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Pocket Watch – A level reform

Introduction

The Government's sweeping education reform programme reached another stage this week with an [announcement](#) about forthcoming changes to A levels. The changes follow a period of consultation undertaken last year and instigated by a letter to Ofqual from the Secretary of State last April. One decision, scrapping the January exam opportunity from this September, had already been signalled, but the consultation had covered a range of other issues including notably what to do with the AS level and how best to involve universities in the development of content. It was these more fundamental issues that were covered in this week's Statement

So what was announced?

Five main things.

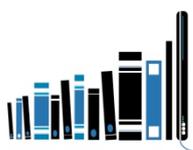
First, confirmation in the Secretary of State's words that: "*the primary purpose of A levels is to prepare students for degree-level study.*" Debate about the role of A levels has never been far away and indeed was the first question in the consultation: are they an entry point for HE, a filter for the labour market, a recognition of higher level achievement, can they be all this and more? Michael Gove did concur that they should be able to prepare people "*for degree-level study and for vocational education*" but the primary role was clearly underlined

Second, the AS, introduced in its current form under the notorious Curriculum 2000 changes and left ambivalent in the consultation. There was strong support in the consultation for retaining the AS in its current form but with some modification of the weighting. The Government has however gone for a standalone model, retained as a separate qualification and not contributing to the A level. It's proved to be a contentious move both with universities who use the AS in admissions procedures and with teachers and professional bodies who value the range of opportunities the AS often offers

Third, and as is already happening with GCSE, A levels should be "*fully linear*," this to deal with the "*too much assessment, too little learning*" problem that the Secretary of State outlined to the Education Committee this week. So exams at the end allowing for full coverage of the course rather than those bite-sized chunks

Fourth, the knotty problem of HE involvement in assuring the standard of A level specs, knotty in the sense that while the Secretary of State was keen to have HE involved it was less clear whether this was all universities or just some, whether as originally suggested it should be a set number and whether universities, many of whom already work with exam boards, would have time or capacity to be more fully engaged. As it stands, the Russell Group will convene an 'advisory board' to seek the views of other universities as well as professional groups on the content of the facilitating, EBacc derivative subjects. These will be reviewed each year on a before and after use basis

Fifth, the introduction of these new A levels, in facilitating subjects at least, now to be put off for a year until 2015. In theory good news, in practice with the introduction of EBCs due at the same time, ushering in a portentous big bang



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A level reform announcements Jan 2013