

ADDRESS REMOVED

29<sup>th</sup> May 2015

David Cameron,  
Prime Minister  
10 Downing Street  
London  
SW1A 2AA

Dear Mr Cameron

I am writing to you in desperation, so let me start by asking you to persevere with the contents of this letter and the accompanying copy documentation (I may end up repeating myself as I've already written to Nick Gibb and the issue was not addressed). I hope you would pay it the same amount of time and attention, which I have devoted in order to attempt to get my points across.

I am not a mad person by the way ... just very passionate about the impact and credibility of the accreditation process (with Ofqual having now admitted that the standards in the GCSEs that they have already accredited are not suitable) for the new Mathematics GCSE. Let me start by saying, I came into teaching (from the "real world") to make a difference and having worked at a school (that was previously designated as a National Challenge school) where we took Maths results from the mid 40's to over 80% (about 20% above target!) and was actually "most improved school" in England in Jan 2013, I feel I have some credibility. I also happen to have been blogging about the whole process and am so very frustrated that as teachers, we appear to have no voice (I am not alone in this thinking).

Last week saw the publication of the research project and to sum it up there are no surprises ... any Maths teacher across the country who had looked at all three main boards, even when they were in their draft stage would have told you there were massive differences. How on earth can we be in the situation where **they have been accredited** but they are once again being asked to make changes? There are shortfalls with the research project that has just reported but it does include a reminder of the policy objectives of reforming GCSE maths from The Department for Education (DfE) and this note reinforces the issue of having two departments involved in this. I really feel for the exam boards ... the goalposts have been set up by one government department and then moved by another (I'm not even sure they are the same pair of goalposts!)

**The whole accreditation process has been a debacle. I do wonder how the report can unashamedly say that their process got things correct and in the same breath let teachers know that there will be substantial changes to every awarding organisations sample assessment materials.** You may need to be reminded that, when going through the accreditation process last year – specifications and sample assessment materials were bouncing back and forth – NOT A SINGLE board got accredited first time!

We are now in the middle of exam season and there is a serious matter of time running out – this has always been a concern with Maths & English GCSEs changing a year earlier than all the other subjects. Back in Feb 2014 at a meeting with the Joint Mathematical Council, when asked if “Ofqual wanted there to be more time before the implementation of the new GCSE” Glenys Stacey replied “specimen assessment materials will be in schools in Autumn 2014” and this just hasn’t happened. It’s not just the time for us teachers to prepare it is the fact that this same cohort of students are in danger of getting lost in the “gap” having not been subject to the new National Curriculum at Key Stage 2 or 3. They are also the only year group that will leave with GCSEs as “Levels” in Maths and English and “grades” in everything else. What is being done to educate employers?

**I love Maths. I love Teaching Maths.** The intention, I believe, was to make GCSEs harder (and I welcome that!), and the skew that has happened between the different exam boards with regard to the student testing should absolutely be expected, but no reference to this is made in the Ofqual statement, in fact it has been used as a reason for why they are not adequate in some way. It seems there has been no reference to the fact that the exams are not aimed at the current cohort who also had no reason to motivate themselves to revise/take seriously the exams they were asked to sit, and this is an obvious flaw in Ofqual’s interpretation and subsequent requests for amends. I am genuinely worried that based on this reports findings so many people will change to the exam board that they think is the easiest and we will “really” (no “really, really!”) have a *race to the bottom* and if that is the case Ofqual will be complicit in assisting one exam board to force the others to join this race despite the instructions from the DfE of trying to raise mathematical ability/attainment/fluency/understanding/problem solving (call it what you want!).

If you are in any doubt that there aren’t commercial advantages being taken with the uncertainty all of this is creating for some of the awarding organisations you only need to read some of the “self-congratulatory” statements made in the recent “new GCSE too hard” headlines. There is a real danger that schools will choose an exam board based on choosing the one that has got it “less wrong” than the other boards, yet it could be argued that this specific board may have done so by not actually reforming their GCSE much and certainly not bringing us in line with other international jurisdictions. There is a very real danger that the new GCSEs just won’t be fit for purpose and there will need to be future reforms made. – making for more change for teachers at the coalface. There is only so much change the workforce can absorb and having only three weeks to look at new “new” Sample Assessment Materials flies in the face of Nicky Morgan’s workload challenge.

Let me remind you that it isn’t just me that had concerns about the process, when Nick Gibb wrote to Glenys Stacey back in November 2014 (**which I had to get through a freedom of information request as it wasn’t made publicly available**) in which the final paragraph looked for reassurances and said that without them he was concerned about the “implications for the success of the governments qualification reforms with regard to Maths”. I have asked him on two occasions through his office to confirm that he has received these reassurances and his happy with the accreditation process. On both occasions I have been fobbed off and told to refer to Ofqual. He made the statement and I asked him to respond, especially as he mentions the importance of teachers getting the information to prepare for September.

