

Glenys Stacey
Chief Regulator



17 October 2014

The Rt Hon Nicky Morgan MP
Secretary of State for Education
Department for Education
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Dear Secretary of State

I am writing to propose that the roll out of reformed A levels in Mathematics and Further Mathematics is put back a year, from first teaching in 2016 to first teaching in 2017. There are several considerations.

Firstly, responses to our recent A level Maths consultation show widespread concern that the increased emphasis on problem solving - central to the new content developed by ALCAB - will make these A levels more challenging unless the content is significantly reduced. There has been no policy direction to change the overall demand of A levels and this increase in challenge is contrary to ALCAB's intentions and our view that the current standard is appropriate.

Secondly, given the fundamental place of problem solving in the A level content recently proposed by ALCAB, it is important that we have a sufficient consensus as to what it entails. We do not, as yet. It is now clear that there are differing views amongst key players (e.g. exam boards and other key groups) as to what is meant by 'problem solving' and how it is best taught and assessed. This means it will not be possible to design exam papers that promote valid assessment for first teaching in 2016, but we do think it could be achieved for first teaching in 2017.

What is more, it is now clear that problem solving will be a bigger challenge for exam design at A level than at GCSE. For A level it will be a step-change. In our recent accreditation work we have seen exam boards struggle with the change of emphasis in GCSEs. The greater scale of change proposed for A level is therefore significant.

Thirdly, the Maths and Further Maths A level changes mean that the 'gap' between old GCSEs and new A levels is significant. The planned first year of new A level Maths students will have studied the current GCSEs and would be at a clear disadvantage. In particular, they would not have experienced problem solving to the extent required and would be likely to find it extremely challenging. This would be recognised as unfair by students and by all.

The last big changes made to maths A level were in 2000. For various reasons, maths take up fell sharply and took several years to begin to recover. Of course, the changes proposed now are quite different, but you will wish to consider carefully their potential impact and the need for a smooth transition.

I should say that these issues will take time and effort to address and the third issue is best addressed by delaying the implementation of reformed maths A levels for one year, so as to give students the opportunity to first experience the GCSE qualifications that will prepare them properly.

I do hope you find our advice useful and of course I will be more than happy to provide more detailed information and to meet with you or your officials, should you wish.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'G Stacey', written in a cursive style.

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