



Education Committee

Oral evidence: [Examinations for 15–19 year olds in England: follow-up](#), HC 143

Wednesday 3 December 2014

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Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Department for Education \(EXA0014\)](#)

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Members present: Mr Graham Stuart (Chair), Alex Cunningham, Bill Esterson, Pat Glass, Siobhain McDonagh, Ian Mearns, Mr Dominic Raab, Mr David Ward, Craig Whittaker

Questions 85 - 233

Witness: **Rt Hon Nicky Morgan MP**, Secretary of State, Department for Education gave evidence.

Chair: Good morning and welcome again, Secretary of State.

Nicky Morgan: It seems like a regular occurrence, Chair.

Q85 Chair: We know that over three years, schools were given new responsibilities for careers advice, entirely new examinations and an entirely new accountability system as to how they would be held to account. Are you confident that the Department for Education is making reasonable and deliverable demands on schools across all those fronts in a very concentrated period?

Nicky Morgan: Well, there is no doubt that during the period of the past four years, the pace of reform has been swift. That means that for the whole system—including the Department, but particularly for schools at the front line—it is, of course, challenging. The situation that we faced, particularly in relation to what we are going to be talking about this morning—exams and standards—serious. There were concerns, as we will no doubt come on to discuss, about grade inflation and how prepared our young people were for the world of work and for going to university. I do not think my predecessor and previous Ministers in the Department felt there was a moment to lose in 2010.

What we have seen with things like the new national curriculum, which is starting to be taught this September, is that schools have magnificently risen to the challenge. We

continue to be confident that they will be able to do so in relation to the exams we will be discussing this morning.

Q86 Chair: The first proposals for changes to GCSEs were made by your predecessor in autumn 2012, and the process of reforming A-levels started even before that. However, it won't be until 2019 that all exams, for both A-levels and GCSEs in all their forms, will be in place. Do you think this prolonged period of turbulence and uncertainty is good for students, schools, universities, employers or, indeed, anyone else?

Nicky Morgan: That is an interesting way of putting it. It is something that occurred to us when we were discussing the evidence likely to be heard this morning. A lot of people talk about there being a swift pace, and there has been a constant period of change. As you say, Mr Chairman, it has taken from 2010, when the Government was elected and when the thought of the changes was first outlined, right the way through to 2019. The important point is to note that the key subjects, the ones that are most highly valued by universities and employers, are the ones that have been changed first, but it is right that we take time to consult and listen to the subject experts. People would complain even more bitterly if there were to be quicker change or shorter consultation periods. There is going to be a period of turbulence, which will continue.

Q87 Chair: Has there been a cost? You said that from 2010 onwards the Government was in a hurry, and it turns out that, although you can rush it, you can't compress it into a very short period. When the different parts start to move under the strain—you made an announcement only this week on fundamental subjects, such as maths, moving—there is an impact on the design of other subjects. Maths has a link with the sciences, for instance.

Nicky Morgan: Absolutely.

Chair: Wouldn't it have been better to have had a more coherent and cautious approach to the reform that ensured that all the pieces moved together in a co-ordinated way?

Nicky Morgan: No, because the seriousness of the situation when we came into government was such that immediate action had to be taken. However long we had to put in place reforms and the changes to syllabuses and curriculum content, things were always going to occur as we went through those changes. We have seen that with the maths A-level announcement this week. Situations and problems will be identified that need to be dealt with by the system. I think we have the right period and the right approach, working with Ofqual, schools and colleges.

Q88 Chair: When we did our inquiry into the 2012 GCSE English furore, we expressed concern about the relations between Ministers in England and Wales. We suggested that there was a danger that the qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland would come to mean different things in different places and that this might not have been thought through properly. We asked Ministers to ensure that joint ownership remained.

Do you think it matters whether GCSEs, for instance, mean different things in different parts of the United Kingdom?

Nicky Morgan: I don't. There has been continued close working, but the important thing is to communicate to those who rely on exams—other schools, universities and employers—what students are being examined on as part of the different curriculums and the changes in grading. I think the system is able to cope with differences, as long as they are fully explained.

Q89 Chair: Do you think people will understand the differences between the different qualifications and GCSEs in Wales, England and Northern Ireland? Are employers, universities and others really going to understand that when it has been explained?

Nicky Morgan: Yes, I think so. Ultimately, they will take a judgment on the candidate who is sitting in front of them, too.

Q90 Pat Glass: Nicky, in the past this Committee has been very critical of the pace of change. We have had changes to the curriculum, to the form of examinations—from modular to linear—and to what is taught, how it is taught and when it is taught. We have argued that the previous Secretary of State appeared just to throw everything up in the air, and it is all going to come home to roost in 2017 to 2019. As the Chairman said, in our report on what happened with the GCSEs in 2012, one of the things that was very clear to us was that Ministers previously did not listen to the warnings that were given to them. There are concerns that that is happening again. We have seen that the mathematics A-level has been delayed, which is very sensible given that GCSE students will not have studied the things they need for the A-level, but there are clear warnings about chemistry and physics. Is the Department listening to those warnings?

Nicky Morgan: We will always listen. My ministerial colleagues will always retain close contact with Ofqual and others on any notes of caution that are issued. That is what happened in relation to mathematics. We have listened to those who said that we need to get the GCSE in place first, because of the change in the content and standards, and then examine the A-levels. Having said that, when you put in place a period of reform, it is important to listen and be clear about the direction of travel. I do not want to create further uncertainty for schools that think that everything might change again.

We have a clear programme of reform as a Government, and we have a clear reason for making the reforms: wanting our exam standards to be the best in the world and, therefore, wanting our young people to be examined to be the best in the world, whether they are competing in the world of work or universities. It is important that schools and students are assured of that.

Q91 Pat Glass: The exchange of letters between you and the head of Ofqual from 1 December was quite enlightening. What else is red on your dashboard? We talked about chemistry and physics. What else?

Nicky Morgan: Well, maths is it at the moment. I have not been asked to approve or consider any further delays in any other subjects.

Q92 Bill Esterson: Whenever you are evaluating changes in any field, it is always important to be able to do so in a scientific way. You would agree with that, given your academic background, I am sure. Because so many things have been changed in one go—the Chairman set this out well at the start—how are you going to be able to evaluate whether this has worked or not?

Nicky Morgan: We have already seen grade stability over the past two years, which has been important. That has been part of the exam system. We do not want to see ever-increasing grade inflation. More students have been taking the EBacc subjects and maths. We are confident. There has been feedback from those who are going to be relying on the exams—universities and employers. A number of universities were having to teach additional subject information to get students who had passed A-levels ready for the teaching of subjects at universities; we would hope that is not necessary in due course because A-levels really are a stepping-stone to university.

Q93 Bill Esterson: But by changing so many things in one go, how are you going to know which bits have worked and which bits have not?

Nicky Morgan: By listening to the system and those in it.

Q94 Pat Glass: On some of the examinations that we are talking about, chemistry is nowhere near being accredited yet, and physics is largely—

Nicky Morgan: Well, I would say, though—

Pat Glass: There are some very slow parts of the system, and—

Chair: Sorry, Pat; Secretary of State, do you have something that you can tell us about chemistry?

Nicky Morgan: My understanding is that it is very close to being accredited. I will allow you to ask the question, Pat, and then let's do it all.

Q95 Pat Glass: The question was really: at what point do you decide that it is not going to happen and that you have to draw the line on this?

Nicky Morgan: Well, we will obviously wait for advice from Ofqual on that. I am not going to compromise on standards. Ofqual is there; it was set up under the previous Government to look at standard and qualifications, and we take its advice on those issues.

Q96 Pat Glass: But time is pressing. Schools have to be ready, they have to have the curriculum and teach it. If you are not going to compromise on standards, is there a time at which you have to say, “We draw the line here; it is not going to happen”?

Nicky Morgan: I think we have always said that we will try to get everything into schools at least a year in advance so that they have time to plan—obviously, with the new curriculum. My understanding is that they are very nearly there with chemistry. We are talking about a matter of weeks, if that.

Q97 Pat Glass: Can I ask you about ALCAB? Who funds it? Is there any public money going into it?

Nicky Morgan: You have asked me a question that I do not know the answer to. If somebody behind me could pass me a note so I could tell the Committee before I leave, I would be happy; otherwise, I shall write to you.

Q98 Pat Glass: I will give you a couple of questions, because you may need to come back on these.

Why the Russell Group and none of the other universities? It clearly seriously annoyed schools and other universities. I know that I am asking you to answer for you predecessor, but that is the mantle that you take on. Why just Russell Group universities? Who funds ALCAB? Given that it is public money, even if it is just through universities, was there a contract? Did this ever go out to contract?

Nicky Morgan: I will see if I can answer those questions before the end of the session. If not, I shall write to the Committee.

Ian Mearns: I think inspiration is coming forward.

Nicky Morgan: Yes, I have a note here. The Department for Education does fund ALCAB, and I understand that non-Russell Group universities are on the ALCAB panels. But let me supply some more details.

Q99 Pat Glass: But given that the Department for Education does fund ALCAB, was there a contract?

Nicky Morgan: Let me fill the Committee in on that.

