

# **AS and A level decoupling: Implications for the maintenance of AS standards**



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# 1 Executive summary

AS and A levels in England have recently been reformed following concerns raised by key stakeholders that they were not adequately preparing students for degree-level study, as is considered to be their primary purpose. The modular nature and content of A levels, along with the opportunity to resit units, were seen to be the main contributing factors to students not developing the deep understanding and skills needed for university study (Higton et al., 2012).

In order to address these concerns, a number of changes were made to AS and A levels, including changes to the structure of these qualifications. Reformed AS and A levels are now standalone linear qualifications and the AS no longer counts towards the A level. These structural changes reflect the government's expectations for reformed AS and A levels. Ofqual takes the view that decisions about qualification structure are curriculum policy decisions for Government, provided they do not affect our ability to meet our objectives.

The first tranche of reformed AS and A level qualifications were introduced for first teaching in England in September 2015. Prior to reform, state-funded students were required to certificate at AS in all subjects they were taking. Now AS and A levels have been decoupled, students do not need to take the AS as part of the A level and are no longer required to do so for funding purposes. This has, as anticipated, resulted in a decline in entries for AS qualifications.

In England, AS (along with GCSE and A levels) standards are maintained following the principle of 'comparable outcomes'. In essence, this assumes that if the cohort is comparable to previous years, then results (outcomes) will also be comparable to previous years. This principle is operationalised via the use of prior attainment based predictions and examiners' qualitative judgements of students' work. The predictions model the relationship between prior attainment and outcomes in a previous year, then apply this relationship to the current cohort of students. Thus, the same relationship between prior attainment and outcomes is assumed year to year.

If there are changes in the AS cohort following reform that could compromise this relationship, then there might be implications for the predictions, and therefore the maintenance of standards. For example, students who are taking reformed AS qualifications could be less motivated to do well in their assessments than previous cohorts because their results no longer count towards their A levels. If this affects their performance then they would likely under-perform relative to their prior attainment and therefore would exhibit a different relationship between prior attainment and AS performance compared to previous cohorts. As one of Ofqual's statutory objectives is to secure qualification standards, it is important for us to

monitor any changes to the nature of the cohorts<sup>1</sup> that could have implications for the maintenance of standards.

The aim of this qualitative study was therefore to gain an understanding of the nature of students being entered to reformed AS qualifications and whether or not reformed AS cohorts are likely to differ in any systematic way from previous cohorts. We spoke to 17 schools<sup>2</sup> from across England and although any changes in these schools' cohorts may not be representative of changes to the national cohort, this study provided the opportunity to gain insights into the kind of changes which may be occurring. This type of work can inform our thinking around the maintenance of standards.

Senior leaders from these schools were interviewed and asked about any changes to AS entry approaches, subject provision, AS entry requirements, student motivation and student subject/qualification choice following reform, all with a view to considering any implications for maintaining standards. The first round of this research was conducted in the 2016 autumn term just after the first tranche of reformed AS qualifications had been awarded. At this point in time, the schools had experienced teaching reformed AS qualifications in some subjects for a year and had received their first reformed AS results (all schools in the sample had entered students to reformed AS in summer 2016). Follow-up interviews were conducted with 13 of the same schools in the 2018 spring term, in order to see if they had made any additional changes further into the reform period. The main findings can be summarised as follows:

- AS entries from all of the schools in our sample had declined to some degree since reform. This was driven by a combination of moving away from the previously standard practice of entering all students within a subject for AS, to entering only some, or none at all; and reducing the number of subjects which students start with in year 12 from 4 to 3
- the schools that continued to enter students to reformed AS were employing a wide range of entry approaches. It is possible that the nature of the cohort may differ depending on the entry approach used, for example:
  - where schools were entering all students within a subject to reformed AS, the prior attainment profile of the cohort is likely to be similar to pre-reform cohorts. However, some schools reported that students were less motivated to do well in their AS assessments as they tended to also be taking the A level

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this report, the term 'nature of the cohort' relates to who the AS students are and the factors that might affect their performance, such as prior attainment and motivation.

<sup>2</sup> The term 'school' is used to refer to establishments offering A levels in England, and includes sixth form and further education colleges.

in that subject and were aware that their AS results no longer counted towards the A level

- where schools were entering only some students within a subject to reformed AS, these tended to be lower ability students who were not carrying the subject on to A level. They may therefore have a similar level of motivation to pre-reform cohorts but have a different prior attainment profile
- following reform, some schools had tightened their AS/A level entry criteria and/or were encouraging lower ability students to study AS/A level alternatives (for example, BTECs) or subjects which they thought they would do well in. As such, some schools reported reductions in the number of lower ability students applying to study AS/A levels. Some schools were discouraging students from studying subjects seen as being harder, or subjects which they had not studied before. This suggests that reformed AS and A level cohorts could have a higher prior attainment profile than pre-reform cohorts
- there was very little evidence to suggest that the reforms had affected students' AS and A level subject choices. Students did not seem to be choosing non-reformed subjects over reformed and had not been put off choosing subjects seen as being harder. However, as mentioned above, some schools were trying to influence subject choice more than they had done prior to reform
- schools who had decided to start students on 3 subjects in year 12 instead of 4 had increased the amount of teaching time and/or enrichment which could impact on AS/A level performance

The findings suggest that changes in AS entry approaches/provision and students' subject/qualification choices following reform could have many, often counteracting effects on the nature of individual schools' AS cohorts. However, most of the changes identified in this study have implications for the prior attainment profile of the cohort and any changes in cohort prior attainment can be accounted for by the predictions. The predictions cannot, however, account for other changes which may affect performance such as decrease in motivation or increase in teaching time or enrichment.

In carrying forward standards from the legacy AS and A level qualifications to the reformed versions, the Ofqual Board agreed to prioritise the use of predictions in the first years, so that students taking these new qualifications would not be disadvantaged (Ofqual, 2015). This research highlights the need to ensure that, alongside the predictions, examiner judgement is used, since this should help detect any significant changes in performance not related to prior attainment. We have worked with the exam boards to develop principles to support the awarding of the reformed AS qualifications, which require examiners to judge whether the statistically

recommended boundaries are acceptable. To date, while these provisions have worked well to ensure maintenance of standards, this kind of research is helpful in understanding the nature of some of the changes to the cohort and other systematic factors which might affect performance.

## 2 Introduction

In England, A level qualifications have recently been reformed. A key change is the decoupling of AS and A levels. Prior to reform, AS units made up half the A level and therefore AS results counted towards the A level. State-funded students were required to certificate at AS in all subjects they were taking and A level students would typically complete 4 AS qualifications and 3 A levels (Ofsted, 2015). Now the qualifications are decoupled, students no longer have to enter for the AS in the subjects they are taking at A level. This has, as anticipated, led to a large reduction in the number of students taking reformed AS qualifications (see Ofqual, 2017a), which may have implications for the nature of the AS cohorts and the maintenance of standards.

This report presents the findings of research conducted to explore the possible implications of AS and A level decoupling for the maintenance of AS standards. The following section gives a brief overview of AS qualifications from their introduction in 2000 to the current reforms, and explains how AS standards have been maintained over this period. The current research is then outlined.

### 2.1 AS qualifications

Advanced subsidiary (AS) qualifications were introduced in September 2000 alongside new A levels as part of the 'Curriculum 2000' reforms. These reforms followed a review of qualifications for 16- to 19-year olds (Dearing, 1996) and aimed to improve vocational qualifications, employability, and participation and retention in post-16 education, as well as broaden programmes of study (Hodgson & Spours, 2005).

Curriculum 2000 A levels were modular and comprised 6 units, replacing a mix of modular and linear A levels. They were split into 2 parts: the AS – 3 units to be taken during the first year of study (year 12); and the A2 – 3 units to be taken during the second year (year 13). When the qualifications were introduced, units could be taken or resat in 2 series in the academic year, in January or June. Students could choose if they wanted to "cash in" their AS units at the end of year 12 to receive an AS qualification, but were under no obligation to do so. Most students would start year 12 studying 4 or 5 subjects, and then carry at least 3 subjects through to A level in year 13. As well as encouraging breadth of study, it was hoped that this model would facilitate participation and retention in upper secondary advanced level programmes by providing a stepping stone between GCSE and A level, and the opportunity to try out subjects and obtain a qualification after only one year of study.

The first AS qualifications were awarded in 2001 and since then there have been a number of changes to the qualifications, including the introduction of revised qualifications that were first awarded in 2009 for AS and 2010 for A level. As part of this revision, the number of AS and A2 units comprising the A level was reduced from 6 to 4 in most subjects. Further changes occurred in 2011 when all students in

state funded schools were required to cash in their AS units and certificate at AS in all the subjects they were taking to be eligible for funding. Finally, the January AS and A level exam series was removed in 2014, meaning that students had fewer opportunities to resit units from that point onwards.

## **2.2 Current AS and A level reform**

The 'Importance of Teaching' white paper (DfE, 2010) announced the government's intentions to reform GCSEs and A levels in England. Reformed A levels would be developed with input from universities and learned bodies to ensure that they adequately prepared students for degree-level study, as is considered to be their primary purpose. Specifically, the government wished for A levels to be adapted to provide the depth of synoptic learning valued by universities and for rules on resitting to be changed to reduce instances of A level units being re-sat (DfE, 2010, p.49).

