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## GCE Advanced Level

The Advanced Level General Certificate of Education, universally referred to as an A-level, is a qualification offered by education institutions in England, Northern Ireland and Wales and by a small minority of institutions, typically private, in Scotland. (In Scotland, students usually take Highers and Advanced Highers of the Scottish Qualifications Certificate instead). A levels are usually studied over a two year period and are widely recognised around the world, as well as being the standard entry qualification for assessing the suitability of applicants for academic courses in UK Universities.

A levels are part of the tertiary Further Education (FE) process in the United Kingdom. A levels can also be studied by students in the last two years in a Sixth Form at secondary school. This is an integrated part of a Secondary Education institution in many areas of the country, while others have separate Sixth Form Colleges. This is normally done as a direct continuation of the secondary education process and hence most students study for the qualification from age 16 to 18.

A levels are also taken in many Commonwealth and former Commonwealth countries, including Bangladesh, Pakistan, the Commonwealth Caribbean/CARICOM Territories, Cyprus, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Mauritius, Sri Lanka, Cameroon, Singapore, China, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Gibraltar, Brunei, New Zealand, Malta, Zambia, South Africa, Nepal and India. Due to respective changes in the systems, these examinations differ both in terms of content and style from the A levels taken in the United Kingdom. The most extreme case is observed in Hong Kong; the British A level is accused of grade inflation, and thus over time the HKAL has become more strictly graded compared to its British counterpart, as shown by NARIC research. There could be statistically less than 0.05% candidates scoring an "A" in a single examination in the Hong Kong Advanced Supplementary Level Examination. The British GCE A levels are taken all around the world, as many international schools choose to use the British system for their wide recognition. Furthermore, students may choose to sit the papers of British examination bodies at education centres around the world, such as those belonging to the British Council. According to the British Council, A levels are similar to the American Advanced Placements which are themselves equivalent to first year courses of America's four year bachelor degrees. Recently within the Caribbean there has been a move away from the GCE Advanced Level to the CXC CAPE examinations.

### Overview and history

A levels were first introduced in 1951, replacing the previous award, the Higher School Certificate (HSC).

In 1987 Advanced Supplementary levels (abbreviated as AS-level or A/S-level), worth half of a full A level, were introduced to encourage students to broaden their knowledge of other areas. These were of the same academic standard of a full A level (i.e. the topics were studied in the same amount of depth) but covered a narrower range of topics.

The most recent changes to A levels began in 2000, when the government introduced Curriculum 2000 which split the A level into two parts, the AS (Advanced Subsidiary) and A2 examinations. The former is generally taken in Year 12 (Year 13 in Northern Ireland) and the latter is generally taken in Year 13 (Year 14 in Northern Ireland). Satisfactory achievement in AS and A2 modules results in the award of an A level qualification. It is possible to sit only AS modules, in which case only an AS-level qualification would be gained; this is given half the number of points of a full A level on the UCAS tariff points system. Advanced Subsidiary levels differ from the previous Advanced Supplementary levels in that they cover the same breadth of the subject as in the full A level but in less depth. The old AS-levels were also not a prerequisite for the corresponding A level and were examined separately.

While an A level is a qualification in its own right, A levels are often the prerequisite for university-level study as well, making them a de facto university entrance examination, though some universities also require applicants to take separate entrance examinations and the International Baccalaureate and European Baccalaureate are also accepted. Universities in the United Kingdom frequently demand that applicants achieve a minimum set of grades in A level examinations, or the equivalent in other examination systems, before accepting them. While the government has rejected plans to introduce an English Baccalaureate modelled on the International Baccalaureate, it has introduced a Welsh Baccalaureate studies in Wales, based on the French Baccalaureate; but it has yet to be introduced in the rest of the United Kingdom despite favourable comments by the Welsh Assembly to the British Government.

