



Qualifications and  
Curriculum Authority

---

*Evaluation of new and pilot qualifications*

# **Evaluation report on A levels in applied subjects – years one, two and three**

---

April 2009

QCA/09/4248

## Contents

Introduction	3
Methodology	4
Headline findings	6
Key issues for stakeholders	16

This report was prepared by Marianne Talbot of QCA between autumn 2005 and spring 2008, with assistance from the following consultants and colleagues at QCA: Kate Westmacott, Madeleine Swords and Heather Frier.

## Introduction

A levels in applied subjects were introduced in September 2005. They were developed in 10 subjects (applied art and design, applied business, applied information and communication technology (ICT), applied science, engineering, health and social care, leisure studies, media communication and production, manufacturing, and travel and tourism) and replaced Vocational Certificate of Education (VCE) A levels, which were introduced in September 2000.

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) was funded by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and then the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) to evaluate the new A levels in applied subjects between autumn 2005 and summer 2008. This involved annual visits to a number of case study centres, use of postal and telephone questionnaires, and observations of standardisation and awarding meetings.

This report summarises the outcomes of this three-year evaluation. It considers the suitability of the new qualifications, student profile, recruitment and retention, curriculum planning, delivery, assessment, and training and support. It highlights findings that are relevant to Diploma developments and key issues for a range of stakeholders.

Overall, the picture was mixed. The new applied A levels were widely regarded as more demanding than VCEs in terms of the written coursework and evaluation skills they require. Although the AS standard was accessible to most students, A2 results were often disappointing, and many teachers suggested that A2 students would have achieved better results on VCE or BTEC and OCR National awards. However, some believed that the new A levels prepared students better for progression to university than other applied awards.

A levels in applied subjects were offered more widely by school sixth forms and sixth form colleges than by general colleges of further education. Single award A levels in applied subjects were seen by some as an attractive extension to the range of A levels, appealing to students who would otherwise not have considered studying a vocational/applied subject. In contrast, double awards were often regarded as 'not vocational enough' for students who were strongly attracted to an applied subject.

## Methodology

### Case study visits

In year one, QCA identified 20 centres that agreed to act as case study centres for the first year of the evaluation exercise. Visits to these centres were carried out in autumn 2005 and spring 2006. Teachers and students were interviewed, covering as far as possible the range of subject areas and awarding bodies.

In year two, 10 of these centres were revisited, the sample reflecting the widest possible range of subjects/awarding bodies. In year three, 10 further visits were scheduled, which included two centres that had not been visited previously, to achieve a more representative range of centre type.

The centre visit questionnaires were agreed in advance between QCA and the fieldwork consultant, and remained relatively stable over the three years.

### Postal questionnaire

QCA devised a postal questionnaire covering similar ground to the case study interviews. This was sent to a sample of centres offering the new A levels in applied subjects in England early in year one and two of the evaluation, during the winters of 2005 and 2006. The sample was chosen to cover all subjects and awarding bodies as far as possible. The questionnaire mainly consisted of closed questions, but with the opportunity for teachers to make comments where appropriate.

The data gathered via the questionnaire provided a useful indication of how centres were responding to the introduction of the new qualifications on the whole, but were less instructive at a subject level due to the low numbers of respondents per subject / awarding body.

### Standardisation and awarding meetings

Members of the evaluation team also attended some of the standardisation and awarding meetings for the new qualifications, to observe how awarding bodies were responding to the challenges of marking and grading the qualifications. Attendees produced reports that were fed back into both this report and QCA's (now Ofqual's) monitoring team.

## **Telephone survey of further education colleges**

In year two, the requirement to cover a wide range of subjects and awarding bodies within a small sample of centre visits led to a skew in the range of centre types.

Additional telephone interviews with curriculum managers from 10 general colleges were therefore planned for early in year three to investigate how the college experience of AS/A2 delivery in applied subjects compared to that of school sixth forms and sixth form colleges.

## Headline findings

### **Suitability of the new qualification**

In year one, the majority of respondents to the postal survey said that applied A levels were suitable replacements for VCEs (70 per cent) and that the courses were ‘vocational enough’ (75 per cent). This also reflected feedback from the early case study centres, although there were subject differences.

