A* at A-level

Summary

- A* was first used in 2010 and was introduced to help universities identify the highest performing students.

- To achieve the grade, students must achieve an A grade across the A-level, as well as achieving 90% on the A2 units.

- A Cambridge University study found that the more A* grades a student achieved at A-level, the more likely they were to do well in first-year university examinations.

- The A* rules were designed not to reward resitting at AS, and the impact of resitting on A* outcomes are indeed minimal.

- A study has shown the higher education sector needs a minimum of five years to assess the impact of reforms such as the introduction of the A*, so its impact as yet is largely unknown.

- However, given that other aspects of the A-level are to be reformed and given the arcane nature of the A* rule, alternative approaches, in particular awarding A* for a fixed proportion of A grade students, are worth consideration.

Introduction

The A* grade at A-level was first awarded to students in 2010. It was introduced to assist universities in differentiating between the highest performing students and to promote and reward greater stretch and challenge for the most able. The grade is awarded to students who achieve an A grade overall and 90% on the A2 units. In this way, the grade is achieved by candidates who have consistently performed very well throughout their A-level course and outstandingly on the A2 units, which incorporate the new stretch and challenge elements.

At the point of implementation, there was uncertainty over how the new grade would be used. It was thought that many admissions tutors would distrust predictions of A* from teachers in the early years, with some continuing to prefer admissions tests. Since then, it has become clear that the A* grade is used by an increasing number of the top institutions (Higton et al., 2012). In the light of other reforms to A-level, it is timely to consider the grade's future.

Does the A* predict success at university?

If the A* grade is to be used as a selection tool by universities, a pressing question is whether students who achieve A* perform better at university than other students. In the only study which has investigated this issue, Chetwynd (2011) found that the more A* grades a student achieves at A-level, the more likely they are to do well in first-year examinations at the University of Cambridge. This finding, whilst perhaps unsurprising, supports the legitimacy of using the grade to distinguish between students in the university admissions process. Nevertheless, there is a need for further research from other universities. Representatives from

the highly selective universities have expressed concern that the A* may not always differentiate between candidates who are conscientious and good at modular examinations and those who have a genuine talent or a study approach that will be valuable at university (see *Are modular structures responsible for learning to forget?* in the CERP A-level reform series). Studies examining whether A* is predictive of degree performance will enable this concern to be addressed.

The A* and resitting

There is concern that a 'culture of resitting' has led to students being ill-prepared for university study. An expected advantage of the current method for awarding A* was that it would not encourage resitting at AS to fulfil the required criteria (e.g. Qualifications and Curriculum Agency, 2007). This expectation seems to have been justified as our research indicates that the number of candidates who achieved an A* by resitting is tiny and has little impact on the overall number of candidates achieving an A* (see *What is the impact of resitting at A-level?* in the CERP A-level reform series).

Should the rules for A* be altered?

The A* rule is somewhat arcane. Moreover, some university representatives have expressed concern that a student with a lower total uniform mark could achieve an A* while a fellow student with a higher total could receive only a grade A.

Some commentators have suggested that the A* might function better if the rules were changed so that a fixed proportion of candidates achieve the grade - either a percentage of the entire cohort, or of those achieving grade A. The concern underlying this suggestion is that if outcomes were to keep rising then this may eventually lead universities to demand an additional grade above A*. Intuitively at least, awarding the A* to a fixed proportion of candidates would remove this requirement and preserve the integrity of the A* grade as a university selection tool.

The most obvious concern would be the temptation for candidates to choose subjects they consider might have fewer exceptional candidates in order to boost their chances of receiving an A*. Further, the advantage of the current rule in not encouraging resitting would be lost, although this may not matter should there be a change to the resitting policy (see *Should the best mark count when resitting at A level?* in the CERP A-level reform series). Other issues would depend on how exactly the rules were altered.

The first method, awarding the grade to a fixed proportion of the total cohort, would prevent outcomes from rising, but would mean that comparison between subjects, years and specifications would not be legitimate as the performance at A* could change over time. This would be particularly problematic in terms of public understanding, especially when retaining a different method of awarding at the other grades. If the grade A rate fell, wouldn't we expect the grade A* rate to fall too?

The second method, awarding the A* to a fixed proportion of A grade candidates, seems more intuitive and transparent than the current method, and takes into account the varying ability of cohorts of candidates between subjects, years and specifications. However, this scheme would still be prone to rising outcomes, the problem the change in the rules is intended to fix.

What is the future of A*?

Recent research commissioned by Ofqual found that universities are becoming accustomed to the A* grade but are still uncertain about how effective it will be (Higton et al., 2012). This suggests that further immediate reform might be unhelpful. We know that higher education needs a minimum of five years to assess the impact on degree performance or to fully inform

admissions decisions (Pring et al., 2009). Changes to the A* proposed before 2013 (i.e. five years after the new grade was introduced in 2008, three years after it was first awarded in 2010) will therefore not have the benefit of this analysis. However, given that other aspects of A-level are to be reformed it would make sense to take this opportunity to revisit the A* rule.

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