



GCSE, AS and A Level reform

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The Government is in the process of reforming GCSE, AS and A level qualifications. The reforms are extensive and include changes to both the subject content and assessment of these qualifications, as well as the qualifications that may be studied. The reforms have aimed to increase the rigour of the qualifications, with an increased focus on examinations. This note provides an overview of the development of these reforms, which were first announced in 2010.

The reformed GCSEs are linear, with all assessments normally taken at the end of the course, and have reformed course content. There would no longer be higher and foundation tiers, and a new grading scale that uses the numbers 1 – 9 to identify levels of performance, with 9 being the top level, will be introduced. Additionally, exams will take place only in the summer, apart from English, English language and mathematics, where students who want to re-take these subjects will be able to do so in November.

AS and A level course content is being also reformed. Additionally, AS and A levels are to be ‘decoupled’, so that AS levels are taken as qualifications in their own right, and that any student wishing to take an A level after doing an AS level would be reassessed on the AS level material. AS qualifications and A levels will be assessed at the end of the course, and in principle be exam-only.

Reformed course content has been published for many subjects, with the introduction of the revised material being staggered between September 2015 and September 2017.

The Library standard note on the recent National Curriculum review, [SN/SP/6798](#), provides related information.

This note applies to England only.

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1 Introduction

The Government is in the process of reforming GCSE, AS and A level qualifications in England. General information on these reforms is available on Ofqual's '[Get the Facts](#)' [section](#) on gov.uk. This includes a [timeline](#) of the reforms. Sections 2, 3 and 4 of this note describe the development of these reforms in more detail; this section provides a brief sketch of the changes and an at-a-glance view of when they are being introduced.

The Ofqual website provides a useful [timeline](#) of both GCSE and AS and A level reform, which sets out when the various aspects of these reforms will be brought into force.¹

1.1 Reformed GCSEs

GCSE course content is being reformed; the reformed GCSEs are linear, with all assessments normally taken at the end of the course. There would no longer be higher and foundation tiers, and a new grading scale that uses the numbers 1 – 9 to identify levels of performance, with 9 being the top level, will be introduced. Additionally, exams will take

¹ Ofqual, [Changes to qualifications](#) [retrieved 14 August 2014]

place only in the summer, apart from English, English language and mathematics, where students who want to re-take these subjects will be able to do so in November.

Revised content English language, English literature, and mathematics GCSEs will be taught from September 2015, with other subjects to be taught from September 2016.

Changes have also been made to school accountability, with a new 'Progress 8' performance measure to be applied to secondary schools from 2016.

1.2 Reformed AS and A levels

AS and A level course content is being reformed. Additionally, AS and A levels are to be 'decoupled', so that AS levels are taken as qualifications in their own right, and that any student wishing to take an A level after doing an AS level would be reassessed on the AS level material; AS qualifications and A levels will be assessed at the end of the course, and in principle be exam-only. More detailed information is available in section 3 of this note.

The following revised courses are first teaching in 2015: English language, English literature, English language and literature, biology, chemistry, physics, psychology, art and design, business studies, computing, economics, history and sociology.

First teaching in 2016: Modern foreign languages (MFL), ancient languages, and geography.

First teaching in 2017: Mathematics, further mathematics.

2 Reform of GCSEs

2.1 *The Importance of Teaching* White Paper and initial proposals

The November 2010 Schools White Paper, *The Importance of Teaching*, said that the Government was seeking advice from the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) on changes to restore confidence in GCSEs. The proposed changes included a return to exams taken at the end of the course, and measures to improve the assessment of spelling, punctuation and grammar.

The next stage of the reforms was announced on 17 September 2012 when the then Education Secretary, Michael Gove, made an oral statement in the House of Commons. This was made against the background of concern about the grading of GCSEs in English. Mr Gove announced that the Government intended to replace GCSEs with new qualifications, to be called English Baccalaureate Certificates (EBCs), which would cover the core academic subjects that make up the current English Baccalaureate – English, Mathematics, sciences, history, geography and languages. He also proposed a single awarding organisation in each subject, for a period of five years.²

Following the Secretary of State's statement, the DFE launched a consultation entitled *Reforming Key Stage 4 Qualifications*. The consultation closed on 10 December 2012.³

Strong concerns were expressed about the content and implementation of the proposed EBCs. In particular, there was concern about the treatment of creative subjects - such as art, drama, music, and ICT, and sport.⁴ There was also concern about the single awarding

² [HC Deb 17 Sep 2012 c653-655](#)

³ Department for Education, *Reforming Key Stage 4 Qualifications*, September 2012

⁴ See, for example, a Guardian article on 10 December 2012: [Education in brief: will EBCs raise achievement for all students?](#)

system. These issues were explored in some detail in an Opposition Day debate on examination reform in the House of Commons on 16 January 2013.⁵

The House of Commons Education Select Committee voiced concerns about proposed EBCs in its report, *From GCSEs to EBCs*, and asked for more evidence that EBCs were necessary. The Committee said that the GCSE brand was not damaged beyond repair.⁶ The Government's response was published in April 2013.⁷

(N.B. The proposed English Baccalaureate Certificates, which would have been new qualifications, were distinct from the English Baccalaureate, which is a performance measure.)

