

UNPACKING QUALIFICATION REFORM

Results of the UCAS survey
on A level reform

UCAS

January 2015



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FOREWORD BY MARY CURNOCK COOK

England is currently experiencing an unprecedented level of qualification reform. Many changes are underway in a range of post-16 options, including vocational qualifications, apprenticeships and A levels. At the same time, we have seen changes to the way schools are funded and how their performance is measured.

From a university admissions perspective, the highest profile change to qualifications is the decoupling of the AS from the full A level. This change offers schools and colleges flexibility in designing their qualification offerings to suit the needs of their students. But, coming as it does, with the phased introduction of reformed A levels, this also creates new set of challenges for schools and colleges.

Responses to this survey paint a picture of a high level of uncertainty and anxiety amongst schools and colleges, and a wide range of responses to the A level reform. Only half of schools and colleges who responded to the survey are planning to offer AS qualifications in all reformed subjects that they offer from 2015. These respondents may have chosen this course of action having realised that increased teaching and learning time, one of the key intentions of the policy decision to decouple the AS, will not be fully realised until the 2017-19 cohort. Schools might therefore consider that the most manageable and least disruptive option is for all students to undertake AS examinations until this point.

The survey presented more than 15 possible programmes that schools and colleges could offer from September 2017 but no dominant model emerged from the responses. This means that universities and colleges can anticipate a much greater diversity of qualifications held by applicants and they will need to revise their admissions approaches to ensure that no one is disadvantaged as a result of decisions made by their school.

The secondary sector is looking to universities and colleges to explain clearly how they will manage the changing qualifications landscape. Some universities have already produced qualification reform statements, expressing their commitment to be flexible and work with schools and colleges during this transition. I would encourage all universities and colleges to move quickly to publish similar statements detailing how they intend to accommodate reformed qualifications within their admission processes to ensure fair admissions.

It is not until September 2020 that applicants from England will apply holding a full set of both reformed A levels and GCSE qualifications. Earlier admissions cycles will need to be flexible in handling students with mixed profiles of current and reformed qualifications.

The admissions environment is further complicated by the divergence of A levels and GCSEs across the UK. Learners in England, Wales and Northern Ireland will be studying different qualifications of the same name, which will have different assessment arrangements and structures depending on the country of study. Reform in these three countries is also taking place on different timescales. Universities and colleges will need schools to explain what qualifications have been available to students as part of their references for university applications.

One of the themes from this survey is schools' desire for more detailed information about qualification reform and greater clarity about how the reformed qualifications are intended to operate in practice. Questions about the funding and co-teachability of the new AS qualifications were raised by many respondents. I would urge awarding bodies to provide more information about the cost of revised AS and A level qualifications, and guidance about co-teaching approaches, as soon as possible.

UCAS' survey shows a clear need for those involved in, and affected by, qualification reforms to work together to address current information gaps. I hope that our findings and recommendations go some way to shedding light on this complex issue and helping those advising their students about their AS and A level choices for September 2015.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mary Curnock Cook'.

Mary Curnock Cook

Chief Executive

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Following the confirmation of reforms to A levels in England, there has been considerable speculation about how secondary schools and colleges might alter their 16-19 curriculum and what impact the changes might have on progression and admission to higher education.

To find out how the secondary sector is responding, UCAS has undertaken a survey of all of the English schools and colleges registered to use its undergraduate admissions service to identify their current position. They were asked their intentions with regard to offering reformed A level subjects in 2015, their intentions with regard to the AS, and their longer term curriculum plans post-2017.

Almost 500 schools and colleges responded to the survey and this report summarises the results, examining differences by school, by size, and by English region. It examines how universities are responding to the reforms by reviewing and updating their admissions policies. This report also explains how UCAS will continue to support students, teachers and advisers, and higher education providers.

The main findings of the survey are:

- 66% of respondents will offer standalone AS qualifications in their school and colleges in some or all of the reformed A level subjects. 16% of responding schools definitely won't be offering the standalone AS; these are primarily schools in the independent sector.
- 18% of respondents are still undecided about whether or not their school or college will offer their students the opportunity to take standalone AS qualifications from September 2015. Many cite a lack of clarity, information and practical challenges making it difficult to make a decision.
- Secondary schools and colleges cite a diverse range of factors as influencing their decisions on the AS. As well as practical considerations such as funding, timetabling, performance measures, and university entry requirements, some believe that there is intrinsic value in a midpoint assessment. It is also clear from the comments provided that many schools and colleges are taking "a wait and see" approach, maintaining their current AS offer for now and reviewing their programmes once the full suite of revised A levels is available from 2017.
- 21% of respondents do not know what their AS and A level programmes will be in 2017 when the full suite of reformed qualifications will be available.

- UCAS identified over 15 possible A level programmes schools and colleges could offer from September 2017. The responses to this question indicated wide diversity in intended 16-19 provision nationally. Most state schools and academies that responded envisage that they will offer either four AS qualifications moving to three A levels, or a mixed programme combining reformed A levels (with the AS) with other qualifications such as BTECs. The most common offer from independent schools who responded is to offer three A levels with an Extended Project qualification.
- 68% of respondents think that the qualification reforms will have no impact on the uptake of A levels, but 24% think that fewer students will choose A levels in future. These are largely state schools and academies.

We hope that this report will be of interest as it offers a broad perspective of how schools and colleges are shaping their AS and A level programmes in response to qualification reforms, and provides an indication of the diversity of provision we are likely to see in the future. Higher education admissions professionals will be interested in this report as it highlights the variety of qualification profiles that applicants may present from 2017 onwards and the impact of decisions made by schools and colleges on those profiles.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Suggestions for Universities and Colleges	Suggestions for Schools and Colleges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Universities and colleges should publish qualification reform statements that clearly show how they will respond and accommodate the changing qualifications landscape. We have already seen a number of higher education providers produce these statements, which will be available on the UCAS website. • Universities and colleges should continue to liaise with their school and college networks to share information and understanding regarding reformed qualifications. • Universities and colleges should review their admissions practices in light of qualification reform happening around the UK to ensure that students are not disadvantaged as a result of curriculum choices made by their schools or colleges. • Universities and colleges should be clear and transparent in their entry requirements. Any specific requirement for the AS qualification should be clearly stated. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To support an applicant’s reference, schools and colleges should consider putting information on their own website about the qualifications they offer and the rationale for this. For example: “We have chosen to offer the AS examination in both reformed and unreformed A level subjects first taught in 2015 and 2016 as it is more manageable for us to timetable and is less disruptive to students.” We suggest that schools and colleges include a link to this page within an applicant’s reference. • Schools and colleges should engage with their local higher education networks to share their perspectives and the challenges they face regarding qualifications reform.

INTRODUCTION

Significant reforms to A level qualifications are underway, which will result in different specifications and assessment methods for A levels in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

In England, the A level will become a two-year linear qualification with the AS decoupled. The AS qualification will no longer count towards the overall A level grade but will be a standalone qualification in its own right. Awarding organisations have sought to develop AS qualifications that can be co-taught alongside the first year of the A level programme, so that students can still be entered for the AS examination if their school or college chooses to offer this option.

The AS qualification in Wales and Northern Ireland will remain embedded as part of the A level and will continue to count towards the final A level grade, but with a slightly reduced weighting. From September 2015, schools and colleges in England and Wales will begin to teach the first tranche of new A level specifications, with additional reformed subjects being introduced from September 2016 and 2017. Northern Ireland will begin to teach revised specifications from September 2016.

This means that the first major cohorts of learners holding revised A level qualifications in some subjects will be applying to higher education (HE) from September 2016 to begin undergraduate courses from September 2017. Applicants with complete profiles of reformed A levels will first apply to higher education in September 2018 but we will not see learners applying with complete profiles of reformed A levels and GCSEs until September 2020.

In England, the AS qualifications will become optional for schools and colleges. This unprecedented level of flexibility has led to schools and colleges questioning the value of offering the revised AS qualification. When making this decision, schools and colleges are considering a range of factors including:

- funding
- HE requirements
- pedagogical considerations
- timetabling and logistics.

