

Unpacking qualification reform

UCAS A level survey – January 2016 update



Unpacking qualification reform

UCAS A level survey – background

In November 2014, UCAS surveyed schools and colleges in England about their response to A level reform. We published the findings of the survey in our report '[Unpacking qualification reform](#)' in January last year.

Key findings were as follows:

- 52% would offer the AS in all reformed subjects.
- 14% would offer the AS in some reformed A level subjects.
- 16% would not be offering the AS in reformed subjects. These were more likely to be independent schools.
- 18% had not decided on their future provision, less than a year before reformed qualifications were due to be taught.

In light of the ever-evolving landscape, UCAS has now re-run the survey to gain an updated insight on the future provision of the AS.



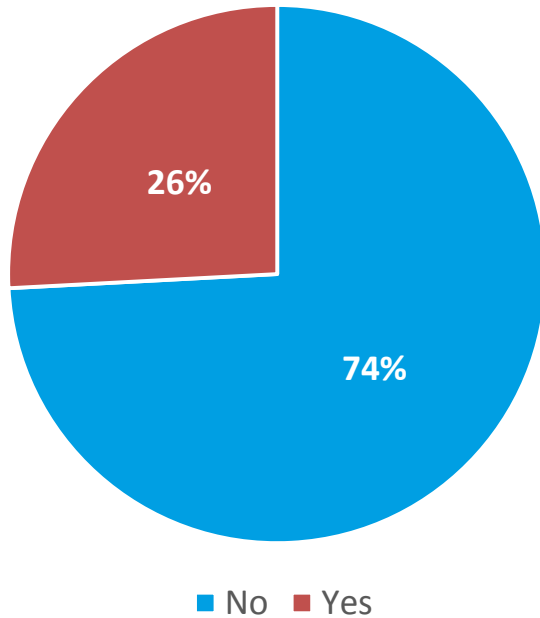
Respondent profile

The 2015 survey received a total of 305 analysable responses. However, the level of response to each question varied. Below is a breakdown based on school type:

School type	Respondents	Percentage of respondents	Comparison with 2014 survey
Academy	121	40%	39%
Grammar	12	4%	7%
Independent	93	31%	28%
State	67	22%	21%
Other	10	3%	4%
Grand Total	303		



Has the range of qualifications you offer changed as a result of qualification reform?



26% of respondents indicated that the range of qualifications they offer has changed as a result of qualification reform. This was more likely to be the case for state schools (32%) than for academies (27%) and independent schools (22%).

We are fighting to keep our curricular breadth. We will almost certainly drop our standard offer to three A levels (currently students start on four) and we will abandon the AS.

Has the range of qualifications you offer changed as a result of qualification reform?

We offer more Level 3 vocational courses now instead of A levels

We have dropped PE A level

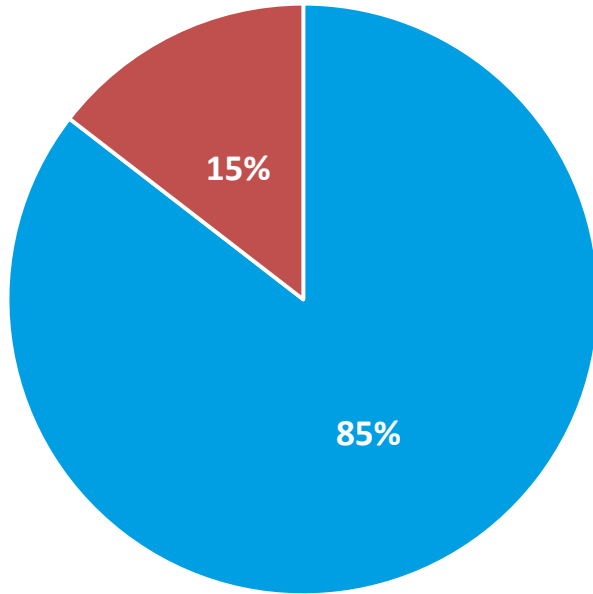
We have introduced Sport BTEC but also will need to change some of our A levels to BTECs if they are not being reformed e.g. Health & Social Care

We have had to reduce the number of subjects if there is a low take up as we have to reach an increasing break even point due to the reduction in funding

Fewer A levels will be offered

No longer able to offer Applied A levels, will be offering BTEC from Sept 2016

As a result of qualification reform, have you sought collaborative arrangements with other schools and colleges?



■ No ■ Yes

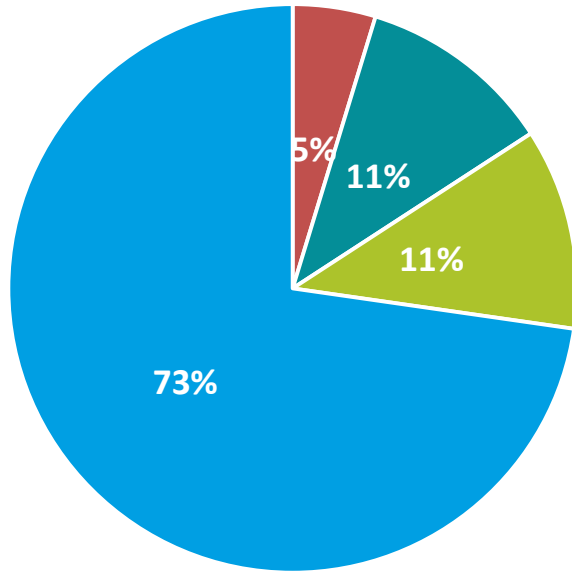
Multiple agendas have led to this. Financial as well as in response to A level reform.