To fully understand the issues relating to A levels, Ofqual commissioned research to investigate the extent to which A levels were perceived to prepare students for higher education or employment, and the nature and level of any concerns about A levels (Higton et al., 2012). This research involved interviews and focus groups with key stakeholders such as higher education institutions (HEIs), awarding organisations, A level teachers and employers, along with a review of relevant literature. The findings suggested that although, generally, the A level system was working well for many students and HEIs, there were areas for improvement.

Participants thought that the modular structure of A levels encouraged teachers to "teach the test" and students to "learn the test" rather than the subject as a whole (see also Hayward & McNicholl, 2007). Therefore, the modular structure was perceived to inhibit synoptic learning and the development of skills essential for undergraduate learning such as analytical skills, critical thinking and the ability to make connections and solve problems by applying knowledge of different topics. A linear approach was viewed as a better way of developing synoptic learning and skills.

Many participants voiced concerns around issues relating to resitting A level examinations, namely grade inflation and the volume of examinations taken (see also CERP, 2012; Poon Scott, 2011; QCA, 2007). Increases in the number of students achieving higher grades (see Coe, 2007) was perceived to partly be a consequence of students resitting multiple times to improve their grades. HEIs which select rather than recruit students perceived that grade inflation was making it more difficult to differentiate between high achieving students. This was because students who were diligent about learning the test but who were lacking skills valued by these institutions (such as the above) were able to achieve high marks as these skills were not being tested. A level teachers in particular were concerned about the amount of study time lost to examinations and the number of examinations students were taking (Higton et al., 2012).

Similar concerns were raised by stakeholders in response to a consultation which Ofqual published on their proposed regulatory approach to implementing A level reform in June 2012 (Ofqual, 2012). Analysis of responses showed that although A levels were considered to be largely fit for purpose, stakeholders thought that their modular design, January assessments and/or multiple opportunities for resits were having a negative impact on teaching, learning and student development (Smith, Mitchell, & Grant, 2012).

In order to address the concerns raised, a number of changes have been made to AS and A levels. The content of the qualifications has been reviewed and updated with, in some subjects, considerable input from universities (see Smith, 2013). The reformed qualifications are all linear so students are assessed at the end of the course. There has been a reduction in non-examination assessment, which is now only used when needed to test essential skills that cannot be validly assessed via exam (for example, practical performances). Finally, and of most relevance to the present study, AS and A levels have been decoupled; the AS no longer counts towards the A level. Exam boards can design AS qualifications to be taught alongside the first year of A levels, but they are now separate, standalone qualifications. This means that students do not need to take an AS in the subjects they are taking at A level, and are no longer required to do so for funding purposes.

Changes to the structure of AS and A levels were outlined in letters exchanged between Ofqual and the Department for Education in 2013 (Gove, 2013a; 2013b, Stacey, 2013) and reflected the government's expectations for these qualifications. As part of this exchange, Ofqual advised the Government:

We take the view that decisions about structure are curriculum policy decisions for Government, provided they do not affect our ability to meet our objectives. We have considered – as we should – your policy intent, the responses to the 2012 A level consultation and other relevant factors including our equality impact assessment, and have concluded that we should act consistently with the policy you have set out. Your decisions do not jeopardise our ability to maintain standards and meet our wider objectives. However, they may affect the volume of assessment and the costs of qualifications.

(Stacey, 2013, p.2).

These changes are likely to have affected the AS cohort in a number of ways, some of which might have implications for the maintenance of AS standards. This is discussed in the next section, following a brief outline of how standards are maintained in England.

The current reform occurred in stages<sup>3</sup>. The first tranche of reformed qualifications were taught from September 2015, with the first AS awards in summer 2016 and first A level awards in summer 2017.

## 2.3 AS standards

There was no policy decision from Government to change the AS standard and so, in 2013, Ofqual stated that “the standard of the new AS will remain broadly as it is now” (Stacey, 2013). Therefore, in each subject, legacy AS standards are being maintained during the first awards of reformed AS qualifications. This is achieved using a combination of statistical and judgemental evidence.

The statistical evidence takes the form of prior attainment based predictions. The expected outcomes of a cohort in a particular qualification, for example, AS physics, are predicted from their prior attainment (mean GCSE point score) and the outcomes of a previous ‘reference’ cohort who took that qualification (see Appendix A for more information). The exam boards work together to produce predictions for each subject, based on the national cohort, to ensure that grade standards are comparable across boards. The students included in the predictions for a particular qualification are typically those who would be expected to certificate in that qualification (17-year-olds for AS) and for whom prior attainment is known. These students are called ‘matched’ students. The predictions are used to help guide the setting of grade boundaries when there are sufficient numbers of matched students - typically 500 or more (Ofqual, 2016a). For linear qualifications such as the reformed AS qualifications, the predictions are used to generate statistically recommended grade boundaries at the subject level. Senior examiners scrutinise samples of students’ work around the recommended boundaries and so grade boundaries are set using a mixture of statistical and judgemental evidence<sup>4</sup>.

The principle of ‘comparable outcomes’ is rooted in earlier research by Cresswell (2003) into setting standards in examinations when a revised syllabus is introduced. When a new specification is introduced, cohort performance typically dips in the first year that the specification is awarded and then improves over time as teachers and students become more familiar with the requirements of the specification and the associated assessment. This is known as the “Sawtooth Effect” (see Ofqual, 2016b). Faced with a choice between carrying forward comparable performance standards, which would mean students in the first year of a new qualification are potentially disadvantaged, and comparable outcomes (results), prioritising comparable outcomes at a time of change is fairer to students. Ofqual has followed this principle in overseeing recent changes to qualifications since 2009.

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<sup>3</sup> See [here](#) for a timetable of the reforms

<sup>4</sup> This happens for the A/B and E/U boundaries, the other grade boundaries are determined arithmetically once these key boundaries are set.

Statistical predictions are the most effective way to carry forward grade standards and to ensure comparability between exam boards when new qualifications are awarded. As such, the Ofqual board agreed that exam boards should prioritise the statistical evidence in the first years of awarding the reformed qualifications (Ofqual, 2015). In collaboration with the exam boards, Ofqual developed principles to support the awarding of the reformed qualifications, which required examiners to judge whether the subject-level statistically recommended boundaries were acceptable at each key grade boundary and, if so, to confirm that boundary (see Ofqual, 2016a, Appendix 3). Although limitations in examiner judgement have been documented (for example, Baird & Dhillon, 2005; Cresswell, 1997; Stringer, 2012), it is generally accepted that examiners can identify a range of marks within which a grade boundary should lie. Therefore, if there were any significant changes in the performance of the cohort (not related to prior attainment) that impacted on the position of the statistically recommended grade boundaries, examiners should be able to detect them.

Changes to AS and A levels following reform have resulted in fewer students entering the AS than previously. For example, in summer 2016, entries to reformed AS qualifications for 17-year-olds were 22% lower on average and between 10% and 32% lower across subjects (Ofqual, 2016c). This change may not be problematic if the students continuing to take AS are representative of those who previously took AS – ie they have the same relationship between prior attainment and AS performance. However, if the students who continue to take AS exhibit a different relationship between prior attainment and AS performance, then the predictions might be less reliable. For example, if students who are taking reformed AS qualifications are less motivated to do well in their assessments than previous cohorts because their results in these assessments no longer count towards their A levels, this might affect their performance. If this was the case across all students taking reformed AS qualifications, then they would likely under-perform relative to their prior attainment and their outcomes would be over predicted. However, it is also likely that any such changes in performance relative to prior attainment would be relatively small.

Potential changes to the nature of the AS cohort following decoupling, such as a reduction in motivation, will to some extent be dependent on the entry approaches that schools take to reformed AS qualifications. For example, if we assume that students taking reformed AS will be less motivated because the AS no longer counts towards the A level, then we also have to assume that most students who are taking reformed AS are also taking an A level in that subject. However, this may not be the case, or may not be the case in all schools. Entry approaches to reformed AS are likely to be much more divergent than in previous years when the standard approach was to enter all students. For example, research conducted by UCAS prior to the first teaching of reformed AS identified 15 different planned entry approaches to reformed

AS (UCAS, 2015). These ranged from not entering any students at all to just entering students for one AS, to continuing to enter all students.

Furthermore, if schools start to enter only some students for AS, entry approaches are likely to differ within and between subjects, as well as between schools. For example, schools may choose to enter students to 3 A levels and one AS so that they have an AS in a fourth subject, but they do not have to take the AS in the subjects they are planning on taking at A level. If schools left the decision of entering AS up to heads of department, then all students studying one subject might be entered, but students studying another might not be. Different entry approaches such as these may both result in changes to the AS cohort but with different effects.

## **2.4 Research overview**

As one of Ofqual's statutory objectives is to secure qualification standards, it is important for us to monitor any changes to the nature of the cohort which may impact on the relationship between prior attainment and outcomes and therefore on the maintenance of standards. In order to gain a better understanding of the nature of the students entering reformed AS qualifications, we spoke to a sample of schools and asked them about any changes that they have made or seen following the introduction of reformed qualifications. This covered changes in entry approaches, subject provision, student motivation, student subject/qualification choice and AS/A level entry requirements. As these changes are likely to be diverse and numerous, a qualitative approach was deemed the most appropriate. The findings were considered in light of any implications for maintaining standards.

