

Curriculum 2000

Dariel Burdass

Recent changes to the structure and content of UK post-16 qualifications will affect the knowledge and skills that students will have when they enter university or employment. Dariel Burdass describes the new system.

Changes to post-16 qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland came into effect in September 2000. The new and revised post-16 qualifications are located within the new National Qualifications Framework, which has been developed by the regulatory authorities: the Quality and Curriculum Authority; Qualifications, Curriculum and Assessment Authority for Wales; and Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (see Table 1).

The aim of the changes to the post-16 qualifications is to:

- Ensure that all qualifications are valued and are equally worthwhile
- Encourage a broader programme of study without sacrificing depth
- Raise and widen levels of student participation, retention and achievement
- Provide a greater opportunity to mix general and vocational qualifications and to transfer from one programme to another

The three broad categories of qualifications are:

General (previously termed academic), e.g. Advanced GCE [A level (A2)] and the new Advanced Subsidiary GCE (AS).

Vocation-related, e.g. Vocational A level (formerly Advanced GNVQ) and Vocationally Advanced Subsidiary

Occupational, e.g. National Vocational Qualification (NVQ)

● Advanced Subsidiary GCE and Advanced GCE

Most Advanced GCEs will have six units (previously called modules).

The Advanced Subsidiary (AS) GCE will have three units and will be a qualification in its own right as well as being the first half of Advanced GCE. It has been designed to bridge some of the gaps between GCSE and Advanced level studies and also to provide extra breadth

in the curriculum. The second half of the Advanced GCE, known as A2, will also have three units but will not represent a qualification as such, but form the second half of study for Advanced GCE. It is thought that students may take four to five AS qualifications in their first year of sixth form study and reduce this to three A2s in their second year.

Most applicants to higher education are likely to have AS grades on their UCAS form, although as it is not obligatory to take the AS assessment at the end of the AS course some students may not have their grades at that stage.

● Vocational Advanced Subsidiary and Vocational A level

The Vocational A level will come in two sizes. The Vocational A level will have 6 units and the Vocational A level Double Award will have 12 units. It is expected that the 6-unit qualification will be the most commonly offered of the new Vocational A levels and that it will form part of a mixed programme, e.g. combining qualifications from both the general and vocationally related categories of the framework.

The Vocational Advanced Subsidiary will be a 3-unit qualification that will be available in a limited number of subject areas.

● Key skills

A new Key Skills Qualification is also available and is based on the first three skills listed below:

- Application of number
- Communications
- Information technology
- Improving own learning and performance
- Problem solving
- Working with others

Further information about post-16 qualifications can be found in the publication *Changes to Post 16 Qualifications – A briefing for higher education on changes to the post 16 curriculum in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* available from UCAS (www.ucas.com).

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Table 1. New and revised post-16 qualifications

Level of attainment	General qualifications	Vocation-related qualifications	Occupational qualifications
Higher level/5			e.g. NVQ level 5
Higher level/4			e.g. NVQ level 4
Advanced level/3 (entry into higher education)	e.g. Advanced Subsidiary (AS) and Advanced GCE (A2)	e.g. Vocational Advanced Subsidiary Vocational A level	e.g. NVQ level 3
Intermediate level/2	e.g. GCSE grades A*–C	e.g. Intermediate GNVQ	e.g. NVQ level 2
Foundation level/1	e.g. GCSE grades D–G	e.g. Foundation GNVQ	e.g. NVQ level 1

Entry level qualifications can provide a basis for progression to qualifications across the framework at foundation level.

The impact of Curriculum 2000

● A meeting took place on 10 April at the Biochemical Society Bristol Meeting that brought together representatives from QCA, exam boards, universities and schools to look at the impact the new AS/A levels will have on post-16 education in schools and universities.

Roger Barnes from St Edmunds School, Canterbury summed up the views of many teachers when he reported that schools and students were being overloaded both in terms of class sizes and curriculum content. Class sizes have risen by between 33 and 67% due to pupils taking extra AS level courses. This is a particular problem with popular subjects such as biology. Larger class sizes have had a direct effect on teaching methods, with hands on practicals being replaced by CD-ROMs and lessons becoming more teacher-focused, leaving little time for debate.

Concerns have also been expressed over the content of the new specifications. The depth of knowledge required by each pupil has not been reduced. So whilst teachers and students welcome the opportunity to study more than three subjects at AS level and increase their breadth of knowledge, the increase in workload has left them little time to develop their independent study skills. There has also been a reduction in the amount of time that students are able to spend on extracurricular activities such as music. This will obviously have a knock-on effect on the skills and experiences that students will take with them to higher education.

Teachers are reporting that retention is not good and many students are dropping back to three AS levels from the four or even five they originally started to study.

Roger Barnes concluded his talk by calling on universities to give clear and unambiguous advice about entry requirements for 2002.

Will the universities still be asking for three A levels? This question was answered in part by an article in the *Times Educational Higher* on 13 April 2001, 'Admissions tutors blamed as AS levels falter', which reported the finding of a study conducted by London University's Institute of Education which indicated that many universities are barely interested in the new AS level qualifications and even less so in the key skills.

If universities continue to ask for three A levels and students continue to feel under pressure from increased workloads then fewer will choose to opt for the fourth AS level. It appears that the new system is faltering already because the potential consequences were not considered before it was brought in.

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