Q100 Ian Mearns: Good morning, Secretary of State, and welcome back. What representations have you received from schools as to whether they have enough information today to understand what their September 2015 timetables will look like? Do you think that they have enough information to demonstrate to pupils and parents what the timetable will look like? Do the schools have enough information to staff up those timetables?

Nicky Morgan: Our understanding is that schools are making good progress in preparing for those timetables. I have to be honest: I have not signed lots of letters to people, seen lots of e-mails or had lots of conversations when I have gone round the country suggesting that schools are not going to be ready or that they are struggling to do their timetable and to prepare for the new curriculum in terms of lesson planning. There may very well be schools—I am absolutely certain, before I get deluged with e-mails, that there will be schools and individual teachers—who will say to me that they do not yet feel confident. But our research shows, and the information the Department has is, that the schools are on track but always welcome more information.

Q101 Ian Mearns: What evidence did you have that schools would be ready to teach the first phase of A-levels, AS-levels and GCSEs from September 2015?

Nicky Morgan: Again, it was something in consultation—we consulted on the content and the schools, but we have to set a timetable. If you do not do that, we could be here until—well, Mr Chairman was talking about until 2019, but we could be here until 2025. There has to be a timetable that everyone can work towards.

Q102 Ian Mearns: What role is the Department playing in moderating schools' preparations? For instance, how many staff have you designated to oversee these reforms?

Nicky Morgan: We have a team, but again, I would have to find out the details of numbers of staff. We have a team of curriculum people within the Department who will be liaising with schools as well as colleges. Don't forget that Ofsted, when they inspect schools, will be looking generally at this issue of school readiness as part of their overall judgments on the school and the curriculum.

Q103 Ian Mearns: So is there a symbiotic flow of information going between Ofsted, the schools and yourselves?

Nicky Morgan: I don't know about symbiotic, but there is a very close collaboration, certainly between schools and officials in my Department, who are going out all the time and meeting individual schools and representatives of schools or other bodies.

Q104 Ian Mearns: When it comes to staffing up the timetable, I must admit that I was taken aback last week when I saw the DFE's press release about teacher training recruitment. It was very bullish. When you actually look at the fine detail, there was over-recruitment in some subjects and significant under-recruitment in others. For instance, physics and design and technology had significant shortfalls. I was taken aback at the tone of the DFE press release on that. It did not seem to reflect the reality of what was happening on the ground.

Nicky Morgan: Overall, we are at 93% of the number of teachers that we wanted to recruit. But obviously, within individual subjects there are going to be areas where it is harder

to recruit. We have introduced some financial incentives for particular subjects—things like maths and science. In terms of 2015-16 bursaries, physics and chemistry postgrad teacher trainees with a first will get bursaries ranging from £20,000 to £25,000, and biology trainees with a first-class degree will get £9,000 to £15,000.

We monitor the recruitment levels needed for particular subjects all the time, but I welcome this sort of discussion. The message that I would like to get out into the country is that we need lots of excellent people to be teachers, whether they are coming straight from university, from another career or returning to work. I am very keen that we look at all those avenues, as well as helping those already teaching to improve and to gain more confidence and new skills.

Q105 Ian Mearns: But the 93% figure hides a lot, because you have significant over-recruitment against target in art history, English and PE and significant under-recruitment in design and technology, physics, RE and business studies. To have an overall, global figure of 93% really does hide a significant hinterland of problems in terms of recruitment in specialist subjects.

Nicky Morgan: I think that I have just said to you, Mr Mearns, that the 93% is the overall number and there are issues in other subjects. We have achieved 122% of our target in chemistry, 67% of our target in physics and 85% of our target in biology and general sciences. As I said, that is in relation to initial teacher training; a lot of people will also come back into teaching or may come into teaching for the first time, particularly those who are returning to work.

Q106 Ian Mearns: Look, I accept what you are saying, but will you accept that I have a right to be a little surprised by the tenor of the DFE press release? It was very glowing and bullish about overall teacher recruitment while hiding some significant problems.

Nicky Morgan: I do not accept that there was a hiding of anything. There is an acknowledgement that there are different percentage recruitments in different subjects, but I am Secretary of State for the whole teaching profession and I want to champion the teaching profession and all the hard work that is going on in the teacher training colleges and schools, while also admitting that yes, we do want more teachers in certain subjects.

Q107 Ian Mearns: Given what we have just been discussing, are you confident that steps are being taken to ensure that there are enough teachers to introduce the new maths GCSE?

Nicky Morgan: Clearly, more steps need to be taken. We have maths hubs, and we are going out and talking specifically about recruiting maths graduates. In terms of the pipeline, of course, that is why we want more of our young people to study maths to a higher level—at A-level and then at universities. There is also a lot of work going on to increase and improve the confidence and skills of those who are already teaching to see if they can teach to a higher level. A lot more must be done, but yes, I am confident that we will get there. It is

a whole-profession effort—a whole-country effort, if you like, from Committees such as this one right the way through to Members of Parliament and local authorities saying, “Maths is important and we really need to focus on it.”

Q108 Ian Mearns: Given the overall agenda, we are dealing with a significant pace of change. Do we have enough understanding of what needs to be done to ensure that good-quality textbooks can be prepared for all the subjects in time to deliver the courses to pupils next September?

Nicky Morgan: There is a whole debate about the use of textbooks and other teaching materials. That is obviously a matter for the publishers, but I think that the content is becoming very clear. We have mentioned a couple of issues where there are accreditations to happen, but overall, yes, I am confident that the training materials can be available.

Q109 Chair: Take chemistry, for example, where we need to produce really good, high-quality textbooks. You say that it is a matter for public debate, but the Department’s view is very clear, which is that textbooks—the publishers’ responsibility—are not good enough and that the highest-performing jurisdictions rely on textbooks more, have high-quality textbooks, and ensure that those textbooks relate to and support learning in a carefully considered way. How is that going to be possible in something as important as chemistry if we do not even know what the content is yet?

Nicky Morgan: We know what the content is; the content has been set since April. It is the accreditation of particular awarding organisations that is the issue. I entirely agree with you, Mr Chairman. If the Minister for Schools was here, he would wax lyrical about the importance of textbooks and the rigour needed—

Q110 Chair: I assume that you agree with him.

Nicky Morgan: Absolutely, it is just that he would wax even more lyrical than me about these things. With the content having been set since April, I think that there is more than enough time for publishers to write extremely high-quality textbooks.

Q111 Bill Esterson: Returning to the concern about STEM subjects and recruitment being well below the targets, for design and technology we have met 44% of the target this year, and we have had falls in overall recruitment for three years. I take the point that you made in your answer earlier that you have things coming forward, but if STEM subjects are seeing under-recruitment, isn’t there a real problem?

Nicky Morgan: We need more people to be teaching STEM subjects. We need them to study to a higher level and we need more people to teach them. As I have said, we have a number of different initiatives in place. If I were to be political, people are pledging the teaching of maths to even higher levels and there is an issue about teacher recruitment to achieve those policy aims, but I am confident that we will find excellent teachers in those

subjects. Part of that is about discussing those things in open ways so that people know—they might want to be design technology teachers, so they should know that there are jobs available for them.

Q112 Bill Esterson: You talked about bursaries and things like that. I am trying to tease out how you make the step change from the levels of recruitment now to the number of teachers that young people, schools and business need, so that we can deliver and get the skills into the economy.

Nicky Morgan: First of all, you talk about these issues, so that people are aware—not just people in the teaching profession, but people outside who may be thinking about changes, or whose life circumstances mean that they are looking for another challenge—that those vacancies are open and that we need good people. We look at people with all sorts of qualifications and backgrounds to do those important jobs, such as design and technology teaching. When I go and see D and T in schools in my constituency, I see teachers who often have professional expertise in another field inspiring young people. That is what it is all about.

Q113 Mr Ward: Can I just ask you a couple of questions about the accountability measures? We know about the history of the perverse effects of having assessments of young people also being used as the assessment of the schools that teach them. The borderline C/Ds is the best example. We are now moving to Progress 8, a new measure of accountability. Do you foresee any gaming or problems that may arise as a result of moving to a new form of accountability for schools?

Nicky Morgan: There is a new system to get used to and that will obviously take some time, like all reforms, as we have discussed. But Progress 8 is to be warmly welcomed, because it is about tracking the progress of young people. It is not about that focus on the C/D borderline, but about looking at the achievements of young people doing the subjects that are right for them. I hope there will be a real focus on the core EBacc academic subjects, but there is also an opportunity to study other subjects, particularly arts subjects, which also inspire, to track the progress of young people for themselves.

Q114 Mr Ward: The heavy emphasis will obviously be on English and maths—50% of the weighting is on those—but, as it beds down, are you concerned that, over a period of time, people will become aware of the best eight to get the highest performance for their school and that we will be back to where we are now, with those perverse effects?

Nicky Morgan: I suppose there can always be concerns and—we have had this debate before—we can always assume the worst and that people will try to do that with the system. I would like to think that the incentive to look at progress rather than at specific grade borderlines will mean that, as I say, young people will be doing the right subjects for them and that their progress will be tracked. It is all about the progress they make in education. That is where education has that life-transforming power I talked about.

Q115 Mr Ward: There will be an attempt to make GCSEs more rigorous. Are you concerned that that will be reflected in schools falling short of the new thresholds that will be introduced?