This research commenced at the beginning of the 2016 to 2017 academic year. We decided to carry out this research at this time as schools had experienced teaching the first tranche of reformed AS qualifications for a full year, entering students to reformed AS assessments, and receiving results for these assessments. This experience was imperative for answering some of the questions asked such as whether or not students taking reformed AS assessments were as motivated to do well in these assessments as previous cohorts. The schools had also made decisions on entry approaches for the 2016 to 2017 academic year and, in most cases, the 2017 to 2018 academic year and so we were able to capture a good picture of how entry approaches in our sample were evolving over time. It is worth noting that when the first AS qualifications were awarded in summer 2016, senior examiners judgementally confirmed that the statistically recommended boundaries were appropriate. Although this suggested that, for the first set of reformed subjects, there were no detectable differences in the nature of the reformed AS cohorts compared to previous cohorts (beyond any differences in prior attainment), we wanted to investigate this further as this is something that could still change over time, especially if entries continue to decline.

## 3 Methodology

### 3.1 Research design

A qualitative design was deemed the most appropriate approach for exploring changes in AS cohorts following reform. Approaching the research in this way allowed for a thorough exploration of school and student behaviour which would not be possible using other (quantitative) methods.

### 3.2 Sample, participants and procedure

#### 3.2.1 Round 1 – Autumn term 2016

All schools offering A levels in England were identified using the Department for Education's school and college performance tables<sup>5</sup> for the 2014-15 academic year. Although the small-scale nature of the study meant that it was not possible to achieve a fully representative sample, we aimed to recruit as broad a range of schools as possible. We did this by stratifying all the schools identified based on their attainment (average A level point score - APS) and size (number of students aged 16-18) – both factors we thought likely to affect AS provision. Schools were allocated to one of nine roughly equal-sized strata based on where their attainment and size ranked in the full distribution of attainment and size across all schools identified (bottom third, middle third and top third).

Within the 9 strata, schools were categorised as being either local (ie, in the West Midlands or Warwickshire area) or further afield. We aimed to recruit a mixture of local schools which were within travelling distance from Ofqual, and schools that were further afield, so that we could get a wider picture of changes being made across the country. Local and further afield schools were separately selected at random from each stratum and approached by email to take part in the study. We aimed to recruit 2 schools from each stratum, but due to difficulties recruiting smaller schools, only one school was recruited from the small size/medium attainment stratum and small size/low attainment stratum. We recruited 3 schools in the large size/medium attainment stratum making 17 schools in total. Of these, 10 were local schools and 7 were further afield.

Table 1 below shows the type of schools recruited in each attainment/size group and the location of each school (local – L or further afield – F). In total, 6 academies, 4 independent schools, 4 secondary schools, 2 FE colleges and 1 sixth form college took part in the study. This is reasonably representative of the distribution of school types offering A levels<sup>4</sup>. Figure 1 below shows the geographical spread of the schools who took part in the study.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.compare-school-performance.service.gov.uk/download-data>

At least one senior leader from all recruited schools was interviewed either face-to-face (8 interviews) or over the telephone (9 interviews) by a researcher (one of the authors). The 23 senior leaders who participated were mainly heads of sixth form or post-16 studies but also included principals, vice principals and teachers. Interviews took place in November and December 2016.

Table 1. *Types of schools recruited*

	<b>Large size (270+ students)</b>	<b>Medium size (159-269 students)</b>	<b>Small size (158- students)</b>
<b>Attainment group 1 (APS ≥ 217.4)</b>	Academy (L) Foundation school (L)	<i>Community school (L)</i> Independent (F)	Independent (L) Independent (F)
<b>Attainment group 2 (200.4 - 217.3 APS)</b>	Academy (L) Sixth form college (L) FE college (F)	<i>Academy (L)</i> <i>Academy (L)</i>	Independent (F)
<b>Attainment group 3 (APS ≤ 200.3)</b>	FE college (F) Community school (F)	<i>Academy (L)</i> <i>Voluntary aided school (L)</i>	Academy (F)

Note. Schools in italics did not take part in round 2 of the study.

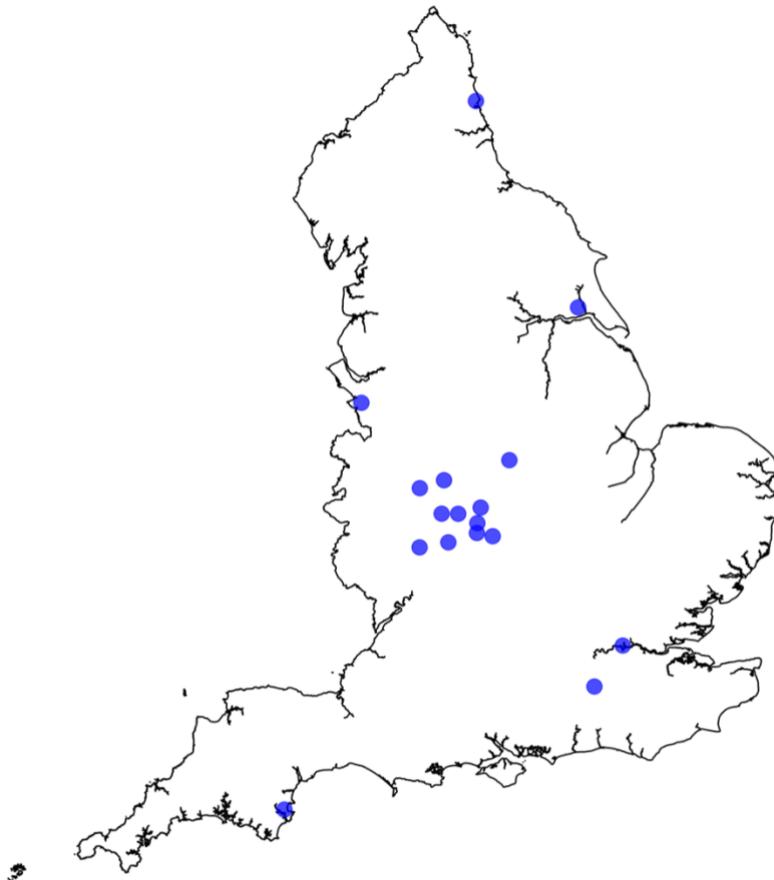


Figure 1. *Location of recruited schools.*

The interviews were semi-structured and were all completed using the same interview schedule (Appendix B). The questions primarily aimed to elicit explanations of pre- and post-reform AS provision, along with the reasons behind any changes in provision resulting directly from reform. Specifically, participants were asked about any changes to AS entry approaches, subject provision, AS entry requirements, student motivation and student subject/qualification choice following reform, all with a view to considering any implications for maintaining standards. The researchers conducting the interviews allowed digressions but always returned to the interview schedule as soon as possible. Participants were encouraged to comment on any other relevant changes which had been made following reform which they thought had not been addressed.

Questions were grouped into 2 blocks. All participants answered the first block of questions on AS provision pre- and post-reform. The questions which were asked in the second block depended on whether or not the school was still offering AS qualifications. If they were not, participants were asked questions relating to the impact of this change and the reasons behind it. If their school was still offering AS qualifications, participants were asked questions primarily about student motivation towards AS assessments. Participants were given the opportunity at the end of the interview to provide any feedback they wished in relation to AS and A level reform. Interviews were audio recorded and ranged between 12 and 46 minutes in duration, with an average of 28 minutes.

### **3.2.2 Round 2 – Spring term 2018**

We carried out a second round of interviews just over a year after the first to see if any additional changes had been made at the same schools further into the reform period. All the participants who took part in the first round of the study were contacted in December 2017 and asked if they would like to take part in the second. Participants from 13 out of the 17 schools in the original sample took part. In most cases the participants were the same people who we spoke to in round one (11 participants from 10 schools). In 3 schools we spoke to different people due to role changes/availability and in one school we spoke to an additional person. This resulted in a total of 15 participants.

Interviews took place either face-to-face or over the telephone and were carried out by a researcher (one of the authors) during January 2018. The interview schedule (see Appendix C) was very similar to round 1, although some questions were updated to reflect the change in time period. Interviews were again audio recorded and ranged between 17 and 52 minutes in duration, with an average of 32 minutes.

### **3.3 Data analysis**

All interviews were transcribed verbatim. For both rounds, 2 researchers (the authors, who had also carried out the interviews) independently coded the transcripts line by line using Nvivo software. Coding was approached with the questions from

the interview schedules in mind which reflected the changes to provision likely to have implications for the maintenance of standards. Therefore, coding covered the following topics:

- AS entry approaches over time
- different types of entry approaches
- reasons for continuing or not continuing to enter for AS
- student motivation
- changes to provision (including changes to subjects and qualifications offered and changes in teaching time and enrichment activities)
- student subject choice
- other changes likely to affect the nature of the cohort (for example, changes in entry criteria)

The researchers then met to discuss the coding and reach consensus on the extracts relating to each topic. These are summarised and discussed in the next section. Coding took place directly after data was collected in each round. Data from both rounds were amalgamated, so that we had a clear picture of all of the changes made in each school over time.

## 4 Results

The results section below is organised into the following topics: AS entry, provision, student choice, student motivation and other changes. These topics reflect the coding described above and cover all of the identified changes to provision likely to have implications for the maintenance of standards. Although the focus of this study was on any changes which have implications for the maintenance of AS standards, there may also be some implications for the maintenance of A level standards. Section 4.6 provides a summary of all the changes identified in sections 4.1 to 4.5 and the likely impact of these changes on the nature of the schools' AS cohorts. The implications of the changes in terms of the maintenance of AS standards are discussed in section 5.

