



# UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Academic Division  
Cambridge Admissions Office

10 September 2012

Dear Sir / Madam

Please find attached the University of Cambridge response to your A-Level Reform Consultation. As you will see we were unable to offer direct responses to a number of your questions, as we found that the statements to which they referred were often making several points which required separate answers, or required further clarification or context. We trust that you will take into account the comments that we have provided in lieu.

There are a few points that we would like to emphasise as we make our response:

- (1) We believe that A-levels remain fit for purpose and are a good preparation for study at Cambridge. We would suggest that such problems as there are with A-levels lie primarily in the nature of the assessment, rather than the structure and content. Students taking science-based A-Levels need the technical fluency required to prepare them for undergraduate study, whilst those taking arts-based subjects must have the ability to write extensively; both should have the skills to think critically and to learn independently. Currently students can lack these skills to some extent.
- (2) We support the removal of the January assessment window, and believe that the additional teaching time that this would create – perhaps up to six weeks – could be used effectively to address some of the issues described above, to stretch and challenge the very brightest students, and to prepare them for a higher education.
- (3) There should continue to be resit opportunities for those who genuinely need them, but we are concerned that some students spend their time attempting to improve individual scores rather than extending their learning. Should A-levels continue to be modularised, it may indeed be better for students to simply sit modules later rather than sit and resit examinations.
- (4) We strongly support the retention of AS for reasons of choice and flexibility. It allows students to transition effectively from GCSE to A-level, to sample subjects at a higher level before making A2 choices; and formal validation of achievement in Year 12 can give some students the confidence to apply to more selective universities. In addition, it allows students to make better informed and targeted UCAS choices and reduces the risk of unrealistic applications.

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- (5) The AS is also fundamental to the Cambridge admissions process; we have found that UMS data collected at the AS stage is a better predictor of success at Cambridge than GCSE, and means that we are considerably less reliant on predictions made by referees than most other institutions. We recommend that UMS data be routinely supplied to all HEIs each year so that they can make decisions based on the most up-to-date information about a student's academic ability.
- (6) We do not believe that the weighting between AS and A2 needs to alter; given that A\* grades are dependent upon performance in A2 there is effectively already a weighting.
- (7) We regard as essential the means for differentiating between students at the top end of the ability range. The introduction of the A\* grade has been extremely positive in this respect, and we are not convinced that there is a need to make changes to the A-level grading system if current distribution can be preserved.
- (8) We are opposed to the introduction of different grading systems for 'old' and 'new' A-levels because it would create a two tier system with some students (inevitably those from widening participation backgrounds) disadvantaged by their choices. Indeed, we would prefer there to be no phasing-in process for reformed qualifications: we would like to see all of the new qualifications introduced in the same year. It is vital that the reforms prove successful and produce a high quality replacement for existing qualifications, and we believe strongly that the current timeframe (ie to introduce new A-levels for teaching in 2014-15 is too compressed to achieve this.

We welcome the opportunity to contribute to A-level reform, and to respond to this consultation. Many of our academic colleagues (at Cambridge and elsewhere) are already involved in the process of shaping and improving qualifications, and we would wish them to continue to do so. It is vital that A-levels remain fit for entry to higher education. We do, however, believe that the views of schools, colleges and employers must be taken into account. We note that it would be impractical for this University to approve or otherwise every qualification offered by each examination board, and that it would be inappropriate for us to provide assurances regarding the suitability of qualifications for entry to other higher education institutions, since each sets its own entry requirements.

Yours sincerely

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