Nicky Morgan: Obviously, we want our GCSEs to be more rigorous and to higher academic standards. That was one of the absolute reasons for the changes that my predecessor and the Department have overseen in the past four years, which I entirely support and endorse. Inevitably, as Ofsted has found, if you change the ratings of schools and make things tougher, some people who would have passed under the old system might be the wrong side of the floor standard for a year or a couple of years as they get used to the new system. But that shows that we are not compromising on standards and that the changes will raise the bar across the system.

Q116 Mr Ward: What about the impact on the early cohorts that go through on those more rigorous standards?

Nicky Morgan: As an early entry? One of the changes is that we do not want to see—the Department has been very firm—students being put forward to take exams before they are ready, as in early entry. We have rightly seen a 40% drop in early entry. It is right that students have the right length of time to study a subject and take it at the right moment.

Q117 Bill Esterson: Although head teachers describe that as an obscure and ridiculous interpretation of the rules.

Nicky Morgan: Some might, but a lot of people have enormous sympathy. I personally think it is about getting it right for our young people. They should take the exam when they are ready to take it and not get it out of the way early, because they may not achieve the grade they could have done had they waited.

Q118 Bill Esterson: The concern put to us is that it is going to have quite a big effect on school league tables, but you are not worried about that?

Nicky Morgan: I think it will have a positive effect on the students' individual attainment and that is important for the individual students. That is what the education system is there for.

Q119 Bill Esterson: Can I ask you about IGCSEs? Do you like them?

Nicky Morgan: I don't have a particular view one way or the other, but I think they play a role in the system and people like them. We have concentrated on the reforming of the GCSEs.

Q120 Bill Esterson: Because IGCSEs still keep modular elements, don't they, and you've removed them from GCSEs?

Nicky Morgan: As I say, it is about diversity. Along with early entry and modules, it is right that students are not constantly thinking about the next test or exam, but are thinking about the final exam. They have a two-year period, or a year in the case of AS-levels, in order to really focus and study the subject in detail.

Q121 Bill Esterson: So you want to stick with a linear end-of-two-year exam, but it is okay for schools to choose not to do that?

Nicky Morgan: The whole point about our exam and school system is to have diversity. We are very focused and the Department has made it clear in the reformed GCSEs that we want to follow the linear structure of exams. We have set out the reasons for doing that.

Q122 Bill Esterson: It has been put to me that having a final exam is a test of memory rather than of understanding, yet we have high standards at our universities—some of the best in the world, in fact—where the approach is very much to use continual assessment and modular learning. Why the difference?

Nicky Morgan: The Department has set out the direction of travel and Ofqual also consulted on this. I think linear assessment is the right way to go. Universities are obviously teaching in a different way and to an older cohort, but having two years to really understand a subject rather than having continuous assessment is the right way to have our exam system.

Q123 Bill Esterson: I realise that you think it is the right way to go, but where in the world of work do you need to be able to sit down and write for three hours? Where is that of any use to anyone?

Nicky Morgan: It is not about the sitting down and writing, but the real in-depth understanding of a text, mathematics or an arts subject. That is what the linear system delivers.

Q124 Bill Esterson: By supporting the continued accreditation of IGCSEs, are you merely pandering to the independent sector, as that is where they are predominant?

Nicky Morgan: No, I think we are reflecting diversity in the system and that people can make choices.

Q125 Chair: And why are the IGCSEs accredited pre-2010 continuing to be accredited, as opposed to others?

Nicky Morgan: Because they have obviously met the tests and we feel they are rigorous enough. As I say, the focus has been on the IGCSEs and that they stay as they are. The Department, Ofqual and others are focused on the reformed GCSEs, which is what we want to see the majority of students taking.

Q126 Chair: It just seems a bit odd. You believe that the construction of examinations in general, including IGCSEs, needs to be changed, and you are moving to a linear examination system, which you have just set out the arguments for. Yet, you are allowing a subset of IGCSEs, which are based on a construction that you have just said you don't agree with, to continue in the name of a diversity that you don't want for GCSEs.

Nicky Morgan: They are not going to be in the league tables from 2017 and they might well be open for reform. In terms of concentrating on certain things, the focus of the Department and of Ofqual is the GCSEs and those are the first ones for reform.

Q127 Bill Esterson: Do you agree with listening to employers in designing qualifications?

Nicky Morgan: Yes.

Q128 Bill Esterson: Which is what is happening with apprenticeships, isn't it?

Nicky Morgan: Yes.

Q129 Bill Esterson: So why do it with apprenticeships, but not with GCSEs or A-levels?

Nicky Morgan: The consultation is open to everybody so people are able to participate and there are conversations happening. Apprenticeships are, I suppose, particularly employer-focused, but all can contribute to the consultation on the curriculum.

Q130 Bill Esterson: So having exams that are of practical use, that are designed to help employers and the way that children learn, is a good thing.

Nicky Morgan: I think it is important. What we are testing in our exam system is the overall understanding of the subject and the skills. The young person will make the decision about where they want to go after that, whether it is to universities, straight into the world of work or perhaps to apprenticeships.

Q131 Bill Esterson: Are apprenticeships and vocational qualifications of equivalent value in this country?

Nicky Morgan: I don't think they are as much as they should be. We have a job to do. This Government have made enormous progress in creating a number of apprenticeships, raising their profile and getting employers involved, as we have seen with the trailblazers. It is incumbent on all of us—I certainly try to do this—to make it clear that vocational and technical qualifications are and should be equivalent to going to university. But it is about what is right for the individual young person.

Craig Whittaker: Good morning, Secretary of State.

Nicky Morgan: Good morning, Craig.

Q132 Craig Whittaker: We have heard quite a bit of evidence, particularly from Ofqual, about the risk of a lack of coherence between key stage 4 and key stage 5. I just wondered what your view is on how to get pupils and schools through that reform process.

Nicky Morgan: I think that it is about communicating. It is about involving schools that have been involved early on. It is about setting out the pathway, so that schools teaching key stage 4 will also be mindful of—not necessarily dictated by, but mindful of—those students and their needs as they go on to key stage 5. But they are obviously different tests.

Q133 Craig Whittaker: Okay, but we have a real risk from the staggered introduction of reforms. Either the old GCSEs will not prepare students for the new A-levels, or we have a real risk that the new A-levels will be repeating content from the old GCSEs. You have delayed maths to hopefully avoid that happening, but what about the other subjects? What can be done to make sure that we have continuity in the other subjects too?

Nicky Morgan: Obviously the content is being set by the Department, but then assessment is very much a matter for Ofqual. On maths, we have listened to those who said that the gap between the new GCSEs is such a change and that is why we should delay the A-level. We have listened to those who advised us on that. We have not had representations like that on any of the other subjects.

Q134 Craig Whittaker: So you are fairly confident that we will not have the same issues with all the other subjects that you have foreseen with maths.

Nicky Morgan: We have certainly not had any representations on that basis. As I said to Ms Glass, we will obviously listen should such representations be made, but we are confident that the other subjects are very much aligned.

Q135 Craig Whittaker: We know this from experience—on the botched introduction of the A2s back in 2000, the advice then was that we should have done some pre-testing. The Department has not chosen to do any pre-testing this time. Why is that?

Nicky Morgan: It is very difficult to pre-test or pilot with exams like GCSEs or A-levels, where you have hundreds of thousands taking them. It is difficult to explain to those people who are going to rely on the exams, “Well, actually, you were part of a pilot this year, and that is why your grades might be different.” It was considered, but Ofqual—I think the Committee might have asked Ofqual about this when they gave evidence—very much took the view that they did look at it, but that piloting was not a sensible option.

Q136 Craig Whittaker: Okay, so you are quite confident that we will not have the same issue that we had with A2s.

Nicky Morgan: We have taken a lot of care over all of this. We are taking time to listen to those who are in the system and listen to representations. I should just point out that I was part of the first year to do GCSEs back in 1988. There was always a worry—

Chair: How young you are, Secretary of State.

Nicky Morgan: Oh, thank you very much, Mr Chairman. You are very charming. The system coped with things then.

Ian Mearns: You must have taken them very young, Secretary of State.

Nicky Morgan: Okay, let’s not get carried away.

Q137 Chair: But since then, there have been a whole series of things that did not go so well. That GCSE reform took quite a long time. The whole thing was planned coherently and brought in with broad consensus. There were the relatively small changes to A-level maths in 2000, the collapse of take-up and the SATs fiascos. We have spent a lot of time on this Committee—I have spent more hours than I care to think of—looking at various problems around exams. Overall, there is a whole series of changes across different subjects. There is an awful lot of risk across the field that we are talking about, isn’t there?

Nicky Morgan: I think this goes back to your initial question. There is a lot of change. I am confident in the way that it is being delivered. We are taking time and listening to representations. The teaching profession has already delivered the new national curriculum; I am confident that they will be able to do this.

We inherited a situation when we came into Government of grade inflation, additional teaching having to be done by universities, and employers not being confident of the qualifications that applicants were showing them for jobs. There was not a moment to lose. You could either do it all at once and make the system work together, or you could do it piecemeal. I do not think that piecemeal was right, given its seriousness and the way that we have to prepare our young people for life—to compete with people around the world as well as domestically.