### 4.1 AS entry

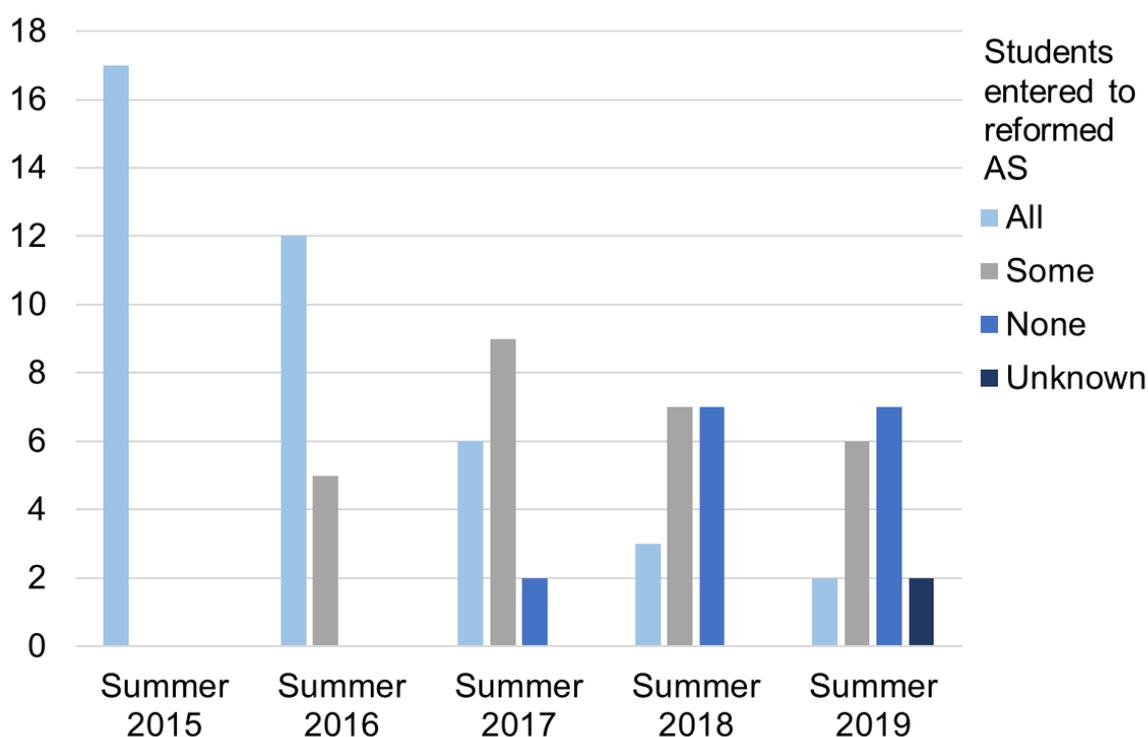
One of the key purposes of this research was to explore schools' AS entry approaches following the reforms, with a view to identifying any changes that might have implications for the maintenance of AS standards. In this section, the various AS entry approaches used by the schools are discussed, along with changes in approaches over time and the reasons behind these changes.

#### 4.1.1 Entry approaches

Participants were asked how they chose to enter students for AS prior to reform and in each academic year since, and how they were planning on entering students in the future. They were also asked whether this was a blanket approach for all students. Their responses allowed us to ascertain whether they were entering all, some or none of their students in each academic year, how they were entering students and the number of subjects which the students were studying. Figure 2 shows the entry approaches used by the 17 schools in our sample for the last 3 summers and their planned entry approaches for summer 2018 and 2019 where that data was available.

Overall, entries to reformed AS from the schools in our sample are declining. This is representative of the national picture where AS entries in reformed subjects have been declining over time (see Ofqual, 2017a). Prior to reform, all of the schools entered all of their year 12 students for AS. This was not surprising given that the majority of schools we spoke to were state-funded and, prior to reform, all state-funded schools were required to enter all year 12 students for AS in order to be eligible for funding. Figure 2 shows how the number of schools in our sample who continued to enter all their students to reformed AS has declined over the years since the reformed AS qualifications were introduced. Twelve schools entered all their students to reformed AS the first summer that these qualifications were awarded (summer 2016) but only two were planning on doing so in summer 2019.

Over time, 7 of the schools in the sample decided that they were not going to enter any students to reformed AS qualifications from summer 2018 onwards<sup>6</sup>. The notable increase in the number of schools who were not entering any students for reformed AS in summer 2018 is likely to be because the 2017 to 2018 academic year is the first year in which reformed specifications are being taught across all subjects. Figure 2 suggests that our sample’s entry approaches may remain relatively stable from summer 2018 onwards.



Note. Data on planned entry for summer 2019 was available for all schools apart from 2 who only took part in round 1 of the study.

Figure 2. Number of schools entering all, some or none of their year 12 students for AS in reformed subjects, summer 2015 to summer 2019.

Where schools had decided to enter only some students for AS they did so in a number of different ways. These different entry approaches are discussed in the next 2 sections and have been grouped into ‘entry approaches which differ between subjects’ and ‘entry approaches which differ within subjects’. The section on entry approaches which differ between subjects covers approaches where all students are entered to reformed AS within particular subjects but not others. Therefore, overall, the school was only entering some students to reformed AS. The section on entry approaches which differ within subjects covers approaches where some students

<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that 4 of these 7 schools did say that if any students were leaving at the end of year 12, or were not making sufficient progress towards the A level, then they would be entered for an AS.

within a subject are entered to reformed AS but not others. The approaches have been grouped this way because they result in different changes to the AS cohort which are discussed in section 4.6.

#### **4.1.2 Post-reform entry approaches which differ between subjects**

Five schools in the sample were entering all students to reformed AS in some subjects but not in others. Three of these schools left the decision of entering AS up to heads of departments and so students were entered in some subjects but not others.

Because we got a new head of science, and we had some other new science teachers, what he wanted to do was kind of scope out the capabilities of his department and obviously get to understand the A levels a bit better. So he stuck with an AS because he wanted to ensure that the tracking was right, the monitoring was right and that the teaching was right.

*Medium sized school, attainment group 2*

Another of the five schools decided that they would enter students for AS only in the first year of each subject. The reforms are being phased in over a three-year period so this means that during the second year of reform, students taking phase 2 subjects would be entered for AS but students taking phase 1 subjects would not. The school did this because they wanted “external verification” during that first year, but said they could not afford to enter students the year after.

In the first year, what we have said – so that our staff, more than our students, can actually get to know the course – we have said that we will enter [for AS].

*Medium sized school, attainment group 2*

The final school had been put off continuing to enter students for AS in subjects where students had achieved lower results than expected the first year, but continued to enter students in other subjects. This was to protect students and the school’s results.

Psychology we changed from last year because of what we think the requirements are and what the students are ready for...So we had learners last year who did extremely well on 2 of their AS subjects but did crushingly badly in their psychology paper. Now the impact on that learner emotionally and also practically is significant.

*Large sized school, attainment group 3*

#### 4.1.3 Post-reform entry approaches which differ within subjects

Thirteen schools in the sample were entering some students within a subject to reformed AS but not all students. There were a variety of different entry approaches being used by these schools. Six of the thirteen schools said that they would enter A level students for AS if they were planning on leaving the A level course at the end of year 12, so that they would have a qualification to take with them<sup>7</sup>. This could be students who are leaving the school all together:

So if a student were to make a decision that they were definitely going to leave, which some do, then we would enter them for the ASs. I mean we've got a student who's looking to apply for the [armed forces] for example. He knows the process starts in April so he'll see out this year, but he will go to the [armed forces]. So for him we could put him in.

*Medium sized school, attainment group 3*

This might also apply to students who were planning on transferring to a different course:

Students that have already identified themselves to us as perhaps thinking that they've not made the correct choice for them at 16, that they want to transfer to a different course next year; so in order for them to get credit for the year's work that they're doing, they will do AS exams at the end of the first year.

*Large sized school, attainment group 2*

Another AS entry approach (used by 3 schools in the sample), which meant that some students within a subject were entered but not others, was to enter only those students who were struggling with the A level at the end of year 12 and might not be able to achieve it. The AS results may then be used to determine whether the student should carry on with the A level, or take an alternative qualification in year 13, for example, an AS in another subject.

So for example, a student doing psychology, the vast majority of students are OK, they're going to continue to next year, but we're worried about 2 or 3. We would target those students and say we think you need to do the AS.

*Medium sized school, attainment group 2*

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<sup>7</sup> The AS and A level have overlapping content and so if students had been taught the first year of A level they would likely have studied some of the AS content.

Two of the 13 schools had decided to continue to start students on 4 subjects in year 12 but only enter students to one AS at the end of year 12 (in the subject that they would not continue to A level). To facilitate this entry approach, both schools were co-teaching AS and A levels. The schools were doing this because they wanted to keep a similar entry approach to that which they had been operating prior to the reform (4 AS to 3 A levels), but could not afford to enter all students to reformed AS.

What we cannot afford to do is put them through four AS levels. So we're going to run it that all students will do 4 [subjects]. They will get to the very latest point at which we can make a decision on entry at AS level. The school will pay for one AS entry, and we will then give them an internal entrance exam in the other 3. The idea being that you see it rather perversely [as an] AS level in your weakest subject.

