night, the examiner, the people who are marking it, it gets to three in the morning and an A can look like a five and you don't know what kind of state the examiner is in.'*
>
> <div align="right">Student</div>

> *'The more they [examiners] do the more money they get the quicker they mark the more money they get, less time they have to spend on it. So, it's in their nature to mark quickly, do it quickly, not rush but hey if I can finish this in an hour maybe I can do a few more, make a few more pounds and the teachers aren't the highest paid so why not? But to them it's just a tick tick tick and give a mark which to somebody else is you know their A-levels, it's their future…'*
>
> <div align="right">Student</div>

3.3 The Specification

Participants' perception of specifications in relation to trust in A-levels could be divided into three sub-themes: 1) the question paper 2) the content and 3) the mark scheme. Participants seemed to be divided regarding the trustworthiness of question papers. Notably, AQA staff seemed to feel that A-level question papers were fair, whilst students tended to be distrustful of question papers, suggesting that they had been designed to 'trick' or deceive them:

> *'I would generally think the question papers I've seen are fair, in the sense that they don't, very clearly, advantage a group of candidates that are coming from one particular perspective, compared to another.'*
>
> <div align="right">AQA Staff</div>

> *'I think that the setting of the question papers is, for me, sound.'*
>
> <div align="right">AQA Staff</div>

> *'I don't trust the way the questions are set, I don't like that erm.'*
>
> <div align="right">Student</div>

> *'I think if they're [examiners] trying to deceive you like make you think that they're asking about one thing when they're actually asking you about something in a round-about way, you'd rather they be to the point and then I think that's a trust thing really.'*
>
> <div align="right">Student</div>

Furthermore, the students suggested that the way a question is phased or worded can sometimes unfairly impact upon a student's ability to provide a response. Here, the students were touching upon the important issue of question validity; a poorly worded question may not provide a valid measure of a student's ability/knowledge in a certain area:

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'People's understanding of like the way things are worded isn't as good as other people so one person might understand that straight away and the other person could be like oh my god what does that mean and they could know even more than the person who understood the question.'

<div align="right">Student</div>

'I read the question, the whole entire question relied entirely upon you knowing what one word meant and if you didn't know what that meant then you were completely and utterly in trouble.'

<div align="right">Student</div>

Admissions tutors, in particular, felt that the content of A-levels was important to students, teachers, and universities and employers looking to take on students post-A-level. However, one admissions tutor suggested that whilst A-levels may not cover all of the material he would like, this was something fundamentally different to trust. He made the following comment:

'Somehow the design of them or content of them isn't really what we need or what we want it to be. Which is different to saying we don't trust them.'

<div align="right">Admissions tutor</div>

Finally, amongst the students, there was a feeling that mark schemes can sometimes be too stringent, resulting in students not being awarded marks where they perhaps should have been:

'I think my main problem was answering the questions but then you know how there's a criteria on it that says where you get a mark and if you don't have that word even if you explain it just in different words, if you don't put in that particular word…'

<div align="right">Student</div>

'I was doing my A level Chemistry… they had in the mark scheme if you didn't say that word you didn't get the mark or you didn't phrase it in that way. Because a lot of the time you had to learn you know the erm like the quotations for what different things meant so what this equation means… and if you don't get it word for word…'

<div align="right">Student</div>

3.4 Fit for Purpose

Whether or not A-levels are fit for purpose proved to be a dominant theme across all four groups. Participants expressed general concerns over reports that universities are questioning the utility of A-levels to prepare and select students for university places:

'There's a story that I've seen on the news that says that universities are now going to have to start doing four or five year courses because they have to spend the first year educating A-level students up to the level that they can start doing university entry exams.'

<div align="right">Employee</div>

'I find it worrying that the universities are starting to question A-levels… I don't know enough at the moment about that but I, that I do find worrying, given that we feed a lot of people into universities.'