### Grades and grading history

Originally, A levels only distinguished between a pass and a fail, although fails were divided into two types: one meaning that the student had failed a subject at A level but passed at the O-level equivalent of that subject, and the other meaning that the student had not passed at either A level or O-level. In 1953, another grade was introduced: the distinction, for high passes. Due to complaints from universities that the grading system was not specific enough to identify the students they wanted, a grading scale close to the current one was created in 1963, but retained an O-level pass between the grades E and F (Fail). They also introduced norm-referenced grading, which meant that only

a certain proportion of candidates will achieve certain grades—10% A, 15% B, 10% C, 15% D, 20% E and a further 20% allowed an O-level pass. In 1984, the Secondary Examinations Council advised that grade boundaries should be based on the partition of the mark scale rather than on proportions of candidates, in a move towards a criterion-referenced system. Examiner judgement was to be the basis for the award of grades B and E, with the remaining grades determined by dividing the mark range between these two points into equal intervals. This system was introduced in 1987 and remained in force until the introduction of the new curriculum in 2000. With the introduction of the new system and the replacement of the O-levels with the GCSE, the O-level pass was dropped, replaced by a grade N, standing for "Near miss", which was a much narrower denotation for candidates who failed to achieve the minimum standard for an A level pass by only a few marks. The grade F was also replaced by a grade U. With the increase in the modular structure of the A level examinations, the retention of the grade N was considered unnecessary as there was far more information to indicate how close a candidate was towards achieving a pass based on the modules taken. Therefore, with the introduction of the new revised A levels in 2001 under Curriculum 2000, the grade N was finally dropped.

In the current system, A levels are graded from A\* to E. The raw mark in papers are converted to marks on a Uniform Mark Scale (UMS), so that every A level subject has a maximum of 200, 400 or 600 UMS marks, and every AS-level subject 100, 200 or 300, depending on the number of units. Each grade requires a specific percentage of the UMS points available in both the A- and AS-levels:

#### Demographics

This section's factual accuracy may be compromised because of out-of-date information. Please help improve the article by updating it. There may be additional information on the talk page. (October 2009)

In the UK, A level results have risen for twenty-five years in a row, with a 2005 pass rate (A–E) of 96.2%. For the June 2005 series, a total of 783,878 (359,284 male, 424,594 female) candidates received their full A level results; for the AS-level, it was 1,079,566 (492,248 male, 587,318 female). 22.8% of A level final results were graded A; 23.8%, B; 23.3%, C; 17.2%, D; 9.1%, E; and 3.8% were not graded (U). The most popular subject, from most A levels achieved to least, were: English (all combined) (85,858: 11%), General Studies (59,403: 7.6%), Biology (53,968: 6.9%), Mathematics (52,897: 6.7%), Psychology (50,035: 6.4%). Further Mathematics was the subject with most A grades as a percentage, 58%.<sup>[18]</sup> In general, languages, science and mathematics subjects tended to yield the highest proportion of A grades. Over the last few years, languages and some sciences have declined relative to other subjects such as Psychology and Media Studies. Full A level grades are higher than AS-level grades; for example, 22.8% of A level grades are graded A compared to 17.9% at AS-level.

Some research has that A levels in mathematics, sciences and modern languages were graded more severely than in humanities and arts. It led to the conclusion that not all A levels were equal

#### Studying A levels

The number of A level exams taken by students can vary, though generally not in the state sector in which around 90% of students are educated. A typical route is to study four subjects at AS-level and then drop down to three at A2 level, although some students continue with their fourth subject. Three is usually the minimum number of A levels required for university entrance, with some universities specifying the need for a fourth AS subject. There is no limit on the number of A levels one can study (except in Singapore, where students are restricted to 12 "academic units" and private candidates are also limited in their number of subjects), some students do obtain five or more A levels. It is permissible to take A levels in languages one already speaks fluently, or courses with overlapping content. General Studies and Critical Thinking, which require a grasp of basic political ideas and current affairs in order to write essays rather than specific learning, sometimes augment a student's batch of qualifications. While many universities do not consider an A level in General Studies to be a stand-alone subject (and thus is not accepted as part of an offer), it may affect the offer which a student receives. For example, a student of Mathematics, Physics and Computing might receive an offer of B-B-C for a Physics degree, whereas one also taking General Studies might receive B-C-C. Unlike A level General Studies, Critical Thinking, which aims to improve student's analytical skills, has generally received a more positive reception from universities. Often it is given a UCAS tariff score unlike General Studies and some University admissions tutors see it as an advantage when applying for competitive courses.<sup>[23]</sup>

