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Nick Gibb MP

Minister of State for Schools

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Professor Graham Hutchings FRS
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18 August 2011

Dear Professor Hutchings,

Thank you for your email of 28 July, addressed to the Secretary of State, regarding subject specialist teaching in the sciences. I am replying as the Minister of State for Schools.

I support SCORE's aims and am grateful for your continued work on improving the quality of specialist science teaching. Your briefing paper is a helpful contribution which I know will support further close cooperation between SCORE and the Department in tackling the issues.

You have asked for the definition of 'subject specialist' that the Department uses for data collection. I know that SCORE has already had useful meetings with the Department's analysts responsible for data collection. A further meeting on this matter is planned in the autumn in preparation for the 2011 School Workforce Census. I hope that this constructive dialogue will continue.

You have raised concerns about the grouping of biology and general science for the purpose of initial teacher training targets. As you are aware, this year the Department separated chemistry and physics out from the single science target because of the need to focus strongly on the recruitment of specialists in these subjects in particular, rather than in science overall. Recruitment of biology teachers is relatively strong, with recruitment targets met in recent years and a large pool of applicants from which to select. I therefore do not consider that currently we need also to separate biology from general and other sciences. The Department will of course keep this position under review as we monitor closely the quality and quantity of biology trainee teachers.

On the issue of subject knowledge enhancement courses and the science additional specialism programme, I agree it is essential that we evaluate the success of these changes as we implement them.

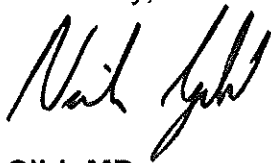
You have asked about the requirement for trainees to hold at least a 2.2 degree in order to be eligible for funding from the Department for teacher training. A good grounding in degree-level subject knowledge is an important element of being an effective teacher, and holding a second or first class degree provides a good indication that a trainee has the knowledge and intellectual capability to teach specialist subjects. We are clear that teaching is a career for the best graduates and we expect all trainees to meet tough minimum standards.

The TDA wrote to initial teacher training providers this year setting out the expectation of recruitment of trainees with at least a 2.2 degree for the 2011/12 academic year, in advance of the removal of Department funding from these trainees from 2012/13. Early indications show an improvement in the level of recruitment to physics and chemistry for 2011/12, rather than a reduction. We will of course continue to monitor carefully specialist science applications as we enter the recruitment cycle for the 2012/13 academic year.

I look forward to continuing to work with SCORE across the full range of the Department's work.

With best wishes.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Nick Gibb', written in a cursive style.

Nick Gibb MP