



Department
for Education

Reformed A level subject content consultation

Government response

December 2014

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Introduction

On 16 July 2014 the Department for Education published a consultation on proposed A and AS level subject content based on the A Level Content Advisory Board's (ALCAB) recommendations for AS and A levels in **modern foreign languages, ancient languages, mathematics, further mathematics, and geography**.

In this document, the Department provides its response to the ALCAB recommendations. Separate consultation responses will be published in the New Year on the remaining subjects to be first taught from 2016¹.

New A level content aims to encourage development of the skills and knowledge needed for progression to undergraduate study and employment. The consultation sought views on the following questions:

- whether the revised A level content in each subject is appropriate:
 - whether the content reflects what students need to know in order to progress to undergraduate study
- whether the revised AS qualification content in each subject is appropriate
- whether the revised modern foreign languages content, covering assessment of all four skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening), is applicable to all languages currently available for study at AS and A level.

The consultation ran for 9 and a half weeks until 22 September 2014 and received 315 responses from schools, further and higher education institutions, employers, subject associations, curriculum and assessment experts, and the general public. We also met regularly with subject associations to help us understand expert views in more depth.

Ofqual, the independent regulator, consulted in parallel on GCSE, AS and A level assessment arrangements for these subjects. Ofqual's response to its consultation will be available at: www.gov.uk/government/consultations/.

The Department and ALCAB considered the evidence for A and AS levels in modern foreign languages, ancient languages, mathematics, further mathematics, and geography. The Department has worked with ALCAB to finalise content for these subjects, and ALCAB has explained its recommendations in a [letter to the Secretary of State](#).

¹ Including GCSEs in art and design, dance, computer science, music, physical education, design and technology, drama, citizenship, cooking and nutrition and religious studies; and AS and A levels in dance, music, physical education, drama and theatre studies and religious studies.

Overview of A level reforms

The government is reforming A levels to make sure that they prepare students better for higher education and employment. The new A levels will be linear qualifications that encourage development of the skills and knowledge students need for progression to undergraduate study. The content allows for awarding organisations to develop new stand-alone AS qualifications taught over one or two years that can be co-taught with the A level. Students may want to benefit from this change and only take an AS qualification to add breadth to their A level study. However, it will continue to be possible for students to take an AS in some subjects before deciding which to continue onto A level.

Reforms to these qualifications are already underway. At AS and A level, [subject content](#) in art and design, biology, business, chemistry, computer science, economics, English language, English literature, English language and literature, history, physics, psychology, and sociology was published in April 2014. These new qualifications will be taught from September 2015.

Responsibility for reviewing subject content for the remaining facilitating subjects, which are to be taught from September 2016, was remitted to a new independent body, the A level Content Advisory Board (ALCAB).² We consulted on proposals based on ALCAB's [recommendations](#).

Ofqual has [consulted](#) on proposals for the final phase of reform and will decide on the process for the final phase of reform soon. Reformed GCSEs and A levels in remaining subjects will then be introduced for first teaching from 2017.

² It was decided that A levels in modern foreign languages, mathematics, further mathematics and geography required more significant change and development time and that these subjects would be reformed for first teaching in 2016. Following a request from the Department, the Russell Group of universities set up ALCAB to review subject content in these subjects, together with ancient and classical languages.

Summary of responses received and the government's response

This section sets out the views that we have heard in response to the consultation on the ALCAB A levels. It also sets out the decisions that have been taken to finalise the content in these subjects.

The written responses and the views expressed by subject experts during the consultation period and throughout the development process have been important in shaping and strengthening the content. The Department has also worked closely with Ofqual and awarding organisations to ensure that the subject content can be regulated.

Some respondents who provided written responses to the consultation chose only to answer a subset of the questions that were posed. Therefore, response figures for each subject differ depending on which questions people answered, for example there were 24 responses to our question on A level ancient languages whereas there were 88 for A level Maths. Throughout the report, percentages are expressed as a measure of those answering each question, not as a measure of all responses.