However, feedback from teachers and students in years two and three suggested a more complex picture, in which A levels in applied subjects were seen as considerably more academic than VCEs and less vocational than other applied awards such as BTEC and OCR Nationals.

While the AS standard was regarded as accessible to most students, there were concerns that the standard of written work required by the A2 standard was beyond the reach of many students, particularly those undertaking double awards. This led to concerns that A levels in applied subjects did not represent a suitable progression route to students from level 2 vocational awards.

There were progression issues from level 2 GNVQ replacement courses to applied A levels – these students will do better on the OCR National award. We now have 60 year 12 students doing to single AS and 75 doing the National.

However, many teachers suggested that applied students develop highly valuable study skills through these awards, for example team working, research skills, presentation skills and self-management. The opportunities to develop study skills and undertake external assessment provided within A levels in applied subjects were seen to prepare students well for university.

Some centres regarded single awards in applied A levels as much like other A levels and hence suitable for students with higher GCSE achievements. These students were regarded as better able to cope with the demands of a complex marking scheme and the amount of external assessment. However, they were also likely to be less vocationally motivated than double award students and may be more likely to drop their applied subjects at AS level.

Heavy coursework demands within A levels in applied awards, made worse by early deadlines, were seen as limiting opportunities for vocational learning. Some of the students who were interviewed expressed disappointment with the lack of opportunity for skills development and practical work within their courses.

Teachers suggested that the more vocationally focused students who opted for double awards would achieve higher grades on applied courses that offered more opportunities for vocational

learning and portfolio-based assessment. As a result, a number of case study centres replaced double A levels with BTEC and OCR Nationals.

## **Subject differences**

The case study centre evaluation visits in year three provided an overview of subject feedback.

### **Applied art and design**

Four centres offered three single and four double awards. Courses were running very successfully in three centres, with two regarding them as their most successful area of applied provision. The fourth centre was withdrawing single and double courses as teachers felt that too many marks depended on high-level writing skills rather than technical ability.

### **Applied business**

Six centres offered both single and double awards; three single and four double awards were being withdrawn. Subject teachers from three centres were happy with the course, although some had concerns that heavy assessment demands meant that there was not enough time to deliver vocational opportunities, particularly with single awards. Students expressed concerns about managing the amount of coursework and that assessment followed the same pattern throughout the course, which can become boring. In one case, the college management decided to switch to BTEC Nationals throughout the centre, despite reasonable achievements and positive student feedback in relation to applied business.

### **Applied ICT**

Nine centres offered nine single and seven double awards; two single and three double awards were being withdrawn. Double awards were seen as less practical with less technical content than VCEs, and results were lower. Double award students would have preferred courses to be more practical, with fewer reports and a reduced amount of coursework. BTEC Nationals often were being introduced as replacement or as an alternative for weaker double award students, for example those progressing from level 2 courses. The single award was proving popular as a fourth subject, providing breadth in mixed programmes of A levels. Achievements were mixed, and students needed good GCSEs to do well: in some centres the single award replaced traditional ICT and was targeted at business/creative/media students.

### **Applied science**

Four centres offered three single and two double awards; one single and one double award were being withdrawn. Feedback suggested that students were generally underachieving and

that courses were not practical enough for vocationally motivated students. Teachers were tackling underachievement by either seeking to raise entry requirements or switching to alternative level 3 provision, for example BTEC National Diploma or National Certificate, which were seen as more appropriate to the cohort.

## **Engineering**

One centre offered the single award and saw this as an inappropriate replacement for VCE:

My views have not changed over the three years. I still feel we should have scrapped the A level after the first year and gone back to the VCE until a proper job could have been done... We are getting vocational students taking what is basically an academic A level. They really struggle. The very people the course should attract are the ones who cannot understand the need to write work in a certain way to meet the criteria. It becomes an 'understanding English' exam rather than engineering... Vocational is supposed to mean related to work and practical activity. Neither the new 14–19 Diploma nor the vocational A levels meet this requirement.

