



**Rt Hon Michael Gove MP**  
Secretary of State

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## **Restricted Policy**

Glenys Stacey  
Chief Executive  
Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation  
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30 March 2012

Dear Glenys,

### **REFORM OF GCE A LEVELS**

The White Paper, 'The Importance of Teaching', made clear the Government's commitment to engage Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in A level reform. It is my view that the single most important purpose of A level qualifications is to prepare young people for further study at university, whether in the specific subject studied for A level or in a related subject area. Coupled with this, universities need information about students' abilities and achievements recorded in a way that enables them to make decisions about an individual student's suitability for a particular course. Qualifications that command the confidence of our best universities will also command the confidence of teachers, parents, students and employers. Our officials have been discussing these issues: we have a shared interest, given Ofqual's regulatory responsibility for A levels and the Government's policy oversight.

I am increasingly concerned that current A levels – though they have much to commend them – fall short of commanding the level of confidence we would want to see. Leading university academics tell me that A levels do not prepare students well enough for the demands of an undergraduate degree, and I am troubled by reports from learned bodies such as the Institute of Physics. I know that your own research has identified particular concerns regarding both subject content and assessment at A level.

I would therefore like to see universities having far greater involvement in the design and development of A level qualifications than they do at present. That involvement should be both when qualifications are developed initially and following each examinations cycle, so that universities' influence over the qualification develops over time. I am keen to see Ofqual taking a lead in convening a form of post-

examinations review, to ensure that lessons are learnt to inform future qualifications development.

Before qualifications are accredited, we should expect Awarding Organisations to provide evidence of those universities that have engaged in the development of qualifications, and details of those that support the specifications and associated assessment materials, with a particular emphasis on our best, research intensive universities such as those represented by the Russell Group. You will of course want to consider how Awarding Organisations should be required to evidence the appropriate level of university endorsement. I will expect the bar to be a high one: university ownership of the exams must be real and committed, not a tick-box exercise.

This means that Government must take a step back in order to allow universities to take a leading role. In future, I do not envisage the Department for Education having a role in the development of A level qualifications. It is more important that universities are satisfied that A levels enable young people to start their undergraduate degrees having gained the right knowledge and skills, than that Ministers are able to influence content or methods of assessment. I am particularly keen that universities should be able to determine subject content, and that they should endorse specifications, including details of how the subject should be assessed.

I want to see new arrangements that allow Awarding Organisations to work with universities to develop qualifications in a way that is unconstrained – as far as possible – by centrally determined criteria. We need to be confident that standards – of content, assessment and grading – are secured within a subject, but I would not wish standards in any particular subject to be constrained artificially as a result of any concept of comparability between subjects. It is important that this rolling back allows universities, not Awarding Organisations, to drive the system.

The examination system is already becoming more diverse, and will continue to diversify, as people study what is right for them. I do not believe Government should seek to limit this diversity in the interests of bureaucratic tidiness. Different subjects have different requirements; I am interested in your views as to how the system should develop to allow for approaches to – for example – mathematics that provide for differential levels of challenge. Different universities will also have different requirements and I am keen for there to be a broad debate on how any new arrangements can recognise this, which I see as reflecting a welcome diversity between our best universities.

Ofqual has a crucial role in establishing a system that is capable of engaging universities in the ongoing development of A levels. There will need to be some core 'design rules' underpinning new qualifications, in particular to secure standards within a subject, although I would wish those to be kept to a minimum. You will want to consider what arrangements – for assessment, grading and monitoring - you think will be necessary to secure standards in line with Ofqual's statutory objectives, including the international objective, and to secure the credibility of A-levels in general. Beyond that, you should step back. I know that in considering this you will be informed by the research you have commissioned into HE views of A levels,

including on such matters as assessment and the impact of the current structure of the qualification, and also your forthcoming research comparing A-levels with international competitors.

The discussions I have had with university academics and school and college leaders on the subject of A levels have left me concerned about the impact of the current modular structure on students' education, and their ability to make the connections between different topics within a subject that are so crucial for deep understanding. I will therefore be interested in your views – and in those of others – regarding A level modules (including the division of the qualification into AS and A2), and in particular the opportunity to take modules in January, together with the impact of resitting on confidence in A level standards.

I know you share my view that, together, we should make rapid progress on this matter, particularly in the subjects that are most important in facilitating young people's entry to a wide range of undergraduate courses (the Russell Group 'facilitating' subjects). We should be ambitious; from discussions with Awarding Organisations I understand that teaching of new A levels could start from September 2014, and I want, if at all possible, that to be achieved. But I recognise that this ambition will require our leading universities to make a strong commitment to the A level system: it is in their interest that they do, and I am confident that they will.

You will, I am sure, want to consult with a wide range of people with an interest in A levels on a range of matters, including those raised in this letter; the ensuing debate will itself be essential to establishing a new approach to the qualification.

I look forward to your views on the measures that will be necessary to achieve the A level qualifications that young people deserve.

I am copying this letter to Leighton Andrews, John O'Dowd and to Graham Stuart, MP, in his capacity as Chair of the Education Select Committee.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Michael Gove". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent initial "M" and a long, sweeping tail.

MICHAEL GOVE