Schools and colleges will make different decisions based on various considerations reflecting their individual circumstances. Broadly speaking, schools and colleges are likely to adopt one of the following models:

- offer the AS to all students in reformed subjects
- do not offer the AS in reformed subjects



- offer the AS in some reformed subjects
- offer the AS in reformed subjects to certain students.

These differing patterns of provision are likely to challenge higher education providers as they seek to understand what qualifications their future applicants will hold and seek to ensure that their admissions policies and processes are fair for all students, whether or not they have had an opportunity to take standalone AS qualifications.

UCAS SURVEY OF ENGLISH SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES

To provide greater clarity and insight into how schools and colleges in England are planning to respond to these changes, UCAS has undertaken a survey of the 2,470 schools and colleges in England registered with UCAS. The survey explored which of the reformed A levels each school or college is planning to offer from September 2015, their intentions with regard to the AS, their rationale for this, and what they expect their A level and AS offer to look like in 2017.

The survey was carried out in December 2014 and received 469 analysable responses (a response rate of 19%). As part of the survey, we asked respondents to self-declare a school type. Of those that declared a school type (465):

- 97 (21%) were from state schools
- 181 (39%) were from academies
- 128 (28%) were from independent schools.

We received seven responses from sixth form colleges and their results are included in the state schools group, resulting in 104 centres defined as state schools (22%).

This is not a representative sample of school types. The Independent Schools Council Census 2014 reported that there are 429 mixed-age schools and 219 senior schools in England delivering education up to year 13¹. Data from the Department for Education suggests that 57% of state funded secondary schools are academies (1,588)².

The sample is also not representative of the make-up of the student population, both in secondary and higher education. However, the survey does provide a good insight into the current thinking of schools and colleges.

¹ <http://www.isc.co.uk/research/Publications/annual-census/isc-annual-census-2014>

² https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/335176/2014_SPC_SFR_Text_v101.pdf

459 schools self-declared a Level 3 cohort size which we categorised as follows:

Level 3 cohort size	Number of respondents	Percentage of classified respondents
0-100	82	18%
101-200	144	31%
201-300	138	30%
301-400	65	14%
400+	30	7%
0-200	226	49%
200+	233	51%

We also asked schools to provide a postcode to allow for regional analysis. The distribution of the 438 schools that provided a postcode is as follows:

Region	Number of respondents	Percentage of classified respondents
North East	15	3%
North West	35	8%
Yorkshire and The Humber	40	9%
East Midlands	33	8%
West Midlands	45	10%
East of England	63	14%
London	70	16%
South East	85	19%
South West	52	12%

This report summarises the responses received and presents non-weighted results looking at:

- the portfolio of reformed A levels that schools and colleges will be offering from September 2015
- whether or not schools and colleges will be offering the reformed AS from September 2015, on what basis, and why
- the portfolio of reformed qualifications that schools and colleges expect to offer from September 2017 and their views on whether the reforms are likely to alter the proportion of young people studying A levels.

Over two thirds of respondents provided a free text response to the survey, showing a high level of engagement with the survey. The report uses these comments to highlight views and opinions from the secondary education sector about qualification reforms and admissions to higher education. It concludes by looking at how universities are responding to the reforms by reviewing and updating their admissions policies, and summarising the information and support that UCAS will continue to provide to students, teachers and advisers, and higher education providers.



FINDINGS

Reformed A levels offered from September 2015

From September 2015, revised A levels will be taught in the following subjects:

- Sciences: Biology, Chemistry, Physics
- English: English language, English literature, English language and literature
- Art and design
- Business
- Computer science
- Economics
- History
- Sociology
- Psychology

We asked schools and colleges to list which reformed A levels they intend to offer in 2015. Figure 1 shows the overall results, Figure 2 the split by school or college type and Figure 3 by school or college size.

Figure 1: Reformed A levels being offered from September 2015

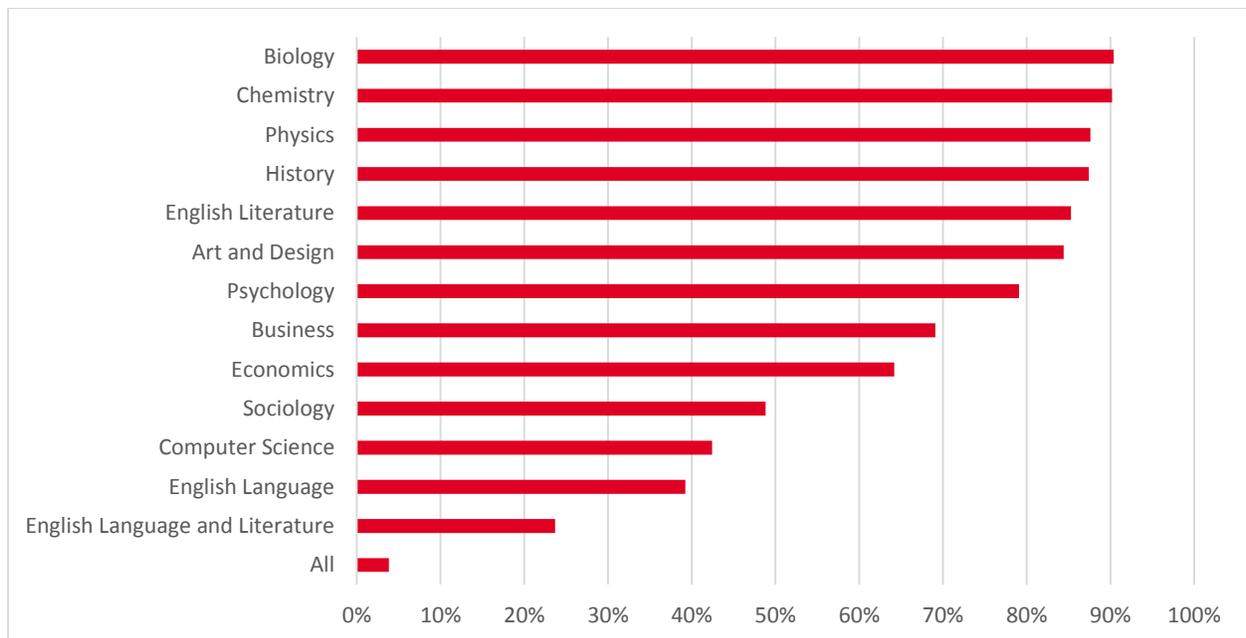


Figure 2: Reformed A levels offered from September 2015 by school and college type