*Large sized school, attainment group 1*

One of these 2 schools was offering the opportunity for students to enter as many AS qualifications as they wished to but the students would have to pay for additional AS entries themselves, as the school would only pay for one entry.

An alternative entry approach used by one school was to offer an AS pathway for lower ability students. Students on this pathway would chose a number of subjects to study at AS with a view to them only completing the AS in those subjects. However, if they did decide after year 12 that they wanted to complete the A level as well, then they would be able to carry on with the A level in year 13. This school was also offering an A level pathway where students would not be entered for AS and so there would be a situation where, within a subject, some students would be entered for AS and others would not be. This school was one of the schools who were entering A level students for AS if they were planning on leaving the course at the end of year 12 or if they were unlikely to achieve the A level.

What we're looking at doing next year is offering what essentially will be an AS route... we will offer a suite of subjects and tell a student you are effectively an academic access student. We are only entering you for the first year. If you are successful then at AS, then we would allow you to continue onto A2.

*Medium sized school, attainment group 2*

Finally, one school was not entering any year 12 students to reformed AS but was entering some year 13 students. These were either students who had already achieved one or more A levels in year 12 and were picking up extra qualifications in year 13, or students who had dropped a subject at the end of year 12 and picked up a different subject in year 13.

#### 4.1.4 Reasons for continuing to enter AS after reform

The schools that had continued to enter students for AS gave a number of, and, in most cases, multiple, reasons for doing so. The most commonly cited reason (7 schools in the sample) was to provide external verification of student and/or teacher performance on the new courses.

It's a good way of ensuring that the pupils are on track. And so I think a little part was a little bit of a comfort blanket; that's what we've always done.

*Small sized school, attainment group 2*

Four schools in the sample stated that they continued to enter students for AS qualifications so that students would have an AS grade to present on their university applications. The schools perceived that universities would value a predicted A level grade based on an externally assessed qualification more than one based on an internal exam.

We think it's a solid grade for universities to base offers on, as opposed to just an internal school exam.

*Large sized school, attainment group 1*

Three schools in the sample perceived that AS qualifications were still valued by universities, particularly Cambridge, and this had factored in to their decision to retain AS.

We've also acknowledged the fact that some of our students want to do Cambridge and Cambridge were saying that actually, you know, AS levels are extremely useful to them.

*Small sized school, attainment group 1*

Four schools in the sample valued the breadth of study which taking an AS in addition to 3 A levels brings.

We don't want to cut off that fourth AS. We feel it offers a lot of breadth, a lot of opportunity for students to have a contrasting subject, which is particularly important now that the opportunity to do things like general studies and critical thinking has disappeared.

*Medium sized school, attainment group 1*

Four schools in the sample had retained AS qualifications to keep their students motivated through the two-year A level course. They perceived that having an external exam at the end of year 12 would give the students something to aim for at the end of the first year and would encourage them to revise and review their work.

We think that doing the AS at the end of the first year gives students something really to aim at and focus on during their first year... We think that's a lot more significant than just doing a mock at the end of the first year.

*Large sized school, attainment group 2*

Three schools in the sample thought that taking the AS provided students with a good opportunity to practise taking and preparing for exams.

We actually feel that for the children it's quite beneficial with exam practise, preparation, getting them to start revising the topics and the contents.

*Small sized school, attainment group 2*

Three schools in the sample who had continued to enter students to 4 AS and 3 A levels stated that they had carried on with this approach to facilitate A level choice. Continuing with this entry approach meant that students would still be able to select their 3 final A level subjects after gaining external feedback on their performance.

We wanted students to be able to choose from 4 to 3, choose their best subjects. We acknowledged there'd been a survey done in the last 5 years where they found out that 40% of students actually changed their mind from about April/May as to what subject they're intending to drop to when they actually got their results. And so we just thought that's too much of a risk to take.

*Small sized school, attainment group 1*

Less commonly stated reasons given for retaining AS qualifications: were to see what the exams were like; so that teachers would not have the additional workload of internal assessment; keeping AS until all subjects had been reformed; to make A levels more accessible to learners, feedback from students that they valued the AS, and AS results remaining stable following reform.

#### 4.1.5 Reasons for dropping AS after reform

There were many reasons behind decisions to not enter students to reformed AS. Cost was the most commonly cited reason (8 schools in the sample); the cost of entering both the AS and A level in a subject has increased since reform perhaps partly because these are now 2 standalone qualifications rather than the AS being part of the A level.

A lot of it to be honest to do with cost, because otherwise you're paying for an AS and then you're paying for a full A level, and having worked out the cost of that, that would have cost us about £25,000 to offer them the AS and the full A level.

*Medium sized school, attainment group 3*

Six schools in the sample felt that their time was better spent teaching A level content rather than devoting the time necessary in the summer term for AS exams.

The majority of staff want to get on with teaching that second year content if you like way before the end of year 12. And if you're having a big break for exam leave for formal exams it impacts massively.

*Small sized school, attainment group 1*

Three schools in the sample reported having difficulties co-teaching reformed AS and A level and so they had decided to stop offering reformed AS qualifications. Three other schools who had retained AS qualifications also commented that they were having difficulties co-teaching. Some subjects were identified as being more difficult to co-teach than others, for example, English, arts and humanities subjects. Difficulties centred around the different skills needed for AS and A level as well as the practicalities of co-teaching.

Mainly because of co-teaching and the different skills required for the A level in a lot of subjects as opposed to the AS. So, an example, in the modern poetry at AS you compare 2 poems from the anthology; whereas, at A level it's one poem from the anthology with an unseen - completely different skill. And that's similar in quite a few subjects. And so it was just deemed to be actually a little bit of a waste of time when it's just having to reteach something.

*Small sized school, attainment group 3*

For 3 schools in the sample, reformed AS outcomes had factored into their decision to stop entering students.

Students were initially entered for the AS because we weren't really sure how it would be and just to get them used to being on a linear course really. Some of the ASs in some subjects went quite well, but most of the ASs the grades were not like we would have expected... This year now we've entered everyone except for a small number of subjects for the whole linear. So they won't be doing the AS.

*Large sized school, attainment group 3*

Unlike some of the other schools we spoke to, 2 schools in the sample perceived that entering students to reformed AS was *not* worthwhile because they did not need the AS to get in to university.

Most importantly did the students need the AS, in terms of the next steps? Probably not... if we manage it tightly and manage it well the students will develop, get better grades at the end of year 13 if they've got more time to develop those more demanding higher level skills that the A level requires.

*Medium sized school, attainment group 3*

Two other schools in the sample perceived that entry to reformed AS may even disadvantage students who were applying to university.

Overall statements by universities [were] that they would take into account declared ASs and yet they would not penalise students who hadn't done them. And so the feeling was that if we were going to have students doing ASs, and one or two of them having some disappointing grades in the mix, it was not fair on them to be filling in UCAS forms and being judged alongside students who might have been not as strong as them but who were coming from schools where the policy was not to take any.

*Medium sized school, attainment group 1*

Two schools in the sample had stopped entering students to reformed AS because their students weren't motivated to do well in them (more on this in section 4.4).

We'd initially gone with the AS level because we thought that the AS level exams at the end of year 12 would keep the students motivated. But we found that that wasn't necessarily the case. And that, you know, we were paying money to enter them for exams that they weren't particularly, this is not all of the students obviously, but quite a few of them weren't bothered about.

*Small sized school, attainment group 3*

Less commonly stated reasons given for dropping AS qualifications were: to protect the school's results (schools thought that their AS pass rate might be affected and did not want to run the risk of their pass rate dropping); the perception that moving to a no AS/3 A level model was the route that most schools were taking; and the negative impact that entering for reformed AS had had on students.

#### **4.1.6 Number of subjects studied**

Across the sample of schools there appeared to be a movement away from starting students on 4 subjects in year 12 and narrowing this down to 3 in year 13. Eight schools had moved from starting students on 4 subjects in year 12 prior to reform to starting them on 3 post reform. Two schools had always started students on 3 subjects and continued to do so. Of the 7 schools who were still starting students on 4 subjects, 5 commented that they were seeing an increase in the number of students dropping to 3 subjects during year 12.

Eight schools in the sample expressed concerns that starting students on their final 3 A level subjects would lead to poorer A level outcomes, particularly if they were not taking AS qualifications in the subjects as well. This was because students would not have the opportunity to change subjects if they started with 3 and they would not have external feedback on their performance at AS which may have motivated them to work harder in year 13 or may have informed them as to which final 3 A level subjects to choose. This is essentially a concern about the possibility of a reversal of the 'Curriculum 2000 effect' whereby A level outcomes rose when the first Curriculum 2000 A levels were awarded due to students taking forward their best subjects to A level following feedback on their performance at AS.

## 4.2 Provision

### 4.2.1 Subject provision

In this section, changes in the AS and A level subjects offered by schools are discussed. It should be noted that a small number of A level subjects are not being reformed (and therefore will soon no longer be available) and so A level provision is likely to naturally decrease in schools which offered these subjects. The changes reported below are outside of this inevitable decrease and are as a direct consequence of the reforms.

Seven schools in the sample had reduced the number of A level subjects which they were running when we spoke to them. For 5 of these, this was because the number of students wishing to take certain subjects was too low to be viable. For one school this may have been due to a reduction in the cohort size; they had experienced fewer students applying to do A levels since the reform. For 4 schools this was a direct consequence of moving from starting students on 4 subjects (for example, a 4 AS/3 A level model) to starting them on 3 (for example, a 3 AS/3 A level model or a no AS/3 A level model). This affected both reformed and non-reformed subjects such as geology, law, environmental science, computer science, drama and economics.

