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Elizabeth Truss MP

Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Education and Childcare

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Jennette Arnold OBE AM
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27th November 2012

Dear Ms Arnold,

Thank you for your email of 25 October, addressed to the Secretary of State, regarding the motion agreed by the London Assembly at its meeting of 24 October about the awarding of GCSE English this year.

As the London Assembly is aware, grade boundaries for some modular English and English language GCSEs were changed between January and June. This meant some pupils who were expecting a C grade were awarded a D grade. This has caused significant concern among teachers, parents and students. I have enormous sympathy for all the young people who took their GCSEs this year and did not get the grades they expected.

I would like to make it clear that Ofqual is the independent regulator of qualifications, with a statutory responsibility to secure standards in qualifications between years and between exam boards. It must be able to do that free from political interference.

Ofqual has investigated the concerns about the awarding of GCSE English and English language. Its initial report, published at the end of August, found that each Awarding Organisation had set standards appropriately. The June grade boundaries had been properly set and candidates' work properly graded. At the same time, the results of some schools were significantly lower than predicted. Ofqual has undertaken further work to understand the concerns of schools, establish the detail of what happened, and learn lessons for the future. In doing so, Ofqual took evidence from Awarding Organisations, school representative groups and teacher associations. Ofqual also drew on interviews with head teachers and teachers from schools and colleges across England. A final report was published on 2 November and is available at:
<http://tinyurl.com/OfqualReport2>.

After considering the evidence, Ofqual has confirmed its initial findings that the June grade boundaries for GCSE English were properly set and candidates' work was properly graded. In addition, the moderation of controlled assessments could have been tighter and communication, especially with schools, could have been better. Monitoring by Awarding Organisations and regulation by Ofqual could also have been stronger and more intelligent. It also confirmed that it would not be appropriate to re-grade either the June or January results. Instead, Ofqual believes the additional November re-sits are the right way to give students who did not get the grades they expected an opportunity to demonstrate what they can achieve.

According to Ofqual, the complexity and design of these modular GCSEs, along with too much emphasis on controlled assessment, led to some schools experiencing significant grade variations in June. Combined with pressure on schools to ensure as many students as possible achieve a C grade, this led to schools significantly over-marking controlled assessments in the summer. Indeed, Ofqual noted that the pattern of marks, with unprecedented clustering around perceived grade boundaries, was striking.

Ofqual is now taking regulatory action to secure standards in the awarding of GCSE English and English language in 2013. January assessments will be marked, but they will be graded at the same time as the June assessments. Moderation will be tightened, and Ofqual will require Awarding Organisations to improve their communications with schools. Ofqual will also review its own approach to regulating and planning qualification reforms.

The London Assembly's motion suggests that influence exerted by the Government is to blame. While the Government is reforming the exam system, this is entirely separate from the awarding of GCSEs this summer. Ministers have not sought to influence the awarding of any exams, nor could they. Ministers *cannot* direct Ofqual to order a re-grade of GCSEs as some have suggested. Parliament established Ofqual as the independent regulator, accountable to Parliament, precisely so that decisions about standards and grades are taken without political interference. Ministers do believe, however, that the problems revealed this summer, and the heartache caused for so many young people, strengthen the case for reform of qualifications at 16 and to school accountability.

The Education Committee of the House of Commons is also looking into the issues. It took oral evidence from Ofqual, head teacher representatives and the Secretary of State on 11-12 September. The Committee's investigation continues and Ofqual recently responded to its detailed questions about English GCSE awarding this year. Details can be found on the Parliament website at: www.parliament.uk/education-committee.

The London Assembly's motion questions whether the June candidates were treated fairly. The question of fairness is not a simple one. Ofqual's role, as set out in law, is to secure standards in qualifications so that they give a reliable indication of candidates' knowledge, skills and understanding; and indicate a consistent level of attainment, including over time, between comparable regulated qualifications. Ofqual has found that the June grade boundaries were

properly set and candidates' work was properly graded. It also found that the 7% of assessments marked in January were graded generously. Re-grading the June assessments to bring them into line with the "generous" January assessments would be unfair to the candidates who completed their English GCSEs last year, and to those who will complete them in 2013.

We are already taking steps to improve the exam system. Modular GCSEs are being phased out, with pupils who started two-year GCSE courses this September taking all their exams at the end of the course. In the longer term, the Government is committed to restoring confidence in the exam system. We propose to do this by replacing the current GCSE with a new qualification, the English Baccalaureate Certificate. They will be rigorous exams which equip children for the 21st century and allow us to compete with the best performing nations in the world. Further information about the proposals, including the consultation on their implementation, is available at: <http://tinyurl.com/gcsereform>.

We will also consider afresh, in the context of these reforms, how we hold schools to account. We have announced that we will consult widely on school accountability to find better ways of recognising those schools that add value and help pupils from the poorest backgrounds to achieve. We also wish to recognise the best vocational, as well as academic, qualifications in a fair and rigorous way.

Thank you for writing on this important matter and I hope that my letter is helpful to the Assembly.

With best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'pp' followed by a stylized, cursive signature.

This response has been approved by the Minister and signed on her behalf.

Elizabeth Truss MP
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Education and Childcare