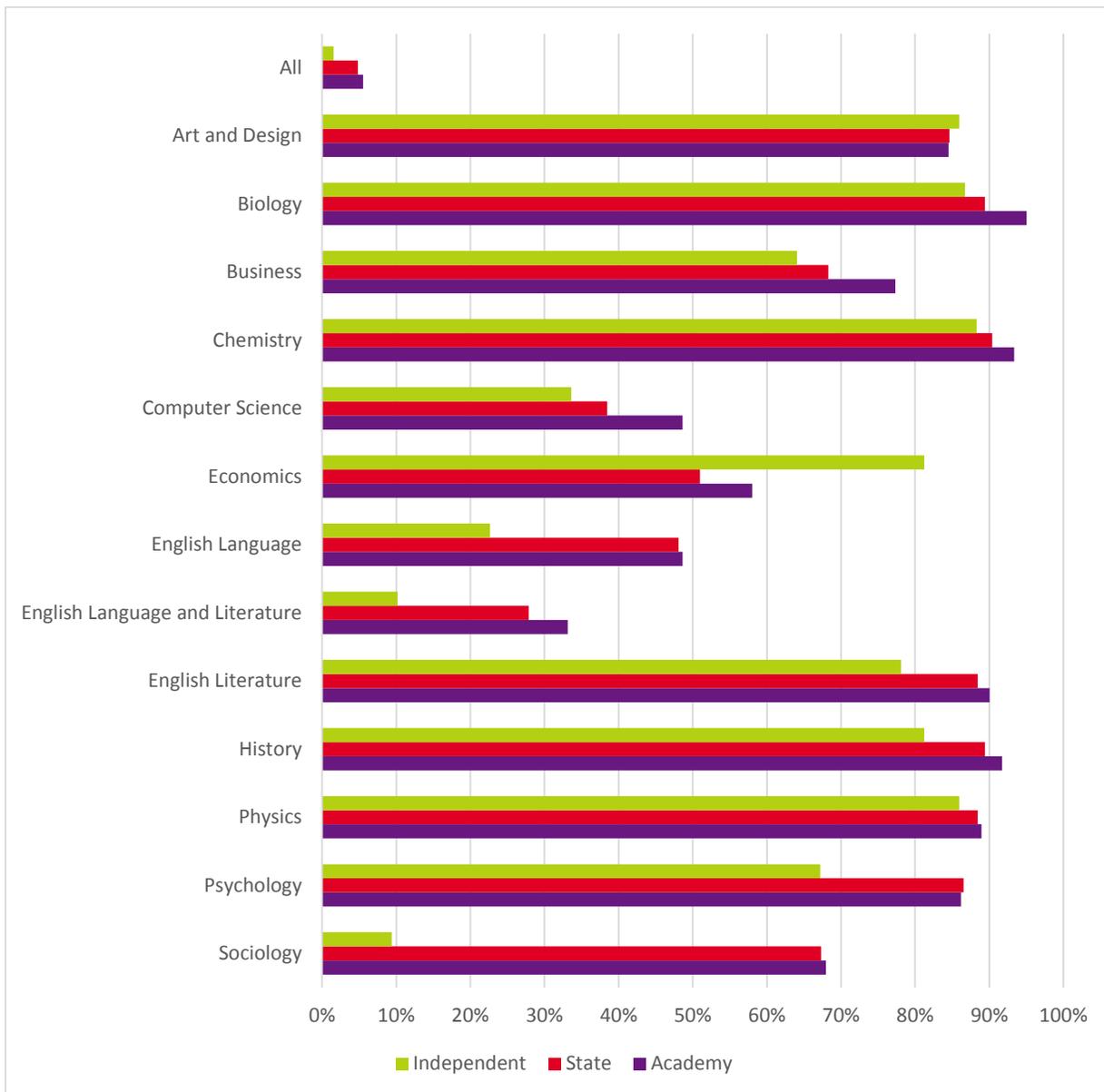
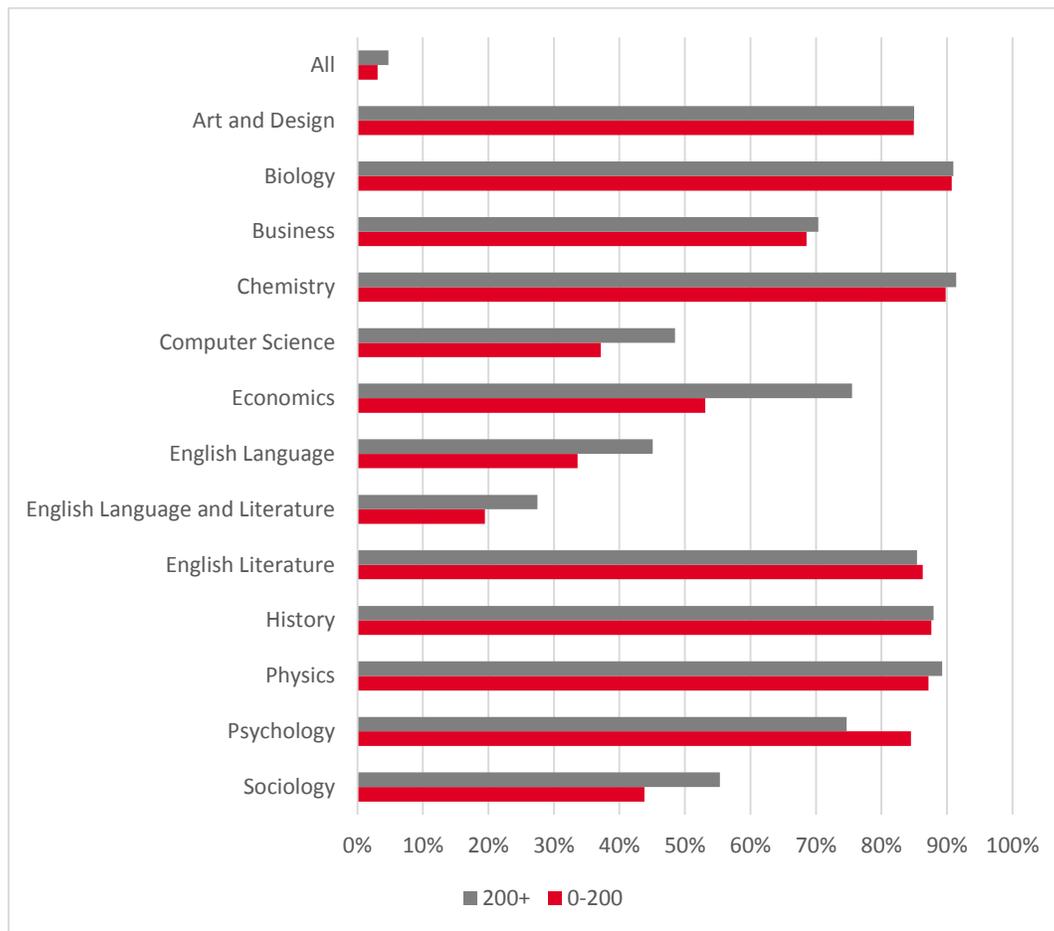


Figure 3: Reformed A levels offered from September 2015 by school size**The main findings are:**

- Only 4% of schools and colleges who responded to the survey will offer the full range of reformed A levels from September 2015, with academies (6%) the most likely centre type to do so.
- The most common reformed subjects that will be offered from 2015 are: Biology, Chemistry, Physics, History and English literature. Over 85% of respondents indicated they would offer each of these.
- The least common subjects are English language and literature (as a single qualification), English language and Computer science.
- There is variation by the size of provider. Economics, Sociology and Computer science are more likely to be offered by larger providers (those with a Level 3 cohort of more than 200).



- Economics and Sociology appear to be the subjects where there is likely to be the most variation. For example, 68% of academies intend to offer A level Sociology in 2015, compared with 9% of independent schools, although this may reflect pre-existing variations in subject offerings.

