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# A level reform: Is the Government in tune with its stakeholders?

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## Introduction

Reformed GCE A levels are on the educational horizon for many students and their teachers. Awarding bodies are in the process of redeveloping their courses and from September 2015, the new syllabuses will be taught in sixth forms across England. In this article, we give a chronological account of the recent developments in Government policy which have fed into these plans. Alongside this account, we describe five studies that we have undertaken within our Higher Education (HE) Engagement research programme. An overarching aim of our research has been to ascertain the views and experiences of

stakeholders in schools, colleges and universities on multiple aspects of A level reform.

## Early Coalition Government policy

In November 2010, the Department for Education (DfE) published a White Paper – *The importance of teaching* – in which it signalled its intentions for whole-system reform in England. The paper set out the (then) recently elected Coalition Government's early views and concerns relating to a range of educational issues, including teaching and leadership, behaviour, accountability, school improvement, and funding.

Within a chapter of the paper on curriculum, assessment and qualifications, the Government indicated its desire to reform A levels. Moreover, it made clear its commitment to engage Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the reform process:

*A levels are a crucial way that universities select candidates for their courses, so it is important that these qualifications meet the needs of higher education institutions. To ensure that they support progression to further education, higher education or employment, we are working with Ofqual, the awarding organisations and higher education institutions to ensure universities and learned bodies can be fully involved in their development. (Department for Education, 2010, Section 4.47)*

The idea that universities should play a role in developing A levels was not a new one. In the 1950s, 60s and 70s, lecturers and other university staff worked extensively with examination boards to ensure that A levels prepared students for higher level study (Kingdon, 1991; Raban, 2008). Arguably, the grounds for this collaboration have since strengthened, as the number of students taking A levels in preparation for university has risen considerably; 52% of all A level students now progress directly to HE (DfE, 2012b). On the contrary, however, the influence of HE on the design and content of A levels waned significantly in the last two decades. Successive governments and government-funded bodies became more actively involved instead.

## Stakeholder re-engagement within Cambridge Assessment

Prior to the publication of the Government's White Paper (DfE, 2010), Cambridge Assessment was already attempting to reassert a more balanced ecosystem in which it worked with universities as well as schools and colleges. Five years ago, for example, Cambridge International Examinations (our international awarding body) ensured that HE representatives were successfully involved in the development of the Cambridge Pre-U, an alternative academic qualification for 16 to 19 year olds. In early 2010, Cambridge Assessment launched a consultation paper on the future of A levels and staff engaged in extensive discussions on the topic with personnel at the Department for Education. Alongside this work, OCR (our UK awarding body) set up a series of consultative forums as part of a wide-ranging stakeholder re-engagement programme. The forums' dual aims were: (i) to provide regular opportunities to update stakeholders on relevant developments in qualifications policy and practice; and (ii) to obtain their views on such developments, in order to inform OCR's plans.

The consultative forums are on-going and their memberships continue to grow. There are currently 11 subject-specific forums, each of which meets twice a year. Membership comprises a range of people from across the educational community, including HE lecturers and admissions tutors, teachers, employers, and representatives from subject and professional associations, learned societies, and charitable organisations. Over 70 different institutions are involved. Additionally, an HE strategic forum meets three times a year and its members are drawn solely from HEIs.

Throughout 2011, the merits and weaknesses of A levels were discussed by over 240 interested forum members, around a hundred of whom were HE representatives. Many lecturers and tutors made suggestions as to how curricula and associated assessments for 16 to

19 year olds could be improved in the future. This engendered a need to gauge the wider representativeness of the views expressed, to prioritise concerns, and to conduct some more detailed investigations.

In September 2011, this need was met by Cambridge Assessment's Research Division. As part of its wider research programme, a programme of studies to complement OCR's re-engagement work was set up, known as the HE Engagement research programme. This rolling programme was designed to extend over several years. From the start, it adopted systematic approaches to data collection and analysis, which were critical in giving credibility to the evidence upon which qualifications and curriculum development decisions could be based. Overall, a 'mixed methods' approach was used, to enable the corroboration and triangulation of findings drawn from both quantitative and qualitative data. In addition to generating an evidence base, the programme provides an example of how research in itself can be viewed as an important means of restoring and strengthening links between assessment organisations and HE.

