



Rt Hon Michael Gove MP
Secretary of State

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Ofqual policy steer letter: reforming Key Stage 4 qualifications

Thank you for the advice that you have provided on my proposals for reforming Key Stage 4 qualifications, on which I have recently consulted. I am publishing the Government's response to that consultation today, and am now writing to you to set out my policy steers on the development of the new qualifications.

Following our consultation I remain persuaded that there is an urgent need for reform, to ensure that young people have access to qualifications that set expectations that match and exceed those in the highest performing jurisdictions. There was broad agreement in the meetings we held during the consultation period that GCSEs as currently constituted are not giving our pupils the best chance to succeed, and that change is required. However many have also argued convincingly that GCSEs themselves could, with comprehensive reform, once again be highly respected qualifications in which pupils, employers and further and higher education institutions can have faith.

I have therefore decided that GCSEs should be comprehensively reformed, building on the work that Ofqual has already done to strengthen the qualification. The qualification will remain, but will be subject to significant reform in order to command the respect our pupils deserve as reward for their hard work. This letter sets out the scope of the reforms I believe are necessary. I would like to see those changes applied to GCSEs, ready for first teaching by September 2015, in at least the following subjects: English language, English literature, mathematics, biology, chemistry, physics, combined science (double award), history and geography. Other subjects may be in a position to move to the new approach by that date as well. Changes to remaining subjects should follow as soon as possible after that. I believe

our aim should be for that to happen for all subjects for first teaching in September 2016; I would welcome your views on the extent to which that will be possible. I would be grateful if Ofqual would begin work immediately on revising the GCSE regulatory requirements as informed by the policy set out in this letter with a view to giving schools at least a year to prepare for first teaching.

GCSEs will continue to have multiple purposes. The primary purpose is to evidence pupils' achievement against demanding and fulfilling content. They also need to provide a strong foundation for further academic and vocational study; and a basis upon which schools will be held accountable for the performance of all of their pupils. I understand the challenge of creating qualifications that are both reliable and stretching (requiring less predictable assessments and less scaffolding, for example). I am clear that the value of the qualifications for individuals must take precedence ahead of ensuring the absolute reliability of the assessment. We will take account of this in considering the implementation of the new accountability framework.

I have considered carefully the points you have made about the potential risks of reforming the qualifications market at the same time as fundamentally changing the qualifications themselves. I remain very concerned about the perverse incentives in the current system that have led to the 'race to the bottom'. I also recognise the significant steps you have taken to tighten up the regulation of GCSEs and to ensure that standards are right. In this context I am persuaded by your advice that we should not move to a single Awarding Organisation offering each subject suite at this time. I intend to keep this position under review should it become clear that there remains a tension which acts against our shared priority of rigorous and challenging qualification standards.

You have highlighted the interaction between qualifications and the way in which schools are held accountable, identifying the focus the current system places upon pupils near borderlines. I am today launching a consultation on accountability, which sets out how we propose to address this, for example, by using average points score measures alongside a threshold measure. The latter will focus on those subjects – English language and mathematics – in which achieving good qualifications is hugely important for pupils' prospects of continuing to further study and employment. You will want to take proposals for the new accountability system into account when designing your regulatory arrangements for the qualifications.

The reformed GCSEs should remain universal qualifications of about the same size as they are currently, and accessible, with good teaching, to the same proportion of pupils as currently sits GCSE exams at the end of Key Stage 4. At the level of what is widely considered to be a pass (currently indicated by a grade C), there must be an increase in demand, to reflect that of high-performing jurisdictions. This is something we believe the vast majority of children with a good education should be able to achieve. At the top end the new qualification should prepare pupils properly to progress to A levels or other study. This should be achieved through a balance of more challenging subject content and more rigorous assessment structures. We know that employers and others are keen for greater reassurance that pupils who

achieve that level of performance in English and mathematics are literate and numerate.

The qualifications should be linear, with all assessments taken at the end of the course. I am concerned that the current system of tiered papers, whereby pupils are forced to choose between higher and lower tier papers, places a cap on ambition. I would like reformed GCSEs to avoid that, while enabling high quality assessment at all levels. The appropriate approach to assessment will vary between subjects and a range of solutions may come forward, for example, extension papers offering access to higher grades alongside a common core. There should be no disincentive for schools to give an open choice of papers to their pupils.

Reformed GCSEs must prioritise stretching assessment, which truly tests the depth and breadth of pupils' knowledge and abilities. Examinations must test extended writing in subjects such as English and history, have fewer bite-sized and overly structured questions, and in mathematics and science have a greater emphasis on quantitative problem-solving. Internal assessment and the use of exam aids should be kept to a minimum and used only where there is a compelling case to do so, to provide for effective and deep assessment of the specified curriculum content. You will want to consider this in the light of your current review of controlled assessment.

I consider there to be a strong case for the reformed GCSEs to have a new grading scale, to reflect the step change in expectations for pupils, and would welcome your advice on this. Any changes should apply across all subjects, and should differentiate performance more clearly, particularly at the top end. For qualifications in English language and mathematics I would like you to consider the benefits of all pupils receiving more information directly from Awarding Organisations on their performance across the different areas tested by the qualification, in order particularly to support progression for those who may need to re-take the qualification post-16. I recognise that there is a tension between the provision of more detailed marks and the challenge of reliably marking more open-ended assessments, and that you will want to work with Awarding Organisations to determine what is possible here.

We will publish for consultation, by May this year, requirements for subject content in the new qualifications in English language, English literature, mathematics, science, history and geography in time to allow Awarding Organisations to prepare specifications.

The new GCSEs should include English literature and English language but not a combined 'English' option. They should include a combined science option worth two GCSEs but not a combined science option worth one GCSE. We are considering what the subject suite should be in mathematics and will confirm in due course. I am keen to see qualifications developed in a wide range of modern and classic languages. We do not anticipate publishing content requirements for subjects outside the EBacc. I would welcome your view on the appropriate subject coverage of reformed GCSEs.

It may be helpful for there to be some form of regular post-assessment review of reformed GCSEs, and I would welcome your views on whether arrangements similar to those proposed for the new A levels could be introduced.

I would like to thank Ofqual for its work to date on reforming qualifications and for your helpful recommendations on the ways in which they should be introduced. I look forward to continuing to work with you, ensuring that all young people are given the best possible chance to succeed and provided with qualifications which are rigorous and relevant, raising the bar on the standards we expect them to achieve.

I am copying this letter to Leighton Andrews AM, John O'Dowd MLA, Graham Stuart MP, and Sir Michael Wilshaw.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael Gove". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'M' and a long, sweeping tail.

MICHAEL GOVE