Quote from survey respondent

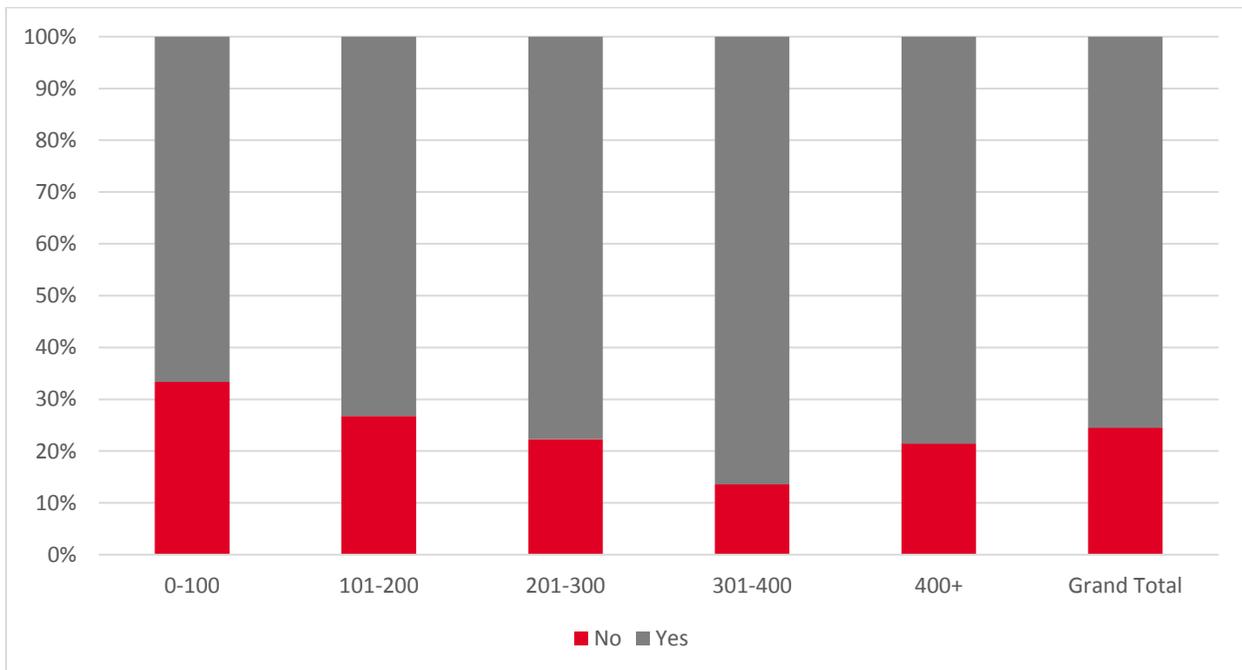
“The most difficult thing for schools is trying to make decisions with so little information from the government. The staggered implementation of the reforms makes things difficult as it is not easy to guide pupils towards the correct pathway. The funding implications are huge - this school is in serious financial difficulty and departments are already squeezed dry so it will be hard to find the money to resource new courses.”

Reformed AS offered from September 2015

Reformed A level subjects will be introduced in a phased manner until 2017, when all subjects will be reformed. Therefore, in 2015 and 2016, schools and colleges in England will deliver a mix of reformed and unreformed A levels.

We asked schools and colleges whether they have made a decision about offering the AS. Figure 4 shows the percentage of providers who have made a decision by school size.

Figure 4: Percentage of schools and colleges who have come to a decision regarding the provision of AS qualifications from 2015 by school size



The main findings are:

- The survey indicates that 76% of schools have come to a decision regarding the provision they will offer in 2015, meaning that a quarter of schools have yet to decide what provision they will offer less than a year before they are due to deliver these courses.
- 82% of independent school respondents have reached a decision, compared to 73% of academies and 70% of state schools.
- Smaller schools and colleges appear less likely to have reached a decision regarding the provision of AS qualifications in 2015. 71% of respondents from schools with fewer than 200 students enrolled on Level 3 programmes have made a decision about their provision for 2015, compared to 82% of respondents with more than 200 pupils enrolled on Level 3 programmes.

Schools and colleges in the East of England are the most likely to have reached a decision regarding the provision of AS qualifications in 2015 (85%). Schools and colleges in Yorkshire and The Humber (66%) and South West (67%) are the least likely to have reached a decision. Universities and colleges in these regions may wish to engage local schools and colleges and provide support.

Quote from survey respondent

“Still a great deal of uncertainty as we approach an election year. Very difficult to advise our year 11 students about how to select 4 A levels.”

Quote from survey respondent

“The logistical problems of starting reformed A levels whilst most subjects are unreformed feels like a confusing mess to parents, staff and worst of all students. I don't disagree with reform but have huge problems, being on the receiving end, with delivering [both reformed and unreformed A levels] in the best possible way.”



We asked schools and colleges what kind of AS provision they will be offering from September 2015, and specifically whether they intend to:

- offer an AS in all reformed A level subjects
- offer an AS in some reformed A level subjects
- not offer the AS in reformed subjects
- or are undecided.

Figure 5 shows the proportion of respondents offering each profile, and Figure 6 shows the breakdown by school and college type.

Figure 5: Percentage of respondents offering each AS profile

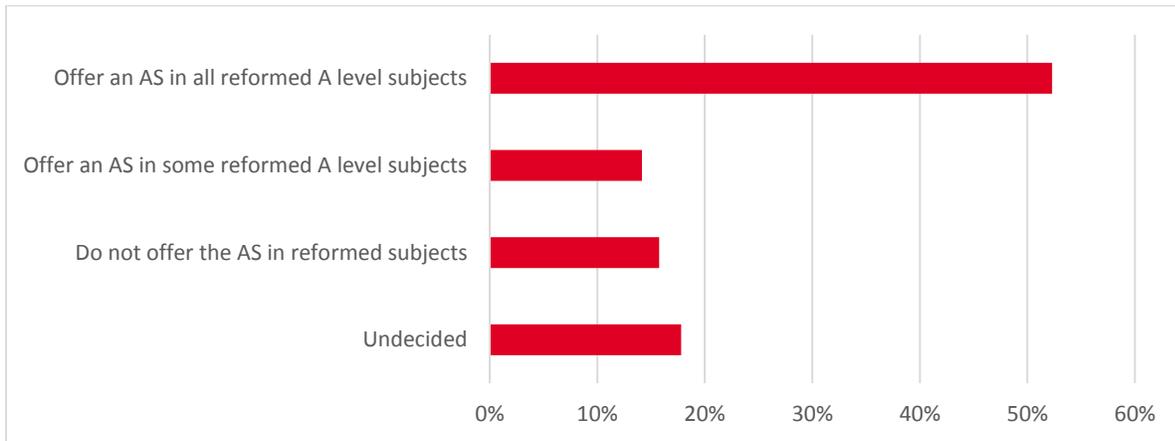
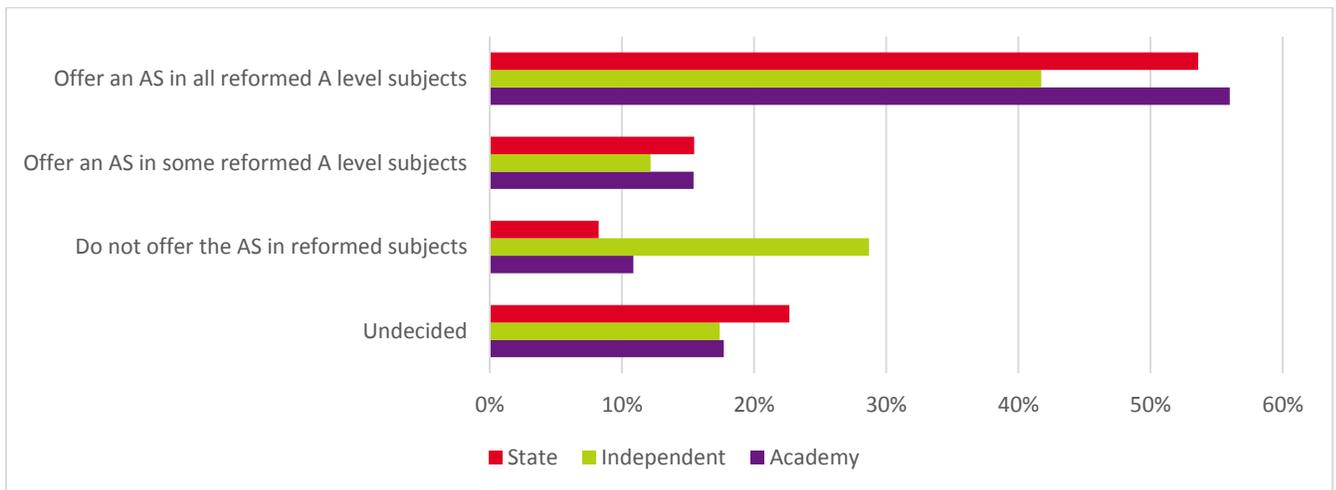


Figure 6: Percentage of respondents offering each AS profile by school or college type



The main findings are:

- Two thirds of schools and colleges who responded to our survey indicated that they will offer the AS in some form, and just over half will offer AS examinations in all reformed subjects that they offer. Leaving aside those who are undecided, if this picture were to be extrapolated across all English schools and colleges it would mean that about one third of them will potentially have learners applying to higher education without an AS qualification from September 2016.
- Schools and colleges that have 200 or more students enrolled on Level 3 programmes are more likely (56%) to offer an AS in all subjects than schools with fewer than 200 (48%). This may be associated with funding and staffing resources.
- Independent schools are less likely to offer an AS in all reformed subjects (42%) than academies (56%).
- Independent schools are less likely to offer the AS in any of the reformed subjects, with just under a third of respondents indicating this position. This means that HE admissions tutors may have less information available to them about applicants from independent schools. However, some applicants from independent schools do not currently declare AS grades.
- Schools and colleges in the East Midlands (56%), West Midlands and Yorkshire and the Humber (both 55%) are more likely to offer the AS in all reformed subjects. The AS is most likely to be offered in some form at schools and colleges in the West Midlands (73%) and East of England (72%).

