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Chief Regulator
Ofqual
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19 March 2014

Dear Glenys

A-level reform

Thank you for meeting with SCORE on 6 March 2014 to discuss the proposed reform to the A-level sciences. It was useful to hear an update on the reform process, and the rationale behind the proposed changes to the grading of practical work in the sciences. We were also encouraged that you agreed to explore how awarding organisations had selected and appointed their advisors from higher education, since this is also seen as a significant factor in the reform of the qualifications.

I am writing to reiterate the concerns we raised in the meeting about the impact of the proposed changes on the range, quality and prevalence of practical work carried out in schools. While we agree that the current arrangements for the assessment of practical work are in need of review, we do not accept that the proposals made by Ofqual will address what are being stated as the main reasons for doing so; namely, malpractice in schools, and a lack of differentiation in marks. On malpractice, we have yet to see any evidence that it is significantly more problematic in the sciences than in other subjects that are essentially practical in nature, for example art and design or geography. Neither are we convinced that separating the practical grade will lessen the likelihood that schools will engage in these practices; if the grade still has value to users, the motivation to do so will remain. We would argue that this issue should be addressed through strengthening the moderation processes used by awarding organisations to ensure that marking is fair and robust. Likewise, we would challenge the assertion that practical components are uniformly poor at differentiating ability; the extended investigation component of OCR Physics (B), for example, achieves a satisfactory spread of marks.

Our primary concern remains that by separating the practical grade, the impression is given that practical skills and knowledge are an adjunct to the main study of science, rather than being an integral part of these subjects, and that practical work is no longer seen as a vehicle for developing scientific analysis, reasoning and understanding. Post-16 qualifications should be challenging, both in their own right and as preparation for further study or employment, and in the sciences that must include the ability to work and think scientifically, at the heart of which is empirical observation and analysis. From our discussions with colleagues in higher education, it is these abilities they wish to see in A-level students, beyond a narrow range of technical and manipulative skills. The response from higher education to any changes in the grading structure for the sciences will be critical to their

impact on schools, and our discussions indicate that this will be an issue, both in terms of communicating the changes and the use universities will be able to make of the information from the separate grade.

We agree that curriculum and pedagogy are matters for schools themselves to decide; however, given the time requirements for A-level study, the contents of an A-level course will largely be driven by the specification, and the assessment. We believe there is a very real danger that, because of the extra resources required to carry out practical work effectively, if it does not count directly towards the main grade in the sciences, some schools will reduce the amount of practical work they do, to the detriment of their students' learning. And it is likely to be those schools that are poorly resourced that will do so, compounding disadvantage and running counter to the drive to widen participation in universities. In addition, given the increasing globalisation of education, it is important that A-levels prepare young people to compete with their peers from overseas, and this will be damaged if the place of practical work in the sciences is threatened.

As we stated when we met, SCORE is ready and willing to work with Ofqual and the awarding organisations to ensure that the assessment of practical work can be carried out in an appropriately robust way to give sufficient confidence to allow the marks to be included as part of the overall grade. We have had fruitful discussions with the awarding organisations about their progress so far, and believe that we would be able to work with them, and with representatives from higher education, to come to a solution that would ensure that the full range of investigative and analytic skills associated with studying the sciences is recognised appropriately. However, we would not be able to do so in the current timeframe, so would urge Ofqual again to delay the introduction of new A-levels in the sciences to allow this work to take place.

Yours sincerely

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

Professor Julia Buckingham
SCORE Chair

cc Michael Gove MP, Secretary of State for Education
David Willetts MP, Minister for Universities and Science
Amanda Spielman, Chair, Ofqual
Professor Julius Weinberg, Deputy Chair, Ofqual
Professor Sir Mark Walport, Government Chief Scientific Adviser