



Association  
of Colleges

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Department  
for Education

# Information for Schools and Colleges:

## Implementing A Level Reforms

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Association  
of School and  
College Leaders



NAHT  
FOR LEADERS. FOR LEARNERS.



Sixth Form Colleges  
Association

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## Introduction

This document was produced by the Association of Colleges (AoC) with support from the Department for Education (DfE) and Ofqual, and in consultation with the National Association of Headteachers (NAHT), the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) and the Sixth Form Colleges' Association (SFCA). It is designed to support governors, managers and teachers in schools and colleges to implement the reforms to A Level qualifications. The guidance focuses on the change to the overall structure of the qualifications: the decoupling of AS qualifications and the introduction of linear assessment. It is designed to help schools and colleges to decide how to implement these changes for 2015 and to develop their plans for subsequent years. The document includes a number of case studies that illustrate the different approaches available to schools and colleges.

AoC would greatly appreciate feedback on the guidance offered in this document, including questions that are unanswered, issues that have not been raised or approaches not explored.

## The purpose of the reforms to A Level qualifications

1. The impetus for these reforms can be traced back to the White Paper, *The Importance of Teaching* published in November 2010. This document announced the government's intention to reform GCSEs and A Levels. The government emphasised the importance of the role of higher education in developing reformed A Levels and raised concerns about the modular structure of existing qualifications.
2. Research by Ofqual found that, although A Levels were generally highly regarded, there was scope for improvement in certain important respects. Ofqual's report, *Are A levels fit for purpose: views of those who use them*, April 2012, indicated that higher education representatives, employers and teachers considered that modular A Levels had some advantages, but that assessment in January and June each year disrupted teaching and hindered the development of broad, deep and coherent learning.
3. The current reforms aim to address these concerns by moving from modular to linear assessment, mainly by examination, and by strengthening the content to prepare students for higher education or employment. Linear qualifications maximise classroom time over the full two years of the course, supporting students to gain a broad and deep understanding of their subjects. There will be no change to the level of demand placed on students at A Level and in AS qualifications.

More detail about the [background to the reforms](#) is available on the government website.

## Timing

4. The reforms to AS and A Levels are being phased over 2015 – 2017. A [timeline of reforms](#) can be found on the government website.
5. The first set of reformed subjects will be taught from September 2015, the second set from September 2016 and the remainder from 2017. The three groups are:

For teaching from September 2015:

- English literature, English language, English language and literature, history, biology, chemistry, physics, psychology, sociology, economics, business, computer science, art and design.

For teaching from September 2016:

- Modern foreign languages (French, German, Spanish), ancient languages, geography, dance, drama and theatre, music, physical education, religious studies.

For teaching from September 2017:

- Mathematics and further mathematics, design and technology.
- Remaining A Level subjects (apart from subjects withdrawn by Ofqual after consultation).

## The main reforms

6. There are four main areas of reform:

- Decoupling AS and A Level qualifications.
- Assessment structure and methodology.
- Subject content.
- Range of subjects available.

7. This document explains these reforms and supports schools and colleges to make well-informed decisions in their approach to implementation.

## Decoupling AS and A Level qualifications

- At the moment, although AS qualifications are awarded in their own right, their assessments also contribute to students' final A Level grades. The reformed AS qualifications will be separated from A Levels, or decoupled, making them freestanding, with AS results no longer counting towards the A Level. The AS may be taught over one or two years, providing the opportunity to preserve breadth as part of 16-19 programmes of study. Students will be able to take a new A Level without having taken an AS in the relevant subject.
- AS qualifications will continue to be assessed at the same level of demand as they are now. The challenge will be appropriate for the knowledge, skills and understanding expected of a student who has completed the first half of an A Level.
- The reformed AS is designed so that schools and colleges can co-teach the AS with the A Level. This means that lessons may include a mix of students taking the AS and the A Level in a given subject. All the AS and A Level specifications so far accredited by Ofqual have been designed by the awarding organisations (AOs) to be co-teachable.
- If students do take an AS in the subject at the end of the first year, the marks awarded at that point will not count towards the final A Level grade. Whether or not a student takes the AS, at the end of the two years they will be assessed on all elements of the A Level course, including those that constituted the AS. The assessment at this point will be at the standard expected at the end of a two-year course.

## Assessment structure and methodology

12. Significant changes are being made to both the structure and methodology of assessment. A Levels and AS qualifications will be fully linear with all external assessments at the end of each course.
13. Ofqual is also reviewing the specific assessment arrangements for each subject, applying the principle that assessment should be by examination only, except where non-exam assessment is necessary to test a skill essential to the subject. The outcomes of [Ofqual's review of subjects for first teaching in September 2015](#) can be found on the government website.

In summary:

- AS qualifications will in principle be assessed by examination only, with art and design the only exception among the 2015 start subjects.
- A Level assessment in biology, chemistry, physics, psychology, business, economics and sociology will be 100% by examination.
- In biology, chemistry and physics there will also be a separate assessment for practical skills; this will be a pass / fail assessment.
- A Level assessment in English language, English literature, English language and literature, computer science and history will be 80% by examination and 20% by non-examination.
- A Level assessment in art and design will be 100% non-examination with 40% allocated to tasks set by exam boards and completed in a specified time.

