

# OFQUAL Consultation University of Cambridge Response Draft

## 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?**

See Q 34.

## 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 are providing a comment rather than an answer because Section 2 is in our view poorly phrased and any response using the scheme provided is therefore open to misinterpretation.

We strongly support strengthening the involvement of HEIs in some A-level design and assessment, but other parties have an interest and so A-level reform should not be determined solely by HEIs. Moreover, different HEIs will have different expectations and requirements. Cambridge would like to admit candidates who hold A-levels that are academically demanding, comparable, rigorously assessed and which encourage skills such as extended writing and independent study.

We agree that students should not be disadvantaged by choice of exam board; however we do not believe that it is necessarily the case that there should be comparability between different subjects (we note here your section regarding 'exceptions'), or that any qualification should guarantee access to any HEI.

### 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?**

We are providing a comment rather than an answer because Condition 1 is arguably several different conditions and any response using the scheme provided is therefore open to misinterpretation. In particular we are not sure if bullets 3 and 4 are compatible – positioning A-levels as HE entrance examinations and school leaving certificates is potentially contradictory. We are unable to comment on bullet 5 – employers will need to be consulted.

We agree that A-levels should be broadly comparable. We do not believe that it is necessary for 'old' and 'new' A-levels to have different grading schemes to avoid any confusion during transition, unless there are significant changes in resulting grade distributions – indeed we believe that this may cause a two tier system during the transition period. It would be simpler instead to label the qualifications themselves in some way to differentiate.

### 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?**

We are providing a comment rather than an answer because other factors which are not considered by the question are relevant.

The current A\* to E grading scheme is currently fit for purpose. Its value is however eroded over time if attainment continues to improve year on year, and for that reason future-proofing by normalising grades to a standard distribution may be prudent. Grading would need to be at a sufficient level of granularity in order for us to be able to differentiate at the top, and we would argue strongly for the routine provision of UMS scores for all points of study via a central body. Currently we have to ask students to provide this information.

**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?**

See 6 above

**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?**

We do not have a view on this question.

**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

In principle, we agree that assessment in January of Year 12 and 13 should be removed because it would enable teachers to spend more time (potentially up to 6 weeks) on learning and less on preparing for exams. But in special circumstances, and where good cause can be demonstrated, students should be able to resit modules, or preferably take them late.

**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?**

We strongly support Option 3 and the retention of AS, because (a) it minimises the step change between GCSE and A-level, (b) it provides breadth of study and an opportunity to sample subjects at a higher level before narrowing down, (c) UMS data collected at AS stage has been demonstrated to be a substantially better predictor of success at Cambridge than GCSE, and d) the demonstrated attainment of high marks/grades in public examinations at the end of Year 12 is valuable in encouraging applications to selective universities, particularly from students who might otherwise lack the confidence to make such applications. We highly value synoptic assessment and so cannot see how AS and A2 could be decoupled.

**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:**

See below

**Do you have any further comments or suggestions?**

Whilst there is a logic to weighting AS and A2 differently) for example 40:60 rather than the current 50:50), we make use of the A\* which itself places greater emphasis on A2

## 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?**

We believe that both extended exposition and multiple choice are valid forms of assessment if appropriately applied. However the balance and approach will vary by subject; multiple choice may have less value in arts and humanities subjects. Extended exposition will itself depend upon the subject of study. It will often involve essays, but for Mathematics and some science subjects it may take the form of providing diagrams or written proofs.

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?**

Synoptic assessment is vital for successful transition to higher education

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?**

Makes clear the purpose of assessment to whom? The candidate, examiners, admissions selectors, or some other group?

**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?**

All examination boards should have comparable assessment requirements

**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?**

We agree that it should be 60% as a minimum, and argue that a higher figure is better. Why not 100% for A2?

**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?

### 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?

We agree that universities should play a significant role in A-level reform and beyond. However HEIs have different missions, offer courses with different objectives, and look for different things in qualifications presented for entry. Endorsement would therefore need to be secured from a representative group of HEIs rather than individual institutions. It would be inappropriate for this University to endorse a qualification for admission to other HEIs or vice versa, and it is unrealistic to expect every HEI to produce a considered view encompassing both content and demand for every qualification.

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

No, and we note that it may be unhelpful to categorise in this way

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

- Yes
- No

Do you have any comments or suggestions?

See answers to 24 and 25 above

**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?

See answers to 24 and 25 above

**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

Surely this is unviable in practical terms?

#### Questions on Section 4: Exceptions

The following questions refer to Section 4: Exceptions.

We do not believe that approaching this topic by means of exceptions is appropriate, and so have not responded to the below.

**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.**

## 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?**

We believe that the proposal is appropriate, but we cannot say if it is sufficient. For example, appeal arrangements must be robust but also fair - currently they favour better supported students.

## 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

The changes to the assessment structure are desirable for students starting A-levels from September 2013. The timetable otherwise seems too quick.

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

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

We would suggest that allied subjects are considered at the same time for coherence.

**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.

- \_\_\_\_\_ physics, chemistry, biology
- \_\_\_\_\_ French, German and Spanish
- \_\_\_\_\_ mathematics
- \_\_\_\_\_ English literature
- \_\_\_\_\_ geography and history
- \_\_\_\_\_ a combination

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

We would strongly argue for all subjects being implemented at the same time, so as to avoid unnecessary confusion.

## General questions

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

### Your details

#### Name\*

Jon Beard

Director of Undergraduate Recruitment and Head of Cambridge Admissions Office

Patricia Fara

Associate Secretary to the Senior Tutors Committee, and Senior Tutor, Clare College

John Rallison

Pro-Vice Chancellor (Education)

Helen Reed

Head of Admissions and Data Services, Cambridge Admissions Office

Mike Sewell

Director of Admissions for the Cambridge Colleges, and Admissions Tutor, Selwyn College

Steve Watts

Admissions Tutor, Homerton College, and Chair of Admissions Forum

#### 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

**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\***

University of Cambridge

**Nation\***

- England
- Wales
- Scotland
- Northern Ireland
- International

**Email address\***

Who should be our main contact?

**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?**