

The A Level Content Advisory Board

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

31 October 2014

Dear Secretary of State,

In the absence of a meeting, I am writing as Chair of the A Level Content Advisory Board (ALCAB) to seek your views before I take action to reduce the support and facilities available to the organisation for the next year or two. We have had helpful exchanges with DfE officials, but I need to obtain Ministers' views and report these to the Management Board of ALCAB and to the Russell Group of universities.

As you know, ALCAB was set up by the Russell Group in response to an invitation from Ministers to provide advice which would enable the content of new A levels in facilitating subjects to be reviewed with a view to providing better preparation for higher education. In July we published reports recommending new content for A levels in modern and classical languages, mathematics and further mathematics, and geography. We have recently been considering the responses to consultation on those, working closely with your officials, Ofqual and the awarding organisations. I shall write separately to you with ALCAB's advice on these qualifications.

ALCAB is an independent company limited by guarantee, but entirely grant-aided by DfE, so we have been discussing with your officials the role of the organisation after our current work is concluded. Officials have now told us that the ongoing post-qualification review of A levels in facilitating subjects, will not require any substantive input from universities collectively until around 2017. I have considered with the Management Board of ALCAB the appropriate action to take if you confirm this position.

The experience of engaging universities in the development of the new A levels on which we have advised has been a very positive one, and it has sent strong messages to all involved in these qualifications that universities want to help and are important partners. This has reversed a regrettable trend in recent decades which have seen historic links broken between the universities and the awarding organisations. I should add that the university members of our panels have also learned a lot from their involvement in ALCAB's work. The ALCAB Management Board has concluded that it would send the wrong messages if they were to close down ALCAB. Instead, in the absence of a substantive commission from DfE after

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Registration number: 08867428

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January 2015, they have recommended winding down the organisation from January 2015, moving to a minimal holding arrangement from March 2015, confined to occasional clerical work to check communications. That holding arrangement would continue until DfE sought a substantive contribution from ALCAB. This arrangement will also make it easier to start up ALCAB more substantially in the future, if that is required.

I should be grateful for confirmation from you that you do not wish to commission more substantive work from ALCAB in the near future. If I receive that confirmation I shall immediately set in train the measures needed to reduce our commitment from January 2015. If, however, you do wish further work to be done by universities collectively between January 2015 and the Election, I shall advise the Board and we shall adjust our plans accordingly.

In most of the subjects which we have reviewed the new A level content will be significantly different from that of the current qualification and it will only be after the first syllabuses and prototype assessments are developed and reviewed that we shall be able to be confident that our intentions have been realised. I hope that universities can continue to be engaged as the qualifications are developed, even if ALCAB is not itself significantly involved.

I look forward to knowing your views and I would be happy to discuss this further with you if you wish.

I am copying this letter to Glenys Stacey at Ofqual and I am grateful to her officials and to yours for their advice and support over the past year.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Nigel Thrift". Below the signature is a long, horizontal, slightly wavy line.

Professor Nigel Thrift
Chair, ALCAB