Some issues which arose fell outside the scope of the subject content consultation. Some were relevant to Ofqual's parallel consultation on regulatory requirements and assessment arrangements. These issues will be addressed by Ofqual in its consultation response and are therefore not reported here.

This analysis does not include issues mentioned by respondents which were outside the scope of the review – for example, issues raised on the decoupling of the AS and A level qualification, upon which a decision was taken in March 2013.

ALCAB Subjects

This section sets out the responses we received on the proposals for AS and A levels in the remaining facilitating subjects. It also summarises the recommendations that ALCAB made on subject content for these subjects. Further information is available in [ALCAB's panel reports](#).

Modern foreign languages AS and A level

Modern foreign languages A level

We received 74 responses on the suitability of the modern foreign languages A level subject content, of which 18 agreed the draft content was appropriate.

Is the revised A level content in Modern Foreign Languages appropriate in view of the issues raised in ALCAB's reports?	Total	Percent
No:	40	54%
Yes:	18	24%
Not Sure:	16	22%

Respondents referred the need to increase participation in the study of modern foreign languages. 19% of respondents were concerned that the proposed changes to the A level could reduce interest in the subject and depress student numbers. Recurring suggestions from the consultation were:

- The amount of assessment in English should be reduced to allow for a greater focus on teaching foreign language skills (39% of respondents)
- The themes suggested by ALCAB should be amended to make them more engaging and appealing for students at this level (24% of respondents)
- ALCAB should reconsider the compulsory study of literary works to broaden the appeal of the qualification (15% of respondents)

In expanding on these views, respondents stressed the amount of time taken away from language study by taking and preparing for an exam task in English. Respondents also highlighted the potential for unfair bias towards students with good English skills that could arise from assessment in English.

Where respondents expressed concern that some themes and topics were not appropriate for students at this age or level of study they often had regard to the list of

exemplar topics published in ALCAB’s report in July. Respondents and stakeholders also expressed concern that the subject content was too large could not be taught effectively in the time available.

Teachers responding to the consultation reported that many students considering studying modern foreign languages at A level were clear that they did not wish to study literature and that a focus on literature might decrease uptake. Respondents suggested that students whose interests lay in science subjects could more appropriately study non-literary works.

Modern foreign languages AS level

We received 67 responses on the suitability of the modern foreign languages AS level subject content, of which 13 agreed the draft content was appropriate.

Is the revised AS level content in Modern Foreign Languages appropriate in view of the issues raised in ALCAB’s reports?	Total	Percent
No:	40	60%
Not Sure:	14	21%
Yes:	13	19%

Respondents to the consultation on AS level modern foreign languages echoed the suggestions made for the subject at A level. In addition, 18% of respondents suggested that ALCAB should consider reducing the size and scope of the AS level to ensure effective progression from GCSE to further study.

Government response to modern foreign languages AS and A level

The ALCAB panel considered the consultation responses regarding teaching and assessment in English and has recommended replacing the proposed analytical essay in English with a requirement to give a critical and analytical response in the language of study to two works presented in that language.

ALCAB carefully considered concerns that the content was too large or too ambitious. The panel recommended reducing the number of themes to be studied at AS level from three to two, and at A level from six to four.

Some respondents wanted more emphasis on communicative language skills rather than intercultural understanding. In the view of the ALCAB panel this is a false dichotomy. Their recommendations are based on the development of independent communicators in the target language whose linguistic ability is integrated with an understanding of aspects

of the society and culture of countries where the language is spoken. . Employer surveys demonstrate the importance of intercultural understanding for language users.

In response to suggested alternative topics or works to be studied, e, ALCAB recommends extending the range of works eligible for study to include biography, as well as journals, diaries and letters, to offer a greater choice to students. It also agreed to publish revised indicative lists of themes, works and research topics. The revised lists can be found at alcab.org.uk/.