14. Ofqual has published the assessment arrangements for reformed GCSEs, AS qualifications and A Levels in subjects for first teaching in September 2016. [The decisions](#) can be found on the Ofqual website.

In summary:

- AS and A Level qualifications in ancient languages will be assessed entirely by examination.
- AS qualifications in geography will be assessed entirely by examination.
- A Level assessment in geography will have 20% of marks allocated to non-examination assessment, focussed on fieldwork skills.
- AS and A Level qualifications in modern foreign languages (French, German and Spanish only) will be assessed with 30% of marks allocated to non-examination assessment.

15. Consultations and decisions on the assessment of subjects to be taught for the first time in 2017 will follow in due course.

16. The grading system for the new AS and A Levels remains unchanged: the scale for AS will be A-E; for A Level, A\*-E. The structure of the reformed qualifications means that a different approach to calculating A\* will be required and this is currently being considered. Ofqual will publish its decision before teaching of the first tranche of reformed A Levels begins in September 2015.

## Subject content

17. The reforms also include a review of the content requirement for each subject, with greater involvement from higher education in the development of that content. The [new subject content](#) can be found on the government website.

The outcomes of the consultations on the reformed content are published on the government website:

- [GCSE, AS and A Levels, new subjects to be taught in 2015](#)
- [GCSE, AS and A Levels reform of subjects for September 2016](#)

18. Examples of subject changes:

- Strengthened mathematical and quantitative content in science, computer science, economics and business.
- A significant overhaul of content in computer science with a greater emphasis on programming, algorithms and problem solving.
- Greater emphasis on drawing in art and design.
- The inclusion in English literature of an unseen text to encourage wider reading and the requirement to study one post-2000 text and three pre-1900 texts.
- Increased breadth in history through the requirement to study topics from a chronological range of at least 200 years.

19. AOs have submitted [specifications for accreditation by Ofqual](#). Details can be found on the government website.

20. The AOs have published their accredited specifications, including some explanations of the changes, along with other support materials and details of CPD opportunities:

- [AQA](#)
- [Edexcel](#)
- [OCR](#)
- [WJEC](#)

## Range of subjects available

21. There will be some reduction in the number of subjects available. In June 2014 Ofqual published a consultation on the options for the reform of subjects not being developed for first teaching in 2015 or 2016. Some subjects were proposed for reform, others for withdrawal because of an overlap with those subjects already reformed. In December 2014 Ofqual announced that the following qualifications will be withdrawn at AS and A Level:

- Applied art and design.
- Applied business.
- Human biology.

- Economics and business (combined course).
22. It is possible that further subjects will be withdrawn once Ofqual has fully analysed all subject content. [Further details](#) can be found on the government website.

## Issues and options for schools and colleges

23. The phasing of the reforms means that during 2015-16 and 2017-18 reformed A Levels in some subjects will run alongside unreformed courses in others. During this transitional period AS qualifications in the unreformed subjects will continue to be coupled with the A Level, so that marks gained at AS will count towards the A Level; this will not be true in the reformed subjects. Some students will be taking study programmes, which include a mix of reformed and unreformed subjects.
24. The reforms to AS and A Levels outlined above are significant. As they consider their post-16 offer, schools and colleges will want to ensure that they provide appropriate guidance to prospective students and their parents. Although the academic level of the reformed qualifications is unchanged, there are important changes to the nature of the demands made on students and teachers.
25. Teachers and students will need to understand the characteristics of the new A Levels, both generally and at individual subject level, when comparing them with alternative pathways such as Tech Levels, Applied General Qualifications or other vocational qualifications.
26. The reforms may also prompt schools and colleges to review their entry criteria for A Level courses and to consider the range of alternatives that they offer.

## The size and structure of A Level programmes

27. There will continue to be variety in the size and structure of A Level programmes, and while the structure will change, there is no intrinsic reason why the size of programmes should change.
28. The reforms do not dictate a particular model for AS and A Level programmes. Schools and colleges may consider a range of approaches or models, including the existing four AS / three A Level structure, and a fully linear approach with three A Levels and no AS. The decision on the most appropriate structure is with the individual school or college, and the outcome will, to some extent, vary according to local circumstances. The models presented below may help with the decision-making process.

### i) Model One: Three linear A Levels

29. Students enrol on three A Levels and do not take AS in any subjects; they continue with all three subjects in the second year.
30. Possible advantages of **Model One**:
- Motivation: by choosing only three subjects to which they are wholly committed in Year 12, students avoid including fourth subjects, which they might not find equally interesting or motivating.