The first phase of the research programme comprised three linked studies. They were designed to address four overarching questions which had surfaced in discussions within OCR's consultative forums:

1. In which areas do university lecturers think new undergraduates are most prepared?
2. In which areas do university lecturers think new undergraduates are least prepared?
3. What, therefore, are the transitional challenges for new undergraduates?
4. How could A levels be improved?

## Study 1: What are the impacts of qualifications for 16 to 19 year olds on Higher Education? A survey of 633 university lecturers

Our first study (Suto, 2012; Suto, Mehta, Brown and Jeffery, 2012) comprised a survey of university lecturers in Biology, English, Mathematics, plus a diverse range of other subjects. The study's objectives were to collect mostly quantitative data indicating:

- i. the perceived strengths and weaknesses of typical new undergraduates, and
- ii. the systemic factors that are considered by lecturers to contribute to these skill sets and deficits.

We developed a questionnaire through an iterative piloting process involving lecturers and awarding body colleagues. The final version was available for completion on-line. It comprised 13 questions, took 10 minutes to complete, was suitable for lecturers in any subject, and did not refer to A levels from any particular awarding body.

Over 3000 lecturers were invited by e-mail to participate in the study, 633 of whom responded. Although all university groupings were targeted equally, 40% of respondents were teaching at Russell Group universities and 60% were teaching at universities in other groupings. Although this over-representation of the Russell Group was not ideal, we found throughout our data analysis that the views and experiences of Russell Group lecturers were broadly similar to those of other lecturers.

Several striking findings emerged from the study:

- There was a healthy appetite among lecturers for engagement in research exploring the transition from A level to HE.
- Over half of lecturers thought that new undergraduates are underprepared for degree level study.
- ICT, teamwork, presentation skills and intellectual curiosity were the skills and attributes most likely to be considered strengths of typical undergraduates when they begin degree level study.
- Most lecturers thought that academic writing, self-directed study, independent inquiry and research, and critical thinking skills are weaknesses of typical undergraduates when they begin degree level study.
- Depth of subject knowledge was also a concern for some lecturers.
- History, English and Mathematics were the A level subjects considered to provide the best preparation for degree level study by lecturers across a wide range of subjects.
- 60% of lecturers indicated that their institutions provide additional support classes for underprepared first-year undergraduates. Classes often focus on writing and independent learning skills.
- 72% of lecturers had had to adapt their teaching approaches to teach underprepared first-year undergraduates. This most frequently entailed covering more basic, fundamental or lower level content. Teaching higher level study skills, essay writing, and academic writing were common adaptations among English lecturers. Biology lecturers taught more numeracy and mathematical skills.
- 87% of lecturers thought that too much 'teaching to the test' was a major factor contributing to undergraduates being underprepared.
- Many changes to A level suggested by lecturers related to pedagogy and student learning, and included allowing less spoon-feeding and teaching to the test. Other suggestions included making examination questions less predictable and reducing re-sit opportunities.

## Study 2: How effective are curricula for 16 to 19 year olds as preparation for university? A qualitative investigation of lecturers' views

In our second study (Mehta, Suto, and Brown, 2012) we collected detailed data through a series of seven events in four different regions of England. A total of 46 lecturers participated, from a range of disciplines and with varied teaching experience. Each session entailed two linked research activities. First, participants completed a written prioritisation task. They were presented with 10 core academic areas and were asked to indicate:

- i. the two areas in which new undergraduates were least prepared; and
- ii. the two areas in which new undergraduates were most prepared.

The responses were anonymised, analysed immediately, and reported back to the participants. This prioritisation data thereby provided stimulus material for the second activity: a focus group. The discussion schedule comprised open-ended questions with related prompts and probes.

A thematic analysis of the primarily qualitative data enabled several of the key findings from the questionnaire study to be corroborated. For example, critical and higher order thinking skills, academic writing skills, and independent inquiry and research skills were again identified as weaknesses of new undergraduates. The general view among the lecturers was that students joined university well prepared in examination

techniques, but unable to carry out analytical tasks. Many lecturers believed that the grades achieved at A level did not really alter the picture. In their view, most of the new undergraduates, irrespective of previous grades, were not prepared for university study.