ALCAB advises that, with these changes, the qualifications fulfil the intended aims set out by ALCAB and reflect what students need to know in order to progress to undergraduate study. The board's full response to the consultation can be found at: alcab.org.uk/correspondence

Ancient languages AS and A level

Ancient languages A level

We received 24 responses on the suitability of the ancient languages A level subject content, of which 9 agreed the draft content was appropriate

Is the revised A level content in Ancient Languages appropriate in view of the issues raised in ALCAB's reports?	Total	Percent
Not Sure:	10	42%
Yes:	9	38%
No:	5	21%

Ancient languages received the fewest responses of any A level subject in the consultation. Respondents made a number of recommendations on points of detail in the subject content, which have been taken on board by ALCAB. The main suggestions put forward in the consultation on Ancient language were:

- 13% of respondents felt that the length and difficulty of the proposed texts would be too demanding for students and put too much pressure on classroom time for translation and analysis. Respondents suggested that longer texts would lead to an emphasis on the literature over language, and lead to duplication of content between the A level languages qualification and qualifications in classical civilisation.
- 13% of respondents were concerned that the qualification should be drafted so as to be applicable to ancient languages which are taught less often than Latin and

Greek. Other languages which respondents thought should be specifically included in the content included Biblical Hebrew, New Testament Greek and Sanskrit.

Ancient languages AS level

We received 20 responses on the suitability of the ancient languages AS level subject content, of which 10 agreed the draft content was appropriate.

Is the revised AS level content in Ancient Languages appropriate in view of the issues raised in ALCAB's reports?	Total	Percent
Yes:	10	50%
Not Sure:	6	30%
No:	4	20%

Respondents to the consultation on AS level modern foreign languages echoed the suggestions made for the subject at A level.

Government response to ancient languages AS and A level

The ALCAB panel thoroughly deliberated suggestions that the study of shorter or partial texts, with less focus on their historical and cultural content, would allow for more language learning. The panel considered that, while it was important that the qualification was manageable and fit for purpose, the proposed subject content is not overly focussed on the context surrounding set texts and it would not duplicate classical civilisation or classical history qualifications in this regard. It restated the position of language skills within the qualification and said that translation from the language of study to English should remain at both AS and A level.

The ALCAB panel was not equipped to give detailed consideration to other ancient languages. The panel confined its advice to classical languages which are recognised as facilitating subjects by the Russell Group of universities, i.e. Ancient Greek and Latin. However, content set out by the panel can be adapted for A level specifications in other ancient languages.

ALCAB advises that, with these changes, the qualifications fulfil the intended aims set out by ALCAB and reflect what students need to know in order to progress to undergraduate study. The board's full response to the consultation can be found at:

alcab.org.uk/correspondence

Mathematics AS and A level

Mathematics A level

We received 88 responses on the suitability of the mathematics A level subject content, of which 21 agreed the draft content was appropriate.

Is the revised A level content in mathematics appropriate in view of the issues raised in ALCAB's reports?	Total	Percent
No:	46	52%
Not Sure:	21	24%
Yes:	21	24%

11% of respondents expressed concern that the reformed subject content would depress take up of A level mathematics. Respondents were also concerned that the new mathematics AS and A levels, which contain 100% prescribed content, would be inflexible. Specific suggestions raised in the consultation were:

- Optional mechanics and statistics should be reintroduced to allow schools to tailor the course their students follow to better prepare them for further study in certain specialist degrees (11% of respondents)
- Allowing students to opt out of statistics and mechanics would prevent a fall in student numbers (10% of respondents)
- Reducing the level of demand in the subject would increase its appeal and accessibility (3% of respondents)

In expanding on these views, some respondents expressed the view that schools required the opportunity to tailor their course to include more mechanics or statistics where students intend to progress to further study in specialised undergraduate programmes e.g. more mechanics for engineering and physics students; more statistics for students of psychology and social sciences. Similarly, some respondents believed that students would be deterred from studying mathematics if they could not pursue a course through the qualification that avoided areas of study which did not appeal to them.

15% of respondents felt that decision mathematics should not have been removed from the subject content, although some teachers responding individually welcomed the removal of decision mathematics as they believed it offered an inadequate level of challenge and allowed for easy routes through the qualification.

Mathematics AS level

We received 77 responses on the suitability of the mathematics AS level subject content, of which 21 agreed the draft content was appropriate.