- Maturity: students have two full years in which to develop the skills necessary for success at A Level.
- Efficient and effective use of teaching time: schools and colleges can allocate more teaching time per week to each subject; teaching time saved from the fourth subject may be reallocated to enhanced individual support for students.
- Effective use of the school / college year: by removing AS exams in Year 12, a fully linear approach increases the number of effective teaching weeks and removes the unhelpful interruption.
- Flexibility in the planning and delivery of the full A Level course over two years, avoiding the constraint of external assessment in June of the first year.
- Clarity of assessment level: teachers and students can focus throughout on the standard and type of assessment applicable at the end of the A Level course.
- Three A Levels are sufficient to meet the entry requirements for many higher education institutions (HEIs).
- Cost-effectiveness: this model reduces examination costs for AS assessment.

## ii) Model Two: Four AS Level qualifications in Year 12 and three A Levels in Year 13

31. Students take AS qualifications in all four subjects at the end of the first year and then choose which three to continue to A Level.

32. Possible advantages of **Model Two**:

- Motivation: some students may find it motivating to focus on an external assessment, leading to a qualification, at the end of the first year.
- Students leaving the course after one year have the opportunity to gain nationally recognised qualifications.
- Flexibility: students can re-think their programme of study for the second year in the light of experience and results, enabling them to make better-informed, more mature choices about their area of specialisation and subsequent HE / career ambitions.
- Breadth: students continue to develop a wider range of knowledge, skills and understanding.
- Higher education institutions value the breadth offered by AS qualifications and currently use AS results in their admissions processes.
- In the short term this model provides continuity and consistency whilst the old-style AS and A2 structure is phased out.
- For students who are less confident about academic study, the AS could be seen as a stepping stone towards A Level, and evidence of achievement at the end of Year 12.

**33. Models One and Two** represent two contrasting approaches to the delivery of the reformed A Level qualifications. Between these models are a range of mixed approaches, some of which are outlined below.



### iii) Mixed approaches

34. Schools and colleges might consider approaches that combine Models One and Two. For example:
- a) At the start of Year 12, students choose three A Levels, and a different subject to study at AS for added breadth. They complete the AS qualification at the end of the first year, with no external assessment in the other subjects until the A Level examinations at the end of the second year.
  - b) Students choose four courses at the beginning of the first year and are then asked early in the spring term to decide which they wish to continue to A Level; they are then entered for AS in the subject(s) they intend to discontinue.
35. Both (a) and (b) offer the breadth of Model Two but without the cost and interruption of AS assessments in all subjects at the end of the first year. Approach (b) has the advantage of enabling students to delay their decision until they have experience of their subjects at A Level.
36. However, both (a) and (b) fall short of delivering the full range of advantages associated with Models One and Two. In particular:
- These approaches do not take full advantage of the efficiencies possible through co-teaching.
  - The approaches are less cost-effective in their use of teaching resources than Model One, as they still involve the delivery of four subjects in the first year. These approaches do not give students the opportunity to obtain up to four AS qualifications.
37. Whichever curriculum model they choose, schools and colleges should have the flexibility to meet the needs of different students. There will be some students whose abilities and ambitions will benefit from a wider programme of four or even five A Levels (funding is available for students achieving high grades on large programmes), while others will be best served by taking just one or two A Levels alongside a technical and vocational qualification.

### Managing the transition

38. Until 2017-18, unreformed A Levels, with modular AS qualifications still in place, will run alongside the reformed linear subjects. During the transitional phase the number of students taking a mixture of reformed and unreformed courses would dwindle, coming to an end in summer 2018. Schools and colleges will be considering how to manage the transition to Model One. It can be implemented either gradually or in a single step.
39. In a gradual approach, students studying reformed subjects would take a linear two-year course, while those studying unreformed subjects would take AS exams at the end of Year 12. Schools and colleges might choose this approach because it would at the first opportunity take advantage of the benefits of linear courses, while during the transition years unreformed subjects would continue in the manner for which they were designed and for which established patterns of work are in place. However, as noted above, it requires schools and colleges to run two systems in parallel for a limited period and it may lead to students applying themselves differently across their subjects.

40. Alternatively, schools and colleges might prefer to continue entering all students at AS for all subjects in Year 12, including reformed (decoupled) subjects, until September 2017 when all subjects will have been reformed. During the transition, schools and colleges might choose this approach so that all subjects would be taught similarly, with external assessment at the end of Year 12. However, schools and colleges would not then be taking immediate advantage of the educational opportunities made possible by linear courses. Moreover, students would take AS examinations in subjects for which the marks would not count at A Level, and students would be assessed on the same content twice.
41. In the single step approach, all subjects would be taught as linear two-year courses. No AS exams would be taken at the end of Year 12, and instead students would be assessed entirely at the end of Year 13. This means that in unreformed subjects, students would take both the AS and the A Level at the end of Year 13. Schools and colleges might prefer this option in view of the fact that many of the high volume subjects have been reformed for a 2015 start. This approach removes any risk of students perhaps channelling their Year 12 efforts into the unreformed subjects (because they are externally assessed and count towards the A Level).