Q138 Pat Glass: Are we in danger of creating a problem that did not really exist? As a Committee, we looked at the whole issue of grade inflation. We decided that, on balance,

there probably had been some, but there was not a massive problem with this. The Government seem to be lashing around for solutions where there were not problems.

Nicky Morgan: I am afraid to say that you have just admitted that there has been a problem.

Q139 Pat Glass: You have hugely exaggerated the position.

Nicky Morgan: I do not think that it is fair to our young people. More fundamentally than that, it was about the content of the academic side. Our young people have to compete with people from around the world.

Q140 Pat Glass: We know that there are issues on which we may disagree, but you are trying to find solutions to problems. We did a huge amount of work on this and decided that, on balance, there was a little bit of grade inflation but not the massive problem that you are suggesting that it was. At least be fair about this. You may have philosophical or political reasons for these changes, but there simply is no evidence to support the argument that the whole thing was a complete mess.

Nicky Morgan: Well, we have independent research showing that GCSEs in 2006 were a whole grade easier than a decade earlier. The same study shows that pupils who would have received a U in the maths A-level in 1988 received a B or C in 2006.

Q141 Pat Glass: That evidence was not fed to this Committee.

Nicky Morgan: The Department has that evidence.

Q142 Pat Glass: The Department does not have a good record with this. You need to submit that, because we looked at this and we did not find that evidence.

Nicky Morgan: Well, we certainly have that. As I say, it is a broader thing about recognising that our exam system has to prepare our young people for securing good degrees, jobs, and competing with the best around the world.

Q143 Pat Glass: And those are nice warm words, Secretary of State, but you just need to accept and own up to it. The Government may want to change things and there may be good reasons for doing that; they are the Government. But it is disingenuous to suggest that there was a complete mess that needed to be put right by throwing everything up in the air and possibly creating an even greater problem.

Nicky Morgan: I think we will have to agree to disagree on that. There was an issue and my predecessor took some firm steps to tackle it.

Q144 Pat Glass: And this is going to make it better?

Nicky Morgan: Yes.

Pat Glass: This is throwing everything up in the air.

Chair: Secretary of State, I was going to say that we were not necessarily disagreeing about the need to change, but my colleague has shown that perhaps there are differences of opinion.

Pat Glass: I am just asking for honesty here.

Q145 Chair: The point is about getting the reforms right, having accepted that they are happening. Some people could disagree as to the severity of the problems being addressed, but it is about delivering it in a coherent fashion. You said that it is not right to do it in a piecemeal way. What do you see as the biggest risks within this set of non-piecemeal but co-ordinated reforms?

Nicky Morgan: It is about ensuring that all the changes follow others. Craig asked a question about ensuring that the GCSEs and A-levels fit together; it is about listening to those who advise us.

Q146 Chair: And do they? A-level reform is running ahead of GCSE reform, which seems extraordinary—you would think that GCSEs have to be designed to fit into A-levels, because it is about progression. How can that be right?

Nicky Morgan: I think they do fit together. We are seeing the consultations happening alongside each other. It goes back to the point about what would happen if waited for people to work their way through the GCSEs and we did not reform A-levels. A-levels are very important for preparing our young people, often for the world of universities. Universities are telling us that they were not ready for that, and we would lose several years' worth of a cohort. I don't think it is very fair to them not to make the changes.

We have talked about one of the other risks, which is having the right numbers of qualified teachers to teach. I am confident again that we will be able to match that, but there is no doubt that there are going to be challenges in getting the right people into the system. We are working very hard to ensure that that happens.

Q147 Bill Esterson: We have asked you the same question in a number of different ways—there is all this change going on, and is it going to work—but what will success look like? When the dust settles, what will young people notice that is different from what went before? What will the country notice is different in the results?

Nicky Morgan: I think we will have even better and more academically stretched students who will, as I say, be competing against the best in the world. Our universities will tell us that young people are coming out prepared for the degrees that they are going to be

taking, or employers will tell us that we have got young people who are prepared for the world of work.

Chair: Good luck with that.

Nicky Morgan: Well, yes. There are many skills that our young people will need, but that is what success looks like. We will be competing with the best. People will be saying, “Look at what England has done with its exam system, really preparing its young people,” rather than us having to go abroad to look for excellence elsewhere. We want excellence here.

Q148 Bill Esterson: It is not going to happen overnight, is it?

Nicky Morgan: The Chairman has already made the point that we started the reform process in 2010, and on the current timetable it ends in 2019. That is about as quick as it can be. The Committee and others cannot have it both ways. You can’t on one hand say that the pace is too quick and on the other hand say it is going to take a long time. We have done it on the right timetable.

Q149 Chair: Finally on this, will there be any objective measures? Are you going to do surveys with universities and employers? Is there going to be some way that we—this Committee or its successors—will be able to look at whether it is coming through and delivering? At the moment it is high-flown and rhetorical, and for the most part I agree. It aims for a greater rigour and to fulfil the aims that you have just set out, but how will we know whether or not it is genuinely delivering?

Nicky Morgan: I am sure that the successor Committee will hold its own evidence sessions and will be asking for the responses of those who take the exams or who would particularly benefit from using those exams to recruit both undergraduates and employees.

Q150 Chair: They’ll find it easier if I can extract from you, Secretary of State, certain things that you expect to have happened. Then they will be able to say, “The Secretary of State said in December 2014 that this would happen, and the Government should be held to account on this, this and this.” If they don’t improve, there will be questions to be asked, but if we haven’t got that, it becomes rather difficult.

Nicky Morgan: First, I think it goes back to the point about measuring progress. We are obviously measuring progress as a result of the new Progress 8 measure, and I want to see good progress for all pupils while they are in full-time education. That is incredibly important. The responses from universities are going to be very important, as are organisations like the CBI and others, who again do surveys in relation to literacy and numeracy. They are the ones who came to us and said there is an issue with our exam system and the way our education system is preparing our young people at the moment. That is what we get back from employers all the time. There will always be a continual striving, and I am sure there is always more that can be done, but those are the particular ways to measure success.

I have not yet mandated that there is going to be a departmental survey come 2020, but let's see where we get to in the next couple of years.

Q151 Chair: Your predecessor and yourself have made a great point of the fact that we have got to look at ourselves in the international context. Are there any ways, other than PISA, that we could measure whether these reforms have delivered?

Nicky Morgan: I think the OECD is also very important in terms of the way that they measure.

Q152 Chair: Well, they produce PISA.

Nicky Morgan: Yes, but the analysis that they do is also very important. There might be others, but at the moment we are focused on the reforms and we know where we want to get to. It is a good point about measuring.

Q153 Chair: Could you write to us about that?

Nicky Morgan: I am happy to write to you with some thoughts about how we can measure things.

Q154 Pat Glass: Do you think in five years' time, if the CBI and employers are coming here to say to us that kids are not fit to go into work, as they have been doing for as long as I can remember, and universities come here and say, "We are getting students in and we having to re-teach them because they are not ready," which they have been doing as long as I can remember, that will mean that this is a failure?

Nicky Morgan: Well, I am not sure that universities have been doing that.

Pat Glass: For as long as I can remember they have been.

Nicky Morgan: Representing a university, that is not something that has become particularly clear to me in the past few years, but I would be disappointed to hear that. I am confident in the reform programme that we have as a Government.

Q155 Siobhain McDonagh: Ofqual's consultation on grading argued against norm referencing and criterion referencing. Do you agree that comparable outcomes are the best way to award grades in the new GCSE?

Nicky Morgan: I do, but that is a matter for Ofqual.

Q156 Siobhain McDonagh: Ofqual has controlled grade inflation by pinning outcomes to KS2 results. How can the Government tell whether there has been any real improvement in students' performances between the ages of 11 and 16?

Nicky Morgan: A lot of that is for assessment. Obviously at 16 we have got GCSEs and Progress 8 tracking, which will come in in 2016 to track progress. In the meantime, schools are best placed to judge the progress that students are making. Key stage 2 is a useful baseline. Ofqual considered other measures, but key stage 2 is the right one.

Q157 Chair: The question is really this. If outcomes objectively improve, how will that be reflected in the results if the comparable outcomes and data-based approach effectively holds the results down? Is it effectively norm referencing, so everything is held in place? If your GCSE results are moderated in terms of what happened at the end of primary in order to keep everyone where they were and to maintain stability, a lot of people in the school community fear that you have actually created norm referencing, which means that even as standards are raised, that is not reflected in improved exam results. That is the point.

Nicky Morgan: We want things to remain stable. There has to be measurement of progress, but we don't want to go back to the system in which things were getting ever better and people were getting less and less confident about the results.

Q158 Siobhain McDonagh: Why do you want things to remain stable? Surely you want things to get better.

Nicky Morgan: I want them to be genuinely better, not just because we keep changing the bars every year.

Q159 Siobhain McDonagh: If you tie it to how somebody does at the end of primary school, how can that really measure improvement or progress?

Nicky Morgan: Because I want know how children were doing at the end of primary school, and therefore how their secondary education is benefitting them. I want to know the progress they are making up to the age of 16.

Q160 Siobhain McDonagh: But if you are anticipating grades at 16 by reference to KS2 scores, that is surely not fair or right.