## **Health and social care**

Eight centres offered eight single and six double awards; two double awards were being withdrawn. Teachers became confident in their understanding of assessment requirements over the three years of evaluation. These courses seemed to recruit well and attract students with a wide range of abilities, for example some with good GCSEs, others progressing from level 2 vocational courses. The applied awards were seen as more difficult than VCE and not practical enough, particularly for double award students, who tended to underachieve. Single awards tended to attract students also taking psychology, sociology, childcare or biology courses. Some centres increased the proportion of examined units students took to reduce the amount of coursework and marking required.

## **Leisure studies**

Five centres offered five single awards and one double award; one single award was being withdrawn, with another under threat of withdrawal. Feedback suggests that the course was very successful and popular in two centres and on the rise in a third. However, two centres were concerned about take-up and viability. Where courses were successful, they attracted large groups of students, which placed heavy marking demands on teachers. Most teachers felt the course should be called leisure management to better reflect the subject content.

## **Media communication and production**

One centre offered the single award to four AS and two A2 groups of students. Teachers stressed that the course involved a lot of theory and filtered out students who wanted a more practical course early on. The amount of written evidence and the pressure of deadlines



meant a heavy AS workload with which those who had lower prior achievement struggled. More technical training for teachers has been important in raising standards:

Excellent course and great preparation for industry. Students learn team working and presentation as well as research skills. Strengths are quality of student portfolios, range of achievements, range of vocational settings.

### **Performing arts**

Three centres offered three single awards; courses were generally running well, and none were being withdrawn. Teachers expressed concerns that the amount of performance placed heavy demands on time and regretted the lack of a double award. The single award was not seen as being as vocational as the VCE, because it did not include opportunities for technical skills development, for example stage management. The course was much enjoyed by students and seen as good preparation for university and employment in industry.

### **Travel and tourism**

Four centres offered four single and two double awards. In two centres courses were recruiting well, – for example one course has recruited around 40 AS students while the other has recruited 20 – and applications in these centres were also up for September 2008. Students often found the written coursework to be a challenge. In one centre the course attracted fewer students with lower prior achievements and was vulnerable to being withdrawn or having its timetabled hours cut. Another centre found that the more vocationally oriented students tended to leave for employment after a successful AS year; although this was regarded as a positive outcome by teachers and students, it was not encouraged by college managers.

### **Student profile**

We recruit the same profile as VCE students but are not retaining the bottom end; we lose them at the end of AS.

Applied A level students look better on paper than VCE students, as we tend to only recruit those with Bs in English – literacy of students with C is often not adequate given demands of written assessment.

Students on these courses had profiles similar to those of typical VCE students in terms of prior achievements and learning preferences. However, from the outset centres expressed concerns that students with lower prior achievement did not have the literacy, numeracy, ICT and evaluation skills required for the applied A level courses, particularly at A2.

By year three, some teachers were suggesting that students needed a GCSE grade C/B in English to cope with the written coursework requirements of A levels in applied subjects.

Some case study teachers observed that more students with higher GCSE achievements were attracted to single award applied A level courses than to double awards. Some applied subjects also seemed to attract students with higher GCSE achievements, for example performing arts and applied art and design.

## **Curriculum planning**

I liked that they had the same structure as other A levels as this helped timetabling. We now face a problem with some A levels having two units; applied having three or six units, and BTECs having four or eight units.

When VCEs were withdrawn, most centres replaced them with A levels in applied subjects or BTEC Nationals (UCAS survey 2005).

By year two, case study centres were withdrawing courses where recruitment, and to a lesser extent achievement, was low. This had a particular impact on double awards, 33 per cent of which were being withdrawn, compared to 9 per cent of single awards. Some double awards were replaced with single awards, particularly in subjects that are seen as less vocational, for example applied business and applied ICT.

In most cases, centres indicated that they intended to stick with current applied A level provision, despite their reservations, until the implications of the new Diplomas and forthcoming A level reforms were fully understood.

By year three, where A levels in applied subjects were working well, their flexible structure was often seen as a strength, for example students can take an extra applied AS or sometimes a one-year AS/A2 programme.