We work in partnership with other academy sixth form schools and colleges to ensure we can provide access to A levels we are unable to deliver at our own school.

Schools are fighting for increased numbers so collaboration has fallen due to decreased funding per head and the battle for students.

As a result of A level reform, has the amount of teaching time available in your school or college changed?

One of the rationales behind A level reform in England was that it would lead to an increase in teaching time. However, feedback from respondents indicates this may not be the case. Note that this may be linked to the high level of AS provision in 2015.



■ Decreased

■ Increased

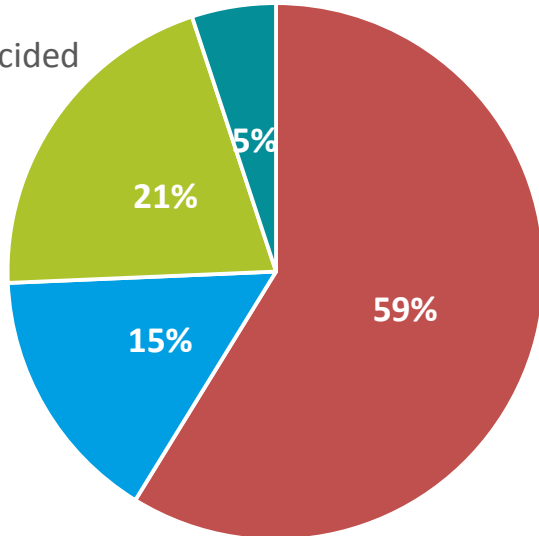
■ Not yet clear

■ Remained the same

Maximising teaching time and having the ability to re-design our Sixth Form offer means we will no longer offer AS exams at the end of Year 12.

For 2015 first teaching, are you:

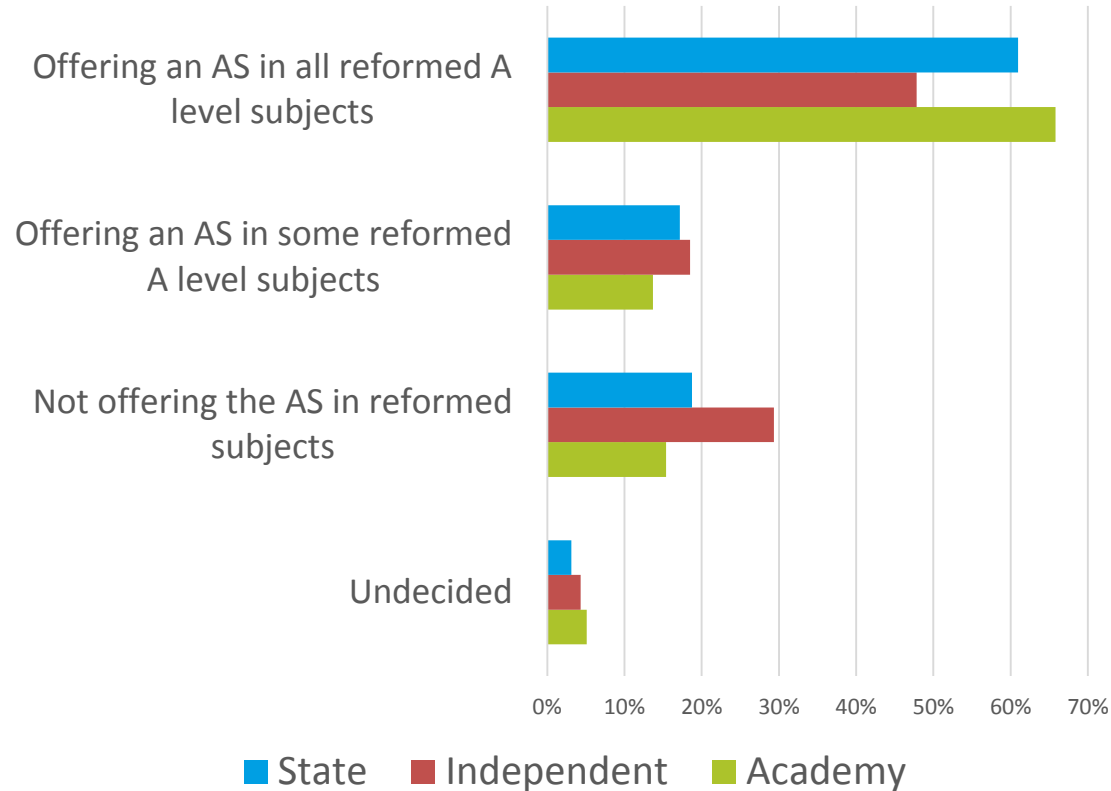
- Offering an AS in all reformed A level subjects
- Offering an AS in some reformed A level subjects
- Not offering the AS in reformed subjects
- Undecided



The findings of the November survey indicate the AS may be more prevalent in 2015 than initially thought. 74% of respondents indicated they would offer the AS in some form. However, the percentage of respondents not offering the AS qualification has also increased to 21% of respondents.