2.2 Revised Proposals to reform GCSEs and A Level reform (February 2013)

On 7 February 2013, the then Education Secretary announced that he would not be pursuing the proposal to have a single exam board offering a new exam in each academic subject. EBCs would not be introduced; instead, existing GCSEs would be reformed.⁸

The reformed GCSEs would be linear, with all assessments normally taken at the end of the course. There would no longer be higher and foundation tiers so students would no longer have to choose between higher and lower-tier papers. The new GCSEs would be introduced from September 2015. The speech also set out proposals for AS and A level reform (see section 2 of this note for more detail). A key section of the then Secretary of State's statement is reproduced below.

The Secretary of State for Education (Michael Gove): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I should like to make a statement on the future of qualifications, school league tables and the national curriculum.

Last September, we outlined plans for changes to GCSE qualifications that were designed to address the grade inflation, dumbing down and loss of rigour in those examinations. We have consulted on those proposals and there is a consensus that the system needs to change. However, one of the proposals that I put forward was a bridge too far. My idea that we end the competition between exam boards to offer GCSEs in core academic qualifications and have just one wholly new exam in each subject was one reform too many at this time.

The exam regulator Ofqual, which has done such a great job in recent months upholding standards, was clear that there were significant risks in trying to both strengthen qualifications and end competition in a large part of the exams market. I have therefore decided not to make the best the enemy of the good, and I will not proceed with plans to have a single exam board offering a new exam in each academic subject. Instead, we will concentrate on reforming existing GCSEs, broadly along the lines put forward in September. There is a consensus that the exams and qualification system we inherited was broken.

[...]

⁵ HC Deb 16 Jan 2013 c877-938

⁶ House of Commons Education Committee, *From GCSEs to EBCs: the Government's proposals for reform*, January 2013, Eighth Report of Session 2012-13, HC 808-I

⁷ House of Commons Education Committee, *From GCSEs to EBCs: the Government's proposals for reform: Government Response to the Committee's Eighth Report of Session 2012-13*, April 2013, Seventh Special Report of Session 2012-13, HC 1116

⁸ HC Deb 7 Feb 2013 c441

We are also reforming A-levels. Schools and universities were unhappy that constant assessment and modularisation got in the way of proper learning, so we are reforming those exams with the help of school and university leaders. GCSEs will also be reformed in a similar fashion. The qualifications should be linear, with all assessments normally taken at the end of the course. Examinations will test extended writing in subjects such as English and history, have fewer bite-sized and overly structured questions, and in mathematics and science there should be greater emphasis on quantitative problem-solving. Internal assessments and the use of exam aids will be kept to a minimum and used only where there is a compelling case to do so, to provide for effective and deep assessment of the specified curriculum content.

Importantly, the new GCSEs will be universal qualifications and I expect the same proportion of pupils to sit them as now. This is something we believe the vast majority of children with a good education should be able to achieve. However, reformed GCSEs will no longer set an artificial cap on how much pupils can achieve by forcing students to choose between higher and foundation tiers. Reformed GCSEs should allow students to access any grade while enabling high-quality assessment at all levels. The appropriate approach to assessment will vary between subjects, and a range of solutions may come forward—for example, extension papers offering access to higher grades alongside a common core. There should be no disincentive for schools to give an open choice of papers to their pupils.

I have asked Ofqual to ensure we have new GCSEs in the core academic subjects of English, maths, the sciences, history and geography, ready for teaching in 2015. These proposals will, I believe, achieve a swift and significant rise in standards right across the country, equipping far more young people with the knowledge and skills they need to achieve their full potential.⁹

2.3 Focus on examinations (February-June 2013)

In a February 2013 “policy steer letter” to Ofqual on GCSEs, the then Education Secretary, Michael Gove, wrote that “internal assessment and the use of exam aids should be kept to a minimum and used only where there is a compelling case to do so, to provide for effective and deep assessment of the specified curriculum content. You will want to consider this in the light of your current review of controlled assessment”.¹⁰

Ofqual published a report in June 2013 entitled *Review of Controlled Assessment in GCSEs*. Given the report’s findings, Ofqual “developed a set of principles to apply in reformed GCSE qualifications”, which included: “Non-exam assessment should be used only when it is the only valid way to assess essential elements of the subject”. Ofqual added that “we will use these principles when designing qualifications in the future”.¹¹

Also in June 2013, Ofqual published its *GCSE Reform Consultation*. Under the heading, “Assessment in reformed GCSEs”, Ofqual stated: “In line with the Secretary of State’s [February 2013] letter, we propose that where subject content can be validly assessed by written exams, such exams set and marked by exam boards should be the default method of assessment. This will mean that reliance on alternative forms of assessment is reduced”.