The crux is that **am not convinced that adequate reassurances have been made and neither will teachers be adequately prepared.** I know, in government these things take time, but we don’t have that time. We have a year 9 cohort (over 570,000 students) that may end up poorly prepared or the wrong decisions being made about choice of exam board ... that is not an insignificant number of students. What would you be thinking now if it was YOUR son or daughter facing these changes?

We do not operate in a vacuum and this is a subject that I have so much to say on having chronicled the process for over 12 months now (below are some links to my interpretation and shortfalls with the latest research report). I am frustrated knowing that having formed a new government, for most people now isn’t the time to make any radical decisions, notwithstanding making the “right decision”. In my opinion the “right decision” would be to defer the first examination date to 2018 – it would bring Maths into line with other subjects (none of the confusion that will come

from students leaving with grades and levels for a start!). This would mean putting the plans for A level back again, so what? Someone may have to make some apologies ... it's not the end of the world – a few bruised egos are better than the implications of not making the “right decision” for a whole cohort of students.

I genuinely believe that the governments' best course of action is to defer the first examination date until 2018. I am merely an observer but have been told by my sources that my chronicling of the saga has been very accurate to date and I know that you are all extremely busy people but I hope you are aware that people will tend to tell you what “they think you want to hear” which isn't necessarily the whole story.

As I am sure you will appreciate there is a massive time pressure on us as we approach the date upon which new Sample Assessments will be published so look forward to your response.

Yours faithfully,

Mel Muldowney

cc. Glenys Stacey, Nicky Morgan, Nick Gibb.

Email Address: [mel@justmaths.co.uk](mailto:mel@justmaths.co.uk)

Research Project Blog Posts:

<http://justmaths.co.uk/2015/05/21/the-ofqual-research-project/>

<http://justmaths.co.uk/2015/05/23/the-ofqual-research-project-iii/>

<http://justmaths.co.uk/2015/05/28/the-ofqual-maths-research-programme-iv/>

ADDRESS REMOVED

7<sup>th</sup> April 2015

REFERENCE: 2015-0012777

Nick Gibb MP

Sanctuary Buildings

20 Great Smith Street

Westminster

SW1P 3BT

Dear Nick

Thank you for your response of 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2015 referring me to Ofqual; however I feel that you may have missed the point of my writing to you.

In a letter to Ofqual (24<sup>th</sup> November) your final paragraph asked for certain reassurances and I quote: "Without such reassurances I remain serious (sic) concerned about the implications for the success of the governments qualification reforms with regard to Maths" and **I am seeking confirmation from you that you have received these reassurances and now have complete confidence in the accreditation process.**

For the reasons I laid out in my previous letter (a copy of which is attached) I remain deeply concerned that the Ofqual machinery is ploughing on regardless of what is the right decision to make.

I look forward to your response.

Yours faithfully,

Mel Muldowney

ADDRESS REMOVED

9<sup>th</sup> March 2015

Nick Gibb MP

Sanctuary Buildings

20 Great Smith Street

Westminster

SW1P 3BT

Dear Nick

I am writing to you as a concerned Maths teacher; Back in November you wrote to Ofqual for certain reassurances and I am asking you to confirm if the events that have subsequently unfolded with regards the Research Project have provided you with the reassurance you required and would ask that you seriously consider if ploughing on ahead is the right thing to do.

As a Maths teacher who happens to write a blog I have been following the GCSE shenanigans with interest. I add the following not as a boast but to provide you with some assurances that I'm not a "nutter": I have just changed jobs and have been at a (previously National Challenge) school that was announced as Most Improved School in England in Jan 2013 having been involved with Maths results going from mid 40% to mid 80% A\* to C (a phenomenal improvement!) ... so feel I have some credibility in this area.

In your letter, you hit the "nail on the head" when you stressed how important it is that "schools receive clear and accurate picture of how the Maths GCSE is changing in time to allow them to adapt their teaching in advance of September 2015". Communication is an issue in that both the DFE and Ofqual have been selective about what and where they publish updates- the fact that I had to make an FOI to get a copy of your letter that was referred to in a published response is just nonsense. So much for a transparent system! The more forward thinking teachers are actively looking for updates but none of it is helped by them choosing to be selective about what is published and where it does get published means that many people aren't aware that there are changes afoot with the research project.

**That aside** – it really isn't as simple as needing this to plan for September, if you believe that, you have been misled – there is a third extra assessment time with extra content so some of "us" have been attempting to teach the content of the new programme of study since September. There is such a big change in the style of questioning that we needed to be adapting what we do with our **CURRENT** year 9s. I know that the content is the same regardless of which exam board you choose **BUT** there is a massive difference in the way each exam board is approaching "problem solving". This is fundamental to the way we approach the teaching of this course. This is not, and I repeat NOT a 2 year GCSE starting in September 2015 – you are delusional if you still think that can be done (Ok it'll get done but for some people it won't get done WELL!). "We" (the education establishment as a whole and not me personally as a teacher by the way!) will be doing the students an injustice.