<div align="right">AQA staff</div>

'In terms of the universities, they erm, if they can't actually pick from the A-levels, you know the top students then it's not working for them.

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> *Aren't they really important as a stakeholder… that the A-level system has to meet their basic requirements?'*
>
> Employee

Some of these concerns were borne out in comments made by the admissions tutors:

> *'I think I trust it [A-level] up to a point but I'm not sure its discriminating enough that's all. I trust that if you get a student with a good grade it presumably means that they're a good student potentially and able to cope with a higher education course but I think probably erm there needs to be some more discrimination at the top level… I mean when you're actually trying to look for the really good students and not just the good students.'*
>
> Admissions tutor

> *'I think that they [the students] are bright and they're trained, but they're not trained as A-Level students to do university work… They're trained to pass their A-Level exams.'*
>
> Admissions tutor

> *'[Education is] about sort of skills development and developing mature learners, independent learners and erm developing students who can engage with the subject matter and not just learn for the exam, and I think A-Level certainly discourages those kinds of skills.'*
>
> Admissions tutor

Admissions tutors also commented that A-level results provide relatively imprecise information about students' abilities in a particular subject area and that they are perhaps too narrow in scope; expressing a preference for qualifications such as the International Baccalaureate. Having said this, they seemed to have a general trust in the processes used by examination boards to mark and publish A-level results. This raised an interesting distinction between trust in the 'nuts and bolts' of the A-level examination system, and trust in the qualification to provide learners with the skills and knowledge necessary to study at university level.

For students, whether or not A-level qualifications were fit for purpose took on a slightly different meaning. They were concerned that A-levels may not necessarily be relevant to or benefit them in their future careers:

> *'It needs to be clear what will get you where. I think that's really important, it's like somebody who wants to go and work in the music business does a music qualification, you're not going to get into music, it might help but really it's not the way… and it's like erm theatre studies, performing arts, if anyone did it, I'll hold my hands up, I did drama right and what they tell people and what the examining board.. Oh yeah you do this er you'll become an actor. Right, if that's true I should be like on Palm Springs beach sunning myself, getting a tan because I did drama…'*
>
> Student

Participants also discussed A-levels in relation to the broader social functions of the education system; in terms of enabling young people to enter the labour market and to lead fulfilling careers. For some, A-levels were merely filtering students into universities and potentially into debt and unemployment. Whether or not individuals perceive the education system in England, in general, to be fit for purpose may impact on individuals' trust in A-levels, and vice versa. The following exchange between members of the employee focus group illustrates the points above:

> *'There's a lot of people now who you know in my day would be working or on the dole but now they're at university and off the dole and the poor buggers will have to pay themselves. It was free when I went to university, now they're off the dole and paying for themselves. Someone's having a laugh.'*
>
> Employee 1

> *'And they won't get a job when they get to the end of it.'*
>
> Employee 2

> *'They'll just come out with a huge debt.'*
>
> Employee 3

> *'A massive debt and then you do bar work.'*
>
> Employee 4

3.5   Type of Assessment

The methods used to assess candidates at A-level were a popular talking point in the focus groups.   Discussions particularly focused upon coursework and the modularity of A-levels. Participants expressed mixed views regarding the fairness of coursework as a mode of assessment; whilst some participants believed that coursework rightly provides those students who struggle with written examinations the opportunity to excel, others felt that coursework was open to abuse by students, teachers and parents.   The comments below illustrate these opposing viewpoints:

> *'It makes it a lot easier or potentially a lot less stressful and a lot easier for the students to get all their grades if they can have 50% on the exam and 50% on the coursework. It would make it more accessible to people who learn differently and handle assessment differently.'*
>
> Employee

> *'I think it's good that they have coursework because some people respond better to exams and some people are better at coursework.'*
>
> Student

> *'You can't trust coursework. My personal view is the internet is a great source of education.'*
>
> Employee

