

Teachers, headteachers, senior managers, local authorities, learners, examinations officers

Changes to A levels



Improving the assessment system

Each year half a million young people sit A and AS level examinations. The regulators of external qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland are introducing changes to the way students complete their A levels.

The AS/A2 structure has proved to be successful but the large number of examinations places a burden on students. Also, in some subjects, assessment focuses too much on factual knowledge and understanding, and too little on thinking and problem-solving skills. The revised A levels are designed to be more challenging and stimulating to students. They will be introduced in September 2008.

This fact sheet explains the changes that the regulators have made to A levels and the impact that these changes will have on teachers, examinations officers and students.

What will change?

Most subjects will be reduced from six units to four (music and the sciences will remain at six units). This will help to reduce the burden of assessment.

The introduction of 'stretch and challenge' at A2 should better prepare

students for higher education and employment. The emphasis on the development of thinking and problem-solving skills should be more motivating for students. The changes to the assessments include:

- a broad range of question types to ensure that a wide range of skills is assessed
- some questions requiring extended answers to give students the opportunity to demonstrate the full breadth and depth of their knowledge and understanding
- synoptic assessment that will test students' understanding of the subject as a whole and their ability to make links between different areas of the subject.

An A* grade will be introduced to the grading of A level (not AS level) to reward the most exceptional candidates. It will be awarded to students who achieve a grade A overall at A level and also achieve 90 per cent or more on the uniform mark scale (UMS) across their A2 units. Please see below for more information on the UMS.

How will the changes affect teachers?

In many subjects, the content will not change significantly but will be redistributed between fewer units. Teachers will need to focus on

encouraging A2 students to further develop their thinking and problem-solving skills, and to ensure that students achieve a holistic understanding of the subject.

How will the changes affect examinations officers?

There will be fewer unit entries to administer, fewer predicted grades and fewer examinations to schedule and invigilate.

Applied A levels and A level mathematics

Changes were made to the Applied A levels and A level mathematics relatively recently and so these qualifications have not been involved in this review. The only change that there will be to Applied A levels and A level mathematics is the introduction of the A* grade at A level.

Uniform mark scale

A levels with six units will continue to work on a maximum of 600 UMS marks but the A levels with four units will have a maximum of 400 UMS marks. Teachers and examinations officers will have a role in helping students to interpret their marks.

A levels and the extended project

The extended project will be a separate qualification that A level students are encouraged to add to their study

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Further information

If you would like to know more about A levels or the uniform mark scale please visit the QCA website at www.qca.org.uk

Further information on the Diplomas can be found on the QCA website or at www.accreditedqualifications.org.uk.

Delivering the 14–19
education and skills programme



programme. Students will be able to carry out a project on a topic of their own choosing, which may or may not be linked to their chosen A level subjects. The projects will involve planning, research and evaluation, but the end product may be a dissertation, the findings of an investigation or field study, a performance or an artefact. Students will be

encouraged to take the extended project as it will develop research and independent learning skills that will be of great benefit to them when they progress to higher education and employment.

A levels and the Diplomas

AS and A levels may be incorporated into the level 3 Diplomas as additional and/or

specialist learning, where they complement the Diploma Lines of Learning. For example, AS/A level biology would complement the Diploma in society, health and development, AS/A level mathematics and/or physics with the Diploma in engineering.