

Glenys Stacey
Chief Regulator



3 April 2012

Rt Hon Michael Gove MP
Secretary of State
Department for Education
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Dear Secretary of State

A level reform

Thank you for your letter of 30 March on the development of new A levels.

We agree that universities should play a larger role in the development of A level qualifications than they do now.

You would like the design rules and other regulatory arrangements for A levels to be kept to a minimum. This suits our developing approach to regulation: we don't want to regulate where there is no need to do so. We will strip back the regulatory requirements for A levels, and intervene only where we need to, to make sure standards are right. We will need to look at comparability within subjects, and we expect there will need to be a common grading scale, but I am confident we can reduce the regulatory burden significantly.

We have been talking with your officials about how the new system might work, and I would welcome your views. We will of course consult formally on the details, and talk more with those in universities, schools, and colleges, to get the detail right. First of all we need to understand the commitment that universities will be able to make, so that the new arrangements will work.

Making sure that A levels are fit for purpose means getting four things right: subject content (curriculum), teaching, assessment and level of demand. We would look to universities, working with learned societies and awarding organisations, to agree the subject content of A levels. Ofqual would be happy to work with whatever arrangements are put in place to do this, provided that they enable universities to develop high quality content. We will want to be sure that respected university departments and learned societies support the content defined for each new A level. Content will vary to some extent between different A levels in the same subject, but we would want to see all A levels being widely accepted. So even if a particular A level is developed by a small group of universities, we would want to

see a significant number of key universities signed up to it. We will look to the university sector to put in place sensible arrangements for this as soon as possible.

It is not for Ofqual to determine how A levels are taught, but we will need the views of teachers to make sure that they can be taught effectively. We will also check how new A levels are working in the classroom once they are being taught.

We know that universities will have views about the way in which the subject should be assessed, and on the structure of the qualification. We will take account of these views as we discuss assessment here at Ofqual and with assessment experts. We do need to make sure that the assessment arrangements for A levels or any other qualification are the best they can be - assessments should not be too predictable or too narrow, for example. We will consult on A level assessment arrangements (including modular assessment and resits) and we will speak with schools, colleges, universities and awarding organisations.

Once these new A levels are available, we will check that awarding organisations are maintaining the level of demand subject by subject as they develop each round of exams and set grade boundaries. We will report annually, and provide an important and powerful feedback loop to identify any problems with content or assessment. We will compare our qualifications with their international counterparts, and propose changes where we think our qualifications can get better still.

The research we are publishing today on the views of higher education on A levels is a useful start point, as we develop the new arrangements. Assuming university leaders' commitment, we would aim to start consulting formally in June on the new arrangements, working as far as possible with our regulatory partners in Wales and Northern Ireland.

We, like you, want to see progress made without unnecessary delay. With the full commitment of and support from universities and awarding organisations, a September 2014 start date for teaching new A level qualifications should be possible in at least some subjects. We will do everything we can to achieve this goal, whilst securing quality and standards.

I am copying this letter to recipients of yours.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Glenys Stacey', with a stylized, flowing script.

Glenys Stacey

cc: Leighton Andrews AM
John O'Dowd MLA
Graham Stuart MP