Quote from survey respondent

“It is particularly difficult to know what advice to give our students and staff - there is no clear voyage through at present and this needs to be addressed in the interests of young people.”

Quote from survey respondent

“We will make a final decision about what to do when we have all available information from government and exam boards. We had hoped to make a decision by June 2015 but the decision to delay the implementation of Maths A level may delay that. Our preference is actually very much to stick with the status quo; AS, as a part of the wider A level has worked very well for us as has the modularity that is [in] line with courses all over the world. We feel that removing January modules is the right step, but that we are now in a position where no one seems to know exactly what will happen.”

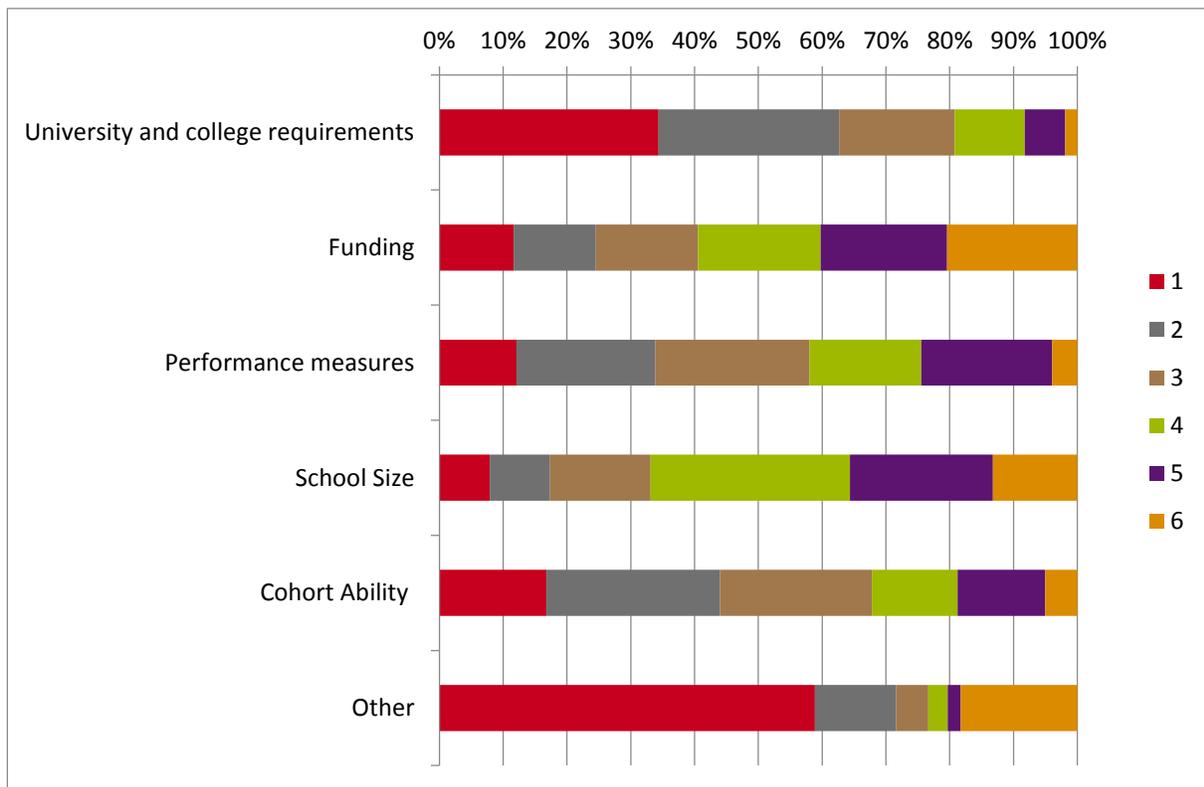


We also asked schools and colleges to rate in order of priority the factors that had influenced their decision about whether to offer the AS. Specifically:

- cohort ability
- funding available for 16-19 learning
- school or college performance measures
- school or college size
- university and college entry requirements
- other (please specify).

Figure 7 shows the priority ranking for all schools and colleges, Figure 8 for independent schools, Figure 9 for state schools and Figure 10 for academies.³

Figure 7: Main factors for all schools and colleges in deciding what AS programme to offer



³ Factors were ranked in order of priority from 1 to 6, with 1 the most influential factor.



Figure 8: Main factors for independent schools in deciding what AS programme to offer