> *'The thing that I'm not sure about is, on the coursework side now of the A-level system, I'm not sure whether it's the teacher that teaches that class that marks the coursework and if it is then I think there's a real chance of kind of favouritism and in terms of that as well of parents who are a bit naughty.'*
>
> Employee

Admissions tutors and AQA staff, in particular, commented on the modularity of the A-level system. They felt that enabling students to re-sit modular exams several times may make it easier for students to achieve the higher grades, inflate pass rates, and unfairly advantage students taking modular examinations over students who sat linear examinations in the past. The following comments illustrate these points:

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'Certainly from our point of view, in science subjects, the ability for students to take and re-take modules over and over has certainly made a difference in terms of grade shift because they're almost invariably able to improve their grades and that I think has been a major factor in terms of grade shift. Whether that's given us students who are any better I'm not sure… that's not our perception.'

Admissions tutor

'Well I think the modular system has made it easier to get higher grades because a lot of err, A-level pupils re-sit their modules, my own son did that, to, to up his marks. It's easier to re-sit a module than sort of the full exam.'

AQA Staff

'For somebody who only had one shot at it, that's it, and then for somebody a few years later and with a different system can have this bit from there, and this bit from there which happens to be the second or third time they've done it, then the overall quality of what they can finally say, I've got in front of me can potentially be higher therefore get a higher grade but is it fair on somebody who they might be competing for a job with who had a grade eight years earlier?'

AQA Staff

In addition, admissions tutors expressed the opinion that the modular nature of the A-level system may discourage integrated learning. They felt that students tend to compartmentalise knowledge and information, rather than viewing the whole:

'I think the modular structure of A-Level has its disadvantages because students see little things in little packets and don't see the connections, but, to, to a certain extent, the way we structure our degree programme does a similar kind of thing. Erm, so, so its interesting year on year that you see the same topics that students have practically forgotten about erm, but they, they obviously knew them at some point, because they passed their modules.'

Admissions tutor

'This sort of modular thing does seem to mean that they finish one thing then they forget about it and they move on to something else. It's never actually all brought together.'

Admissions tutor

3.6 Testing Ability

The issue of whether A-level results are an accurate reflection of an individual's ability in a given subject was commented on with equal frequency to 'type of assessment'. Comments relating to this theme were made by the employees and students only. In general, participants felt that there was a correlation between the grades a student received and their level of intelligence:

'Everybody [peers] seemed to get around what you'd expect them to get for their level of intelligence.'

Employee

'There's definitely like a relationship between people who are smarter and get better grades.'

Student

However, the student group questioned what A-level examinations were actually testing. They felt that in some cases A-levels were more a measure of a student's ability to learn the examination 'technique', rather than of knowledge, skill, or general intelligence:

> *'I have a friend who went in the exam and he did better than me, I had more knowledge and like kind of information….because I got the exam papers back and had a look at his as well and he did better than me because he knew the technique better.'*
>
> Student

> *'I think that technique, although you don't know it, technique is a big thing because it's a style of writing and that's what they're [examiners] looking for…'*
>
> Student

> *'I think to some extent, like with some of my exams, technique was ridiculously important…it was really important because erm you had specific hoops that you had to jump through.'*
>
> Student

Some of the 'techniques' that students used to prepare for A-level examinations are summarised in the following comments made by one student:

> *'You spend ages doing you know past papers and going through the mark scheme and seeing what other marks you can get and all the last minute revision is looking at the mark schemes and stuff. I mean it's not always because the exam questions are the same or similar but it's the way they word it and you know one word triggers this kind of response and stuff like that, that explains this criteria and describes this one and you know you have to get it really really spot on to get the marks.'*
>
> Student

Interestingly, a number of the students recognised the drawbacks of such techniques. They felt that rote-learning of marking schemes and the practice of predicting questions detracted from their learning experience:

> *'It's learning to pass the exam rather than to learn for yourself, so you're learning so you know just to get the grade rather than learning about it just because you're interested; it's all about passing the exams.'*
>
> Student

Students also expressed frustration over the use of examinations to assess performance in general. They felt that a two or three hour examination was not enough time to demonstrate what they had learnt throughout their A-level course.

