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Cc: Jeremy Benson
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You will remember that Glenys Stacey, Ofqual Chief Regulator, wrote to the Secretary of State in advance of the publication of this year's GCSE results. I have attached a copy.

We have been asked - by a number of media outlets and others - to publish this letter.

We see no reason not to do so but wanted to let you know, as a courtesy, that we intend to do this at some stage tomorrow (Thursday September 6).

I would be grateful if you could acknowledge this email and confirm the DfE is content with us publishing Glenys's letter to the Secretary of State.

Adrian

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Glenys Stacey
Chief Regulator



22 August 2012

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Dear Secretary of State

As A levels, and now GCSE results are coming out, I wanted to tell you about our approach to make sure grades are right, and to alert you to some consequences for the wider system.

As you know, it is our job to make sure results are right. It is not credible that the year-on-year rises in top grades over the last 20 years are solely down to real improvements in attainment. We think this pattern undermines public confidence in results and in the qualifications themselves.

The approach we have taken since 2010 for A levels - what is known as 'comparable outcomes' - halted grade inflation at A-level last year. It is not in itself a success if results fall, as they did this year, but the fact that they can do so should give more credibility to any increases that show up in future years. We have taken a 'comparable outcomes' approach to GCSEs this year and we expect it to have a similar impact on GCSE grades announced by the exam boards tomorrow.

The experts on our Standards Advisory Group advise that it is the right approach, and the best available approach for dealing with what is known as grade inflation. We published details of it on our website some time ago, and I have spoken publicly about it. Briefly, it involves getting the exam boards, in setting grade boundaries, to check that the results are in line with what they would expect given the prior attainment of the students. If the results are out of line, they have to justify that. We would welcome the chance to explain it in more detail, if you wish to know more.

It does aim to prevent grade inflation – that is, increases in the numbers of students achieving higher grades where there is not sufficient evidence of real improvements in performance. It also enables us to allow for the dip in performance that can arise when a new qualification is first taken. It is not, incidentally, a norm-referencing approach, as some have suggested.

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One consequence of this approach is that it can make it harder for any genuine increases in the performance of students to be fully reflected in the results.

In past years, we saw year-on-year increases in national exam results. Our approach means that whilst some schools will see improvement in their exam results, due to comparable outcomes the overall results will not show significant increases. So it will be difficult to secure system-level improvements in exam results which you have said you want to see. And we know that many in the education sector are concerned about this.

We will continue to work with the best experts in the field, so as to make sure we always use the best methodologies available for making sure that results are right, and standards maintained. And for future years, we will explore whether there is scope to develop the approach so that genuine increases in performance can be more easily demonstrated, where there is evidence for that. But we do not underestimate the difficulty of doing that.

I wrote last week to Sir Michael Wilshaw on the same issue, since Ofsted need to be aware of how we are doing things, and I am hoping to discuss it with him shortly.

Yours sincerely

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

Glenys Stacey
Chief Regulator