Because we have many fewer students doing 4 subjects in the first year now, we closed down 3 subjects due to low numbers at the start of the year, so we weren't able to offer law, environmental science and computer science this year. And we are planning still to offer them for 2018 start, but they didn't run this year.

*Large sized school, attainment group 2*

The other 2 schools who had reduced the number of A level subjects they were running had each dropped one subject for different reasons.

One of the schools we spoke to had added one subject to their A level offering and 3 schools we spoke to had increased the number of A level subjects which they were offering through sharing provision with other local schools or schools from the same academy trust. One other school said that they were thinking about increasing A level provision for accessibility purposes.

### 4.2.2 Qualification provision

Alongside changes to subject provision, a number of schools had changed the types of qualification which they were offering because of the reforms. Four schools in the sample who had stopped entering students to reformed AS qualifications had started to offer the Extended Project Qualification (EPQ) as an alternative to a fourth AS. Three other schools were thinking of offering the EPQ as an alternative to AS.

We've just done away with the AS and we now offer the EPQ alongside the three A-levels, which about 40% of the [students] in each year, I would suggest, take up and do alongside their three A-levels.

*Small sized school, attainment group 1*

In addition to their A level programme, some schools in the sample had introduced A level alternatives following reform. This could mean that some students who would have studied AS and A levels prior to reform, because they were the only qualifications available at their school, now will not if they are attracted to the A level alternatives instead. One school had introduced a BTEC in forensic and criminal investigation in order to increase accessibility to post-16 education and was thinking about introducing a BTEC in physical education. Two other schools were thinking about introducing BTECs in the future for the same reason.

I guess the concern that we have is where we cite ourselves as a sixth form in that we are quite academic but our cohort is largely wanting to do A levels. Equally there are still a proportion of students that we need that increased entitlement and access to post-16 courses. So we'd like to introduce BTEC sport.

*Large sized school, attainment group 2*

One school in the sample had increased their offer of A level alternatives through starting to share provision with another school. Another school had started offering an international A level in geography instead of the reformed A level.

Three schools in the sample had introduced an A level alternative to replace A levels which were not being reformed; 2 schools had replaced A level home economics with a similar level 3 diploma and 1 school had replaced A level leisure and tourism with a BTEC in criminology.

Because we've always offered a food qualification at A-level, and the loss of the food A-level has been felt quite hard, we've ended up with a Level 3 Food Science and Nutrition Diploma.

*Medium sized school, attainment group 1*

#### **4.2.3 Other changes to provision**

As mentioned in section 4.1.1, schools in the sample were moving away from starting students on 4 subjects in year 12 and narrowing this down to 3 in year 13. This will increase the amount of free time which students have available and some schools commented on how this was being spent. As mentioned above, 4 schools

had introduced the EPQ as a replacement to the fourth AS. Two schools had increased enrichment activities (for example, volunteering, work experience, young enterprise, qualifications such as a GCSE in a language or work-related qualifications such as food hygiene certificates) and one school was thinking about increasing enrichment activities.

We're also doing a much more significant enrichment programme so that they can say alongside three A-levels I have done an EPQ, I've done volunteering, I've done food technology, food hygiene, and I think we're very aware that now with three A-levels they need to show much more of a sort of rounded package, so quite a lot of work has gone into that.

*Small sized school, attainment group 1*

There was some evidence that reformed A level students were receiving more teaching and/or studying time. Five schools in the sample commented that they had increased teaching time across reformed A level subjects and one school was asking students to do more work outside of the classroom in preparation for lessons.

At the moment it goes solely on teaching because we need to invest in those learning skills that need to be addressed based on their experiences at GCSE... So realistically those extra hours are so key to make that progress, to really embed it, because students need that depth of learning.

*Large sized school, attainment group 2*

### 4.3 Student subject and qualification choice

We asked schools a number of questions relating to whether the reforms had affected the subjects which students were choosing to study at AS and A level. As subjects are being reformed over a three-year period, students would have the option of selecting a mixture of reformed or non-reformed subjects for the first 2 years. We asked schools if they thought that students were selecting non-reformed subjects over reformed because they would be able to get feedback on their performance at AS and the opportunity to complete half of their assessment in year 12 rather than all at the end of year 13. The schools we spoke to did not think this was happening, since students were choosing the subjects which they needed for their post-18 plans. As such, whether the subjects were reformed or not did not factor into their decisions.

To be honest they've all got a career path in place. So I think we were all concerned ... that learners might pick legacy subjects if they felt that the AS would get them half of their grade and that they'd avoid reformed subjects. We don't see a huge amount of evidence of that.

*Large sized school, attainment group 3*

Similarly, if schools were not entering students to reformed AS we asked them whether they thought students were now less willing to take subjects perceived as being harder (such as mathematics and the sciences) because they wouldn't have external feedback on their performance at AS. Only 3 schools in the sample thought that the reforms had affected student subject choice in this way, the majority thought that there was no difference in student subject choice.

I mean possibly a bit early to tell, but I've not noticed any significant changes in the way that students choose their options.

*Large sized school, attainment group 2*

One of the schools we spoke to suggested that the change from starting students in year 12 on 4 subjects to 3 had affected student subject choice, rather than the loss of external feedback at the end of year 12 specifically.

[A] related point which is about students' willingness to take certain subjects which they're apprehensive about... if they can take [the subject] as one of four subjects, students are significantly more willing to, whereas if they can only take 3 subjects they tend to play safe.

*Large sized school, attainment group 2*

Two schools in the sample said that although students had not been put off choosing subjects perceived as being harder, they did think that students were less willing to try subjects which they had not studied before.

So the only 3 we offer at A level that we don't offer [lower] down the school is business studies, economics and psychology. And all 3 of them, the numbers are down. And that is definitely because they are not wanting to put their toe in a water they don't understand.

*Small sized school, attainment group 1*

Related to this, 6 schools stated that they thought that fewer students were choosing to study A levels following the reform. Schools which offered A levels and other alternatives (such as BTECs and Cambridge Technicals) said that they had seen an increase in students opting to take those alternative qualifications following reform.

I've noticed that there's more children now leaning towards the Cambridge Technicals than the A levels. So say for example in business studies... I'd say it's probably swinging more now more towards Cambridge technical than it is towards the A level.

*Small sized school, attainment group 2*

Schools in the sample which only offered A levels said that they had seen a reduction in the number of students applying to study A levels.

The year group in year 11 is about 240 this year. If we get 50% of students, I'll be surprised. Apprenticeships, massive increase... I think the kids are being put off because we have to be honest and say A levels are hard, well some of these students don't want to tie in for a year or 2 years because it's a long time without that [AS] bailout option.

*Medium sized school, attainment group 3*

There were a number of changes which schools had made which would ultimately influence the subjects which students chose to study at AS and A level. Firstly, 6 schools had tightened their entry criteria, either overall or in specific subjects.

There has been some nudging up of entry requirements in dare I say what are viewed as harder subjects... Where for example in the past A level physics would need an A in physics and a B in maths; it now needs an A in maths as well as physics.

*Large sized school, attainment group 1*

Five schools in the sample were providing students with increased advice and guidance and steering students towards choosing subjects which they thought they were likely to succeed in and away from those which they thought they were not.

I mean I'm being very, very careful about who I advise because I don't want them to waste 2 years of their life. And anyone who, previously I would have said yes you'll be OK but it's a little bit borderline, I'm basically saying no don't do it, because I think it's just too risky.

*Medium sized school, attainment group 3*

Two schools in the sample said they were directing more students to A level alternatives.

But we also think about steering some students who we think are quite borderline on to a BTEC rather than onto an A level. Whereas we may have given them like a chance at an AS level before, because we're not offering the AS levels anymore we might suggest maybe do double health and social care as a BTEC or double sport as a BTEC or science, BTEC science instead of an A level because we just want to make sure that that kid achieves.

*Medium sized school, attainment group 2*

We also asked schools if they thought that there may be students taking A levels in subjects which they would have dropped at the end of year 12 following feedback from AS if they had been on a 4 AS/3 A level model. Of the 8 schools in the sample who had moved from this model to either a 3 AS/3 A level model or a no AS/3 A level model, 6 thought that there definitely were students taking A levels in subjects they may have dropped before reform and 2 thought that there possibly were. This was based on their experiences of students wishing to drop or change subjects part way through the course.

Yes... a few students, I would say a few, possibly about 3-ish, maybe up to 5 who decide I don't like this subject. But there's nothing else that will fit in and we talk to them, we tell them that well, you know, if you drop this maybe in the second year, you perform well in your mocks, we would offer you an AS in this but it only gives you two-and-a-half so you're not going to matriculate to university as well as someone else. I mean we try to have contingencies, but we do get students who we have to encourage to continue as being in their best interests.

*Large sized school, attainment group 3*

## 4.4 Student motivation

We asked schools if they thought that reformed AS cohorts were as motivated to do as well in their assessments as previous cohorts, given that their AS results no longer count towards their A level. Nine schools in the sample said that they thought that their students taking reformed AS qualifications were less motivated than previous cohorts. Four of these said that their AS outcomes in reformed subjects were better prior to reform and attributed the drop in outcomes to lack of motivation. Five schools attributed the drop in motivation directly to the fact that the AS results no longer count towards the A level.