> *'Trying to show what you know in two hours with a pen and a piece of paper is just quite disappointing really that you know you're there for seven years working towards this big exams and that's all it is...it's done in two hours.'*
>
> Student

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'A couple of two hour exams determines whether you get into Uni or not and I think for people who haven't done that much work it's easier to say everything they know than people who've done loads of work and they don't have the time to put everything you know down because you want to show exactly how much you know'.

Student

'I think my main problem with exams, well A-level exams, was time restraints because I think you erm having to write what you know in a certain time is important but I think to have a more lenient time, a very lenient time would be better because that would mean you can really show what you know.'

Student

3.7 Perceptions of trust by group

A matrix query was run in NVivo to determine whether the groups of participants differed significantly in terms of their perceptions of trust in A-level. Figure 1 illustrates the prevalence of each theme by group. Themes are presented in order of dominance, with cells being shaded proportionally to the number of references made by participants. Interestingly, the most frequently referenced theme for each group seemed to reflect their interests in the A-level examination system. The most prevalent theme for admissions tutors, for example, was 'fit for purpose'. Admissions tutors use A-level results to differentiate between and select students for university courses, thus it follows that their perceptions of trust would centre on whether or not A-levels are performing this task successfully. Likewise, amongst the most popular themes for students were the marking of examination papers, the specifications and whether or not examinations are a valid measure of ability. Having recently taken their A-levels and received their results, it is not surprising that these topics were in the forefront of the students' minds.

By far the most frequently referenced theme for the employees was examination standards. Debates regarding whether or not A-levels are getting easier and whether so called 'soft' subjects are easier than 'hard' subjects are frequently played out in the media following the publication of examination results each summer. Unlike the other groups, the employees did not (at the time) have a defined stake in A-levels, consequently it might follow that their perceptions largely focused upon popular debates in the public domain. Being from across the organisation and not necessarily involved in the standard setting process, AQA staff also commented on examination standards. Interestingly, however, the most dominant theme for this group was 'acceptance of an imperfect system'. The participants in this group recognised that the system wasn't perfect, that errors do happen when marking and processing students' results, but felt that in the main the system is reliable and examination boards try their upmost to ensure the accurate and timely delivery of results:

'I think you know, we recognise and everyone's recognising that there are flaws in it [the A-level examination system] and things can go wrong but… you know ninety per cent of the time it's reliable erm, and the people in it are trustworthy and you know, have integrity…'

AQA staff

'I have a basic trust, yes, in A-levels and I think erm, there are systems in place, checks and balances, to help, and I think err, we try, I think in AQA we try hard to actually err, maintain those checks and balances, but I also think that it does go wrong.'

AQA staff

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Figure 1: Dominance of themes by group

Theme	Admissions tutors	AQA Staff	Employees	Students
Standards	Weak dominance	Weak dominance	Strong dominance	Moderate dominance
Marking	Weak dominance	Weak dominance	Weak dominance	Strong dominance
Specifications	Weak dominance	Weak dominance	No references	Strong dominance
Fit for purpose	Moderate dominance	Weak dominance	Weak dominance	Weak dominance
Testing ability	No references	No references	Weak dominance	Strong dominance
Type of assessment	Weak dominance	Weak dominance	Moderate dominance	Weak dominance
Communication & provision of information	Weak dominance	Weak dominance	Moderate dominance	Weak dominance
Government & politics	Weak dominance	Weak dominance	Weak dominance	No references
Anonymity	No references	No references	Weak dominance	Moderate dominance
Education as a business	No references	Weak dominance	No references	Moderate dominance
Perverse effects	Weak dominance	No references	Weak dominance	Weak dominance
Quality control	Weak dominance	No references	Weak dominance	Weak dominance
Acceptance of an imperfect system	No references	Moderate dominance	No references	Weak dominance
Administration	Weak dominance	Weak dominance	No references	No references
Qualification types	No references	Weak dominance	Weak dominance	No references
Caring	No references	No references	No references	Moderate dominance
Manipulation	No references	No references	Weak dominance	Weak dominance
Figure Heads	No references	Weak dominance	Weak dominance	No references
Scandals	No references	Weak dominance	Weak dominance	Weak dominance