We are 'holding the line' at present in an attempt to make the best informed judgment going forward. However, the direction of travel, given budget constraints, is reluctantly towards 'dropping' the AS altogether.

For 2015 first teaching, are you:

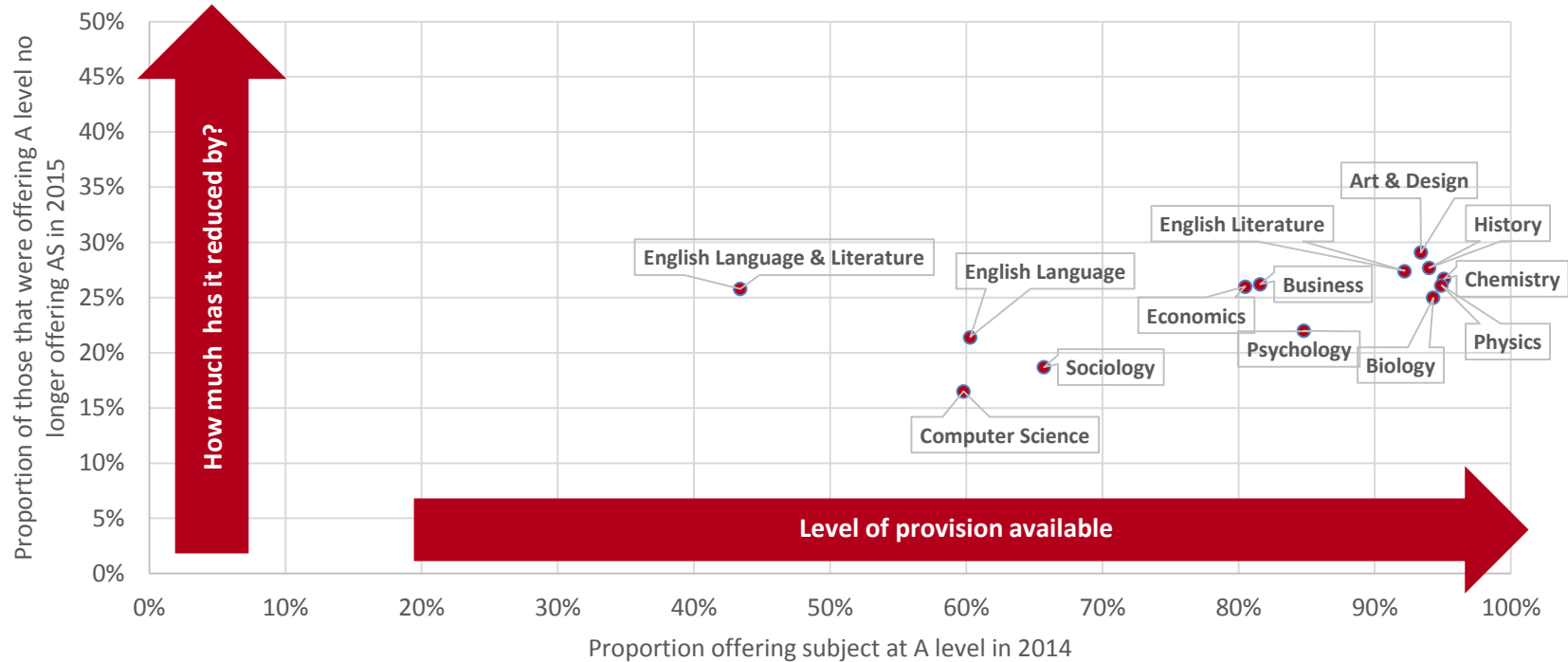


Independent schools are more likely to move towards a fully linear structure, with just under 1/3 of independent schools not offering the AS. This reaffirms the findings of the previous survey.

