

Students' and parents' perceptions of proposed A-level reforms

In light of current discussions and the recent [Ofqual consultation](#) on A-level reform, CERP researchers spoke to some of the people likely to be most affected by any changes to the current system: students and their parents. Although a small sample, the focus groups provide some insight into how the proposed changes are viewed by these key stakeholders in a way that we believe has yet to be systematically carried out elsewhere.

The Ofqual consultation emphasised three main areas of focus: the involvement of universities in A-level content and design; limiting resit opportunities and abolishing January exams; and whether AS-levels should continue to be offered. The focus groups considered these questions, as well as issues surrounding the availability of past papers for students and the relative merits of modular and linear course structures.

Four focus groups were conducted in the last two weeks of July with the aim of exploring students' and parents' responses to some of the proposed changes to the A-level qualification.

The four groups consisted of:

- One group of A2 A-level students (5 males, 4 females).
- One group of undergraduates who had recently completed A-levels (3 males, 7 females).
- Two groups of parents recruited via the intranet for a large Hospital Foundation Trust: group A (3 males, 5 females) and group B (1 male, 8 females).

Each group was asked to discuss their responses to the following proposed changes:

- Removing the AS-level altogether, changing its contribution to an A-level, or otherwise altering the qualification.
- A move from modular assessment (with exams taken throughout the year) to a linear structure (with all exams taken at the end of the course).
- Increased involvement of universities in assessment design (including question writing)
- Decreasing the predictability/transparency of A-level papers (e.g. by reducing the availability of past papers and mark schemes).
- The number of opportunities to resit exams.

The discussions were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by a secretarial agency. All participants signed a consent form and were informed of the confidentiality and intended uses of the data. The transcripts were analysed by two CERP researchers, who discussed and negotiated the themes and quotes.

Quotes are provided for each theme to illustrate the participants' beliefs and perceptions.

Key findings

As a qualitative study consisting of only four focus groups, it is important not to place inappropriate weight on the conclusions drawn. The discussions indicated that:

- Parents valued the A-level qualification and felt that it provided good preparation for university.

- Parents valued the AS-level, and were keen that the reform process should not change or undermine the contribution of AS to the A-level qualification.
- A-level students and undergraduates believed that the step up from GCSE to A-level was significant.
- A-level students were generally confident that their A-level studies were preparing them for undergraduate study, in contrast with the view of the undergraduates, who were less convinced that their A-level studies had prepared them well for university.
- Participants across all groups tended to perceive question papers as predictable (particularly science subjects). However, this was not perceived as problematic – participants argued that learning is still required.
- There was widespread support across groups for the continued availability of past papers and mark schemes as these were valued learning and exam preparation resources.
- There was widespread support across groups for the involvement of universities in specification design and question writing.
- With the exception of one parent group, participants expressed a preference for modular rather than linear specifications. The participants discussed several perceived benefits of the modular structure.

Findings

Value of A-level

All groups were asked about the value of the A-level qualification. However, even with probing, the student participants were unable to perceive a value beyond the attainment of skills and knowledge particular to the subjects they had studied. Parents on the other hand valued the A-level qualification for promoting life skills (although they suggested not enough attention was paid to life skills), and skills that are generic across subjects and useful in other aspects of life, such as critical thinking and research and analysis skills. Parents strongly believed that A-levels foster independence and independent learning, and expressed the view that this might particularly be the case if they were completed at a different institution to GCSE.

'I think [A-level] is a good stepping stone particularly if they don't stay at school and do their A Levels, if they go to a college [...] they've got to be more independent.' (Parent, female)

Parents believed that A-levels were good preparation for university. However, parents believed that the emphasis on A-levels as the foundation of university study made them less relevant for entry to employment.

Value of AS

Parents tended to believe that AS had a unique and important function. This belief appeared to be underpinned by the following perceptions:

1. AS gives students a chance to reflect on their subject choices (made at a relatively early age) and make a more informed decision about which subject to drop prior to A2:

'My son's just picked his AS's and he would ..., he's picked four to drop one [...] so, on a positive side, he doesn't know what he wants to do. He's never known what he wants to do and he has no career pathway at all and AS has given him a choice.' (Parent, female)

2. AS exams serve a motivational purpose, either as a response to doing well or the student not achieving as expected:

'If the children do really well at their AS Level, it might give them that motivation to keep going, to do well the next year so it's good for them to see, actually "Yeah I am doing well at this and I will keep going to do even better."' (Parent, female)

3. AS is a valuable standalone qualification in case a student decides not to go on to A2:

'Committing a 16 year old to two years' study, not knowing if they're going to like it after 12 months, I think is a bit, you know, [...] They could give up halfway through and then not leave with anything [...] [If they want to] give up and go into work then they've at least got the AS-level and it is something that, you know, shows that they committed to going into beyond GCSE.' (Parent, male)