Key

- Strong dominance
- Moderate dominance
- Weak dominance
- No references

4   DISCUSSION

Participants' perceptions of trust in A-levels largely centred on examination standards. This is perhaps not surprising given that education, and educational standards in particular, has increasingly become politicised over recent years (McCaig, 2004). This 'politicisation' has been accompanied by an intensification of examination coverage in the media. Typical examination story headlines include assertions that educational standards are falling; examinations are getting easier; more students achieving top grades must be a bad thing; and 'soft' or less traditional subjects are easier than 'harder' traditional subjects (Murphy, 2004; Warmington and Murphy, 2004). Many of these common educational debates were evident in the comments made by participants. Surprisingly, however, participants also raised the issue of multiple organisations being involved in A-levels as problematic. Recent research conducted by Ipsos MORI (2009) into public perceptions of reliability in examinations suggested that many

individuals are curious about why multiple examination boards exist, rather than just one, and where different responsibilities lie (between DCSF, QCA, Ofqual, examination boards and schools). This is perhaps an area where greater provision of information is needed.

In discussing marking, many participants recited experiences where marking had been found to be erroneous, i.e. grades had been amended following a re-mark, and suggested that these instances had undermined their trust. Whilst in this study marking errors were deemed to be unacceptable, given the potential impact on students' life chances, there is evidence to suggest that the public are more accepting of certain types of errors than others. In previous focus group research, participants have been found to be understanding of examiner-related error, i.e. examiners misinterpreting what the student is trying to say or clerical errors when adding up marks, but viewed errors in the examination paper itself to be unacceptable (Ipsos MORI, 2009). Participants' comments not only related to marking reliability in general, but also the marking of individual examiners. This distinction highlights the symbiotic relationship that exists between trust in organisations, such as examination boards, and trust in individuals (Parker & Parker, 1993); trust in an organisation is influenced by trust in representatives of that organisation, and vice versa. Capturing both forms of trust in a single quantitative measure of trust may be challenging.

Discussions concerning specifications (the question paper, the mark scheme and their content) suggested that students in particular are distrustful of examination questions, believing that they are in some way intended to trick or deceive them. Given that examinations are often stressful, worrisome and anxiety-inducing events for students (Putwain, 2008, 2009), it is disconcerting that question papers were perceived in this way. Furthermore, students suggested that mark schemes are often too stringent and can prevent examiners from awarding marks where they are deserved. The reliability and validity of question papers and mark schemes are longstanding issues in the field of assessment. The fact that participants could engage with these issues suggests that some members of the public may have a more sophisticated understanding of assessment than is often assumed (Newton, 2005; Taylor, 2007).

Some participants questioned the fitness of purpose of A-levels, and the education system more broadly. This finding may be indicative of an erosion of trust; if qualifications are not perceived to be functioning correctly then the information they provide may not be valued by society. Having said this, the notion that A-levels should be fit for purpose does raise the question 'fit for whose purpose?' Had other stakeholder groups, such as teachers and employers, been included in the focus groups it seems likely that they would have had further expectations of A-levels. Is it realistically possible for A-levels to satisfy the requirements of a myriad of users, and if not, can A-levels ever fully be trusted?

