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Pocket Watch – Some more A' level questions

Introduction

The latest round of consultations on the 'new' A' levels drew to a close last week and based on an initial sample of published responses, two issues seem to have attracted the most attention.

One is the de-coupling of the AS qualification, stoutly defended by the Secretary of State last year but continuing to provoke strong views and even bringing together an unlikely forward row of the University of Cambridge, Guild HE and the AoC, locked together in a recent press release. *"If the de-coupling of AS and A' level is to go ahead as proposed, we believe all students should be able to sit four fully-funded AS levels at the end of Year 12."*

The other is the proposal to take practicals out of the formal assessment requirements for the sciences, considered essential by Ofqual to ensure future credibility but regarded by many as a retrograde step. The CBI was just one of a number of respondents to argue that *"science is a practical discipline and hands-on experience is vital preparation for apprenticeships and inspiring young people in the first place."* So from these initial responses at least, how widespread were views on these and any other issues raised in the consultation?

The AS question

Broadly three arguments were raised on the question of a de-coupled AS.

First, that for many universities, the AS remains an important component in the HE admissions process. Michael Gove had argued last year that universities tended to rely on GCSE and other criteria rather than the AS but in its response, UCAS, while acknowledging that the picture on the use of AS remains *"variable,"* notes that many institutions do still use it. Indeed, *"92.5% of courses listed on UCAS Course Search as available for options in 2014 make reference to the AS in their entry requirements."* It's a point Cambridge University has consistently made, repeating in its latest joint press release that it *"helps universities make objective judgements about potential."* The worry as the ATL (Association of Teachers and Lecturers) points out is that the move to de-couple the AS *"will encourage more universities to design their own exams."*

A second argument about the AS and one that was used to legitimise it when it was introduced under Curriculum 2000 all those years ago is that the AS can broaden the curriculum for young people and help them determine which lines of learning they wish to pursue. It's a point made for instance by SCORE (Science Community Representing Education) and ASCL who state that: *"school and college leaders have found the AS encourages motivation post-16, enables students to delay final decisions about which subjects to continue at A' level, and supports progression."* Breadth v depth of study at advanced level seems to have been the issue here. Michael Gove strongly believes that the AS adds to the treadmill of exams and hinders students from studying subjects in depth while others, as indicated here, believe that it offers important opportunities to widen interests and check out future avenues.

The third line of argument taken up in the responses is just how a future co-teachable AS will work out, how easy will it be for students taking a one year AS and students taking the first year of a two year A' level to work together? The Cambridge/Guild HE/AoC grouping *"would rather have universal co-teachability than no or partial co-teachability"* but as UCAS note, there's likely to be great variability in how schools use the AS. *"Some centres may continue to offer the qualification at the end of the first year of A' level study whereas some may choose to offer only the full A' level."* They urge Ofqual to undertake a review about how schools and colleges will be using the AS, a point endorsed by SCORE who call for *"the purpose of the AS level to be clarified."*

The previous Shadow Education Secretary had said that a future Labour Government would look at reversing this particular change but most respondents like the ASCL, seem to acknowledge that *'the reform now has to go ahead,'* not least because some new specifications need to be ready this autumn if first teaching of the initial batch is to be ready for September 2015. Further delay could prove damaging but it seems that considerable uncertainty about the future role of the AS remains.

The science practicals question

Strong views were also expressed about what many perceive as a side lining of the practical assessments in the three sciences. *"We are deeply concerned,"* wrote the Gatsby Foundation in its response, *"by the proposal that science A' level grades should no longer include the direct assessment of practical skills, not least since this proposal has little or no support among scientists."*

In fairness Ofqual who had proposed in their consultation last autumn that practicals should be separately assessed and recorded but not contribute to the overall grade, claim that it doesn't mean that *"we don't value practical work in science. In fact, it's quite the opposite. We are not saying practical skills are unimportant, we are saying they are so important that the assessment arrangements should not adversely influence (limit) what students experience and learn."* Their argument, as expressed in the consultation is five-fold: current practical skills assessments don't discriminate well between students; practical assessments have been too favourably marked; too much teaching has been focused on the practicals at the expense of other skills; there have been cases of malpractice; and there are question marks about authenticity of evidence. There are in other words, some *"intractable issues."*

Other respondents see it differently. The Nuffield Foundation, ATL and ASCL believe the move will lead to an inevitable downplaying of practical work in schools, SCORE challenge the basic premise, *"Ofqual has deemed it appropriate to include fieldwork or practical work in grades in other contexts for example A' level Geography, so we would like to see the same approach applied to A' level sciences,"* while Gatsby call for a specific weighting to be attached to practical assessments. *"We recommend that there should be a single Assessment Objective unambiguously associated with the direct assessment of practical skills and this should be weighted at a minimum of 20% of a science A' level."* It goes on to offer some helpful ways in which practical assessment could be enhanced to overcome some of the problems outlined by Ofqual including the use of Lab books, cluster moderation and emerging best practice from both national exam boards and international research.

It leaves Ofqual facing some difficult decisions.

Some other questions

Inevitably a number of respondents worried about the pressurised speed of change with SCORE for instance calling for the new science A' levels to be *"postponed for at least a year"* particularly as new GCSEs are also under development at the same time. Maths and Further Maths have of course been put back for a year yet here the Advisory Committee on Maths expressed concerns about whether this would halt the recent increase in the take-up of maths while others questioned whether there was sufficient maths content in some other subjects. There were also concerns about whether the opportunity should be taken to have a look at assessment and standards generally while UCAS raised the issue about the impact of such changes on the uptake of vocational qualifications. Plenty to work on.



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