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Dangers in A-level sciences grading reform highlighted

As Ofqual announces the separation of marks for practical science from core A-level grades, a leading partnership of scientific societies, SCORE, has expressed its disappointment and concern.

The reform presents a hurried large scale change that will affect both school reporting procedures and university admissions processes, including how students' attainment in science is measured and recorded.

Professor Julia Buckingham, Chair of SCORE, said, "We fully appreciate that reform is needed but the current solution is rushed and does not address operational issues. We believe we can develop workable new approaches but Ofqual has decided to go ahead with an inadequate solution."

The change, devised to overcome the problem of perceived malpractice in A-level coursework, is due to be implemented in September 2015; while in other subjects, such as Geography, practical coursework is set to be re-introduced, for implementation in September 2016.

SCORE raises the concern that the separation of practical marks in science from the overall A-level grade will leave universities with an incomplete reflection of students' scientific skills and competencies.

Professor Buckingham continues, "Universities are likely to perceive A-level grades as a full reflection of a student's knowledge and ability, but the grading will not include practical work which is an integral component of science learning and an essential foundation for studying science at university.

"With schools having a very narrow accountability framework, another unintended but serious consequence of this reform is that schools may reduce the opportunities for students to do practical work if the separate mark for practical work is viewed as less important than the A-level grade used on UCAS forms, for example.

"With poorer performing schools often the least inclined to undertake practical work, this reform is likely to have a larger effect on already disadvantaged students.

"It could also serve to leave students in our schools behind their international peers - as governments around the world seek to hone their nation's scientific talent, we send a strong message to teachers and students that downgrades the importance of 'doing' science."

SCORE hopes that the regulating body will work closely with UCAS and university admissions departments, to communicate clearly the implications of separate marking in practical science assessment.

Professor Buckingham adds, “Ultimately, universities must be able to continue to admit students on the basis of their scientific knowledge and skills in the round – the fundamental principle in doing science is about being practical: being able to think and work like a scientist – the introduction of this separate mark serves to further jeopardise the process that universities must rely upon to get a complete picture of their applicants’ scientific ability.”

ENDS

Notes to Editors

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2. SCORE

SCORE is a partnership of organisations, which aims to improve science education in UK schools and colleges by supporting the development and implementation of effective education policy. The partnership is chaired by Professor Julia Buckingham and comprises the Association for Science Education, Institute of Physics, Royal Society, Royal Society of Chemistry and Society of Biology. To find out more, go to <http://www.score-education.org/home>