## Teaching and learning

42. The success of any model that a school or college decides is right for its students will depend on the quality of teaching and learning. In order to make the most of the opportunities offered by the reforms and to rise to the challenges they present, schools and colleges will need to focus on their own approaches to teaching, learning and assessment to ensure that they are well-suited to the different demands of the reformed courses. Whilst some teachers will have experience of linear A Levels, others will not – and some will themselves have been assessed in modular fashion at school, college and university. Equally, in the early years of the reformed A Levels, before reformed GCSEs have been implemented, students will be taking A Level courses without previous experience of linear assessment.

## Progression to higher education

43. The views of universities are of particular interest to schools and colleges when deciding how best to implement the reformed A Levels. In January 2015 UCAS published [Unpacking Qualification Reform: Results of the UCAS survey on A-level reform](#), which is available on their website.
44. Based on a survey of approximately 500 schools and colleges in England, the report analyses universities' expected approaches to the reformed A Levels.
45. The report emphasises that universities are familiar with considering applications from students presenting linear qualifications, and that they will continue to ensure fair admissions. It gives examples of universities that have already made statements and encourages others to do so at the earliest opportunity.
46. UCAS has also published a new UCAS points tariff for use from 2017 onwards, which is available on the [UCAS](#) website. One significant change from 2017 onwards is that an AS qualification will attract 40% of the points allocated to an A Level.

## Contextual issues

47. AoC, SFCA, NAHT and ASCL have compiled a set of Frequently Asked Questions in relation to:

- Funding.
- Inspection.
- National data on retention and qualification success.
- The reporting of AS in performance tables.
- Registration of students for AS qualifications with Awarding Organisations.
- The recording of co-taught AS / A Level activity on the Individualised Learning Record (ILR).
- University admissions / UCAS applications.
- Ofqual training and materials.

[DfE's answers are included as Appendix Two](#)

## Appendix One: Case studies

The following selection of case studies do not claim to be comprehensive, but are intended to offer illustrative examples of how providers are implementing the reforms. It is clear that local and institutional factors are influencing decisions on how, to what extent, and when to modify practice in response to the reforms. The case studies include a school, two sixth form colleges, a tertiary college and a general further education college.

### Case study: College A

#### The College and its curriculum

College A is a sixth form college with over 1,800 students. The College is inclusive in character and has a wide-ranging curriculum including A Levels, BTEC Diplomas, OCR Nationals, NVQs, NCFE Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications, GCSEs, and a Level 1 programme. Over 500 students are taking AS / A Level programmes, choosing from a range of over 35 subjects. The breadth of the curriculum gives students the flexibility, if appropriate, to study programmes incorporating applied and vocational as well as academic learning.

#### Entry requirements for A Level

In order to progress to an A Level course at the College students are expected to have a minimum of five A\*-C grades at GCSE, generally including English and maths; some subjects have specific entry requirements such as a grade B in maths or require a particular GCSE score. These requirements are being kept under review and the College thinks it likely that they will be raised in response to the challenge of linear A Levels.

#### A Level programmes: size and structure

Until this year (2014/15) most of the College's A Level students took four AS courses in Year 12, sitting the AS examinations at that point and then typically enrolling for three A2 courses in Year 13.

However, for the current year and future years, the vast majority of level 3 students will follow three qualifications, some taking a purely AS / A2 set of courses, others combining A Level with other qualifications. A relatively small number of students, the more academically able, take four level 3 courses; similarly, a minority have a mixed level 3 and level 2 programme.

At present, students take AS exams at the end of Year 12. In 2016 and 2017 students will take AS exams only in the unreformed subjects (so the marks will still contribute to the final A Level). Only in exceptional circumstances, if an individual subject department considers it appropriate, will they sit AS exams in the reformed subjects. This decision, however, remains subject to the response of HEIs to applicants who do not have an AS grade.

#### Rationale

The changes to the A Level curriculum at College A are only partly a response to the forthcoming qualification reforms; significant steps have been taken a year ahead of the first reformed subjects coming on stream, as the College had already identified an increase in teaching time as a possible way of improving outcomes for students. In 2012/13, therefore, it ran a pilot scheme to increase the teaching time from six periods per week to seven for AS

Levels in the STEM subjects, with the additional period used to review and consolidate the students' learning. This change produced a significant improvement in results. For 2013/14 the pilot was extended to include A2 as well as AS in the STEM subjects; once again the results were significantly improved, if not as dramatically as in the previous year. Following the success of the pilot, the new model was rolled out across the full range of subjects in September 2014.

To afford the additional teaching time for each subject, the College reduced the programme size for most of its students, taking the view that it would be better for them to study fewer subjects but with greater levels of success. This reduction in the number of qualifications was made possible by the new funding methodology, which allocates funding to a full-time Programme of Study rather than individual qualifications, a change that the College describes as "liberating".

Although the impetus for the change from four courses to three came from the College's own analysis of how to best meet the needs of its students, it has been reinforced by the reforms to A Levels themselves. In the College's view extra teaching time will help students meet the demands of linear courses.

