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**Elizabeth Truss MP**

Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Education and Childcare

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1<sup>st</sup> August 2013

Dear David,

Thank you for your letter of 15 July, outlining your concerns about the future uptake of A level Mathematics and Further Mathematics.

Naturally, I share your concern to ensure that the number of students taking Mathematics and Further Mathematics A levels should continue to rise. You will know that I firmly believe that everyone who can take A level mathematics, should do so as it offers significant benefits for higher level study, and for later life.

I do understand that, with any change to the structure and delivery of A levels, there will of course be some concern about the effect on student choices and subject teaching, especially after the impact of Curriculum 2000 on mathematics entry. You raise two specific issues with regard to the potential impact on Mathematics and Further Mathematics, which I have addressed below.

**Decoupling of AS and A level**

My starting point for the reform of A Level is the fundamental importance that the qualifications A level students gain should be robust and rigorous. I am sure you are aware of the research commissioned by Ofqual<sup>1</sup> which highlights concerns that have arisen about the teaching and students' learning experience since the introduction of the modular A level structure. This led to our decision to make A levels linear from September 2015. Linear A levels will allow students to demonstrate deeper learning and enable students to benefit from greater intellectual maturity when they take their examinations.

The AS will be retained as a standalone qualification, as we know that the AS is a valuable qualification for universities, to provide breadth of study. AS levels to

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ofqual.gov.uk/files/2012-04-03-fit-for-purpose-a-levels.pdf>

be taught from September 2015 will remain, as now, qualifications set at a level appropriate for the first year of A level study. They will therefore continue to be worth approximately half an A level, although marks will not contribute towards a student's A level grade. I do not believe that this will devalue the AS level.

As you note, AS levels are not only valuable in their own right, they can also play a role in encouraging students to "step up" to a full A level; and that will continue in future. Where possible, the Awarding Organisations (AOs) will make changes to AS qualifications in line with changes to respective A level subjects. Where subject content is shared between the AS level and A level, it should be possible for schools to continue to co-teach the qualifications. Retaining the AS as a stand-alone qualification in this way will preserve the opportunity for students to take an AS alongside their A level programme, whether in year 12 or in year 13. It will also enable students who find they do unexpectedly well in their AS courses to continue to study the subject at A level.

As you know, AOs have been reviewing the content of A levels in all facilitating subjects, and some other high volume subjects, with representatives from higher education and learned societies, in a process chaired by Professor Mark Smith, Vice Chancellor of Lancaster University. Ofqual is now considering Professor Smith's report about the changes required to key A level subjects, and will set out its conclusions, including which subjects should be reformed for first teaching in 2015, later in the autumn.

### **Assessment burden, and cost, at the end of Year 13**

I understand your concerns about the assessment burden for students taking both Mathematics and Further Mathematics at the end of year 13. The short-term reforms, including the removal of the January assessment window for all A levels, mean that students must take all AS and A level assessments in the summer. Ofqual's decision to implement this change from September 2013 is intended to address the concerns raised regarding multiple entries and resits (which you will know is very common in mathematics). This can impact on the time available for teaching, rather than assessment, and cause a lack of depth of study with a resultant impact on the standards of the qualifications.

While the changes will impact on all students, we are aware that the structure of Mathematics A level, with six rather than four modules, does lead to an additional assessment burden, both now and in the future. Students taking Mathematics and Further Mathematics at A level (discounting re-sits) will be taking six modules at the end of year 13, compared to four modules for a student taking two other qualifications. Schools can of course minimise the assessment burden by making sure that students are well prepared for the examinations when they come to take them, reducing the likelihood that they will need to re-sit elements of the qualification.

In the context of Ofqual's decision, we are keen to monitor any impact on the take up of A level Further Mathematics and have asked the Further Maths Support Programme to lead on this work. We will ensure that Ofqual is made fully aware of the data and if issues arise we will consider our options to address

these. You will be aware that Ofqual gave careful consideration to making an exception for Further Mathematics in the decision to remove the January assessment window but decided that the case for making an exception was not strong enough.

When the A level is reformed, AOs will be giving consideration to the most appropriate assessment model within a linear structure, as well as to the relationship between Mathematics and Further Mathematics. I know that in the discussions Professor Smith has chaired with AOs and higher education representatives, careful consideration has been given to the impact of the changes on the perceived difficulty of Mathematics and Further Mathematics A level, and on the take-up of these important subjects.

### **Change in funding arrangements for schools**

You also raise issues about the changes to school sixth form funding arrangements. The move to funding per student is intended to allow schools and colleges the flexibility to offer students the programmes that best suit them, at A level and across all other post-16 study, and to remove the existing perverse incentives which focus colleges' attention on putting together bundles of qualifications to "maximise profit". Under the new funding formula for 2013/14 institutions will be funded for, on average, 600 teaching hours per year per full-time student, formula protection funding will ensure that no institution is losing funding per student for the next three years.

I understand that providers will have concerns about what happens at the end of that three-year period. We are fully aware of the concerns this raises and are considering what more we can do to minimise any disruption or impact on particular subjects – especially Further Mathematics. We have said that we intend to bring forward our proposed approach to the funding of programmes greater than 600 planned hours per year before formula protection funding comes to an end.

### **Maths Free Schools**

Finally, as part of our previous correspondence I outlined the process for universities to develop and run specialist maths free schools that will bridge the gap between A-levels and undergraduate study. I am sure you will be pleased to hear that the schools led by Kings College London and the University of Exeter are developing well. These schools will not only stretch our brightest and best young mathematicians, but will also contribute towards more young people from a variety of backgrounds going on to study Mathematics and Mathematics related subjects.

I am pleased that we are having discussions with a number of your members about them sponsoring and developing specialist maths free schools and I know that you will want to encourage them. As I said in my last letter, both I and officials in the Department, would be pleased to discuss proposals with universities to help them refine their plans.

Thank you for writing to me on this important matter.

With best wishes,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Elizabeth Truss". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'E'.

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**Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Education and Childcare**