



Department for Education

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Dear Mr Ransom and Professor McBride

Thank you for your letter, which we received on 22 October, addressed to the Secretary of State, about early entry to GCSE examinations. As I am sure you can appreciate, the Secretary of State receives a large amount of correspondence and is unable to reply to each one personally. It is for this reason I have been asked to reply.

The department welcomes your support for the changes that we have introduced to early and multiple entry to examinations. As you are aware, the department has been concerned about early entry for some time, having published in 2011 our own analysis of the impact it has on attainment.

Before taking action, it was essential that we considered the latest examination results from 2013 – to fully understand the scale of the problem. We did not expect these figures to show that such a high proportion of schools have taken to using early and multiple entry to improve their own standing in the tables. The department had hoped that our clear signals would have been sufficient to have encouraged schools to act responsibly. But the scale of the problem is such that we cannot allow another year 11 cohort to be let down by an examination system in which confidence is eroded, and therefore acted decisively.

Since the announcement was made, the department has heard of several instances of entire cohorts being entered early – and on more than one occasion – for qualifications. Such indiscriminate use of early entry cannot be in the interests of our students.

The department agrees that inappropriate early entry can lead to students having to re-take GCSEs, which in turn cuts into teaching time and leads to a focus on teaching to the test rather than developing a student's understanding of a subject. Given the increasing evidence that early entry – and subsequent re-taking – of qualifications has a negative impact on attainment, it was crucial we acted quickly to ensure changes took effect as soon as possible. The department will always look to act in the best interests of pupils.

Schools that have used early entry in a well-considered manner – whose students are suitably prepared to take their examinations early – should be unconcerned by the changes set out. If the decision to enter students early was right before the Secretary of State's announcement, it should continue to be so after it.

Thank you again for taking the time to share your views with the department.

Yours sincerely

Jenny Crowley
Ministerial and Public Communications Division

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