

An Update on the Reforms Being Made to AS Qualifications and A Levels

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What's this document for?

We are reforming GCSEs, A levels and AS qualifications. This document is to let you know about some decisions we have made for A levels and AS qualifications, why we have made them and what is going to happen next.

In October 2013, we launched a consultation on how to assess students taking the reformed qualifications that will be first available in 2015. We're now confirming our decisions for assessing students in these subjects at AS and A level:

- Sciences: biology, chemistry, physics
- English: English language, English literature, English language and literature
- Art and design
- Business
- Computer science
- Economics
- History
- Sociology
- Psychology.

We also explain how we're improving assessment objectives.

We will be reforming more subjects for first teaching in 2016 and 2017. We have not yet made decisions about how to assess these. We will be consulting on the assessment arrangements in due course.

Why are AS qualifications and A levels changing?

Some aspects of the current AS and A level qualifications do not work as well as they should. We want to improve them so teachers and students have the opportunity to make the best use of classroom time, that students gain a broad understanding of subjects and that they finish their studies better prepared for their next steps in education or employment.

What we know from our previous research and consultation activities

In our research (April 2012¹), we found that A levels were generally well thought of and considered 'fit for purpose'. But we did find some problems. The most significant ones were to do with the modular structure. When we spoke to higher education representatives, teachers and employers, the specific things they told us were:

- **There are too many resits**
Previously, students could often take an exam or non-exam assessment several times over. This created a 'resit culture' with some students not taking assessments as seriously as they should. It also meant that students are not properly prepared for their next steps in education or work, where they are often expected to do their best at the first opportunity.
- **Too many assessments disrupt teaching**
Multiple assessments throughout the year mean teachers have to spend too much time focusing on them (exam preparation or setting, monitoring and marking non-exam assessment), rather than moving through the material at a pace that suits their students.
- **They can have a negative effect on other subjects**
Some schools and students prioritised subjects which have assessments in January. This meant they then neglected other subjects with exams in June only.
- **The modular system isn't giving students a broad range of knowledge**
Breaking up learning into modules meant students' knowledge could be fragmented – some were not developing the breadth of understanding we expect them to have over the whole of a subject.

¹ www.ofqual.gov.uk/files/2012-04-03-fit-for-purpose-a-levels.pdf

The Government's aims for A levels

The changes we are making also cover some of the Government's wider goals for reforming A levels. These include greater involvement from the higher education sector in deciding subject content, and separating AS and A levels (see [page 9 for more on this](#)).

What has happened 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**.^{2,3} 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**⁴ 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:

² www.ofqual.gov.uk/documents/international-comparisons-in-senior-secondary-assessment-full-report/all-versions

³ www.ofqual.gov.uk/files/2012-04-03-fit-for-purpose-a-levels.pdf

⁴ <http://comment.ofqual.gov.uk/a-level-reform/>

- 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 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.

What are the changes to AS qualifications and A levels?

Here is a summary of the decisions.

- **AS qualifications and A levels are ‘decoupled’**

In March last year (2013), the Government decided that AS qualifications should be separated from A levels, making them completely freestanding. At the moment, although AS qualifications are awarded in their own right, their assessments also contribute to students’ final A level grades (with an intended weighting of 50 per cent).

Separating them means students will be able, if they want, to take new A levels *without* also taking an AS in the subject (if students take an A level *after* doing the AS, they’ll be reassessed on the material they’ve already covered).

- **AS qualifications and A levels will be assessed at the end of the course**

In January last year (2013), the Government decided that AS and A level qualifications should be linear qualifications assessed at the end of the course only. Students will not have to take exam board assessments halfway through an A level course, like they usually do at the moment. They will do all the exams together at the end of a (typically) two-year course for A levels and a one year course for AS qualifications (it is likely that students will still take their schools’ own internal or practice exams at earlier points).

- **AS qualifications can be designed to be taught alongside A levels**

Exam boards will be able to design AS qualifications so schools and colleges can (if they want) teach them alongside the first year of the A level in that subject. This will help them plan their teaching and timetables. It will also mean a smoother transition for students who’ve finished an AS qualification to progress to the A level.

