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Foreword

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Foreword

And then came pandemic. The Research team at Cambridge Assessment turned from the established research programme not only because of disruption to work, but because the organisation needed to focus on how best to ensure continued delivery of the important public goods which assessment and qualifications supply to individuals, society and the economy. We needed to supply grades and certification in both academic and vocational qualifications. And being researchers, we marshalled all the existing evidence which could inform the process of giving grades in the absence of exams and made that available for decision-making. We placed researchers in operational teams to support awarding. We contributed to national policy work and convened special teams to interpret processes as they were applied for the first time. We used prior research to help build the guidance for teachers and the data portal for them to submit data. We ran processes which created data to drive the awarding. And despite the lack of the normal stream of information from examinations, and despite lack of access to schools, we knew that we had to gather information to interpret the impact of the pandemic—to understand the quality and fairness of the alternative arrangements which had been put in place, the patterns of “learning loss” and the impact of both disruption and the policy response. And while the domestic scene required constant attention, the organisation also was providing certification to over 170 countries, all with their own patterns of disruption and distress. The articles in this edition of *Research Matters* are the first articles from our effort to understand what occurred, and to understand what we need to put in place to introduce greater resilience into assessment and qualifications. We now go into a second year of alternative approaches in England, and a mixture of exams and alternatives internationally. We go into the summer conscious of the burst of grade inflation in 2020, and with a recognition that the cohorts of summer 2021 have suffered greater learning loss than those in 2020. We will continue to trace the impact of the pandemic—particularly the progression of learners and the vexed issue of standards. That will take time. But simultaneously—and quickly—we are extracting from our review of events the key characteristics of future arrangements which will meet the complex demands we place on assessment—which include but are not limited to: recognition of learning, supporting admissions and progression, specifying the key content and outcomes of learning programmes, and signalling the quality of arrangements for learning.

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