Executive Summary

Joint research between OCR and NUS demonstrates that students are deeply concerned with the Government’s reforms to AS and A level qualifications. We interviewed 1765 Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE) students online between January and March 2014.¹

The ‘decoupling’ of the AS level

Respondents emphasised students’ fears over the ‘decoupling’ of the AS level. Currently the AS level comprises 50 per cent of a students’ final grade. However under the Government’s reforms the qualification will be completely freestanding.

As such the primary objectives of the reformed AS level will be to provide evidence of students’ achievements at a level below that of the full A level and mean students can study a broader range of subjects if they wish.

The survey responses showed that slightly more than three quarters (77 per cent) of students would only find the standalone AS level useful as tariff points for UCAS. Similarly almost three quarters (73 per cent) said they would only pick a standalone AS level if Universities included them in offers and 61 per cent said that without AS results as an indicator of progress it would be more difficult to apply to University.

POLAR analysis of the responses revealed that half of those from areas with high participation in higher education (HE) would take an AS level out of enjoyment or interest.² Yet, only 1 in 5 from areas with low participation would take an AS level for this purpose.

The reform of the A level qualification

From September 2015 ‘new’ A levels will be taught as linear qualifications, with assessment taking place at the end of the course only. This means exams will be taken at the end of two years of study.

¹ A full note on the methodology is included below.
² The POLAR classification shows how the chances of young people entering HE vary by where they live. The classification comprises five quintile groups of areas ordered from ‘1’ (those wards with the lowest participation) to ‘5’ (those wards with the highest participation).
Just eight per cent of respondents said that the reforms would make A levels more attractive to students.

Compared to the current system six in ten said that the reformed A levels would not be better preparation for University and almost seven in ten (68 per cent) said they would be no better preparation for a job.³

Over three quarters (76 per cent) of survey respondents were opposed to A levels consisting of exams only at the end of a two year course. Sixty-nine per cent said that the main disadvantage of assessment in this form is that there will be no feedback on how well they are doing until their course is completed. Likewise 71 per cent answered that the new A levels would be too stressful, with too much to remember at the end of two years of study.

There was also considerable opposition to the reduction in the opportunity to re-sit, as January exams are removed under the new format. Eighty-nine per cent said that this will unfairly penalise students who have faced significant upheaval in their education and need a second chance.

Respondents reacted strongly to changes to the type and weighting of assessment in A level qualifications. For English and Computer Science, the amount of coursework has been reduced from 40 to 20 per cent. The assessment of practical work in Science will not contribute to the final A Level but will be reported separately in a certificate of endorsement.

Fifty-one percent of students stated that the biggest influence on subject choice was ensuring they were able to progress to University or career of choice. There was also a perception that new A levels will be harder and that students may choose to move away from STEM subjects.

Our results suggest that men are more likely to be comfortable with the changes than women, with women more likely to say they would not take the new A levels if there were fewer opportunities to complete coursework (36 per cent compared to 27 per cent for men). In contrast, male respondents were twice as likely to say they would prefer to do A levels with more exams (16 per cent of men compared to 8 per cent of women).

Disabled students are also less comfortable with the changes, almost half (48 per cent) said they would not take the new A levels if they consisted of fewer opportunities to complete coursework (compared to 31 per cent overall).

³ In 2012 OCR conducted research with HE institutions on the structure and subject content of the ‘new’ A levels. This was undertaken to ensure that the new qualifications are good preparation for University.
The limit on choice and second chances

Respondents raised concerns over the potential for limitations to be placed on their subject choices by the reforms. They also communicated worries over the removal of second chances as students lose the opportunity to ‘drop’ an AS level and review their progress after one year of study.

Just fewer than seven in ten respondents (68 per cent) agreed or strongly agreed that: ‘The age of 16 is too early for young people to be making subject choices which could define their future career path’.

In addition 42 per cent said that they did not receive enough Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) about career choices and choice of study before they made their A level subject choices. As a result 41 per cent of respondents changed their mind about which subjects to drop at AS level.

There was also a significant difference between those from areas of high levels of HE participation and low areas, in terms of the quality of IAG they received. Just one quarter of those from POLAR 1 said they received enough advice before they chose their A levels, compared to 44 per cent in POLAR 5.

This trend in access to resources is mirrored in the disparity between those students who said they had read independently, away from their school or college and those that hadn’t. In the areas of highest HE participation 60 per cent said they had read independently, in contrast to 31 per cent in the group of lowest participation.

Conclusion

This joint research indicates that students are keen to make rational, informed decisions about their subject choices and career paths, and have concerns that changes to qualifications may make this this more challenging.

Students expressed anxiety about the decoupling of the AS level, changes to types of assessment and the potential for second chances to be significantly limited. The research also emphasises the potential for a disproportionate impact on students from disadvantaged backgrounds, as well as women and disabled students.
About the research and respondents

This report presents the research findings of a survey carried out in England from January to March 2014. The survey included quantitative and qualitative questioning.

The survey was open to any student who had taken, or is taking, Level 3 qualifications in England. This encompassed those who had taken or are taking AS and A levels, vocational qualifications or a combination of both.

The survey was distributed via NUS’ Extra card database, as well on NUS Jiscmails and on social media. A Kindle e-reader was offered to incentivise survey completion, with five £10 Amazon vouchers as runner up prizes.

The research gathered the experiences of 1765 students.

Demographics

Thirty-four percent of respondents were studying at a State Funded Sixth Form College, 31 per cent at University, 27 per cent at an FE College, 3 per cent at State Funded Schools, 2 per cent at Adult Education Providers, 2 per cent at Independent Schools/Sixth Forms and 2 per cent Academies.

Thirty-one percent of respondents were in their first year of Level 3 study, 22 per cent in their second year at this level, 16 per cent were first year Undergraduates, 12 per cent second or third year Undergraduates, 12 per cent in other education or training, 6 per cent had completed education and 1 per cent on their gap year.

Sixty-nine percent of respondents were female and 30 per cent male. A small minority (0.8 per cent) preferred not to select their gender identity and 0.8 per cent preferred not to say.

In terms of age 52 per cent were 16-18, 25 per cent 24 or over, 23 per cent 19-23 and 0.06 per cent under 16.

Ninety per cent of respondents did not identify themselves as having a specific learning disability, other disability, impairment or long-term health condition. Fourteen per cent said they did and 2 per cent preferred not to say.

Eighty-four per cent of respondents were White, 8 per cent Asian or Asian British, 3 per cent Black or Black British, 2 per cent Mixed, 0.26 per cent Arab, 2 per cent preferred not to say and 0.26 per cent from another ethnic group.
Eighty-seven per cent of those who responded to the survey reported their sexuality as heterosexual/straight, 4 per cent as bisexual, 3 per cent as gay/lesbian, 4 per cent preferred not to say and 2 per cent in another way.