- **In principle, all AS qualifications will be exam-only**

Except for art and design, all AS subjects listed for first teaching in 2015 will be exam only. Running one set of non-exam assessments for AS qualifications and another for A levels would be a significant burden for schools and colleges. It would also take more time away from teaching and learning, going against one of the main aims of our reforms. And it reflects the different purposes and difficulty of A levels and AS qualifications (that AS qualifications are as challenging as the first year of an A level course and allow students to mix more subjects, keeping their options open a bit longer).

■ **The objective of AS qualifications**

As the AS will be a freestanding qualification we need to ensure that it has defined objectives that must be met in all AS qualifications in all subjects. We have decided the objectives will be:

- to provide evidence of students' achievements in a robust and internationally comparable post-16 course of study that is a sub-set of A level content; and
- to enable students to broaden the range of subjects they study.

■ **The objectives of A levels**

The objectives of A levels were previously consulted upon. They were, and remain, to:

- define and assess achievement of the knowledge, skills and understanding which will be needed by students planning to progress to undergraduate study at a UK higher education establishment, particularly (although not only) in the same subject area
- set out a robust and internationally comparable post-16 academic course of study to develop that knowledge, skills and understanding
- permit UK universities to accurately identify the level of attainment of students
- provide a basis for school and college accountability measures at age 18 and
- provide a benchmark of academic ability for employers.

It is important to say that the **challenge of new AS qualifications will be the same as now**. And they'll be assessed at the same level of demand as they are now. That means the challenge will be appropriate for the knowledge, skills and understanding we expect from a student who's completed the first half of an A level.

How will we assess practical skills in sciences at AS and A level?

Practical work is a vital part of science education. We want qualifications and assessments to properly support students in developing practical skills, and for practical work to make a positive contribution to teaching and learning.

What's the situation at the moment?

In our research in the higher education sector, people told us that universities put a lot of importance on practical science skills. Respondents told us that many undergraduates arrive at university without these skills because they are not taught them as part of AS and A level study.

We looked at the current arrangements for assessing practical skills and found these problems:

- **Predictable assessments have led to narrow teaching**
This is because:
 - the content of current tests is constrained by the limited time available for them to be completed
 - exam boards have to let schools know what's in assessments in advance so they can make sure they have the right equipment
 - some schools only focus on teaching the skills they know students need to pass an assessment, rather than a broad range.
- **Students get similar results**
Most students get similar results, bunched around the top of the scale. This makes it difficult to differentiate students and grade boundaries end up close to each other.
- **The marks do not reflect students' overall ability**
They get better results in practical tests than written exams.
- **They are open to malpractice**
Different schools (and different students in the same school) might take the same assessments at different times, and schools get instructions for assessments in advance – this means some students and/or teachers might share information about what's in them.
- **Lack of evidence**
The way practical assessments are marked doesn't give exam boards evidence

of the direct assessment of practical skills to check the marks teachers give their students.

What we proposed in our consultation

We proposed there should be two grades for science qualifications: one for the written exam(s) and one for using practical skills. Questions in the exams would assess students' conceptual knowledge and understanding of these practical skills.

What our respondents told us

They liked the idea that the written exam would assess students' understanding of scientific methods. But they wanted the direct assessment of the skills themselves to count towards the same grade. Having a separate grade seemed like a downgrading of practical skills. They were concerned that if the skills didn't count towards a single final grade, they would not be taught.

Overall, our respondents felt that practical science work in schools and colleges needs to be taught and assessed better – and we agree. With the decisions we have made for the new science AS and A levels, we aim to:

- tackle the problems listed above
- emphasise the vital role of practical skills in teaching and learning in science subjects
- help students develop sound practical skills.

What we've decided about assessing sciences at A level

- Students will carry out **practical work** (it will be a content requirement for the qualification).
- They will get a 'pass' or 'fail' grade for this practical work, which will be separate from their grade for the written exam.

Exam boards will set out requirements for practical skills. Each student will need to carry out a minimum of 12 practical activities. The written exams will include questions in the context of these, and other, practical activities. To get good marks, students will need to show knowledge and understanding of the experiments that they have gained through doing them.