Nicky Morgan: I think you are looking at individual students. Obviously there is also going to be the national reference test, which Ofqual is also introducing. A small cohort of year 11s each year will take the same test to measure progress and measure how the system is doing.

Siobhain McDonagh: It just seems to be restricting excellent teaching and great improvement on the part of young people.

Q161 Pat Glass: The concern we have always had is that schools that do so much better because they have really good teaching and a new head teacher will be disadvantaged under this system. That is not going to be recognised.

Nicky Morgan: I think it will be, in terms of looking at Progress 8. The national reference test is about checking each year, like for like. Progress 8 will measure individual student achievement.

Chair: Comparable outcomes worked at a system level, so the individual school was perfectly capable of moving up massively. Therefore, I don't think it hits the individual institution; it is overall, which is the key point.

Pat Glass: It is not reflecting the system. It is not just about the individuals but the schools. That is our concern. We understand why it is necessary, but it has its disadvantages.

Q162 Siobhain McDonagh: Do you agree with the proposal to set the grade 9 boundaries so that only 20% of students who get grade 7 or above can get the highest grade in the new GCSE? Isn't that a cap on aspiration?

Nicky Morgan: Again, I think that is a measure for Ofqual. I am not sure that decision has finally been taken. You want to be able to differentiate at the top level. We would never want to see a cap on aspiration, but we also need those who are going to rely on the exam results to have confidence that a grade 9 really is something truly exceptional.

Q163 Siobhain McDonagh: But what if 30% of people achieved that level?

Nicky Morgan: It is something that will be looked at over time. There needs to be a differentiation at the top end, which is why Ofqual decided to introduce the 1 to 9 system.

Q164 Siobhain McDonagh: With which countries should Ofqual be looking to align the standard of GCSE grade 7?

Chair: Grade 5.

Siobhain McDonagh: Grade 5; sorry. Why not include Singapore or China? How often should they review this, and against what criteria?

Nicky Morgan: I think that is again a matter for Ofqual. We set the overall direction of travel. We want high standards. Ofqual have a remit to deliver that. I agree that there are a number of key countries around the world. The whole point of reforming the system is to be able to compete with the best in the world.

Q165 Pat Glass: You previously made reference to the national reference test. There are issues around it that have been raised with us: the additional pressure that it puts on

students; whether it is compulsory for those students in that cohort; and how you will keep it secret if the same test is used year after year. One of the big things that we were concerned about is what has happened elsewhere. For example, in Hong Kong comparisons are made between the tests and the actual results of students later, and they are unwelcome, so they are ditched.

Chair: Some of the papers.

Pat Glass: Some of the papers, yes. In Singapore there appears to be a great deal of selection of pupils who will do the test that will reflect well on the schools and the city state. How are you going to deal with those things to make sure that it is actually worth while?

Nicky Morgan: We are not, but Ofqual are in charge of the national reference test. They looked at a number of other different mechanisms, but this is the one they came up with as the best alternative. They will be looking at other data as well. It is not all done on the national reference test; there are other data that Ofqual will take into account when thinking about the issues that we have just been discussing.

Q166 Pat Glass: We have talked a little bit about grade inflation, and we may disagree about that. Head teachers are clever people. If I was a head teacher and my future depended on this kind of thing, I would be picking out the best pupils in year 7 to do this test. How will that give us an accurate picture? How does it not become simply one more gaming of the system?

Nicky Morgan: I am sure the Committee will have pressed Ofqual about this. The Department will keep a close eye on this. There needs to be some reference test at this stage. As I say, Ofqual will rely on other data, too. They have a very clear remit from us as to what we want them to achieve. After thinking long and hard about this and after consultation, listening to others and looking at other alternatives, they decided that this is the best way of doing it.

Q167 Pat Glass: Is it fair to introduce this at the moment, when schools and Ofqual are already struggling with huge changes in the timetable?

Nicky Morgan: Again, Ofqual have decided. It is essential so that they are able to compare like with like on a year-on-year basis.

Q168 Pat Glass: What will be the impact on the reform agenda around GCSEs if the deadline is not met?

Nicky Morgan: Ofqual have a clear remit from the Department. We hold them to account. Both Ministers meet them regularly, and I have had meetings with Ofqual, too. They have a clear remit, and this is their way of meeting it.

Q169 Pat Glass: The Committee has heard evidence about the national reference test and other ways of doing it. There are lots of disadvantages as well as advantages. What is your personal view about it? Are you in favour of it?

Nicky Morgan: As I say, there has to be a mechanism. It is not the only way.

Q170 Pat Glass: There are other mechanisms.

Nicky Morgan: As I understand it, they looked at other mechanisms. This is the one that Ofqual have identified. It is not for the Department to be second-guessing all the time the decisions that Ofqual have taken. We have set them a clear remit. That is what they have to meet and that is what we will hold them to account on.

Q171 Pat Glass: There is a lot of criticism about the national curriculum tests. I know that those things are being looked at at the moment. One of the biggest concerns that people have is the stress that it puts on year 6 pupils, and there are concerns that this will put the same stress on a small number of year 7 pupils. Is it fair to introduce that into the system?

Nicky Morgan: Well, it is year 11 pupils who will take the national reference test. I think there will already be a fair amount of focus on exam results.

Pat Glass: They will be doing their GCSEs at the same time.

Nicky Morgan: Exactly, so they are already going to be preparing for exams. This is one additional test to be taken, and I am confident that schools will be able to manage that.

Chair: Alex Cunningham is next.

Q172 Pat Glass: While Alex is getting ready—he has only just arrived—can I just say that if it was my child, I would be withdrawing them, and I think a lot of parents would do the same? What are you going to do if huge numbers of parents withdraw their children?

Nicky Morgan: Again, that is a matter—Ofqual has a remit. They will meet it; we will hold them to account on it.

Q173 Alex Cunningham: They say timing is everything, Secretary of State. We have had the timing of the manifesto coming out from the Association of Colleges and one of the things it says, in recommendation No. 6, “Assessment which reflects real life”, is: “The way students are assessed in school and college should reflect the fact that we learn in the workplace and at university incrementally, not solely through end of year exams. The next Government should maintain AS-levels in their current form and should allow for rigorous modular assessment in vocational and academic qualifications, alongside final exams.” What do you think of that?

Nicky Morgan: First, we have retained AS-levels; they have just been decoupled from A-levels. And I think we have already discussed with Mr Esterson the point about modular testing. Clearly there are some subjects for which practical skills are absolutely essential; again, that is what universities and employers will be looking for. But I am also a fan of linear assessment, in terms of having time to study something properly, without having the stress of continuous assessment.

Q174 Alex Cunningham: So you are rejecting that recommendation, basically.

Nicky Morgan: Well, first, our push back on AS-level is already there, and I would say that in certain subjects, practical skills and assessment are absolutely necessary, and in others it is right to be examined at the end of the subject.

Q175 Alex Cunningham: Okay. As you said, there has been this decoupling of AS-levels from A-levels, but evidence to us is unanimously against it. So does anybody outside the Department actually think that this is the right idea?

Nicky Morgan: We took evidence and consultation at the time that the decision was taken, and I certainly wouldn't say that evidence—obviously the evidence that the Committee has received may be one thing—

Chair: Nearly unanimous.

Nicky Morgan: Right. So there were some people who said that they—

Chair: Not quite unanimous.

Nicky Morgan: Right. Well, then. So there are some people who—

Q176 Alex Cunningham: Okay, the vast majority of the evidence that we received is against decoupling, but you're not going to reverse that.

Nicky Morgan: No.

Q177 Alex Cunningham: Okay. Ofqual has told us that it has options and time scales ready for a reversal on policy. What have you got to say on that? We will have to wait for a different Government, perhaps?

Nicky Morgan: I understand that other parties have said that they would like to recouple and I suspect that Ofqual, like any other body, will be thinking about how they might do that. However, I sincerely hope that there will be no other parties in a position to do that, and we want to continue with our reform process after May.

Q178 Alex Cunningham: The professionals out there are very concerned about the AS-level and the fact that it might not be available in some areas—that in disadvantaged areas children may well lose out because they won't get the opportunity to take AS-levels. What will you do to mitigate that?

Nicky Morgan: We would obviously listen to evidence, but I think that where a college or school is teaching A-levels, they will be able to teach AS-levels as well. For some people, AS-levels will be the right thing to do; they add breadth to an otherwise A-level curriculum. As I say, we have not taken AS-levels away; they are still there. They are just not coupled to A-levels.

Q179 Alex Cunningham: But colleges tell us that in many cases they cannot actually afford to teach, as you say, both of them at the same time, so what are we going to do about that? I suppose there is the VAT issue as well in colleges—

Nicky Morgan: That is a separate issue. We obviously listen to colleges and what they are saying, but we are now funding institutions on a per-student basis—funding for an average of 600 teaching hours per academic year—which is sufficient to offer three linear A-levels and one AS qualification under the new arrangements. And then there are another 150 hours of study for enrichment activities or tutorials, so we don't think that at the moment that should be an issue.

Q180 Alex Cunningham: So the colleges that are telling us that they don't have the resources to do this are absolutely wrong?

Nicky Morgan: I would welcome their representations directly to the Department.