The participants emphasised that in addition to A level content, other aspects such as the structure of assessment and the opportunity for in-depth learning were equally important in preparing students for university study. A lack of preparedness was felt to result in a steep learning curve for the students, sometimes leading to students failing courses or dropping out of university. This challenge was considered to add to the financial, social, and personal challenges faced by new undergraduates. The participants described several of their solutions to transitional challenges. These included delivering extra classes for undergraduates (either stand-alone or integrated within wider courses) and using particular pedagogical techniques.

As in the questionnaire study, the participants perceived teaching at A level to involve a lot of spoon-feeding, to be narrow, and to focus on teaching to the test. They also thought that the modular structure of A levels and the many opportunities to re-sit examinations contributed to transitional challenges. (In 2000, a revised modular A-level structure was introduced, with twice-yearly opportunities to be assessed on each unit.) When reflecting on the research tasks, most participants felt that there should be more communication between schools and universities, since they realised that their knowledge about A levels was limited. They felt that such interaction would help them to increase their awareness of syllabuses and examinations, and ensure some common ground between HE and A level.

## Study 3: A review of the literature examining the pedagogical differences between A level and university

The third study (Jeffery, 2012) comprised a review of recent research investigating pedagogical differences between A level and university from the perspectives of students, A level teachers, and university lecturers. Our aim was to identify research that explained or accounted for some of transitional challenges revealed in Studies 1 and 2. The review included research conducted in the UK from 2001 to 2010; that is, after the introduction of Curriculum 2000. Although only 10 studies met the full inclusion criteria of the review, all were comprehensive in their examination of the topic. Most studies employed self-report methods and the academic subjects covered included the English subjects, History, Geography, Psychology, and Business Studies.

A series of relevant differences between education at A level and at university emerged. For example, the main aims of A level pedagogy were widely considered by teachers and students to be to impart the curriculum and ensure that students obtain good grades. A level teachers saw their students as receptive learners, and in keeping with this view, they maintained personal and frequent interactions with them. At A level, essay-writing was seen to be about regurgitating the facts and figures needed to score highly in examinations. In contrast, at university the main pedagogical aim was perceived to be to encourage autonomy, self-confidence, problem-solving abilities and subject enthusiasm. Lecturers and tutors adopted a more 'hands-off' approach and saw themselves as responsible for providing only basic information, which students should investigate in greater depth for themselves. Essay-

writing was regarded as an opportunity to illustrate original and critical thinking.

These types of qualitative difference between the two educational levels are likely to be longstanding. However, potentially newer differences in approaches to assessment also surfaced. At A level, it was felt that students were thoroughly prepared for examinations and were provided with all the information they could possibly need. Assessment feedback was personalised and provided regularly and in a timely way. At university, on the other hand, students were expected to gather for themselves most of the assessment information they needed. Feedback was felt to be much more general and not always timely.

## Policy developments in early 2012

The findings from the above three studies were initially disseminated at a national conference at the start of April 2012 (Suto *et al.*, 2012a). This presentation coincided with the publication of a letter from the English Secretary of State for Education to the Chief Executive of the national qualifications regulator, Ofqual. The letter expressed concerns that although A levels have much to commend them, they fall short of commanding a desirable level of confidence within HE and among other stakeholders. The Secretary of State reiterated and expanded upon his earlier vision (Department for Education, 2010) for universities to be more involved in developing A levels:

*I would therefore like to see universities having far greater involvement in the design and development of A level qualifications than they do at present. That involvement should be both when qualifications are developed initially and following each examinations cycle, so that universities' influence over the qualification develops over time... I am particularly keen that universities should be able to determine subject content, and that they should endorse specifications, including details of how the subject should be assessed. (Department for Education, 2012a).*

The Secretary of State went on to write:

*The discussions I have had with university academics and school and college leaders on the subject of A-levels have left me concerned about the impact of the current modular structure on students' education, and their ability to make the connections between different topics within a subject that are so crucial for deep understanding. I will therefore be interested in your views – and in those of others – regarding A level modules (including the division of the qualification into AS and A2), and in particular the opportunity to take modules in January, together with the impact of resitting on confidence in A level standards. (Department for Education, 2012a).*

The Secretary of State's concerns were in line with those expressed by the lecturers in Studies 1 and 2. The letter and the research were reported jointly in much of the national media (for example, BBC, 2012). The Chief Executive of Ofqual replied to the letter, agreeing that the role of universities in the development of A level should increase. She clarified that:

*Making sure that A levels are fit for purpose means getting four things right: subject content (curriculum), teaching, assessment, and level of demand (Ofqual, 2012a).*

The Chief Executive went on to agree with the Secretary of State that universities should be involved (together with awarding bodies and

learned societies) in determining subject content, and to indicate that Ofqual would also take account of HE views on A level assessment. She also indicated that Ofqual would hold a public consultation on the structure and assessment arrangements for A level. The consultation was launched in June 2012, lasted three months, and sought views on the full range of proposed changes to the qualification, including:

- i. the involvement of HE in the design and sign-off of A levels;
- ii. the abolition of January exams and the limiting of re-sits; and
- iii. whether or not AS levels should continue, with a range of options put forward.

In June 2012, following on from its earlier (2011) consultation paper, Cambridge Assessment produced its own policy paper (Cambridge Assessment, 2012), setting out how the Government could best support HE-awarding body interactions, and arguing that greater involvement of university academics in setting the content of A levels would both be a better guarantee of school standards and improve the university admissions process. The policy paper claimed that if university lecturers and tutors were to determine A level content, with awarding bodies focusing on how to test that knowledge, then the state's role in setting examination standards could be minimised. Arguably, such changes would end the constant tinkering with syllabuses that currently occurs, as examinations would only need to change when leading academics felt change was needed. The paper proposed that 'communities of interest' should be set up around each A level qualification. Such communities would bring together subject communities, learned societies, HE, schools and colleges, teachers, and awarding bodies to share a particular view of what constitutes the A level standard in relation to a subject. This would enable the standard of each qualification to be maintained over time by all those with a direct interest in it.

## Study 4: Comparing the assessment types students encounter at A level and university

Whilst Ofqual's consultation was underway, a further phase of the HE Engagement research programme was launched. It comprised two studies which explored in greater depth some of the transitional issues raised in the first three studies. One study (Wilson, Child and Suto, 2013) began in July 2012. Its aim was to systematically compare the assessments that students encounter at A level and with those encountered in their first year at university. As in Study 1, this research focused on Biology, English and Mathematics. Assessment materials from 16 universities were collated, and we compared them to assessments in the equivalent A levels.

We were interested in four aspects of assessment at A level and university:

- i. the types of assessment to which students were exposed (extended writing, multiple choice etc.)
- ii. the written guidance and scaffolding students were given during the assessments
- iii. the opportunity for re-sits
- iv. the timings of the assessments throughout the academic year.

We found a greater variety of assessment types at university in comparison with at A level. Biology entailed the most varied assessment at university, followed by English and Mathematics. Interestingly, the

written guidance provided to students was greater and more detailed at university than at A level. It is possible that this guidance is in place due to the emphasis at university on working independently, and to help students negotiate new forms of assessment. Unlike at A level, university students were given only one re-sit opportunity in the majority of cases, with a cap on the potential mark that could be achieved. Students also had to cope with earlier summative assessment in comparison with A level.

## Study 5: An exploration of additional support classes at university

In Studies 1 and 2, lecturers indicated that students arrived at university underprepared in certain skill areas including critical/higher order thinking, academic writing, and independent research. Furthermore, 60% of the lecturers in Study 1 reported that their institutions offered additional support to their students which focused on their general skills, subject-specific content or both. These findings gave rise to Study 5 (Mehta, Child, Brown, and Suto, 2013), which began in August 2012 and had three main aims:

- i. to collect more in-depth information on the content and structure of additional support classes in Biology, English and Mathematics
- ii. to gather the views of students, lecturers and A level teachers on the effectiveness of these classes
- iii. to determine the potential for the content and skills covered in these classes to be included at A level.

For each target subject, case studies were conducted at three contrasting universities that ran additional support classes for their students. Each case comprised lecturer and student interviews, lesson observations by researchers and an A level teacher, and a facilitated discussion between the A level teacher and university lecturer.

We found that classes focused on a range of subject-specific and general skills. For example in Biology, classes typically centred around the appropriate writing and formatting of scientific reports, while in English, classes focused on developing students' awareness of critical approaches and independent reading. For Mathematics, a variety of specific content areas were covered, to fill perceived gaps in knowledge for students progressing from A level. The A level teachers thought that many of the areas covered in the additional support classes had been addressed at A level, but in less detail. In Biology, recommended changes to the A level included earlier development of project skills and numeric calculations. For English, participants advocated that the A level include a greater focus on independent criticism and historical background of texts. For Mathematics, participants suggested that making closer links between different content areas would be beneficial. More in-depth analysis of the data collected is currently underway.

