

24 December 2014

To the Responsible Officers

Office of Qualifications
and Examinations Regulation
Spring Place
Coventry Business Park
Herald Avenue
Coventry CV5 6UB

Telephone 0300 303 3344
Textphone 0300 303 3345

Dear Responsible Officers

GCSE maths

Thank you for joining yesterday's teleconference. For the avoidance of doubt, I am writing to you with the key points.

In terms of specific Government policy aims for GCSE maths, these are to ensure all students are more confident and competent in basic maths, and to properly stretch more able students. They represent a real step change in expectations.

As we have discussed previously, accreditation is not a comparability exercise. It is a process by which we determine whether or not the materials submitted by an exam board give us sufficient confidence that our requirements can be met on an ongoing basis. To carry out a comparability exercise without an established methodology would be inappropriate and potentially misleading. We have a programme of research planned for GCSE maths exams which can explore comparability properly, using appropriate methodologies. Our letter to you of 3 December outlines this research and explains that we will keep you informed on its progress.

To make sure that specifications developed met the policy aims and other requirements, we worked together to develop industry standards. These were to embed agreed approaches to quality and also to prevent the most adverse effects of competition. Of course, not everything can be pinned down absolutely: there will always be some scope for variation, there is more than one valid approach to assessment and we do not wish to constrain innovation. There is a fine line between prescribing every detail and allowing flexibility where it is appropriate. What we cannot permit though is flexibility creating a threat to standards.

In September we set out six issues that we expect all exam boards to work on to make sure that the first live papers in 2017 meet the new standards. At the heart of the recent discussions has been the assessment of mathematical problem solving. The design of mathematical problem solving questions is complex and there is no simple way to ensure that it is assessed effectively, nor is there only one

acceptable approach to assessment. Ensuring any question assesses what it intends to, requires a complex consideration of the content domain being assessed, the effects of question style, the language used, and the functioning of marking schemes and so on. Ensuring a mathematical problem solving question is valid requires additional considerations of the effects of context and what might be familiar or unfamiliar to different groups of students. The discussions that we have been having about clarifying our guidance are to do with ensuring the best quality assessments; it is not about requiring all exam boards to approach the requirements for mathematical problem solving in exactly the same way.

We have arranged a meeting in January at which I want to:

- reiterate the Government's policy aims for GCSE maths and the approach we have taken to delivering those aims;
- discuss the work now underway on GCSE maths, and the likely timescales, so that all is understood clearly; and
- make sure that everyone has a clear and unequivocal understanding of the GCSE maths guidance.

We have previously confirmed that exam boards may publish additional sample assessment materials in the usual way. It would though be irregular, plainly wrong and in breach of the Conditions of Recognition, to publish additional sample assessment materials which are different in demand from those that formed part of our accreditation decision. You must inform me by 8 January of any proposals for additional sample assessment materials so that senior staff at Ofqual can be engaged well before any materials are issued. After that time we expect to be provided with good notice of any further proposals.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Glenys Stacey', written in a cursive style.

Glenys Stacey
Chief Regulator