Is the revised AS level content in mathematics appropriate in view of the issues raised in ALCAB's reports?	Total	Percent
No:	38	49%
Yes:	21	27%
Not Sure:	18	23%

Respondents echoed concerns expressed at A level about the effect of introducing 100% prescribed content on the study of mechanics and statistics. There were also concerns that the proposed reforms included too much content to be taught effectively at AS level (14% of respondents) and that the content which was chosen for inclusion at AS mathematics was too difficult for study at this level and did not provide for effective progression from GCSE (8% of respondents).

Government response to mathematics AS and A level

ALCAB has clarified the wording of the subject content to avoid ambiguities that were highlighted in responses to the consultation. Where drafting suggestions on points of detail were made they were gratefully received and taken into account.

After careful consideration of the responses to the consultation the ALCAB panel reaffirmed its support for 100% prescribed content in the new AS and A level mathematics to better prepare students for undergraduate study. ALCAB also decided that the amount of content for the compulsory statistics and mechanics units of the course was well balanced and suited to the size of the qualification. ALCAB pointed out that, under the unreformed qualification, A level modules were often selected based on a teacher's familiarity with subject content and not on students' plans for further study. University tutors had reported that students who had studied the current mathematics A level were often inadequately prepared for their chosen areas of study.

In response to concerns that the qualifications were too large, some content has been moved from the AS level to the A level and some has been removed from the qualification entirely. Mathematical problem solving remains at the heart of the new A level and will involve applying mathematical knowledge and understanding.

After careful deliberation the panel decided that further mathematics was the right place for a revised version of decision mathematics, and that it should therefore not be retained in A level mathematics.

ALCAB advises that, with these changes, the qualifications fulfil the panel’s intended aims and reflect what students need to know in order to progress to undergraduate study. ALCAB recommends that mathematics and further mathematics AS and A level should be first taught in 2017, so that the first cohort to study the reformed A level will have studied the reformed GCSE. The board’s full response to the consultation can be found at: alcab.org.uk/correspondence.

Further mathematics AS and A level

Further mathematics A level

We received 80 responses on the suitability of the further mathematics A level subject content, of which 27 agreed the draft content was appropriate.

Is the revised A level content in further mathematics appropriate in view of the issues raised in ALCAB’s reports?	Total	Percent
Not Sure:	28	35%
Yes:	27	34%
No:	25	31%

As with responses to mathematics, respondents were concerned that the changes to the qualification would depress student numbers (16%), suggesting that increased focus on pure mathematics in the prescribed subject content would deter students. A number of respondents suggested clarifications to the wording of the subject content, which have been taken on board by the panel.

Respondents were divided about the balance of prescribed and optional content: 13% objected to prescription of modules or wanted greater modularity; 13% thought that more prescription was needed in further mathematics to ensure universities could rely on consistency of knowledge in students with the qualification; 15% thought the right balance had been struck between prescribed and optional content. 5% of respondents believed the core content should include a greater focus on mechanics and statistics.

13% of respondents felt that the content or accompanying guidance should make it clear how mathematics AS and A level and further mathematics AS and A level would align for effective co-teaching. Respondents were particularly concerned that the lower level of prescribed content in the further mathematics AS level could lead to conflicts with the fully prescribed mathematics AS level. Respondents suggested that the content of the further mathematics AS level could be further prescribed to more closely align it with the mathematics AS level and thereby avoid the possibility of such tensions.

Further mathematics AS level

We received 68 responses on the suitability of the further mathematics AS level subject content, of which 23 agreed the draft content was appropriate.

Is the revised AS level content in further mathematics appropriate in view of the issues raised in ALCAB's reports?	Total	Percent
Not Sure:	23	34%
Yes:	23	34%
No:	22	32%

Responses on AS level further mathematics echoed concerns about the impact of the reformed qualification on student numbers. 4% of respondents wanted more prescribed content at AS level. These respondents had largely accepted ALCAB's reasoning and suggested that, for the credibility of further mathematics, options such as decision maths should be removed. Respondents expressed the view that many further mathematics students would pursue similar routes at higher education, i.e. engineering and sciences, meaning that further mathematics lends itself to a greater level of prescription.

