

Implementing A Level Reform

ASCL has produced the following guidance to assist members in the very difficult decisions they are currently making about the structure of A level courses from 2015. ASCL is not recommending a particular approach as this is a professional decision to be made by school/college leaders with the best interests of students in mind and, as ever, students have different needs and will want to pursue different progression routes. We are very aware that there are still too many unknowns and have made this point repeatedly to all those involved in the decision making process. As soon as any further information becomes available ASCL will ensure that this is communicated to members via the weekly email newsletter.

This guidance is arranged in three sections:

- the facts about AS and A level reform
- a summary of the options which we know members are considering from feedback received
- the issues to consider before making your decision

A and AS level reform: the facts

- 1 The content of all AS and A level qualifications is being reviewed. Universities are involved in this work through a process led by Mark Smith, ALCAB (the A level content advisory board) and/or awarding body advisory groups.
- 2 A and AS have been decoupled. This will come into effect as each subject is reformed. AS will then be a freestanding qualification which does not contribute to the A level grade.
- 3 AS and A level qualifications will be assessed at the end of the course.
- 4 AS qualifications are being designed to be taught alongside the first year of an A level course.
- 5 Non-exam assessment will be used only where the content/skills cannot be assessed in any other way and the intention is to make most AS qualifications exam only. Two grades will be awarded for the A level science subjects: an exam grade, and a separate pass or fail grade for practical skills.
- 6 The grading remains as now for AS and A level. There will be a revised methodology for the calculation of the A* at A level.
- 7 The reformed AS and A levels will be phased in between 2017 and 2019 (awarding). From 2019 it is

proposed that all existing AS and A levels which have not been reformed will cease to be offered.

- 8 Subjects for first teaching 2015, first AS exam 2016, first A level exam 2017: English language, English literature, English language and literature, biology, chemistry, physics, psychology, art and design, business studies, computer science, economics, history, sociology. Ofqual has published details of the percentage of exam/non-exam assessment proposed for these subjects. Awarding bodies are currently submitting draft specifications to Ofqual for accreditation. It is expected that, once accredited, final specifications will be available during the autumn term 2014.
- 9 Subjects for first teaching 2016, first AS exam 2017, first A level exam 2018: modern and ancient languages, maths, further maths, geography, religious studies, drama, dance, music, physical education. Ofqual is currently consulting on the assessment structure of these subjects.
- 10 Ofqual has completed a consultation on which other subjects should be reformed and which subjects should no longer exist as AS or A levels. Announcements are expected during the autumn term 2014. These subjects will be reformed for first teaching 2017, first AS exam 2018, first A level exam 2019.

Options for structuring an A level programme

- 11 Schools and colleges will be making decisions this term about the future structure of their A level courses as most publish sixth form prospectuses and hold information sessions for students and parents during the autumn term. Each institution will have to decide on the structure which provides the best progression routes for their students and is manageable within their resources. This is always a delicate balance but decision making is more difficult at present because of the aspects which remain unclear. We know that ASCL members are considering the following options and thought it would be helpful to outline them all in order to assist with your decision making process:
 - Start all students on a 4 A level course and ask them to decide which subjects to continue to A level early in the spring term of Y12 so that they can be entered for AS in the subject(s) they intend to drop.
 - Start all students on a 4 A level course as above and ask them to decide by September of Y13 which subjects to continue with. They drop the fourth subject (if they wish) but do not take it to AS so they do not need to decide in advance.

- Start all students on a 4 A level course and enter them all for AS in every subject. They can then use the AS results to assist them in making a decision about which subject to drop in Y13. Those students who decide not to continue with an A level course will have a set of qualifications to support progression.
- Limit all students to a 3 A level course in Y12 and do not offer any AS courses.
- Ask students to choose 1 AS and 3 A level courses at the beginning of Y12.

Issues to consider

- 12** Mixed economy from 2017 to 2019. It may be that you want to adopt one approach until all A levels have decoupled AS and a different approach from 2017, (ie for students starting in Y12 in 2017). During the period when some A levels have an integral AS and some don't, the situation will be very confusing for students, parents and employers and it may be difficult to prevent students from taking AS in certain subjects when they are taking AS in others.
- 13** In May 2015 there will be a general election and we know that the Labour Party is considering the possibility of recoupling AS if they were to be in government. This adds an additional layer of uncertainty which might make institutions unwilling to make immediate major structural changes.
- 14** Parent and student perceptions. If your offer is very different from others in your area this will need particularly careful explanation. Ensure that governors have agreed the curriculum structure (in case of complaints) and that staff are well briefed to be able to discuss it with students (11-18 schools). If you wish to delay your decision, make students and parents aware of this and your reasons for taking this course of action.
- 15** Funding. In order to qualify for funding a student's study programme must meet with the requirements set out in the relevant documentation available at www.gov.uk/government/publications/advice-funding-regulations-for-post-16-provision In general the planned hours for any student must be timetabled, organised and/or supervised by the institution, and take place in line with the institution's normal working pattern to deliver the study programme during the relevant funding year. The hours that will count towards a study programme are categorised as either a qualification (planned learning hours) or non-qualification hours (planned employment, enrichment and pastoral hours). There is a wide range of flexibility in this and members are urged to read the detail of the current documentation before finalising their curriculum plans.
- 16** Impact on application to Higher Education. We know that the majority of universities like to see AS results and have opposed the decoupling of AS, however it is impossible to predict at present how individual universities, and departments within those universities, will react to this change. It is very unlikely that university departments will ever present a united front on this so students should ensure that they keep an eye on university websites if they already know what type of university and what course they might be applying for. It seems unlikely that universities will require AS post 2017 but if students do not have AS results they may place greater emphasis on GCSE results and their own tests (where they exist).
- 17** UCAS is planning to implement a new points tariff (following their recent consultation) from 2017 (ie for students starting undergraduate courses in September 2017). The value of the new points system is expected to be announced during September 2014 (including the value of the new AS).
- 18** Performance tables. The value of the new A and AS qualifications from 2017 will not change in future performance tables; however, new point scores will be used from 2016. More information will be available in the '16-19 accountability headline measures: technical guidance' which will be available this autumn.
- 19** Ofsted inspectors will determine the effectiveness of the post 16 curriculum by looking at the holistic nature of the provision. They will want to see well-planned study programmes which include support for students in choosing relevant courses and progression routes, a range of activities which develop students' personal, social and employability skills and high quality impartial careers advice.
- 20** Cost of entry for A and AS. As far as we are aware no announcements have yet been made about the entry fee for the new decoupled AS. As soon as awarding bodies have made decisions about this information will be posted on their websites.
- 21** Managing teaching of mixed groups. Although it is planned for the content of the AS to be the same as the first year of the A level, the exam questions on that content will be more demanding at A level than at AS. This will inevitably pose challenges for teachers if they have a mixed A and AS level group as will the structure of the summer term if some students are taking AS exams and others not. Decisions will need to be made about the need for internal exams for those taking A level and not AS.