As noted above, College A would like to do away with the external AS assessment in Year 12 but is unsure whether this will be possible until universities have made their admissions policies known. The College's rationale is that external assessment in May / June of Year 12 effectively acts as a brake on learning. The College would prefer to have the freedom to teach through to the end of the year in July. The absence of the AS assessment point would also, the college believes, remove the need for time-consuming re-enrolment in late August. In total they could gain up to seven weeks of core teaching.

## Summary

This College has decided, in general, to offer three A Levels with students taking the AS only exceptionally, subject to HEI responses. The reforms to A Levels have coincided with College A's internally-driven reasons for (a) reducing programme size and (b) moving away from AS assessment in order to increase teaching time per subject while remaining financially viable.

## Case study: School B

### The School and its curriculum

School B is a comprehensive academy catering for the 2-19 age range. It has a roll of c.2,500, of whom 150 are students aged 16-18. The sixth form is expanding and is expected to grow to c.300. Until recently the School had a largely vocational-based programme in the sixth form, but now there is a growing demand for more academic elements to be added to the curriculum. The School offers both A Level and level 3 BTEC courses at present and intends to add apprenticeships in future. A Level students can choose from a range of approximately 25 courses. About a quarter of the students combine A Level and vocational courses in their programme.

### Entry requirements for A Level

In order to progress to A Level students are expected to have GCSE grades of C or better in the subjects they wish to study, normally including English and maths, but the emphasis is on considering each student individually. The School does not intend to alter its entry requirements in the context of the A Level reforms, taking the view that this would run counter to the School's commitment to maximise the opportunities available to each of its students. Rather than becoming more exclusive the school will work to ensure that staff and students are equipped to meet the challenges of the new courses.

### A Level programmes: size and structure

A Level students start with four AS Levels and most commonly progress to three A Levels. The school has considered reducing the programme size to three A Levels and no AS, but believes that this would detract from a more rounded education, which provides both depth and breadth and keeps open a wider range of post-school opportunities. Far from moving to narrow student programmes, the school is attracted by the breadth offered by, for example, the International Baccalaureate.

While it is committed to retaining the four AS / three A Level model, School B is less certain exactly how it will use the new decoupled AS qualification. The School is likely to continue with the students taking AS exams in all subjects, reformed as well as unreformed, despite the heavy burden of assessment that this places on students. Ultimately they may end up in a position where students take the AS examination only in the subject(s) they do not intend to continue to A Level.

### Rationale

School B is taking a conscious decision to continue with what one might term the 'old model'. A Levels are proving an increasingly attractive and effective option for the post-16 section of School B, so it currently sees no need for the substantial changes that a more radical implementation of the reforms would bring.

School B began its curriculum review by trying to identify what would be in the best interests of the children, who may well attend the school from the age of 2 to 19. They wanted to offer a range of future pathways, including university as an option for all, and to enable them to become effective players in a global economy. With that in mind they concluded that the tried and trusted current A Level system should be preserved as far as possible with the new reformed qualifications.

## Summary

School B has decided to retain the four AS / three A Level model to retain the breadth of curriculum and keep open the widest range of post-school opportunities possible. They plan to offer this to all students initially, but will review this model in the near future. In the School's judgement, much of the breadth and flexibility offered by the pre-reform model can be preserved whilst still putting the new qualifications in place.

## Case study: College C

### The College and its curriculum

College C is a general further education college with c. 20,000 students, including c. 4,500 aged 16-18. A Level provision is concentrated in the College's Sixth Form Academy, where c.850 students are following A Level courses in 2014/15, choosing from a menu of between 20 and 25 subjects. Elsewhere in the College there is a full range of vocational and applied courses but at present Sixth Form Academy students take only A Levels and, when necessary, GCSEs in English and maths. The philosophy of the College is to ensure that all of its students have what it terms 'positive exits'. In order to achieve this in the future, it intends to widen its sixth form curriculum offer to include elements of BTEC and OCR Diplomas to be taken alongside A Levels; it is also looking at the Technical Baccalaureate. The College sees this widening as all the more necessary in the context of the A Level reforms.

### Entry requirements for A Level

The College has recently raised entry requirements as part of its drive to improve success rates at A Level. In order to progress to an A Level course at the College students are now expected to have a minimum of five A\*-C grades at GCSE; maths and science subjects at A Level require grades of A or B at GCSE.

In the reformed environment the College sees a vital role for Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) at 16+, which will be essential in raising awareness and understanding of other options.

### A Level programmes: size and structure

A Level students typically take three subjects; a small minority, the most able, may take four or five. They take AS exams at the end of the first year, enabling them to gain a qualification should they decide to leave the course or the College at that point.

College C intends to continue with this model. Despite the decoupling of the AS from A Level, its students will still sit four AS qualifications at the end of Year 12.