Nevertheless, centres continued to withdraw courses associated with low achievement or a low proportion of higher grades. Again, more double than single awards were affected (39 per cent compared to 18 per cent). Other reasons for withdrawing courses included when teachers had grown dissatisfied with the amount of coursework and marking, the constant changes in assessment requirements and problems with moderation.

## **Marketing, recruitment and retention**

Feedback suggested that some centres targeted the applied A levels at specific groups of students – for example those who preferred coursework assessment to examinations, or those with a vocational focus – while others marketed single and double awards differently – double awards have lower entry requirements than mixed programmes of single A levels.

Early indications suggested that recruitment rates to these A levels were similar to those for VCEs. By year two, some centres had concerns that recruiting small groups of AS students would lead to non-viable A2 subject groups. As a result, some centres did not commit to offering A2s in all AS subjects, while some larger centres were prepared to subsidise smaller A2 courses as necessary.

Recruitment to single subjects within case study centres held up better overall than recruitment to double awards. However, students taking single awards tended to be less committed to the applied subjects than those taking double awards, and were more likely to drop their weakest subject once they had their AS results.

By year three, recruitment remained steady overall but varied considerably across subjects. For example, subjects such as applied ICT, health and social care, applied business and applied art and design continued to recruit well, while leisure studies and travel and tourism tended to fluctuate each year.

### **Awarding body training and support**

In year one, teachers did not feel suitably prepared for delivery and assessment of the new qualification and expressed dissatisfaction with the support provided by the awarding bodies. While training courses were mostly rated as good, difficulties were reported in getting information about courses and finding local courses. Teachers also complained about difficulties in contacting appropriate specialist staff within awarding bodies, poor guidance documents, poor exemplars and inadequate provision of textbooks.

By year two, some teachers and students expressed frustration at being treated as 'guinea pigs' for awards that they considered should have been piloted before they were rolled out nationally. Some teachers were concerned that students were being disadvantaged by restricted opportunities to resit examined units. This was sometimes caused by the lack of a January assessment opportunity, and also by the time-consuming nature of some extended external assessments, which are difficult to retake within the duration of a course.

By year three, teachers expressed concerns that revisions were being made to assessment guidance midway through courses, leaving centres unsure which rules they should be following. This revised guidance was often distributed not to all centres but only to those who attended training events. While the assessment materials and examples of marked work available on most websites were valued, teachers would appreciate more examples of higher-grade work.

Some awarding bodies were commended by teachers for offering opportunities for centres to submit work to be marked before moderation, to support standardisation. Others were commended for visiting centres and developing effective working relationships. Teachers also valued web-based subject communities as a way of sharing experiences, concerns and good practice.

## **Delivery**

We arrange visits to homeless day care centres, but there is not enough time to arrange work placements in day centres for all single award students as they are doing other subjects.

We don't like the amount of coursework – effectively we have four bits of coursework for each unit... First you learn about the topic, then regurgitate the same type of information from four different angles – which seems pointless as we're not learning anything new... We need more visits, but there's not enough time to do them with all the coursework.

The most frequently expressed concerns related to the manageability of the coursework and the impact of a mid-May deadline.

Many teachers believed that the amount of written coursework for the applied A levels meant that there was not enough time to provide opportunities for vocational learning. Many students reported that lessons focused on completing coursework rather than developing understanding of subjects and vocational relevance.

Centres reported fewer opportunities for vocational delivery within single awards, and often single awards had little input from staff with specialist vocational knowledge.

Many teachers and students expressed concerns about the complexity of the marking criteria, which they felt could be expressed more clearly without watering down standards.

The mid-May deadline had a major impact on how teachers structured their delivery. Many single award students managed to submit their AS coursework by the mid-May deadline and started their A2 units in June. However, in most cases double award students did not.

To make the coursework load more manageable, teachers often arranged that double award students completed their final coursework unit(s) in the remainder of the summer term. Hence many double award students started their A2 year in September without confirmation of their double AS results. This limited the potential opportunities available for resubmitting work for these students within the duration of the course.

The amount of coursework and the complexity of the criteria resulted in a heavy marking/remarking workload for teachers. Some teachers, particularly with larger class sizes,

found this workload to be overwhelming. No case study centres were involved in any collaborative arrangements to offer A levels in applied subjects.

