

UK DEANS OF SCIENCE
Response to Ofqual A Level Reform Consultation

Questions on Section 1: Background and purpose

The following questions refer to Section 1: Background and purpose.

1. I believe that all equality issues have been considered in the accompanying equality analysis.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

2. Do you have any comments or suggestions?

No comment.

Questions on Section 2: What we hope to achieve

The following questions refer to Section 2: What we hope to achieve.

3. I support the general principles as set out in this section.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

4. I support the need for comparability of demand and content in different specifications in a subject.

- Yes
- No

Do you have any comments or suggestions?

We cannot respond to this question as it presupposes that there should be more than one specification for a subject. It is not clear in any part of the consultation document why there should be more than one specification for an individual subject, nor why there should be more than one examination board. We believe that having more than one specification will only lead (even if only in the medium to longer term) to the problems of standards that have brought the current system into disrepute.

Questions on Section 3: Design rules - The purpose of A levels.

The following questions refer to Section 3: Design rules - The purpose of A levels.

5. I believe that Condition 1 adequately defines an appropriate primary purpose of A levels for regulation.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Do you have any comments or suggestions?

Such precise and clear expectations will need thorough and continuous monitoring by a robust agency which is separate in every respect from the awarding body and from Government.

Questions on Section 3: Design rules - Size and grading.

The following questions refer to Section 3: Design rules

Condition 2 - Size and grading.

6. A new grading structure should be introduced for new A levels.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Do you have any comments or suggestions?

Although the grades A, B, C, etc are perfectly adequate we would expect the assessments to be much more rigorous and searching at each grade boundary than is the case at present.

7. The current number of grades, as specified in Condition 2, is appropriate for discrimination.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Do you have any comments or suggestions?

Although broadly supporting the proposed grading system, it will be important to distinguish between the grades of the current A levels and the 'new' A level qualifications that will be introduced over the coming years.

8. Even considering the other changes being made to A levels, the A* grade (or similar) should be retained as it will continue to facilitate differentiation of achievement.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

9. The expectations for the performance of learners should be set out for the upper and lower levels of the grading scale (currently grades A and E).

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Do you have any comments or suggestions?

Please see comment under 4 above.

The following questions relate to the options regarding the future structure of A levels:

Condition 3 - Qualification structure and availability of assessments

10. The opportunity for assessment in January should be removed.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

11. I believe that Option 1 is the right option - Removing the AS qualification – which would mean a return to a linear two year course of study.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree

- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

12. I believe that Option 2 is the right option - Making the AS a standalone qualification but where the results do not contribute to the A level.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

13. I believe that Option 3 is the right option - Retaining the AS qualification in its present form – but making changes as outlined in paragraphs 48-53.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Do you have any comments or suggestions on these three options?

The AS level should be retained in some form as it gives candidates the opportunity to trial a subject that they may find more interesting than they had expected (and thus take it through to a full A level) or to follow a broader curriculum, following an interest beyond GCSE.

The following questions relate to Option 3 - Retaining the AS qualification – but making changes as outlined in paragraphs 48-53.

14. The opportunity for AS/A2 assessment and therefore resits in January should be removed.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

15. I believe that where a student resits an assessment the highest mark should count towards the student's qualification.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

16. AS and A2 should contribute equally to the overall outcome of A levels.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

I think that the weighting should be split as follows:

No comment.

Do you have any further comments or suggestions?

No comment.

Questions on Section 3: Design rules - A level design

The following questions refer to Section 3: Design rules - A level design.

17. To enable Ofqual to secure standards in A levels (GCEs), the rules outlined in Condition 4 are:

Needed?

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Sufficient?

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Do you have any comments or suggestions?

No comment.

18. To enable Ofqual to secure standards in A levels (GCEs), the rules outlined in Condition 5 are:

Needed?

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Sufficient?

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Do you have any comments or suggestions?

It may be premature to make this point, but in the case of science programmes it is important that the specification of the subject includes the requirement that the use of numbers and the application of simple mathematical principles and methods to the scientific subject are taught, applied and assessed.

19. To enable Ofqual to secure standards in A levels (GCEs), the rules outlined in Condition 6 are:

Needed?

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Sufficient?

- Strongly agree

- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Do you have any comments or suggestions?

We wish to reiterate the comment under 18 (above) regarding use of numbers and mathematical principles in science subjects.

20. To enable Ofqual to secure standards in A levels (GCEs), the rules outlined in Condition 7 are: Needed?

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Sufficient?

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Do you have any comments or suggestions?

No comment

21. I believe that a minimum of 60 per cent external assessment is the correct proportion for most subjects.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Do you have any comments or suggestions?

The pressures on teachers, schools and colleges are such that we believe external assessment should account for at least 80% of the overall grading. The contribution from internal assessment must not be able to change significantly the overall grade awarded. Internal assessment should predominantly be used for supporting and measuring Learners' progress during their study.

22. I believe that the weighting of synoptic assessment should be flexible.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Do you have any comments or suggestions?

If we understand this proposal correctly it has the potential to undermine the credibility of the 'new' A levels and comparability of grades in different subjects.

Questions on Section 3: Design rules - Qualification support

The following questions refer to Section 3: Design rules - Qualification support.

23. I believe that universities should be able to provide this level of engagement.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

24. I believe that the level of support required is sufficient to demonstrate that the qualification will allow progression to study at higher education.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Do you have any comments or suggestions?

No comment.

25. Do you have any suggestions about how we might categorise universities as defined in Condition 8?

If the proposals are adhered to, the simplest and least controversial way would be to use the current organisational groupings of HEIs, of which we believe only one (the Russell Group) is mentioned in the consultation. This, and the condition we mention in Section 25 relating to the choice of employer and professional body representation, should ensure an appropriately broad input and consensus, which will be essential to the success of these major reforms.

