

Kathleen Tattersall
Chair



Jim Knight MP
Minister of State for Schools and Learners
Department for Children, Schools and Families
Sanctuary Buildings
Great Smith Street
London
SW1P 3BT

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

Telephone 0300 303 3344
Textphone 0300 303 3345
info@ofqual.gov.uk
www.ofqual.gov.uk

10 October 2008

Dear Jim

Functional skills: link to GCSE achievement at Grade C or above

I am aware that work has been under way for many months to explore options for implementing the Government's intention stated in the 2005 *14-19 Education and Skills White Paper*, that learners in England should not be able to achieve a grade A*, A, B or C in GCSE English, ICT or mathematics without having passed the complementary functional skills qualifications at level 2. When I became Chair of Ofqual I was briefed on the work that QCA had been asked to do to explore the possibility of a functional skills "hurdle" for GCSE achievement at Grade C or above. I know that you have been advised on the conclusions of QCA's initial work and that Ministers have asked for further work to be done on some of the options. I think it is appropriate for me to write to you at this time to set out the principles which Ofqual would use in considering the desirability of a functional skills "hurdle", and the outcome of applying these principles to the options which have been under consideration by QCA.

I should first say that I fully support the importance which Ministers have placed on ensuring that young people have the functional competencies required for the modern world. The question for Ofqual is how to advise you, from its regulatory perspective, on the fairest and most appropriate way of achieving that objective. In considering the various options involving links with GCSE grades, Ofqual has worked to develop a set of principles against which each option could be judged, and which could be used in the future. These principles may be further developed in future, but they include the following:

1. Qualifications must support the interests of learners and be fair to them
2. The public must understand, have confidence in, and support qualifications
3. It is important to maintain three country regulation
4. Qualifications with the same label should demonstrably have the same standard
5. There should be clarity over the purposes of qualifications
6. Assessment should be economical and not burdensome
7. The way qualifications work, and grades are derived, should be transparent to users.



Applying hurdles within compensatory qualifications causes problems with the perceived fairness of the outcomes, as well as technical difficulties, and those problems are evident in several of the options that QCA have been considering. Also, some of the options left open the possibility that the same GCSE script could be awarded different grades in England and Wales. That outcome would be unacceptable and would risk bringing the qualifications concerned into disrepute.

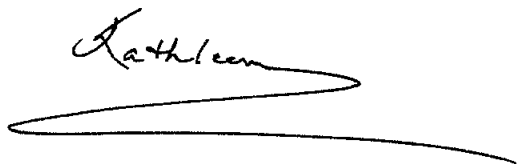
Ofqual would support an approach that allowed candidates to be awarded appropriately both for their achievements in their GCSEs and for their evidence of functional skills. That cannot be accomplished when GCSE grades are dependant on the outcome of a quite separate assessment. Ofqual cannot support an option which denies candidates the recognition of the level of attainment they have reached in a given qualification.

Of the options under consideration by QCA, the fairest way of achieving the educational objectives set out in the White Paper would be by providing separate qualifications in functional skills, separate from GCSEs, and using other incentives than links to GCSE grades to encourage the attainment of functional skills by individual students. I am aware that QCA has also been considering options involving composite qualifications (comprising a functional skill and the cognate GCSE) or the possibility of using two labels to show the candidate's attainment – one to show the GCSE grade obtained and the other the level achieved in the relevant functional skill. I am not ruling out at this stage the possibility that some variant of those options might be developed in a way that meets at least some of the principles to which I have referred, although each has disadvantages.

I look forward to receiving your response to this letter and I would be happy to discuss it in more detail. When I have your reply, we shall arrange for it, together with this letter, to be placed on the Ofqual website. Our officials will continue to keep in touch as QCA does its further work, and we shall continue to work with them with the aim of arriving at an agreed position which Ofqual, together with the regulators for Wales and Northern Ireland, will be able to incorporate in the final regulatory criteria for GCSEs in English, Maths and ICT.

I am copying this letter to Ken Boston at QCA, Mike Clancy at the Welsh Assembly Government and David McKee at CCEA.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kathleen', with a long, sweeping horizontal line underneath it.

Kathleen Tattersall
Chair, Ofqual

Direct Line: 02476 716742