'You might as well do the AS-level and have something for it. [...] At least it's a, like you say, it's a qualification on its own, it stands on its own, doesn't it, if you don't go on to do the A-level.' (Parent, female)

Gap between GCSE and A-level

With the exception of parent group B¹, participants tended to believe that A-level was substantially more demanding and difficult than GCSE. Students and undergraduates reflected on the fact that the difference had not been fully anticipated (despite teachers' warnings). It was instead 'a massive shock' and had impacted on students' confidence when they received poorer grades during mocks or January exams than they had expected based on their GCSE performance:

'A-levels were a lot more essay-based which is like a big jump from GCSE [...] It was quite a big jump from GCSEs where it's just question and answer [...] I thought I was good at Maths and I like got to A-level and I got a 'U' because I just couldn't do it at all.' (Undergraduate, female)

In the light of this, some participants questioned the extent to which GCSEs had prepared them for A-level study. Some suggested that there might be merit in starting GCSEs earlier – perhaps in year 9 – and completing them in two years, creating time and space in year 11 to begin A-level induction/taster courses:

'Yeah, I think a good way to do it could be to do the GCSEs, say, a year early and then have another year when it could be maybe getting ready for sort of A-levels because they are easy, GCSEs, [...] I think that there's just not enough content in GCSE - it's not difficult at all, so I think they could do them early and [...] and then you'd [...] it wouldn't be such a big gap between school [GCSE] and college [A-level].' (A-level student, male)

Preparation for university

A-level students were generally confident that their A-levels were preparing them well for their future university studies in terms of, for example, the level of pressure and the requirement for independent learning.

¹ Parent group B did not comment on this theme to any great degree.

'I think it's good that [A-levels] give you like [...], you get pressure in A-level, whereas in GCSE you could kind of wing it in a way but you've got more pressure at A-level which is what you're going to have at degree level.' (A-level student, female)

'[A-levels are] a nice halfway board, I think, between what doing a degree would be like and what GCSEs are like. GCSEs just get spoon fed, it's like 'learn this and learn that', whereas A-level it's like 'this is the kind of stuff you've got to know' and they just kind of give you a bit more freedom.' (A-level student, male)

However, undergraduate participants who had recently gone through the transition from A-level to undergraduate study did not share this view. Indeed, the undergraduates offered examples of how, with hindsight, they felt they had been under-prepared. The most frequently cited example was essay writing skills, with undergraduate participants suggesting that they lacked the skills required to tackle large essays (i.e. greater than 1000 words). They suggested that essay writing at A-level is often formulaic and this did not prepare them for the independent approach required at university:

'[During A-level study] there should be some focus on structuring a proper essay because I think I got [to university] and handed in my first essay thinking it was the best work I'd ever done and it got the worse mark I've ever got.' (Undergraduate, female)

Predictability/transparency/availability of past papers and mark schemes

Participants across the groups tended to believe that question papers were usually fairly predictable, and especially so in the sciences:

'Some of [the question papers] are really predictable though, especially, I think, some of the Sciences. [They] can be very predictable.' (A-level student, male)

However, they also believed that:

1. Past papers and mark schemes are essential learning and revision resources. Students felt strongly that they needed to know the standard they were aiming for, and that they would be more likely to fail without access to these resources:

'I don't think I could have done it without [the past papers and mark schemes] really [...] I don't think it would be possible without past papers - I think everyone would fail.' [...] I don't think [past papers and mark schemes are] something they should get rid of really.' (A-level student, male)

2. Parents commented that past papers and mark schemes help them to help their children:

'Don't take them past papers [away] because they, as a parent, they help you, they help your child. [My son] was doing past papers all the time and I went on the ..., I got on [the AQA website] and got them all off there, you know, and I could follow it. [...] I could follow it [but] I needed that answer sheet and I needed that to be able to show him how to, you know, how to do it so, no, definitely [do not stop publishing past papers and mark schemes].' (Parent, female)

3. The debate about the availability of past papers and mark schemes is perhaps unimportant. Participants across all groups commented that students would still need to learn the content, regardless of the availability of past papers and mark schemes. A-level students commented that, in their experience, their top performing peers 'will learn everything anyway'. It was also mentioned that students follow the same specification so there should be no surprises with or without past papers:

'You have a syllabus to follow and, if that syllabus is followed, there should be no surprises for anybody. What will be different is the wording of the question but why deny the children the opportunity to go through past papers?' (Parent, female)

Students and parents also suggested that students would find a means of sharing exam resources (remembering questions and posting online) irrespective of whether such resources were available publicly:

'But you'd only have to Google it [to gain access to information on past papers]. So somebody who did the paper a year ago would write onto a site that this was the question and then it would ..., I mean children are very clever and we've got the World Wide Web. It only takes ten people to log what the question was last year so then they'd get them in another way.' (Parent, male)

