Reform of pre-university qualifications – university involvement

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ARC Council meeting, 27 February 2015
Outline

• What is happening? – and when?
• Involving universities
• The ALCAB story
• What went well ... and less well
• Looking forward – for schools/colleges and universities
What is happening? – and when?
New A levels – England, Wales, NI

New GCSEs - England

New Nationals - Scotland

New Highers - Scotland

VQ reform - England

Coupled AS – Wales and NI

Increased use of VQs

Declining 18 year old population

Science practical - England

New Welsh Bacc - Wales

New core maths - England

Decoupled AS - England
What is happening

• (In England): Changes to GCSEs and A levels
• For all:
  • Move from modular to linear structures (exam at the end)
  • End of January exams
  • Reduction in coursework
  • Changes to assessment (Ofqual) (including practical science)
• GCSEs – big changes:
  • Harder (particularly mathematics)
  • New grades (1-9) (4 and above = C and above)
What is happening? (ctd)

• A levels (England)
  • Many broadly the same, but with new (linear) structure
  • Universities to be involved in reviewing content
  • AS “decoupled”

• Wales and N Ireland
  • AS “coupled”

• New qualifications
  • Core mathematics
  • External Project Qualification (EPQ)

• Changes to funding and accountability for schools and colleges

• Diversification of routes to university
English 18 year old entry rate by type of qualifications held

Source: Figure ST from ‘UCAS End of Cycle Report 2014’, www.ucas.com
English 18 year old acceptances holding BTECs to acceptances holding A levels
.... And when?
Not to mention... (May 2015)
What is happening? ...and when? Key messages

• Long period of “mixed economy”
  • Old and new qualifications
• Differences across the UK
• Schools and colleges facing the AS dilemma
  • Majority will probably continue to offer ASs at present, but review later
• Pressures on schools and colleges (funding, accountability, teacher supply)
  • Not all will be able to offer the qualifications universities like
  • Need for subject-based training for teachers
• Major challenge to university admissions staff to be fair and deliver access policies
Involving universities in reform of A levels

• Historic links with awarding organisations
Then...
And now

- Awarding organisations
- Universities, FE, employers, subject communities, students, parents, taxpayers........
The Government’s intention – bring the universities in again

“A levels are a crucial way that universities select candidates for their courses, so it is important that these qualifications meet the needs of higher education institutions…. [We will] …ensure universities and learned bodies can be fully involved in their development. We specifically want to explore where linear A levels can be adapted to provide the depth of synoptic learning which the best universities value.”

White Paper “The Importance of Teaching”, 2010
The ALCAB story – the process

- Some policy decisions non-negotiable – terminal exams, less coursework
- Government approach to the Russell Group
- Initial review of current A levels by awarding organisations and Professor Mark Smith
- Most OK to be introduced in new form for first teaching in 2015
- Ofqual international survey – A levels came out well
- Three subject groups remitted to universities at various times for more detailed work:
  - Mathematics and further mathematics
  - Languages – foreign languages (classical languages added)
  - Geography
- These subjects were intended for first teaching in 2016 (together with others) (timetable for mathematics now extended to 2017)
- Russell Group set up ALCAB (independent company)
ALCAB’s approach

• Panels established (not just from Russell Group universities)
• Engagement with subject associations, teachers’ conferences etc
• Linking to other relevant thinking
  • Royal Academy/British Council (languages)
  • Royal Society (maths/science)
  • Employers’ organisations
  • Subject associations
Conclusions – general

• Students should engage with subject essentials: what it means to be a mathematician/linguist/geographer
  • Rich and rewarding, not just recycling of topics studied at GCSE
• The AS qualification is valuable and valued by universities
• Concentrated work required on teacher development and resources for teachers
Specific subjects

• Modern languages
  • Crisis of low uptake
  • Content sometimes seen as dull (particularly AS)
  • Lack of confidence in marking/grading – seen as risky for high-achievers
  • Aim to revive the subject, rooting it in the life and culture of the countries where it is spoken. Not recycling generic topics studied at GCSE.

• Mathematics/further mathematics
  • 100% prescribed (50% of further maths)
  • Includes both mechanics and statistics
  • About understanding mathematical concepts and solving mathematical problems
  • Need to delay first teaching until 2017 (AGREED)
Specific subjects (ctd)

- Geography
  - Balance between human and physical geography
  - 60% core prescribed
  - Modern approach – including geographical information systems
  - Fieldwork
ALCAB’s final advice (following consultation)

• Some content taken out (or moved from AS to A level)
• Some controversial proposals removed (e.g., analytical essay in English in modern foreign languages)
• Content for new AS/A level mathematics suitable if first teaching is **no earlier than 2017**
  • First cohort should proceed from the new GCSE, not the current one
  • ACCEPTED BY GOVERNMENT
What went well ....

• Involvement of universities collectively went well, once it got going
• Subject academics wanted to help – good learning process for them and for the exam boards
• A levels were good qualifications before and the new ones should be better
• Alignment of A level thinking with the modern subjects in universities
But....

- Universities too slow to respond to initial invitation to help
  - Very little university input to first reviews by exam boards
- Process needed more input from teachers
  - Initial recommendations had to be cut back to be teachable in the time available
- Qualifications development is a holistic process
  - Content and assessment interdependent
- The outcome depends on the eventual qualifications – the new syllabuses and exams – not on the central specifications
- Need for continuity in the design and development of the new qualifications
  - Risk of losing the philosophy behind reform proposals in a divided implementation process
- Need to bring subject expertise together
  - Separate “subject experts” can cancel each other out
Looking forward – challenges and opportunities for schools and colleges

• Important to distinguish two questions:
  • What qualifications will get my students accepted for entrance to their university of choice?
  • What courses of study/qualifications will best prepare my students for the university course(s) they want to do?
• Subject-based training and development
  • Need to use the expert resources available, particularly subject associations and university subject departments
• Managing – and explaining - the complicated picture
• Coping with mixed messages from universities (eg about AS)
Looking forward – for universities

• Continuing to involve subject academics
  • Working with exam boards
  • Working with the subject associations
  • Working with schools and colleges

• Managing mixed economy for many years
  • Inconsistency in knowledge/skills of entrants
  • Differences across the UK
  • Lack of understanding by subject departments

• TRY to make the messages to schools and colleges more consistent
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But, despite all the problems

• It was good to engage the top subject academics in the review of A levels
• They need to continue to be involved, as new qualifications are developed and implemented
Thank you

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