Q181 Alex Cunningham: Right, okay. That is very helpful.

A common concern raised in evidence to us was the real risk that bright but less confident students would be put off subjects if they were not able to try them out at AS-level, in particular STEM subjects. Will you monitor the impact of AS reforms, particularly around STEM subjects?

Nicky Morgan: We monitor the impact of all reforms, obviously, and I would very much hope that, for those who perhaps do not feel confident enough, their schools or colleges are able to give them the confidence that they are more than capable of studying for the A-level. But as I said, the AS-level is still there and students are able to take that and go on to take an A-level if that is what they choose to do.

Q182 Alex Cunningham: So again you are saying that colleges shouldn't really be concerned about this particular group of students.

Nicky Morgan: The point is that each student needs to get the right programme of study for them, and that schools and colleges are best placed to advise each student on what is right for them.

Q183 Alex Cunningham: I just want to ask a question concerning the universities. The DFE has previously argued that the new GCSEs will provide better information to universities on student performance, but is it not understandable that universities would prefer to use AS results until the reformed GCSE exams are introduced and they are able to have the benefit of that better information?

Nicky Morgan: Universities use a number of different factors; it's not just down to one particular exam. I know that some universities may say that. Others do not, and other heads are pushing back on that quite hard. I think that universities are best placed to decide whether a student is right for their university. We have no evidence to indicate that the decoupling is going to affect the way the universities make judgments on students' ability.

Q184 Alex Cunningham: I have a final question. It just strikes me that everything that you've said in the last few minutes is totally contrary to what the professionals out there in the colleges are saying publicly and saying to us in evidence. That must concern you.

Nicky Morgan: Obviously I have a Skills Minister, who speaks to the college sector regularly, and I do too. We listen to all that, but we're very clear. I think you missed the earlier parts of the evidence about the reason for the reforms, the necessity of the reforms. We think that colleges are very much a key part of delivering those reforms, but we have set a timetable and that's what we are working towards.

Q185 Alex Cunningham: I don't think any of us will deny that the reform is necessary; that's a no-brainer. But the colleges, the professional people out there, are telling us that they don't approve of what is going on and they don't think it is going to work, particularly for more disadvantaged groups, so again, how much listening are we going to do?

Nicky Morgan: That is not what our evidence or research would tend to suggest. We have a wide variety of people, obviously, responding to consultations and we take all views on board, but at the end of the day, a decision has to be taken, and we now have a timetable and a reform programme, which we are obviously very focused on. We continue to listen to all representations people make.

Alex Cunningham: Your evidence is very different from the evidence that we're receiving.

Q186 Chair: I don't think it is that different. You will have had exactly the same evidence that we have had, which is that there is very little support out there for the decoupling of AS from A-levels. That sits rather oddly with a Government that says it trusts the front line: "Schools know best and teachers know best what's best for their pupils." There

was an overwhelming, near unanimous response from the entire sector saying that actually they don't agree with this, so you haven't listened and isn't it something that you could review?

It seems very odd. If you are trusting the front line and you think that for some pupils—you have evidence for this—the linear approach, a two-year, in-depth, non-spoon-fed, non-permanently preparing for a test approach, could work, well, great! Why not allow schools to choose whether they do a linear A-level in the subject or a linked AS and A2 approach and then allow time and the universities to decide whether one is a better approach than the other? Why just come down so strongly in the face of the near unanimous view from the education sector, including universities? Cambridge University could not be more vocal, more cross or more frequently in my office—it's not just children you are inconveniencing. It's a serious issue. This doesn't seem to fit very well.

Nicky Morgan: On the Cambridge University issue, there's various press around that and some of the heads have pushed back. Our research and evidence is that AS-levels are no better predictors of outcomes in terms of ability when going to university. Students can still take AS-levels. Schools and colleges can continue to offer AS-levels. But I have already set out the clear view on the need for a linear system where students are examined after two years. That's what we want to see, with A-levels, not the continuous assessment where you are doing exams at the end of your first year—doing AS-levels—and then doing A-levels.

Q187 Chair: My instinct, personally, was the same as that of the previous Secretary of State, until I talked to the head teachers in my own constituency and they took me through how they felt, for quite a number of their pupils—and I have to accept that they are rather closer to the needs of their pupils than I am. They felt that there were risks and that we might see pupils drop out—many do in the sixth form, as we know, but the linked AS-A2 system encouraged them to stay the course and achieve more highly than they expected. They also felt there could be a disproportionately negative impact on disadvantaged pupils, for whom the Government in other spheres is doing everything possible—rightly—to provide additional help.

Nicky Morgan: As I say, the AS-level still remains an option, as does the A-level. I am not sure I buy this argument about people who are less able to do A-levels or the judgment being taken that if someone is from a particular background, they will do AS-levels rather than A-levels. I think that this move is part of the whole drive in our reforms to drive up excellence and the aspiration and academic achievement of all pupils.

Q188 Chair: There is quite a high drop-out rate in sixth forms, isn't there?

Nicky Morgan: But there would be anyway, because there are a number of people who haven't had the right advice on going to sixth form. Now, thanks to the success of apprenticeships—and other schemes, but particularly vocational and technical apprenticeships—there are other options open. People often find out about those after they have made the decision to study A-levels.

Q189 Chair: We were talking earlier about objective measures so that we would know whether this had succeeded. What would need to happen to make you revisit this? Would it be a total collapse—I don't know what that means, but if there was an 80% reduction in those doing the new stand-alone AS-levels, would that be a worry for you, or would you be quite comfortable because they are all going to be two-year things?

Nicky Morgan: We would need to understand the reason for any changes. This year we saw an increase in the number of students doing AS-levels. As I said in an answer to Mr Cunningham, we will keep all these things under review as a Department, always listening to the sector.

Q190 Chair: What would need to happen to cause you to rethink this?

Nicky Morgan: I am not going to set out here how we are going to measure and review, but as I say, we will keep listening to what is going on. We want to understand the reason for the changes. I would be delighted if I saw more people doing A-levels and achieving to a higher level.

Q191 Pat Glass: You expressed a concern about getting more young people doing mathematics. That is an aim I share with you. I have seen this so many times—it is not about ability, but about confidence. It is about getting the confidence of those young people who do okay at maths at GCSE but don't necessarily have the confidence to go on to do it at A-level. They do AS-level and see that A-level mathematics is completely different from GCSE level, which is pretty turgid.

Nicky Morgan: Not any more, under our new reforms.

Pat Glass: Well, we'll have to differ on that one.

Chair: We don't know yet.

Pat Glass: I remain to be convinced. I have seen lots of students—not small numbers—who, because of the AS being coupled with A-level, have gone on to do A-level and then to do pure maths at university. Are you prepared to let that kind of thing suffer? As the Chairman says, to what extent will you allow that before the Government accepts that is happening? You have said you are listening, but you clearly are not. An entire sector is saying to you that what you are doing is wrong and is not going to work. As far as I can remember, the only people we have heard saying that this is a good idea are the people sitting behind you in the DFE.

Nicky Morgan: As I say, the AS-level is still there and is still very much an option that students can be advised to take if they need to have that.

Q192 Pat Glass: Schools can't afford it.

Nicky Morgan: I have just set out the funding that is available. There is funding available and there is the ability to take the AS-level. Students could still take the AS-level and then, as you say, decide whether it is for them.

Q193 Chair: You say they are, but if everyone is doing the AS-level anyway, the whole debate about decoupling and the two-year linear, deep-thinking, reflective approach goes in the dustbin anyway.

Nicky Morgan: They're not. The point is that, actually, we have to see. We are in this position of change and transformation, so let's see what the numbers are. The AS-level remains an option. I hope, as I say, that people take high-quality A-levels.

Q194 Alex Cunningham: You talked about drop-out in sixth form colleges and rightly said that it is because young people are not getting adequate advice. We are seeing the collapse of the careers service in our schools—the regulator is saying that in four out of five schools, the advice is less than good. How on earth can we expect young people to get the right advice if the careers service has collapsed in such a manner? We will continue to see students ending up in sixth form, but dropping out and wasting years of their life.

Nicky Morgan: Obviously we have reformed and reorganised the National Careers Service. The new contract came into force on 1 October this year. When the Ministers met the Committee—I am not sure if you were there—we talked about the need for better links between businesses, employers and schools, and for advice early, not leaving it too late, so that young people are making informed career and subject choices.

I am not sure that the word “careers” is quite right; it is about options, about knowing that different options are open. That goes back to the question from Mr Esterson about apprenticeships and vocational education. It is about making sure that all schools and colleges are under a duty to advise their pupils—their students—about all the options that are open to them.

Q195 Alex Cunningham: I agree with you 100%, Minister, but what are we actually going to do about improving the quality of advice? It is all very well saying, “We need get employers involved”, or that we need to do this, that or the other, but what is actually going to happen? What will the Department do to drive that improvement in the advice and guidance that young people get in schools? The budgets were stripped away, the teachers are ill-equipped, the professionals have lost their jobs—how on earth are we going to get the right advice so that children and young people make the right informed decisions?

Nicky Morgan: I hate to sound like an advert or a cinema trailer, but I am giving evidence to the Committee next month on careers—

Chair: On precisely that.

Nicky Morgan: On precisely that issue.