4. Finally, students and parents believed it would be unfair on future student cohorts to disallow or restrict access to past papers and mark schemes, given that earlier cohorts have benefited from such access:

'All the other children who've gone before have had the past papers so my child will be the first child who comes along who hasn't had the past papers [if access is denied or restricted] ...' (Parent, male)

University input to content of question papers

There was widespread support across the groups for university input into curriculum and assessment design and question writing. Participants believed that such input would be beneficial in terms of students being clear about the depth and breadth of knowledge, skills, and attributes that were required to secure a place at their chosen university. They largely believed that universities would set relevant questions of appropriate demand, and would thus bridge the perceived gap between A-level and university:

'I do Psychology at uni and [the] stuff we learnt at A-level, now I've got to uni [it's] like 'just forget [what] you've learnt, this is what it really is' so, in that case, there's no point in A-levels if that's how it's going to be. So if the universities were involved in setting the questions for A-levels ... [that] would be better.' (Undergraduate, female)

'It would make A-levels harder wouldn't it? But it would make the jump [between A-level and undergraduate study] smaller. [...] It would bridge that gap.' (Undergraduate, female)

However, some parents expressed caution, believing that the involvement of highly selective universities could increase the difficulty of A-levels. Parents' chief concern was not the breadth or depth of content, or the degree of challenge, but simply the grade their child achieves at the end – they were cautious therefore of supporting any initiative that would increase the difficulty/demand of A-levels:

'I'd be happy for my children to take one that had been set by the new universities but if the red brick universities were setting it and setting it harder [...] would you have more sixth formers failing, under-achieving?' (Parent, female)

Parents also expressed some concern that the involvement of universities would further devalue A-levels as preparation for employment – instead, university input would strengthen the link between A-levels and undergraduate study which would not be wholly desirable:

'Having [one or more universities] setting [question papers] completely I think is possibly a bad idea because, like we said before, not every child doing A-level is going to go on to do university. Some will enter employment or do other things.' (Parent, male)

Reducing the number of re-sit opportunities

Among those who commented on this theme, the most frequent response was to consider reducing the number of re-sit opportunities as beneficial. Parents and students typically believed that it was poor practice to allow several attempts at improving grades; that the system was easily abused; and that it devalued 'genuine' attempts to secure high grades.

'I think it should be linear because, if you look at modular, it's breeding a culture of re-takes, and I think you should be allowed one re-take and one re-take only [...] I think the system was set up for the right reason but like most systems it's been abused [and it encourages] people to see that A-levels are easier because you can re-take [...]' (Undergraduate, male)

Modular/linear

There was considerable overlap between participants' perceptions of modular and linear designs and their perceptions of the value of AS. For example, if participants valued AS they were likely to also value modular specifications. There is therefore some repetition of the content of the 'Value of AS' theme.

There was support among participants for January exams. The noted benefits included:

- Practice opportunities (e.g. practice of skills, timings and coping with pressure).
- Helping students to make A2 subject choices
- Gaining exam experience
- Increasing familiarity with the required standards and expectations
- Indicating how much work/knowledge is required

January exams were also perceived to be motivating when students received poorer grades than expected:

'I've got a lot of friends that came out with like straight 'A's at GCSE, then they got their very first 'U' ...in January and I've never seen them work so hard in their life...' (A-level student, male)

The debate about modular or linear design produced an interesting distinction between the two parent groups. As a whole, group A favoured a linear design, reasoning that end of course exams would give their children a chance to mature and experience life, without the constant pressure of exams. As parents, they suggested they would like to be relieved themselves of the assessment burden on their children e.g. helping with revision, reminding about coursework or other deadlines.

'They've just gone through five years of modular exams, [so] it'd be like two years off. You know, [my son's] done exams since the age of 13 every month and I think he could do with a year off just to be a student [...] I mean I could do with a year off [...]' (Parent, female)

In contrast, group B was in favour of modular designs. They believed modular specifications gave their children multiple opportunities to pass their exams, mediated against the effects of having a bad day and involved less stress and anxiety than end of course exams.

'[There's] too much pressure [...] just to chance it on one exam [...] It could go so wrong in that time if there's no constant ..., not constant monitoring but, you know, no monitoring.' (Parent, Female)

Concluding comments

Ofqual published their intentions for the reform of A-level in June 2012. The consultation focused on: the involvement of universities in A-level content and design; limiting resit opportunities and abolishing January exams; and whether AS-levels should continue to be offered. The findings of this small-scale study suggest that whilst some of these proposals may find favour with students and parents (for example, there was support for the involvement of universities in specification design and question writing across the groups), others may not (parents for example valued the AS-level, and were keen that the reform process should not change or undermine the contribution of AS to the A-level qualification). Despite being a small sample of four focus groups, the findings provide an interesting insight into how the proposed changes are viewed by some of the key stakeholders.

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