⁹ Full statement and subsequent debate at [HC Deb 7 Feb 2013 c441-457](#)

¹⁰ Department for Education, *Ofqual policy steer letter: reforming Key Stage 4 qualifications*, 6 February 2013, p3

¹¹ Ofqual, *Review of Controlled Assessment in GCSEs*, Ofqual/13/5291, June 2013, p4

However, it proposed that “the demonstration of science practical skills should be assessed other than by exam, marked by teachers and contribute to the overall grade”.¹²

2.4 Performance measures for schools (September-October 2013)

Resits and school league tables

A further [announcement](#) was made by the then Education Secretary on 29 September 2013. This was aimed at discouraging schools from entering pupils early for GCSE. It stated that, effective of September 2013, only a student’s first entry to a GCSE examination would count in their school’s performance tables. The Secretary of State said:

The evidence shows that candidates who enter early perform worse overall than those who do not, even after resits are taken into account.

It seems likely that candidates are being entered before they are ready, and ‘banking’ a C grade where their performance at key stage 2 would suggest that if they had continued to study the subject and taken the GCSE at the end of year 11 they could have achieved a top grade.

This is of particular concern in maths, where there is high progression from A*/A grade at GCSE to A level, but low progression from grades B and C.

In addition, I believe that this speaks more generally of a narrowed curriculum, focused not on sound subject teaching as a basis for successful progression, but on preparation to pass exams.¹³

It was reported in the *Guardian*, following the announcement of these changes, that head teachers had reservations about the reforms and their immediate implementation.¹⁴

Progress 8

On 14 October 2013, the Schools Minister, David Laws, made an [announcement](#) on school accountability that included the following:

We will require all schools to publish core information on their website, in a standard format. From now on, there will be 4 key measures which must be published:

- pupils’ progress across 8 subjects. So, a parent will see whether pupils at a school typically achieve 1 grade more than expected, or 1 grade less
- the average grade a pupil achieves in these same ‘best 8’ subjects. This will show, for example, that pupils in a particular school average a high B grade or a low D grade in their GCSEs
- the percentage of pupils achieving a C grade in English and maths
- the proportion of pupils gaining the EBacc, which will continue in its current form

We will also look at including a destination measure to show the percentage of pupils who move on to further study or employment - including further training.¹⁵

¹² Ofqual, [GCSE Reform Consultation](#), Ofqual/13/5292, June 2013, pp20–21

¹³ Department for Education, [Changes to early entry at GCSE](#), last updated 18 November 2013. Includes information on some transition measures that were in place after the change was first announced.

¹⁴ Guardian, [Headteachers criticise new rules on pupils entering GCSE exams early](#), 29 September 2013

¹⁵ Department for Education, [Reforming the accountability system for secondary schools](#), 14 October 2013; see also [HC Deb 14 Oct 2013 c437-439](#)

This announcement followed a consultation, conducted between February and May 2013, on school accountability measures, which the Government [responded](#) to in October 2013.¹⁶

Progress 8 will be introduced for all schools in 2016 (based on 2016 exam results, with the Progress 8 score showing in performance tables published in late 2016/early 2017). The new measure will be based on students' progress measured across eight subjects: English; mathematics; three other English Baccalaureate (EBacc) subjects (sciences, computer science, geography, history and languages); and three further subjects, which can be from the range of EBacc subjects, or can be any other approved, high-value arts, academic, or vocational qualification.

The Department for Education has published a variety of [information](#) on the measure, including a [factsheet](#) which provides a brief overview of the changes and their intentions.

2.5 Ofqual consultation on GCSE reform (June-November 2013)

As previously mentioned, Ofqual published its [GCSE Reform Consultation](#) in June 2013. The reform focused on changes to English language, English literature, and mathematics, with course assessment, structure, tiering and grading the main issues considered.