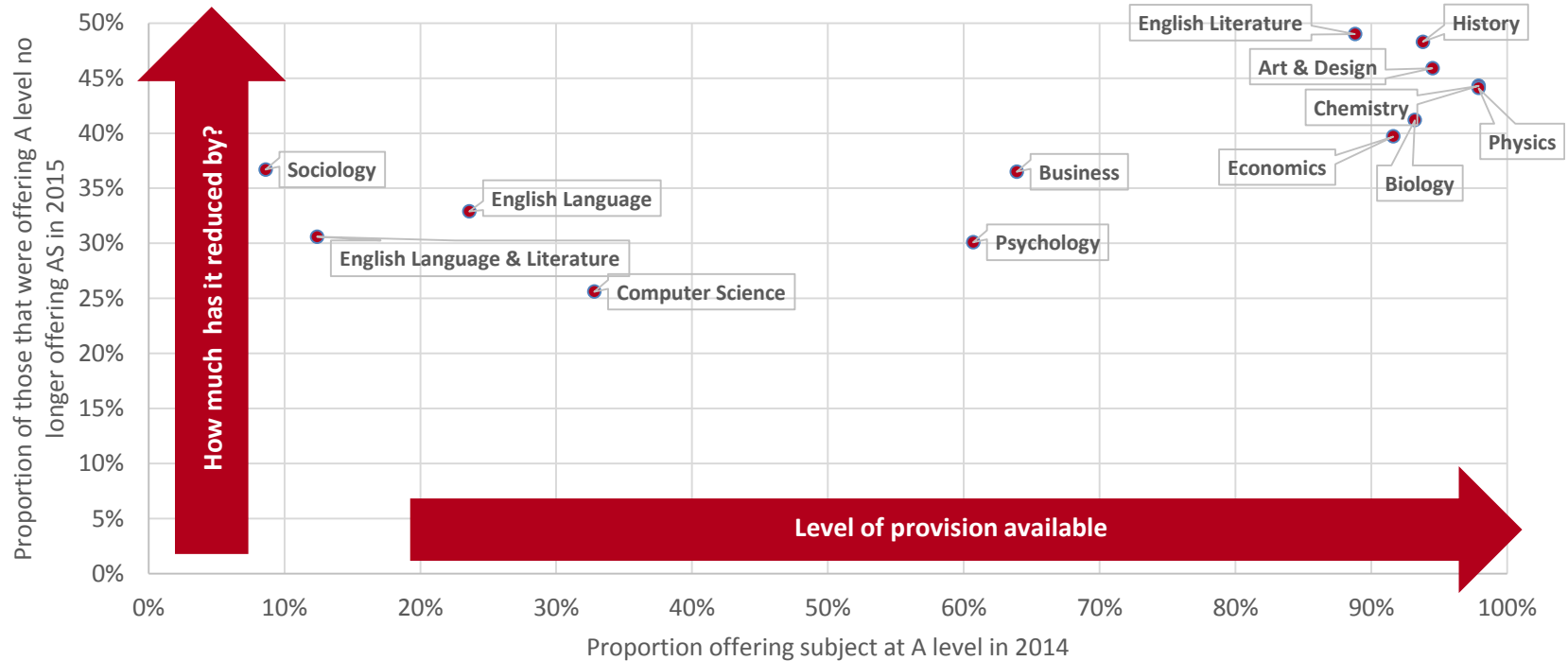
Which of the following subjects have you been offering as an AS since September 2015?

- In our survey, we asked whether a school or college would continue to offer a specific subject at AS now that the subject has been reformed.
- The next graphs indicate the level of change per reformed subject for the centres that responded to the survey. Schools that responded to the survey are less likely to be offering the AS in art and design, history, chemistry, physics, biology, and English literature.
- English language and literature, computer science, sociology, and English language appear to be impacted less.
- There are significant differences across centre types. Independent schools are less likely to offer the AS in high volume subjects. State schools saw a similar level of reduction across all subjects.

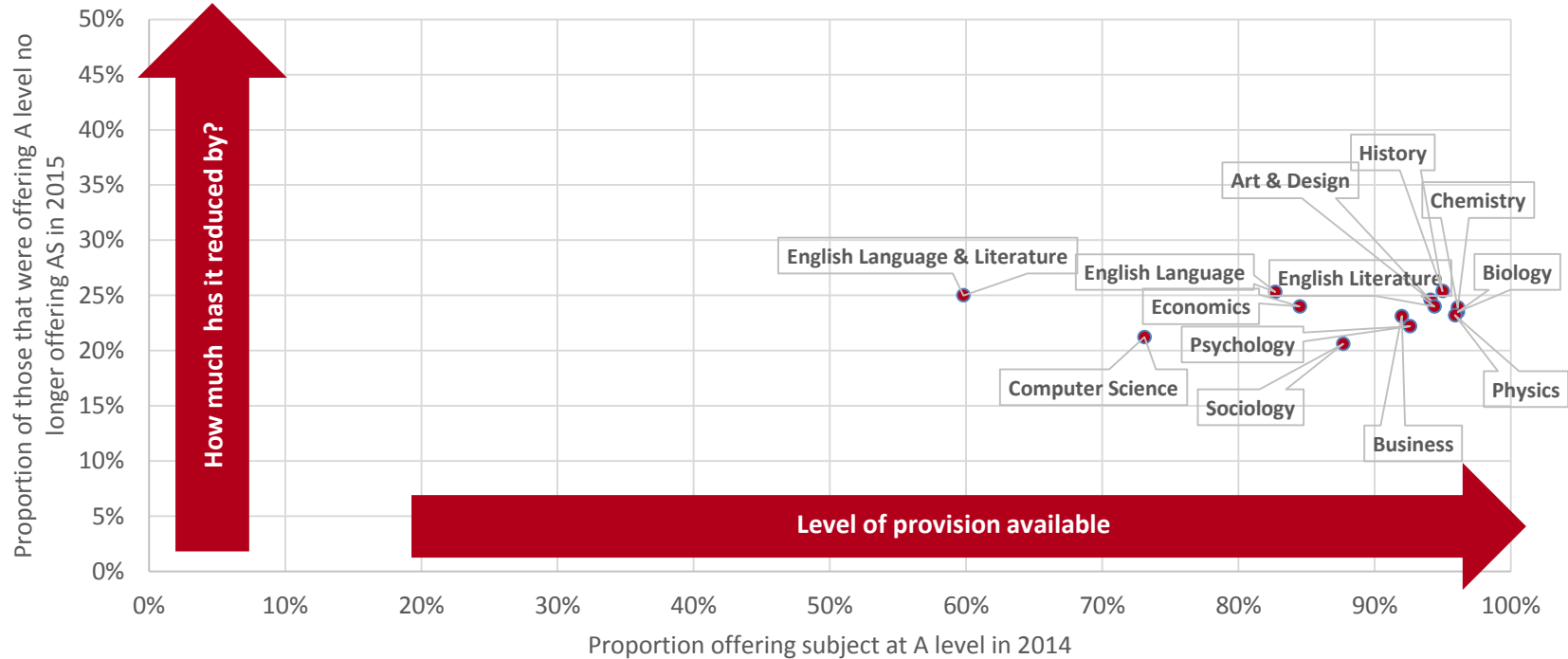
Which of the following subjects have you been offering as an AS since September 2015? (All schools)