Participants identified both coursework and modular schemes of assessment as potential factors that undermine their trust in A-levels. Both modes of assessment were thought to lower educational standards. However, there is evidence to suggest that students prefer coursework to examinations because of the additional support and feedback from teachers, amongst other reasons (Putwain, 2009). Hayward and McNicholl (2007) investigated the costs and benefits of the increased use of a modular assessment scheme. They suggested that the proposed advantages of modularity – short-term goals and regular feedback, flexibility in curriculum design, improved progression possibilities- were outweighed by the disadvantages – such as fragmentation of knowledge and more instrumental approaches to assessment and learning. Hayward and McNicholl, however, were writing from an academic perspective. Practising A-level teachers might perceive modularity to be in their best interest and in the best interest of

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candidates – it provides students with multiple opportunities to improve their mark- and thus place trust in such a regime. In short, aspects of A-level, such as mode of assessment, may be perceived differently by different users. What for one group may erode trust, for another may engender trust. A successful administration of a quantitative tool to measure trust will hopefully highlight any opposing inter-group perceptions. However, the issue of whether one group's perception should be prioritised in terms of developing strategies for increasing trust would then need to be tackled.

For the most part, participants believed that an association existed between an individual's A-level results and their general level of intelligence. However, students were particularly sceptical of whether A-level examinations were a valid and fair test of their abilities. They described techniques that they had been taught to prepare for examinations, such as rote-learning of mark schemes, learning the meaning of command words, and predicting questions that will appear on the paper. Some students felt that A-level examinations were more a measure of a student's ability to learn the 'technique' than anything else. Moreover, they felt that the emphasis on passing A-level examinations detracted from their learning experience. Indeed, Tomlinson (2004) estimated that a typical young person that goes to study A-levels will lose overall two terms worth of learning preparing and taking examinations. The findings relating to examination preparation replicate those of previous qualitative research conducted to explore teachers' and students' views of A-level (Baird, Daly, Tremain and Meadows, 2009; Baird, Chamberlain, Meadows, Royal-Dawson, and Taylor, 2009).

The most striking findings from the study include the complexity of participants' perceptions of trust (as indicated by the large number of themes identified) and the fact that different groups clearly hold different perceptions of what it means to trust in the A-level examination system. Furthermore, it seems that the inclusion of other stakeholder groups, such as teachers, will inevitably introduce further dimensions of trust. The chief difficulty in developing a scale to measure trust in A-levels is going to be designing a tool that encompasses all understandings of what it means to trust in this context.

<div align="right">Lucy Billington
November 2009</div>

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APPENDIX A   FOCUS GROUP SCHEDULE

Introduction (5 minutes)

- Introduce self and company/University affiliated with (AQA/University of Bristol).
- Outline the purpose of the research – to gain an understanding of the meanings that stakeholders attach to trust in the A-level exam system, with a view to developing a quantitative measure of trust. The focus group is part of PhD research into trust in high-stakes assessment.
- Outline structure of the focus group and my role as the group facilitator (1-2 hrs duration, amenities etc, impartial observer as much as possible).
- Explain that the session will be in the form of a group discussion. Stress that there are no right or wrong answers. Everyone's views are of interest. The aim is to hear as many different thoughts as possible.
- Participants should not wait to be invited into the discussion. However, it is important that participants do not talk over each other.
- Discussion is being taped, and will later be transcribed for analysis.
- Reassure respondents that discussions in focus group will remain confidential- data anonymised and destroyed after use. Also ask the group to treat what others say as confidential and not to repeat anything outside the session.
- Ask participants to introduce themselves to the group

Section 1: Warm-up exercise (20 minutes)

Split participants into two groups. Provide them with a flipchart and marker-pen. Ask groups to discuss and record on the flip chart the following:

1. When we say that we have trust in someone (a family member, friend, work colleague) what do you think it means? List the attributes that a trustworthy person has.

2. Think about a company or institution (e.g. the NHS, the police, your local council) that you particularly distrust. What is it about the company/institution that makes you distrustful of it? List reasons on the flipchart.

