



Statement on standards in the 2008 A-levels

The A-level results for 2008 were issued on Thursday 14th August and it is right that the standards set in a qualification as important and popular as A-level are the focus for national debate. It is vital, however, that the debate is based on a clear understanding of the principles which underpin A-level standards and a sensible assessment of the facts.

A-level was introduced in 1951. Since then, it has been the key qualification for entry to Higher Education and an important qualification for employment – this year there were over 825,000 subject entries. Over time, the curriculum has changed and new subjects have been introduced. The form and content of the examinations have undergone changes and without these changes the curriculum would have become stale and outmoded and A-levels would not meet the needs of a changing society.

There have also been changes since 1951 in the subjects which attract most entries from students and these sorts of changes will continue. They reflect developments in society and the changing aspirations and interests of young people. All A-level qualifications are approved by the qualification regulators and all A-levels are of equivalent demand regardless of the subject title. There are more popular subjects, but not easier options. It is inappropriate and misleading to suggest that subjects recently introduced into A-level are somehow less demanding than established subjects.

Curriculum choice is, of course, not a matter for the Awarding Bodies but for schools, colleges and students. Our commitment is to provide qualifications across the entire curriculum which are fit for purpose, robust and meet the needs of all learners. However, as educationalists, we share the concern about recent declines in the number of entries for some subjects in important skill areas and we contribute to addressing these issues by providing demanding courses which are nonetheless engaging and motivating. We are particularly heartened to note that, this year, there is an increase in A-level entries for Mathematics, the Sciences and Languages.

The A-level standard has been maintained. Each year the Awarding Bodies follow procedures which have been independently acknowledged to be among the best in the world and are designed to ensure that standards do not change. The same is true when a new A-level subject is introduced. Specialist examiners decide the standards in each examination on the basis of their judgements of the quality of students' work and sophisticated statistical and technical information, using well-established procedures. The care and professionalism with which these procedures are carried out has been independently attested on many occasions in the past. Independent research has found no evidence to suggest

that they do not maintain A-level standards from year to year. The procedures are closely specified in our regulators' Code of Practice and monitored throughout by them.

It is therefore a matter of great concern that there is so much ill-informed comment about declining standards and easier examinations. For example, it is rarely pointed out that:

- half of the national increase in the number of A-level passes in the last 10 years simply mirrors the growth in the number of 18 year olds in that period;
- the remainder of the national increase in the number passing is equivalent to about 2 extra candidates passing in each subject for an average school or college;
- the increase in the national number of students awarded Grade A is equivalent to 1 or 2 extra students getting a Grade A in each subject for an average school or college;

Some schools and colleges will have improved their results by much more than this since the mid 1990s, others by less, but an average improvement of this size in ten years puts into context some of the comments which are made about A-level standards.

Moreover, the rate of improvement in A-level results varies systematically between different types of schools and colleges and in different regions of the country, indicating that the improvements reflect different approaches to teaching and learning and cannot be accounted for simply in terms of examination standards. More students are passing A-levels now, compared to 10 years ago, because of their own hard work and that of their teachers.

Only about 4% of the 18 year olds in the country get three or more A Grades in their A-levels – evidence of just how demanding A-levels really are.

Nonetheless, there are some faculties in a small number of universities which select from among the very best candidates and the greater number of students achieving Grade A does create some selection difficulties in those few cases. This is a problem of success which is being dealt with. We are now providing universities with a result for each candidate in each of the Units which they take to make up their overall A-level award.

In addition to providing unit results, a new A* grade will be awarded to the very best candidates from 2010 onwards, on the basis of the new A-level syllabuses which schools will be teaching from this September. The new A-levels will include more demanding material to underpin the award of the new Grade A*.

The students awarded A-levels, all those who use the qualification and the nation at large can have complete confidence in A-level standards. The results reflect the high standards associated with A-level since its inception, the excellent work of our schools and colleges and the effort and talent of our young people. We should celebrate their success.

Dr Mike Cresswell
Director General
AQA
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