



## BRIEFING PAPER

Number 06962, 31 March 2017

# GCSE, AS and A level reform (England)

By Robert Long

**Inside:**

1. Introduction
2. Reform of GCSEs
3. Reform of AS and A levels
4. Withdrawal of subjects at GCSE, AS and A level



# Contents

<b>Summary</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
1.1 Reformed GCSEs	4
1.2 Reformed AS and A levels	4
<b>2. Reform of GCSEs</b>	<b>5</b>
2.1 The Importance of Teaching White Paper and initial proposals	5
2.2 Revised Proposals to reform GCSEs and A Level reform (February 2013)	6
2.3 Focus on examinations (February-June 2013)	7
2.4 Performance measures for schools (September-October 2013)	7
Resits and school league tables	7
Progress 8	8
2.5 Ofqual consultation on GCSE reform (June-November 2013)	9
2.6 New grading system consultation (April-September 2014)	10
New grading system	11
A 'standard pass' and a 'strong pass'	11
2.7 Revised subject content: timetable for introduction	12
<b>3. Reform of AS and A levels</b>	<b>14</b>
3.1 Features of new qualifications	14
3.2 Rationale	14
3.3 Timetable for new qualifications	16
<b>4. Withdrawal of subjects at GCSE, AS and A level</b>	<b>18</b>

## Summary

The Coalition Government undertook significant reform of GCSE, AS and A level qualifications, which has continued under the Conservatives. 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 are no longer 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 for students receiving their results in reformed GCSEs from June 2017. Grade 4 will be considered a 'standard' pass, and Grade 5 a 'strong pass'.

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 National Curriculum review carried out under the Coalition Government, [SN/SP/6798](#), provides related information.

This note applies to England only.

# 1. Introduction

The 2010-15 Government undertook reform of 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.<sup>1</sup>

## 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 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 has been taught since September 2015, with other subjects to be taught from September 2016 and 2017; a timetable is provided in section 2.7.

Changes have also been made to school accountability, with a new 'Progress 8' performance measure 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.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ofqual, [Changes to qualifications](#) [retrieved 14 August 2014]

## 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.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup>

Strong concerns were expressed about the content and implementation of the proposed EBCs. In particular, there was concern about the treatment of excluded creative subjects – such as art, drama, music, and ICT, and sport.<sup>4</sup> There was also concern about the single awarding 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.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup> The Government's response was published in April 2013.<sup>7</sup>

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

---

<sup>2</sup> [HC Deb 17 Sep 2012 c653-655](#)

<sup>3</sup> Department for Education, [Reforming Key Stage 4 Qualifications](#), September 2012

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

<sup>5</sup> HC Deb 16 Jan 2013 c877-938

<sup>6</sup> 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

<sup>7</sup> 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

## 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.<sup>8</sup>

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 3 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):** [...]

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.

[...]

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.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> [HC Deb 7 Feb 2013 c441](#)

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

## 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”.<sup>10</sup>

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”.<sup>11</sup>

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”. 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”.<sup>12</sup>

## 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.

---

<sup>10</sup> Department for Education, [Ofqual policy steer letter: reforming Key Stage 4 qualifications](#), 6 February 2013, p3

<sup>11</sup> Ofqual, [Review of Controlled Assessment in GCSEs](#), Ofqual/13/5291, June 2013, p4

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

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.<sup>13</sup>

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

## Progress 8

On 14 October 2013, the then 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 [English Baccalaureate], 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.<sup>15</sup>

This announcement followed a consultation, conducted between February and May 2013, on school accountability measures, which the Government [responded](#) to in October 2013.<sup>16</sup>

Progress 8 would 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 is based on students' progress measured across eight subjects: English; mathematics; three other English Baccalaureate (EBacc) subjects

---

<sup>13</sup> 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.

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

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

<sup>16</sup> 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



(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

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”.<sup>17</sup>

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

---

<sup>17</sup> BMG Research, [New GCSE Grades Research Amongst Employers – Prepared for: Ofqual](#), November 2013, pp2–3

## 11 GCSE, AS and A level reform (England)

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.<sup>18</sup>

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”.<sup>19</sup>

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.<sup>20</sup> 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 would be in place from September 2015, for students receiving their results in summer 2017.