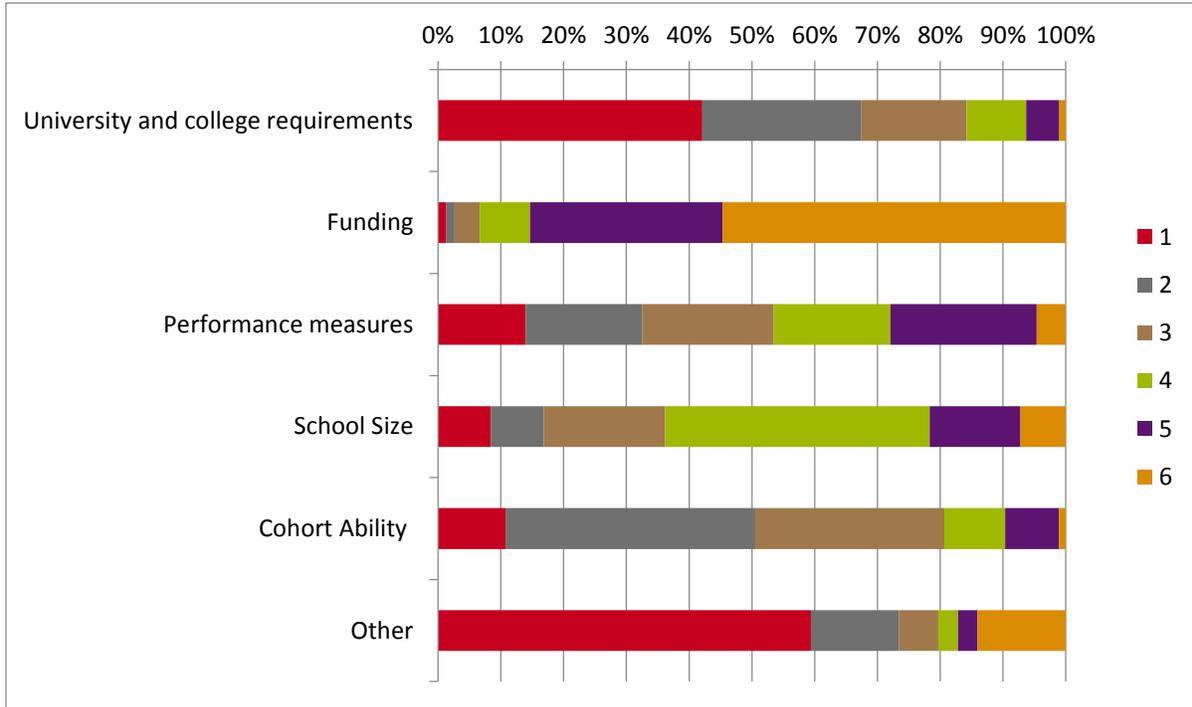


Figure 9: Main factors for state schools in deciding what AS programme to offer

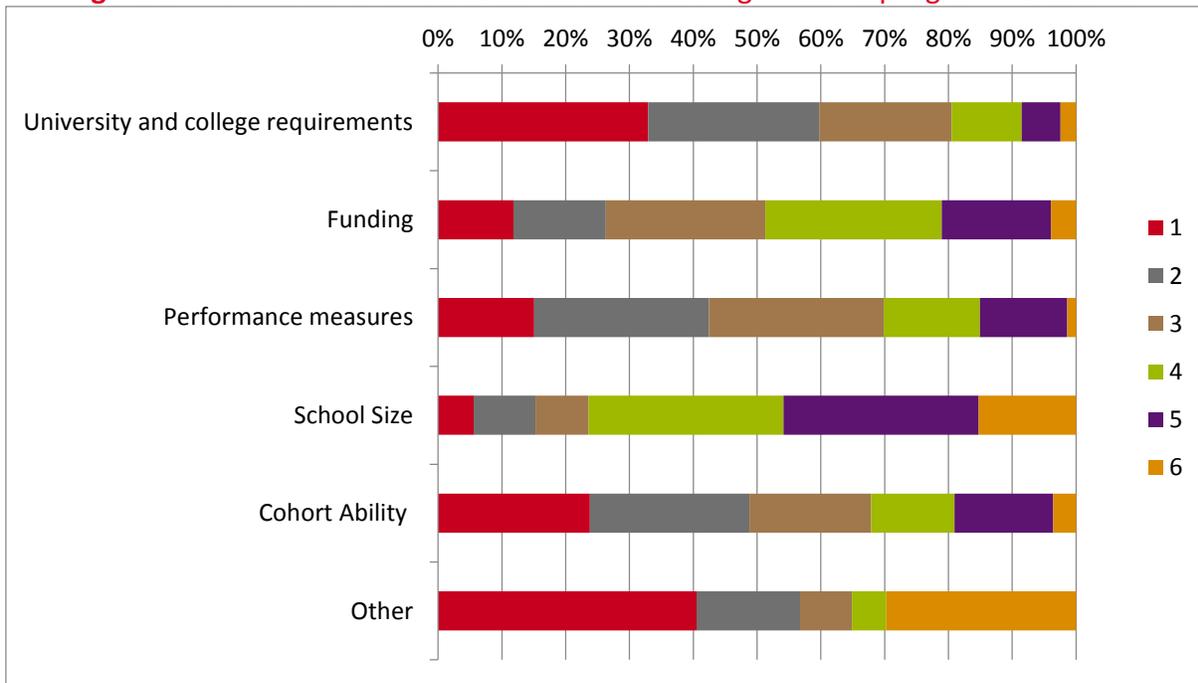
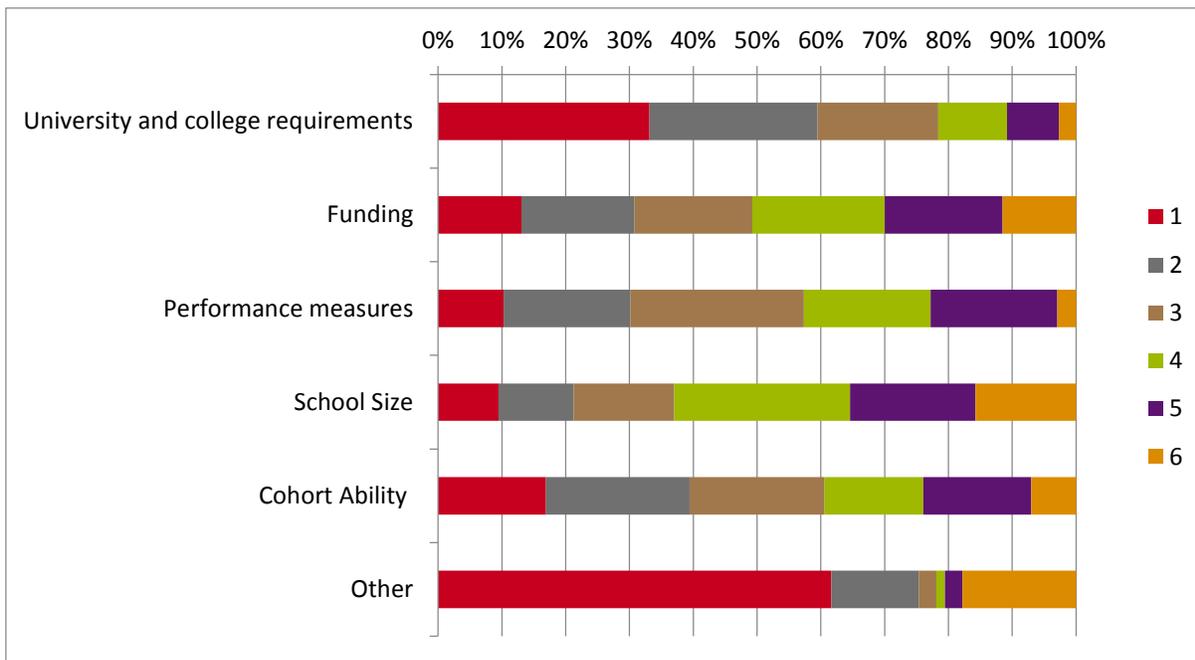


Figure 10: Main factors for academies schools in deciding what AS programme to offer



The main findings are:

- The most frequent response for all school types collectively and individually is “other”, showing the diversity of considerations for schools and colleges. The responses given for “other” include:
 - the belief that increased teaching time will not be achieved until all subjects are reformed
 - simplicity and familiarity for students and parents
 - pedagogical reasons, such as a preferred method of teaching
 - timetabling and logistical challenges
 - other school decision making
 - the value of a midway assessment
 - schools and colleges choosing to “wait and see”.
- University and college requirements were highlighted by respondents as the second most common driver for decisions regarding the provision of the AS. However, this is more likely to be a primary consideration for independent schools than for academies or other state schools.

- Funding of AS qualifications does not appear to be a consideration for independent schools, with the majority of independent school respondents indicating that this is their lowest ranked decision-making factor.
- Following “other”, and “university and college requirements”, the third most influential factor for state schools and academies is “cohort ability”.

Quote from survey respondent

“It is very difficult to plan for the future - our offer will depend on several different variables including funding, what other local providers are offering, whether AS and A levels can be co-taught, difficulties of the new curriculum, amongst others.”

We asked schools and colleges whether they intend to revisit their current decision on the AS once all A levels have been reformed. The main findings are:

- The decisions that schools and colleges are making regarding the provision of the AS appear to be interim ones, with two thirds of respondents indicating that they will revisit their decision once all A levels are reformed.
- State schools and academies are more likely to revisit this decision (67% and 68% respectively) than independent schools (56%).
- Just under a quarter of respondents are undecided about whether they will revisit this decision, whereas 13% of respondents have indicated that they won't be revisiting the decisions they have made now.
- Larger secondary providers (200 students or more) were more likely (67%) to say they intend to revisit their decision regarding AS provision in 2017 than smaller providers (0-200) (61%).
- Schools and colleges in the West Midlands (72%) and South West (74%) are the most likely to revisit their decision regarding AS provision in 2017.