Ofqual published a suite of documents on 1 November 2013, including an analysis of the responses to the June consultation and information on how the reforms would subsequently proceed:

- [Summary on reforms to GCSEs from 2015](#)
- [Analysis of responses to the consultation](#)
- [Regulatory impact assessment](#)
- [Research with employers on GCSE grading](#)
- [Equality analysis of GCSE reforms](#)

The Ofqual press notice, [Design details of new GCSEs in England](#), published on the same date, announced the key features of the new GCSEs:

- A new grading scale that uses the numbers 1 – 9 to identify levels of performance, with 9 being the top level. Students will get a U where performance is below the minimum required to pass the GCSE
- Tiering to be used only for subjects where untiered papers will not allow students at the lower end of the ability range to demonstrate their knowledge and skills, or will not stretch the most able. Where it is used, the tiering model used will be decided on a subject-by-subject basis
- A fully linear structure, with all assessment at the end of the course and content not divided into modules. This is to avoid the disruption to teaching and learning through repeated assessment, to allow students to demonstrate the full breadth of their abilities in the subject, and to allow standards to be set fairly and consistently

¹⁶ Department for Education, [Reforming the accountability system for secondary schools: Government response to the February to May 2013 consultation on secondary school accountability](#), October 2013

- Exams as the default method of assessment, except where they cannot provide valid assessment of the skills required. We will announce decisions on non-exam assessment on a subject-by-subject basis
- Exams only in the summer, apart from English language and maths, where there will also be exams in November for students who were at least 16 on the preceding 31st August. Ofqual is considering whether November exams should be available in other subjects for students of this age.

The same press notice confirmed that the previous timetable for introduction of the reformed GCSEs had been altered. The new GCSEs in English literature, English language and mathematics would be introduced from September 2015, with the new GCSEs in other subjects to be introduced from the following year. (Previously, all were intended to be introduced from September 2015.)

2.6 New grading system consultation (April-September 2014)

As previously noted, the reforms introduce a new grading system for GCSEs, with the existing A*-G system replaced by a grading of 1-9 (with 9 being the highest level of achievement).

In September 2013, Ofqual commissioned BMG Research to undertake a telephone survey of employers to gather views on proposals for a new GCSE grading system. The survey, based on the findings from the 90 completed online and telephone interviews, included the following findings:

- “Employers are most likely to use GCSE grades to identify candidates with specific grades in specific subjects, while two in five look for a minimum number of specific grades/grade ranges. In both cases this most commonly amounts to at least 2 to 3 GCSE grades A to C in English, Maths and sometimes, a science subject”;
- “Most employers did not feel confident enough in their knowledge of the grading system to comment on the possible benefits. There seemed to be a lack of understanding of the reasoning behind the proposed change. Some viewed the potential change as making levels more distinct and clear and they saw some benefit in terms of clarity to using numbers instead of letters. There was some feeling that the change might also involve reassessment of the levels so that top grades are harder to achieve and have more status”.
- “The potential drawbacks are viewed as mainly revolving around familiarisation with the new levels and possible confusion in terms of what the different levels are equivalent to. A third of employers felt a change to the grading system would add more confusion/complexity. Comments from employers strongly suggest that the current system of A* to G grades is so familiar and established that a new system would have to deliver benefits that would compensate for the inconvenience of its introduction. Employers would look to compare the two systems for some time to come as the existing system of grading has become such a key benchmark for them”.¹⁷

Ofqual also published a Regulatory Impact Assessment of its changes to GCSEs more generally, which included the following on grading:

¹⁷ BMG Research, *New GCSE Grades Research Amongst Employers – Prepared for: Ofqual*, November 2013, pp2–3

Employers – Whilst it is not envisaged that a move to a new grading structure will result in any significant system upgrades, the new system will be unfamiliar and will have potential implications for educating the staff and when comparing old and new grading structures. In addition, there could be confusion created by different approaches in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.¹⁸

Ofqual stated that it would “carry out a more detailed, quantified (where possible) assessment of the cost and delivery impacts of the reforms. This will include modelling scenarios for the potential cost of the reforms for schools, colleges and other training providers offering GCSEs. We will update this impact assessment once this work is complete”.¹⁹

In April 2014, Ofqual issued a new consultation document entitled [Consultation on Setting the Grade Standards of new GCSEs in England](#). The consultation closed on 30 June 2014.

New grading system

Ofqual published its response to the consultation on the new grading system in September 2014.²⁰ It confirmed that the new GCSEs will be graded 1 to 9, with 9 being the top grade. Ofqual stated that, under the revised system:

- Broadly the same proportion of students will achieve a grade 4 and above as currently achieve a grade C and above
- Broadly the same proportion of students will achieve a grade 7 and above as currently achieve an A and above
- For each examination, the top 20 per cent of those who get grade 7 or above will get a grade 9 – the very highest performers
- The bottom of grade 1 will be aligned with the bottom of grade G
- Grade 5 will be positioned in the top third of the marks for a current Grade C and bottom third of the marks for a current Grade B. This will mean it will be of greater demand than the present grade C, and broadly in line with what the best available evidence tells us is the average PISA performance in countries such as Finland, Canada, the Netherlands and Switzerland
- The new maths GCSE will be tiered, with grades 4 and 5 available through both tiers

The new system will be in place from September 2015, for students receiving their results in September 2017.

