



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

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Glenys Stacey  
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*Dear Glenys,*

## **REFORM OF GCE A LEVELS**

In March, I wrote to you to outline concerns about the current structure of A levels and to propose a way forward. Following your consultation over the summer, I am now writing to set out my policy steers about A level reform.

I believe that the primary purpose of A levels is to prepare students for degree-level study. All students should have access to qualifications that are highly respected and valued by leading universities. Current A levels do not always provide the solid foundation that students need to prepare them for degree-level study and for vocational education. The modular nature of the qualification and repeated assessment windows have contributed to many students not developing deep understanding or the necessary skills to make connections between topics. Many leading universities are concerned about current A levels, and nearly three-quarters of lecturers say that they have had to adapt their teaching approaches for under-prepared first year undergraduates. As you have found, there is support for much greater higher education involvement in A levels.

There is clear dissatisfaction among leading university academics about the preparation of A level pupils for advanced studies. I am concerned that some natural science degrees have become four-year courses to compensate for problems with A levels. Linguists complain about the inadequacy of university entrants' foreign language skills. Mathematicians are concerned that current A level questions are overly structured and encourage a formulaic approach, instead of using more open-ended questions that require advanced problem-solving. The Cambridge mathematics education project is designed specifically to address deficiencies in the teaching of mathematics that affect pupils' ability to progress successfully to more advanced study. There is also growing concern that the best private schools routinely teach beyond A levels, giving their pupils an advantage in the competition

for university places, while many state school pupils, particularly in poor areas, are not aware that universities with the most competitive entry criteria look for skills beyond those required by A levels. It is vital that we address these concerns if we are to reverse knock-on effects on universities and make our society fairer.

Your consultation highlighted a strong interest in A level and AS qualifications. You have already announced, as an interim reform, that from 2014 you will end the January assessment opportunity that led to 'bitesize' learning and encouraged resits. There was support for this reform both in response to your consultation and in the research you published last spring. I have considered the findings of your consultation and your response carefully. In your consultation you were clear that changes to the structure of A levels would not have a detrimental effect on your ability to maintain standards, and would therefore be a matter for Government policy rather than a decision for you as Regulator. I am therefore writing to set out my policy decision to make changes to A levels in order to restore their reputation, and, given the importance I attach to this, it is important that Ofqual has regard to my views.

The AS is regarded as a valuable qualification, and a useful means of securing breadth within an A level programme. I have concluded that it should be retained, but that its design should be reconsidered in order to establish it as a high quality standalone qualification. I would like the AS level to be as intellectually demanding as an A level, covering half of the content of a full A level and delivered over either one or two years, so that institutions could decide what is best for their students. This approach is a variation on the second option that you presented in your consultation. I recognise that this will be a change from the current system whereby universities can use the AS qualification to inform admission offers, but I note that your impact assessment found that very few universities base offers on AS grades. You will want to consider with the awarding organisations and others the details of how this new AS level qualification should be specified.

Alongside a standalone AS level qualification, I have concluded that the case for a fully linear A level is compelling. Moving to a linear A level assessed at the end of two years will address the issues of modularity and resits leading to grade inflation. This will allow students to develop a better understanding of their subject through the greater maturity that will be developed over two years of study – something that I know teachers believe can be particularly important for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. I would like Ofqual, in setting out the conditions that will underpin the new qualifications, to be clear that an A level should assess students' knowledge and understanding across the whole course, with assessment taking place at the end of the course.

It is of paramount importance that new A levels command the respect of leading universities. I am delighted that the Russell Group is planning to create an organisation to provide advice to Ofqual on the content of A levels. The advisory body will focus on those A levels which are most commonly required for entry to our leading universities and will seek the views of universities outside of the Russell Group, as well as engaging with relevant learned societies and others. The involvement of respected academics will help to ensure that the qualifications are designed to equip students for university. It will be critical that new qualifications are reviewed each year to ensure that they are delivering the rigorous and high quality

education that is needed. You proposed in your consultation an annual post-examination review to consider standards, and I am pleased that the Russell Group will be involved in this process.

When I wrote to you in March I set out my aspiration for new A levels to be developed for first teaching in September 2014 and recognised that this would be an ambitious timetable. I believe that it is right to want these new, rigorous qualifications to be available as soon as they can be. I have, however, listened to the concerns that were highlighted in your consultation, and I recognise that you, awarding organisations and any Russell Group advisory body will need sufficient time to develop the qualifications to the quality that students deserve. I have therefore agreed to delay the date for first teaching of the new qualifications. I expect that the first new A levels in facilitating subjects will be developed in time for Ofqual to accredit them so that they are ready for first teaching in September 2015.

Together, these changes will enhance the reputation of A levels, better prepare more students for higher education, and ensure that competition for university places is fairer.

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

Yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'M. Gove', with a long horizontal stroke underneath.

MICHAEL GOVE