



# Advanced level standards

## SHA's submission to the Tomlinson Inquiry

Policy paper 3

### INTRODUCTION

- 1 The Secondary Heads Association (SHA) welcomes the opportunity to submit its views to the Inquiry on A level standards being conducted by Mike Tomlinson.
- 2 The first stage of the Inquiry was, of necessity, on a very short time scale. Although the second stage has until November to reach its conclusions, the issues are complex and inter-related. We would have wished for more time to gather evidence and consult SHA members, but we recognise the urgency of this exercise, which is needed in order to restore not only the confidence of the public in A level standards, but also the confidence of A level students, teachers and examiners.
- 3 The terms of reference of this second stage of the Inquiry are:

To investigate the arrangements at QCA and the awarding bodies for setting, maintaining and judging A level standards, which are challenging, and ensuring their consistency over time; and to make recommendations by November to the Secretary of State and the Chief Executive of QCA for action with the aim of securing the credibility and integrity of these examinations.

- 4 The SHA evidence is therefore set out below in three sections:
  - 4.1 Advanced level standards.
  - 4.2 Roles and relationships of the DfES, QCA and the awarding bodies.
  - 4.3 General concerns about assessment.

The SHA evidence on 4.3 is supported by the paper on *Examinations and Assessment*, recently published by the Association.

With HMC and GSA, SHA has identified 15 recommendations that need to be put in place urgently for 2003. These are attached in a joint GSA/HMC/SHA paper at Annex 1.

### ADVANCED LEVEL STANDARDS

- 5 We have often heard A level described as *the gold standard*. Nothing could be further from reality: there has never been a single standard for A level. It has been well known for many years that different A level subjects have different levels of difficulty. Evidence for this view has consistently been produced by Professor Carol Fitz-Gibbon through the A level Information Systems (ALIS) project, which has analysed A level results for the last 20 years. **SHA recommends that equivalent grades in all A levels should represent the same level of achievement.**
- 6 It was understood that, from the mid-1980s, A level grades would no longer be *norm-referenced*, but would be *criterion-referenced*, at least at grades A and E. In fact, as has become public knowledge in 2002, the grading system is an uneasy mixture of norm and criterion referencing. **SHA recommends that the A level grading system should be criterion-referenced.**
- 7 A stronger focus on criterion referencing would ensure that grades resulted from the professional judgements of experienced chief examiners and were not subject to statistical manipulation at the end of the process. **SHA recommends that the chief executives of awarding bodies, acting as Accountable Officers, should not normally change the grades agreed by chief examiners. In the exceptional circumstances where this is done, a report on each case should be sent to QCA within two days.**
- 8 The calculation of AS grades has been transparent, at least in theory. According to the Dearing Report, each grade at AS represented the standard reached after one year of an A level course that is equivalent to the same A level grade reached after two years. **SHA recommends that this definition of AS grades should remain.**

