

11 September 2017

Dear Mr Naish,

Inter-subject comparability and progression from GCSE to A-level

We were pleased to see the findings and commentary in Ofqual's March report *Progression from GCSE to A level - Comparative Progression Analysis as a new approach to investigating inter-subject comparability*. And we are grateful for the discussion that took place at the time of the report.

We were particularly heartened to note that Ofqual considers that the science organisations 'have a good point' when we highlighted the different distributions of A-level results by type of subject when comparing progression from similar grades at GCSE.

It is our position that this analysis adds further weight to the case that there are genuine differences in grading severity across subjects and that those differences act against certain groups of subjects – including the sciences. The fact that each new analysis reveals the same subject groups as being adversely affected adds to our confidence that the disparities are not an artefact of one or other method of analysis. There is an increasingly strong case that there really is a lack of comparability between similar grades in different subjects.

We contend that it is time to move on from discussing the validity of the analysis methods to considering how to address what now seems extremely likely to be a genuine problem.

Clearly this lack of comparability is a basic inequity for students who take the subjects that are graded more severely: they are not being awarded a just grade. And, on that basis alone, the problem needs to be addressed.

However, even outside the question of whether the differences exist, they are *believed* to exist. And, as is highlighted in your report, this is affecting the behaviours of a large number of schools and many students. Schools seem to be setting different entrance requirements for different subjects and this is a big concern – in terms of fairness of opportunity for students and in terms of increasing the number of students choosing these subjects. It is worth noting that the last point is a Government priority.

Furthermore, whether or not schools set different requirements, it is likely that the reputation of more severe grading is affecting the advice given by teachers (relating to choice) and the eventual choices that students make. And, given the selection and self-selection that is taking place, the grade distributions in the subjects that are graded more severely are shifting towards the higher end so it will become harder to address the longer that it is left.

Therefore, it is our belief that, although a solution is going to be hard to find, the status quo is unacceptable and the problem of the lack of inter-subject comparability needs to be addressed, and addressed soon.

Our organisations are very happy to help with this work and, in particular to help determine what other evidence might be useful. For example, whether students are being put off by the reputation of more severe grading, whether schools are selecting differently for different subjects, what advice teachers are

giving, whether A-levels in different subjects require and build on different amounts of pre-requisite knowledge from GCSE and the reliability of grades.

Yours Sincerely,

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