Which of the following subjects have you been offering as an AS since September 2015? (Independent)



Which of the following subjects have you been offering as an AS since September 2015? (State)



What were the key drivers in your decisions?

In the survey, we asked respondents to rank the factors that influenced their decision in relation to AS provision (see next graph). 'Other' appears to be the key driver in making decisions relating to the AS. Further analysis shows that the rationale behind school decision-making is varied. Common themes include:

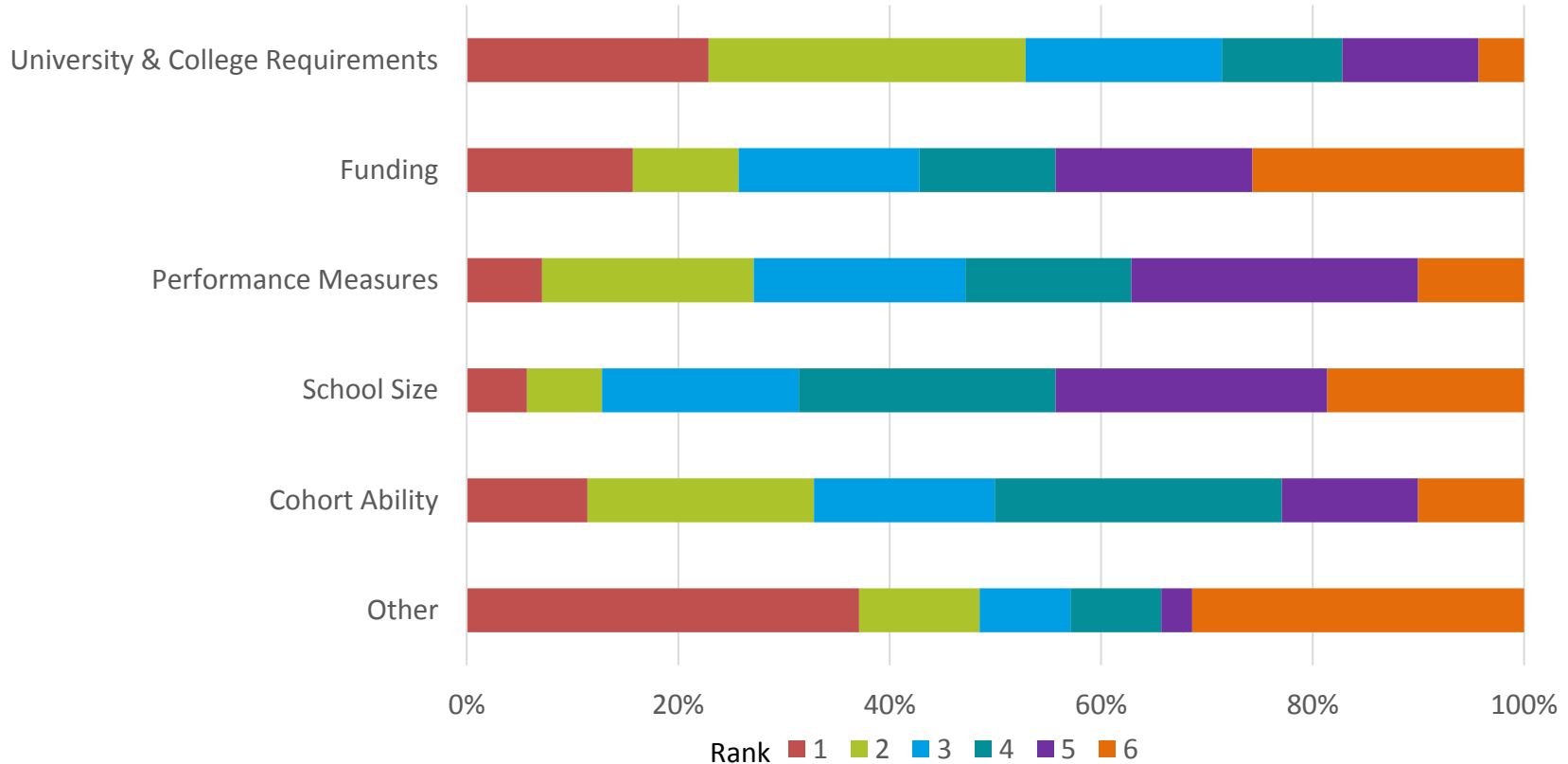
Continuing to offer the AS in 2015

- The AS offers a useful measure of progress
- Allows for early exit with an external qualification
- Timetabling challenges
- Maintain breadth of study
- Support for predicted grades

No longer offering the AS in 2015

- Staffing challenges
- Maximising teaching time
- The decisions of other schools
- Increased focused on A level assessment
- Pedagogical preference
- Perceived lack of value of AS results
- Challenges with co-teachability

What were the key drivers in your decisions? (Ranked)



What were the key drivers in your decisions?