### A ‘standard pass’ and a ‘strong pass’

On 16 June 2015, the then Education Secretary further [announced](#) that the new grading system would set a new level of what constitutes a ‘good pass’. The existing system of using grade C as the base measure would be altered to the new grade 5. Grade 5 would be the equivalent to a high C or low B under the existing system, whereas the bottom of the current grade C would be the bottom of the new grade 4. The Government stated that this would bring the standard into line with

---

<sup>18</sup> As above, p16

<sup>19</sup> As above, p18

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

top-performing countries such as Finland, Canada, the Netherlands and Switzerland.<sup>21</sup>

Subsequently, on 28 March 2017, this [proposal was revised](#). In a letter to the Chair of the Education Committee, the Education Secretary stated that the Department would now consider:

- Grade 4 as a 'standard pass' and
- Grade 5 as a 'strong pass'

The letter confirmed that the DfE would report on both. The Secretary of State continued:

Under the new system, a grade 4 and above will be equivalent to a C and above. This is - and will remain - the level that pupils must achieve in order not to be required to continue studying English and maths post 16. Therefore, a GCSE pass at new grade 4 will continue to have real currency for individual pupils as they progress to further study and employment. Where employers, FE providers and universities currently accept a grade C we would expect them to continue recognising a grade 4.

The government wants to see the percentage of pupils achieving a grade 5 and above rising as the performance of the education system improves - but this will take time. Indeed the process used by Ofqual to avoid grade inflation will ensure that broadly the same proportion of pupils achieve the grade 4 and above this summer as achieved the grade C and above last year.<sup>22</sup>

## 2.7 Revised subject content: timetable for introduction

As part of these reforms, the subject content of GCSE courses has been revised. These revised courses are being introduced between 2015 and 2017.

Ofqual [provides](#) a timetable setting out when the revised GCSEs would be first taught:

- From September 2015 (results in summer 2017):
  - English language
  - English literature
  - Mathematics
- From September 2016 (results in summer 2018):
  - ancient languages (classical Greek, Latin)
  - art and design
  - biology
  - chemistry
  - citizenship studies
  - computer science

---

<sup>21</sup> Department for Education, [New reforms to raise standards and improve behaviour](#), 16 June 2015

<sup>22</sup> Department for Education, [Letter to Rt Hon Neil Carmichael MP](#), 28 March 2017

### 13 GCSE, AS and A level reform (England)

- dance
- double science
- drama
- food preparation and nutrition
- geography
- history
- modern foreign languages (French, German, Spanish)
- music
- physics
- physical education
- religious studies
- From September 2017 (results in summer 2019):
  - ancient history
  - astronomy
  - business
  - classical civilisation
  - design and technology
  - economics
  - electronics
  - engineering
  - film studies
  - geology
  - media studies
  - psychology
  - sociology
  - statistics

Revised [GCSE subject content](#) has been published by the Department for Education.

## 3. Reform of AS and A levels

### 3.1 Features of new qualifications

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.<sup>23</sup> Ofqual responded to state that it would develop reformed A levels, through consultation, to address these concerns.<sup>24</sup>

Ofqual provides an [overview](#) of the main features of the new qualifications:

- 1 Assessment will be mainly by exam, with other types of assessment used only where they are needed to test essential skills.
- 2 AS and A levels will be assessed at the end of the course. AS assessments will typically take place after one year's study and A levels after two. The courses will no longer be divided into modules and there will be no exams in January.
- 3 AS and A levels will be decoupled – this means that AS results will no longer count towards an A level, in the way they do now.
- 4 AS levels can be designed by exam boards to be taught alongside the first year of A levels.
- 5 The content for the new A levels has been reviewed and updated. Universities played a greater role in this for the new qualifications than they did previously.

### 3.2 Rationale

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

...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.

<sup>23</sup> Department for Education, [letter from Secretary of State to Chief Executive of Ofqual](#), 30 March 2012

<sup>24</sup> Ofqual, [letter from Chief Regulator to Secretary of State for Education](#), 3 April 2012

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.<sup>25</sup>

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.

