

Has the AS-level achieved its intentions?

Summary

- The AS-level was introduced in 2000 with the aim of bridging the gap between GCSE and A-level, recognising students' attainment during the first year of A-level study, and encouraging students to study a broader range of subjects.
- Following the introduction of the AS-level, students study more subjects and a greater variety of subject combinations, but more could be done to encourage breadth of study.
- AS-level grades are a useful predictor of final A-level grades. This is particularly important because evidence suggests that teacher estimates can be less reliable for particular student groups.
- To support progression from GCSE, the AS units are less demanding than the A2. Hence, some stakeholders argue that the AS units should count for less than 50% in the overall A-level grade. However, this is already the case – the actual achieved weight of the AS-level is less than 50%.
- Any move to decouple the AS and A-level qualifications needs to consider carefully the reliability of the ensuing grades, the cost of assessment and the potential of students to bypass the AS.

Introduction

The AS-level was conceived by a Conservative government and recognised as a promising innovation by the Labour government which implemented Curriculum 2000. It was intended to support progression by bridging the gap between the standard of GCSE and A-level and recognise student attainment during the transition from GCSE to A-level study. As a curriculum innovation, it was intended to encourage breadth of study, with most students taking four or more AS-levels (Hodgson, Spours & Savory, 2003). This brought the English system more into line with those in high attaining jurisdictions, in which breadth of study post-16 is valued (Green & Steedman, 1993).

Has the AS-level achieved its intentions?

The introduction of AS-levels has encouraged more students to broaden their curriculum by taking more subjects. The percentage of students with examination results for all three of the domains of Maths/Science, Arts, and Social Sciences/Humanities doubled between 2001 and 2002 (Bell, Malacova & Shannon, 2003). Many students, however, do still specialise within a domain. This may be appropriate for some, those going on to study medicine, for example. For others, it may be that choosing to study AS-levels across subject domains is seen as too risky, in the absence of incentives such as university offers that value breadth. It is also the case that many students drop subjects that they find difficult after AS, such as modern foreign languages (Gill, 2009). However, it may be that without this option there would have been an even greater decline in the number of students studying these subjects beyond GCSE.

AS-levels and AS unit grades fulfil an important role in university admissions. AS grades are a reliable predictor of students' final A-level grades (Meadows, 2003) whereas teachers' estimates can be unreliable for particular groups. The grades of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and minority ethnic groups are more likely to be wrongly estimated (Hayward et al, 2005). The excellent predictive validity of AS-levels has supported universities in widening participation to disadvantaged students, many of whom who had the confidence to apply to university from the feedback they gained about their performance at AS-level (Parks, 2010).

Is the weighting of the AS-level correct?

Some commentators argue that given the lower demand of the AS units in comparison with the A2 units, the AS-level should not have a 50% weighting in the overall A-level. This is already the case, however. Students tend to drop those AS subjects in which they do not perform well. This means that students who continue to the full A-level are a relatively homogenous group in terms of their AS uniform marks. Hence, it is their performance on the more demanding A2 units that spreads them out and so determines their overall A-level grade. This means that the achieved weighting of the AS (i.e. the actual contribution that the AS makes to students' overall A-level grades) has, historically, been lower than 50%.

The additional stretch and challenge introduced into the A2 units in 2010 increased this effect and the achieved weighting of the AS has become, in fact, closer to 40%. The achieved weightings for AQA's AS-levels vary from around 37% to 48%. For example, in 2011 the achieved weighting of AQA's AS French = 45.6%; Geography = 48.0%; History = 40.8%; Biology = 40.3%; Chemistry 39.3%; Physics = 36.1%; English = 42.3%. If yet more demand is incorporated into the second year of the A-level, this effect will be amplified.

Should the AS and the A2 be decoupled?

It has also been suggested that the AS and A2 components of the A-level be decoupled. There are a variety of ways in which this decoupling might occur, and when evaluating the possible models a number of issues must be considered. For example, the reliability of the grade upon which university entrance is determined must be sufficient. This reliability is partly determined by the amount of assessment upon which the grade is based (usually between four and six assessments at present). This must be balanced against the cost of producing the assessments. A model in which the A-level continues with the current level of assessment and the AS requires its own assessment would represent an unacceptable increase in cost for schools. Any decoupled model must also guard against students choosing to bypass the AS altogether. This would devalue the qualification but more importantly might not provide a good basis for progression to university.

Given that decoupling is proposed in response to the concern that AS has too great an impact on the overall A-level grade, policy makers should consider carefully the technical evidence above with regard to the actual impact that AS has.

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