- 9 The calculation of A2 grades has never, to this day, been clearly articulated. If, as has been suggested, the level of A2 grades is above that of A level in order to compensate for the lower level AS grades to which they are to be added, this has never been made clear. If that is the case – and SHA strongly believes that it should not be the case – then the amount by which A2 is above A level needs to be publicly stated.
- 10 SHA believes that it is wrong for A2 grades to be above that of A level. During the debates on the implementation of Curriculum 2000, it was never suggested that it was the purpose of the changes to raise the standard expected of 18 year olds.
- 11 If the combining of AS and A2 grades into a single A level grade proves impossible without raising the standard of A level accreditation, **SHA recommends that the A2 grade should be uncoupled from the AS grade, with AS and A2 grades being reported separately. The AS marks should not be used in the calculation of the A2 grade.**
- 12 Students study AS courses and normally complete AS examinations after one year. They proceed to the A2 courses in their chosen subjects and take A2 examinations during the second year. At least one of the A2 module examinations in each course would be synoptic, testing students on the work covered in the whole AS/A2 course. **SHA recommends that the A level grade should be the A2 grade and should not be computed by combining marks from AS and A2.**
- 13 Although uncoupled for grading purposes, **SHA recommends that the AS and the A2 courses should continue to form a single coherent A level course, normally taken over two years.** There should be no change in AS and A2 specifications.
- 14 With A2 uncoupled from AS, **SHA recommends that A2 grades should represent the same achievement as the equivalent traditional A level grades.**
- 15 AS is currently worth half an A level in UCAS points. In the interests of promoting breadth of study post-16, **SHA recommends that the UCAS points for AS should remain at half of those for a full A level of the same grade.**
- 16 SHA believes that it is vital to retain the modular structure of A levels, which has brought greater flexibility and helped to raise achievement. There is, however, little reason to retain the six-module structure, other than for symmetry of course architecture. In order to reduce the amount of post-16 assessment, **SHA recommends that AS courses should have only two modules**, a proposal put forward by SHA and others several years ago. This should not, however, necessitate a reduction in coursework, which SHA sees as a valuable part of many A level courses.
- 17 The two examination sittings per year, in January and June, have given schools and colleges opportunities for flexibility of organisation and **SHA recommends that two examination sittings per year should be retained.** However, SHA believes that a system of end-of-module assessments would be preferable to examination period at fixed dates in January and June.
- 18 SHA believes that it would add to the reliability of AS grades if greater weight was placed on the professional judgement of teachers in the manner described in the Annex to this Submission. **SHA therefore recommends that AS should be largely teacher assessed.**
- 19 SHA welcomes the discussions concerning a six-term year and the potential thus created for a post-qualifications admissions process to university.
- 20 The six modules of vocational A levels are currently all assessed at full Advanced level standard. This causes considerable problems for many vocational A level candidates taking modular examinations in the first year of their course. SHA therefore recommended previously that the assessment structure of vocational A levels be changed to match that of A levels, with the first three modules being assessed at a standard half way to full A level. SHA recognises that this potentially creates the same grading problem for the final three modules of vocational A levels as has beset A levels in 2002. **SHA therefore recommends that the standards expected in vocational AS and A2 should match the standards expected in the general AS and A2 equivalent.**
- 21 The Code of Practice – or, at least, its interpretation – has been found wanting in 2002. **SHA recommends that the Code of Practice should be amended to reflect the changes recommended by the Tomlinson report.**

## ROLES AND RELATIONSHIPS OF THE DFES, QCA AND THE AWARDING BODIES

- 22 Although there was no evidence of involvement by DfES ministers or officials in the statistical manipulation of A level grades in 2002, SHA officers have long observed the close links between the DfES and QCA. DfES officials attend critical QCA meetings and QCA seemingly feels unable to make recommendations to ministers that might be received unfavourably. This is not a healthy system. QCA advice to the DfES should be evidence based and independent. **SHA therefore recommends that QCA should be reconstituted as an independent body, governed by a Board drawn from schools, colleges, universities and business, and reporting to parliament.**
- 23 The government nevertheless has a legitimate interest in curriculum and assessment matters. Legislation on curriculum and assessment will, of course, remain with the DfES. **SHA recommends that the DfES, advised by the independent QCA, should establish a framework for the curriculum and assessment, but should leave the detail to QCA.**
- 24 During the years when separate bodies were responsible for curriculum and assessment, SHA officers observed tensions and disjunctions between the two bodies. SHA believes that assessment should serve the curriculum and that the two should be planned coherently by a single body. **SHA therefore recommends that QCA should continue to be responsible for both curriculum and assessment.**
- 25 A confusion of role exists at QCA because of its responsibility for setting national curriculum tests. **SHA recommends that QCA should no longer set national curriculum tests. These should be set by another body, regulated by QCA.**
- 26 There should be greater clarity concerning the role of QCA as the regulator of the awarding bodies. SHA believes that, with the independent status described above and with its responsibility for setting national curriculum tests removed, QCA will be better able to act as an effective regulator of the processes and decisions of awarding bodies.
- 27 Under current circumstances, SHA supports the continuation of three awarding bodies. Recent administrative problems experienced by awarding bodies have partly stemmed from their large volume of work, much of it acquired recently with the great expansion in the number of examinations caused by Curriculum 2000. If, however, the SHA recommendations to reduce the number of external examinations are accepted, it may be possible for the work to be done by fewer than three awarding bodies. For the meantime, however, **SHA recommends that there should be no reduction in the number of awarding bodies.**
- 28 In order to reduce the bureaucracy associated with the examinations process, **SHA recommends that the awarding bodies should streamline and co-ordinate their procedures**