The A level has been criticised for providing less breadth since many A level students do not generally study more than 3 subjects in their final year.<sup>[24]</sup> A major part of this criticism is that, while a 3 or 4 subject curriculum can be balanced across the spectrum (e.g., students may choose one science subject, a language subject, and a "creative" subject like Music), in many cases students choose three closely-linked subjects, for instance, Mathematics, Physics and Chemistry or Sociology, Psychology and Politics. This is in part due to university entrance requirements, which, for degree programs such as medicine, may require three related A level subjects. Thus, while the purpose of Curriculum 2000 was to encourage students to undertake contrasting subjects, to broaden their 'skill-base', there is a tendency to pursue similar disciplines. However, others disagree, arguing that the additional AS-level(s) studied would already have provided more breadth compared with the old system. The A levels' breadth also pale in comparison to the International Baccalaureate, which examines in six subjects, or the European Baccalaureate, which examines in at least 10 subjects.

#### Curriculum 2000

Main article: Curriculum 2000

Following the introduction of Curriculum 2000 in September 2000 (with the first AS-level examinations held in Summer 2001 and A2 examinations the following year), an A level now consists of six modules studied over two years. Normally, three modules are assessed at the end of the first year, and make up a stand-alone qualification called the "AS-level" (or Advanced Subsidiary level, not to be confused with an older AS-level, the Advanced Supplementary level). Another three modules are assessed at the end of the second year, which make up the "A2". A2 modules do not form a qualification in their own right; the satisfactory completion of the AS and A2 modules in the same subject is required to constitute a complete A level. Modules are assessed by exam papers marked by national organisations and internally-assessed coursework.

The introduction of the new GCE Applied A level suite, taken from the old VCE A levels, generally have a more vocational twist to them. For example, the new GCE A level in Applied Business combines the traditional theory based subject 'Business Studies' (which can be studied as an A level itself) and adds a more practical and hands-on approach to it. In this case, for the mandatory modules in the AS year, the candidate is expected to create a simulated Marketing Proposal (module 1) and Recruitment and motivational package (module 2) as opposed to just studying the processes. This essentially asks the candidate to show a more thorough insight by actually applying the theory. Given that many universities have shown a dislike to vocational subjects as opposed to the traditional ones, their reaction to the new applied suite remains to be seen. However, considering the subject is now much broader and more 'student-friendly' it is hoped that universities will see that this subject is no less than the traditional Business Studies given that the traditional aspect of the subject is not fully lost. The new GCE Applied A levels are available in: Art and Design; ICT; Business and Science.

#### Examination boards

A level examinations are administered through a series of examination boards. These were originally based on the major UK universities but have over the last 50 years merged into five very large organisations, AQA, OCR, Edexcel, WJEC, and CCEA. Some of these boards also offer A levels to international students.

In the UK it is customary for schools to register with multiple examination boards and to 'mix and match' A levels to get a combined curriculum that fits the school profile. Schools outside the UK are often unaware that registration with one examination board generally makes registration with them all a 'pro forma' exercise, all A levels in the British system, being considered exactly equivalent.