### Rationale

College C operates in a highly competitive 16-18 context. As most of the more academically able students stay at school or move to a local sixth form college, many A Level students at College C are only marginally qualified for their courses and need a strong framework of support to give them the best chance of success. For the majority of its students, therefore, College C judges that a three A Level programme is most appropriate. It was their experience that starting on four AS courses led to many students dropping a subject during the first year. Teaching three subjects and providing skills-focussed workshop support in addition is seen as the most cost-effective model and the College hopes to be able to maintain it.



The decision to continue with AS qualifications has been guided by the College's 'positive exit' philosophy. Those students who leave at the end of the first year will have a concrete achievement in the form of the AS. For other students the AS can be a source of motivation and a meaningful external progress check mid-way through the A Level course.

## Summary

In the years leading up to the current reforms, College C had taken a number of decisions in order to improve levels of success on its A Level programme, raising entry requirements, slimming down the programme, including more support and exploring alternatives to A Level. The introduction of linear A Levels will reinforce these steps but the College will retain elements of the 'old model', including the AS qualification, as it believes this is necessary to best meet the needs of its students.

## Case study: College D

### The College and its curriculum

College D is a sixth form college with c.2,100 students aged 16-18. The College is inclusive in character and this is reflected in an increasingly wide-ranging curriculum that includes A Levels, Level 3 Applied Diplomas, GCSE courses and Level 2 Applied Diplomas. Over 1,400 students are on programmes comprising wholly or mainly of A Level subjects, of which over 30 are offered, while some of the Level 3 Diploma students also take an AS or A Level as part of their programme.

In recent years the College has expanded its range of Applied Diploma courses, and has adopted a cautious approach to encouraging students to mix A Level and Applied courses, concentrating on defined pathways comprising combinations which experience has shown to be successful.

### Entry requirements for A Level

The College raised its 2014 entry requirements for A Level courses from five A\*-C grades at GCSE to seven, including maths and English. This differentiated A Level from the Applied courses, for which five A\*-C grades remains the requirement. It envisages further changes to entry requirements, tailoring them in a more sophisticated way to specific subject choices.

### A Level programmes: size and structure

At present, A Level students at College D typically take four AS courses in Year 12 and then choose three subjects to continue in Year 13. The College will continue with this pattern in 2015/16 but will introduce a new model for 2016 onwards.

From 2016 the majority of A Level students will take three subjects. The possibility of taking four subjects will remain open to those with the necessary level of academic ability. Students will sit AS exams only in the remaining unreformed subjects. Once all subjects have been reformed or withdrawn students will not be entered for AS qualifications at the end of Year 12; the courses will be taught as two-year, linear courses. In order to address the potential problem of students deciding not to complete the full two-year course in one or more of their subjects, College D plans to offer a number of one-year A Level courses and six-unit Diploma courses to be taken up in Year 13.



## Rationale

College D is not changing its approach in 2015. This is partly to allow more lead-in time; partly because the advice and guidance given to prospective students up to this point has been on the basis of the current model; and partly because in 2015/16 a significant proportion of A Levels will be unreformed, which means the current model is still largely appropriate.

The rationale for introducing changes in 2016 is in part a response to the A Level reforms while also reflecting financial pressures. From an educational perspective, College D considers the changes to have positive features. Consultations with teaching staff revealed much support for a three A Level programme on the basis that this would:

- Lead to greater motivation on the part of students, who would be genuinely committed to all of their subjects.
- Enable the College to allocate more teaching time to each subject, up from 4.5 to 5 hours, and review the timetable structure.
- Free up the timetable so that it can include properly scheduled support sessions such as subject workshops and learning conversations.

Similarly, dropping the AS qualification and adopting a linear approach is seen to:

- Give the students longer to mature academically before taking an external assessment, recognising that weak AS grades achieved at the end of Year 12 are not an asset in applying to higher education.
- Give teaching staff much greater flexibility to plan their courses in ways that make most sense for them and their students.

From a college management perspective the curriculum changes will reduce pressure on the estate and / or enable the College to educate more students without adding to the teaching accommodation.

## Summary

College D, although delaying change until 2016, is making quite radical changes to its A Level delivery. These have been driven initially by a financial imperative but both management and teaching staff also see educational merit in the new model. The college believes that linear qualifications will be more attractive to some students than to others, and that a smaller proportion of the College's students may therefore wish to study them. However, with increased teaching time, greater flexibility in course planning and enhanced support arrangements, the college is confident that its A Level students will continue to be successful.

## Case study: College E

### The College and its curriculum

College E is a tertiary college with c.1,500 students aged 16-18, of whom c. 500 are on A Level programmes, choosing from a range of over 30 subjects. The curriculum also includes BTEC Diplomas, occupational courses and apprenticeship provision. Almost all of the A Level students have programmes comprised purely of A Levels; only in exceptional cases do they combine A Levels with other types of course.

Reviewing its curriculum in the context of the current reforms, College E is reducing its A Level offer by withdrawing a small number of minority subjects. This reduction may well go further if, as currently expected, the College moves in the medium term to a linear three-subject programme for most of its A Level students, rather than the current four AS / three A2 model, thus inevitably reducing demand for some subjects.

