



UK Curriculum Reforms to GCSEs and A Levels

UCL recognises that the reforms to the UK curriculum will present many challenges both for schools and universities in the coming years. We are awaiting further clarification from the government around the new curriculum and examinations before making formal decisions on our entrance requirements and policy. However, we are aware that schools are looking for guidance from universities in how they will consider applicants, so that this can be taken into consideration for the provision and delivery of the new qualifications.

For universities one of the key challenges that we will face is the mixture of qualifications that an applicant may present. Not only will the constituent countries of the UK be providing different styles of qualifications, such as the GCSE, but as subjects are phased in we will see applicants who offer a mixture of both old and new style GCSE and A levels. As always, we will look at each applicant on an individual basis, but the reference will be key in explaining the teaching within the school to the admissions selector.

Over the past year we have spoken to many school representatives so have some understanding of the pressures that are faced, both in terms of funding and the delivery of the new qualifications. A number of our academic staff are also on subject boards for the examining bodies which has given us forewarning of potential issues. Below is an outline of the areas that we believe will be affected and our current thoughts.

GCSEs

From 2015 the government will introduce the new –style GCSEs with examinations taken at the end of the second year of study and a new numerical grading structure. At present we understand that the subjects that will be offered are English Language, English Literature, Maths, Science, History, Geography and Modern Languages. As the first students offering these qualifications will be applying to university for 2019 entry we expect to be considering them in tandem with GCSE subjects taught in the current format. Whilst the new GCSE will be marked on a scale of 1 to 9 with 9 as the highest grade, it is unlikely that UCL will ask for grade 9. It is anticipated that we will consider an A* and 8, A and 7, B and 6, and C and 5 on an equal basis.

A levels

One of our greatest concerns is the effect that funding reductions for post-16 education may have on the range of subjects available to students in schools. In conversations with schools we understand that the reduction of funding will mean that many schools will not be able to provide students with teaching for a 4th AS subject, and in some cases there will be a reduction in the variety of subjects that are offered, with less popular arts subjects being unviable. For a large multi-faculty institution such as UCL this is of particular concern as it will reduce the number of students who will be eligible, or able to consider certain degree programmes. UCL has a policy of the number of particular A level subjects that it accepts which can be found at the following link: <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/prospective-students/undergraduate/apply/entry-requirements/alevels>. This policy will be maintained when A levels have been reformed. We would strongly recommend that all schools be aware of the Russell Group publication on 'Informed Choices' which outlines the subjects that are considered to be 'facilitating' and allowing to keep their options open for later university study. The publication can be found at the following link: <http://www.russellgroup.org/InformedChoices-latest.pdf>.

As more is known about the A level reforms and schools plan their teaching delivery for 2017, we would be keen to hear of the impact this has had on subject provision. This will allow us to take these factors into consideration when determining any amendments to our entrance requirements and policies. At present we do not envisage any changes to our grade or subject requirements, but this will be kept under review. However, we will need to make some amendments in our science subjects where the practical element of the assessment will be separated out from the final grade.

The 4th AS

At present all applicants taking A levels are required to offer 3 A levels and a pass in a 4th subject at AS level. The requirement for the 4th AS was introduced with Curriculum 2000 and modular A levels, when 4 subjects were routinely offered in year 12. Now that there has been a reduction in funding and a return to linear A levels it is likely that UCL will no longer require a 4th AS. We would not wish to maintain a requirement that would discriminate against applicants from schools that are not able to offer four subjects.

At present UCL accepts the Extended Project Qualification in lieu of a 4th AS. Whilst the removal of the requirement for the 4th AS will mean that the EPQ can no longer be offered as a qualification that counts towards our entrance requirements we continue to recognise its value as preparation for independent study, which is key to university-level study.

Predictions and AS modules

For the 2017 admissions cycle we understand that it will be difficult for teachers to predict final grades. In the past AS modules have been useful as an indication of a student's level of achievement and likelihood to achieve their prediction. For a handful of our degree programmes AS modules have been looked at in more detail, such as for Medicine, but as the information will no longer be available we will be more reliant on the past academic history, references and predictions. It will also be helpful for referees to comment on an applicant's level of achievement in the end of year 12 examinations we expect most schools will hold.

Overall advice on applications

As the reforms are still evolving and we are every conscious that schools and students have to decide on A level options prior to the publication of our 2017 prospectus, we will endeavor to provide as much information on our policy in advance as possible. In the first year we will also pay particularly close attention to the reference as an explanation of the path the individual has followed. Examining boards are working with UCAS to ensure that the different styles of GCSE and A levels are available to select on the application form, and we would encourage schools to work with applicants to choose the correct options and help us in our assessment. We would also ask that referees provide a clear explanation of any restrictions or difficulties they have faced in terms of funding and subject availability, along with an explanation of the styles of GCSE/A levels that have been taken. Where possible we would also ask referees to provide a picture of the applicant's progress through both GCSE and A level study, to give us an added context to A level predictions.

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