2.7 Revised subject content

As part of these reforms, the subject content of GCSE courses is being revised, with the aim of making the qualifications more rigorous.

Between June and August 2013, the Government consulted on subject content and assessment objectives for new GCSEs, including English language, English literature, mathematics, the sciences, history, geography, and modern and ancient languages. A

¹⁸ As above, p16

¹⁹ As above, p18

²⁰ Ofqual, [Setting standards for new GCSEs in 2017](#), September 2014

response to this consultation was published in November 2013.²¹ The then Education Secretary, Michael Gove, made a statement on this publication:

Today I am publishing the [outcome of a consultation on subject content for new GCSEs in English literature, English language and mathematics](#), which will be taught in schools from September 2015. I have prioritised English and mathematics because they are both fundamental to facilitating learning in other subjects, and yet PISA evidence demonstrates that 15-year-olds in 9 other countries are, on average, at least half a year ahead of students in England in both reading and mathematics. Reform of these key subjects is, therefore, a matter of pressing urgency.

The new [mathematics GCSE](#) will demand deeper and broader mathematical understanding. It will provide all students with greater coverage of key areas such as ratio, proportion and rates of change and require them to apply their knowledge and reasoning to provide clear mathematical arguments. It will focus on ensuring that every student masters the fundamental mathematics that is required for further education and future careers. It will provide greater challenge for the most able students by thoroughly testing their understanding of the mathematical knowledge needed for higher level study and careers in mathematics, the sciences and computing.

The new mathematics GCSE will be more demanding and we anticipate that schools will want to increase the time spent teaching mathematics. On average secondary schools in England spend only 116 hours per year teaching mathematics, which international studies show is far less time than that spent on this vital subject by our competitors. Just one extra lesson each week would put England closer to countries like Australia or Singapore who teach 143 and 138 hours a year of mathematics respectively. We announced on 14 October that mathematics, alongside English, will be double weighted in secondary school performance measures from 2016. This will also provide a strong incentive for schools to ensure that they are strengthening their mathematics provision.

My ambition is that the great majority of students should continue to study mathematics, post-16, by 2020. All students without a grade C or above will continue to study mathematics post-16. New high-quality 'core maths' qualifications will be introduced from 2015 for students who have passed GCSE, and want to continue to improve the mathematics skills they need for further education and work, but don't wish to take a full AS or A level. The new GCSEs will provide a firm foundation for this further study.

The [English language GCSE](#) will provide all students with a robust foundation of reading and good written English, and with the language and literary skills which are required for further study and work. It will ensure that students can read fluently and write effectively, and will have 20% of the marks awarded for accurate spelling, punctuation and grammar. It will also encourage the study of literature for those who do not take the English literature GCSE, with students reading high-quality texts across a range of genres and periods.

The new [English literature GCSE](#) will build on this foundation, and encourage students to read, write and think critically. It will involve students studying a range of intellectually challenging and substantial whole texts in detail including Shakespeare, 19th-century novels, Romantic poetry and other high-quality fiction and drama. The new GCSE will also ensure that all students are examined on some 'unseen' texts,

²¹ Department for Education, [Reformed GCSE subject content consultation: Government response](#), November 2013

encouraging students to read widely and rewarding those that can demonstrate the breadth of their understanding.²²

New subject content for the English language, English literature, and mathematics GCSEs was published on the same day. Reformed content for the other subjects consulted upon was published in April 2014.

On 16 July 2014, the Education Secretary, Nicky Morgan, made a [statement](#) announcing the publication of revised GCSE content for art and design, computer science, dance, music and physical education for consultation. The consultations closed in September 2014. The Government's [response](#) to this consultation, as well as [decisions on the assessment](#) of these subjects, was published in January 2015.^{23 24}

The gov.uk website provides a [full list](#) of the revised subject content currently available:

- [GCSE English language and GCSE English literature](#)
- [GCSE mathematics](#)
- [GCSE ancient languages](#)
- [GCSE geography](#)
- [GCSE history](#)
- [GCSE modern foreign languages](#)
- [GCSE combined science](#)
- [GCSE single science](#)
- [GCSE art and design](#)
- [GCSE dance](#)
- [GCSE computer science](#)
- [GCSE physical education](#)
- [GCSE music](#)

In September 2014, a [consultation](#) was published on GCSE citizenship studies, cooking and nutrition, design and technology, and drama; the consultation closed in November 2014.²⁵

