

Rt. Hon Ed Balls MP
Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families
Department for Children, Schools and Families
Sanctuary Buildings
Great Smith Street
London
SW1P 3BT

30 March 2010

Dear Secretary of State,

GCSE science examinations – 2011 specification development

The science community has been closely engaged with the review of the GCSE science criteria and the subsequent development of revised specifications, which we believe to be of major importance to education in science. We have some serious concerns about the way the 2011 suite of GCSE science specifications are being developed.

Key issues include:

Timescale for consultation on specifications

We are very concerned about the short timescale for the development of the revised specifications, with very little time for SCORE partners to comment on the specifications - often less than two weeks. These short notice requests, from QCDA and Awarding Organisations, make proper and full consultation and the input of expert advice impossible. We believe Cabinet Office guidance on minimum consultation periods – usually of 12 weeks – should equally apply to the QCDA and Awarding Organisations.

Roles and responsibilities

The roles and responsibilities of QCDA, Ofqual and Awarding Organisations are far from clear, as is the role of SCORE partners. SCORE partners are being asked to advise both QCDA and the Awarding Organisations. A real concern is that participation in the specification development process could later result in the organisation stating that specifications were developed 'in consultation' with the professional bodies. Given our concerns noted above, this cannot be claimed.

Evidence of support from learned societies

In addition, SCORE partners are also being asked to review specifications for both QCDA and the Awarding Organisations. We understand that many of the SCORE partners will be asked by awarding organisations to provide evidence of support. Despite earlier discussions with QCDA on this issue, the SCORE partners have had no official notification from QCDA about the nature of this evidence. There is some confusion over whether SCORE partners are being asked to verify the scientific accuracy of the specifications or whether they are being expected to confirm that the awarding organisations have "listened to and acted on feedback from the learned societies". In addition, we would welcome clarification of the obligations of the awarding bodies to obtain external endorsement and whether all such evidence would be made public.

If the evidence of support (where present) is not made public there is a danger that it may be seen as full accreditation of the specification, when this may not be the case. It appears that the professional bodies are being asked, in effect, to accredit the specifications without the time (or capacity) to do so, and moreover, without any ability to change them if the proposed specifications are not fit for purpose. We are not willing to do this, and the partner bodies in SCORE will say so publicly if necessary.

The commercial nature of awarding organisations

In discussions with awarding organisations, we have met reluctance to address suggested changes to specifications on two bases that are very concerning as matters of principle – the relationship between awarding bodies and publishers, and commercial drivers.

Regarding publishers, the timescale for the revision of the text books is ahead of the specification development timeline, yet the text books are well underway so changes cannot be effected. This leads to concerns that suggested changes to the teaching order or content might be rejected on the basis that the structure and outline content of text books is already decided. In addition, because of the difference in timelines, text book authors have also been involved in discussions about the specifications as they develop, rather than awaiting their acceptance by Ofqual.

In terms of commercial drivers, proposed changes were rejected because they affected marketing decisions. Essentially, it appears that awarding organisations are seeking advice and will then make decisions based on commercial implications, rather than the needs of the learners.

It is essential that these issues are resolved urgently, if revised specifications supported by the science community are to be in place by September 2011, ready for first teaching in September 2012. Until these issues are clarified, it may not be possible for SCORE partners to provide evidence of support for the revised specifications. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss these concerns with you, and to seek to resolve a way forward that ensures students have access to high quality specifications.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Alan Wilson', with a horizontal line underneath.

Sir Alan Wilson FBA FRS

SCORE Chair