A level and AS offering from September 2017

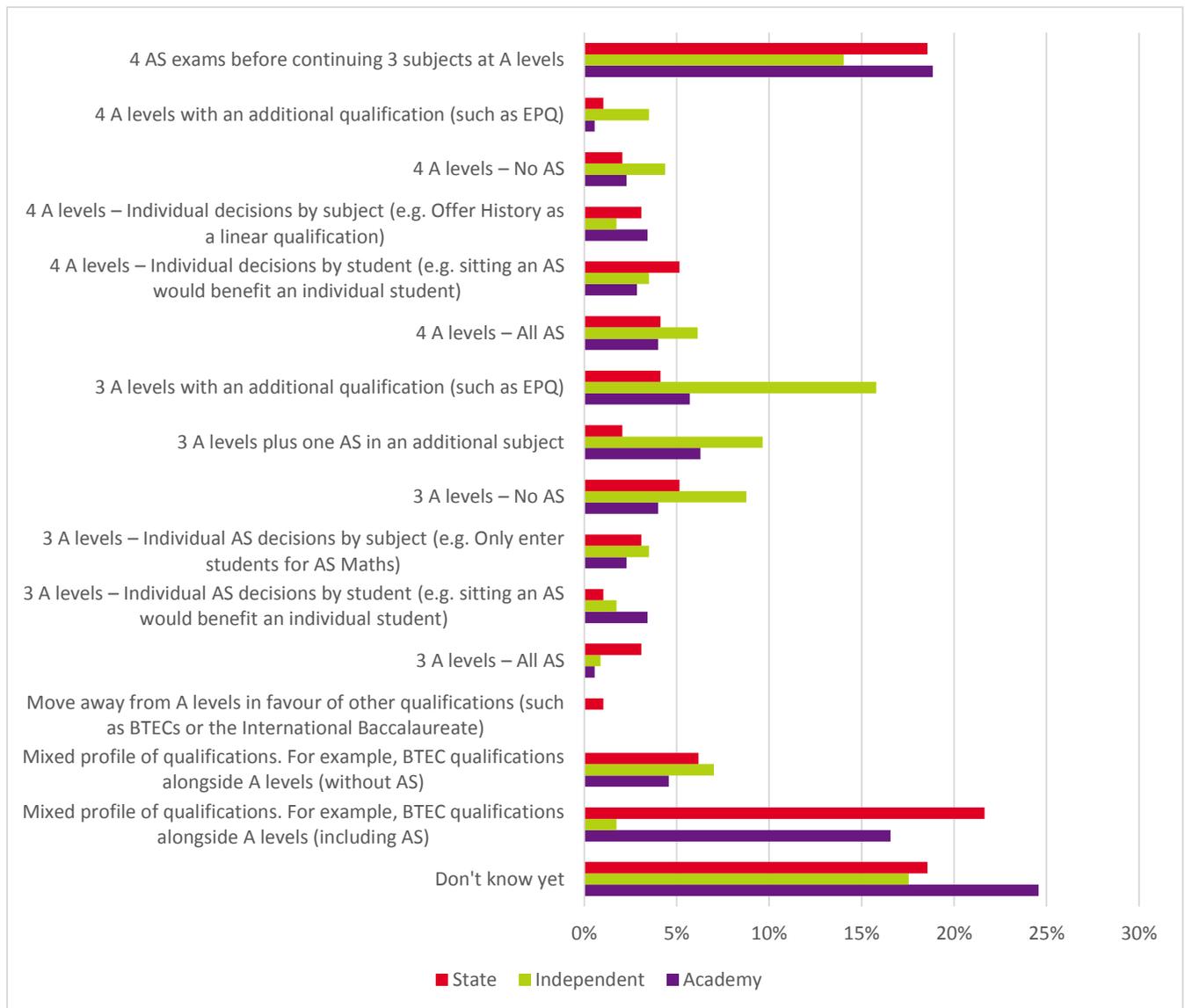
Based on the current reform timelines, September 2017 will see all A level subjects in England reformed. Due to the increased flexibility in A level provision introduced by the decoupling of the AS, there are a number of different A level programmes schools and colleges could follow.

We asked schools and colleges to indicate which A level programme they are likely to offer in 2017 to provide an indication of what the future pattern of provision across England may look like. Figure 11 shows the range of different A level programmes which English schools and



colleges could offer from September 2017 and what percentage of providers expect to offer each model, by school and college type. The large number of options available to respondents led to a wide distribution of responses, so the findings of this question should be treated as indicative and not conclusive.

Figure 11: Anticipated A level programme that will be offered from September 2017 by school and college type



The main findings are:

- The lack of a dominant response to this question shows the diversity of future provision. Universities and colleges will want to be flexible in accommodating this diversity in their admissions practices and ensure that no learner is disadvantaged by their school or college's curriculum choice.
- 21% of respondents do not know which A level programme they will offer in 2017, indicating a high level of uncertainty amongst schools. Academies are more likely (25%) not to know what their future provision will look like than independent schools (18%) and state schools (19%). Larger providers, with over 200 students enrolled on Level 3 programmes, are more likely not to know what their future provision will be (24%) than smaller providers (17%).
- 5% of respondents intend to offer a three A level programme with no AS examinations.
- Four AS qualifications leading onto three full A levels looks as if it will continue to be a popular programme, with 17% of respondents indicating that this will be their A level programme in 2017. 43% of these respondents were academies.
- The survey indicates differences in offerings by centre type. Three quarters of the respondents that indicated that they will offer a mixed profile of qualifications, including BTECs, are classified as academies or state schools. Independent schools are the most likely to offer a three A level programme along with an additional qualification, such as the Extended Project. 16% of respondents from independent schools indicated that this will be a likely programme offered in 2017, compared to 5% of academies and 4% state schools.
- Only a single respondent indicated that they will move away from A levels as a result of these reforms.

Quote from survey respondent

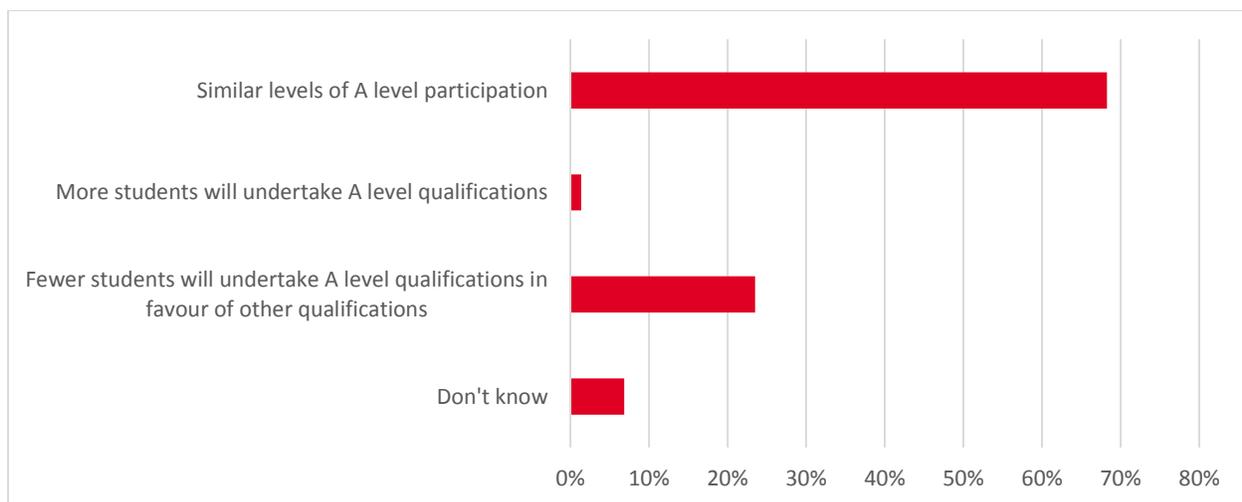
"Part of the issue is undoubtedly also knowing what the 'standard' will be to ensure we are in line with national trends - currently so little concrete information available - glad you are doing this survey."

Some commentators have suggested that participation in A levels may decline as a result of A level reform, with a perception that linear A levels may prove more demanding. Although Ofqual has categorically stated that the standard of the qualification is to remain the same, the move to a linear structure with a terminal exam could be perceived as more challenging by some learners.

We asked schools and colleges whether they feel that A level participation will change as a result of the reforms. Specifically, whether they think that:

- more students will undertake A level qualifications
- fewer students will undertake A level qualifications in favour of other qualifications
- A level participation will remain the same
- or if they don't know.

Figure 12: Respondents' views on the impact of the reforms on the uptake of A levels



The main findings are:

Just over two thirds of providers think that A level participation will remain similar. However, just under a quarter of respondents feel that A level participation will decline. Of these respondents, 78% are from schools and colleges classified as academies or state schools. These are also the centre types that are more likely to offer alternative qualifications, such as BTECs.