Section 2: Exploring the meaning participants attach to trust in the GCE examination system (60 minutes)

Switch on tape recorder. Ask participants to state their name to facilitate later transcription.

Ask members from each group to feedback on their discussion in the warm-up exercise, and then proceed to the main group discussion:

1. Would you say that you trust the GCE exam system in England?

Prompts: Why do you say that? Is your trust in the exam system without reservation? Do you trust some aspects of the exam system more than others?

2. Can you describe a past experience which led you to build or establish trust in the GCE exam system?

3. Can you describe a past experience which led you to lose or not to establish trust in the GCE exam system?

4. Do you think that the experiences of others (friends, family, work colleagues) have impacted upon your trust in the GCE exam system in anyway?

Prompts: Tell me about their experiences and how they have affected your attitude toward the GCE exam system.

5. Has media-based information influenced (positively or negatively) your trust in the GCE exam system?

Prompts: Which media do you feel has had the greatest impact upon your trust in the exam system? Can you describe a particular media source (newspaper article, news broadcast, documentary) that you feel has influenced your trust in the exam system? In what way did it change your attitude toward the exam system?

6. What do you think that those responsible for the setting and grading of GCE exams (QCDA, Ofqual, or the English awarding bodies) should be doing to further engender trust amongst exam users?

Prompts: Can you outline any information/activities that you think would better enable you to place trust in the GCE exam system? Please explain your answer.

7. Given our discussion, if you had to assign a mark between 0 and 10 to indicate the degree of your trust in the GCE exam system, what mark would you give (where 0 means don't trust at all and 10 means trust a lot) and why?

(Get the group to summarise the outcome of their discussion)

8. As you know the purpose of the focus group is to develop a questionnaire to measure trust in the GCE exam system. Which aspects of trust in the GCE exam system do you think have arisen in your discussions? Which factors influence whether or not you trust the exam system?

Closing (5 minutes)

Ask if participants have any further comments.
Thank participants for taking part.

Probing techniques

- Ask, in general, 'How do other people feel?' or 'What does everyone else think?'
- Repeat the question or part of it.
- Highlight a particular point that has been made and ask for the groups' thoughts on it.
- Ask the group directly, 'Can you say a bit more about that?'
- Look around or gesture to the rest of the group to come in.
- Use expectant silences to allow the group time to reflect further on the issue.
- Highlight differences in views and encourage the group to explore and explain them.

(Finch & Lewis, 2003)

APPENDIX B   **CONSENT FORM**

CONSENT FORM

A-level Research Project

I(Name) …………………………………………………………………………..

agree to take part in the above research project. I give my permission for any data I supply to be recorded and transcribed for data analysis purposes. I understand all data collected will be anonymised and any resultant reports will not identify specific individuals. I also understand I may withdraw from the research at any time without giving a reason for doing so.

Signed (participant)……..…………………………….   Date………………………

Signed (researcher)…………………………….........   Date…………………….

APPENDIX C   THEMES WITH ILLUSTRATIVE COMMENTS

Theme	Comments
Standards	See main report
Marking	See main report
Specifications	See main report
Fit for purpose	See main report
Testing ability	See main report
Type of assessment	See main report
Communication & provision of information	*'Well they [examination boards] obviously must be sitting on a wealth of data about people who have sat their exams so I would have thought that they should be thinking about how they communicate that and get their messages out there about how good and reliable they actually are.'* Employee *'I'd like to see more links between say AQA and the subject centres, the higher education subject centres. I mean, I assume these links are there but I've never come across them as an Admissions Tutor'.* Admissions tutor
Government & politics	*'There seems to be a political agenda behind education now and I don't think there was in the past, I think get rid of that political agenda and go back to basics…'* Employee *'Exams aren't sat in part of a vacuum, they're, they're sat within a sort of very dynamic political system.'* AQA staff
Anonymity	*'The actual marking and all that kind of thing, it's such a faceless thing erm so it has no face so that makes it very difficult to make a judgement about trust in it so all you're hearing about is the process that went wrong.'* Employee *'I don't know who they [examination boards] are; they're just kind of like erm a trademark on a bit of paper at the top of it to me.'* Student
Education as a business	*'What bothers me is erm like we talked about the amount of money for the remark; it feels like the examination boards are just trying to make money out of us.'* Student *'You've got the three exam boards and then within those exam boards you've got different exam systems, you've got AQA A-level, you've got Diplomas, International Baccalaureates, all this sort, all sort of eyeing the competition and, and money from schools.'* AQA staff