26. Would you propose a different number or proportion of universities providing support?

- Yes
- No

Do you have any comments or suggestions?

We are unclear to what 'proportion' this question refers as Condition 8 mentions '20 UK universities, at least 12 of which are respected in the specific field **and/or** [our emphasis] from those deemed to be leading research institutions'. We would expect the representatives of all the universities involved to be respected in the field of study. However, this concentration on the university representation may be unhelpful. The proportion of one type of university over all others is less significant than the overall range of types of universities and which individuals will represent employers and professional bodies. If the latter (employers and representatives of professional bodies) all come from the same background as most of the university representatives this could have serious implications for balance and for the equality of opportunity that the consultation is seeking.

It is important that university representatives are chosen from the main 'users' of the A levels, *ie* the specific, subject-based, academic Faculties and departments, and not their education departments.

27. I believe that the level of support required is sufficient to demonstrate that most universities will accept a qualification for entry.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Do you have any comments or suggestions?

No comment.

28. I believe that the support required should also provide additional assurances to those set out in paragraphs 73 and 74.

- Yes
- No

If your answer is Yes, please give further details:

29. I believe that exam boards should be expected to consult schools, colleges and employers specifically for each qualification.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Questions on Section 4: Exceptions

The following questions refer to Section 4: Exceptions.

30. Exceptions to Condition 1 should be allowed in relation to the purpose of A levels.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

31. Exceptions to Conditions 4–7 should be allowed in relation to the design of A levels.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

32. Exceptions to Condition 8 should be allowed in relation to the support secured for an A level.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

33. If you anticipate that there will be particular challenges for specific subjects which may require exceptions, please outline them below.

We are surprised that there is no space for separate comment under each of the responses 29-32. It is essential that any decision to allow exemptions is subject to the most robust test before it is agreed. Such exemption must not apply to issues such as the percentage of externally assessed work.

Questions on Section 5: Making sure standards are right year on year

The following questions refer to Section 5: Making sure standards are right year on year.

34. These review arrangements are sufficient and appropriate to secure standards.

- Strongly agree
- Agree

- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Do you have any comments or suggestions?

No comment.

Questions on Section 6: Implementation

The following questions refer to Section 6: Implementation.

35. I support the proposed staged approach to the reform of A levels.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

36. I agree that all current A levels should have been reviewed by 2018.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

37. I agree that the priority subjects for implementation in September 2014 should be:

Please rank in order of preference, 1 being your first choice.

- ___1___ physics, chemistry, biology
- ___3___ French, German and Spanish
- ___2___ mathematics
- _____ English literature
- _____ geography and history
- _____ a combination

Do you have any suggestions for other subjects/combinations of subjects?

No, but please see comments below (section 38) for the speed of implementation.

General questions

38. Do you have any additional comments in relation to all proposals as set out in Sections 1- 6.

If this consultation is to lead to the major change in A levels that is required it will be one of the most major upheavals in pre-university education since the 1940s. While it is understandable that the Secretary of State wishes to see it commenced very quickly, the deadline for implementation of the first new A levels is at least one year and probably two/three years too early. We strongly advocate a more sensible timetable for this reform.

The changes in rigour, content and assessment should be sufficiently significant that the whole grading system of the new A levels will be vastly different to the present ones. The alphabetical grades between the old and the new should not be equivalent. For example a B in the new system should not be comparable with a B in the current A levels. The changes in demand should be so dramatic that we expect a new name will be needed for the new qualifications.

We have answered all the questions as best we can but would reiterate that there is an assumption in the consultation with which we fundamentally disagree. UK Deans of Science have consistently argued that there is no justification for more than one properly constituted and regulated Awarding Body. If there were to be a decision to continue to have more than one Awarding Body then we believe that only one of them should be involved in each subject. *The 'playing of the system' by schools will not stop until there is only one examination board and one specification for each subject.* We sincerely hope that this consultation will be able to finally change the present arrangement, which has led the current need for reform.

Your details**Name***

(Prof) Ian Haines

Organisation*

- School/College
- Training Provider
- Higher Education Institute
- Awarding Organisation
- Student/Learner
- Parent/Carer
- Employer
- Representative group/Interest Group
- Government Body/Organisation (national and local)
- Other (including General Public)

School / College type

- Academy and/or Free School
- Comprehensive
- State Selective
- Independent
- Special School
- FE/Sixth Form
- None of the above

Is your institution a member of any of the following groups?

- Russell Group
- Million+
- 1994 Group
- University Alliance
- GuildHE
- UUK
- None of the above

Your role

Executive Secretary

How many staff does your business employ (full or part time)?

- Less than 50
- 50 to 249
- 250 or more

Representative group / interest group type

- Learned Body / Subject expert group
- Equalities group
- Unions
- Sector Skills Council (SSC)
- QAA
- UCAS
- Other voluntary or community group
- None of the above

Organisation name*

UK Deans of Science

Nation*

England

Wales

Scotland

Northern Ireland

International

Email address*

i.haines@btopenworld.com

May we contact you for more information?

Yes

Would you like us to treat your response as confidential?

Yes

We are changing the way we communicate. We want to write clearly, directly and put the reader first. Overall, do you think we have got this right in this document?

Yes

No

Do you have any comments or suggestions?

While the document reads reasonably well there was a lack in several places of clear connection between the questions asked and the part of the document to which is referred, for example there were references in the questionnaire to section numbers which seemed to be missing from the earlier part of the document.