A further [consultation](#), opened on 7 November 2014, seeks views on revised subject content for GCSE and A level religious studies. This consultation closes on 29 December 2014.²⁶

²² Department for Education, [Reformed GCSEs in English and mathematics](#), 1 November 2013

²³ Department for Education, [High-quality and more rigorous arts-based GCSEs and A levels](#), 26 January 2015

²⁴ Department for Education, [Decisions following consultation on GCSEs and A levels](#), 26 January 2015

²⁵ Department for Education, [Developing new GCSEs, A levels and AS qualifications for first teaching in 2016](#), September 2014

²⁶ Department from Education, [Reformed GCSE and A level subject content consultation](#), 7 November 2014

3 Reform of AS and A levels

3.1 Reform of AS and A level qualifications: Timeline

AS and A Levels are also in the process of being reformed. The Ofqual website provides [general information](#).

In March 2012, the then Education Secretary, Michael Gove, wrote to Ofqual expressing concerns about the standard of A levels, and the extent to which they prepare students for study at university.²⁷ Ofqual responded to state that it would develop reformed A levels, through consultation, to address these concerns.²⁸

An Ofqual [publication](#) sets out the steps in the process that have taken place so far:

- **November 2010** In the white paper *The Importance of Teaching*, the Department for Education (DfE) said: “we are working with Ofqual... to ensure universities and learned bodies can be fully involved in the development [of A levels]” (paragraph 4.47).
- **Spring/summer 2012** We published our **research on A levels**. For this research, we spoke to teachers, employers and other higher education representatives. We also looked at the standards and methods other countries use to assess students at this point in their education.
- **June to September 2012** We ran a **consultation** where we asked education specialists and the general public for their opinions on possible changes to A levels, including removing exams in January. This consultation was supplemented with face to face events across the country with a wide range of stakeholders including higher education, teachers and representatives of disability groups.
- **November 2012** We confirmed that we would **remove January exams**. There were no A level exams this January (2014).
- **March 2013** The DfE confirmed that AS qualifications would ‘**decouple**’ from the new A levels (there is more about what this means in the next section).
- **September 2013** We published a **report** by Professor Mark Smith, the independent Chair of a group established by the Government to review the current curriculum requirements for some A levels and confirm whether they were ‘fit for purpose’ or needed to change.

We also confirmed the **timetable** for reform (which has been slightly changed in the light of feedback to the consultation on subject content hosted by the DfE). It is now:

First teaching in **2015**: English language, English literature, English language and literature, biology, chemistry, physics, psychology, art and design, business studies, computing, economics, history and sociology.

First teaching in **2016**: Mathematics, further mathematics, modern foreign languages (MFL), ancient languages, and geography.

- **October 2013** We launched a **consultation on assessment arrangements** for each subject to be introduced for first teaching in 2015. This consultation included geography, but the Government has since confirmed that this subject will be

²⁷ Department for Education, [letter from Secretary of State to Chief Executive of Ofqual](#), 30 March 2012

²⁸ Ofqual, [letter from Chief Regulator to Secretary of State for Education](#), 3 April 2012

introduced in 2016. In the consultation we set out proposals for the role of non-exam assessment in each subject. The proposals are based on the principle that assessment should be by **exam only, except where non-exam assessment is needed to test a skill essential to the subject** (for example in art and design). This principle comes from our aims:

to create a better balance between exam and non-exam assessment

to give clear reasons why non-exam assessment is needed

to have greater consistency across the qualifications set by different exam boards.

After this consultation, we made decisions on assessment for subjects that will be first taught in 2015. We have yet to make decisions about assessment for the 2016 subjects. We will consult on this in due course.²⁹

The same document provides the following overview of the changes being made:

- AS and A levels are to be ‘decoupled’, so that AS levels are taken as qualifications in their own right, and that any student wishing to take an A level after doing an AS level would be reassessed on the AS level material;
- AS qualifications and A levels will be assessed at the end of the course;
- AS qualifications can be designed to be taught alongside A levels;
- In principle, all AS qualifications will be exam-only, with exceptions for art and design. A level qualifications may retain some non-exam assessment, but this is likely to be reduced (for instance, in English the weighting will be set at 20% for non-exam assessment, reduced from a current level of 40%);
- Clarify the objectives of AS and A levels respectively.³⁰

The return to linear A levels with exams at the end of the two-year course, and the introduction of stand-alone AS qualifications will take place from 2015.