For the practical skills element of the course, a 'pass' will show that a student has developed and shown the right practical skills during their course. They will need to show they are suitably competent in the required skills.

We considered using a number of grades for practical work but decided this would continue some of the problems we are trying to address (for example schools might feel pressure to maximise marks rather than teaching a range of skills).

There are pros and cons to both the pass/fail and multiple grade models of reporting. The relative merits and shortcomings of each model depend upon the purpose the reporting is designed to achieve. Based on our proposals, the purpose should be the assessment of essential subject-specific skills that cannot be assessed validly by a written exam. For science these skills are practical, technical and manipulative skills. In the pass/fail model a pass grade would show that the student has developed the necessary practical, technical and manipulative skills identified as being essential at A level. The bar needs to be set suitably high to reflect this.

We already have evidence that suggests it is very difficult to differentiate between students in practical assessments. This was supported by some of the responses to our consultation including responses from higher education. If a multiple grade model was used the new measures would not be vastly different from those already in place. There may be fewer grades but this would not address issues with discrimination, pressures to achieve the highest grade and the opportunity for malpractice. The new system means that instead of just focusing on grades, teachers can make practical work an integral part of studying sciences, and students can concentrate on developing the skills they need for university and work.

What we have decided about assessing sciences at AS

There will not be any non-exam assessment of practical skills for AS qualifications. However, the requirement for practical work to be undertaken and for the conceptual knowledge and understanding of practical skills to be assessed in the exams remains.

How we made these decisions

We considered all the responses to our consultation carefully, including other proposals from specialist organisations and experts. We believe the changes we are making will mean teachers can focus on developing students' practical skills. By fully integrating practical work within the curriculum and making better use of resources, we hope it will be more exciting and better prepare students for university and work.

How will we assess English at AS and A level? English language, English literature, and English language and literature

What is the situation at the moment?

These three qualifications are currently assessed using a mixture of exam and non-exam assessment. Non-exam assessment is essential because some of the skills students need for these subjects (like crafting a piece of writing over an extended period of time) cannot be assessed properly by exams alone.

At the moment non-exam assessment can count for 15 to 40 per cent of marks; most specifications (the details of content and assessment set by exam boards) have it at the top of that range.

When we looked at the arrangements for non-exam assessments in use at the moment, we found problems including:

- **Impact on teaching time**
Non-exam assessment can take up too much classroom time
- **Students get similar results**
Most candidates get similar results, bunched around the top of the scale
- **The marks do not reflect students' overall ability**
Students get much higher marks in non-exam assessments than in exams
- **They are open to malpractice**
Some schools might not stick to the rules on how much time students have to prepare for assessments, how they are supervised, the amount of feedback provided and how much they can change their work after the assessment. And because they can do the work over a period of time and unsupervised, it can be hard to know if it is all the students' own work.

What we have decided about assessing English at A level

After our consultation, we concluded that we need non-exam assessment in English to test skills essential to the subject. But allocating 40 per cent of marks to non-exam assessment tips the balance too far. Given the evidence – particularly how difficult it is to differentiate between candidates – we have decided to set the weighting at **20 per cent for non-exam assessment** in these three A levels.

We will also look at what else we can do to support more valid and reliable non-exam assessment in this subject.

What we have decided about assessing English at AS

There will not be any non-exam assessment for AS qualifications in English (English language, English literature, and English language and literature). This does not mean that the development of the skills of crafting more extended pieces of work should not form part of the teaching and learning.

We have improved assessment objectives

'Assessment objectives' describe the main abilities students need to show to get a qualification. We consulted on proposed assessment objectives in these subjects: English language, English literature, English language and literature, biology, chemistry, physics, psychology, art and design, business studies, computing, economics, history and sociology.

The abilities must be:

- **relevant** to the subject
- **balanced** appropriately
- **easy to compare** between different exam boards and over time.

After looking at our consultation findings, we have changed the assessment objectives for some subjects. We have done this to make sure the abilities described are:

- **appropriate** for the subject
- **consistent** across the assessment objectives
- **clearly focused** on the specific abilities
- **demonstrable at a range of levels** by students (so exam boards can differentiate between different students' performances).

