

Glenys Stacey  
Chief Regulator  
Ofqual  
Spring Place  
Herald Avenue  
Coventry  
CV5 6UB

16 September 2013

Dear Ms Stacey

### **A-level reform**

I am writing as Chair of SCORE<sup>1</sup> to express strong concerns about Professor Smith's report on A-level content, which was published on Friday 6 October. Our concerns are as follows:

1) Throughout the report, there are references to SCORE and its member organisations that give the impression that they were an integral part of the review process. This is not the case. While SCORE was invited to provide evidence for the review, we felt that both the timeframe and process for doing so were unacceptable, and wrote to the Joint Council for Qualifications in May explaining this decision. The subject associations within SCORE also wrote to Professor Smith outlining serious concerns with the review he was undertaking, offering to work with Ofqual and the Russell Group to address shortfalls with the qualifications in their subjects, but this offer was not acted upon. Though we have met awarding organisations and others to discuss the reform of A-levels, including at a round table with the Minister in May, we have had no discussions with the awarding organisations or Professor Smith's committee on subject content.

2) We are pleased that Professor Smith's report recognises the importance of mathematical skills within the A-level sciences, and that the research we published last year has been taken into account. We are also pleased that there is some discussion about the place of the assessment of practical skills. However, it is not clear how the issues raised will be resolved within a timeframe that will allow awarding organisations to develop new qualifications by September 2014, nor is it clear who will be involved in those discussions. We hope that the learned societies will play a central part.

3) We note that the sciences have been deemed to require minor changes, while mathematics will need major changes and thus reformed under the auspices of ALCAB. This will mean they are being

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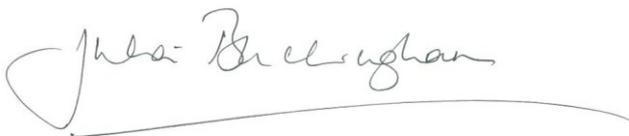
<sup>1</sup> SCORE is a partnership between the Association for Science Education, the Institute of Physics, the Royal Society of Chemistry, the Royal Society, and the Society of Biology.

reformed on different timescales, with different processes, which will make it more difficult to ensure coherence between these related subjects.

4) We continue to be concerned about the conflict of interest that lies at the heart of the process that has been used to reform A-levels, with awarding organisations involved in developing the criteria that their own specifications will be judged against. We would have liked to see the evidence presented by awarding organisations to demonstrate their engagement with higher education, and would urge you to make this evidence publicly available.

SCORE supports the principle of reviewing A-level content to ensure it is fit for purpose and encourages progression to higher education. Since the announcement last year of the intention to involve universities more closely in the design and content of A-levels, SCORE has held meetings with a number of organisations to discuss how the professional bodies in the sciences could be involved in the reform. We believe that the main weakness with the A-levels is the quality of the assessment, and, as we have made clear on a number of occasions, we feel that the best way to ensure appropriate involvement of all stakeholders would be the formation of national subject committees, independent of any commercial interest and with an explicit remit to monitor assessment. This proposal is also supported by the heads of university departments of biology, chemistry and physics, who wrote to the Secretary of State to that effect in November 2012. The subject organisations within SCORE have made some progress in setting up their own curriculum committees, and would welcome the opportunity to discuss how these groups could contribute to the ongoing reform of A-levels.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Julia Buckingham". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above a long, thin horizontal line that extends across the width of the signature.

Professor Julia Buckingham  
SCORE Chair