Let me make it clear: I applaud and welcome the changes to the Maths curriculum. I am actually very positive about what can be done with my students ... ok .. not so much if it was with my current year 11s (but they'll do fab under the current system!) but give me 3 full years with a year group knowing what the end result is meant to be and I can get very very very excited about the possibilities.

You state that schools are telling you that "sample assessment materials are critical to the picture" and you are so right ... I could go on about how problem solving requires a body of knowledge but also the ability to solve problems means being able to consider how your past knowledge of similar problems can be applied, but I have more important things to say.

There are some serious concerns about how robust the process has been from start to finish (oh yeah ... we haven't finished yet have we?!?)

- The accreditation process took months, especially to get to the point where they were all accredited – if one were cynical you *may* be of the mind that bouncing back one of the exam boards TWICE was sending them a message (especially as they have the biggest market share). The more cynical would suggest that this was providing ammunition to the "single exam board" fans.
- In some of the communications Ofqual refers to "initial" sample assessment materials (SAMs). These materials have supposedly gone through an accreditation process and now deciding to call them "**initial sample materials**" isn't going to fool anyone into thinking that it is ok that what was published as SAMs and something that we should be able to trust to be exemplars of what the new style of exam would look like, now isn't the case. Nope, sorry! ... just calling them something doesn't make it OK!
- **None of the boards were accredited first time** – they all went through what **should have** been a rigorous process before now. I'm not naïve – I know we can't go back in time ... we are where we are and we now need to make sure lessons are learned from the past.
- Accreditation should not be an "**important step** in assessing the quality of the new qualifications across boards" as Ofqual have said BUT I believe it should have been the **BIGGEST STEP**. Of course there should be ongoing moderation, but that is different to accreditation.
- Having to instigate the research project having tried to define the difference between difficulty and demand and now the latest admission that one of the strands isn't working is doing the opposite of what it was intended to do. At the very least it certainly isn't providing us with "further confidence".

On a serious note, we'll pick up the pieces and one way or the other we **WILL** come out the other side, but you can't keep relying on the professionalism and goodwill of teachers to have to deal with the aftermath of a poorly planned and poorly executed accreditation process. As Maths teachers we understand the pressure of accountability more than most other subjects – you only need to be in school on results day in August to get a feel for how much responsibility sits on the shoulders of Heads of Departments. This is one of the reasons that Maths teachers get fed up and are leaving the profession in droves – the constant poorly thought out changes we face. I am genuinely excited about the prospect of the depth of study we **SHOULD** be delivering from the new programme of study; we could be developing students that have a real love and passion for Maths.

The crux is that you made a request for assurances that the changes were reflected as soon as possible and here we are at the end of February and not expecting anything till at least the end of April, and **I am not convinced that adequate reassurances have been made**. I know, in government these things take time, but we don't have that time. We have a year 9 cohort (over 500,000 students) that may end up poorly prepared or the wrong decisions being made about choice of exam board ... that is not an insignificant number of students. What would you be thinking now if it was YOUR son or daughter facing these changes?

We do not operate in a vacuum and I have so much I wanted to relay to you, but it's difficult to formulate my thoughts. I am frustrated knowing that we approach a General Election and for most people now isn't the time to make any decisions, notwithstanding making the "right decision". In my opinion (and I know it'll never happen, but it's making me feel better writing this!) is that, the "right decision" would be to defer the first examination date to 2018 – it would bring Maths into line with other subjects (none of the confusion that will come from students leaving with grades and levels for a start!). This would mean putting the plans for A level back again, so what? Someone may have to make some apologies ... it's not the end of the world – a few bruised egos are better than the implications of not making the "right decision" for a whole cohort of students.

On that note I will end by quoting Theodore Roosevelt: "In any moment of decision, the best thing you can do is the right thing, the next best thing is the wrong thing, and the worst thing you can do is nothing".

Mel Muldowney

(A frustrated teacher)

**PS:** – Through all that twaddle and gumph what I'd really like you to do, is to confirm if the recent events following your letter, and in particular those surrounding the Research Project have provided you with enough assurances so that you are no longer concerned about the "implications for the success of the governments qualification reforms with regard to Maths"?

**PPS:** If you've got half an hour – the posts below detail the whole process as far as I have been able to ascertain

1 <http://justmaths.co.uk/2015/01/13/mmmmwwwwahahahahaha/>

2 <http://justmaths.co.uk/2015/01/18/now-means-now/>

3 <http://justmaths.co.uk/2015/01/22/ofqual-letter-speechless/>

4 <http://justmaths.co.uk/2015/01/22/gcse-maths-research-programme/>

5 <http://justmaths.co.uk/2015/02/02/accreditation-process-is-robust/>

6 <http://justmaths.co.uk/2015/02/05/saint-mel/>

7 <http://justmaths.co.uk/2015/02/16/make-up-your-mind/>

8 <http://justmaths.co.uk/2015/02/19/going-all-gangsta/>

9 <http://justmaths.co.uk/2015/02/25/its-finally-arrived/>