# A-LEVEL REFORM AND HE ADMISSIONS

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# Haven't we been here before?

1998: Curriculum 2000 reforms: *modular A-levels, Advanced Subsidiary qualification (AS), resits.*

First HEI intake 2002

2006: 14-19 qualifications reform programme

*4 to 6 modules, specification changes, stretch and challenge, A**

First HEI intake 2010

2012: Re-design with greater HE involvement

First HEI intake 2016

# What is the purpose of A-levels?

- Government view:
- '... the single most important purpose of A-level qualifications is to prepare young people for further study at university ...'

- University view:
  - For progression to university
  - A mass general higher qualification/school leaving certificate

- Teachers:
  - multiple purposes – a higher level qualification, preparation for the next stage whatever that might be, development of skills and knowledge

# What do the government want?

- Government White Paper 2011pledged to ensure that A-levels developed to  better meet the needs of HE
- Letter to Ofqual March 2012:
  - HE to have far greater involvement in design and development
  - Emphasis on Russell Group involvement
  - Consider how awarding organisations should be required to evidence the appropriate level of university endorsement
- Government to step back – unconstrained development, **universities to drive the system**
- Implications that want to see demise of modularity and AS levels
- Implication that market forces will reduce number of A-levels

# Ofqual response

- Agreement on involvement of HE
- Strip back regulatory requirements and intervene only to make sure standards are right
- Looking to the sector to put in place arrangements for content development and 'signing up' process to determine acceptability of subjects
- Will 'take account' of HE views on assessment
- Start date of 2014 for teaching of new A-levels
- Publication of research on HE, teacher and employer views on A-level
- Consultation in summer (June?)

# The reality of using A-level for admissions

- Oversubscribed and selecting subjects increasingly use A* to differentiate
- EPQ seen as good basis for skills development but lack of universal availability means unlikely to be required
- Unlikely that selectors take account of differences between specifications
- Some preference for particular subjects amongst selecting universities ('facilitating subjects')
- Very wide range accepted as third subject
- Many courses happy to accept any subjects – no prerequisites
- First year programmes take account of very broad range of qualifications so will always be a need for levelling out knowledge and skills of incoming students

# What HE said it wanted from A-levels

- Students with better ‘generic’ skills and no need of ‘remedial’ support
- Students with more experience of in-depth, extended study
- Less ‘atomised’ and more synoptic assessment
- More help with differentiation
- Qualifications and curriculum designed with their needs in mind ie better articulation between HE and pre-HE curricula

DCSF 2006

# What do HE colleagues think of A-levels now?

- Generally, those associated with higher education and teachers agreed that the A level qualification prepares most students for higher education undergraduate degrees.

- most higher education sector interviewees were generally content with the knowledge content of A levels across subjects.

- the Extended Project Qualification (EPQ) is recognised by teachers and some within the higher education sector as a useful differentiator of talent, especially in relation to the study skills outlined as deficits

IPSOS MORI April 2012

# What do HE colleagues think of A-levels?

- The topics taught within a subject at A level do not always coincide with the knowledge requirements of higher education

- Some issues were identified around the lack of specific academic skills: researching, finding sources, essay-writing and referencing, problem solving, analysis and critical thinking.

- some students lack the requisite levels of academic English and Mathematics.

- Would like to see more 'synopticity'

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# What do HE colleagues think of A-levels?

- Concern about resits , would like to see them restricted but not removed comlpletely
- Grade inflation makes it difficult to differentiate between applicants at the top end
- However, some understanding of why grades have increased within the current system
- No higher education sector interviewee suggested that academic level study skills should be fully developed by the time a student completed A levels.

IPSOS MORI April 2012

# Involving HE in A-level reform

- Generally agreed that ‘is a good thing’
- Awarding Organisations have a history of involving HE
- But levels of engagement fairly low because of
  - Long lead times
  - Lack of consensus between different types of institutions on subject content
  - Not seen as essential in a time of other great changes
- What does ‘endorsement’ mean?
  - Could it mean developing a bureaucratic structure around kitemarked qualifications
  - how is ‘the sector’ expected to lead? Who? What?
  - what would the unintended consequences be?

# Implications for admissions

- In the short term fairly little – AS likely to stay
- University policies around resits might need to change
- Information provided by Awarding Bodies might change
- Pattern of results might change allowing greater differentiation (fewer grade A* and A??)

# Many questions…

- What is the appetite of HE to take the lead on development of A-levels?
- Does HE have the requisite technical skill to develop valid A-levels?
- What infrastructure would be required and who would fund?
- What would be the consequences for the future of A-level subjects or awarding bodies of 'kitemarking' particular specifications?

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