

# **Decisions on regulating Advanced Extension Awards**



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## **Decisions on regulating Advanced Extension Awards**

Advanced Extension Awards (AEAs) are qualifications taken alongside A levels, designed to stretch and challenge the most able students. Our rules permit AEAs in any subject, but there is currently only one available (in mathematics). Around 700 school-age students take this qualification each year. Some universities use it to inform entry decisions.

A levels in England have been reformed, with most new A levels now being taught. These changes mean we need to alter some of our rules for AEAs; we consulted on our proposals in February-March 2018.

### **Summary of decisions**

Most respondents agreed with most of our proposals. Pearson, the only exam board which currently offers an AEA, supported all our proposals.

In line with our consultation proposals, we have decided we will:

- continue to require AEAs to be accessible to students who have taken an A level in the corresponding subject, without requiring further study or learning;
- continue to require AEAs to be more demanding than the corresponding A level, requiring students to demonstrate a greater depth of understanding;
- continue to require AEAs to have two passing grades – 'Merit' and 'Distinction';
- only permit AEAs in subjects where there is at least one A level offered in England, and require future AEAs to be based on the Department for Education's subject content for the corresponding A level;
- in line with reformed A levels, require future AEAs to use exam assessment, with non-exam assessment only used in subjects where we have expressly permitted it; and
- require exam boards when setting standards to use the same high-level approach we have adopted for reformed A levels.

We have made a change to one of our proposals reflecting the responses we received to our consultation. We have decided we will:

- require future AEAs to reflect the assessment objectives we have set for the corresponding A level, placing greater emphasis on more demanding skills – for example, analysis, evaluation and problem solving.

## **Maintaining comparability with previous qualifications**

We made proposals regarding AEAs' continuing comparability with previous qualifications. We proposed we would require them to:

- be accessible to students who have taken an A level in the corresponding subject, without requiring any further study or learning;
- be more demanding than the corresponding A level, requiring students to demonstrate a greater depth of understanding; and
- have two passing grades – Merit and Distinction.

We have decided to adopt all these proposals. Responses to the first two of these proposals were broadly supportive, but there was a more mixed response to our third proposal.

Respondents who disagreed (or strongly disagreed) that AEAs should have two passing grades suggested that a larger range of grades would allow for more differentiation between learners, and might make the qualification relevant to a wider range of learners. We have considered the alternatives suggested in responses. However, we have decided that the grading scale should not change, for two reasons. First, it would break comparability with existing qualifications, making it difficult for users of the qualification to compare results from different years. Second because it would be difficult to set additional grade boundaries reliably in a qualification with such a small (and potentially volatile) cohort.

## **Reflecting A level reforms**

We made four proposals on how AEAs should reflect reformed A level qualifications. We proposed we would require them to:

- only be permitted in subjects where there is at least one A level offered in England;
- be based on the Department for Education's subject content for the corresponding A level;
- reflect the assessment objectives we have set for the corresponding A level, but with a greater emphasis on the skills of analysis and evaluation; and
- use exam assessment, with non-exam assessment only permitted in subjects where we consider it appropriate. In such cases, we would set regulations to specify the amount and form of any non-exam assessment.

Two respondents disagreed with our proposal that AEAs should only be permitted in subjects where there is at least one A level offered in England. They commented that

there might be merit in an AEA which combined content from more than one A level (for example, to give a qualification in physical sciences, or mathematics and philosophy). Given the very small cohort currently taking the only AEA being offered, and considering the complexity of deciding which elements of subject content to be included in any mixed offering, we have decided not to accept this suggestion, and we will take forward the proposal on which we consulted.

All respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the proposal that all AEAs should be based on the Department for Education's subject content for the corresponding A level, so we have decided to adopt that proposal.

Four respondents disagreed with our proposal that AEAs should reflect the assessment objectives we have set for the corresponding A level, but with a greater emphasis on the skills of analysis and evaluation. They commented that the concepts of 'analysis' and 'evaluation' are not particularly meaningful in the context of the assessment objectives for mathematics. They instead suggested a greater focus on problem solving would be appropriate.

We agree that a different form of wording might make this requirement more applicable to all subjects. We have decided, therefore, to maintain the current emphasis on AEAs placing greater emphasis on more demanding skills, and will include specifics such as analysis, evaluation and problem solving as examples rather than requirements.

Respondents broadly supported our proposal that AEAs should generally use only exam assessment. Respondents commented that non-exam assessment did not seem appropriate to the academic nature of AEAs, and mentioned the importance of ensuring AEAs remain manageable for schools and colleges. The two respondents who disagreed with our proposals both commented that this seemed unduly restrictive.

We did not propose a complete proscription of non-exam assessment, however, but said that it would only be permitted where we accept it in a specific subject. We have seen no evidence to make us think again about this proposal, so have decided to adopt it.

## **Securing standards**

We made one proposal regarding how standards should be secured for AEAs. We proposed that:

- we should set rules for setting grade boundaries in AEAs that require exam boards to use the same high-level approach we have adopted for reformed A levels.

Views from respondents on this proposal were mixed. None of the respondents who supported our proposal provided any further comments. Respondents who disagreed commented that the small cohort size for AEAs, as well as the increased difficulty of the qualification, might create challenges for the statistical methods used to set grade boundaries in GCSEs, AS and A levels.

While there is some merit in these arguments, the rules we proposed here are not as restrictive as some might have thought. We think it is important that awarding organisations should consider appropriate quantitative and qualitative evidence, and that they should (as a minimum) consider evidence of Level of Demand, actual attainment, prior attainment and performance of previous cohorts. We have decided therefore to adopt this proposal.

## **Usefulness of AEAs for universities**

Several respondents commented on universities' increased use of 'entrance' exams in mathematics. Most felt the wide range of tests being used was a problem, particularly for less well-resourced schools. They suggested that a reformed AEA might reverse this trend, and some of the alternative proposals which were put forward in response to our proposals may have been specifically to counter some of the arguments universities give for not currently using AEAs.

One such suggestion was that we should create a requirement that awarding organisations permit universities to access learners' scripts. This is something that could be arranged with a learner's agreement, and not something on which we would create specific requirements.

We are clear that it is for universities to decide what they do (and do not) use for admissions. It is important in the case of AEAs that universities understand what the grades represent. Awarding organisations could facilitate this by sharing past papers and grade boundaries and other relevant material, but this is not an area which we would subject to regulatory requirements.

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