## **Assessment and moderation**

The trouble is that the assessment criteria mean that often students have to do extra work to achieve higher marks, which does not develop their skills nor lead to any improvement in the quality of their work – this seems unnecessary and artificial... Students could produce poor art and design but get a good mark if they wrote well.

We have found that weaker students found it difficult to get their coursework finished on time previously, so now we do three exam and three coursework units on the double award. This seems to have worked, as all have completed their coursework and have done perhaps 10 per cent better. Also, students seem happier and less stressed than last year, and we have three weeks now to focus all lessons on exam techniques.

Initial feedback suggested some enthusiasm among teachers for the new system of marking and recording, but low levels of confidence in using it.

By year two, teachers were voicing concerns about the complexity of mark band descriptors and assessment criteria, and found grades more difficult to predict with applied awards than with previous awards. Teachers also noted more variability in students' performance in examinations, compared to VCEs, with some students unexpectedly doing better on examined rather than coursework units.

While recognising 'the dangers of teaching to the assessment', by year three many teachers thought that assessment criteria and mark bands could be better expressed without undermining standards.

Many teachers, particularly of double awards, missed the incremental approach to marking of VCEs and GNVQs (which still characterises BTEC and OCR Nationals). Many thought this approach was better suited to supporting development of students with lower GCSE achievements.

While some welcomed the different approaches to external assessment, teachers stressed that there was not enough time to prepare students adequately for the whole range of external assessment formats used within awards, which was not a problem faced by other A level students.

Some also had concerns that extended external assessments limit students' retake opportunities with the duration of the programme, again disadvantaging applied students compared to those taking other A levels.

Most centres' experience of moderation was straightforward, but there were reports of marks being altered with little explanation. In year three, three out of 10 case study centres had faced some issues with moderation in the past year. In some cases, marks were changed by the moderator than reinstated by a senior moderator. In others, work marked by the same college team working at different sites was marked down significantly by one moderator and accepted by another.

## Diploma

The level 3 Diploma seems flawed in terms of content. It may have what big businesses want, but they do not employ 18-year-olds; they employ graduates. Graduates come with transferable skills developed through higher education studies. Small and medium enterprises would appreciate more technical competencies. Developers do not seem to have considered what young people want.

By year three, six of the 10 case study centres had plans to implement the Diploma, while two schools and two sixth form colleges were adopting a 'wait and see' attitude. Curriculum managers and some teachers were positive about the extent to which the DCSF Diploma Gateway process has forged better links between colleges, schools and employers.

Concerns were expressed about the quality of the Diploma, the target market and the likely impact on existing awards.

While many recognised that the Diploma rightly addresses the needs of large business and higher education, there were concerns that it will fail to deliver the technical skills that were valued by smaller businesses and appealed to young people.

Many expressed doubts that the Diploma would be 'vocational enough' for students attracted to double/triple awards. Most teachers thought that the level 3 Diploma would be targeted at students currently studying applied subjects in school sixth forms and sixth form colleges, and expected that existing double awards will be withdrawn at the end of their accreditation period (summer 2010).

However, some teachers argued that single A levels in applied subjects provide an academic approach to the study of vocational subjects that appeals to students and parents. Increasingly, centres were offering single applied subjects as part of mixed A level programmes, and many hoped that this option would remain following the launch of the Diploma.

Feedback from students and teachers suggested that Diploma developers should ensure that:

- the views of students and smaller businesses should be considered in Diploma development, as well as the views of large companies and universities
- students should not be disadvantaged by participation in any pilots
- students should gain credit for their Diploma achievements to date if they wish to change courses
- teaching staff should have relevant vocational experience and expertise
- sufficient time should be allocated within courses to develop vocationally relevant experiences for students
- students should be given adequate opportunities to prepare for the range of assessment methods
- opportunities to resit should be the same as within other awards
- specifications should define the standard without reference to additional guidance
- mark band descriptors and assessment criteria should be expressed in a language and format that is accessible to teachers and students
- all centres should be sent assessment guidance updates once a year to aid standardisation
- entry requirements and prior achievements of students of the level 3 Diploma should be monitored to ensure that this award is accessible to students with level 2 vocational awards.