Quote from survey respondent

“Whilst as a centre we feel the decoupling will have little impact owing to the selective nature of our Sixth Form, it is highly likely that students from disadvantaged backgrounds will be put off taking A Levels. The AS has acted as a great confidence boost if GCSE grades profiles are weaker.”

HOW HIGHER EDUCATION PROVIDERS ARE RESPONDING TO THE REFORMS

One of the key themes that schools and colleges raised in the survey was concern about how higher education admissions will operate in light of the reforms.

This section of the report summarises the current state of knowledge based on information provided by universities and colleges themselves and explores:

- how admissions are likely to work for students who have not taken AS examinations
- expectations around a fourth AS alongside three A levels
- potential impacts on admissions tests.

Schools and colleges are keen to offer their students A level programmes that give them the broadest possible range of opportunities for progression. A number are taking decisions about their AS offering in response to university and college entry requirements as Figures 7-10 demonstrate, and some have said that they would like universities to take a common approach to handling the reforms.

Universities and colleges do not wish unduly to influence the choice of qualifications offered by schools – who will be best placed to judge what programmes are most suitable for their students.

Different universities have different views on the AS and A level today, and are very likely to continue to do so in the future. However, all universities and colleges will want to be explicit about the AS in their entry requirements and offer making. Several universities have already published statements explaining how they will respond to the reforms and UCAS strongly encourages all to do so. We will also publish these on our website.

Treatment of applicants with no AS examination results

Schools and colleges are looking for clear guidance from universities and colleges about their treatment of the AS and are concerned about both transparency and fairness. Questions raised included:

- “We need to know how they will decide on which students to offer places to if they cannot see evidence of AS qualifications.”
- “What will be the significance of sitting / not sitting AS examinations? How will this alter the application and acceptance of students onto courses?”

- “Requirements for AS grades on UCAS applications - will those without AS’s be disadvantaged? If not, how will this be ensured and monitored?”
- “An indication of how Universities will use the AS examinations and, if the majority of centres stop sitting them what the universities will use instead (or as well) to judge performance.”
- “How are universities going to make offers if students haven't done an AS? What will they base their offer decisions on?”
- “A clear steer on how they view AS grades, will they play any part in offers.”
- “Will universities prefer students to go straight for A2 or will they prefer they have an AS in all subjects even if reformed”
- “Will the universities want the students to do AS for predicted grade purposes?”
- “Will universities be expecting AS results as Cambridge have said they will?”

It is worth emphasising that universities and colleges are familiar with considering applications from students presenting linear qualifications with no midpoint examination. For example, students studying an International Baccalaureate Higher Level certificate will not undertake an external examination halfway through their studies.

Moreover, universities and colleges will wish to continue to ensure and maintain fair admissions. Whilst some universities and colleges currently consider that the AS provides a useful indicator of a learner’s progress towards their final A level grade, not all applicants taking A levels will have the opportunity to take the AS. Higher education providers are therefore unlikely to require the AS for admission to their courses.

The University of Cambridge has been very clear about its position, having stated:

University of Cambridge

“For the 2015-17 cohort of students starting their sixth form studies in an environment where there is likely to be a mixture of reformed and unreformed A Levels, we will continue to use UMS in those subjects that retain it. We strongly encourage potential applicants to take AS Level examinations in at least three, and preferably four, subjects, whether reformed or not, at the end of Year 12. This will provide us with a strong measure of applicants’ recent academic progress, will assist us and the students in judging whether an application to Cambridge is likely to be competitive, and will provide reassurance that grade predictions are not relied upon too heavily in a new system.”

The University went on to say:

University of Cambridge

“We recognise some schools and colleges may not offer this as an option. Where a student presents without externally moderated Year 12 AS results as a result of school policy or limited availability of subjects that may have restricted a student’s choices we would ask schools and colleges to address the policy issues in their UCAS reference. Our admission goal remains to select the best students, regardless of their educational regime. We are committed to ensuring that no student is disadvantaged within our processes by the model of provision offered by their educational institution.”

Therefore, even though the University of Cambridge places value on learners taking AS qualifications and wishes to encourage students to take them, they are also committed to ensuring that no applicant without the AS qualification will be disadvantaged in their application to the university. From the applicant’s perspective it is important that their school or college makes clear in the UCAS reference if the opportunity to take the AS has been available or not. For example, Aston University says in its guidance:

Aston University

“If a school or college chooses to enter its students for AS levels then this should be stated on the UCAS form and in the UCAS reference.”

Other universities and colleges who use AS results as a part of their admissions decision-making are in the process of reviewing their admissions policies and procedures to ensure that no applicant is disadvantaged. For example the University of Sheffield has published the following:

University of Sheffield

“At present (2014) there are a small number of areas in which AS attainment is a key part of the admissions decision at Sheffield, and we will ensure that, by the time applicants are presenting with reformed AS and A levels, any areas which currently use AS grades revise their practices so that there is no advantage or disadvantage to applicants based on the presence or otherwise of certified AS grades on their UCAS application.”

The fourth AS

Some university courses, particularly medicine and dentistry degrees, currently require applicants to hold a fourth AS qualification alongside three A levels. Schools and colleges also raised several questions about the number and nature of AS qualifications likely to be required in the future:

- “Will any universities expect the fourth AS level?”
- “Will the top universities expect students to do 4AS subjects and then drop to three?”
- “[We need] Clear guidance about whether they are expecting students to have 3 A levels and 1 AS.”

Although some higher education providers are likely to continue to value a fourth AS qualification for the breadth of learning that it can demonstrate, or continue to recommend the Extended Project Qualification (EPQ), maintaining fairness in admissions is paramount. Universities and colleges are currently reviewing their requirements and some have already published guidance that makes their position regarding reformed qualifications clear, including their position regarding the requirement for a fourth AS. Others will publish guidance before students holding the reformed qualifications start making their applications and we strongly encourage them to do this at the earliest possible opportunity.

For example, University College London recently published the following:

University College London

“At present all applicants to UCL 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 change 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 disadvantage applicants from schools that are not able to offer four subjects.”

Admissions tests

A number of commentators have speculated that the change to linear A levels and the decoupling of the AS could result in universities running more of their own admissions tests.

This was reflected in the responses to the UCAS survey, with schools and colleges raising the following points:

- “How they intend to offer places to students? Will they introduce more in house testing and admissions tests or will it be purely on staff predictions?”
- “Reassurance that any future reduced uptake in AS won't lead to more extra sixth term entry papers set by individual institutions or groups (PAT, HAT, BMAT, TSA etc.)”

To date, feedback from higher education providers suggests that there is no appetite to increase the use of admissions tests.

UCAS SUPPORT FOR SECONDARY SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES

In our survey we asked schools and colleges what help they would like from UCAS to support the introduction of qualification reforms. Many respondents asked that UCAS continue to offer a central information point for the latest information about the reforms and how higher education providers are responding to these.

To support schools and colleges, we will:

- **Source and share university and college statements about their response to qualification reform:** We are encouraging all universities to make public statements about how they will accommodate the changing qualifications landscape and ensure they are fair and transparent in their processes. We intend to list all of these statements on our website so that advisers and applicants are able to access and review these. Those available will be published on UCAS.com upon the launch of our new website at the end of January 2015.
- **Publish information and resources:** We will publish detailed information on our website covering qualification developments across the UK. We will also provide additional materials, such as factsheets on changes to qualifications, in early 2015.
- **UCAS Tariff:** We have also launched the new UCAS Tariff to support admissions from 2017 to align with the introduction of new A levels. It has been designed to address a number of issues identified with the existing Tariff.

Further information about the new Tariff can be found here:

<http://www.ucas.com/how-it-all-works/explore-your-options/entry-requirements/new-ucas-tariff>

- Where appropriate, we will also host information provided by third parties, such as the qualification regulators or awarding bodies.