## November 2012: Ofqual announces the reduction of re-sit opportunities

In November 2012, whilst the above Studies 4 and 5 were underway, Ofqual published the outcomes of its consultation on A level reform. Almost a thousand stakeholders participated in the consultation, and key findings included support for:

- the principle of HE engagement with A level design, (however there was less support for universities specifically 'endorsing' each A-level)
- students being assessed at the end of each of their first and second year of study
- the removal of January examinations and reduced re-sit opportunities
- increasing synoptic assessment in A levels, allowing students to integrate and apply their skills, knowledge and understanding with breadth and depth
- reducing internal assessment.

(Ofqual, 2012b).

On the basis of these findings, Ofqual announced a significant interim reform: that from January 2014 onwards, there would be no January examination sessions for A levels. This meant that from September 2013, students would only be able to sit AS and A level examinations in the summer. Ofqual explained that this change was likely to be the first of wider reforms. It stated that:

*Further changes to the system, including more involvement from higher education into the design of A levels, and changes to the A level structure, are also being considered and will be announced at a later date. (Ofqual, 2012b).*

## Confirmation of A level reforms by the Department for Education

In late January 2013, these further changes were announced. The Secretary of State wrote another widely publicised letter to the Chief Executive of Ofqual, setting out his policy steers (DfE, 2013). According to this letter, new A level syllabuses will be developed which do not have the modular structure that was introduced in 2000. Instead there will be a return to linear assessment, with all examinations being taken at the end of the two-year course. The AS level examination will remain, however it will exist in a more traditional form. It will no longer be taken after the first year of A level study and will not count towards a full A level. Instead, AS levels will be exclusively stand-alone qualifications with half the content of full A levels. They are to be taken alongside A levels in other subjects after two years of study. The new A level and AS level syllabuses are to be introduced for teaching in schools from September 2015, and will initially be in all 'facilitating' subjects except languages; that is: English (Language, Literature and Language and Literature), Mathematics and Further Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, History and Geography. The Secretary of State's letter also confirmed plans for 'leading' universities to be more closely involved in developing the content of new A levels, beginning with those subjects which are most commonly required for undergraduate study.

These changes to A level have received mixed responses. While the reversion to linear assessment fits with the preferences of many of the HE representatives who participated in our research programme, there is considerable concern over the reforms to AS levels. According to *The Daily Telegraph*, a spokesman for the University of Cambridge believed the loss of AS levels in their current form would damage the fairness of the admissions process, and in particular, the university's efforts to admit students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Without current AS levels, such students might lack the confidence to apply:

*This change is unnecessary and, if implemented, will jeopardise over a decade's progress towards fairer access to the University of Cambridge...AS is the most reliable indicator available of an applicant's potential to thrive at Cambridge. (The Daily Telegraph, 2013).*

This view was shared by the Russell Group universities, whose Director General commented:

*Whilst we have welcomed the Government's review of the modular structure of the A-level, we do not believe this need be extended to the complete removal of the AS examination from the A-level. (Russell Group, 2013).*

In March 2013, the Chief Executive of Ofqual responded to the Secretary of State's letter. She reported on an agreement between Ofqual and the awarding bodies to review a further six A level subjects in time for first teaching in 2015: Psychology, Art and Design, Sociology, Business Studies, Economics, and Computing. This means that overall, subjects covering approximately 70% of A level entries will be reviewed (Ofqual, 2012c). The regulator is also now exploring mechanisms for awarding bodies to work with HE to obtain agreement on A level content. At the time of writing, it is likely that some form of supervisory committee will be convened, possibly for each subject. In effect, this may 'officialise' some of the processes of stakeholder consultation and input gathering that Cambridge Assessment has developed and engaged in over the last few years.

## Conclusion

To date, the HE Engagement research programme has dovetailed effectively with policy developments at a national level. It has been helpful in providing curriculum developers with an evidence base upon which to re-develop A levels in time for first teaching in September 2015. The research is likely to continue over the coming years, investigating new issues and questions as they become apparent. We believe that the use of systematic and methodologically sound approaches to research will strengthen the development of future qualifications.

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