

LETTER TO AWARDING ORGANISATIONS FROM THE MINISTER OF STATE FOR SCHOOL REFORM, NICK GIBB

16 JANUARY 2015

I am writing to you, together with the other major exam boards, regarding GCSE reform.

As you know, this Government has extensively reformed GCSEs to ensure they are the gold standard qualification at age 16.

By requiring pupils to study more rigorous curricula, in line with the best in the world, we will ensure that more young people acquire the skills and knowledge to succeed in modern Britain. As such, throughout the reform programme we have been determined, to create qualifications which keep pace with universities' and employers' needs. That means GCSE students will spend more time focusing on important topics such as mathematics, English classic literature, the study of British history and cutting-edge science such as the human genome. The changes that have been made to subject content are the product of careful consultation with teachers, schools and subject experts.

As you know academic level 1 / 2 certificates, sometimes known as IGCSEs, were first counted in school performance tables from June 2010. As a result of the increased level of demand and rigour in GCSEs, the Government announced in July 2014 that with the introduction of reformed GCSEs in maths and English in 2015, level 1 / 2 certificates in these subjects would not be included in the 2017 performance tables.

We said then that following the first exams in the new GCSEs, exam boards would be able to propose alternative academic qualifications for inclusion in performance tables. Qualifications would need to demonstrate they are at least as demanding as the new GCSEs and share key characteristics. To do this, the Department for Education consulted with awarding organisations on a process that might allow alternative qualifications to be put forward. Since the announcement, the Department has worked closely with exam boards and Ofqual to see how these qualifications can be reformed to ensure they are as rigorous as the new GCSEs.

I have discussed this issue on a number of occasions with the Chief Regulator, most recently in a meeting on 14 January. She has advised me that the requirements for new GCSEs ensure that awarding organisations develop comparable content in subjects and also provide flexibility for specifications to offer appropriate choice. Including level 1 / 2 certificates in performance tables risks undermining the Government's national curriculum and could lead to a less demanding curriculum for some students. Simply put, the Regulator believes that the biggest market opportunity for awarding organisations would be to create level 1 / 2 certificates that are less demanding than new GCSEs.

I am convinced that allowing exam boards to take such a route could encourage a race to the bottom, with each board feeling obliged to produce less rigorous level 1 / 2 certificates rather than leaving the market to its competitors. Such an eventuality would jeopardise the entire rationale for our GCSE reforms – namely to ensure that the exams that students take at 16 are high quality, rigorous and on a par with the best in the world. This is not an outcome I am prepared to risk or accept.

Having worked closely with the Regulator we have concluded that there are no halfway measures that would provide us with assurances about level 1 / 2 certificates. The only acceptable option would be to be as prescriptive about level 1 / 2 certificates as GCSEs by detailing the curriculum and regulating assessment design as tightly as GCSEs: the Regulator's view is that this is self-defeating, as this brings level 1 / 2 certificates increasingly closer to GCSE.

I have listened carefully to the advice from the Regulator and have had in-depth discussions with awarding organisations. The Department consulted you on proposals for a separate process and criteria and I invited you to provide further evidence in October 2014. What we have heard is that our desire to safeguard standards is best served through the process we have set out for reformed GCSEs. Despite the Department's best efforts, it has therefore not been possible to create a route by which alternative qualifications can be included in performance tables that would not undermine the rigour of GCSEs and the hard work of teachers and students that study for them.

The opportunity has been made available throughout this time for all awarding organisations to make sure their qualifications are included in performance tables by redeveloping them to meet the GCSE requirements for curriculum and assessment and any awarding organisation can continue to do this.

The decision is not a reflection on the quality, demand or standard of particular qualifications. Instead it has been made to provide assurance to employers, universities and parents that they can have full confidence that the qualifications we include in league tables, and which schools are incentivised to adopt, are of the highest standard and best prepare young people for life in modern Britain.