Useful progress measure and allows students to drop one of their four subjects and still gain a qualification.

Lack of co-teachability in certain subjects such as drama and English language.

Helps with predicted grades.

Need for students to experience advanced level assessment.

15% of our year 12 students leave after one year – we want them to leave with a recognisable qualification.

Freeing time from exam preparation to implement enrichment programme.

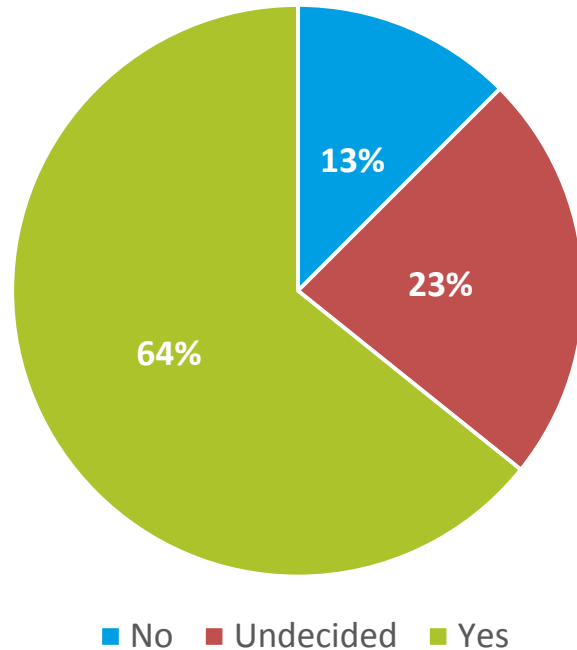
We did not want a mixed economy when it came to exam leave.

What were the key drivers in your decisions?

Following 'other', university and college requirements is the second most common key driver. The findings of this survey indicate there is still a strong demand for clarity from the HE sector on how they will accommodate qualification reform.

A clear indication as to how universities intend to make offers for students following the reformed qualifications: what evidence will they use to make an offer – GCSE performance or would AS performance be preferred? Would internal AS examination provide suitable evidence?

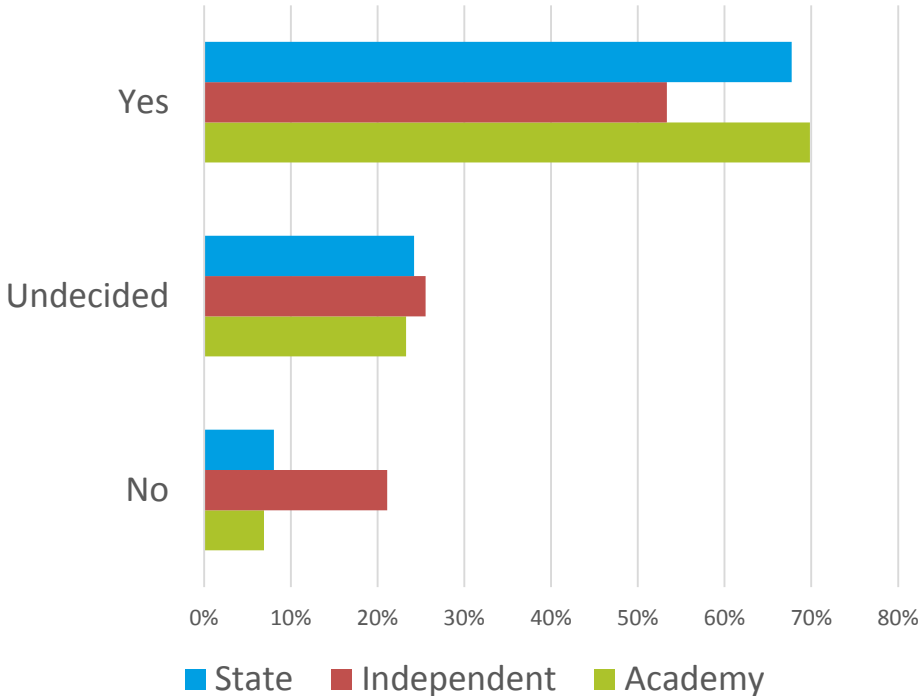
Do you intend to revisit this decision regarding AS provision once all A levels are reformed?