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## GENERAL CONCERNS ABOUT ASSESSMENT

- 29 SHA believes that young people are subjected to far too many external examinations. SHA also believes that greater clarity is needed about the purpose of each examination and assessment instrument.
- 30 **SHA recommends that the government should place greater trust in the professionalism of teachers and thus recommends that internal summative assessment should play a greater part in the examination system.** SHA particularly welcomes the support given to this proposal by the chief executive of QCA at the QCA Annual Conference in October 2002.
- 31 **SHA recommends that its proposal for the establishment of a cohort of Chartered Examiners should be piloted and, if successful, adopted nationally as soon as practicable.**
- 32 SHA recommends that decisions on GCSE and AS grades should rely more on internal assessment by teachers. A2 papers should remain predominantly external examinations, with coursework where appropriate.
- 33 SHA's full recommendations for the future of assessment and examinations are set out in the paper *Examinations and Assessment: Proposals by the Secondary Heads Association for a radical reform of examinations and assessment.*

## ANNEX 1

**GSA****HMC****SUMMARY OF PROPOSALS FOR IMPLEMENTATION IN 2003****A LEVEL STANDARDS**

- 1 Agreed national definitions of the words “standards” (in relation to public examinations) and “standards over time” should be communicated as a matter of urgency by QCA (as the standard-setting body) to awarding bodies, schools and colleges, and the public at large.
- 2 Differences between the old, legacy A levels and the new A level structure should be more widely publicised, with a focus on managing public expectations that pass rates are likely to rise.
- 3 Teachers’, examiners’ and moderators’ confidence in their professional judgements (especially in respect of coursework) needs bolstering, as a matter of urgency, through an intensive programme of support from the awarding bodies.
- 4 The primacy of professional judgement over statistical data in the awards process needs reasserting.
- 5 The system of marking and grading should be made less complex and more transparent.
- 6 The immediate priority is to define and communicate the standards of AS and A2 and how, together, they form the new A level standard. These should be criterion-referenced:
  - for the AS, against the standards established through the AS pilot and the 2001 summer award;
  - for the A2, against expanded grade descriptions (Grades A, C and E provided in the specifications for all subjects), with greater use of archive scripts. Use of the grade C description, although not currently a judgemental point, would serve as a useful additional check on the accuracy of the overall grade setting.
- 7 The standards expected of the vocational AS and A2 should match those of the general AS and A2 equivalents, in line with recommendation 6 above.

**ROLES AND RELATIONSHIPS OF QCA AND THE AWARDING BODIES**

- 8 QCA should be fully independent of DfES and accountable either to Parliament (not a Select Committee) or the Privy Council.
- 9 QCA’s functions should be restricted to setting national standards and regulating the system that assesses achievement against such standards.
- 10 QCA should be supported in its regulatory role (at least for the next three years and arguably as a permanent arrangement) by a distinguished panel of independent scrutineers.
- 11 The Awarding Bodies should be demonstrably independent of QCA (and DfES) although the powers of their Accountable Officers would be circumscribed and their operations open to independent scrutiny (as suggested above).
- 12 Awarding Body Accountable Officers should only be permitted to move grade boundaries recommended by the Chairman of Examiners /Principal/Chief Examiners by an agreed maximum.
- 13 Final raw mark grade boundaries should be routinely published by all awarding bodies for each unit of assessment, at the time that results are published.
- 14 All awards meetings should, in future, include representation from the other board(s) to help ensure consistency of approach and the application of common standards.
- 15 All awarding body personnel (including teachers employed as examiners on a part-time basis) should have a “let out” clause in their confidentiality agreements to enable them to contact the independent scrutineers if necessary.