Perverse effects	*'Performance management processes within schools almost, erm, almost make the candidate as a person quite secondary because there is an academic target; what percentage you've got to get, bottom line.'* AQA staff *'I think that the, the results are more sort of skewed towards school targets rather than what the child actually needs.'* Employee
Quality control	*'We trust the exam boards are doing everything correctly and that the checks are there.'* Admissions tutor *'I also think that at A-level there's, as a particular area of examination, probably more quality control than perhaps GCSEs.'* Employee
Acceptance of an imperfect system	See main report
Administration	*'Trust in the A-Levels does have to be founded on a strong faith in procedures, I'm afraid. The procedures have to be seen to be water-tight erm. If they're not then erm I think trust would disappear pretty quickly.'* Admissions tutor *'Yeah, the reputation I think of, certain, a certain board in London was, was very much related to their ability erm, to, not so much produce the right results but to produce results on the day. I mean they're dreadful, sort of in administrative terms.'* AQA Staff
Qualification types	*'I suppose these are indicators of trust aren't they, say the number of people who start doing things like Cambridge Pre-U qualifications rather than A-levels because you might have more trust in, I don't know, the reliability or the validity of those results.'* AQA Staff *'I think erm there's a lot of confusion about what this Diploma stuff means but they seem to be positioned, there's a lot of work coming out, communication coming out about these Diplomas and they seem to be almost belittling what the A-levels are and what they can do and what they will do.'* Employee
Caring	*'I think I've got, I do trust them [examination boards] to an extent because before I sat my AS levels about 3 weeks before I found out I was dyspraxic and got diagnosed with dyspraxia and erm basically I was entitled to extra time and everything and I've found out now it takes months and months to put that through… I do kind of trust them because they got it put through so fast, so they could see that I needed it and it wasn't my fault.'*

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	Student
	'A friend of mine had chicken pox when she was about to take the exam and it actually erm she was pretty worried about not being able to take the exam but what happened was they sent an adjudicator to the hospital and she was under quarantine but she was allowed to take her exam… the fact that she was actually allowed to take her exam in the hospital with two examiners there outside the room watching her erm actually gave that sort of a comfort and trust, the exam boards would do that.'
	Student
Manipulation	*'I think er the media focus on exams getting easier, it might actually have a really negative effect in that erm when exam board sort of determine erm grade boundaries I think that I think that's going to have an impact on where they determine grade boundaries…I think it's sort of statistically driven so erm say I don't however many percent get As or whatever, they might reduce that or heighten it so you get erm sort of consistent level year on year so people won't be able to say next year 'oh look exams have gotten easier or gotten harder'…'*
	Employee
Figure Heads	*'I don't have faith in Ed Balls, somebody that could actually sort of take things forward, I think he's got a piece meal approach to it, I think he's got too much power erm and I don't think he's got kids best interest…'*
	Employee
Scandals	*'There've been some terrifically high-profile cock-ups… what have you got 2001 or 2 is it that Edexcel made a massive sort of err sort of, erm, problem of issuing results, erm, and the wrong results, erm, but the more recent ones, erm, think was it the American company looking after the SATs and the whole sort of QCA contract for that. That is almost used sort of as a brush to tarnish every other bit of the system with and erm, there is no sort of distinction made within the media…'*
	AQA Staff

A qualitative exploration of perceptions of trust in A-levels   Lucy Billington