In 2017, all A levels in subjects in England will be reformed. Our January survey indicated a number of schools would offer AS qualifications until this point to make timetabling easier. The breakdown for responses for this question is exactly the same as it was in our previous survey, suggesting more significant change in the provision offered by schools may occur from the 2017/18 academic year, once all A levels in England are reformed.

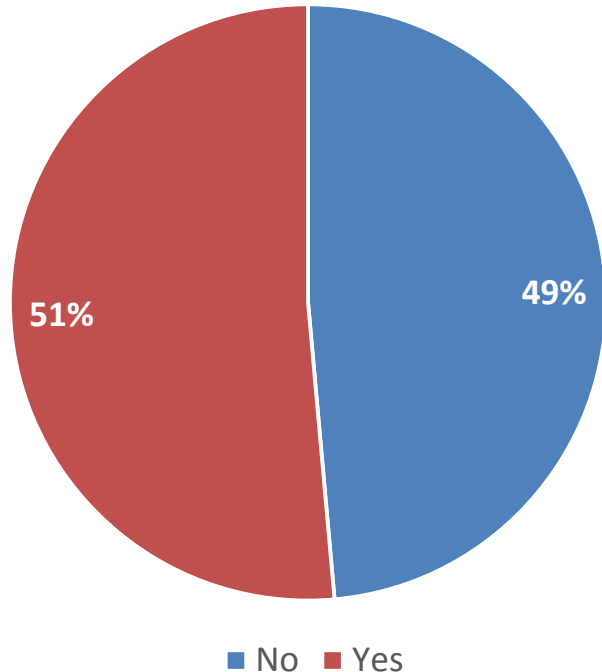
[The phased introduction of reformed A levels] makes it extremely hard to timetable since we have to arrange internal exams alongside external exams so we have some idea what predictions to make on the UCAS application.

Do you intend to revisit this decision regarding AS provision once all A levels are reformed?



As with the 2014 survey, state schools and academies seem more likely to intend to revisit their decision regarding AS provision in 2017.

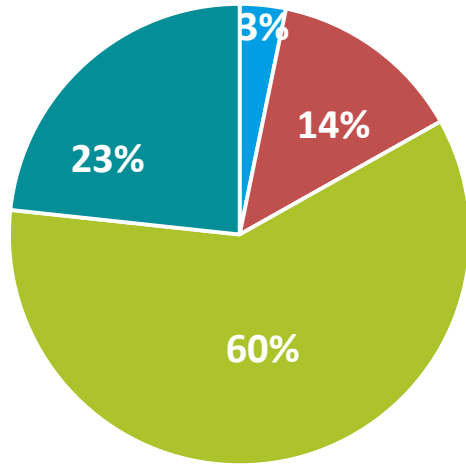
Do you feel you had a sufficient amount of information regarding qualification reform?



A large percentage of respondents to the survey did not feel they had sufficient information about reformed qualifications when making decisions regarding provision. This may lead to challenges for schools and colleges, and HEPs should be mindful of this when reviewing admissions policies.

It would be helpful if examination boards could provide approved specifications at least 12 months before the examinations are started. Insufficient information about course content and structure is provided and it is difficult for colleagues to plan when the information is being drip fed as the course progresses. It would be good for the examination boards to produce standards banks showing the expectations at each grade boundary before a course starts and then adhere to them.

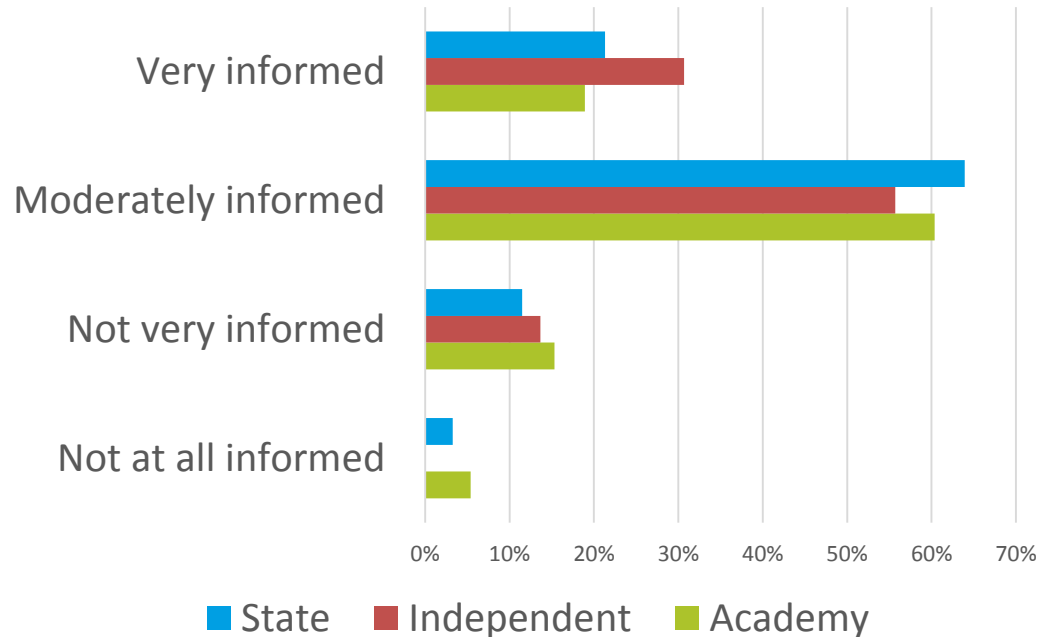
How informed did you feel when making decisions regarding reformed qualifications?



