

UCAS/DfES Curriculum Development Group

Discussion questions on the 14-19 Education white paper

RESPONSE FROM THE COLLEGES OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

1. AEA challenge

How would members envisage this operating?

If this is going to aid differentiation between applicants, then the AEA element must be compulsory, not optional. If it is optional then there is a clear danger that able students lacking in confidence will opt for the safety of more routine questions that they know they can answer successfully. It is inevitable that such students are disproportionately likely to come from widening participation backgrounds. It would be extremely unfortunate if any move to improve differentiation had the side-effect of reducing access.

If AEA-style questions are to be introduced, it is essential that some of the issues that currently limit take-up of AEAs as stand-alone qualifications are addressed and overcome:

- *Awareness*: At present there is limited awareness even of the existence of AEAs within parts of the secondary education sector. This lack of awareness may well inhibit informed discussion of this proposal and therefore undermine its introduction.
- *Resourcing*: Even if, as is desirable, the AEA element requires no additional subject knowledge, the fiction that there are no additional costs associated with its delivery must not be perpetuated. Any change must be properly resourced.
- *Reliability of assessment*: At present there is widespread anecdotal evidence of unreliable assessment within AEAs. An essential prerequisite for the introduction of AEA questions within A-levels is reassurance that the awarding bodies can assess these more open-ended questions fairly and reliably.

One possibility is to include additional AEA questions in each unit. This would have the advantage that results on AS units including these questions would be available at the time of application and would thus aid selection. The inclusion of AEA questions in A2 units would enable, at the top end of the ability range, more challenging conditional offers to be made, aiding differentiation, and also aiding selection by enabling more offers to be made. The obvious disadvantage is that each examination would become longer, so the “burden of assessment” would be increased.

An alternative approach, which would not increase the number or length of examinations, is to replace the synoptic unit with, in effect, a full AEA paper. It can be argued that AEA style questions should inherently be synoptic. The disadvantage of this approach is that this would only assist in offer-making; no additional information would be available at the point of selection.

In arts subjects, it would be very helpful if the AEA questions entailed the writing of hour-long essays, as this would ease the transition to study at HE. At present, at the point of application, students have little experience of writing anything longer than one or two paragraphs. As a result, they tend to think of an essay as a collection of paragraphs rather than a whole which is greater than the sum of its parts. To develop this skill, with a fairly open-ended assessment scheme, would be beneficial to both students and HEIs alike.

How much AEA content/questions would students need to cover?

We would hope that there is no additional “content” associated with the AEA style questions, just more interesting questions that test critical thinking, analysis, problem solving, insight, creativity and extended argumentation skills. For the additional information thereby provided to be reliable, students would need over the course of an A-level to do several such questions. Either of the two schemes of delivery suggested above would meet this criterion.

How should attainment in this separate section be recognised?

As the skills being tested are distinctively different from those tested by A-levels, we believe the AEA component should be graded separately, possibly as a numerical grade awarded alongside the letter grade achieved on the standard A-level.

2. Extended Project

How would members use the Extended Project?

This would inevitably depend on the nature of the project. Ideally we would like to see it completed in year 12 so that it could be submitted to universities to support an application and discussed during part of the interview, though the ability to do this would depend on its content and (from a practical viewpoint) its length.

Unless the amount of outside help (from parents, siblings, teachers etc.) can be very strictly controlled, then the value of the project as an aid to selection would be limited to its role in providing a basis for an oral examination at interview; no weight could be placed on the quality of the project itself unless it was incontrovertibly representative of the applicant's ability and theirs alone.

What would HE want to get from the Extended Project?

We would want the project to develop in the student independent thinking, independent research skills, analytical skills, critical thinking skills, extended argumentation skills and essay writing skills, as well as basic presentation skills – the balance between these depending, of course, on the subject of study. If implemented and delivered properly, such a project would be enormously beneficial to students at whatever stage it was completed. As mentioned above, to aid selection the project would have to be completed by the end of year 12 (under the current university application timetable).

What do you think your institution would want the Extended Project to look like?

Given the stated intention that potentially all Level 3 students will do an extended project, this is an impossible question to answer! No one-size-fits-all model can conceivably work in such a context. The IB extended essay provides a good model of a project that works well for high ability students studying traditional academic subjects, but would not work for students doing a more vocationally focussed programme.

3. Pace and Progression

What issues does it raise for HE if more young people are attaining Level 3 earlier in some areas?

If attaining Level 3 earlier in some areas allowed those students to be stretched and challenged further in the time thereby released that would be welcomed. The danger is that it might free up time that is not used in this way and students could become demotivated and struggle on taking up their place in HE, finding it difficult to adapt to the demands of the course.

The impositions of child protection legislation are making it increasingly difficult for HEIs to admit students under the age of 18, so it must be recognised that earlier attainment of Level 3 qualifications does not imply an earlier start at university.

How would you treat applicants who have studied HE modules in school?

A crucial factor in determining our position on this issue is equality of opportunity. If all students do not have the same opportunities for study of HE modules, then fairness would require that we pay scant regard to whether an applicant has done these. Indeed, it is difficult to envisage that many applicants will have completed any HE modules in year 12 and therefore, within the current university application timetable, this may well be a non-factor as far as selection is concerned

anyway.

If all students are given the same opportunities, which realistically means that only modules delivered by distance learning are viable, then our attitude would then depend on the level and nature of these modules. In a best-case scenario they would stretch and challenge the most able, enthuse them about the prospect of studying the subject at university and help ensure that students are adequately prepared for study at HE. Such modules could even, in this utopian vision, be included in conditional offers to aid differentiation.

It must also be recognised that some first-year HE modules may neither stretch nor challenge the most able at all, and therefore that encouraging students to do them may be totally counterproductive.

Given that Cambridge degrees are not awarded on a credit accumulation basis, we would not give credit towards their degree to students who had completed HE modules at school/college. It is highly likely that some universities would do so, and there might be pressure on very good students from poor homes to opt for the “quickie” degree, which would be a pity.

The White Paper (para 6.22) gives a clear signal that we want students to take fewer GCSEs (ie no more than 8). What other things would you like to see them doing?

We believe that there should be more emphasis on key skills and critical thinking at a younger age. This would also free up time in years 12 and 13 enabling greater breadth in post-16 academic and vocational study to be achieved.

More reading, not solely for the purposes of assessment, would also be enormously beneficial.

If the question of which subjects should be compulsory at GCSE within the National Curriculum is up for discussion as part of this consultation, then we would strongly urge that the study of a modern foreign language should regain this status, alongside Maths, English, Science etc.

More opportunities to undertake enrichment activities, such as those offered by the National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth and many HEIs, including Cambridge, would open the eyes of students to range of possibilities available at university and, thus, enable them to make much better informed choices of subjects of study post-GCSE.

Agreed by the Admissions Forum on 3 June 2005 and approved by the Undergraduate Admissions Committee of the University of Cambridge on 13 June 2005.

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