Government response to further mathematics AS and A level

ALCAB has clarified the wording of the subject content in places to avoid ambiguities that were highlighted in responses to the consultation. In particular, ALCAB has reviewed the text to ensure that the overarching themes are clearly expressed.

After carefully considering all responses to the consultation on the correct balance of optionality and prescription at both AS and A level, the panel restates its view that flexibility is needed in further mathematics. This can accommodate the need to allow for more applied mathematics than pure mathematics. However, it agrees that the sections on proof in AS and A level can be strengthened and has acted accordingly.

After careful deliberation the panel decided that further mathematics was the right place for a revised version of decision mathematics.

ALCAB advises that, with these changes, the qualifications fulfil the panel's intended aims and reflect what students need to know in order to progress to undergraduate study. ALCAB recommends that mathematics and further mathematics AS and A level should be first taught in 2017, so that the first cohort to study the reformed A level will have studied the reformed GCSE. The board's full response to the consultation can be found at: alcab.org.uk/correspondence

Geography AS and A level

Geography A level

We received 49 responses on the suitability of the geography A level subject content, of which 18 agreed the draft content was appropriate.

Is the revised A level content in geography appropriate in view of the issues raised in ALCAB's reports?	Total	Percent
No:	19	39%
Yes:	18	37%
Not Sure:	12	24%

20% of respondents welcomed the approach to fieldwork in the reformed qualification and the balance of human and physical geography. 10% of respondents felt that the qualification demonstrated adequate progression from geography GCSE. 20% of respondents welcomed a perceived increase in the demand of the qualification and 31% of respondents approved of the core content.

Some respondents were concerned that a requirement for all students within a cohort would each be required to undertake distinct practical fieldwork exercises to satisfy the requirement for independent study would strain teaching resources. Ofqual confirmed that the draft subject content does not require separate fieldwork practical trips to be organised for each individual in a cohort. The individual project should reflect a focus identified by the student individually which may be informed by data collected as a group.

Some further suggestions put forward in the consultation were:

- Removing some content from the qualification would make it more practical to teach (8% of respondents)
- Certain specific topics should be added to the prescribed core content or moved from elsewhere in the content (12% of respondents)
- Reducing the amount of complex theoretical concepts would make the qualification more engaging and accessible (10% of respondents)

Geography AS level

We received 38 responses on the suitability of the geography A level subject content, of which 12 agreed the draft content was appropriate.

Is the revised AS level content in geography appropriate in view of the issues raised in ALCAB's reports?	Total	Percent
No:	13	34%
Not Sure:	13	34%
Yes:	12	32%

Respondents at AS level echoed the suggestions of respondents at A level.

Government response to geography AS and A level

After careful consideration of the size of the qualification and the practical requirements of teachers, the ALCAB panel decided to remove some content from the core. ALCAB also recognised that certain topics might be new to some teachers and have therefore included additional explanatory text in the revised content to assist teaching in these areas.

ALCAB reaffirmed that fieldwork was essential to the study of geography at this level. The panel decided that the allocation of at least two days' fieldwork at AS level and at least four days at A level should be required, and that the fieldwork should cover practical study of both human and physical geography. The panel has amended the wording of the content in several places to avoid ambiguities highlighted in consultation responses. Ofqual has confirmed that awarding organisations will be required to obtain an assurance from schools and colleges that the required fieldwork has been done.

ALCAB advises that, with these changes, the qualifications fulfil the panel's intended aims and reflect what students need to know in order to progress to undergraduate study. The board's full response to the consultation can be found at:

alcab.org.uk/correspondence

Conclusion

We are grateful to all those who responded to the consultation and to those individuals who have worked with awarding organisations, ALCAB and the Department to finalise subject content for these subjects. We believe that the changes made in response to the consultation appropriately address the issues raised and that the content we have published will provide young people with the high quality qualifications they deserve.



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