#### A levels in British university admissions

Because A level students often apply to universities before they have taken their final exams, British universities (including Scottish universities, which receive many applicants taking A levels) consider predicted A level results when deciding whether applicants should be offered places. The predictions are made by students' teachers and can be unreliable. Thus, the acceptance of a student onto a course will normally be conditional on him or her actually achieving a minimum set of grades (for example, conditional offer of three A levels at grades B-B-C). Universities may specify which subjects they wish these grades to be in (for example, conditional offer of grades A-A-B with a grade A in Mathematics). A level grades are also sometimes converted into numerical scores, notably through the UCAS university admission system.[25] For example, under the UCAS system, an A\* grade at A level is worth 140 points, while an A is worth 120, a B is worth 100, a C is worth 80, a D is 60, and a E is worth 40; so a university may instead demand that an applicant achieve 280 points, instead of the equivalent offer of B-B-C. This allows greater flexibility to students, as 280 points could also, for example, be achieved through the combination A-B-D, which would not have met the requirements of a B-B-C offer because of the D grade. Or even a combination which is made up of more than 3 subjects (typically 4 or 5) but with lower grades. The points system also allows for non-academic input, such as higher level music grades or a Key Skills course.

#### Criticisms and reform

There have been many criticisms about A levels. One issue widely discussed in the UK is the steady rise in grades for 27 years in a row, in particular whether this implies that the A level has been getting consistently easier. The government and teaching bodies maintain that the improved grades represent higher levels of achievement due to improved and more experienced teaching methods, but many educationalists and elements of the popular press argue that the change is due to grade inflation and the examinations getting easier. A third view is that, as schools come under increasing pressure to improve their examination results, pupils are being coached to pass specific examinations, at the expense of a general understanding of their subjects. Still another view is that, as the cost to an examination board of changing a subject's syllabus is very high, they are reluctant to do so, leading to a lengthy period over which exam questions will inevitably be very similar and so teaching towards their likely content will be more successful. Yet another view is that, because of the new changes introduced in Curriculum 2000, where students are examined in both years of sixth form, less academically able students drop subjects they find difficult resulting in better candidate self-selection and enabling students achieving less than desired grades to retake specific modules. The ability of unlimited resits, with the best mark going through, has improved results. According to some, students selecting "easier" subjects instead of "harder" ones have also contributed to this rise.

Universities in Britain have constantly complained that the increasing number of A grades awarded makes it hard to distinguish between students at the upper end of the ability spectrum.[36] The C grade was originally intended to represent the average ability, and students typically required 60% or higher across all assessments to attain it; however, the average result is now at the lower end of the B grade. Thus, many universities now have their own entrance tests such as the BMAT and LNAT for specific courses or interviews to distinguish between applicants. In 2005, the head of admissions at the University of Cambridge outlined changes he believed should be made to the current system, particularly the use of the Advanced Extension Awards, a top-up qualification that tests the most-able students some of the harder content in their A level courses. More universities have wanted to see applicants' individual module results to see how comfortably they have achieved their result. There are fears that the A level may not offer an accurate test of ability, nor will it be a good prediction of future academic success.

Concern over A level grading became national news in September 2002. The Observer newspaper ran a story making claims that A level results had been fixed. It was alleged that students had been given lower marks than they deserved in order to fix overall results, making the pass rate seem lower than it really should have been and so disproving that A levels were becoming too easy. This resulted in the Tomlinson Inquiry. As a result, some papers were re-marked but only 1,220 A level and 733 AS-level students saw an improvement to their results.

In response to concerns shown by employers and universities that it is not possible to distinguish between the large number of students achieving A grades, and in order to mirror the current GCSE standards, a debate arose in 2004 as to whether a new, higher "super A" grade (like the A\* grade at GCSE) should be attainable. As will be seen in 2010, it was generally agreed that bringing in higher grades would be a much better idea than raising the grade boundaries to keep the standards consistent, and it has been proposed that on top of the A\*, an A\*\* grade should be attainable at A level in order to stretch the most able students while still allowing others to achieve the grades they deserve. The Advanced Extension Award has been increasingly used to serve this purpose. From A2 exams sat in 2010, the highest A level grade will be A\*, requiring an A grade overall and 90% overall average UMS in A2 papers.