---

<sup>25</sup> [HC Deb 16 April 2013 c52-53WH](#)

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.<sup>26</sup>

### 3.3 Timetable for new qualifications

Ofqual has published a [timetable](#) for the introduction of the new qualifications:

- From September 2015 (first AS results summer 2016; first A level results summer 2017):
  - art and design
  - biology
  - business
  - chemistry
  - computer science
  - economics
  - English language
  - English language and literature
  - English literature
  - history
  - physics
  - psychology
  - sociology
- From September 2016 (first AS results summer 2017; first A level results summer 2018):
  - ancient languages (classical Greek, Latin)
  - dance
  - drama and theatre
  - geography
  - modern foreign languages (French, German, Spanish)
  - music
  - physical education
  - religious studies
- From September 2017 (first AS results summer 2018; first A level results summer 2019)
  - accounting

---

<sup>26</sup> [HC Deb 16 April 2013 33-56WH](#)



## 17 GCSE, AS and A level reform (England)

- ancient history
- archaeology
- classical civilisation
- design and technology
- electronics
- environmental science
- film studies
- further mathematics
- geology
- government and politics
- history of art
- law
- mathematics
- media studies
- music technology
- philosophy
- statistics

Revised [AS and A level subject content](#) has been published by the Department for Education.

## 4. Withdrawal of subjects at GCSE, AS and A level

On 4 June 2014, an Ofqual consultation was launched on [Completing GCSE, AS and A Level Reform](#). The consultation ran for eight weeks and focused on a variety of issues, including requiring core content for new GCSE, AS or A level qualifications.

It stated that as a part of the reform process, qualifications in some subjects would be withdrawn:

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.<sup>27</sup>

Decisions have subsequently been [published](#) on the completion of GCSE, AS and A level reform and the subjects that would subsequently be withdrawn or replaced by similar subjects (for instance, A level human biology was deemed too close in content to biology, and as a result there will be only a biology A level once the reforms are concluded).<sup>28</sup>

Ofqual has published a list of [subjects not being reformed](#) at GCSE, AS and A level.<sup>29</sup>

Ofqual [consulted](#) on last teaching, exams and resits in 'legacy' GCSEs, AS and A levels. The consultation was launched in December 2015 and was open until 2 February 2016.<sup>30</sup>

Following the consultation, Ofqual announced that:

- Students taking legacy AS and A levels would have the opportunity to re-sit these qualifications after the final scheduled award, regardless of the subject. These resits would be in May or June of the following year.
- At GCSE Ofqual would require exam boards to provide:
  - two re-sit opportunities in relation to legacy GCSEs in English, English language and mathematics (including linked pair maths GCSEs – 'applications of mathematics' and 'methods in mathematics'), one in November 2016 and one in summer 2017
  - a re-sit opportunity, no later than summer 2018, in all GCSE science and additional science qualifications currently

<sup>27</sup> Ofqual, [Completing GCSE, AS and A level Reform](#), June 2014, p3

<sup>28</sup> Ofqual, [Completing GCSE, AS and A level Reform](#), 15 December 2015

<sup>29</sup> Ofqual, [GCSE, AS and A level subjects that are not being reformed](#), 15 December 2015

<sup>30</sup> Ofqual, [Final Entries to Legacy GCSEs, AS and A Levels: Consultation](#), December 2015

## 19 GCSE, AS and A level reform (England)

offered. Exam boards could decide to offer GCSEs in Biology, Chemistry and Physics but would not be required to.

- At GCSE level Ofqual would also allow, but not require, exam boards to offer a single re-sit opportunity in the year following the last scheduled sitting in any other legacy GCSE subject
- There would be restrictions on who could take both the GCSE and AS and A level re-sits.

Relevant [formal rules](#) were published in May 2016.

## About the Library

The House of Commons Library research service provides MPs and their staff with the impartial briefing and evidence base they need to do their work in scrutinising Government, proposing legislation, and supporting constituents.

As well as providing MPs with a confidential service we publish open briefing papers, which are available on the Parliament website.

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in these publically available research briefings is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware however that briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.

If you have any comments on our briefings please email [papers@parliament.uk](mailto:papers@parliament.uk). Authors are available to discuss the content of this briefing only with Members and their staff.

If you have any general questions about the work of the House of Commons you can email [hcinfo@parliament.uk](mailto:hcinfo@parliament.uk).

## Disclaimer

This information is provided to Members of Parliament in support of their parliamentary duties. It is a general briefing only and should not be relied on as a substitute for specific advice. The House of Commons or the author(s) shall not be liable for any errors or omissions, or for any loss or damage of any kind arising from its use, and may remove, vary or amend any information at any time without prior notice.

The House of Commons accepts no responsibility for any references or links to, or the content of, information maintained by third parties. This information is provided subject to the [conditions of the Open Parliament Licence](#).