## Key issues for stakeholders

### **Schools and colleges**

Schools and colleges should consider the following points.

The amount of coursework, particularly in double awards, sometimes places undue pressure on students and teachers. Further guidance from awarding bodies on coursework requirements, especially for higher grades, could help to alleviate this to some extent, but if centres opt for more examined units, they should monitor closely the impact on achievement.

Assessment deadlines sometimes have an adverse impact on course delivery and on the time available to extend vocational opportunities for students. Centres should share examples of good practice to highlight ways of managing assessments and innovative means of introducing vocational learning within mixed programmes.

A2 awards may be too difficult for students with lower GCSE achievements to access, due to the required standards of writing and analytical skills. Centres need to monitor achievement of students closely. They also need to consider how the implementation of functional skills and personal, learning and thinking skills (PLTS) may support student achievement.

The uncertainty surrounding the future of A levels in applied subjects and BTEC and OCR Nationals may discourage centres from investing fully in new courses. Centres need to address concerns regarding the appropriateness of specific awards for different students. For example, they should look again at marketing, recruitment and entry requirements, ensure that student guidance about courses is accurate, consider whether additional support is needed to help students on courses to access higher grades, and identify progression opportunities for students with AS awards.

### **Awarding bodies**

Awarding bodies should:

- analyse data on take-up of and achievement in applied subjects by centre type, student prior achievement, gender and race to check for underperformance in A levels in applied subjects compared to other awards
- ensure that teachers and students are more fully involved in the testing and piloting of specifications to improve the clarity of language of the specifications



- ensure that all new guidance is sent to every centre, not just those attending training events, and extend the use of e-learning and web-based tutorials so that more teachers can access training on awards in addition to face-to-face delivery
- monitor the impact of the assessment method on student performance
- provide more guidance focused on how to avoid coursework/marking overload, for example encouraging quality rather than quantity
- ensure that moderators and external examiners visiting centres have appropriate subject expertise
- ensure that a mechanism is in place so that teachers and students can provide feedback on specific units and implementation issues on an ongoing basis.

## **QCA**

QCA should consider whether A levels in applied subjects offer students appropriate opportunities for success by comparing awarding body data on take-up and achievement to answer the following questions.

- Are students' achievements in line with predictions based on prior attainments?
- How do achievements compare to those in other A levels and applied awards?
- Do A levels in applied subjects provide an appropriate progression from level 2 vocational awards?
- Are student profiles and achievements different on double and single awards?

QCA should also consider:

- what progression routes are open to students with AS awards by investigating whether AS awards are valued by employers and how students might progress to other programmes, such as the Diploma
- whether the assessment model is inevitably associated with excessive and repetitive coursework by investigating ways in which the assessment model (assessment objectives, assessment criteria and grading bands, and associated guidance) might place greater emphasis on quality rather than quantity of coursework and by producing case studies of centres that encourage a more integrated approach to student work

- the impact of course structure on the manageability of coursework by investigating how the manageability of coursework is perceived on two- and four-unit courses as compared to three- and six-unit courses.

## **Learning and Skills Network – quality improvement and staff development**

The Learning and Skills Network should seek to:

- increase the vocational expertise of teachers by providing opportunities for subject teachers to undertake placements with relevant employers to extend their vocational experience and by encouraging teachers to undertake industry-related professional development activities
- promote opportunities for vocational delivery, using examples of how centres worked with local employers to provide specific input to applied courses, as well as general work placements for students (such as business visits, work shadowing, speeches and master-classes, and project material)
- improve information available to careers and guidance providers on applied A levels to ensure that those providing guidance to students on qualification options have accurate information about course content and assessment.

## **Ofqual – regulation of qualifications and awarding bodies**

Ofqual should consider whether all A levels in applied subjects offer a valued addition to the range of A levels by:

- investigating perceived value and utility of single and double awards in different subjects
- considering the availability of alternative awards of similar size
- considering the costs associated with maintaining awards with low take-up versus their value to learners.