



Rt Hon David Laws MP
Minister of State for Schools

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Kevin Brennan
House of Commons
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14th May 2013

Dear Kevin,

Subject: AS and A level reforms

I am writing to you following the 16 April Westminster Hall Debate on AS and A levels, which you highlighted in your letter of 1 May addressed to the Ofqual Chief Regulator Glenys Stacey. I welcomed the stimulating debate on A level reform and I would like to share some further information with you in relation to the use of AS results in university admissions processes.

You and others who spoke raised your concern that changes to the AS will affect university admissions processes, specifically for those institutions that use students' AS results to aid their decision making process.

Universities use a range of sources of information to determine who should receive an offer, including exam results (GCSE, AS and A level grades, if already obtained); predicted A level grades and also personal statements; academic and (where relevant) other references. Our discussions with university admission officers and UCAS suggest that although practices vary between institutions, many universities do not systematically use AS results.

We acknowledge that the University of Cambridge, which has been most vocal about the role of the AS in admissions, does use AS results to select candidates. The University's evidence demonstrates that the AS, with the exception of maths, is the best predictor for University of Cambridge degree performance (Partington et al 2011). However, the University does not use the AS in isolation – indeed, its policy is to interview all relevant candidates before making offers, which reflects the fact that a very high number of Cambridge applicants are predicted top A level grades.

Many universities do not publicly express the degree of importance given to each source of information available to them, including the AS results, but universities do, of course, want to admit students who will do well on their courses. A sensible way to assess the role of the AS is therefore to look at whether knowing the AS grades improves a university's ability to predict exactly that. Although all degree classifications represent a pass, achieving a 2:1 is generally seen as a "good pass" and is often a requirement in the graduate labour market. For that reason, Department for Education analysts have looked to see whether AS grades are a useful predictor of whether students will achieve a 2:1 or better, in the context of knowing the GCSE results. In short, this approach will tell us whether knowing AS grades adds anything useful for admissions officers.

In order to undertake this analysis, analysts matched records from the National Pupil Database (GCSE, AS grades) with records from the Higher Educational Statistics Agency (degree results, and institution) to build a logistic regression model. This model covers all undergraduate outcomes in 2011 for which we have matched KS4 and KS5 data. It covers 88,000 students across 151 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), and can be considered the most comprehensive analysis of this issue. I enclose full details of the analysis.

The analysis showed that knowing GCSE results alone allows a university to correctly predict whether a student will receive a 2:1 in 69.5% of cases. This means that GCSE results are a slightly better predictor than AS results alone, which correctly predict the outcome in 68.4% of cases. Knowing AS levels as well as GCSEs does not add, significantly, to an admission officer's ability to predict outcomes: knowing both increases the prediction accuracy only slightly, from 69.5% to 70.1%.

Here then is the nub of the issue. GCSEs and AS grades both record essentially the same information about the student: their general academic intelligence and willingness to work hard. In the technical language of those who study the roles of exams, these two sets of exams are "unidimensional". Once you know a student's exam results in one set of these exams, you learn little by knowing the results in the other set of exams.

We have a choice therefore: we can use much of the year 12 summer term undertaking formal external AS exams, or we can use that same time for teaching and learning that encourages students to gain a deeper understanding of subjects. Were AS results to lead to a significantly better match between students and universities it may well be worth sacrificing learning to achieve that outcome. But the evidence is clear that this is not the case for the overwhelming majority of students. That is why the Government has decided to prioritise additional teaching and learning over additional time devoted to exam preparation. Decoupling the AS will put an end to routine assessment at the end of year 12 that is not necessary for all students, and help to move us away the current state of affairs in which English students are subjected to a constant streams of exams.

I hope you find this supplementary evidence informative and, despite your recent letter to Ofqual, you will support our decision on this issue.

Yours sincerely,

David Laws

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "David Laws". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, stylized 'D' at the beginning.

David Laws MP