The [Government’s response](#) to the consultation on A level subject content was published in April 2014. On the same date, the Government published AS and A level [subject content](#) for AS and A level study of:

- [Art and design](#);
- [Business](#);
- [Computer science](#);
- [Economics](#);
- [English language](#);
- [English literature](#);

²⁹ Ofqual, [An Update on the Reforms Being Made to AS Qualifications and A Levels](#), April 2014, p6-7

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p8-9

- [English language and literature](#);
- [History](#);
- [Science](#);
- [Sociology](#).

This revised material will be taught from September 2015. Ofqual provide [further information](#) on the requirements for each of these subjects.

On 16 July 2014, alongside [consultations](#) on GCSE subject content, the Government launched consultations on the content of AS and A level ancient languages, dance, geography, mathematics, further mathematics, modern foreign languages, music, and physical education. These consultations closed on 19 September 2014.

On 18 December 2014, the Government published its [response](#) to the consultations on A level subject content in modern languages, ancient languages, mathematics, further mathematics, and geography³¹

Subject content³² was published on the revised programmes to be taught from September 2016:

- [Ancient languages](#);
- [Modern languages](#);
- [Geography](#).

The following subject content will be taught from September 2017:

- [Mathematics](#);
- [Further Mathematics](#).

On 26 January 2015, the Government published its [response](#) to the consultation on AS and A level dance, music, and physical education,³³ along with subject content to be taught from September 2016:

- [Dance](#)
- [Music](#)
- [Physical education](#)

3.2 Government's rationale behind AS and A level reforms

In a Westminster Hall debate on AS levels and A levels in April 2013, the Schools Minister, David Laws, explained why the Government were making the changes:

³¹ Department for Education, [Reformed A level subject content consultation: Government response](#), 18 December 2014

³² Department for Education, [Publication of reformed A level content](#), 18 December 2014

³³ Department for Education, [High-quality and more rigorous arts-based GCSEs and A levels](#), 26 January 2015

...We want to give students a better experience of post-16 study, ensuring they are studying for rigorous qualifications that will provide them with the right skills and knowledge to allow them to progress. Students currently start A-levels in September and then they immediately start preparing for examinations in January. They and their teachers have spent too much time thinking about exams and re-sitting them, encouraging in some cases a “learn and forget” approach. A student taking A-level maths would need to sit six exams: three papers for their AS-level, and three for their A2. The old rules allowed multiple re-sitting of those papers, so a student might sit some papers in January, and if they wanted to improve their grades they could re-sit them in June and again the following year, while sitting and then re-sitting their A2 papers. In 2010, 74% of maths A-level students re-sat at least one paper.

During the past few years, too many students in our schools system have spent too long preparing for and taking tests in years 10, 11, 12 and 13. During the past decade, we have been in danger of creating an “exam factory” in our schools, particularly in the last four years of education, rather than creating places of deep learning where teachers and students are given the time and space to develop deep knowledge of subjects, rather than just preparing constantly for public examinations. That is one of the key reasons why the Government are making the changes that we are debating today.

The focus that there has been on exams in every one of those final four years of school education can lead to young people failing to deliver and develop that deep understanding of their subject, and to their failing to make connections between topics. Re-sits have also led to too much teaching time being sacrificed for assessment preparation. Research—hon. Members have said that they are keen on it—from Durham university and Cambridge Assessment suggests that repeated opportunities for students to re-sit exams have also risked a form of grade inflation. This is why our reforms to A-levels are so important. Ofqual announced the first stage of the reforms last autumn by removing the January exam window, which will reduce the number of re-sits, as the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston said.

Seema Malhotra: The Minister makes some valid points, which I also referred to, about ways in which we might reform, such as reducing re-sits, which may have contributed to grade inflation, but does he not agree that those changes—those improvements—can take place within the current framework and that the de-coupling of AS-levels and A-levels is not required to achieve those improvements?

Mr Laws: Some of those changes clearly could take place without the additional measures that we are taking, but we believe, for the reasons that I am giving, and will continue to give, that they would not by themselves go far enough. That is why we announced earlier this year that from 2015 we would return to linear A-levels, with examinations taking place at the end of the two-year course. Linear A-levels will free up time for teachers to focus on what teachers do best, which is providing high-quality teaching, developing their students’ deep understanding and love of a subject, and ensuring, therefore, that the final two years of education are about not simply public examinations and test preparation, but doing what our education system is designed to do, which is educating young people in these key subjects.

Nic Dakin rose—

Mr Laws: I would like to make more progress and then give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Some have claimed that the introduction of linear A-levels will have a negative impact on the social mobility agenda. If that was going to be the case, this Government, and certainly my party, would have no truck with these changes.³⁴

On the change to stand-alone AS levels, Mr Laws said that

From 2015, the AS-level will be decoupled as a stand-alone, linear qualification and will remain at the same level of challenge as existing AS qualifications. That means that schools and colleges can decide whether to teach the AS-level over one year or two years. If schools and colleges decide to teach the AS in any given subject in one year, that would give them the opportunity, which I think the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) was seeking—it is a valid concern—to co-teach the AS and the new A-level together, if that meets the needs of the students and if it is a sensible way for those institutions to ensure that they can deliver education for all young people who want to access both A-levels and the AS.

