

2012/60

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Pocket Watch – First steps in A level reform

Introduction

The recent announcement from Ofqual about changes to A level exam arrangements tells us a bit more about where A level reform is heading but not much. From September 2013, exams will only be held in the summer and one resit per paper permitted. So much, so expected but as for more fundamental issues such as the future of the AS and the role of HE in A level design, we'll have to wait a bit longer. Yet since the consultation was first announced in high summer, there've been issues with GCSE, proposals for EBCs, new principles for the operation of the exam system and fleeting glimpses of a new National Curriculum. A lot of change is piling up

What's the context?

In theory reform of A levels should be more straightforward: they are still well regarded as Ofqual's survey earlier this year indicated; there's general consensus about where any change is needed (resits, teaching to the test, modularity and a bit more creativity, Ofqual again;) and after 61 years, they've pretty much retained their aura. Indeed some have said 'leave well alone.' However, the Secretary of State has remained adamant that he wants to see universities more closely involved and a broader package of ABacc style learning undertaken

What did the consultation tell us?

Consultation on proposed changes to A levels took place over the summer, over 1,000 responses were received and as Ofqual noted in its analysis of the responses, some fairly clear messages came through:

- On the purpose of A levels there was broad support for the dual role of A level as a measure of attainment at age 18 and as an entry requirement for HE but a belief that it shouldn't just be seen as an HE entry tool or basis for accountability
- On the AS there was clear support for retaining the AS without a January resit but debate about the appropriate weighting between the two. Most favoured a 40:60 split
- On grading there was support for the current grading system including the A* grade and grade descriptors though a recognition that new style A levels might require a new grading structure. Also support for greater transparency and consistency of grading
- On the role of HE it was recognised that HE involvement was helpful but differing views about how far it could or would want to get involved. There was support for the full range of HEIs to be involved not just 'select' universities, for other stakeholders to be included through the concept of learned societies, for an equal hand to be applied to all subjects and for the ownership of A levels to remain with awarding organisations
- On implementation there were mixed views about having a staged approach to the reform of A levels, with no great consensus as which batch of subjects should go first. Also strong support for ensuring all A levels had been reformed by 2018 but, almost etched in blood, a belief that 2014 was too soon to implement any changes properly



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