We have recently published the final versions of the assessment objectives in these subjects. You can find them on our website.⁵

Assessment objectives for computer science for AS and A level

The DfE consulted on the content of AS and A level computer science (previously called computing). After the consultation, they made significant changes to the original content proposals with the help of the British Computing Society (BCS) and Computing at School (CAS).

Following these changes to the proposals, we have now revised the wording of the assessment objectives. We aim to be much clearer about the abilities students need for each objective and the distinctions between these abilities.

⁵ www.ofqual.gov.uk/how-we-regulate/regulatory-requirements/linear-as-a-levels

The changes we have made to the assessment objectives for computer science are consistent with the feedback we got in our consultation. See the link above.

Table: Assessing the new A levels

This is a summary of the assessment arrangements for the subjects we have mentioned above, as well as other subjects we will be introducing in 2015.

Qualification	Year for first teaching	Assessment	Other information
English language	2015	Exams – 80% Non-exam assessment – 20%	
English literature	2015	Exams – 80% Non-exam assessment – 20%	
English language and literature	2015	Exams – 80% Non-exam assessment – 20%	
Biology	2015	Exams – 100% A separate assessment for practical skills	Students will either pass or fail the practical skills assessment
Chemistry	2015	Exams – 100% A separate assessment for practical skills	Students will either pass or fail the practical skills assessment
Physics	2015	Exams – 100% A separate assessment for practical skills	Students will either pass or fail the practical skills assessment
Psychology	2015	Exams – 100%	
Art and design	2015	Non-exam assessment – 100% 40% is allocated to tasks set by exam boards and completed in a specified time	We have introduced this 40% to improve consistency across exam boards and specifications

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Business studies	2015	Exams – 100%	
Computer science (formerly computing)	2015	Exams – 80% Non-exam assessment – 20%	
Economics	2015	Exams – 100%	
History	2015	Exams – 80% Non-exam assessment – 20%	
Sociology	2015	Exams – 100%	

What happens next?

We will reform more subjects

We need to reform more AS and A level subjects for first teaching in 2016. The Government has announced which subjects these will be: religious studies; design and technology; drama; dance; music and physical education. The DfE will lead the consultation on the content of these subjects. At the same time, we will consult on their structure and how they'll be assessed.

We will reform the remaining AS and A level subjects by 2017

This spring, we will consult on our plans for the reform of the remaining A levels (and GCSEs). When we have finished the consultation, we'll set out the process exam boards will have to follow if they want to develop and award an AS qualification and/or A level in any subject.

We are proposing:

- **All 'legacy' AS qualifications and A levels will be withdrawn or reformed**
If they are withdrawn, this will be from 2017 (meaning the last award will be 2018). If they're reformed, they'll be for first teaching in 2017 (meaning the first award will be in 2019). This limits how long the old and new qualifications will run in parallel.
- **Future AS qualifications and A levels will have pre-determined core content**
We will publish minimum content requirements for each subject which exam boards will have to use when developing their qualifications.
- **A collaborative regulatory framework**
This will mean that exam boards can work together to develop core content.
- **A policy approach for deciding future AS and A level subjects**
This will be rooted in our regulatory requirements and will ensure that AS qualifications and A levels are only developed in subjects which can be assessed validly and reliably against the full grade range.

When will the new AS and A level qualifications be taught?

- From **2015** – English language, English literature, English language and literature, biology, chemistry, physics, psychology, art and design, business studies, computing, economics, history, sociology.
- From **2016** – Mathematics, further mathematics, modern foreign languages (MFL), ancient languages and geography plus the subjects recently announced by DfE - Religious studies; design and technology; drama; dance; music and physical education.
- From **2017** – all other subjects.

Keeping you up to date

You can find out the latest news on these reforms on our website⁶ where we will also publish our:

- evaluation report of the consultation
- equality impact assessment
- regulatory impact assessment
- assessment arrangements and objectives for each subject to be taught from 2015
- link to the DfE subject pages for each subject to be taught from 2015.

⁶ www.ofqual.gov.uk

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