- Not at all informed
- Not very informed
- Moderately informed
- Very informed

The survey indicates that schools and colleges felt moderately informed when making curriculum decisions. However, the findings of this question along with the previous one suggest the amount of information made available was insufficient. For example, the lack of information regarding co-teachability was referenced by a number of respondents.

How informed did you feel when making decisions regarding reformed qualifications?



The survey indicates that independent schools felt more able to make more informed choices about qualification provision. 31% of independent schools that responded to the survey felt very informed when making decisions regarding reformed qualifications.

What information would schools like from HEPs?



How will they view AS grades in 2016, when there will be a combination of 'old style' and 'new style' AS and A levels?

Are universities going to make offers based on or including AS levels?

Guidance regarding predictions for linear courses and whether universities will give heavier emphasis to GCSE results.

Early and clear guidance of grade requirements. If admissions tests are introduced, how will they ensure state students are not disadvantaged?

Will AS levels count for anything? Will performance at AS level be taken into consideration if a student struggles to get their target grade at A level?

What would universities like from us in terms of references? An idea of the level of detail, evidence etc. would be very useful for the reformed subjects.

A clear statement of where universities stand on qualification reform.

Outcomes of the 2014 survey

In January, we published the findings of our initial survey. In our report 'Unpacking qualification reform' we raised greater awareness across the education sector about the future provision of the AS. In the report, we also made a number of recommendations. These include:

- **Universities and colleges should publish qualification reform statements:** Since our report, over [40 universities have published qualification reform statements](#) detailing how they will accommodate the changing qualification landscape and ensure that applicants are treated fairly.
- **Schools and colleges create a web page detailing their qualification offer and rationale behind it:** This recommendation has been warmly welcomed by schools and colleges and we are beginning to see more references containing a URL to this information. Schools and colleges did feed back requesting guidance on what to include in this information. The SPA National Expert Think Tank on Qualifications Reform has created [guidance for schools in response to this](#).

Recommendations for HEPs

- Create a qualification reform statement detailing how you are adapting to the changing qualification landscape.
- Continue to engage with local and national school networks to hear the challenges they face.
- Review admissions processes to ensure they remain appropriate for the changing qualification landscape.
- Aim to be clear and transparent in entry requirements, referencing legacy, current, and future qualifications where relevant, and stating any requirements for the AS, science practical grade, and GCSEs.



Recommendations for schools

- Review the guidance produced by the [SPA National Expert Think Tank](#) on qualification reform to gain an understanding of the sort of information universities and colleges may value regarding qualification provision in the reference.
- Create a web page detailing your qualification provision and the rationale. The URL to this can be included in the applicant reference.
- Continue to engage with universities and colleges to share perspectives on the challenges faced.



Recommendations for UCAS

- Continue to encourage universities and colleges to produce and review qualification reform statements. These will be hosted on ucas.com.
- Continue to inform universities and colleges and support them as they assess the impact of qualification changes and adapt to these. This extends beyond A level reform and includes GCSE and vocational reform.
- Produce further materials to support schools, colleges, and universities. These will include videos detailing how universities and colleges are adapting to the changing qualifications landscape, toolkits, and factsheets.



Further support

UCAS has produced a range of materials to support schools, colleges, and universities in the changing qualifications landscape.

Qualification reform

[We have a range of resources in relation to qualification reform](#). These include videos explaining what is happening around the UK, a detailed guide, timelines, third party materials, and university produced qualification reform statements.

The new Tariff

UCAS is introducing a new Tariff for the 2017 entry cycle. A range of supporting resources can be found on the website for both [advisers](#) and [higher education providers](#).

Progression pathways project

UCAS has recently concluded its Progression pathways project. The outcomes of this project, which provide guidance to learners, advisers, and higher education providers on the different qualification pathways, is due to be released in January.

General qualification information services

UCAS also provides a range of information regarding qualifications to aid universities and colleges in assessing qualifications. Our [Qualification Information Profiles](#) can be found on our website.