### Entry requirements for A Level

In order to enrol for an A Level programme at College E, students must have a minimum of two B grades and three C grades at GCSE. B grades are required for certain subjects: science, maths, computing and languages.

The College is not changing these entry requirements for September 2015. For 2015/16 at least, it is retaining the four AS / three A Level approach so students who do not cope well with the demands of the first year will have the opportunity to change track at the end of that year. In the medium term, if the College does move to linear courses, it hopes to be able to do so without significantly raising the entry requirements. It is, however, concerned that linear courses could be challenging for students with weaker GCSE backgrounds.

### A Level programmes: size and structure

Most A Level students at College E follow four AS courses in the first year, taking examinations in all subjects at that point and then choosing three subjects in which to complete the A Level in the second year. A few students take five AS courses and complete five A Levels. Some also undertake the Extended Project Qualification (EPQ).

The College will continue with the current approach in 2015. It expects, however, to move to a fully linear model in 2016, with programmes comprising three A Levels chosen at the start of the two years. In this context students will take AS exams only if the subject department considers it appropriate. It is possible that, on a small scale, some students will be able to take an additional AS course in Year 13 if this is necessary for their HE / career ambitions. Such courses would be co-taught with the A Level.

### Rationale

A number of factors have contributed to College E's decision not to change its approach to the A Level curriculum for 2015. Firstly, the college is unsure about the impact the reformed structure will have on subject-level success rates. Secondly, the College was influenced by the fact that other local A Level providers are staying with the four-subject model for 2015.

The move to a linear three-subject model for 2016 is not yet a firm decision. The advantages of the change would be partly financial, not least through the cutting of exam fees and the greater efficiency of delivering three subjects rather than four to fulfil the full-time study programme

requirements stipulated by the EFA. Finance is not, however, the prime consideration. The College sees significant educational merit in a linear approach over two years; this would allow for real skills development, especially if the College was able to provide explicit skills support classes and offer the EPQ alongside the A Levels.

There are some concerns about this change. The AS assessment at the end of the first year allows students to switch pathway after only one year; a fully linear approach would make this more difficult. Similarly, the AS attracts students from less academic backgrounds who benefit from the chance to develop and prove to themselves that they are capable of higher level study. On balance, however, the College is inclined to think that these concerns can be overcome and that it will be able to move to the linear approach without its A Level programme becoming more exclusive.

## Summary

College E is taking time to consider the full implications of this reform. For 2015 the College is continuing with the delivery model developed under Curriculum 2000. However, notwithstanding some important concerns, the College can see a positive educational rationale for adopting a linear approach and will in all probability move in that direction in 2016.

# Appendix Two: Frequently Asked Questions – Decoupling AS and A Levels

## Funding

### **1. How will the funding methodology respond if students entered for both AS and A Level in the same subject do not progress after securing their AS Level?**

**A.** 16-19 funding calculations are no longer based on qualifications, but on planned hours. Students' decisions about qualifications are likely to have an impact on the number of planned hours. For example, a student studying four AS Levels in Year 12, and two A Levels in Year 13, is likely to have fewer planned hours in Year 13. This may affect the proportion of students in full-time education from one year to the next, and therefore the amount of funding generated from year to year. This is no different, in principle, to funding regimes in previous years.

The retention factor is a key component of 16-19 funding, based on a student's study programme. To count as retained, students on a purely academic programme need to complete, or be continuing, at least one of their learning aims (either AS or A Level). Therefore, where an A Level is logged as a learning aim at the beginning of Year 12, but the student decides only to enter for an AS, and then completes it, this change of plan must be recorded within the academic year in order for the student to count as retained. This is currently how funding is calculated, and will continue to be the case after and during the decoupling of the AS from the A Level.

### **2. In the transition years there will be a combination of coupled and decoupled AS provision. Is the funding basis sufficiently robust to cope with duality?**

**A.** Yes. Provided the data accurately reflects the student's programme, combinations of coupled and decoupled provision should be managed within the current funding methodology.

Further information about retention calculations, planned hours and all other aspects of the funding methodology can be found in the [Rates and Formula guidance](#) on the government website.

## Inspection

### **3. How will Ofsted view A Level retention and success rates if some students enrolled on A Level courses do not progress beyond AS Level? Will there be guidance in this year's Common Inspection Framework (CIF) and the new CIF for September 2015?**

**A.** Inspectors consider the extent to which students are following appropriate study programmes. They take into account a range of evidence, including retention, and consider the learning aims for which the students have been enrolled. Where study has not progressed beyond AS Level, inspectors recognise that this may be suitable for particular students.

The CIF summarises the judgements inspectors make during inspections. It does not include detailed guidance. In its revision of documents for school inspection for September 2014, Ofsted indicated its move towards providing briefer handbooks and guidance, and stated that many elements of previous guidance were now included in a new training programme for inspectors. Responses to Ofsted's consultation, *Better inspection for all*, including any requests

for detailed clarification, will inform the development of the new CIF, accompanying guidance and inspector training, for September 2015.