The first year was fine because just we did the ASs and the students worked as normal. But it was the second year where we tried that and the students realised that the ASs don't actually mean anything, you know, you have to resit the papers again basically, so they don't take ... the summer exams seriously.

*Large sized school, attainment group 3*

Four schools in the sample said that students had prioritised AS assessments in non-reformed subjects over reformed and had put less effort into their AS assessments in reformed subjects.

On the grapevine the students naturally last year put more into the ASs, which counted, and we noticed that, and we noticed that in the subject residuals<sup>8</sup> as well.

*Large sized school, attainment group 1*

One school in the sample said that students perceived that the universities they were applying to were not interested in their AS grades and that this impacted on their motivation to do well in their AS.

Some students were looking at universities that AS level wasn't a consideration and they obviously just didn't see it as a priority at that stage.

*Small sized school, attainment group 3*

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<sup>8</sup> The difference between a student's target grade and the grade they achieved in the exam.

Seven schools in the sample thought that there was not much difference in motivation. Of these, two said that students were motivated by knowing that their reformed AS grades would be on their university application forms.

I think because of the focus on going to university and the fact that the AS grades were important for universities that most students were in fact entirely motivated and took the exams very, very seriously.

*Large sized school, attainment group 3*

Two schools in the sample said that students were motivated because they had to get a minimum grade to be allowed to carry on to A level by their school.

The carrot that we dangle to them is this, you need to get your D in order to be able to continue, and if you don't continue then we offer them a three-year programme where they can start year 12 again. And so that works as a motivator in itself.

*Medium sized school, attainment group 2*

Two schools in the sample said that their students were generally quite motivated and that AS decoupling had not affected their motivation.

I think thankfully the school that we work in and the area we're in we've got students that on the whole are driven and want to be successful so they do see the value in that.

*Large sized school, attainment group 3*

## 4.5 Other changes

There were a number of other changes which schools had made following reforms. Eight schools in the sample said that they had been more flexible in allowing students to continue from year 12 in to year 13 following reforms. Of these, 2 schools were still entering all students for AS, 3 were entering some, and 3 schools has replaced AS exams at the end of year 12 with internal assessment. The schools said that they had allowed students to continue to A level who they perhaps wouldn't have before reforms. Where schools were still entering students for AS these were often students who had achieved a U at AS.

For the first time we actually took kids into upper sixth that had failed AS levels, we'd never done that before, and obviously their parental arguments was well they didn't take it seriously, they didn't count, you know, they'll be all right come the end of the 2 years, please give them a chance...But, you know, we were taking students with an E, 2 Es and a U that usually we would have said either you need to start lower sixth again or probably go and find a course that's better suited to your needs, but we've taken them on, and I don't think we really know the full outcomes until the exams in the summer.

*Small sized school, attainment group 1*

Two of the schools who have stopped entering students for AS qualifications at the end of year 12 said that it was now more difficult to stop students from continuing their A levels given that they are enrolled in a two-year course and they do not have any external feedback on performance.

There's several [students] in year 13 at the moment, 3 in particular, who did get Es in their year 12 internal exams. In the past if that had been an external grade that would have been a definitive no you can't carry on. Now unfortunately really I think the school feels it's got less weight to say to parents actually with just an internal grade that that's it. And obviously, you know, it is all internally assessed and I'm not doubting teacher assessment, I think they are working at that level, but we have let those 3 [students] carry on with those subjects into year 13; whereas definitely in the past I don't think we would have done.

*Small sized school, attainment group 1*

Four schools in the sample thought that the reformed A levels were less accessible for certain groups of students and that there would be fewer students from these groups taking A levels in the future. This included less able students, students with health problems, and students committed to activities outside of school such as elite sport. There were a number of reasons behind these beliefs including perceptions

that reformed A levels were harder, the loss of A levels in subjects seen as being more accessible, the move from modular to linear qualifications, and AS decoupling.

We have seen a greater number of students struggling. We're very academic as a sixth form, so we only offer one BTEC at the moment, which is PE. The rest of them are all A levels. Because of the changes we lost leisure studies. So some of our less able students that were able to take leisure studies and things like that, we haven't been able to take those students this year. So it's been a more challenging curriculum, and we have noticed a knock-on effect on that for students in terms of our tail end of students. We have tried to address that.

*Large sized school, attainment group 1*

## 4.6 Results summary

This section summarises the findings reported above and explains the possible impact that the changes to provision identified may have had on the schools' AS cohorts. The implications of the potential changes to the AS cohorts in relation to the maintenance of AS standards are discussed in the next section.

Prior to reform, all 17 schools we spoke to entered all of their students for AS. In most schools, students would begin with 4 subjects in year 12 and the majority of students would certificate in 4 ASs and 3 A levels. Only 3 schools were still planning on entering all of their students for AS in summer 2018 and not all students were continuing to start on 4 subjects; many were starting on 3. Of the remaining schools, half were not planning on entering any students at all to reformed AS in summer 2018 and half were only planning on entering some. This means that AS entries from all of the schools in our sample had declined to some degree since reform which reflects the national picture (see Ofqual, 2017a).

This research highlights that schools are entering students to reformed AS in a number of different ways and for a variety of different reasons. Some schools had decided to enter all of their students in a particular subject to reformed AS. It could be expected that the students entering reformed AS from these schools would have a similar prior attainment profile to those entered prior to reform. However, many of the schools who were entering all students in a subject for AS said that they thought that these students were not as motivated to do well in their assessment as previous cohorts. This was mainly because the students were also taking A levels in the subject and the AS no longer counted towards the A level. So although they may have a similar prior attainment profile, the students may be less motivated which could mean that they under-perform relative to their prior attainment. However, while all 17 schools entered all students to reformed AS in either all or some subjects in summer 2015, only 7 were planning on doing so in summer 2018. This suggests that a potential decline in student motivation may be less of an issue in the future if the schools continue to move away from entering students for AS who are also doing an A level in the subject.

The other 10 schools were planning on either entering no students for reformed AS in summer 2018 or entering some students in particular subjects. Where only some students are being entered for reformed AS, the different entry approaches used suggest that these students could have a different prior attainment profile to previous cohorts. Schools entering only some year 12 students within a subject to reformed AS were entering those who were either leaving at the end of the year, transferring to different courses, struggling with A levels, not able to access A levels, or who had started on 4 subjects and were being entered to reformed AS in their weakest subject. This suggests that the students being entered to reformed AS may have a lower prior attainment profile than the cohort of students the schools entered for AS prior to reform. However, it is possible that whilst the students may differ in their prior

attainment profile, they may be as motivated to do well in their assessments as previous cohorts. This is because they are just taking the AS in the subject and not the A level and, in many cases, the AS will be the qualification which they leave post-16 education with.

This research highlights other changes which may result in the prior attainment profile of reformed AS (and A level) cohorts being different to pre-reform cohorts. Some schools had increased their entry criteria for AS/A level courses and some were advising students who they would have accepted on to AS/A level courses prior to reform to either take different subjects (those they were most likely to do well in) or take alternative qualifications. There was also evidence that some students had been put off studying subjects seen as being harder or subjects which they had not studied before. Some schools reported fewer students applying to study AS/A levels and an increase in lower ability students choosing to study A level alternatives. This all suggests that reformed AS and A level cohorts could have a slightly higher prior attainment profile than pre-reform cohorts.

Finally, there were some changes to provision which could also affect the performance of reformed AS (and A level) cohorts. As cost was cited as a reason for moving away from AS (8 out of 17 schools in the sample), it is possible that only the schools who can afford to enter students for AS continue to do so. It is possible that there is something different about students in these schools, meaning they may perform differently to previous cohorts. Schools which have moved from starting students on 4 subjects to 3 will have more time available to either teach or offer enrichment programmes which may include taking other qualifications such as the EPQ. Increased teaching time may lead to improved performance and increased enrichment may lead to the development of new skills and knowledge which could also increase performance. This could mean that reformed AS (and A level) cohorts perform better than their prior attainment may predict.

## 5 Discussion

The aim of this research was to capture any changes to AS cohorts resulting directly from the recent AS and A level reforms, with a view to identifying any changes that might have implications for the maintenance of AS standards. We used a qualitative approach to do this, as changes were likely to be numerous and complex and therefore difficult to capture using quantitative methods. Senior leaders from 17 schools were interviewed and changes to their AS cohorts were identified. The implications of these changes are summarised below. It should be noted that our sample represents 0.6% of all schools in England who offer A levels and so the research provides a keyhole view of school and student behaviour which may not generalise. Indeed, the variety of different approaches to reform taken by schools in our small sample would suggest it would be unwise for us to generalise. It is nonetheless useful for understanding the range of different choices in school provision and student entry for reformed AS and the reasons behind their choices, which can inform our thinking around how AS cohorts may be changing following reform.

This research suggests that changes in AS entry approaches/provision and students' subject/qualification choices following reform could have many, often counteracting, effects on the nature of individual schools' AS cohorts. Most of the changes could have implications for the prior attainment profile of the cohort. Many of the schools in our sample have changed their entry approaches over time and moved away from entering all of their students to reformed AS to either entering none or only some, possibly lower ability students, who will not be continuing to A level. At the same time, other schools have been more selective in who they admit to AS and A level courses and some lower ability students who may have chosen to study AS/A levels or study particular AS/A level subjects prior to reform may now be choosing (or being encouraged) to study alternative qualifications and subjects. This suggests that the reformed cohorts may be more able than pre-reform cohorts.