The September 2004 reformation of the Mathematics syllabus, following calls that it was too hard,[45] has attracted criticism for allegedly being made easier. In the change, content consisting of three modules (Pure 1-3) were spread to four modules (Core 1-4). It is alleged that this makes the course easier as students do less work for the same qualifications. Further reforms to make the Mathematics syllabus more popular have been met with mixed opinions. Supporters cite it will reverse the downward trend in students taking the subject whilst others are concerned that the subject is being "dumbed down".

Despite ongoing work to improve the image of A levels in the Business community, a number of business leaders are beginning to express concern about the suitability of the qualification for school leavers and to urge the adoption of the International Baccalaureate in the UK instead. During 2009 concerns were raised by Sir Mike Rake, Chairman of BT Group and Sir Terry Leahy, Chairman of Tesco's and by Sir Christopher Gent, Chairman of GlaxoSmithKline

#### Burden of assessment

Following criticisms from many groups[by whom?] on the "burden of assessment", from September 2008 onwards, candidates will take four papers for most A levels, instead of the current six. This will mean that there will be two modules for AS and two more for A2 for the majority of A levels, and that their UMS will total 200 for AS and 400 for the whole A level (rather than 300 and 600 as was the case in the past). However, this will not be the case for all A levels: Biology, Human Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Electronics, Geology, Music and Science will continue with six units, three units for AS and A2 respectively, and 600 UMS for the A level. Mathematics (including Further Mathematics, Additional Further Mathematics, Statistics, and the Use of Mathematics AS), will not change structurally in the 2008 reform; it will stay on 600 UMS (300 UMS for AS), but it will include the new A\* grade and the 'Stretch and Challenge' provision. Also, Bengali, Modern Hebrew, Panjabi, Polish, Arabic, Japanese, Modern Greek, Biblical Hebrew, Dutch, Gujarati, Persian, Portuguese, and Turkish will remain at two units, one for AS and one for A2. However they will move to 200 UMS for A level. Chinese will also move to 200 UMS, but instead of two units, it will move to three units: AS will have two units, A2 will have one. It is the first A level to have an odd number

of units since Curriculum 2000.

Harrow School has warned that it will ditch A levels if they are dumbed down further. They are considering moving to a new exam (to be called Pre-U) being developed by private schools in conjunction with Cambridge University's exam board.

Cambridge University has warned that it is extremely unlikely that it will accept applicants who are taking two or more supposedly 'softer' A level subjects out of 3. It has outlined a list of subjects it considers to be 'unsuitable', which includes Accounting, Design and Technology, Film Studies, Information and Communication Technology, Media Studies, Photography, and Sports studies.

As a result of dislike of the modular system, many schools now offer the alternative International Baccalaureate Diploma qualification. The course offers more subjects, extracurricular activity, a philosophical epistemological component known as "Theory of Knowledge", as well as the requirement of an extended essay on any subject of a candidate's choice. Unlike the current AS/A2 system, the International Baccalaureate is not based on a modular system. The Diploma Programme, administered by the International Baccalaureate, is a recognised pre-university educational programme.

Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair recently suggested that one state school in every county should offer the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme as an alternative to A levels.

#### Predicted grading

A possible reformation would be something called the post-qualifications applications system (PQA), where applicants apply to university after they receive their results. It has been argued that this would be fairer to applicants, especially those from lower-income families whose results were thought to be under-predicted. However, a more recent UCAS report shows that although the reliability of predicted grades declines in step with family income, in general this leads to an over-prediction effect for lower income groups. Moreover, even though just 45% of predicted grades are accurate - 47% being over-predictions, 9% under-predictions — UCAS found "only weak and negative evidence of a systematic relationship between an individual's chances of being accepted at a Higher Education Institution and their examination grades being over predicted". Education ministers have said that PQA will be implemented by 2012.

#### Grading

With the newly introduced A\* as defined above, there has been growing criticism[who?] how it is rewarded. 80% over the two years is needed plus 90% in the A2 year. This means that, for example with a 400 UMS point maximum subject, one student could achieve 320 UMS overall and be graded as an A\* whilst another student could achieve 379 UMS overall but only be awarded a grade A.[citation needed]

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