

Kathleen Tattersall  
Chair



3 April 2009

Mr Christopher Chope MP  
and Mrs Joan Humble MP  
House of Commons  
Westminster  
London  
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Dear Mr Chope and Mrs Humble

### **Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Bill: questions raised in Committee about Ofqual**

I understand that in the course of the debate on this Bill members of the Committee sought guidance from the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Schools and Learners about a number of issues relating to Ofqual. The Minister has asked me to provide you with further information on the following issues:

- our work relating to standards over time and comparability between qualifications
- how we intend to secure consistent standards given the introduction of changes to GCSEs and AS/A levels
- the steps taken to secure consistent standards in GCSE science
- our plans in relation to publishing specific and measurable success criteria; and
- our plans concerning the publication of information about the annual salary and pension contributions of the Chief Regulator and chief executive.

#### **Standards over time and comparability between qualifications**

As the regulator of qualifications in England I can assure you that I am quite clear about the importance of maintaining standards over time and across awarding bodies so that learners and the public can have confidence in the integrity of the qualifications system. As a result, we have programmes of work designed to consider these aspects of qualifications.

The overall aim of our review programme is to determine any action needed to safeguard examination standards, through monitoring examination requirements (the



requirements of syllabuses and their assessment instruments) and grade standards (the level of performance required of candidates at key grades) over time.

The use of the term 'standards' can be confusing. For example, the headline 'Standards for 16 year-olds are rising' may mean that a higher level of achievement is required to obtain a certain level of pass, or that more people are reaching a certain level of achievement than in the past. It could be both; the standard itself may rise as well as the number of students reaching the standard. Also, differences between vocational/occupational qualifications and general qualifications need to be acknowledged. For vocational/occupational qualifications standards change as new requirements and ways of working come into being, whereas with general qualifications there is an expectation that standards in relation to attainment should be comparable over time regardless of a changing curriculum.

Therefore it is important to:

- analyse the nature of the requirements different examinations make on candidates
- compare the levels of performance required for a particular grade
- consider how these two elements relate to each other.

We have published over 60 reports in this area and the findings of the great majority of these are reassuring.

We have also produced comparability reports for a range of qualifications based on an evaluation of assessment practices in centres in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. These include reports covering comparisons between GCSEs and IGCSEs, A level and the International Baccalaureate, and a review of GCSEs in vocational subjects.

Reports setting out our findings in both areas can be downloaded from our website using the following links.

- standards review: <http://www.ofqual.gov.uk/84.aspx>
- comparability studies: <http://www.ofqual.gov.uk/83.aspx>

I hope that you and your colleagues on the Committee will take the opportunity to look at the reports arising from these important areas of our work.

### **Maintaining the standard of GCSEs and AS/A levels**

On 20 March 2009 I wrote to secondary schools and colleges to explain the changes to the structure and the approach which will be taken to grading the revised AS and A

level examinations, to ensure fairness and parity with awards given in previous years. Awarding bodies, when awarding the new A levels, will take into account a range of evidence including students' performance on the examination papers and statistical information such as the attainment of the students as a whole (not that of individuals) at GCSE. Experience indicates that information about prior attainment is a useful pointer to awarders as they make judgments on script performance as to where standards might lie in a given year

This approach has been agreed with the awarding bodies and our fellow regulators in Northern Ireland and Wales.

I thought it would be helpful to share the details of our approach with the Committee and a copy of my letter is attached for information. I can confirm that the awarding bodies have agreed to adopt a similar approach when revised GCSEs are introduced.

### **Securing consistent standards in GCSE science**

In August 2008 the awarding bodies offering GCSE qualifications in England alerted us to an issue with the results for the new GCSE science qualification that was being awarded for the first time that summer. They drew our attention to issues relating to the comparability of grade standards between awarding bodies and over time compared to some previous GCSE science options. We acted to make sure that learners could be assured that the standards applied to them had been carefully checked and their grades truly reflected their attainment. As part of this process we asked AQA to adjust their GCSE science grade boundary in order to make sure that standards were maintained and that all learners had their attainment at the various grades accurately reflected in their results.

The results of our monitoring of the new GCSE science specifications in 2007 and 2008 and the review of standards in GCSE physics in 2007 raised significant causes for concern. We are therefore requiring immediate action from the awarding bodies and their Chief Examiners to address our concerns about assessment so that students, their parents, teachers, government and the wider public can continue to have confidence in the quality of assessment and the grades awarded. Awarding bodies have already taken steps to address the problems about the quality of the tasks set for candidates identified in the Science report. Among these changes, which will impact on the 2009 examinations and beyond, are:

- improved quality of questions, to stretch and challenge all students
- work, including further training for senior examiners, to improve the quality of objective tests
- tighter marking criteria to ensure that only the answers deserving of the marks are credited

- some internal assessment tasks have been revised to ensure better challenge to students and a closer link to the practical work. These changes took effect from last September.
- where possible within the existing specifications, the number of options available to candidates has been reduced.

To ensure standards in the longer term the following actions are being taken:

- QCA is revising the GCSE science criteria and new specifications will be developed for first teaching in 2011. Ofqual has asked that the new criteria take on board the concerns raised in our report and the new specifications will adhere to the current GCSE qualifications criteria, including the limit of one re-sit per unit.
- I have met with the awarding bodies and made clear to them our requirements for determining grade standards in GCSE Science in 2009 and beyond.

A copy of our GCSE science monitoring report 2007-2008 can be downloaded using the following link.

[http://www.ofqual.gov.uk/files/ofqual-09-4148\\_GCSE\\_science\\_2007\\_2008\\_report.pdf](http://www.ofqual.gov.uk/files/ofqual-09-4148_GCSE_science_2007_2008_report.pdf)

### **Measurable success criteria**

We welcome the fact that the Bill will require Ofqual to produce an annual report to Parliament setting out how it has performed its functions. We think it is important that the regulator should be publicly accountable in this way. As you may know, Ofqual is committed to the five principles of better regulation, one of which is for the regulator to be transparent and open. We know that it will be important for us to be very clear about the steps that we will take to meet our statutory objectives and how we, and the public, will know whether we have met those objectives. We would therefore expect to publish, each year, a forward plan setting out how we will address our priorities identified against our objectives. We would also anticipate publishing the outcomes that we would expect this work to deliver against which we could assess how successful this work programme had been.

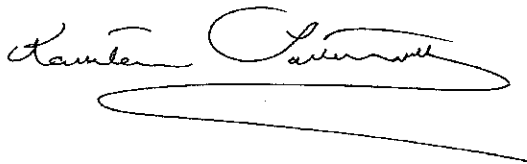
### **Annual salary and pension contributions of the Chief Regulator and chief executive**

I can confirm that this information will be published.

I hope that the information which I have provided you with above is clear and addresses the points raised by members of the Committee. If you would find it helpful to have clarification on any of these points please let me know.

I am sending a copy of this letter to all members of the Committee for information.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Kathleen Tattersall', with a long, sweeping horizontal flourish underneath.

Kathleen Tattersall  
Ofqual Chair