

NT/LdP

31st May 2013

The Rt Hon Michael Gove MP
Secretary of State
Department for Education
Sanctuary Buildings
Great Smith Street
London
SW1P 3BT

Dear Secretary of State,

I am writing on behalf of the Russell Group to confirm that, at its Board meeting on 30 April, the Russell Group approved a proposal to establish an advisory body to advise on A level subject content. I can now therefore set out the details of our proposal and its implementation. I also outline the arrangements we have agreed with the Chief Regulator at Ofqual to facilitate the most value-adding contribution of the advisory body to the redevelopment of A levels in England.

Role of organisation

We see a clear need for authoritative leading university input to the development of qualifications. We aim for any higher level contribution to be as light-touch as possible, whilst sufficient to add real value to the design of A levels.

In response to the request you made for leading universities to take a greater role in the design and development of A levels, the Russell Group therefore proposes to establish a separate and independent company limited by guarantee to be named the A level Content Advisory Body (ALCAB). ALCAB will seek to represent and advise on the views and opinions of Russell Group universities, and will consult other universities and learned societies as appropriate. It will advise Ofqual on the core content requirements considered desirable in A-level facilitating subjects for adequate preparation for our leading universities. The facilitating subjects, as stated in the Russell Group publication *Informed Choices* are: Maths, Further Maths, English Literature, Physics, Biology, Chemistry, Geography, History and modern and classical languages.

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Process agreed with Ofqual

We have shared details of our intentions with Ofqual in order to identify how ALCAB advice can inform the current process of A level reform and longer-term review mechanisms. We propose that ALCAB will contribute in two key ways:

- (i) In accordance with the timescales confirmed in your letter to Ofqual on 14 March, we understand that Ofqual has commenced work to revise and accredit new A levels to be completed by the end of 2014 so that schools have time to prepare for teaching them from autumn 2015. The initial phase of this work is to identify where changes are required to ensure the subjects are fit for purpose. Where subjects are not considered fit for purpose, it is anticipated that first teaching will be delayed to 2016 to allow time for revision. This review will be completed by autumn 2013 and we have agreed with Ofqual that the findings may be shared with ALCAB. Awarding organisations will draw on higher education subject expertise as part of the review and thus we anticipate that ALCAB will build on this input by convening subject panels in those subjects identified through the review as requiring significant change. This is likely to mean that ALCAB will only need to populate panels for a small proportion of facilitating subjects. We envisage this being a fixed term and limited contribution to A level reform, to be completed by autumn 2014 in order to inform the development of revised subject specifications for delivery to schools in autumn 2015 and first teaching in autumn 2016.
- (ii) Also, we understand that Ofqual has commenced a longer-term process to make sure that new qualifications are reviewed each year. ALCAB will contribute advice to this process, drawing on subject panel expertise as appropriate. Through this process, ALCAB will thereby review the content of the remainder of those facilitating subjects not identified for the creation of subject panels in the first phase of ALCAB's work.

Implementation

We agree strongly that Ofqual should retain its responsibility to accredit qualifications and should ensure that specifications developed by awarding organisations reflect advice provided by ALCAB once it is available.

Given the process already underway through Ofqual and the time it will take to establish the advisory body legally and secure appropriate university involvement, it must be recognised that ALCAB will not have significant influence on the subjects introduced in September 2015. In this context, it is important that new A level qualifications should command respect across the higher education sector and beyond, and we therefore expect that Ministers and awarding organisations will continue to engage with a range of higher education bodies and learned societies in addition to ALCAB.

Clearly, the establishment and operation of ALCAB is subject to your agreement. We have undertaken a series of helpful discussions with officials at the Department for Education to this end and will continue to explore the implementation of this proposal. Subject to the successful conclusion of those discussions and the outcomes of the Ofqual review, ALCAB will convene appropriate subject panels for the provision of advice on subjects considered to require significant change. They will also engage with Ofqual on specific contribution to its annual post-examination review process.

I look forward to continuing to work with you and your Ministers on this and thank you again for the opportunity for the Russell Group to contribute to A level reform.

I am copying this letter to Professor David Eastwood and Dr Wendy Piatt at the Russell Group, and to Glenys Stacey at Ofqual.

Yours Sincerely

Nigel Thr