



UNIVERSITY OF
CAMBRIDGE

Academic Division
Cambridge Admissions Office

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for the Cambridge Colleges

Rt Hon Michael Gove MP
Secretary of State for Education
Department for Education
Sanctuary Buildings
Great Smith Street
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12 July 2010

Dear Mr Gove,

A-level Reform

Admissions Tutors in Cambridge have read with interest and a degree of anxiety the reports of your recent comments about A-level reform. We thought you might find it helpful if we were to communicate our perspective on the question, to which we have given a great deal of thought in recent years.

Like you, we have concerns about certain aspects of the current A-level system. These include the academic or technical content of some subjects, and the lack of synoptic assessment at AS-level. (Our concerns about A2 on this score have been eased by the re-introduction of stretch and challenge, which we believe has the potential to identify the most genuinely able.)

We are worried, however, that, if AS-level disappears, we will lose many of the gains in terms of fair admissions and widening participation that we have made in the last decade.

As you may know, central to Cambridge's admissions process is the close examination of AS and A2 marks (UMS) achieved at point of application. Extensive internal research has shown that the correlations between these marks, which mainly come from AS, and performance in Cambridge University examinations are very good. Indeed, they are much stronger than the correlations that can be obtained using GCSEs or aptitude tests. It is no coincidence, in our view, that our utilisation of AS scores as a core component of admissions decisions has been accompanied by a noticeable reduction in the number of complaints we have received from schools and colleges about the fairness of our selection process. The same period has also seen marked improvement in Cambridge examination performance.

At the same time, applications to Cambridge from UK students have risen significantly, as has the proportion of our places being won by students from state schools and colleges and under-represented groups. While we have also been engaged in a great deal of widening participation work, we are convinced that a large part of this success derives from the confidence engendered in students from "non-traditional" backgrounds when they achieve high examination grades at the

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end of Year 12. We have additionally benefited from being able to give clear guidance to schools, colleges and applicants about their chances of submitting successful applications, in the light of their level of achievement at AS.

Without achieved and externally assessed marks at the end of Year 12 we would reluctantly be forced to fall back on GCSE results, interviews, bespoke admissions tests and predicted grades. While GCSE results have some utility in the admissions process, as we have said, they are nowhere near as reliable a predictor of future success as AS. Interviews can be a good checking mechanism for potential, but none of us believes we should place more reliance on these than we currently do. We have trialled aptitude testing extensively. The trial process was worthwhile but overall the results were disappointing. Our research has shown that such tests are no substitute for exam grades/marks achieved at the end of Year 12. Grade predictions from schools and colleges are well known to be unreliable. AS provides an invaluable indicator of progress that can inform admissions decisions critically where so many of the gathered field are predicted top grades. (Our experience this year is that the introduction of A* has had little impact upon the propensity of schools and colleges to predict the highest grades.)

We believe it is possible to improve Year 12 educationally while retaining formal assessment at the end of the year. AS-levels, with strengthened content, could be sat in mid-to-late June but no earlier. This would preserve a larger part of the school year for learning and intellectual development. We also favour Year 13 assessment occurring only in June. In this way, both sixth form years would become linear without the loss of formal examination at the critical half-way point.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss these important issues with you in more detail.

Yours sincerely

Dr Geoff Parks
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Dr Mike Sewell
Chairman

on the behalf of the Admissions Forum of the Cambridge Colleges

cc:

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