SCORE position on A-level reform

Following the Secretary of State’s announcement on 30 March 2012 concerning the involvement of universities in A-level reform, SCORE has developed the following position. It is based on a number of assumptions: that A-levels will continue to have a number of purposes, including university entrance; that there will continue to be multiple awarding organisations, and that Ofqual will continue to operate as the regulator.

Under one system that has been proposed to meet the Secretary of State’s requirements, awarding organisations would act individually to engage with a number of higher education institutions in an unspecified way, in order to demonstrate that specifications they wished to have accredited by Ofqual were developed in consultation with higher education. SCORE does not believe this is a workable solution: higher education is a diverse sector with over 150 separate institutions and a range of differing requirements for entry, and there is no single umbrella body that could take responsibility for their involvement in A-level design. Such a model would leave schools, universities and employers having to navigate a market of qualifications developed by a range of different institutions, all accredited by the regulator but possibly of variable worth. It would also leave those with subject expertise, such as the professional bodies, having to engage with multiple organisations, which is not feasible.

Any system put in place to develop A-levels should follow the set of principles outlined below. It should:

- be free from any commercial interests
- draw on appropriate subject expertise to represent the nature of the subject and maintain standards
- be able to represent existing and potential users of their subject
- have national coverage
- be properly resourced and funded
- operate transparently

SCORE believes that the best way to secure the appropriate expert input for A-level design, reflecting these principles, would be with the formation of national subject committees in each subject.

Membership
Membership of the national subject committees should be such that all those who use A-levels, whether for selection, quality assurance or certification purposes, can have confidence in them as a qualification. This would mean a balance of representatives from higher education, industry, as well as the schools charged with delivering the content to students. Appointments should be made transparently, with regular turnover of membership.

Remit
The national subject committees should have responsibility for overseeing the full range of activities associated with specification and assessment development; they should set the criteria that determine specification content, specify the nature and frequency of assessment, and approve the resulting specifications and (a sample of) assessment materials. Although the focus will be on A-levels, it is important to ensure that there is coherence between A-levels and preceding years, to avoid an unbridgeable gap as students move from one stage of education to the next.
It will be crucial for the success of the national subject committees that they are able to engage with each other on matters of common interest, for example mathematics across the sciences, to ensure that there is coherence between as well as within subjects.

**Regulation**

Ofqual would remain in place as the regulator of the qualifications system as a whole, and would act as the overall authority from which the national subject committees derived their remit. It would be Ofqual’s responsibility to monitor and regulate the activities of awarding organisations beyond the content of individual specifications, for example the administration of specification development, appointment and training of examiners, marking and data collection, setting of grade boundaries, delivery of results and result enquiries. Ofqual would also have a role in ensuring that the national subject committees for different subjects act according to the principles stated above, and would retain their overall responsibility for the maintenance of standards over time and across subjects.

**Role of professional bodies**

SCORE believes that the three professional bodies for the core sciences (the Society of Biology, the Royal Society of Chemistry and the Institute of Physics, alongside the Royal Society and Association for Science Education) are best placed to act as conveners for the national subject committees in their respective sciences, for the following reasons:

- they are guardians of their subject, with no other vested interest
- they already represent the full range of stakeholders in their subjects, so would have the contacts and influence necessary to ensure appropriate membership of committees
- their membership represents those who are currently involved in their subject, so would be able to ensure that qualifications authentically represent the current nature of that subject
- they are independent of both Government and any particular interest group, so can provide unbiased advice
- they represent interests in education from 5 to 19, so would be able to ensure that there is coherence across the different stages of education, and progression from one stage to the next. This will be particularly important to ensure there is no unbridgeable gap between GCSE and A-level if the latter is to be made more rigorous.

SCORE is aware that such bodies do not exist for all subjects, but does not believe that this should prevent the establishment of national subject committees. In the model being proposed, authority and remit for the committees are derived from Ofqual, and where no organisation exists to act as a convener for the committees, Ofqual itself could appoint members, using the same criteria used to set up the national subject committees convened by professional bodies. A similar model was used by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education when developing subject benchmark statements.

SCORE believes that the model outlined above would ensure that qualifications developed by awarding organisations are of a standard that ensures that all users, whether students, teachers, those in higher education or industry, can have confidence that the appropriate content has been included for progression to a range of destinations, including university. It would also avoid a situation in which schools were required to select specifications based on their support from particular universities, a situation that would also make selection by universities and employers considerably more complex.