Andrew Miller MP
Chair, Science and Technology Committee
House of Commons
London
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Thank you for your video letter of 2 December concerning how practical science is assessed at A level.

I enjoyed the discussion at the Science and Technology Select Committee meeting on 3 December and am grateful to have had the opportunity to set out what the Government is doing to improve engagement in STEM subjects, including making sure students experience good quality practical work.

We all agreed it is important that students leave school with the strong practical skills in science that they will need if they want to study science further. I know that this is an objective that Ofqual shares and, as I pointed out, I have continually challenged them on their assessment proposals to ensure that they are supporting high quality practical science. I am assured that the arrangements proposed by Ofqual will mean that students can undertake considerably more practical science as part of their science A level studies than they do currently and that the problem of differentiating between students has been addressed. Ultimately of course, the responsibility for how performance in qualifications is assessed lies with Ofqual. It is important that the Department for Education does not undermine that independence.

You will be aware that Ofqual has now launched their consultation on the assessment of practical work in GCSE science. It provides all those with an interest in science education with the opportunity to respond to Ofqual’s proposals. We look forward to Ofqual’s response next year.

Beyond qualifications, the government is doing much to ensure students experience good quality practical work. The new National Curriculum includes a requirement for schools to develop students’ practical skills as an integral part of the subject content. We are also continuing our drive to increase the number of good science teachers. The Prime Minister’s recent announcement
that we will be training 17,500 maths and science teachers over the next five years is a reflection of the priority we attach to this objective.

During the meeting, I said I would supply the committee with the details of the take-up by schools of Science and Technology Facilities Council (STFC) funded school activities that the Department helps to promote. The National Schools Observatory, which receives funding from the SFTC and which the Department has helped to promote through the European Space Education Resource Office (ESERO) does collect data on observation requests. It shows that the number of requests almost doubled in 2011 (from just over 6,000 in 2010 to 12,000) which coincides with it being promoted on the ESERO website. In 2014 there have been 13,400 requests up to the beginning of October.

Nick Gibb MP