Alex Cunningham: I am glad you appreciate it.

Q196 Mr Ward: The new A-levels are presumably being introduced to improve them. That is the aim. They are being phased in over a number of years, so we will have new and old A-levels side by side over a period of time. Will that not be confusing for everyone, including the young people themselves, parents and employers, with the new ones and the old ones existing at the same time?

Nicky Morgan: There has been an announcement this week about some of the overlap subjects when they are phased in. Obviously, some will be withdrawn by Ofqual, because of the new curriculum. The change will apply in different subject areas, so it will be clear which A-level you will be taking.

Q197 Mr Ward: Absolutely. So you will be coming out of a school with a number of A-levels, some of which will be the new ones, some the old ones. What does an employer do? If these are being introduced as improvements, will that not then devalue the older ones, as the new ones come through?

Nicky Morgan: Obviously, there is a need, as I have mentioned previously, for communications with universities and employers about the changes being made to the exam system. The A-levels that are most in need of reform—English in particular, and there is an issue around maths, which we have already explored—are being reformed first. GCSEs were the ones that there were particular concerns about. With standards in A-levels it was a question of making more improvements, basically, to prepare young people for university in particular.

Q198 Mr Ward: So you do not believe that it will be a concern that the older ones might be regarded as being of lesser value than the newer ones.

Nicky Morgan: No, I don't think so. There was a need for reform, but no, I do not think that that is a nuance that people will worry about.

Q199 Mr Ward: You mentioned maths as the last one to be introduced, from 2017, but some of the other changes, such as for the sciences, will be introduced before then. How will that work out, when you have a new maths one not introduced, but the sciences reformed on the basis of the old maths one?

Nicky Morgan: That is very much an issue for Ofqual, again, in looking at specifics, accreditation and assessment. We have received representations on maths, which we have listened and responded to, but I am not aware of discussions about other subjects, and I am confident that the gap between GCSEs and A-levels in those other subjects is not as wide.

Q200 Mr Ward: It has been raised as a concern—

Nicky Morgan: I am sure, and it is a very valid question to ask, but I am confident that it will not be an issue.

Q201 Bill Esterson: I think you said earlier that you believed that some element of the practical was important in sciences.

Nicky Morgan: Yes.

Bill Esterson: Will you intervene in the row between Ofqual and the subject experts about the use of science practicals?

Nicky Morgan: In relation to A-levels, there will be 12 practical assessments, I think, for A-levels over the course of the two years, and I think that is right.

Q202 Bill Esterson: But if it is right in science, isn't it right in other subjects, too? After all, if there is no practical application, what is the purpose in the subjects?

Nicky Morgan: I think it obviously depends on the subject. I know you have some specific subjects you are going to ask about. This is again very much a matter for Ofqual. We have set the remit of having stretching, rigorous standards, and they will then review that. You may have covered in evidence a concern from Ofqual about the way they can be confident when assessing practicals as opposed to exams.

Q203 Bill Esterson: I am asking for your opinion on it, not Ofqual's.

Nicky Morgan: I am happy to give a view, but these matters are very much for Ofqual. They have a remit to look at the way subjects are assessed.

Q204 Bill Esterson: Okay, so what is your view? What subjects do you think should have practical assessment in them?

Nicky Morgan: I am not a subject expert. I can give you a view as a layperson.

Q205 Bill Esterson: Go on, then, as a layperson—pretend you are not Secretary of State for Education for a moment.

Nicky Morgan: There are certain subjects such as food technology, design technology, PE. However, at the end of the day that is the reason we have subject experts and we have Ofqual looking at the assessments. They need to be confident when assessing practicals and practical skill applications that they can assess on a consistent basis.

Q206 Chair: Are there risks, though, of the assessment tail wagging the educational dog? Ofqual have to provide rigorous, robust assessments. That is their role—to do the

assessments. Where you come in is if the dynamics that they are obliged to enforce within their remit start to distort the education that is going on in the classroom. Is that not why Bill is right to say that you do have a role, and that you cannot just wash your hands of it and say it is just up to Ofqual when it affects the classroom rather than the assessment?

Nicky Morgan: Absolutely, Mr Chairman. We listen, we have representations—we have some at the moment. That is the reason for having a consultation and listening to people.

Q207 Bill Esterson: So go on then. You said that you thought there were other subjects. What are they?

Nicky Morgan: I just mentioned them. I gave the examples of food technology, design technology and PE.

Q208 Bill Esterson: But not subjects that go further? There is practical application in absolutely every subject.

Nicky Morgan: I have given three examples, but I am not a subject expert. That is what subject experts are there for; that is what Ofqual is there for.

Q209 Bill Esterson: So you do not think there is practical application in other subjects?

Nicky Morgan: I haven't said yes or no. That is what Ofqual is there for—to decide the best way to assess all the subjects. A wide curriculum is very important.

Q210 Bill Esterson: You don't have a view. Okay, interesting.

Nicky Morgan: I might have a view, but I am not going to put it on the public record, given that I am not the expert.

Bill Esterson: I am almost lost for words, Chairman.

Nicky Morgan: Almost, but not quite.

Chair: I think a politician who resists giving an opinion on everything is to be congratulated.

Q211 Bill Esterson: You acknowledged earlier the challenge in this country about the way that vocational qualifications are undervalued. Ofqual is removing the universal accreditation requirement—effectively the licensing of a qualification—from vocational qualifications, and is consulting on what to do about the qualifications and credit framework. What is your view of the advantages and disadvantages of the loosening of regulation, bearing in mind that GCSEs, AS-levels and A-levels are still to be accredited?

Nicky Morgan: I think they are rightly looking at the standards that apply to vocational qualifications and the way that subjects are assessed. It goes back to the point about there being a number of reforms in the system being worked on at the moment, all leading to the same place, which is high academic standards that those who rely on those subjects, including many vocational and technical employers, can rely on.

Q212 Pat Glass: Can I ask you about the development of subject content? The previous Secretary of State left what I was going to call a messy system. I am trying to think of a better word.

Chair: Diverse.

Pat Glass: A diverse but messy system. The DFE are developing the content for the EBacc subjects; the rest seems to have been left to the exam boards and subject associations and there are real issues around that. Even the exam boards are saying that setting the content and then examining on it is not compatible with neutrality and getting the most robust content, so there are real concerns. That is at GCSE level. At A-level, it seems we have the Russell Group setting the content for everyone—

Nicky Morgan: I think I said earlier on that there are non-Russell Group universities on some of the content—

Q213 Pat Glass: Hasn't this been largely left to ALCAB?

Nicky Morgan: There are non-Russell Group universities who are part of ALCAB.

Q214 Pat Glass: Right. Who are they? The information that we have is that it is Russell Group universities.

Nicky Morgan: I don't think it is only Russell Group, but I think the Russell Group are a key—

Chair: It was originally going to be only the Russell Group. They will stay in the lead, but they have been allowed kindly to invite some other universities to join with them, I think.

Q215 Pat Glass: It will be interesting to know whether they have. Anyway, I will come back to ALCAB. So why the separation? Is this not just messy right across the piece? What about the concern that even the exam boards have that it is not compatible with setting examinations?

Nicky Morgan: Again, the concern has not been raised directly with me, but I am happy to look at it. I think there are certain key subjects which clearly the Department has a particular focus on—you mentioned the EBacc subjects—and it is also a question of listening to those who are subject experts, which is what we do all the time as a Department.

Q216 Pat Glass: One of the other concerns raised is that, because of the cost of developing the content and so on, leaving this to exam boards—they have raised this—will result in a cull of small-entry subjects. They will not be able to afford to do them, so they will simply drop them off the system. Does that give you enough concerns to look at this again?

Nicky Morgan: It would give me concerns—I will have to look at the individual subjects and issues that they were raising in particular—but there is a clear balance to strike. There may be a reason why some subjects were once popular but are now less popular—maybe people have moved on to a more modern qualification, if you like, reflecting modern needs at universities and workplaces. But I think it is important that we also have diversity in our exam system and that people are able to study the subjects that are right for them—those that they will be most inspired by.

Q217 Pat Glass: The Committee had a detailed inquiry into examinations, exam boards and so on, and although we did not recommend that this should be nationalised, we came quite close to suggesting that the dilemma concerning setting curricula, publishing the curriculum books and setting exams contributed to grade inflation. It appears that that is being repeated in curriculum development, and there are serious concerns about the neutrality of exam boards—not least from the exam boards. It would be good to look at that again and perhaps whether Ofqual’s role should be extended from a qualifications regulator to a national curriculum authority, if we are talking about making these things really robust.

Nicky Morgan: I am always happy to receive submissions. I think we have had a discussion with the Chairman in previous Committee meetings about the word “nationalisation”, which is not something I am terribly keen on, but I am happy to listen, as I always do, to submissions.

Q218 Pat Glass: Can I come back to ALCAB, which is raising concerns? Because of the lack of transparency, the assumption was that it was one of the former Secretary of State’s vanity projects with the Russell Group universities. The issue of a contract, which I raised earlier, is important, because this is public money. If there is no contract, there are questions of legality. Will you come back to us and let us know exactly how this is being funded and by how much, and whether a contract was ever issued?

Nicky Morgan: We can certainly look at that, and also at the involvement of the wider group of universities.