In general, changes in the ability profile of the cohort (as measured by prior attainment) are not problematic for the maintenance of standards as predicted performance (the statistical evidence used to maintain standards – see section 2.3) is based on the prior attainment profile of the cohort. As a result, a cohort with a lower prior attainment profile will be predicted to achieve lower results overall, and a cohort with a higher prior attainment profile will be predicted to achieve higher results overall. This means that many of the potential effects of changes identified by this study will be accounted for by the predictions.

The predictions cannot, however, account for other changes to the cohorts which may affect performance such as changes in student motivation, teaching time, enrichment or the types of schools entering AS qualifications. Although many schools reported an initial reduction in student motivation, it is possible that as

schools move away from entering students for AS in subjects they will be taking at A level, student motivation will not be too dissimilar to that prior to reform.

To conclude, in many reform situations, changes are implemented in a reasonably uniform way across all schools. In the case of the reforms to AS and A level, it is clear that the decoupling of AS from A level has given schools much more choice in how they implement the reforms. Our small sample suggests that schools have tended to adopt an approach which best suits their individual situation, and that likely means a large number of slightly different approaches being taken in schools across the country. As schools are making such a variety of changes and are taking such individual approaches to AS provision, it is difficult to disentangle the different effects of all the changes made. This highlights the need to ensure that, alongside the predictions, examiner judgement is used, so that any significant differences in the performance of the cohort (which are not due to differences in prior attainment) can be detected.

Prior to the first awards of the reformed AS, we worked with the exam boards to develop and agree a set of principles to support the awarding of the reformed AS qualifications, which require examiners to judge whether the statistically recommended boundaries are acceptable (see section 2.3). Over the last few summers, in general, senior examiners have judged that the statistically recommended boundaries for reformed AS qualifications were acceptable which suggests that, overall, there are no detectable differences in the nature of the cohorts to date (beyond differences in prior attainment). Additionally, evidence from centre variability analyses have indicated that there is no greater variability in reformed AS levels than in previous years and the mean variability is close to zero (Ofqual, 2017b). This provides strong evidence that standards have been maintained.

Uptake and entry approaches to AS are likely to continue to change in coming years and this research will help to inform our thinking around the maintenance of AS standards in the future.

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## Appendix A – Generating statistical predictions

Prior attainment based predictions model the relationship between prior attainment and outcomes in a reference year, then use this relationship to predict the expected outcomes of students in the current year. At AS, prior attainment is measured as students' mean GCSE score. There are two main steps to generating predictions for each subject, as follows.

First, an 'outcome matrix' is generated for the reference year (see figure A1 for a fictitious outcome matrix). Students in the reference year that are matched to their prior attainment are divided into deciles based on their prior attainment at GCSE. A matrix is then created that shows how each decile went on to perform in each AS. The top decile (numbered 1 in Figure A1) would include the most able students (based on mean GCSE score), and the bottom decile would include the least able students. Once constructed, this matrix shows the probability of achieving a given grade for students in each decile.

		AS grade						
		A*	A	B	C	D	E	U
Mean GCSE decile	1	70	75	80	85	90	95	100
	2	65	70	75	80	85	90	100
	3	60	65	70	75	80	85	100
	4	55	60	65	70	75	80	100
	5	50	55	60	65	70	75	100
	6	45	50	55	60	65	70	100
	7	40	45	50	55	60	65	100
	8	35	40	45	50	55	60	100
	9	30	35	40	45	50	55	100
	10	25	30	35	40	45	50	100

Figure A1. *Example outcome matrix*

Using this outcome matrix, it is then possible to predict how students in the current year are expected to perform, given their own prior attainment. For example, using the outcome matrix above, 70% of students in decile 1 might be expected to get a grade A\*, 75% might be expected to get an A\* or A; 80% might be expected to get an A\*, A or B; and so on. This is repeated for each decile and then aggregated together to form a prediction for the probability of achieving each grade. Given that the predictions reflect the prior attainment profile of the students entering for each board, one board might have a higher prediction than another if the prior attainment profile of the students is higher.

## Appendix B – Round 1 interview schedule

All schools:

- did the school have any entry requirements for A levels before reforms (eg, that students must have a B in a subject at GCSE to study it at A level)?
- if no, do they now? If yes, have their entry requirements changed since the reforms? Will they in future?
- how did the school enter students to AS before reforms (eg, 3 or 4 ASs)?
- was this a blanket approach for all students/subjects?
- how did they choose to enter students last academic year during the first year of reforms (eg, all entered for AS and A level or pre-choosing 3 A levels)?
- was that a blanket approach for all students/subjects?
- how have they chosen to enter students this academic year?
- is this a blanket approach for all students/subjects?
- are they planning to do the same over the next years of reform? If not, what are they planning to do (if known)?
- can students still take an AS qualification in addition to their A levels if they wish to?
- have the reforms affected which subjects the school is offering? If no, will they in future?
- are students being encouraged to choose particular subjects for any reason (eg, non-reformed subjects over reformed)?

If students are still taking AS qualifications in their A level subjects:

- do you think that students taking reformed qualifications last year were as motivated to do well in their AS assessment as students from previous cohorts given that their AS results do not count towards their A level? Why?
- do you think that students taking reformed qualifications last year worked as hard for their AS assessment as students from previous cohorts given that their AS results do not count towards their A level? Why?
- before reform, did students have to attain a certain grade at AS to continue on to A level?
- do they now? If so, and if yes to the above, has there been any change in the level of attainment required to continue on to A level?
- are there any other changes that have been made following the introduction of reformed qualifications?

If the school has dropped AS:

- before reform, did students have to attain a certain grade at AS to continue on to A level?
- if yes, if they did not attain this grade what did they tend to do after year 12?
- are you carrying out any alternative assessment at the end of year 12?
- if yes, will students have to attain a certain level on the assessment in order to continue to year 13?

- if yes, what do you think will happen to students who don't reach this level – will they take the same pathways as before? (ie, now that they don't have a formal qualification that they can use to transfer to another centre).
- does your school/college take on students at year 13 who perhaps haven't been allowed to carry on at year 13 in another school/college?
- if yes, are you still able to do this if a student hasn't taken AS?
- do you think that students are now less likely to choose A level subjects seen as being more difficult because they won't have feedback on their performance from AS results?
- do you think that there may be students taking A levels in subjects that they might have dropped after receiving feedback on their performance from AS results?
- are you thinking about or have you introduced the extended project qualification or any other qualifications which may be an alternative to AS?
- are teachers finding that they have to motivate students taking reformed A level qualifications more than they had to prior to the reforms when they were assessed during the two-year period of study?
- are there any other changes that have been made following the introduction of reformed qualifications? (eg, introduction of any programmes to fill the AS time?)

Where any changes have been identified ask about the reasons behind these changes.

## Appendix C – Round 2 interview schedule

All schools:

- did the school have any entry requirements for A levels before reforms (eg that students must have a B in a subject at GCSE to study it at A level)?
  - if no, do they now?
  - if yes, have their entry requirements changed since the reforms?
    - has this stayed consistent during reforms or has this changed again? Why?
  - will they continue to do this in the future?
- how did the school enter students to AS before reforms (eg, 3 or 4 ASs)?
  - was this a blanket approach for all students/subjects?
- how did they choose to enter students during the first two years of reforms (eg all entered for AS and A level or pre-choosing 3 A levels)?
  - was that a blanket approach for all students/subjects?
- how have they chosen to enter students this academic year?
  - is this a blanket approach for all students/subjects?
- are they planning to do the same in the future?
  - if not, what are they planning to do (if known)?
- can students still take an AS qualification in addition to their A levels if they wish to?
- have the reforms affected which subjects you are offering? [Not in terms of lost non-reformed subjects.]
  - AS? A level?
    - sharing provision?
    - dropped subjects?
    - new subjects?
    - alternatives to AS/A levels?
  - if no, will they in future?

If students are still taking AS qualifications in their A level subjects:

- do you think that students taking reformed qualifications are as motivated to do well in their AS assessment as students from cohorts prior to reform given that their AS results *do not* count towards their A level?
  - why?
- do you think that students taking reformed qualifications work as hard for their AS assessment as students from cohorts prior to reform given that their AS results *do not* count towards their A level?
  - why?
- before reform, did students have to attain a certain grade at AS to continue on to A level?
  - do they now?
  - if so, and if yes to the above, has there been any change in the level of attainment required to continue on to A level?

- are there any other changes that have been made following the introduction of reformed qualifications?

If the school has dropped AS:

- before reform, did students have to attain a certain grade at AS to continue on to A level?
- are you carrying out any alternative assessment at the end of year 12?
  - if yes, will students have to attain a certain level on the assessment in order to continue to year 13?
- do you think that students are now less likely to choose A level subjects seen as being more difficult because they won't have feedback on their performance from AS results?
- do you think that there may be students taking A levels in subjects that they might have dropped after receiving feedback on their performance from AS results?
- are you thinking about or have you introduced the extended project qualification or any other qualifications which may be an alternative to AS or A level?
- are teachers finding that they have to motivate students taking reformed A level qualifications more than they had to prior to the reforms when they were assessed during the two-year period of study?
- are there any other changes that have been made following the introduction of reformed qualifications? (eg introduction of any programmes to fill the AS time?)

Where any changes have been identified ask about the reasons behind these changes.

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