We want to preserve the AS so that students can study a fourth subject in addition to their full A-levels. We know that universities consider the AS a valuable qualification to provide that breadth, which a number of hon. Members mentioned. We also know that some universities use the AS in their admissions processes, although most place more emphasis on GCSE results and predicted A-level grades, as well as looking at a range of other information, including personal statements, academic references and, in some cases, admissions tests and interviews.

Kevin Brennan: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Laws: I will make this one point before giving way. Most universities do not use AS results as the main basis for making those decisions. Indeed, in some subjects GCSE results can provide a better prediction of degree results across all universities than AS results. Students who have very good GCSE results from schools where the general pattern is for below-average GCSE attainment also have real potential to progress at university.

Kevin Brennan: If the Minister continues with his proposals, AS-levels will be available for universities to use as evidence in only one subject, instead of all the subjects that the young person is studying. Although we could do with more research, he knows that there is powerful research evidence that suggests that AS-level is in fact the best predictor of how young people will do at university.*[Interruption]*. He can shake his head, but his own university's research suggests that AS-levels are the best predictor—far better than GCSEs, and far better even than university admissions tests. I have the research here. I thought he had read it, but obviously he has not.

Mr Laws: I repeat the point I have just made: the majority of universities do not use AS-levels as the main basis for making such decisions. Indeed, we know that, in some subjects, GCSE results provide a better prediction of degree results across all universities than AS results.³⁵

4 Ofqual consultation on completing GCSE, AS and A level reform

On 4 June 2014, an Ofqual consultation was launched on [Completing GCSE, AS and A Level Reform](#). The consultation ran for eight weeks. The announcement stated:

The consultation proposes:

³⁴ Westminster Hall debate, HC Deb 16 April 2013

³⁵ Westminster Hall debate, HC Deb 16 April 2013 56WH

- Requiring core content for any subject in which a GCSE, A level or AS qualification is developed
- Allowing exam boards to develop core subject content collaboratively through a regulatory framework
- Setting out how we will judge in advance which remaining or new subject areas can be developed under the GCSE, A level or AS qualification brands. They will have to:
 - Meet the qualification objective
 - Allow performance to be differentiated using a full grading scale
 - Be set at an appropriate level of demand
 - Allow for valid assessment
 - Be easily distinguished from other GCSE/A level subjects
- Introducing a cut-off date of summer 2018 for the last award of all ‘unreformed’ qualifications; and
- Removing any qualifications now that are unlikely to meet our regulatory expectations in the future.

The [consultation document](#) emphasised that it was primarily concerned with the subject content of remaining GCSE and A level subjects. It stated:

As things change, we want qualifications in different subjects to be similar in their level of demand and assessment structure at each level. Our proposals for this will inevitably lead to a small drop in the number of subjects available: subjects that attract few students may disappear, with exam boards unlikely to invest in reforming them to the standard we require. We also propose a cut-off date for subjects that overlap a lot, or appear to be subsets of more established subjects, unless or until a good case can be made to keep and reform them.³⁶

As a result, the consultation proposed that several subjects would be removed from GCSE, AS and A level, with their content to be included in other continuing subjects. Appendix B of the [consultation document](#) provided a list.

Ofqual’s [response](#) to the consultation was published on 2 December 2014; an [analysis](#) of the consultation responses was also published.³⁷

As well as indicating that any reformed qualification would immediately replace its predecessor, the consultation response listed a several qualifications that would be withdrawn, as Ofqual felt that qualifications in these subjects were “too similar to one or more of the subjects being reformed for first teaching in 2015:”

- AS and A levels in applied art and design;
- AS and A levels in applied business;
- AS and A level in human biology;

³⁶ Ofqual, *Completing GCSE, AS and A level Reform*, June 2014, p3

³⁷ Ofqual, [Completing GCSE, AS and A level Reform](#), December 2014

- AS and A level in economics and business (combined course);
- GCSE digital communication.³⁸

Schools or colleges that already offer these qualifications may do so for one more year, with final awards being made in summer 2017.

Several subjects that had been proposed for withdrawal were retained, and Ofqual believed that they were sufficiently distinct from other qualifications. Their content will, however, have to be reformed before first teaching in summer 2017. These were the AS and A levels in:

- applied science;
- environmental studies;
- humanities;
- science in society.³⁹

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p1-2

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p2-3