Pat Glass: Thank you.

Q219 Chair: I am not sure about your answer on the small-entry subjects. There are always small-entry subjects: sometimes things become more or less fashionable, but one does not want them to be killed off. Can you give a steer on that? It was not clear from your answer whether, if they are no longer very popular and have been replaced by something more modern, you would be entirely happy with their loss, or whether you would say no.

Would you have in place any criteria to ensure that we retain the breadth and create the financial wherewithal to allow their continuation?

Nicky Morgan: I am not going to set the criteria here—I would need to do that in consultation with many other people.

Chair: Will you write to us about it?

Nicky Morgan: Well, as someone who took Latin at A-level, I am a great fan of classics, but I do know that the number of people who are taking classics has fallen. That does not mean that I think they should not be examined. I was thinking in terms of modernity—things such as computing, where different IT skills may now be required in universities and workplaces, which I know have moved on. There may be subjects where we are examining on an older basis—examining technical skills that are not needed in the modern workplace. That is exactly what Professor Wolf found with the 3,000 vocational qualifications that she suggested be swept away. We should focus on the subjects that are needed. Nevertheless, I entirely agree with you that a diverse, broadening exam system that inspires in young people passion, excitement and a desire to study is very important.

Chair: Okay. Will you write to us about the specifics? The issue is that with these reforms, it might just be that a whole load of small-entry subjects are lost. If you could write to us about any work that is going on to ensure that that does not happen, or with any reflections on that, that would be good.

Nicky Morgan: I am happy to do so.

Q220 Chair: How much are you spending on content development? Someone has to resource that, and I am hearing concerns that the Department is not putting its money where its mouth is and that there are issues with who is going to develop quite a few of the other subjects that are in the last tranche.

Nicky Morgan: It is to be discussed and decided. I am happy to write to you with any specific figures. Like every other Department, we are obviously aware of the difficult economic times in which we live and the need for saving, but I must say that so far I have been very impressed with the subject advice I have received from officials in the Department. We obviously deal with subject experts outside the Department as well. If there is any more detail I can provide in writing to the Committee, I am happy to do so.

Q221 Chair: Because there is no obvious model, again, it might be lost. Some subjects have just been pulled in-house, haven't they? You have literally done them in the DFE, and I think that Ministers have spent personal time influencing certain curricula, whereas others are—it is quite a mixed bag. If you look at the final tranche, with subjects that are unfashionable—at least as far as the Department is concerned—someone has to pay for hundreds of hours of expert effort if we are to have a really rigorous curriculum. There is no point in being opposed to subjects that are too weak—if they ever thought that about media studies, rightly or wrongly—and then not putting in place the resource to ensure that, in due course, it is a really rigorous, high-quality course.

Nicky Morgan: When decisions are taken on how to move forward with the remaining subjects, I will be very happy to write to the Committee on that.

Q222 Pat Glass: Concerns have been expressed about the level of expertise in the Department after the cull of 400 staff. Are you convinced that you have within the Department the specialist staff required not only to develop the curriculum content but keep it under review so that it remains robust?

Nicky Morgan: It is part of a two-way process. It is based on the expertise, yes, absolutely, but it is also a question of liaising with subject experts outside the Department. I do not think that you would want only DFE officials or Ministers to be looking at content. It is about listening to those outside the Department while having the expertise in the Department that I am confident we have.

Q223 Chair: And the subjects will be treated equitably, will they? I could see certain Ministers with strong views wanting to pour resource into some subjects of which they approve, and rather less into others of which they do not. How do we ensure that we have an equitable playing field?

Nicky Morgan: Based on the vocal lobby outside the Department for all subjects, I do not think that is likely to happen.

Chair: Vocal lobbies can often be held at the door and never allowed in.

Nicky Morgan: In the days of social media, I think that is unlikely.

Q224 Craig Whittaker: The Committee has seen quite a lot of evidence. A group of heads from schools in Barnet told us: “We feel very strongly that the life chances of young people in this country are being jeopardised by the apparent inability of exam boards to either employ suitably qualified people to mark scripts or to ensure the full completion of adequate training by those they choose to employ.” We have seen a surge this year of 48% in requests for re-marking, and of course we have seen higher grades awarded as a result. Where are Ofqual getting it wrong? What do you think the Government can do to put pressure on Ofqual and the marking boards to ensure that they get it right?

Nicky Morgan: This is a very important issue. I and other Ministers have had meetings and discussions with Ofqual. We take this very seriously. I think it is absolutely right, when schools have taken years to prepare students, when students have put hours in to prepare for their exams and when parents, universities and others are relying on those results, that the students should have confidence in the marks they get. There have been some robust discussions with Ofqual in relation to marking.

I should just point out that the number of grade changes, or the proportion of the number of grades challenged, has not varied substantially this year compared with previous years. It was up just under 1% at GCSE and down 0.1% at A-level from last year. That does

not mean that, in terms of individual scripts, there haven't been changes and those changes were not important to students.

Q225 Craig Whittaker: But if we have seen an increase of 48% in requests for re-marking—

Nicky Morgan: It was an absolute increase, because a greater number of scripts were changed, but when you looked at the actual number of grades that were changed proportionately, actually, the changes were quite small.

Q226 Craig Whittaker: If 1% of 10 is one figure, 1% of 1,000 is a much higher figure, so it is affecting many more young people.

Nicky Morgan: Absolutely. And, of course, it does not mean that for every individual student, having a re-mark or their grade changed is not significant.

Again, I am sure that some of the Committee have quizzed Ofqual, or will, but it has set out to us what it intends to do to be sure that people are confident in the marking system. Obviously, Ofqual is examining this year's inquiries about result data and requiring more information from exam boards; developing better ways for exam boards to measure and report on the quality of marking; requiring exam boards to improve monitoring of markers; evaluating the effectiveness of marker training; identifying best practice and mark scheme design; and simplifying how schools and students raise queries about their exam results. Ofqual is taking a number of different steps and my ministerial colleagues, in particular Nick Gibb, meet it regularly to discuss this.

Q227 Craig Whittaker: Okay. Are you absolutely convinced that, if schools in certain areas are in a financial position whereby they cannot afford to have re-marks done, that is not disadvantaging young people?

Nicky Morgan: It would concern me. I would hope that the queries are still raised, because at the end of the day we have to have a system where young people can rely on the marks they are given.

Q228 Craig Whittaker: But what if they are in a school that physically cannot afford the exam costs? We have had examples of huge amounts of money being spent on re-marking, for example.

Nicky Morgan: It would concern me, and I would be prepared to discuss that matter directly with Ofqual.

Q229 Chair: I remember when the SATs fiasco happened. There was the independent Sutherland inquiry into it and various heads rolled. I was rather shocked to find

out that, through the Maxwellisation process of the document, the former private secretary to the permanent secretary had actually drafted the section that entirely exculpated the Department from all responsibility and pinned it completely on the American contractor and the QCA head, leading to their removal and a completely clean bill of health for the Department. Who will pay the price if this much more complex set of reforms goes wrong? Who will be the whipping boy in this case? Will it be Ofqual? Is Ofqual set up for the fall, with the Department entirely appointing people to independent inquiries to help draft the text that determines who is at fault?

Nicky Morgan: First, Chair, there is the big “if” that I would push back on. I do not think the reforms are going to go wrong; we have the right reform programme and I have set out previously why we have the reform programme. Secondly, although there have been issues and queries around marking this summer, we are nowhere near the situation that you are alluding to. Clearly, we have regular meetings with Ofqual, and it is accountable. Obviously, it will liaise with the exam boards as well. Ultimately, come what may, it was always the duty and joy of politicians, and in the end of Secretaries of State, to be ultimately accountable for any problems within the system.

Q230 Chair: Thank you. Now, back in October we asked you about the Wormald report, looking at the Department’s response to the Trojan horse issue and how it behaved after being first notified. I remember asking then—on 15 October, I think—whether we were days away or weeks away. “I would say days rather than weeks”, you replied. “Super”, I said, “Thank you.” Where is it?

Nicky Morgan: It is very nearly ready. It is a matter for the permanent secretary. I have had discussions—

Chair: This feels like “The Thick of It”—

Nicky Morgan: I know, I know. There have been discussions and I have had—

Chair: “There have been discussions”—I am reassured.

Nicky Morgan: I have had discussions with the permanent secretary. I am aware of the need of the Committee and the public interest in the document. I am very happy to go back and to write to the Committee—

Q231 Chair: Is it hours or days?

Nicky Morgan: It depends on one particular response to the report that the permanent secretary is waiting for.

Q232 Chair: So can you give us any categorical assurance on when it will be published? Will it be published this year?

Nicky Morgan: I certainly hope so. That is what I would like to see, yes.

Q233 Pat Glass: May I just clarify one thing, given that we are talking about timing? In answer to my earlier question about chemistry, you said that it would be “weeks”. Is that two, three or 52?

Nicky Morgan: I want to get it sorted out before we all finish for the Christmas break.

Pat Glass: Thank you.

Chair: Then the publishers will get on with producing their first-class textbooks.

Nicky Morgan: They will.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed for giving evidence to us today. We look forward to hearing from you on the various points raised.

Nicky Morgan: Absolutely.