## National data on retention and qualification success

### **4. What are the implications of the reforms for national success rates? Given that some schools / colleges will not deliver AS and others will, how will institutions be compared? How will this impact on national qualification success rate tables? Is it the government's intention not to report on qualification retention on an annual basis?**

**A.** New accountability measures will be introduced for schools and colleges with students aged 16-19, in 2016. These new measures (progress, attainment, retention, destinations and progress in English and maths) will replace success rates for this age group. We are in discussion with Ofsted and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills to agree the date for replacing success rates with the new measures.

### **5. What are the implications of the reforms for retention rates? Given that some schools / colleges will deliver AS and others will not, how will institutions be compared? If students entered for both AS and A Level in the same subject do not progress after securing their AS Level how will this be reflected in terms of accountability and performance measures?**

**A.** It will be possible for students to switch from A to AS Level, according to their interests. For the retention measure, students will count as retained if they complete at least one of the learning aims. Schools and colleges will need to revise the student's learning aim in data provided for performance measurement. The retention measure will allow schools and colleges to decide with individual students whether or not to take AS qualifications. We want to ensure that schools and students can take a variety of approaches: for example, taking AS Levels before deciding which subjects to continue to A Level, or planning to take all A Levels but deciding mid-year to take an AS Level in one subject instead. We are therefore ensuring that the census and ILR will allow schools and colleges to enter AS, A Level or both AS and A Levels as learning aims for their students and amend these to reflect any changes during the academic year. Students will count as retained if they complete their planned learning aims, even if these change mid-year. For example:

- Where a student, whose learning aims are four A Levels, decides to drop one to an AS; the school will need to amend their learning aim for that subject to remove the A Level aim and add the AS aim. As long as that student then completes their AS aim in Year 12 and A Level aims in Year 13 they will count as being retained.
- Where a student, whose learning aims are four AS Levels, decides to continue on to three A Levels after sitting AS Levels; the school will need to amend their learning aims to add the new A Levels as well. As above, as long as that student then completes their AS aim in Year 12 and A Level aims in Year 13 they will count as being retained.
- Where a student, whose learning aims are three AS Levels, decides to continue on to three A Levels before sitting AS Levels; the school will need to amend their learning aims to remove the AS Levels and add the new A Levels. As long as that student then completes their A Level aims in Year 13 they will count as being retained.

There will, however, be a supporting measure to show the number of pupils who do not continue into Year 13. This will help identify schools and colleges where large numbers

of students are dropping out or moving institutions, highlighting students enrolling on a programme that is not right for them. There will also be a supporting measure to show the proportion of students who are retained, but aren't assessed in examinations.

## **6. How will current and new performance tables report AS outcomes?**

**A.** The new performance tables will be introduced in January 2017, reporting on students completing their key stage 5 studies in the 2015/16 academic year. The first exams in the decoupled AS qualifications will be taken by students in 2016 and appear in the performance tables in January 2018.

AS Levels will continue to feed into the headline attainment and progress measures in the same way as they do in the current performance tables. In the current tables, where a student has taken AS Levels in additional subjects alongside their A Levels, they will be included in the point score per entry attainment score [[http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/performance/16to18\\_14/documents.html](http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/performance/16to18_14/documents.html)] and their Level 3 Value Added progress score. Current discounting practice will apply: an AS will be discounted where the student has gone on to take the full A Level in the same subject. The measures for best three A Levels, and AAB in facilitating subjects will be A Level only measures. Therefore, they will not include AS results.

## **Registration for examinations**

### **7. When is the cut-off date for entering an AS Level? How will awarding organisations deal with AS entries? Will they allow later registration without incurring late fees? Can students withdraw from AS without financial implications?**

**A.** Awarding organisations set entry dates for all qualifications. We are asking awarding organisations to confirm their dates and fees for 2016 (first AS) entries as soon as possible.

## **Individualised Learning Record (ILR)**

### **8. How will co-taught AS / A Level activity be recorded on the ILR?**

**A.** DfE and the Skills Funding Agency have discussed [how to record AS and A Level activity on the ILR](#) and this is published on the government website.

## **UCAS applications**

### **9. How will UCAS view AS results or the lack of them when students apply from October to January? Will they provide guidance to colleges?**

**A.** Universities will need to reconsider their admissions requirements in the light of the reforms. We are working with universities, the Russell Group and UCAS to ensure universities are fully informed about the reforms. As of now, admissions requirements will vary, and universities will continue to publicise their own admission requirements to schools and colleges. We encourage them to do so as soon as possible.

## Ofqual

### **10. Will Ofqual encourage awarding organisations to provide training and materials to assist in the transition to linear assessment?**

**A.** Ofqual and DfE are working with awarding organisations to encourage them to develop materials and training resources that help teachers to successfully navigate the differences between the old and reformed qualifications, including linear assessment. Schools and colleges should themselves consider if their teachers need specific training adapt to the new challenge of teaching linear qualifications and linear assessment. They could, for example, contact their local teaching school, academy sponsor or training provider.




# Association of Colleges

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